

Those of us who would end up in 50th Company were ready for our next challenge, and we would find it at Fort Benning, Georgia.

Infantry School: “Follow Me!”

U.S. Army OCS

Infantry OCS was conducted at Ft. Benning, Georgia. This was also home to the U.S. Army’s Infantry School, where West Point and ROTC officers assigned to the Infantry took their Infantry Branch Basic Course. If you stayed in the Army you would return as a Captain to take the Infantry Career Course. Many allied officers also took these same courses. It was also home to an Airborne Training Unit, a Ranger Training Unit, a Scout Dog School, and a Basic Training Unit. While in OCS we wore a patch on our left shoulder that showed a white sword upright on a dark blue background with the words “Follow Me” in white letters above the point of the sword.ⁱ

At the peak of the Vietnam War, virtually every branch of the Army operated its own Officer Candidate School: Infantry, Artillery, Armor, Engineer, Signal, Transportation, Ordnance, and Quartermaster, each based at a different Army post. According to one source, they turned out 7,000 second lieutenants each year to meet the War’s requirement for junior officers.

Infantry OCS at Fort Benning was by far the largest, with three battalions of between four and six companies each. The OCS complex included sixteen three-story barracks, each one holding one company of over two hundred “candidates,” as we were called.ⁱⁱ

We quickly learned that OCS was the opposite of how many of our recruiters had described Basic. Rather than being geared toward the lowest common denominator, it was designed to weed out those “who were not officer material.” And weed us out it did. On average, over a third of the candidates left the program, either by their own choosing or by being selected out.

While each of us could think of a reason not to go through Infantry OCS, we also had our own personal incentives, whether it was not letting down people back home, or not letting ourselves down, or maybe something else.ⁱⁱⁱ Along with that was the desire to not be viewed as a quitter by our classmates, whom we grew to like, respect, and rely on.

Regardless of whether an individual had voluntarily joined the Army or had been drafted, they could all be considered volunteers now, since one could not be forced to attend OCS. Everyone was there by choice.

Technically, Officer Candidate School was a twenty-three week program. However, it was always referred to as a “six month-program,” including in our class book and other “official” materials. Since most of us had arrived at Fort Benning in late January, and graduation took place on August first, we were under the thumb of Captain Smith, our Tactical Officers (TACs), and senior candidates that whole time. So for us, OCS lasted a little over six months.

The OCS program was structured in three “phases”: Basic, Intermediate and Senior. In the Basic phase, which lasted the first twelve weeks, everything the candidate did was supervised by the TACs, with very little positive feedback and plenty of negative. It was during this stage that the pressure and physical demands were the greatest. It seemed that everything we did, we did wrong. Here, the emphasis was on weeding out those who were not holding up under stress. The pressure let up slightly during the Intermediate phase, from weeks thirteen to eighteen, and there was greater emphasis on technical training. After eighteen weeks, we became senior candidates, and the training focused on infantry tactics, combined arms, and more training and field exercises that required us to lead others. There was still plenty of stress and physical training, but fewer candidates were dropping out or being selected out against their will.

The context for all of this was that, until we had entered the Army just four months earlier, most of us were generally rebellious to the point of dismissing authority. We had to be quickly conditioned to do things “the Army way,” which in our point of view often seemed to defy logic. Used to being convinced and persuaded, we now had to obey orders immediately and without question, just as we would be expected to do in combat and would expect from those under our command. We now aspired to be more than just soldiers – we wanted to become *leaders* of soldiers.

Arrival at Ft. Benning

In late January 1969 we started arriving at Fort Benning. For some, the first impression of our new home may have been a heavy, swamp-like smell that brought forth visions of being sucked into a bottomless morass. As it turned out it wasn’t a swamp at all. It was a pulp mill a few miles away. Whenever the wind was right, this added “nuance” to the ominous anxiety that was our daily companion at the “Benning School for Boys.”

