

Physical Training

We may have thought that Basic and AIT had gotten us into good shape, but when we got to Fort Benning we found that Physical Training (PT) in OCS would be much more demanding. There were regular PT sessions every morning and every evening, plus plenty of exercise in between. We ran obstacle courses and were put through bayonet exercises. But nothing was more important than our score on the PTPC (Physical Training Proficiency Test), commonly called the PT test.ⁱ

Captain Smith had set a goal for the company of an average score of 450 on the PCPT. Since the max score was 500, having a company of roughly 200 men achieve a score of 450 was clearly a stretch goal. As we have seen, we did not score well on our initial PT test and from that point on, Captain Smith took us for PT sessions each evening after dinner. We soon learned that eating followed by these often brutal PT sessions was not a good ideaⁱⁱ and Candidates began walking through the mess hall line and then immediately taking our trays to the kitchen drop off point, perhaps drinking a glass of milk or juice or taking just a single bite of food. This was better than vomiting it all up 30 minutes later.

This went on for a week or so, then the Captain announced a change in plans. From then on, three platoons would go for PT on Monday, Wednesday and Friday and the other three on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. The three platoons that did not do PT with the Captain went to the mess hall and then followed the evening schedule. The platoons that went to PT ate after they returned. While we appreciated this, we never knew exactly what had caused this change. The ever present rumor mill offered several possible reasons, the most plausible being that the Mess Sergeant complained about the wasted food, which led to pressure on Captain Smith to make the change.

In addition to regularly scheduled PT, we ran. And we ran and ran and ran.

A few blocks from our barracks was the Airborne training area, with its three 250-foot “drop towers” which loomed in our skyline. There was a track running around the Airborne area that must have been about a mile long. Virtually every morning we would run from our barracks *to* the track, then run *around* the track, then run back *from* the track. If there was time, we would run around the track twice. On those occasions, as we reached the point where we were supposed to leave the track to head home after one lap, a groan would go up from the entire company as we started around again.

After we ran the Airborne track, we then had to run to class, unless we were being trucked to some location outside of running distance. Infantry Hall was several blocks away – clearly within running distance – and by the time we got there we were sweating heavily, our nicely starched fatigues were soaked and sagging and our boots were a mess. At noon, we had to run back to the barracks for lunch, then again run to Infantry Hall for afternoon classes, then back for dinner. Then, as we have seen, there were frequent after dinner runs to and from the PT field, singing our songs along the way.

We were fortunate on the mornings when our schedule was especially tight; then we would do PT on the lawn outside the barracks rather than run the Airborne track. Since

it was still dark in the morning we could slack off a little and hope we didn't get caught. But the TACs were always prowling and ready to pounce on any unsuspecting candidate who wasn't giving one hundred percent.

Captain Smith was a burly fellow (when he was an Officer Candidate himself a few years earlier he was forced to sit at the "fat table" in the mess hall, right in front of the company commander's table) and he was constantly battling his weight, so he often ran with us, especially during our after-dinner run. He wore a funky plastic sweatshirt, so he could sweat off even more weight. We were sweating plenty and didn't need any silly plastic shirts. Of course, during our runs we would also stop periodically and do PT. The captain declined to join us in this.

Paul Kochis recalls "how Smith would finish a run with us, then pull up the plastic sweatshirt, banded at the bottom, and a pool of sweat would fall out. It used to amaze me, even if it was revolting."

And John Foote remembers "that stupid plastic sweatshirt.... He did it to punish himself. I am sure he thought it was a sound way to maintain fitness, but he probably suffered cardiac arrest somewhere along the way if he kept wearing it and shedding his precious bodily fluids." John may have been right about the captain's self-punishment, but one thing is for sure – he was certainly punishing *us*.

Our company softball team went undefeated and won the Battalion Softball Championship. For one game the entire company ran to the baseball stadium, a couple of miles away, to lend the team our support. After we won the game, some of us hoped that Captain Smith would reward us by letting us march back to the barracks. But this was not the captain's way, of course, and we ran back from the stadium just as hard as we ran to it. One wonders what he would have made us do had we lost.

