

Reflections: 2017

If one were to ask an assortment of OCS graduates what they thought of Officer Candidate School, the responses would cover a broad spectrum. At one extreme there would be those who believe that the whole of OCS was wasted time, just bullshit activities spun off from a rigid culture that valued overtraining for its own sake and that reflexively did things because "...We have always done it this way ..." without a thought about what it takes to produce a good infantry lieutenant. At the other end of the spectrum would be those who say it changed the arc of their lives for the better. Bill Fulton wrote of his OCS experience that it had "...upgraded my life's prospects and lifted me to new horizons." The comments of our classmates Wayne Ferrentino and John Moore capture this duality: According to Wayne: "As hard and crazy as our time was in OCS, I would not trade that experience for anything." To which John adds: "I am proud that I graduated but would not do it again."

One thing that we had going for us was enthusiasm, plus the willingness to push ourselves. And of utmost importance, we managed to keep our sense of humor. This cannot be overrated, nor can the influence of being surrounded by others who also were able to laugh during times that were remarkably "unfunny." Had we not been able to pull this sort of strength from our classmates, no doubt the attrition rate would have been much higher.

For many of us, completing OCS was one of the significant achievements of our lives – perhaps the most significant. It demanded that we reach deep inside to find strengths we didn't know we had (or, perhaps, to create some that heretofore did not exist – it doesn't much matter which.) Our leaders set high goals for us and we accomplished them. We faced obstacles and we then overcame them.

But it was much more than just an individual achievement. 50th Company demanded not only tremendous individual effort, but also that we contribute to a larger effort – it was an opportunity to be part of something bigger and better than ourselves. We were all expected to do our individual best so the whole company would excel; but, more importantly, we were also expected to make sacrifices for the benefit of other candidates.

A vivid example of this comes from Bill Snodgrass:

I learned that I can do things beyond my physical and mental abilities, I learned leadership abilities that I would use throughout my career, and most of all I learned team work. I remember my knees being so bad I could not bend them (I learned to run stiff legged.) When I was having trouble walking up the stairs, you guys took turns carrying me up the stairs. I was not at the top of the class in PT but after 6 months I finished the mile in the top 10. Thank you guys.

Every one of those who carried Bill up the stairs was already bone tired, but was still willing to give this extra effort to help a classmate. It would have been easy to just let Bill be dropped from the program, but no one wanted to see that happen. That's the sort of teamwork we learned in OCS.

For most of us, while our time as Officer Candidates is long past, it is not (nor likely to ever be) forgotten. We are and shall remain proud to have attended OCS and to have

made it through. And we know that, even today, we will never fully appreciate the positive impact it had on our lives.

Appendix A: Shock Reveille on Blue Monday- Additional Stories

From Peter Nowlan:

I am from Vermont which is such a small state that in the 60s there was an instant bond between natives when we met in far off lands, like southwest Georgia. Our first Blue Monday must have occurred early in our cycle. Long before reveille, my roommate, Bob Hines, and everyone else in the barracks were rudely awakened by the lights being flicked on and the screaming of senior candidates from 51st Company. I recall there were two senior candidates in our room, each standing nose to nose with one of us, screaming conflicting orders and screaming louder because of our inability to immediately comply with the conflicting tasks. Then a third senior candidate walked into our room. He quietly asked if one of us was from Vermont. When I responded that I was, he told the other senior candidates he would take care of this room, they left and he told Bob and me to sit down. While our platoon mates were low crawling the hallway in their sleeping bags, slipping and falling in the puddles of water in the hallway, or performing other inane tasks, the senior candidate (I remember his name, Jon Dimick) and I sat and had a nice visit about home. I had forgotten that Bob had remained in the room but was not part of the conversation. Whenever a senior candidate would notice Bob and me sitting quietly, he would come in, but Jon would then tell that senior that he was handling this room. Bob and I missed most of the excitement of that Blue Monday. Jon was from St. Johnsbury in the Northeast Kingdom. We learned we had several mutual friends. Jon even remembered my brother from some sporting event. A few weeks later the 51st Company had their graduation. Jon came to say good bye and brought me a pair of jump boots that glistened with their shine. I thanked Jon but mentioned they were not my size. Jon told me they were not his size either. These are display boots, he said, you do not have to rotate your two pair, working to keep the display shine on each. Just keep these on display and keep your others "good enough" for the field.