Some had arrived a couple of weeks before our cycle was to start, and to our surprise, there were no cadre, no billets available, and nothing for us to do. This was not unusual in 1969.^{iv}

We soon learned that we were being assigned to the 50th Company, and our class designation was OC 24-69. The 50th was the “first” Company in the 5th Battalion, which also included Companies 51 – 55. The 5th Battalion liked to consider itself to be the “first” among the three OCS battalions; so the 50th’s motto was “First and Best,” and from the day we arrived we were expected to live up to this designation. We were the “First and the Best.”

Since our barracks were not ready, a number of the new arrivals roomed with a company of senior candidates who were just days from graduation. A few of these guys thought it was great fun to harass us a bit, but in general they were very laid back (much more so than our class would be, right up to graduation – the pressure on us never let up). These seniors gave some good advice. “Cooperate and graduate,” they said.^v

After living with the seniors for a few days, our quarters were ready, so we moved to the building that would be our home for the next six months. For the next couple of weeks, we had to be kept busy while we waited for the rest of our classmates to arrive. We were busy, all right, doing menial tasks like sweeping debris from the rocks in the drainage ditches in front of the barracks and trimming the grass with our little sewing kit scissors. But it was a relief to learn that in OCS we were not required to do certain things that we had to do in Basic and AIT, such as pull KP and guard duty. Two small consolations.

Our barracks had two- or three-man rooms, and as soon as we moved in we had to arrange everything in a uniform manner. The TACs would give selected candidates instructions about what things should go where, then these candidates would hustle up and down the halls shouting out instructions to the rest of us. Some of these instructions were conflicting, which may have been an intentional ruse to confuse us. If so, it worked, and we kept moving our socks, underwear and toiletries from one drawer to another until we finally got things straight. To add to the confusion, a candidate with a strong New England accent went down the hall yelling “Put your *khakis* in your wall locker!” Then came a reply from another candidate with an equally strong southern accent, “Why should we put our *car keys* in our wall locker?” We were off to a good start.

OCS would be different from Basic and AIT in two other, much more important, respects: expectations and *esprit de corps*. (Actually, the two are inseparable.) In both Basic and AIT, the expectation was that each recruit should do as well as he could in each area (better in some, not as well in others). But a minimum standard had to be reached by all; and minimum was good enough. If there was *esprit de corps*, it came from simply successfully completing the training and now being part of the U.S. Army.

In OCS, expectations were infinitely higher. Minimum performance would not do, and anyone suspected of slacking off to just get by was soon straightened out or drummed out of the program. Maximum performance all the time in everything was the rule. As a company, we were clearly expected to be better than other companies, to be the best company in our battalion, if not in all of OCS. The pressure to meet this standard paid off both in how well 50th Company ultimately did, and the pride we all felt in it.

Daily Life: Marching Songs & Who was Jody Anyway?

In OCS you moved everywhere in formation. Someone was in charge and we marched to a cadence, usually a simple rhyme, to keep everyone in step. Sometimes it was a simple as “1, 2, 3, 4”, but often it was to a song. These cadence songs were called “Jodies” after a civilian character, named Jody, who remained at home to drive the soldier’s car, date the soldier’s girlfriend, hang out with the soldier’s friends and eat mom’s great cooking.^{vi} One example of a Jody is:

*“Ain’t no use in going home.
Jody’s got your girl and gone. Ain’t
no use in being blue.
Jody’s got your sister too.”*

On one of our first days at 50th Company, we needed to march from our assembly area to the mess hall, a distance of perhaps 100 yards. The student commander gave the proper commands and off we went, singing a song we had sung in Basic/AIT. The TAC assigned to us stopped us and told us that we were Officer Candidates now and could no longer sing Enlisted Men’s songs. This had never occurred to us, but as we would for the next six months, we found a way and did not miss dinner.

