

## **Engineer Officer Candidate School (1941-1971)**

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 reactivated 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.

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.

All were given ample opportunity to demonstrate leadership abilities, physical fitness, mental dexterity, and personal courage. They were also required to maintain the highest standard of personal and barracks appearance and had to adhere to rigid requirements pertaining to military courtesy, customs of the service, conduct and discipline. As a result of such training, any graduate of Engineer OCS was a highly sought after asset by engineer troop units, since candidates began their military service as an enlisted man, and some had even attained NCO rank prior to being accepted into the OCS program. That experience, coupled with the rigorous training program at Fort Belvoir, usually combined to create a top-notch Platoon Leader.

The first day of Officer Candidate School is probably firmly cemented in the memories of all graduates. Initial arrival and formation on the company street near the Orderly Room, including

the most important introduction to company Tactical Officers, was a period of transition from being an enlisted man used to much less rigid training and daily operational standards, to a person referred to as a SMEAC (pronounced “smack”). The acronym was based on the five-paragraph field order...Situation, Mission, Execution, Administration & Logistics, and Command & Signal...something each candidate would rely upon daily for the next twenty-three weeks. The term was used to describe someone who had yet to master any of the rudimentary requirements necessary to meet even the basic standards of OCS. In short, it was not a compliment to be referred to as a SMEAC.

A typical class was initially composed of a mix of enlisted soldiers holding great promise for what they were about to undergo. However, after arrival in the training company, many saw a portion of that promise begin to fade. “Suck that chin in, SMEAC!” “Mister, do you know you’re standing on my company street and getting it dirty? Drop and give me twenty!” Confusion, fear, anxiety, and regret were rampant feelings, but soon the first formation was over, and in-processing continued. Buzz haircuts (usually taking less than a minute) were administered at an OCS barber shop, OCS related gear such as collar brass and black helmet liners were issued, personnel records were checked, and barracks bunk assignments were made.

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 footlocker 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 harm’s 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 in areas involving other branches of the Army such as Infantry, Armor, Signal, Ordnance and Artillery. There was a need to study at night, and time was especially set aside to do so before “lights out” at a precise time. However, some continued to study with flashlights under wool blankets.

Going to Fort A.P. Hill, Virginia's field training area, 50 miles south of Fort Belvoir during the ninth week of training was a "water mark" for candidates, because it afforded them an opportunity to get away from the routine of being in USAEOCR at Fort Belvoir. It was also the first time they would live as an Infantry soldier in an OCS field training environment. During that week, candidates were instructed in weapons: including firing the M-14 rifle, 3.5 inch rocket launcher, M-60 machine gun, M-79 grenade launcher and .45 caliber pistol. Infantry tactics played a key role with a focus on squad and platoon operations.

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 liberally 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 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 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 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 completed the remainder of the course.

During the following weeks, candidates were immersed in subjects and completion of field projects most closely associated with the Corps of Engineers...demolitions, 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 operation 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 brass. 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 served as key leaders and staff during execution...proudly shouting out commands in front of a large audience from all over Fort Belvoir. If you were selected by your cadre chain-of-command to be the Regimental or Battalion Commander during such a ceremony, you had definitely reached a pinnacle of success in OCS.

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.

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 classmates would be severed to a certain degree.

After having their new Second Lieutenant bars pinned on by friends or family at the Wallace Theater Graduation Ceremony, each new officer would depart in various directions of service throughout the Corps of Engineers. Many soon found themselves in Vietnam, and unfortunately some were killed or injured in action there. Others were initially assigned elsewhere. However, regardless of where they went, each took with them experiences and a strong sense of accomplishment of having successfully completed a very rigorous training program.

Some Engineer OCS graduates were more successful than others. Those who attained the rank of Colonel or higher, or who were awarded the Silver Star or higher, are recognized in the Engineer OCS Hall of Fame, administered with the Army Engineer School. Special plaques with Hall of Fame member names inscribed are displayed in the school's Lincoln Hall at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

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 cadre.

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.

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