

Signal Corps OCS 1965-1968

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The mission of the Signal Officer Candidate School was completed on February 8, 1968. The 53 members of Class 04-68 who had just taken the oath watched as the Honor Graduate had his new gold bars pinned, symbolizing the commissioning of the entire class as Second Lieutenants.

This one moment at Ft. Gordon's Alexander Hall was the goal of the past twenty-three weeks of rigorous and intensive training which the members of the class had received. It also marked the end of the first Officer Candidate School at the Signal School at Ft. Gordon; a unique institution on post and a source of pride to all those connected with it. The performance of duty, conduct, and appearance of its graduates make this pride easy to understand.

The mission of Signal OCS was, "To develop Second Lieutenants of the Army of the United States who will be capable of performing duties appropriate to their grade in active Army Signal Corps units."

The program produced 2,210 officers of this caliber. In fact, the necessities of the conflict in Vietnam often placed recent graduates in situations where they were called upon to perform the duties of an officer with considerably greater rank and experience. Their performance in these jobs speaks more eloquently than anything else of the success of the program.

1st OC Battalion established

Signal Officer Candidate Schools had previously been established at Ft. Monmouth, N. J. during World War II and the Korean conflict.

The initial order activating the program at Ft. Gordon was issued on September 20, 1965. The order established the 1st Officer Candidate Battalion, commanded by (then) Maj. John J. McManus, a Headquarters and Headquarters Company, and Officer Candidate Companies A, B, and C. On that date, the entire program consisted of ten officers, no enlisted men, and no physical facilities.

First class arrives

The first class of officer candidates, designated Class 04-66, arrived on Nov. 22, 1965 and was assigned to Company A. The original planning concepts called for the program to last for nine months and to commission 792 Signal Corps officers.

Requirements for Signal Corps officers increased, however, and the battalion expanded from three to five companies with the addition of D and E companies in August, 1966. Lt. Col. McManus left Ft. Gordon in January, 1967, and Maj. Patrick B. O'Meara became the commanding officer.

OC Brigade established

On Feb. 13, 1967, the program was reorganized by the addition of a sixth company and the establishment of an Officer Candidate Brigade, commanded by Col. Frank L. Thomsen. A, B, and C companies remained assigned to the 1st Battalion, and D, E, and F companies were assigned to the newly formed 2nd Battalion.

The program ran at a maximum capacity under this arrangement until September 22, 1967 when phase-out operations began. At its peak, it occupied the entire area between 19th and 25th Streets, bounded by 5th Avenue and 26th Infantry Division Road. It had facilities to accommodate 1,200 candidates at any one time and to train 2,300 a year.

Careful screening

Prospective candidates arrived at OCS only after passing a careful screening process. They were extensively examined in written tests and evaluated by a board of officers before being allowed to enroll. While many candidates had several years of enlisted military service behind them, the majority were recent inductees who had volunteered for the program or enlistees under the Army's College Option program.

The successful applicant faced twenty-three weeks of life at a physical and mental double-time. Training was concentrated in three major areas: academics, leadership, and physical fitness.

The program encompassed 1,095 hours of instruction, including 880 hours of academic training. Candidates attended classes from 8 a.m. to 12 noon and from 1-5 p.m. each weekday. Several night problems and field exercises were also scheduled, including a three-mile night Escape and Evasion course.

OC training

The instruction covered everything from operation and maintenance of the M-79 grenade launcher to antenna erection; from the proper format of a military letter to the allocation of frequencies for a division.

Fifty-one hours were devoted to Drill and Command. Here the candidate had an opportunity to learn FM 22-5 and good instructional traits by giving his contemporaries classes on assigned paragraphs dealing with marching movements and formations.

Each candidate was required to pass 15 scheduled examinations. Two hours of study hall in the barracks were scheduled before each class day.

Leadership developed

Candidates developed their leadership abilities under the watchful eyes of Tactical Officers, usually recent graduates of the course. Candidates filled

leadership positions ranging from squad leader to company commander on a rotating basis. Each tour of duty in a position lasted 3 1/2 days.

A candidate might return to his company area for dinner at 12 noon as an ordinary member of his class and leave for academic training at 1 p.m. as Candidate Company Commander, responsible for everything the classes in his company did or failed to do.

During the tour of duty, each candidate was constantly observed and rated by his contemporaries. Tactical Officers made on-the-spot corrections of deficiencies. At the conclusion of each tour of duty, those in chain of command positions wrote observation reports on the performance of their superiors and subordinates.

Performance reports

The Tactical Officer evaluated his own observations of the candidates' accomplishments and mistakes and the reports of his classmates and wrote a final synopsis of each candidate's performance. The candidate was then counseled on his tour of duty by the Tactical Officer and was expected to show improvement in his weak areas the next time he was assigned to a chain of command position.

Col. Thomsen welcomed each class with the statement that the purpose of OCS was not to simply identify those with leadership deficiencies and wash them out of the course. It was, rather, to identify those deficiencies possessed in part by all and to work to correct them so the candidate could successfully complete the course.

"We know you have the aptitude and the ability to complete this course; what we don't know is whether or not you have the desire for a commission."

Each candidate had three opportunities during the course to rate his classmates and to be counseled on their ratings of him.