In a testament to the value of forced learning, the various OC companies at Ft. Benning were endlessly creative when it came to making up and singing “Jodies,” and it wasn’t long before we were too. The Jody we sang most often while marching was to the tune of a song by the Coasters called “Poison Ivy.” One lyric went:

*“You’ve heard the warning order.
The Captain’s had his say.
You hope to God you live another day, In
Vietnam, Vietnam.
Late at night while you’re sleeping
Charlie Cong Comes a creeping*

All around.”

When we ran the Airborne track each morning, we woke up the other OC companies with a simpler cadence:

*“Hey, hey, what do you say?
50th Company is on the way.”*

After we turned Blue, the lyric, which we proudly called out as we passed other companies, became:

*“Hey, hey, get outta the way now.
50th Company’s on the way now.”*

This lyric was followed by a cadence: “1, 2, 3, 4” with the “4” stretched out to two syllables.^{vii}

Panels, Recycles, Drops and Drop Outs

At the start, 50th Company had 224 candidates. But the nature, and in some ways the purpose, of OCS meant that not all of those would graduate with the 50th. While there were a few unique situations, like the law school grad in the 50th who left early in the program to accept a direct commission into the Judge Advocate General (JAG) Corps, and others who fell ill or were injured during training, most fell into one of two categories: those who chose to drop out, and those the Army (meaning Captain Smith and our TACs) decided should be either be “recycled” or dropped from OCS altogether.

Choosing to drop out of OCS did not necessarily reflect poorly on the individual. Some simply decided that they did not want to be officers, or that it was not worth the extra commitment in time (our commitment was to serve two years after being commissioned, rather than two years from the time one entered Basic.) There were also those who would never be successful in the OCS environment. In this respect, the screening process of OCS did what it was supposed to do.

If you did decide that OCS was not for you, you had to wait until week four to leave. The fourth week of the program was known as “Drop Week” or “Quit Week.” This was the time when the pressure was ramped up even more, and “marginal” candidates were made to understand that this was not the place for them. No one who was singled out as being “marginal” stayed past week four.^{viii}

Being “paneled” was the process that could lead to a candidate being dropped from the program involuntarily. A candidate who was not performing up to standards would appear before a panel of officers who would examine his performance and determine what the next step would be. He might continue with his company, but under extra scrutiny – which often meant being placed more frequently in command positions. Alternatively, he might be “recycled” back to an OCS company that started after OC 2469 to repeat parts of the training. Or he might be dropped from the program altogether and returned to enlisted ranks.

The fear of being recycled constantly hung over us, and just the thought of going through it again struck terror in our hearts. Ron Stryker recalls how determined a candidate could be to avoid being recycled: “I believe it was sometime during our 20th or 21st week [only a few weeks from graduation] when, as a result of a minor infraction, Clark Yokley, Paul Mansky, and I were ordered to do 50 pushups. Paul was recuperating from an injury at the time and was threatened with being recycled to a 12th or 18th week company if he could not do the required number of pushups. Paul’s response was: “I wouldn’t take a recycle back to breakfast!” Paul apparently managed to talk himself out of the situation, since he was not recycled and graduated on schedule with 50th Company.

Being recycled offered the candidate an opportunity to prove that he could live up to the standards of the program. If he failed a second time, he was usually dropped from OCS altogether. How many of these “recycles” eventually graduated, we never knew. ^{ix}

Daily Life: Bayonet Sheets

We were evaluated not only by our cadre of TACs and instructors, but also by each other. Through a system we referred to as “screw your buddy,” we were required to complete “bayonet sheets” on which we rated our platoon mates who were the bottom five in terms of leadership. While the few candidates who weren’t team players consistently received low ratings, we mostly rated lowest those we knew the least. As we became more familiar with each other it got harder to give anyone a poor rating. In the last bayonet sheet every member of the 2d Platoon was on someone else’s bottom five. It may not have occurred to us that part of the purpose of this system was to condition us to evaluate the performance of others, plus, to make decisions which could drastically affect another person – and that before long we would be making decisions far more serious.