From Bill Thoroughgood:

Bill Thoroughgood had an experience that illustrates the fact that, hard as it may seem to believe, there were some senior candidates who actually had a heart. (It is also a good example of those odd coincidences that can turn up in the military.) Bill had been stopped somewhere in the battalion area by a senior for a minor infraction – he had a "rope" (also called a "lanyard" but actually a thread) hanging from his uniform. As has appeared in a hundred war movies, the senior asked, "Where are you from, candidate?" It turned out that the senior was from a town near where Bill grew up. Bill told the senior that he used to date a girl from that town and the girl had mentioned a guy from there named Pakradooni. Bill asked if the senior knew this girl and the guy. The senior "breaks into a smile and points to his name on his uniform – 'Pakradooni'. He's the guy she talked about! Now what are those chances?" A few days later, Pakradooni was among the seniors who stormed into the 50th Company's barracks for shock reveille. As Bill reports it, "He asks, 'Where's Thoroughgood?' Just as the other senior candidates start to tear my stuff apart, he steps in and says, 'Leave Thoroughgood alone. He's ok.' He then looks over and winks at me. Pretty amazing coincidence. I have never seen him again, but was always thankful for that rope on my uniform!!"

Appendix B: Mess Hall Stories

From Ken Sutton:

A lot of my fondest memories center on my stint as the mess officer as it relates to Captain Smith. I never was a big Tommy Smith fan and tried to mess with him every chance I got. He would come into the mess hall late in the afternoon after playing basketball in his grey plastic sauna suit (trying to lose some weight) and dump a gallon of sweat all over the mess hall floor which we had to clean up. He would then proceed to pour himself a big glass of lemonade and suck down half the glass all at once before he ever tasted it. One day I filled the pitcher on his table with pure, undiluted lemon concentrate. I don't remember the consequences, just the surprised, puckered look on his face once he tasted it.

The thing that got me in the most trouble with him was the menu. I had to type it the night before on a manual typewriter with carbon paper and it included all three meals for the next day. One time the master menu called for limeade and the ration breakdown point substituted lemons. At lunch, the dreaded "MESS OFFICER!" yell. Sir, Candidate Sutton. Yes sir. "Sutton, where is my limeade? The menu clearly states limeade and that's what I want for dinner." Sir, Candidate Sutton. Yes Sir. So that afternoon after class I went over to the creek beyond York Field and pulled up a small tree by its roots, got some lemons from the mess hall and sprayed them OD green, attached them with string to the tree and put them on a plate, roots, dirt and all along with a note on his table that said "Sir, simulate Lime." Again I'm sure there were consequences, I just don't remember them.

Another time the menu called for "grated cheese" to top the pear slices. The manual typewriter hiccupped and it came out "grate d cheese." I either didn't catch it or didn't want to go back and erase the original and all the carbon copies so it got left the way it was. Once again, at lunch, the dreaded MESS OFFICER yell. Sir, Candidate Sutton. Yes sir. "Sutton my menu says grate d cheese for dinner. That's what I want. Grate d cheese." "Sir, Candidate Sutton. Yes Sir." I called my wife and that afternoon she brought me a semicircle package of cheddar cheese and a hand grater. I cut the center out of the cheese so it took on the shape of the letter D and put it, along with the hand grater and a note, on CPT Smith's plate that said: "Sir. Grate d cheese ye self." Once again, unremembered consequences.

Another time the master menu got me in trouble was when I published our daily menu with maple nut ice cream for dessert and the ration breakdown point substituted vanilla ice cream. At the end of dinner I get, once again, the dreaded MESS OFFICER yell from CPT Smith. "Sir, Candidate Sutton. Yes sir." Smith, holding up his spoon full of ice cream, says, "Sutton my menu says maple nut ice cream. Where are the nuts in my ice cream?" My brilliant response was, "Sir perhaps the nut is on the end of the spoon." An apoplectic "WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY? Tomorrow morning by 0800 I want on my desk, a 5000 word military letter on why you shouldn't have said that." "Sir, Candidate Sutton. Yes Sir."

