

The Noncommissioned Officer Candidate Course

SGM Israr Choudhri

SGM Martin S. Carpenter

Group Room M04

28 February 2005

Outline

I. Background

United States Army in Vietnam

Shortage of NCOs

II. Concept and Implementation

COL Hackworth & SMA Woolridge

Selection Criteria for the course

III. Testing

Phases of the course

Types of training

IV. Duties and Responsibilities

SSG Dwight Davis & Lt. Glen Troester

V. Medal of Honor winner

SSG Bowen, Hammett Lee Jr.

Medal of Honor Citation

VI. Conclusion

During the mid-1960's the United States was fighting a war in Vietnam. By 1966 the war in Vietnam was depleting the United States Army's noncommissioned officer corps. The attrition of combat, the 12-month tour limit in Vietnam, administrative separations of senior noncommissioned officers and the 25-month stateside stabilization policy began to take its toll. Without a call up of the reserve forces, Vietnam was becoming the regular Army's war. The United States Army was faced with a serious dilemma: should experienced NCOs be sent back into combat sooner or should they be replaced in the field with senior PFCs and specialists? The Army was running out of noncommissioned officers fast and demand was exceeding the supply, most noticeably in the combat specialties.

In 1967, the Army developed a solution to reduce the shortage of NCO leaders in Vietnam. The solution was the Infantry Noncommissioned Officers Course (INCOC), which was based on the idea of selecting qualified young men who would be trained extensively in the art of leadership and then off to Vietnam to lead teams and squads of infantry soldiers in combat. Initially the INCOC was implemented just for infantry sergeants at Fort Benning, Georgia. Later this course was introduced at other combat arms training centers, e.g., Fort Bliss, Fort Knox, Fort Leonard Wood and Fort Sill. The INCOC concept paralleled the Officer Candidate Course (OCS) where an enlisted man could attend OCS after basic and advanced training if he was recommended or otherwise accepted. The Army assumed that there must be a large pool of capable soldiers coming through the system who would have made good officers except they

missed the OCS entry by a few points on the school's IQ requirement. The INCOC was designed to take aggressive soldiers and give them the opportunity to train as combat leaders. Selected candidates would be given 23 weeks of intensive training qualifying them to lead squad and fire teams.

Candidates were selected from groups of initial entry training (IET) soldiers who had a security clearance of confidential, and infantry score of 100 or higher, and demonstrated leadership potential. Based on recommendations, the unit commander could select potential NCOs but not all were volunteers. Those selected to attend the course were immediately appointed corporal and later promoted to sergeant upon graduation from Phase One. The few who graduated with honors were promoted to staff sergeant.

Who came up with the concept of the course? In his book About Face COL David Hackworth calls this course "his baby" (Hackworth 594). According to Hackworth, his most significant achievements were the creation and implementation of the Infantry Noncommissioned Officers Course. After brainstorming the problem of shortages of junior NCOs in Vietnam, he, with the help of his boss Hank Emerson, designed the NCO Candidate Course to allow soldiers with leadership potential to be trained as squad and platoon sergeants. He said that the course was modeled on the Officer Candidate Course, and in order to get it going quickly as possible, much of OCS's support system (instructors, curriculum, etc.) was used.

The first Sergeant Major of the Army, William Wooldridge, describes the conception of NCOCC as a result of a conversation he had with LTG Jonathan O. Seaman, Commanding General, II Field Force, at Long Binh, Vietnam, in December

1996. According to SMA Wooldridge, he took the idea directly to the Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson, who in turn sent LTG Lawrence J. Lincoln, Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics, to discuss the details with SMA Wooldridge. As a result LTG Lincoln and his office personnel prepared a concept memo for approval that resulted in the development of the course. SMA Wooldridge stated that there was no discussion by LTG Seaman of modeling the course after OCS but there was a parallel between OCS and the NCOCC.

Army Chief of Staff Johnson approved the concept of this course on 22 June 1967. The first NCOCC class began training on 5 September 1967, and graduated on 25 November 1967. The last class graduated on 18 March 1972. SMA Wooldridge considers this course one of the most noteworthy accomplishments of his tenure.

The NCOCC was divided into two phases. Phase I was 12 weeks of intensive hands-on training, broken down into three basic segments. The tasks included physical training, hand to hand combat, weapons, first aid, map reading, communications, and “call for fire.” The second basic segment focused on fire team, squad and platoon tactics. Out of 300 hours of instruction, more than 80 percent was conducted in the field. The final basic segment consisted of a full week of patrols, ambush preparation, creation of defensive perimeters, and land navigation.

Throughout the 12 weeks of training, leadership was instilled in all the tasks students trained on. A student chain of command was set up and the TAC NCOs closely supervised the performance of the candidates. After successfully completing Phase I, the top five percent of a class could be promoted to the rank of Staff Sergeant after an interview by a panel of officers. The remainder, about 68 percent, would be promoted to

sergeant. Candidates who completed the 12 weeks of training but did not measure up to leadership standards left the course as E-4s.

After graduation from the formal course, the graduates were shipped out for more training as sergeants with infantry AIT (Advanced Individual Training) units through the States. This training provided the NCO candidates with more confidence and made them apply the leadership skills they had acquired. During this phase candidates were constantly counseled and evaluated and their rank could be increased or reduced based on their performance. After this phase, the graduates of NCOCC were ready to deploy. There they would take the live-fire test in the jungles of Vietnam as fire team or squad leaders.

