From Enlisted Soldier to Engineer Second Lieutenant

A brief review of Engineer OCS training at Fort Belvoir, Virginia during 66-67. Color Guard at the left is composed of Candidates from Class 14-67.

(USACEOCR photo)
In 1966, the U.S. Army Engineer Officer Candidate Regiment (USAEOCR) at Fort Belvoir, Virginia was composed of four training battalions, each with multiple training companies, sometimes having two separate OCS classes undergoing training at the same time. There were around one hundred or so candidates in each class. Needless to say, this was a busy time for the cadre assigned to the OCS Regiment. USAEOCR was commanded by a Colonel and he had a typical support staff at his level to manage administration, operations and supply for the regiment. Each battalion commander had a much smaller but adequate staff. It was at company level, however, where all the action was.

A USAEOCR company commander had the support of an Executive Officer, First Sergeant, Training/Operations NCO, Supply Sergeant, Mess Sergeant, and usual company administrative and supply personnel. The unit utilized World War II era wooden barracks, lined up starting with the headquarters (Orderly Room), and followed by a single line of open-bay, two story barracks buildings, with the company mess hall at the end of the line. The open area adjacent to this line of buildings was referred to as the “company street.”

During the twenty-three week Engineer OCS program, candidates were given very intensive training in leadership, along with tactical and engineering subjects designed to equip them to cope with, and overcome challenges many were soon to face...on the battlefields of Vietnam.

Each class was continually observed by a Senior and Junior Tactical Officer (TAC) who were usually recent OCS graduates or young officers just returning from Vietnam combat.

Candidates struggled to develop confidence and teamwork with class peers, in order to overcome obstacles placed in front of them by their tactical officers. In the classroom they had to adapt to the mental challenges of academic instruction provided to them during a long training day. The simple task of staying awake during class was a daunting challenge for many.

During World War II, Engineer Officer Candidate School (OCS) provided the Corps of Engineers with approximately 24,000 commissioned officers. Reopened during the Korean War, Engineer OCS produced over 2300 commissioned officers, whose record throughout the war fully demonstrated the value of the OCS system. On September 15, 1965, the school was re-activated at Fort Belvoir, Virginia to help support the manpower needs associated with the initial stages of the Vietnam War. Before its inactivation in 1971, Engineer OCS produced over 10,000 officers (not all of them branched Engineer) and each again proved the worth of the OCS program to the Army.
Time was a most sought after commodity…and it seemed to candidates as if there was never enough. Barracks and personal appearance inspections were held at least once a day, with accompanying demands by TACs to “stand erect”, “pull your chin in” “keep your eyes straight ahead”, or “wipe that smile off your face, Mister”. When deficiencies were noted during such inspections, by incorrect placement of personal items in a foot locker for example, it was a usual practice to dump all items on the floor near the unfortunate candidate involved, so as to “make a point”. The same applied to items hung in wall lockers.

Unfortunately, progressively more disruptive “creativity” by TACs to devise ways to make their point required Company and Battalion Commanders to insert themselves so as to maintain the dignity of the program. Those TACs who went too far were soon replaced. Still, the definition in those days of what “too far” meant was not as concise as it should have been, so there were some abuses of authority. (Author’s note: Every OCS graduate can describe interesting “events” they went through while trying to stay out of harms way from the wrath of their Tactical Officers. Some stories are humorous, others less so.)

The first eight weeks of OCS were the hardest. Besides the stresses associated with learning to adapt to unfamiliar standards, academics played a major role in daily lives of all. After the first week of training where physical and mental fitness were primary focus areas, weeks two through eight were filled with long hours of map reading and land navigation training, principles of basic field fortifications, and rigging. Hands-on instruction was paramount. Additionally, classroom instruction was presented.
The week culminated with an all-night “escape and evasion” exercise designed to test the candidate’s ability to move undetected and elude enemy aggressors (who were literally and strategically placed throughout the exercise area so as to capture as many candidates as possible). If captured, one had to endure the rigors of a highly realistic POW camp, and that threat alone drove many to do all they could to successfully evade their potential captors.

After returning from Fort A.P. Hill, candidates spent weeks ten and eleven in preparation for a series of academic examinations, and being introduced to Army communications equipment. This culminated in week eleven with a conduct of a field training exercise in communications, to include setting up both a brigade and battalion radio net, while operating under combat conditions.