Okay, so yet another phone call to my wife. I need a bunch of old magazines. At 0800 the next morning on his desk is my 5000 word military letter titled "Why I Shouldn't Have Said That." Page 1 is a narrative description much like the one above describing how I got in this mess in the first place. Page 2 is a picture of some ice cream with the caption, "This is ice cream. Possibly maple nut." Page 3 is a picture of a spoon with the caption, "This is a spoon with which you eat the maple nut ice cream." Page 4 is a picture of some big lips with the caption, "This is my big

mouth.” Page 5 is a picture of a man behind bars with the caption, “This is one of the possible outcomes when you let your big mouth overload your ass.” You know where this is going right?

Page 6 says something to the effect of, “Sir, at first glance this paper may seem somewhat short of 5000 words but sir you have to remember that a picture is worth a thousand words.”

That evening at dinner CPT Smith is passing my paper around their dinner table letting all the TAC officers look at it and they are laughing like crazy. Then I hear it. The dreaded yell, “MESS OFFICER,” and I just know I’m about to get kicked out of OCS. “Sir, Candidate Sutton. Yes sir.” CPT Smith hands me back my paper with this huge smile on his face. “Okay Sutton. You got away with it this time. That showed a lot of initiative and it was funny as hell. You’re dismissed.” “Sir, Candidate Sutton. Yes Sir.” Shortly after that I was released from my duties and replaced by some other unlucky soul. I think I may still have that paper in a box somewhere in the attic.

From Bill Thoroughgood:

I was the Student Mess Officer during OCS, a job I volunteered for shortly after we arrived at Ft. Benning. I had decided to ignore the conventional Army wisdom of “never volunteer” and accept every challenge, either physical or mental, head on. It was only later that I learned that the previous Student Mess Officer had been recycled for his dereliction and that there were a number of unforeseen challenges to being Student Mess Officer. These challenges included the fact that I would always be last to eat, which was not so bad by itself, but it did mean I had only a few minutes to gulp down my food before having to race along to our next scheduled activity. This circumstance was especially troublesome when we had to immediately head out for PT after supper. After a few 50 yard low crawls followed by jumping up and down and jogging in place, the food I consumed was now feeding the grass rather than my body. Moreover, there were IG inspections [Inspector General inspections are very high-level affairs that cover virtually everything that goes on in an army unit; these inspections can have enormous impact on a unit commander’s career.] that put the Mess Hall in the spotlight and caused Captain Smith and the staff to take careful notice of my ability/inability to keep the mess hall in order. (My wife still complains about how I can’t keep the bedroom straight even now.)

Still, my greatest challenge was dealing with the officers seated at the back of the mess hall. This meant our CO, Captain Smith, along with the TAC officers, who lorded over the mess hall from that round table. These officers were often moody and unpredictable. Was something not going their way? I often wondered. Still these were all Army officers and had great influence over my future. I was in awe, or rather in fear of them. While they could be rather ill-tempered to us candidates, they were rather raucous with one another at their table. Captain Smith, who seldom smiled, was always the center of attention while all the young TACs vied for his favor at his left and right. Around this table I tiptoed and tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. This group was a rather capricious lot whose disapproval or enmity you did not want to garner.

One day as I was about to join the end of the chow line I hear this booming voice from the officers’ table. “Student Mess Officer! Thoroughgood, where are you?” Immediately the tone and decibel level created a bit of anxiety. It was Lieutenant Cross. “Where’s Thoroughgood,” he boomed again. Nervously, I quickly moved to the round table where all these characters hung over their food and peered up at me. “Sir, it’s Candidate Thoroughgood reporting.” “Thoroughgood, get me some cherry pie,” Cross demanded in a snarling voice.