The duties and responsibilities of these new sergeants were no different than those of a seasoned noncommissioned officer with twice their experience. These young sergeants who graduated from the NCOCC were met with resentment from middle grade NCOs who had worked for years to get their stripes. These new sergeants were referred to as “Shake and bake NCOs” (Parker 11) because of the speed in which they made rank. They had their work cut out for them because they knew that they were under the microscope and their performance in combat would determine the amount of respect they would receive from the old-timers.

The majority of NCOCC graduates were assigned as assistant fire team leaders upon their arrival in Vietnam, and then they rapidly advanced to squad or platoon sergeants. They were responsible for the lives of many young soldiers. Unlike Korea and World War II, Vietnam was not a senior commander’s war that covered large spans of terrain. Vietnam was a junior leader’s war, limited to small areas of operation, with

the brunt of the fighting falling on the shoulders of junior officers and noncommissioned officers.

The duty of these school-trained sergeants was to keep their men alive each day for a year. They led patrols in the jungles of Vietnam, set up ambushes and ensured that their men on guard at night were vigilant. Lt. Glenn Troester, a platoon leader in the 4th Infantry Division compliments his platoon sergeant, SSG Dwight Davis (NCOCC 37-69), in an article written for “Ivy Leaves”, the newspaper of the 4th Infantry Division. “It was Sergeant Davis who helped me during those terrifying first days, the days when I had to appear cool, confident and competent in front of my platoon” (Troester 6). He describes his platoon sergeant as a competent leader who cared about his men, checked their equipment and ensured they had proper supplies. Lt. Troester’s complement to his platoon sergeant is a testament to the abilities of a NCOCC graduate, who was given a mission to lead young men into harm’s way and successfully accomplished his mission. Four graduates of the NCOCC were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for heroic actions in combat. One of them was SSG Hammett Lee Bowen. SSG Bowen was the graduate of NCOCC Class 4-69 and was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry. He was killed in action on 27 June 1969 in Vietnam. His citation reads:

“SSG Bowen distinguished himself while serving as Platoon Sergeant of Charlie Company 2/14th Infantry, 25th Infantry Division. Sergeant Bowen’s platoon was advancing on a reconnaissance mission into enemy controlled terrain when it came under the withering cross fire of small arms and grenades, from an enemy ambush force. Sergeant Bowen placed heavy suppressive fire on the enemy position and ordered his men to fall back. As the platoon was moving back, an

enemy grenade was thrown amid Sergeant Bowen and three of his men. Sensing the danger to his comrades, Sergeant Bowen shouted a warning to his men and hurled himself on the grenade, absorbing the explosion with his body while saving the lives of his fellow soldiers. SSG Bowen's extraordinary courage and concern for his men at the cost of his own life served as inspiration to his comrades and are in the highest tradition of military service and the United States Army."

SMA William Wooldridge, in his speech to the first graduating class of NCOCC stated, "I am often asked these days, why we are in Vietnam? I have found what I believe to be a good soldierly answer to that question. On one of my recent trips to Vietnam, I asked a young infantryman why he was in Vietnam. He smiled and said, "That's no problem. One morning my sergeant came into the barracks and said, pack your bags, you're going to Vietnam, and here I am" (Wooldridge). SMA Wooldridge told the new graduates of the first NCOCC that great things were expected of them and that besides being the first class, they were also the first group who were trained this way. In his view it had been a whole new idea in training.

COL Jay M. Parker in a recent article in Army magazine states, "during Vietnam, much was said about so-called shake and bake NCOs, and much of it was untrue and unfair. Clearly, there were those who were not ready to wear those stripes. However, many, many more served with courage and dedication both on the battlefield and in key staff jobs during one of the most difficult periods in our Army's history" (Parker 11).

SMA Wooldridge stated that NCOCC met a need in time of war and that the small infantry unit leader was more vital than ever before. After the Vietnam conflict

ended, some of the NCOCC graduates stayed on and helped rebuild the army into today's professional force. I, as an infantry NCO, am indebted to those leaders who lived through those hard times and to the great leaders who had the vision to educate our noncommissioned officer corps. Truly, today we are the backbone of the army because "fortunately, a younger, tougher, smarter generation of NCOs and officers dragged us, sometimes kicking and screaming, into the future" (Parker 12).

Works Cited

Elder, Daniel K. et al. The Sergeants Major of the Army. Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2003.

Hackworth, David H. About Face. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.

Parker, Jay M. "Make Room for the Future." Army. 54 (Nov 2004): 11-12.

Ruhl, Roger L. "NCOCC." Infantry. 59 (May-Jun 1969): 32-39.

Russell, Bud. "A Brief History of the Noncommissioned Officer Candidate Course" 5 October 2004<<http://w3.ime.net/~ncocloca/PAGE10.HTM>>.

Troester, Glenn. Ivy Leaves. 20 Sep, 1970.

Wooldridge, William. "NCOCC." E-mail to the author, 29 Sep 2004.

Zais, Melvin. "The New NCO," Army. 18 (May 1968): 72-76.