

Leadership

Leadership had both a classroom component and field exercises. One of the most interesting of the latter came very early in the program and was called the Leadership Reaction Course. This entailed having one candidate supervise a group of others who were performing a physical challenge, such as getting a loaded wagon across a simulated river (the water itself was *not* simulated, and the weather was cold, so anyone who fell in was wet and miserable the rest of the day.) The leader had to analyze the situation, formulate a plan, and direct the group as they carried out the plan. We weren't graded so much on successfully accomplishing the goal (some of the exercises were designed so that success was virtually impossible) as on how we approached it.ⁱ

Bill Thoroughgood has vivid recollections of the Leadership Reaction Course and how meaningful it was:

We were broken down into platoons and given a problem to solve. It was the responsibility of the platoon leader to come up with a plan. If you were not the platoon leader, you just did as you were told to help the leader solve the problem and make the "mission" a success. Our platoon was successful doing some of the training challenges. Others we failed. Meanwhile copious notes were being written by the training officer about the platoon leader's performance. Then like a thunderclap the training officer said: "Thoroughgood, you're next. Come with me." Just like that, I was fully alert and awake. I knew this was serious.

The training officer and I ran to this wall, perhaps five or six feet high that you could not see over. He leapt up on the top. He beckoned me to do the same. I jumped up on what was like a table top. I peered down on a pool filled with water perhaps thirty feet from one side to the other. Across the pool there were a series of perhaps six thick chains running parallel to one another about three feet apart, each strung between two posts. The evaluator explained that my mission as a platoon leader was to transport a heavy round log, eighteen inches in diameter and two feet long from one side of the pool to the other over these thick chains that were strung between the posts.

I could see the evaluator looking at me with pencil at the ready and a clipboard with my name at the top. My stomach was in knots.

After a couple of long gulps, my mind seemed to clear and I saw a solution. I quickly realized that one person could not carry the log across the chains because the chains would sway too much. I would need the platoon members to lie across the chains to form a roadbed over which one person could drag the log. I yelled to the rest of the platoon to come quickly and jump up on top of the table overlooking the pool. I know Mike Thornton was there, and I believe Brian Walrath. I am not sure the others who took part. I assigned a job to each member except Ratko Sikovic who remained on the other side of the wall not knowing what was going on and being thoroughly annoyed at my failure to clue him in. They immediately climbed down and one by one lay across the chain so that there was a bridge.

Meanwhile, another lifted the heavy log and dragged it across the backs of each candidate who made up the bridge. I'm sure more bark came off the backs of each of them who lay across the chains than came off the log that day. Yet no one complained. Just as I was feeling that the plan was going to work, the training officer yelled to me: "You're dead." He then assigned someone else to finish leading the mission.

On the other side of the wall Ratko was even more annoyed. He was yelling expletives at me for not including him in the exercise as he waited on the other side of the wall. Indeed, the evaluator debriefed me on my performance and noted the one negative was that a good leader must keep his men informed!

If all a stranger knew about OCS was what he got out of this one story, he would have a pretty accurate impression of the self-doubt, worry, and fear of failing that surrounded much of the program, followed – finally – by the learning and growing that comes from finding out you could solve problems and meet challenges for which you were unprepared. Exactly what the Army intended, it would seem.

Leadership was also a factor in the many tactical field exercises that were conducted throughout the program. In each exercise, candidates were put in leadership positions, where they had to demonstrate both their understanding of the tactical principles we had learned in the classroom, as well as the leadership skills to put them into practice. Many of these exercises involved either attacking or being attacked by “aggressors,” who were troops from a regular Army unit stationed at Ft. Benning. We soon found out that controlling a group of men in combat, even simulated combat, was very difficult.

Another method of measuring leadership was to rotate candidates through positions of student company commander, company first sergeant, platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, and squad leaders. Performance in these positions was carefully scrutinized by the TACs and could play a major role in whether a candidate would continue in the program.

Daily Life: Shock Reveille on Blue Monday

While the TACs were tough and demanding, the senior candidates could even be worse. Their job was simply to make our lives miserable, or at least some of them thought so. One OCS tradition was “shock reveille” also known as “Blue Monday,” some of which took place during “Drop Week.” A group of senior candidates would storm into a lower class barracks before reveille, roust out the miserable underclassmen and proceed to give them hell. This might involve PT, piling a whole platoon into the shower while still in their underwear, emptying footlockers onto the floor, bracing candidates against the wall and ordering them to recite a wide range of things we were supposed to have memorized, and on and on. Senior candidates could be very creative in finding ways to harass us.