We even had to do PT in order to enter the mess hall. In front of the mess hall steps was a chin-up bar. Each of us would step up to the bar, do several chin-ups then sound off to the TAC who was glowering at the door, "Sir, Candidate So-and-So requests permission to enter the mess hall," or something like that. One day early in the program, Bob Arnold was standing in line and must have had a flashback to Basic since he shouted "Sir, Private Arnold requests permission to enter the mess hall." "WHAT?" screamed the TAC. "Sir, Private Arnold requests..." "WHAT?" This went on several more times. The candidates behind Bob caught on right away, but, of course, could say nothing. Finally Bob realized his mistake and said "Sir, CANDIDATE Arnold requests permission..." and the TAC let him through. No one who heard this exchange ever made that mistake again, which was the whole idea.

Before the second PT test we rested the day before and achieved a remarkably high score. According to our class Blue Book, *"50th Company set the highest average PTCT score by an OC company since 1962 with a company average score of 458.9. ... Most candidates reached the best shape of their lives as evidenced by the fact that only two men ran the mile slower than 6:30 for the final test."*

Physical Training: Notes

i The PCPT consisted of 5 events: a timed 40 yard low crawl, timed horizontal ladder, Grenade Throw, Run, Dodge and Jump and a timed One Mile Run. All these events were done in combat uniform (without shirts) and boots. The PCPT that we knew in 1969 was replaced in 1980 to provide, (among other things), a “gender normal” test. It consists of three events: Sit ups, Push-ups and a two mile run. These events are conducted in shorts, tee shirts and running shoes.

iii According to Wayne Ferrentino: “After mess one evening, CPT Smith had us low crawl back and forth across a field. One Candidate was having a very difficult time, probably from heat exhaustion, and appeared about to pass out. He was close to me so I crawled over to help when a boot kicked me over and asked what I was doing. After I expressed my concern, Smith got in my face told me to let the candidate die and we would name the field after him.”

Field Exercises

The deeper we got into the OCS program, the more time we spent on field exercises, applying what we learned in the classroom. A few memories stand out from these exercises.

Very early in the program we studied land navigation. The classroom work was followed with time in the field putting into practice what we were supposed to have learned. We were trucked out to some remote part of the post where we lived in tents for a few days while we went through various exercises. These were simple two-man “pup” tents, made of two shelter halves snapped together. It is an exaggeration to call them “two man”, since it was a mighty tight squeeze for two of us plus our equipment. This was in late February or early March. Even though Georgia was very hot in the summer, it was pretty damn cold in the winter. Trying to crawl out of sleeping bags and get dressed inside the tent before going out into the cold would tax the dexterity of Houdini. Inevitably, we would brush our backs against the top of the tent, causing the moisture on the outside to wick through onto our tender skin. Brrr! Then, chilled to the bone, we would crawl outside and stand by the smoky fire barrels trying to warm up.

Another time when we just about froze was during Command Reveille, which was held weekly. The entire brigade would turn out and await the morning bugle. As one would expect, the most junior companies had to line up first and stand waiting, while the senior companies stayed in their barracks until the last minute. It was still winter when 50th Company’s cycle started, so we had to stand at parade rest for a half hour or more, and a number of us got frostbite. The Army had not seen fit to issue caps with ear flaps, plus wool uniforms, warm boots and other cold weather gear. Apparently there was officially no cold weather in Georgia.

On another Field Exercise we were to walk from our billet area to our bivouac location. We assembled with our gear, which meant full packs and weapons, on the blacktop and after the standard rituals we were ready to go. Captain Smith took command and we left at a march, but as soon as we were clear of the blacktop and strung out on line he ordered us to double time. This was unexpected, but what we had come to expect from Captain Smith. We continued to run for what seemed like forever, but was more likely about 30 minutes. When we did stop the double time, we did not take a break; rather we marched at a normal pace all the rest of the way to the bivouac site.

On one of our first Tactical exercises, we set up an ambush along a road down which an “aggressor” column was supposed to pass. Being in our usual state of exhaustion, we all promptly fell asleep. The next thing we knew heavy boots were thumping into our backs and very angry instructors were screaming obscenities about how we had let the entire enemy company go by unmolested. “You’re all dead, dead, DEAD!” they yelled. Well, we felt dead anyway.

During another field exercise, the instructors and aggressors were especially fond of harassing us with tear gas. Whenever we would hear the “pop” of a gas grenade, someone would cry out “Gas!!” and we would scramble to rip our gas masks out of their bags and get them on before being overcome. This was not easy, since the masks are

inherently clumsy and need to be put on just right to gain a tight seal. One evening after we had set up our perimeter for the night, we heard a “pop” from just outside our lines. Cries of “gas” went up along the line and we grabbed for the masks. One unfortunate candidate yelled the warning then instinctively took a big breath to fill his lungs before he started to put on his mask. With the big breath of air came a big breath of gas. For a long time he lay gasping and coughing inside his mask until the cloud cleared and he could get some fresh air.