Oh no, this was a real dilemma for me. I was caught with a variety of conflicting possible responses. The easiest way out was to go get Cross his damn cherry pie, although I'd rather have rubbed it in his face the way he was asking. But something deep inside was telling me not to get his pie. Moreover, we had recently had a class on what moral courage meant. On the other hand, Cross would tell me I wasn't doing the job and perhaps being insubordinate. As I wrestled with myself over my response, I glanced at Captain Smith. He sat there stoically saying nothing. He gave no support to Cross nor did he give me a way out. I realized I was on my own with this one. I only knew that I was **not** going to get Cross his damn pie. Suddenly I came up with a solution or rather the Good Lord took pity on me and planted the idea in my head.

I turned to Lt. Cross and resolutely said, "Sir, this is not a job for an officer candidate. I will have the kitchen help bring you out a piece of cherry pie." I quickly retreated to the kitchen where I got a member of the kitchen staff to bring Lt. Cross his pie. Feeling rather satisfied with myself, I later returned to the round table to see Lt. Cross glowering at me. I half smiled thinking I had survived the humiliation. I was feeling a bit too smug. Still, Captain Smith gave no reinforcement to Cross because I felt he knew that Cross's request was inappropriate. But I was not out of the woods yet.

Captain Smith was in a rather questioning mood after my confrontation with Cross. He asked in a rather straightforward manner, "Thoroughgood, what do you want to be?" Oh my God, I thought. Does he want some deep existential thought from me about Life? My mind started racing again for a meaningful response. I figured from his desire to punish me on the PT field, he was not looking for some profound, philosophical thought. I stammered a few times, and the only thing I could come out with was this weak, rather stupid answer posed as a question, "A Student Mess Officer, sir?" There was this derisive howl that came up from all at the table, with Cross leading the chorus. I had gone from triumphant to humiliated in just a few short seconds.

"No you don't, Thoroughgood", said the Captain with more animation. I knew I was lost. I could not find the key to unlock me from this fix. I kept stammering. Then one of the more sympathetic TAC officers threw me a lifeline: "Thoroughgood," he said, "you want to be a combat infantry platoon leader." Of course, that was the only logical response. How dumb of me not to see the forest for the trees. I should have known what Smith was getting at. But this was OCS, and one could never quite relax. After all, we had received letters from former classmates who had been dismissed from the program. They were humping fifty pound packs as privates in Vietnam. OCS was not the real world in many ways. It was surreal. Now almost fifty years later I understand that OCS ranks alongside my combat tour in Vietnam as a demanding and difficult time of my life physically, mentally and emotionally.

Finally I must add that the next day I was called down to LT Cross's office. I reported in, and he chewed me out. He said that I should never make him look bad in front of Captain Smith again or else. That was the best chewing out I ever received in the Army. He was still wiping the cherry pie from his face as I retreated out the door with a slight smile on my own face. Thank the Lord. He's been taking care of me all this time.

Appendix C: Thomas J. Smith: An Appreciation and Obituary

Earlier this year (2017) Terry and Wanda Hummel sent us this appreciation of Thomas J. Smith and his wife Barbara.

“Upon receiving the obituary for CPT Smith in 2016, I was able to forward a communiqué to Barbara. One afternoon, not too long ago, I received a phone call from Barbara Smith. “Wanda, I can’t believe you found me!” Well, we had a delightful one-half hour conversation.

As some of you may know, all of the wives of candidates who accompanied their OC husbands to Fort Benning, yet lived off-post, had ample opportunity to get to know Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith was recruited by CPT Smith to train the distaff (all of the young wives from equally varied backgrounds and of equally varied temperaments as their husbands) to be U.S. Army officer wives and to complement their officer husbands accordingly. Numerous social functions (training sessions) followed and each of the wives was “expected” to attend. I have great memories of those get-togethers and soon became profoundly thankful for Barbara Smith, who she was, and what she accomplished.

A thumbnail sketch of MAJ (Retired) and Mrs. Smith’s life follows. Hope I got it right. Tom was diagnosed with lymphoma cancer not long after he retired from the Army. A lump under his chin and a cough were the first symptoms. Tom battled this adversary on and off for the rest of his very productive life. At one time or another, a large mass appeared in his chest, he received a stem cell transplant, and he experienced two remissions. Through all this Tom taught 8th grade science at a Catholic school, taught 14 years in high school and finally started a special school for “at risk” children, where he taught for an additional seven years. He was also an athletics coach and he worked with Special Olympics. Barbara worked as a nurse assistant at a VA hospital for twenty years. Tom and Barbara raised three sons who reside in Minneapolis, MN, Alabama and New York State.