During one shock reveille, several of us were made to crawl up and down the hall inside some sort of bag, either our sleeping bag cover or our mattress cover, shouting “I am a worm” at the top of our lungs. Steve Roeder was one of those who were forced to lay on

their backs, legs and arms twitching in the air and yell “I am a dying cockroach,” worms and cockroaches being how underclassmen were supposed to view themselves.

Mike Eberhardt recalls, “There was also ‘Ping-Pong’ requiring two candidates to stand across from each other, backs to the wall. When the senior candidate shouted ‘ping’ they had to step forward, turn around and slam against the other wall. ‘Pong’ was a repeat of that.”

Seniors especially liked to single out candidates who were trying to pull something funny. Don Cramer recalls “...that we were required to frame a picture of our girlfriend in our room at the barracks, which I did. My roommate, Gary Foster framed a picture of a Cocker Spaniel dog that, I think, he cut out of a magazine. Harassing upper-classmen saw the framed dog picture and made Gary do extra push-ups”.

Traditionally, each OCS class got one Blue Monday. But apparently Captain Smith was not satisfied with our progress and arranged for three shock reveilles for 50th Company. Maybe the Captain knew what he was doing, for, in the end, we turned out to be a hell of a good class. ⁱⁱ

[Adherence to Military Standards](#)

This could involve anything from personal appearance, to maintaining an orderly room and barracks, to infractions of various rules. Failure in any of these areas resulted in demerits. Theoretically too many demerits could get one dismissed from the program, but it is not clear how many were dropped specifically because of demerits. What demerits did result in, however, was walking “tours.” The offending candidate would have to march back and forth for up to an hour with a heavy M14 rifle on his shoulder. The idea was to give the candidate an opportunity to contemplate the error of his ways and learn from his mistakes. It was very boring and tiring, but it did let us practice our marching and manual-of-arms skills.

Anything out of order in our rooms was “rewarded” by demerits. Beds must be made perfectly-tight enough for a quarter to bounce off, with “hospital corners” folded at a forty-five degree angle. Socks rolled tightly and neatly, placed in the correct order in the drawer. Uniforms hung in the precise order in the wall locker. Bill Snodgrass recalls, “All the items in each Candidate display had to be exactly the same. Someone changed the brand of toothpaste and everyone had to change the brand of toothpaste to that one that the Candidate used. I wonder if he is still using that same brand (Crest)?

One pair of boots was left on display in our room for inspection while we were off to training each day. We were supposed to rotate our boots daily, ostensibly for health reasons, but the real reason was likely to have yet another way to catch us breaking the rules. So we couldn’t cheat, we had to lace one pair with the laces in the bottom eyelets coming from the inside out, and the other pair, from the outside in. If the wrong boots were on display – more demerits and more tours to walk.

Even the windows had to be uniform – either closed or open exactly six inches. We quickly learned that a dollar bill is six inches long, and it was a handy measure. Brian Walrath recalls the risk of using a dollar: “One day I clumsily dropped my dollar while I was measuring a window and had to rush downstairs to retrieve it. Not only was I littering, but back then a dollar was a dollar.”

Every morning when we left the barracks to go to training, we had to leave them “standing tall” and ready for inspection. Each platoon had a big electric floor buffer, and after we had buffed the floors in our rooms, two men from each platoon were designated to be the last to leave and had to buff the hall on their way out. In their stocking feet, they would start at the far end of the hall and work backwards to the stairway, then take the buffer back to the storage closet before returning to the stairway to don their boots and rush out to formation.

And every day we returned to the barracks to find the same thing: the TACs had conducted “inspections,” which amounted to tearing apart our carefully staged rooms and dragging their feet on our beautifully buffed floors. The aforementioned Lieutenant Toolson was the biggest offender, either out of meanness or having particularly big feet. This went on especially during the Basic Phase, but we were not immune to it even as intermediate and senior candidates. So we had to maintain perfect barracks throughout the six months.

Beyond the daily room inspections, there were also regular formal inspections that were often conducted by Captain Smith himself. If the Captain wanted to find something wrong, he would, and he almost always wanted to. For our first formal inspection, we slaved to get everything in perfect order, and we were pretty sure we had succeeded. We were, of course, wrong. As the Captain and the trailing TACs moved down the hall, we all stood “at ease” in our rooms, ready to snap to attention when the officers entered. Pretty soon whispers started to flow down the hall ahead of the inspection team. “They’re checking entrenching tools!” We immediately knew we were all sunk. No one had thought to remove our entrenching tools, which we almost never actually used, from their canvas covers to make sure they were clean and rust free. In every room the Captain pounced on these little shovels and cried “Dirt!” “Rust!” “Filthy!” They had us, as they knew they would. There was always *something*.