Having successfully completed eleven weeks of training brought significant recognition to each candidate standing in formation as part of a much more proficient and tighter knit group from what had existed during prior weeks of training. Being presented with by a white plastic tab to mount behind their OCS collar insignia was clearly an item of pride, and it afforded the wearer with privileges of “rank” for the first time during OCS. Of course with that rank came assignment of more responsibility to care for and lead others.

In celebration of their newly found status as Junior Officer Candidates, the class held an “Over-the-Hump” party at the OCS Club where for the first time they could relax in the company of their peers and cadre alike. At that time many in the Army there were more “social” duties expected of an officer than there are today, so the event allowed all to sample what would lie ahead for them…assuming they continued to study with flashlights under wool blankets.

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During the following weeks, candidates were immersed in subjects and completion of field projects most closely associated with the Corps of Engineers…destructions, land mine warfare, bridging and construction in a theater of operations. This included learning to estimate materials for construction and actual erection of several types of military buildings. Also included was hands-on instruction with erection of military floating and fixed bridges of various configuration. Additionally, candidates were exposed to operations and maintenance of various items of engineer construction equipment which they would encounter later on in troop units to which they were to be assigned. And finally, while they were becoming more involved with “engineering” as a subject area, they were also required to demonstrate their leadership abilities by being placed in company leader positions on a rotating basis.

A top highlight of OCS was being presented with a red tab to replace the white plastic tab worn behind their OCS collar insignia. As a Senior Officer Candidate, many were selected to serve in leadership positions at battalion and regimental level. Given that a weekly regimental parade was held during the twenty-three week course, these were the people who not only helped plan those events, but were required to coordinate entries of an officer than there are today, so the event allowed all to sample what would lie ahead for them…assuming they completed the remainder of the course.

After having the new Second Lieutenant bars pinned on by friends or family at the Wallace Theater Graduation Ceremony, each new officer would depart in various directions. The author served as a Company Commander in USAEOCR from 1966-67 (Mike Company) and again in 1969-1970 (Alpha Company). He was also the Regimental S-3 in 1970.

According to the Corps of Engineers, this event was designed to test the candidate’s ability to assume their rank of Second Lieutenant. In the rear taking evaluation notes, and helping when needed. “Aggressors” provided realism to the exercise, as did the application of various pyrotechnics. Command, control and teamwork were key during the week, and for the first time candidates were practicing, on their own, the sort of leadership skills they would use as a Second Lieutenant in charge of a platoon in combat.

Graduation from OCS during week twenty-three was a great occasion for all. But, it was also another transition point, and a time when exceptionally close bonds of military service with class-mates would be severed to a certain degree.

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As time in the course neared an end, each class spent an entire week in the field on a specially planned combat simulated exercise designed to test just about everything learned up to that point. All command positions in the exercise were held by candidates, with company cadre standing by in the rear taking evaluation notes, and helping when needed. “Aggressors” provided realism to the exercise, as did the application of various pyrotechnics. Command, control and teamwork were key during the week, and for the first time candidates were practicing, on their own, the sort of leadership skills they would use as a Second Lieutenant in charge of a platoon in combat.

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Additionally, historical documents and memorabilia pertaining to Engineer OCS are important to sustaining the history and traditions thereof. To assist that effort, The Engineer OCS Association (TEOCSA) was organized as a non-profit entity. Members of the association meet at designated locations during the year to discuss various programs which ultimately may help the Engineer School collect and preserve Engineer OCS historical materials for their archives. Additionally, the association serves as a conduit through which to bring together Engineer OCS alumni, including graduates, faculty, and training unit cadres. Those having an interest in this organization may send email to: TEOCSA@comcast.net, or by calling 404.231.3402.

Being commissioned through an Army OCS program, no matter the branch specialty or location of training, signifies that the graduate has successfully completed numerous exceptionally rigorous and challenging tasks which allowed them to pin on the Gold Bars of a Second Lieutenant. In comparison to other sources of commissioning, OCS has the same essential requirements. However, for those graduates who withstood the many training adversities deliberately and carefully placed before them over a twenty-three week period in USAEOCR, there is a big difference. AE