Terry got on the phone with Barbara for a short time and told her of his regrets that we would not be able to meet Tom once again at our upcoming reunion in October. She said, “He would have LOVED that!” Terry thought he could “hear” some tears on the other end of the line. At that point, Terry took the liberty of inviting Barbara to attend our reunion in October and informed her that she would certainly hold a place of honor if she could attend. She seemed somewhat overwhelmed with that and did not provide a response. I finished the conversation with Barbara. I could only smile as I shared with Barbara that the three of us (Terry, Wanda, Barbara) are all the same age, seventy-two. We agreed to stay in touch.

For those of you who may be interested, Barbara Smith’s mailing address is 16799 Hawkweed Road, Sparta, WI 54656. For now, she respectfully requested that we not share her telephone number with others.

So there you have it. Two lives lived serving, teaching, coaching and helping or gracing others. Could Terry and I raise a glass in a formal setting, we would sincerely and simply say, “Bravo! Thank you! Well Done.”

Obituary of Retired Major Thomas J. Smith

Retired Major Thomas J. Smith “slainte,” died Friday, July 29, 2016, at Gundersen Health System in La Crosse and his wife, Barbara, was at his side. Tom was born in Detroit on Feb. 28, 1943. His parents died when he was young and at age 12, he went to Boysville, a boarding school

for at-risk youth. He excelled in sports, especially football, and attended Adrian College on scholarship.

He enlisted in the Army in 1963 to play installation military football at Fort Knox, KY. Football was short lived because of a knee injury. He was then assigned to Fort Dix, NJ, then to Fort Benning, GA, where he attended OCS. Four days after his graduation from OCS he married Barbara Kaye Dugan in Toledo, Ohio. Over the years Tom and Barb lived in many places and had three wonderful sons, Brian, Mike and Terry.

Tom was a basic training company commander at Fort Leonard Wood, MO. He was sent to Vietnam in 1967 and served as a rifle company commander. There, he was wounded and awarded the Purple Heart. He spent two months in Japan for treatment and returned to Vietnam, in November 1967, as an assistant S-3 and in time for the Tet Offensive.

The Smith family made homes in Germany, Michigan, Kansas and Fort McCoy, WI — his last duty station before retirement. At Fort McCoy he was the director of personnel and community activities. His most memorable time frame was during the 1980 Cuban refugee settlement. He retired from the Army in 1983, settled in Sparta, and began a second career teaching and coaching. He taught at St. Patrick's school in Sparta, for 14 years. His sons were active in sports and Tom was an assistant football and wrestling coach for many years. In 1997, Tom joined Aric Soderblum to establish Sparta Area Independent Learning School (SAILS) to help at risk students. He was especially proud of the establishment of SAILS.

He was also a Veteran's advocate, an ambassador for Teach Vietnam, and was privileged to travel to Washington, D.C., to read names at the 25th Anniversary of the Wall. Tom retired from teaching in 2005, and was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma three months later. Over the last 11 years, he endured numerous chemo and radiation treatments and a stem cell transplant. He was strong and brave through all the health problems. He had a positive attitude that everyone who knew him admired. Since retirement from teaching, Tom served on Compass, the SAILS school board, and he was on the board of the 5th Cavalry Association, as well as an ambassador for Teach Vietnam. Tom was an avid Detroit sports fan. He also loved everything Irish. He was a devoted husband, father, and grandfather, who always put family first.

He is survived by his wife of 51 years, Barbara; sons, Brian, Mike (Bonnie) and Terry; and the joy of his heart, his granddaughters, Sydney, Megan and Rachel.

This obituary originally appeared in the La Crosse, Tribune.

http://lacrossetribune.com/lifestyles/announcements/obituaries/obituary-retired-majorthomas-j-smith/article_c9250269-d4ab-5450-b827-7393180b16e9.html