Demerits were also awarded for failing to maintain a neat personal appearance which conformed with military standards, from the highly polished helmet liners on our heads to the spit-shined boots on our feet – and everything in between.

Daily Life: Laundry Runs, Pogy Bait, and Sunday Church Services

We spent a good portion of our pay on laundry. (While in training we were paid at enlisted grade E4.) We had to put on fresh fatigues every day, sometimes more than once a day if our morning training was especially strenuous. Our fatigues were heavily starched, so much so that we called donning clean fatigues “breaking starch” – it was literally necessary to force our way into our pants and shirts. A few of the married

candidates' wives lived just off post, and they had a lively business conducting laundry runs. Now and then they would throw in some snacks with the laundry. The TACs must have known what was going on, having just gone through OCS themselves, but they usually turned a blind eye, especially if some of this booty turned up on their desks. Terry Hummel provides a good description of a "laundry run" that wasn't at all about laundry.

Wanda, (my wife), started out as a "camp follower" for the 6th Platoon, as she faithfully hauled laundry for me, Mansky, Sutton, Tackaberry, Pascua and four or five others for the entire six months of OCS. She drove a metallic blue, 1964 two-door hardtop Ford. One of my favorite memories is the night I called her and asked her to go to McDonalds and buy something like 60 or 70 cheeseburgers and hamburgers with half as many large orders of french fries and other junk food for her to deliver to the parking lot south of the 50th Company barracks. This pogy bait was to be deposited in an empty (somewhat clean) garbage can. Two guys from the platoon smuggled the garbage can up to the top floor where the 6th Platoon lived. We would have gotten away with that one clean, but for the greasy smell of McDonalds that lingered in the barracks all night.ⁱⁱⁱ

Of course, the risk-taking of breaking the rules would have been meaningless if there was no punishment – sometimes severe – when the transgressor was caught. The threats of extra PT, walking tours, and dismissal or recycling loomed over us all the time.

Sunday church services were the only time married candidates could see each other. Wanda Hummel remembers: "Our visits during OCS training were limited. Thankfully, we were Protestant so that meant Terry would sign out for the 8:00 a.m. church service, which we did attend. We would then find a secluded area On Post to "park." After the 11:00 a.m. church service, which we did not attend, I would take Terry, now stuffed with homemade oatmeal raisin cookies, orange juice or other of his favorite snacks, back to the 50th Company area."

Another source of demerits, and a favorite of the TACs, was a candidate's "gig line." This was the straight line formed by the shirt flap lined up with the edge of the belt buckle, and down through the flap covering the trouser zipper. So before falling out for inspection each morning we had to inspect ourselves in the mirror, then hope that nothing got out of line before the TACs checked us out. If a TAC really wanted to find something wrong, he could always nail a candidate for a less than perfect gig line – and who could argue?

Part of the gig line was the shiny brass belt buckle which was a standard part of the uniform. Being brass, they would tarnish, and on top of that, they took a lot of abuse from exercises like low crawling. A couple of buckles had to be kept on display in our footlockers. These were for show, but they tarnished just sitting there, so they needed occasional polishing. The buckle we wore each day had to be polished each evening. So out came the Brasso and rags, and we polished the buckle along with the brass OCS insignia on our collars. Whoever designed the insignia had a sadistic streak, since they

had numerous angles from which Brasso had to be removed with toothbrushes, ear swabs, or pipe cleaners.

Being pressed for time, we constantly sought ways to save a few moments here and there, especially in the mornings when things were particularly rushed. One trick was to shave in the evening rather than the morning. The TACs, of course, were familiar with this trick, as they were with *every* trick. One morning as we stood in formation, the TACs went down each line, looked each candidate in the eye and asked, “Did you shave this morning or last night?” We were bound by the honor code to tell the truth, so one at a time candidates admitted that they had shaved the night before and went back to the barracks to shave again.

Some of us bought snappy Corcoran Jump Boots, while other stuck with what the Army issued. Either way, they had to be spit shined. “Spit shined combat boots” is as much of an oxymoron as “starched fatigues,” but that’s what we wore every day. While we sent our fatigues to the laundry, the boots we had to do ourselves. We experimented with concoctions of shoe polish, floor wax, alcohol, Glo-Coat, and who knows what else in our never-ending quest to get a perfect shine. Perfect, that is, until we went out in the hot Georgia sun. Then the polish melted and the red Georgia clay turned our beautiful shine into something resembling jeweler’s rouge, plus the dust worked its way into every nook and cranny of our boots (not to mention our bodies). By the end of the day, they were a mess, so polishing started all over again.