The third important area of training, physical fitness, was highly emphasized. Each candidate received a minimum of one hour of physical training each day. The program began slowly and made a gradual progression to the high state of physical fitness a Second Lieutenant needs to perform his duties and set a good example for his men.

Honor Code

Each candidate lived by a six-point Honor Code, enforced only by the candidates themselves, to instill in him the habit of uncompromising honesty and the sense of personal responsibility for all his actions required of an officer.

His behavior, restrictions, and duties were prescribed by the Signal Officer Candidate Manual which covered everything from the Honor Code to the number of demerits awarded for unshined boots.

Each class had its own distinctive motto, class song, and a usually colorful class guidon. While individual development was emphasized, class esprit de corps and morale were often significant factors in keeping a candidate enthusiastic and cheerful through all the mental and physical stresses of the program.

Candidates had the use of laundry, a branch of the Post Exchange, a branch of the Signal Bookstore, a Senior Candidate Lounge, a chapel, and a classroom-gymnasium, all within or adjacent to the Brigade area.

The program was divided into three phases: Basic, Junior, and Senior. Basic Candidates wore the distinctive OCS brass and gloss black helmet liner. Academic time was devoted to subjects common to all the combat arms: weapons, vehicles, logistics, tactics, military justice, and other fundamentals. In leadership, the primary emphasis was placed on potential.

At the conclusion of the thirteenth week, each class "turned Junior" and became entitled to wear white scarves and white shoulder tabs on the uniform. This phase marked the beginning of Signal Corps academic training, and an emphasis on leadership performance as well as potential. An off-post party marked the transition to Junior Status and gave many of the candidates their first look at Army social life. The next five weeks were devoted to the study of communications center operations, wire communications, and the fundamentals of radio communications.

Senior Review

The beginning of Senior Status was marked by a Senior Candidate Review at the end of the eighteenth week. The new Senior class, resplendent in orange scarves, orange tabs, and an orange band around the helmet liner and armed with sabers, conducted a brigade-sized review on Fort Gordon's Barton Field. After Class 25-67's ceremony on October 28, 1967 reviewed by MG Walter B. Richardson, the ceremony was moved to the Brigade area because of the decrease in personnel.

Senior Candidates were entitled to the same courtesies as commission officers from all candidates junior to them in preparation for their commissioning. In leadership, the emphasis was placed solely on performance. Academically, the Senior Candidates completed their study of radio communications and went on to applied communications. A three-day field problem in the 22nd week tied together all their previous knowledge from the tactics of defense to the installation, operation, and maintenance of a signal center.

A formal banquet was held on the Wednesday of the 23rd week, the evening before graduation, at the Officers' Open Mess. Here members of the class had an opportunity to plan and supervise a formal military social event. The Officer Candidate Wives' Club, composed of the candidate's wives residing in the Augusta area, helped substantially in the planning of the banquet.

Personal Responsibilities

In addition to all these activities, each candidate also had full responsibility for his personal appearance and the condition of his personal area in the barracks. Outstanding personal appearance and military bearing commensurate with the standards of the officer corps were emphasized, and a candidate could count on a thorough inspection of his barracks and personal equipment down to the last button on his fatigues by the Tactical Officer or Company Commander almost every day.

Each candidate was expected as a matter of course to display the spirit and enthusiasm of a dedicated, professional officer. Those affected by the OCS spirit never waited for a formal chain of command appointment to exercise their leadership; they took it as a matter of personal pride to step forth and take charge whenever they could and to lend a hand wherever they could. They earned a reputation for outstanding personal appearance, military bearing, and gentlemanly conduct on Ft. Gordon and in the Augusta area.

Assignments

About 25% of the graduates of the course could expect to attend an MOS-producing course immediately after graduation. The remainder were assigned directly to units for on-the-job training. Approximately 90 to 95% of the graduates were assigned to tactical communications units; the rest to the United States Army Strategic Communications Command (USASTRACTCOM) or to research and development commands. Graduates were assigned wherever the U.S. Army could be found. A substantial number were assigned to the Signal School at Ft. Gordon and contributed to its mission by serving as instructors, officers in the Student Brigade, or as Tactical Officers and staff officers in the OC Brigade itself.

On August 17, 1967, orders were received from the Continental Army Command to begin phasing out the program because of changes in the requirements for Signal Corps officers. The first step of the phase-out came with the closing of E and F companies on September 22, 1967. Classes in those companies were reassigned to the remaining four companies. The 2nd Battalion was also inactivated at this time, and control of D company returned to the 1st Battalion.

On October 20, 1967, D Company and the 1st Battalion were eliminated. Control of the remaining three companies was given directly to Brigade. C Company was dropped on December 1, 1967 and B Company on December 14, 1967. With the graduation of Class 04-68, only A Company, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, and Brigade Headquarters remain to be phased out.

Most of the Brigade's old facilities have already been assigned to the 8th Battalion. Student Brigade, and the remainder is expected to be available for reassignment within the Signal School by February 26, 1968.

Future Signal Corps officers will come from one of three sources: the United States Military Academy at West Point, college ROTC, or other branch Officer Candidate Schools. All will attend the nine-week Signal Officer Basic Course which is also located at Ft. Gordon.