

## **The History of the Ordnance Department - Military Personnel and Training (The Ordnance School at Aberdeen 1940-45 - The Officer Candidate School)**

### **Office of the Chief of Military History 1955**

In the summer of 1940 Colonel Julian S. Hatcher (Commander of the Ordnance Training Center from January 1, 1940 to June 1, 1942), foreseeing the need for hundreds of additional officers to carry out Ordnance Department responsibilities, urged that authority be granted to institute an officer candidate training program, erect school buildings, and organize a corps of instructors. The War Department, however, was reluctant to approve the training of additional officers at that time because so many Reservists had not yet been called to active duty, and it was not until the spring of 1941 that the War Department authorized the various arms and services to establish Officer Candidate Schools (OCS). On 26 April 1941 Ordnance was directed to open its OCS at Aberdeen Proving Ground in July, but with an initial quota of only fifty students.

The first class at Aberdeen was made up of candidates selected chiefly from the Regular Army and National Guard by OCS boards appointed by corps area or department commanders. The group was housed on the second floor of the auxiliary barracks of the 40th Ordnance Company, and, for lack of better accommodations, classes were held in the basement of the barracks. The officer candidates were instructed by the faculty of the Ordnance School, the OCS actually being a section within the school. The first course of study, adopted in July 1941, provided a quick survey of both military and technical subjects, and allotted thirty-two hours to each of four technical specialties—small arms, artillery, ammunition, and automotive equipment.

Experience soon showed that this program needed elaboration and refinement. It made no provision for instruction in such essential subjects as camouflage, defense against aerial attack, and the use of weapons. It offered little opportunity for the candidates to become familiar with field operations and the time allotted for the study of each category of Ordnance items was sufficient only for a sketchy orientation.

Beginning with the third class, which entered in January 1942, the course was revised to include more specialized instruction in technical subjects. At the end of the eighth week of training each candidate chose one technical subject as his field of study for the remaining four weeks of the course. Toward the end of this period of specialization, the student went on an overnight bivouac and worked out a field problem that required him to apply his newly acquired knowledge. Throughout 1942, because of the necessity for crowding both military and technical training into such a short period, the Ordnance OCS was unable to train its officer candidates with the desired degree of thoroughness. A single overnight bivouac did little to prepare them for the realities of combat operations, and four weeks of technical instruction was not adequate preparation for dealing with practical problems of field maintenance.

After the landings in North Africa in November 1942, reports from overseas commanders indicated that many service troops, in addition to their technical proficiency, needed more thorough training in adapting themselves to field conditions. Beginning in May 1943, therefore, a radical change was made in the Ordnance OCS course. The entire period was given over to basic military subjects including rifle marksmanship, first aid, convoy operations, sanitation, and field

expedients. After completing this intensive course of military training and receiving their commissions, the students entered upon the second phase of their training—twelve weeks of technical instruction during which they spent four weeks on "basic ordnance" and eight weeks on the study of a specialty such as small arms, ammunition, or artillery.

In addition to basic military training and physical conditioning, the Ordnance OCS constantly emphasized the selection and training of men for leadership. The War Department directive authorizing officer candidate schools had stated that demonstrated leadership ability was to be "the basic and predominant consideration governing selection to officer candidate schools," but experience soon showed that the various OCS boards were sending many poorly qualified candidates to the Ordnance OCS. Thus, the school not only had to teach the principles of leadership but also to devise means of evaluating the leadership qualities of the students so that those who were not up to standard could be eliminated. The methods employed at Aberdeen to select and train students for military leadership were similar to those used throughout the Army. They included close-order drill, the "floor rating" system, and subjection of students to constant pressure. The day-by-day judgments of instructors—many of whom were themselves recent graduates of the course they were teaching—played an important part, as did the impressions made by the candidates on their classmates. Some candidates felt that in judging leadership ability, the emphasis placed on close-order drill was excessive and that too little weight was given to the individual's technical knowledge and experience. Others felt that "lack of leadership qualities" was simply a convenient catch-all used by instructors in lieu of more specific criticism. Rightly or wrongly, more candidates were eliminated from the Ordnance OCS for leadership deficiencies than for any other reason.

One of the most pressing problems facing the school throughout its first two years was the need for more barracks, more classrooms, more instructors, and huge quantities of teaching materials. The first classes in 1941 were small and entered at intervals of several weeks, but soon the quotas were doubled and tripled, and a new class was formed every week. During the first six months of 1943 the peak enrollment was reached when over 1,000 students entered the school every month. Classes were then reduced to 200 each beginning at intervals of two weeks, and late in the year the classes were limited to 50 candidates each, entering at intervals of eight weeks. This schedule continued in effect with only minor changes throughout 1944 and the first eight months of 1945. A total of 713 candidates received their commissions during 1945 bringing the number of graduates for the 1941-45 period to approximately 13,000.

**Best available estimate of Ordnance OCS graduates by year (Jul 1941 to Sep 1945)**

1941: 37  
1942: 4,600  
1943: 6,100  
1944: 1,800  
1945: 700  
Total: 13,237



Schooling for Ordnance Officers and enlisted personnel was consolidated in 1940 in the Ordnance School at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland (Shown in 1941). Aberdeen was the center of the Ordnance branch for 68 years, until 2008.