Although we were being trained to become “officers and gentlemen” there were times when we had to forgo the “gentlemen” part. Normally there were very strict rules in the mess hall – no talking, the knife and fork had to be placed just so on the plate after cutting off a single bite, and so forth. All this was done under the watchful eyes of the TACs, who would descend on any candidate sloppy enough to commit some infraction like placing the knife so the sharp end faced out rather than in (“Are you trying to cut your buddy!?!?” they would demand.) But on those occasions when we were running late, we were given “pig privileges,” meaning we were supposed to eat as fast as we could. Being in a constant state of semi-starvation, the challenge was to stuff ourselves as much as possible in just a few minutes. Otherwise, it was a long time until the next meal.

But pig privileges were rare, and most of the time meals were a combination of attempting to satisfy our growling appetites and enduring various sorts of what the TACs viewed as entertainment, and what we “smacks” considered harassment. Offending candidates would be singled out for special attention, which might entail rattling off important information that we had learned: (“Sir, the first general order is: “I will guard everything within my post and quit my post only when properly relieved.”) Or we might be screamed at for “eyeballing” a TAC instead of keeping one’s eyes straight ahead. On occasion, there were more elaborate performances, such as when Clarence Kugler was forced to stand on a chair and repeat a line from “Three in the Attic,” a film

in which he had a small speaking part: “Man what a bummer, she could have been the daughter of Dagwood Bumstead.” Captain Smith had seen the movie and he delighted in making Clarence repeat his performance, especially when higher ranking officers were visiting.

However, rushing us through meals and interfering with eating apparently backfired on Captain Smith. A rumor went around that one of the mess sergeants became angry over the wasted food and complained to the Inspector General’s office. If this caused any letup on the pressure in the mess hall, it wasn’t very noticeable.

Daily Life: Haircuts and Shined Shoes

And then there were haircuts. Most civilians are surprised to learn that soldiers have to pay for their own haircuts. In OCS we went to the barber at least every 10 days, probably more often than that, to maintain our “sidewalls” and “landing strips” (we were pretty much bald on the sides and on top, with just a fringe of hair on either side of the bald strip down the middle.) On at least one occasion, several of us got two haircuts in one day because some wag had spread the word that we could grow our hair a little longer, so we had told the barber not to take so much off the top. Captain Smith made it clear at company formation that those of us who had believed this had better get our rears back to the barber shop ASAP. Could it have been the Captain who started the rumor?

At some point, we were allowed the privilege of getting our boots shined when we went to the barber shop. Those fellows would slap on the polish with their bare hands and in no time would produce a pair of boots that would make us proud. Another privilege that we eventually got was that of “boonie boots” for field exercises. These we did not have to polish.

What We Learned: Notes

ⁱ The ever present rumor mill had it that Hitler used this same type of test for the Wehrmacht, and officers who failed were sent to the Russian Front.

ⁱⁱ There were so many Shock Reveille/Blue Monday stories that they have been collected in an Appendix.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sneaking pogy bait into the barracks was one of those OCS traditions that were generally overlooked, but were sometimes punishable, especially if they got out of hand. It should be kept in mind that these pogy runs were about more than just food. As author Robert L. O’Connell puts it in *Fierce Patriot*, his biography of William Tecumseh Sherman, such activities were actually an integral part of the soldiers’ training. He is describing Sherman’s days at West Point, but his explanation certainly applies to OCS:

Elite military training establishments frequently set up conditions that encourage initiates to play fast and loose with the rules and then punish those maladroit enough to be caught. Not exactly a war game, but definitely a parable about war and its consequences.

Traditionally this often played out in terms of food. Sparta, perhaps the West's most thoroughly militarized society, incentivized trainees to steal from subject Helots by starving them and then savagely beating those found with purloined consumables. West Point managed a parallel set of circumstances – keeping the cadets hungry on a miserable cuisine of boiled food and mealtime harassment, then forbidding, on penalty of dismissal, forays to nearby Benny Haven's tavern, the home of roast turkey, shellfish and beer.

While the food at OCS was much more palatable than that at West Point in Sherman's day, the same principle applied – we were always hungry, in part because we often had little time to eat, and what we did eat we worked off through constant exercise. As Howard Wright put it upon seeing our gaunt frames and shaved heads in pictures taken forty years earlier, "My God! They really did starve us. We look like POWs."