

1SG Andrew Sanders Ayers

U.S. Army Sergeants Major Course

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The “Shake and Bake” Noncommissioned Officer

By the early-1960's, the United States Army was again engaged in conflict, now in Vietnam. As the war progressed, the attrition of combat, the 12-month tour limit in Vietnam, separations of senior noncommissioned officers and the 25-month stateside stabilization policy began to take its toll to the point of crisis. Without a call up of the reserve forces, Vietnam became the Regular Army's war, fought by junior leaders. The Army was faced with sending career noncoms back into action sooner or filling the ranks with the most senior PFC or specialist. Field commanders were challenged with understaffed vacancies at base camps, filling various key leadership positions, and providing for replacements. Older and more experienced NCOs, some World War II veterans, were strained by the physical requirements of the methods of jungle fighting. The Army was quickly running out of noncommissioned officers in the combat specialties.

“A strained voice shatters the stillness: Pass in Review. And at this moment he knows.

This is command reveille. Right Turn March. It is to characterize the next 12 frustrating weeks of training.” Infantry NCO Candidate Course, Class 4-69 yearbook

In order to meet the large requirements for NCO leaders, the Army came up with a solution. The idea was based on a proven Officer Candidate Course. If an enlisted man could attend basic and advanced training, and then attend OCS, why not use the same principle for noncoms? That is if a selected soldiers can be given 23 weeks of intensive training that would

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qualify him to lead a platoon, then others soldiers can be trained to lead squads and fire teams in the same amount of time.

"I think that those who graduated [from the NCOCC] were much better prepared for some of the problems that would arise in Vietnam." Staff Sgt. Melvin C. Leverick, The outstanding graduate of the first class. Infantry NCO Candidate Course, Class 4-69 yearbook.

The NCO candidate course was designed to maximize the two-year tour of the enlisted draftee. By combining the amount of time it took to attend basic and advanced training, including leave and travel time, and then add a 12-month tour in Vietnam, the developers settled on a 21-22 week course. NCOCC was divided into two phases. Phase I was 12 weeks of intensive, hands-on training, broken down into three basic phases. For the Infantry noncom, the course included tasks such as physical training, hand-to-hand combat, weapons, first aid, map reading, communications, and indirect fire. Vietnam veterans or Rangers taught many of the classes. The second basic phase focused on instruction of fire team, squad and platoon tactics. Though over 300 hours of instruction was given, 80-percent was conducted in the field. The final basic phase was a "dress rehearsal for Vietnam," a full week of patrols, ambush, defensive perimeters, and navigation. Twice daily the Vietnam-schooled Rangers critiqued the candidates and all training was conducted tactically.

Throughout the 12-weeks of training, leadership was instilled in all that the students would do. A student chain of command was set up and "Tactical NCOs" supervised the daily performance of the candidates. By the time the students successfully completed Phase I, they were promoted to sergeant or staff sergeant, and shipped off to conduct a 9-10 week practical

application of their leadership skills by serving as assistant leaders in a training center or unit. This gave the candidate the opportunity to gain more confidence in leading soldiers. As with many programs of its time, NCOCC was originally developed to meet the needs of the combat arms. With the success of the course, it was extended to other career fields, and the program became known as the Skill Development Base Program. The Armored School began NCOCC on December 5, 1967. Some schools later offered a correspondence "preparatory course" for those who anticipated attending NCOCC or had not benefited from such formal military schooling.

Many soldiers and Senior NCO's had lots of resentment for the NCOCC graduates, because soldiers taking the regular path to promotions, it took 4-6 years to earn their stripes the hard way. Old-time sergeants began to use terms like "Shake 'n' Bake," Instant NCO," or "Whip-n-Chills" to identify this new type of noncom. Many complained by voice or in writing that it took years to build a noncommissioned officer and that the program was wrong. Many feared it would affect their promotion opportunities, and one senior NCO worried that "nobody had shown them [NCOCC graduates] how to keep floor buffers operational in garrison." *Educating Noncommissioned Officers* By Dan Elder.

"Promotions given to men who complete the course will not directly affect the promotion possibilities of other deserving soldiers in Vietnam or other parts of the world. Great things are expected from you. Besides being the first class, you are also the first group who has ever been trained this way. It has been a whole new idea in training." William O. Wooldridge, First Sergeant Major of the Army In his speech to the first graduating class. Infantry NCO Candidate Course, Class 4-69 yearbook.

The graduates of NCOCC recognized the value of their training. Young draftees attending initial training at the time knew they were destined for Vietnam. Many potential candidates were eligible for Officer Candidate School, but rejected it because they would incur an additional service obligation. They realized that NCOCC was a method by which they could expand on their military training before entering the war. Some were exposed to the Phase II NCO Candidates serving as TAC NCOs during their initial training and felt they could do the same. Many graduates would later say that the NCO Candidate Course, taught by Vietnam veterans who experienced the war first hand, is what kept them and their soldiers alive and the lessons learned would go on to serve them well later in life. Many graduates were assigned as assistant fire team leaders upon arrival in Vietnam and then rapidly advanced to squad or platoon sergeants. Most would not see their fellow classmates again, and in many cases were the senior (or only) NCO in the platoon. Some would go on to make a career of the military or later attend OCS, and three were Medal of Honor winners. In the end almost 33,000 soldiers were graduates of one of the NCO Candidate Courses.

The NCOCC graduate had a specific role in the Army, and that was to be a fire team leader in Vietnam. It was recognized that they were not taught how to teach drill and ceremonies, inspect a barracks, or how to conduct police call. Many senior NCO's rated the program by how the graduates performed in garrison, for which they had little skill. But their performance in the rice paddies and jungles as combat leaders was where they took their final tests, of which many receiving the ultimate failing grade.

"Lasting Image - Sergeant Dwight Davis has gone home. But there are many others like him in Vietnam, and still more are coming. I was his platoon leader. But he left me with something I didn't have before I knew him. He left me an image. An image of a citizen soldier, who saw a job to be done and did it flawlessly. An image of a man who will always stand just a little taller in my book than the average run of men. An image I share with countless others throughout Vietnam. An image of the best America has to offer. The image of a leader." Ivy Leaves, September 20, 1970, page 6

As the war in Vietnam started to wind down, the number of classes and graduates began to diminish. Troop withdrawals which began in 1969 with the Peace Talks in Paris, continued until 1972. The Army policy changed from Search and Destroy Missions to a Pacification Phase.

The last Class to graduate from this program was on March 18, 1972. Because of the success of the program, the Army implemented two new similar programs. The purpose of these new programs was to give opportunity to soldiers returning from Vietnam. So they could get additional training and the chance to move up in rank. The new schools at Ft. Benning became known as BNCOC (Basic NCOC) and ANCOC (Advanced NCOC).

The general consensus among many of the graduates, 30 plus years later, was that NCOC school was the best time they had in the service. The training was the best of its kind, at the time, and many felt it was instrumental in their survival and the survival of their men in combat.

The average NCOC Graduate had five months of military service under his belt and most entered the course with the rank of E-2 and/or E-3. The average age was 20 1/2 years old with one year of college. Noncommissioned Officers have always played a vital part in the history of the United States.

The noncommissioned officer corps has evolved over time through several changes and traditions of various countries to become truly an American Military force. The noncommissioned officer has proven time and time again why they have become known as the backbone of the Army, by setting the standards in training, enforcing the discipline to the soldiers, and inspiring their men to do things that make them heroes.

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