It seems like it rained just about every time we went out on a field exercise. (Captain Smith must have had a direct line to Mother Nature.) This was classic “infantry weather” that left us wet and miserable all the time. We were hot and wet during the day and cold and wet at night. Before long we took on the yeasty smell of those who have been sleeping on the ground and haven’t bathed or changed clothes for a few days. Our rifles began to rust to the point that some of us had to kick open the bolt with heels of our boots.

But field exercises were not all misery. Our longest and most trying exercise was known as the Ranger Problem, since it was taught by instructors from the U. S. Army Rangers. Steve Roeder has a story that typifies the sort of horseplay that went on, especially after we had become loopy after a few days in the field:

“Everyone knew I was afraid of snakes. We were wading through the swamp and someone killed a snake. They snuck up behind me and threw it around the back of my neck, draping it down on both sides of my face. I had no idea the snake was dead. I think I screamed like a little girl. Everyone else died laughing”.

The Ranger Problem came toward the end of our six months in OCS, and Mike Thornton recalls, “My favorite OCS memory is of the last day of the Ranger Problem. When we got off the truck at the assembly area the cadre were popping smoke grenades in celebration. The colors mixed yellow, purple and white, and the combination made me think that we were nearly done. It was a time to celebrate.”

End in View: Turning Black, Turning Blue, Parties, Tiger Tactics, a Man on the Moon, and First Duty Assignments

Turning black refers to becoming intermediate candidates after twelve weeks. Once we turned black, we wore a small piece of black felt under the brass OCS insignia on our collars. Until then, we wore the insignia with no backing. As intermediate candidates, we had more privileges, plus the pressure let up – at least a little. This may have also been the point at which we started marching to class rather than running (but that could very well have been when we became seniors.) We still ran plenty, but that was for exercise, not to get somewhere. Instead, we marched, and one of our members got to carry a heavy bass drum to keep us in step. It was an improvement for the rest of us, if not for him.

At the eighteen week point, we turned blue – we became senior candidates. The OCS insignia on our collars was now chrome silver instead of brass (they no longer required

polishing, a huge benefit!) and the felt tab behind them was light blue (“Infantry Blue”). We also now wore white dickies with the OCS emblem, a mixed blessing since the sweltering Georgia summer had arrived, and wearing what amounted to a scarf did not help us keep cool. But we *looked* cool. We were tall (even those not blessed with great height *felt* tall), thin, and straight. We looked so good that on more than one occasion, a ROTC Lieutenant, newly arrived for the Infantry Basic Course, saluted one of our classmates outside of Infantry Hall. To paraphrase “Like a Rock,” pop singer Bob Seger’s paean to lost youth, “We were somethin’ to see.”

As senior candidates, our classwork did not let up and our field exercises became even more intense and complicated. We held student-led battalion-sized exercises spread out over the landscape which made communication all the more difficult than squad and platoon level problems. We had combined arms drills with tanks and helicopters which increased the number of things we had to worry about. We still got plenty of PT, but this was designed more to keep us in shape rather than to get us into shape.

Basic and intermediate candidates were expected to salute us seniors and treat us as superior officers. We, in turn, were expected to do our part to keep up the pressure on lower-level candidates. This included conducting the sort of “shock reveilles” we had undergone, plus “bracing” candidates as they stood in formation outside their barracks.

When we turned black and again when we turned blue, we had parties. The Intermediate Party was held in the Company Day Room in the barracks – just about the only time this room was put to any real use. The theme of the party was “Scarborough Fair,” borrowed from the popular Simon & Garfunkel song of the day. Reading the lyrics of “Scarborough Fair” today causes one to appreciate the oddly schizophrenic nature of those times:ⁱ

*Generals order their soldiers to kill
And gather it all in a bunch of heather,
And to fight for a cause they’ve long ago forgotten.
Then she’ll be a true love of mine.*

Regardless of the incongruity of this, the party was supposed to be our introduction to the military protocol to be followed at social events on Army posts. There was a reception with cocktails, entertainment, dancing and a dinner that included an appetizer, entrée, dessert and wine. Committees were established for everything from protocol and entertainment to decorations and printing of formal invitations. There was even a committee of Date Coordinators, who were charged with finding local women, (most from nearby Auburn University), with whom the candidates could dance. On top of all this, “Special Arrangements” (whatever they were) were handled by The Wives’ Club.ⁱⁱ This was a chance for the few candidates’ wives living nearby to start learning what it would be like to be a member of the Officers’ Wives Club at their husband’s next duty station. This might also have started some of them wondering just what the life of an officer’s wife would be like.