Leadership potential was also tested by keeping us under almost constant, unrelenting stress to see if we could maintain our composure and continue to function effectively. This was particularly the case during Phase One of the program. Everything was done under pressure, usually from the TACs – getting up in the morning, using the latrine, preparing our rooms for inspection, eating, running to class, physical training, studying – everything. The pace was fast, orders were to be obeyed immediately and without question, and the slightest hesitation was grounds for being singled out. Much of this “harassment” was done, of course, to give the candidate the opportunity to wash himself out of the program.

Infantry School: Follow Me Notes

ⁱ [US Army Infantry shoulder patch](#)

We were also called “smacks,” a derogatory term taken from the Army’s standard fiveparagraph field order: Situation, Mission, Execution, Administration/Logistics, Command/Signal.

ⁱ The experiences of four men are illustrative of what brought many of us to OCS:

Wayne Ferrentino felt “that dropping out of school meant almost certain draft, four months of training and off to VN as a rifleman, [which] was not very appealing. [Going to] Canada was never really considered. Like many, I felt a duty to serve and thought being a leader versus a follower was the route to go.” Several of Wayne’s college friends were in ROTC, which did not

seem all that difficult, and he assumed OCS must be much like that program. "I figured how big a deal could OCS be?" Wayne would soon learn that ROTC and OCS were worlds apart.

From Paul Kochis: "I knew when I enlisted that I had two letters of acceptance to law school and that I wanted to pursue that when my tour was over. I did. And, my law school class of 1974 consisted of perhaps 85% military veterans. One of my professors commented years later that the class was unusually serious and mature due to their service. Having survived those three years, there was no fooling around. We would be 27 or 28 years old by the time we could pursue a real career. A late start, but I would not ever trade my experience in the US Army." Paul's feeling that his military service would give him a "late start" on "a real career" has been echoed by many vets. In the long run, most learned that their service paid off throughout their career. Nevertheless, the concern about "falling behind" was something that kept many from joining.

Bill Thoroughgood agreed that "going into the military [was] a safer option" since he "was not ready for a grad school effort. I felt a lot like Dustin Hoffman in The Graduate, less the Mrs. Robinson element. So OCS offered some attraction; i.e., become an officer and play for time if you weren't sure about the next step, a safer bet."

Brian Walrath's situation was similar:

I had no idea what I was going to do after I graduated, other than get married; I just knew I was supposed to "go to work." For some reason, I didn't feel ready to find a position in the corporate world, despite being a business major. The military seemed somehow "safer," perhaps because it offered a structured culture where many decisions would be made for me. A few years in the service would be good for me, and might also satisfy some vague feelings of "duty." My first choice was the Air Force, which would not take me because I wore glasses, eliminating me from being a pilot or navigator (they had more non-flying applicants than they could handle). This led me to the Army (somehow, the Navy had no appeal, and the Marines...well, they're the Marines, for goodness sake.) I may have been naïve about the war, but having, like all of us, seen it on TV every night for years, was aware that it would likely be my fate to serve in Vietnam. Still, I pretty much put that out of my mind, or had some wistful hope that maybe the war would be over before it was my turn to go. My focus was more on becoming an officer, rather than on what came after that.

^{iv} An earlier company (OC 20-69, 66th Company) arrived with no available billets or cadre, and so all the candidates were sent to the three week long Airborne School that was also based at Ft. Benning. They call themselves the Airborne OCS to this day. www.airborneocs.org

^v Mike Eberhardt, who was among the early arrivals, adds another piece of advice that he heard from one of the senior candidates. "The advice of one of those guys stayed with me throughout the ordeal of OCS. He told several of us in a chat session, 'Never take anything personal. The TACs are doing their job and they will yell and call you names. But never take it personally or you will not survive OCS.' It was good advice."

^{vi} www.army-cadence.com/who is Jody anyway?

