

1966

OCS: UNTRAINED TO LEAD



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After joining the U.S. Army in 1964, I had been assigned to the 2/48 Infantry, 3rd Armed Division in Glenhausen, Germany. There I rose from the rank of Private E-2 (second lowest paygrade) to become the youngest Sergeant, E-5, in the 1st Brigade. I worked hard for that rank, having twice survived annual trips to the overly harsh Grafenwoeher and Wildflecken training areas, earning the Expert Infantry Badge (EIB), and succeeding in graduating from the 2/48 Infantry NCO Academy.

One day, my favorite Sergeant First Class (whose name I don't remember), called me aside. He recommended that I go to Officer Candidate School (OCS). He pointed out that I had held the highest leadership position in the NCO Academy and had a "natural ability to lead." He also pointed out that as a Sergeant, E-5, it would be at least six years before I could expect to be promoted again.

So I made the decision to apply for Officer Candidate School. I sent in my application, passed the written exams, and passed a Screening Board, composed of officers from my brigade. None of them seemed to know what to ask me, so they asked me rather simple questions like, "If you were stranded in a small, unknown town, and had to do something for 3 hours, what would you do?"

I replied, "Go to a museum and study the local culture."

I seemed to give the right answers because I passed. That said, I'm not sure how anyone could have failed a test where there were no right answers.

My orders for OCS arrived shortly thereafter.

I arrived at the 53rd Officer Candidate School Company and was immediately harassed by Senior Candidates. You could easily spot them because they were walking around in crisp uniforms and wearing blue helmet liners. (Junior Candidates had to run everywhere they went and wore black helmet liners.)

There were about 200 men in my class and we were harassed from the moment we arrived until one week before graduation. I was harassed almost until the day I graduated. (If your Tactical Officer disliked you, you were going to be harassed and there was nothing you could do about it.)

I ran for President of my class. I came in third place in the elections, so I became the Class Treasurer. It didn't matter that I had no training in accounting nor had I even been to college, I had to manage the class's money. (I would survive a format Article 32 Investigation of my handling of the money later only because of meticulous record-keeping.)

Our day began at 4:30 a.m. with a wake up and preparation for the day. Chow was at 6 a.m. It, like all the other meals we attended, required that we stand in line, with our helmet liner held in the crux of our arm while we alternately stood at attention or parade rest (a formal, "relaxed" position).

Once inside the Dining Facility, we ran the gauntlet of the cadre who, from their table at the head of the mess hall, would yell questions at us. The questions were not helpful, but were designed purely to embarrass you one more time that day.

I remember that the evening meal every Thursday featured steak. I never ate any steak while in OCS until my final week. Every time I would enter the mess hall, a particularly loathsome second lieutenant would yell, "Candidate Eggleston?"

I would snap to attention and reply, at the top of my lungs, "Sir, Candidate Eggleston,"

An example question was, "How many bolts are in the bleachers at the southeast corner of the parade ground?"

"Sir, Candidate Eggleston. I have no idea, sir."

"Well, go find out," would be the Tac Officer's sneering reply.

"Sir, Candidate Eggleston. Yes, sir."

I would run to the bleachers, about a mile away, and studiously count the bolts, knowing that even if I lied, the Tac would never know. However, my integrity drove me to count rather than fabricate the number — even knowing that there was no way to count the bolts in the eight sets of bleachers and still get back in time to eat. I counted the bolts, and I ran back.

The mess hall was closed — as usual.

Every class during Officer Candidate School began with, “If you don’t pay attention in this class, you’re going to die in Vietnam.”

There was no secret going to Vietnam, and it was no secret that the Army expected 50% of us to either die or be maimed-for-life by the time we finished our one-year tours in that war-torn country.

Unfortunately, we heard that introduction warning for every class, including “Maintenance of Trucks in a Maintenance Company,” “Proper Establishment of a Battalion Aid Station,” and “The Armored Company in Retrograde” (a kind of formal retreat).

We quickly realized that the information was overwhelming and the content under-demanding. The “tissue issue” (papers, books and manuals) given to us filled the shelves in our closets and most of the room in our footlockers. We didn’t have time to read anyway, we were too busy spit-shining the floors.

The reality was that the Army could little afford to fail any of our candidates because the Army was critically short of second lieutenants. I believe the number of candidates dropped from the rolls of our class was about ten, mostly for “lack of leadership ability” rather than academics.

During my short six months in Officer Candidate School, I learned to “spit-shine” floors, scream stupid answers to ever more inane questions, and run around the grounds avoiding both Senior Candidates and Tac (Tactical) Officers.

Spit-shining floors involved large quantities of dry floor wax combined with little water rubbed repeatedly over a small section of floor until it shined as if it were a boot. Whereas one man could shine the hallway floor in 10 minutes using liquid wax and a buffer, spit-shining involved about five men and required one hour if there had been no major damage to the floor.

We avoided major damage to the floors by removing our boots every time we entered the building. Since this was a very time-consuming and challenging task, we didn’t go into the buildings all day unless there was no other option.

We discovered that if you spit-shined the floor under your bunk and sprayed it with Pledge furniture polish, the floor would shine like a diamond under a search light.

The reason we didn't do that to all our floors is that the surface became so slick, one took his own life in his hands trying to walk across that area. A broken arm was guaranteed. A broken wrist was a possibility.

In fact, as I recall, one candidate was the only one who tried it on his whole room's floor. After the Tac Officer fell, following a double-reverse with half-twist cartwheel heels-over-head scream-filled fall, it was just a matter of time before that candidate was gone.

One cannot fathom the amount of useless information one can learn when driven to it. My cranium strained to hold large numbers that meant little, charts that illustrated ill-applied concepts, and multiple alternatives in a single-option world. There was the "school solution," and only the school solution. Innovation was for generals, not for lieutenants-to-be.

After graduating, I never spit-shined floors again, and I never used Pledge furniture polish on floors. I never managed trucks in a maintenance battalion or a battalion aid station or an armored company in a retrograde operation.

What I did *not* learn was how to manage things and lead men, how to survive in combat, or how to place the insignia on my dress uniform.

From my experience, OCS was designed to generate "cannon fodder" and quickly fill the officer ranks of those units going to a war that the United States never had a plan to win.

I was woefully unprepared by OCS for what lay ahead of me.

Too many of my fellow lieutenants died because OCS was a school and not an academy. It was a quickly-established organization that was not very well organized. It was a place where tactical officers were there to harass, not mentor; to scream, not share; and to be icons, not role models.

I made up my mind that if I was ever in charge of creating a school, harassment would not be tolerated, students would have a strict set of goals to achieve, and all training would be focused upon those goals. I successfully achieved that with Warrior University in the 1980's.

Upon graduation from Officer Candidate School, I then graduated from Airborne School and became a paratrooper.

I was assigned to Alpha Company, 2/503 Infantry, 82nd Airborne Division, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

There I trained — as best that I could — 46 men to become a part of the famed 173rd Airborne Brigade (Separate).

Thanks only to my training as a squad leader in the 2/48th Infantry (in Germany), some innate skills, pure luck and the grace of God, was I able to survive the Vietnam debacle.

But that's another story for another time.