When we turned blue, we had another party – the Senior Status Formal. This one was at the big Fort Benning Officers' Club and was much more elaborate than the intermediate party. The theme of our senior party was "The Impossible Dream," based on "Man of La Mancha," the Broadway hit about Don Quixote. This combined our current "impossible quest" to become second lieutenants with what we fancied would be our roles as "knights errant" after we graduated. Colonel Piper, the Brigade Commander and Lieutenant Colonel Harron, the Battalion Commander, were resplendent in their white dress uniforms, looking like they had just stepped out of an old movie.

Once again, our widely talented classmates produced artwork and entertainment even more elaborate than they did for the intermediate party. Some of the class artists had prepared large drawings of scenes from Quixote's time, including a full-sized drawing of the Don, which bore a striking resemblance to Colonel Piper. And Burl Wyatt, who had a remarkable singing voice, performed a version of "I, Don Quixote," reworded to "I, Senior Candidate."

The primary entertainment was a play, "This is Your Life, Candidate Smack," produced, directed and co-written by candidate Clarence Kugler, the fellow who had gone to Captain Smith with the movie request way back before our cycle started. Just as it sounds, it was a parody of OCS, with candidates playing the roles of various officers with whom we were all acquainted. We all roared with laughter, even the officers who were the butt of the jokes. There was also an eleven-man chorus of candidates, some of whom had surprisingly good voices.

The second event was a parade. Before the parade, the 50th Company was awarded a special orange "Tiger Tactics" streamer for our guidon, "made on the basis of enthusiasm, attitude and performance in class throughout the cycle." For many of us this was a very proud moment, one of the high points of our OCS experience. It showed that we had not only excelled individually, but also as a unit. Not every OC company was recognized in this way. Soon after, our artistic classmates painted a tiger on the 50th Company emblem which adorned the blacktop area where we formed up every morning.

As senior candidates we enjoyed more privileges, including a few more weekend passes. On Sunday, July 20, 1969, twelve days before we were to graduate, we (at least those of us who weren't grounded) were enjoying a weekend pass. Many of us watched on TV as the Apollo 11 Lunar Lander sat down on the moon and Neil Armstrong opened the hatch and slowly made his way down the ladder. Then, at 10:56 p.m., came the historic moment when his foot touched down and left its impression in the dusty soil. It was a great time to be an American.

A week or so before graduation, 50th Company gathered around the back door of our barracks while one of the staff stood on the steps and read out where we would be assigned as new lieutenants. As was the standard practice of the time, none of us would

be sent directly to Vietnam. Instead, we would be given assignments that would give us some experience in leading real soldiers, not just our OCS classmates. Twenty-four got branch transfers (to Armor, Finance, Signal, Medical, Chemical, Adjutant General and Military Intelligence), so they would spend the next few months getting more training in their specific branch. Some would go off to flight school, Ranger school or Airborne training. A handful were sent to Korea or Europe. For most of the rest of us, our next assignment would be with an Infantry Division or a Basic Training brigade at one of the many Army posts scattered across the country. The majority of us would spend about a year in the U. S. before shipping out to Southeast Asia.

End in View: Notes

ⁱ Don Driftmier well remembers performing at this party. “Captain Smith requested Pearson and myself to put together a small music group for background music during the formal dinner. I was given money to go into Columbus and rent a keyboard. We did in fact play Scarborough Fair, with all the lyrics. No one noticed a thing. Captain Smith’s only order as I remember it was do the best and make 50th Company look first and best. Gee, wasn’t that our mantra in everything we did?”

ⁱⁱ According to Wanda Hummel, wife of classmate Terry Hummel, Captain Smith recruited his wife, Barbara Smith, to form and lead a Wives Club, the purpose of which was to familiarize the wives of candidates who had moved to the Columbus, Ft. Benning area to be U.S. Army officers’ wives and to complement their officer husbands accordingly. Numerous social functions, (training sessions) were held and each of the wives was “expected” to attend. Wanda has great memories of those get-togethers and she soon became profoundly thankful for Barbara Smith, who she was, and what she accomplished.

