

Extract from the book: *Educating Noncommissioned Officers*  
By Dan Elder (dan.elder@vbnhq.com)

## The Noncommissioned Officer's Candidate Course

*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

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.

In order to meet these unprecedented requirements for NCO leaders the Army developed a solution. Based on the proven Officer Candidate Course where an enlisted man could attend basic and advanced training, and if recommended or applied for, filled out an application and attended OCS, the thought was the same could be done for noncoms. If a carefully selected soldier can be given 23 weeks of intensive training that would qualify him to lead a platoon, then others can be trained to lead squads and fire teams in the same amount of time. From this seed the Noncommissioned Officers Candidate Course was born. Potential candidates were selected from groups of initial entry soldiers who had a security clearance of confidential, an infantry score of 100 or over, and demonstrated leadership potential. Based on recommendations, the unit commander would select potential NCOs, but all were not volunteers. Those selected to attend NCOCC were immediately made corporals and later promoted to sergeant upon graduation from phase one. The select few who graduated with honors would be promoted to staff sergeant. The outstanding graduate of the first class, Staff Sgt. Melvin C. Leverick, recalled "I think that those who graduated [from the NCOCC] were much better prepared for some of the problems that would arise in Vietnam."

The NCO candidate course was designed to maximize the two-year tour of the enlisted draftee. The Army Chief of Staff Gen. Harold K. Johnson approved the concept on June 22, 1967, and on



**A TAC NCO critiques  
candidates**

courtesy U.S. Army Infantry School

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September 5 the first course at Fort Benning, GA began with Sgt. Maj. Don Wright serving as the first NCOCC Commandant. 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, but the cadre of the first course were commissioned officers. 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.

As with the Leadership Preparation Course tested by HumRRO, the "regular" noncoms and soldiers had much resentment for the NCOCC graduates, as those who took 4-6 years to earn their stripes the hard way, were immediately angered. 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." William O. Wooldridge, serving as the recently established position of Sergeant Major of the Army stated that, "promotions given to men who



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complete the course will not directly affect the promotion possibilities of other deserving soldiers in Vietnam or other parts of the world." In his speech to the first graduating class Wooldridge said that, "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." As the Sgt Maj. of the Army expressed, all were not suspicious of this new way to train NCOs. After initial skepticism, former battalion commander Col. W. G. Skelton explained, "within a short time they [NCOCC graduates] proved themselves completely and we were crying for more. Because of their training, they repeatedly surpassed the soldier who had risen from the ranks in combat and provided the quality of leadership at the squad and platoon level which is essential in the type of fighting we are doing."

The graduates 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, was what kept them and their soldiers alive and its lessons would go on to serve them well later in life. Many 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—they were trained to do one thing in one branch in one place in the world, 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 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. But educating NCOs and potential NCOs was firmly in place for the Army.