Graduation

The big day finally came. After six solid months of stress and hard work we would be rewarded with the shiny gold bars (AKA Butter Bars) of second lieutenants. One hundred and sixty of the two hundred and twenty-four who started had made it.ⁱ Sixty-four had dropped out, been dropped, or were recycled to (hopefully) graduate with their new classmates. At least three of our classmates found out during the last week that they would not be graduating with us. Two were recycled and one, Herman Bowden, was dropped altogether.ⁱⁱ

These last-minute recycles and drops underscore the constant fear under which we all lived in OCS – none of us could ever be quite sure of where we stood. All we could do was keep plugging away and doing our best, hoping that we were doing the right things. Each one of us almost certainly would have felt as Herman did if we had been dropped so near the end; and the thought of being recycled at that late date was almost unbearable.

50th Company achieved a graduation rate of 71.5%, which was somewhat higher than other classes of our era. This is rather surprising considering Don Huskins' observation, based on his first duty assignment as an Infantry OCS TAC officer, that 50th had it tougher than most OCS companies. So despite Captain Smith's best efforts, more than the usual percentage of 50th's candidates had managed to make it. On the other hand, maybe this was a result of the captain's high standards – we knew our company was something special and were determined to be part of it.

Graduation took place in Infantry Hall on August 1, 1969. We were actually sworn in as officers shortly before the graduation exercise, in a meeting room near our barracks. There is a tradition in the military that a new officer has to give a dollar to the first enlisted man who salutes him. So after we repeated the oath of office, each of us stepped up to First Sergeant Steed, who gave us our first salute, and we each gave him a dollar in return. This worked for a while, but went too slowly and we were running behind schedule. So most of us got a group salute from the good sergeant and we handed him our dollars as we filed out the door. Good old Army efficiency.

Quite a few candidates' parents came to Fort Benning for graduation.ⁱⁱⁱ Many of them must have looked upon this occasion with a mixture of pride and trepidation, considering what might lie ahead for us. Each of us walked across the stage and was handed a diploma stating that he had "successfully completed the Infantry Officer Candidate Course."

To Mike Gilpin, it was a great moment in no small part because he graduated while wearing a hip to ankle cast after suffering a knee injury during the Ranger exercise. When he was injured, Captain Smith wanted to drop him from the program, but his TAC Officer, Lieutenant Bobby "Bad Mouth" Cross intervened on his behalf and special arrangements were made for him for the three remaining weeks before graduation. He recalls:

“During graduation practice, Captain Smith looked at me with disgust and read my name incorrectly as “Lieutenant Michael Giblett” as I hobbled across the stage. The class laughed. I received my gold bars the following morning.”

We were now the freshest, greenest second lieutenants in the United States Army. OCS may have *made* us officers, but we still had much to learn about *being* officers. But none of us were worrying about that on graduation day. Instead we were filled with both relief at having survived OCS and pride at having triumphed over its challenges. Perhaps no one was prouder than Jim Zack, who remembers “when my widowed mother pinned my father's 2nd Lieutenant bars on me – bars he had earned in a field promotion while serving in the USAAF in the South Pacific during World War II.”

Graduation: Notes

ⁱ The number 160 is taken from the Program for our graduation ceremony.

ⁱⁱHerman’s description in his own words:

“Three days before graduation I was sent to panel with two other members of the company. They were “recycled” into other companies; I was turned out of the OCS program, which left me hugely disappointed, bitter even. The resentment has remained with me all my life. I needed my Commission to fulfill my dream of Flight School, for which I had qualified. After 30 days of leave (the most they would allow me), I was on a plane to Vietnam. I had a Signals MOS, so I wound up doing my year up north with the 37th Signal Battalion out of Danang. I came back to CONUS [the Continental United States] in September 1970, received an early out, and returned to my home state of Georgia.

My last-minute paneling-out experience was a bitter pill for me to swallow and still leaves me with a bad taste. But I remember many of the wonderful comrades in the company. The bonds we forged though hardship and common experiences really meant a lot to me.”

ⁱⁱⁱJim Fields, Ken Sutton, Bill Adams and Brian Flora were sworn in by their fathers, an active duty Lt. Colonel in the Marine Corps, a Navy veteran, and two retired career officers respectively.