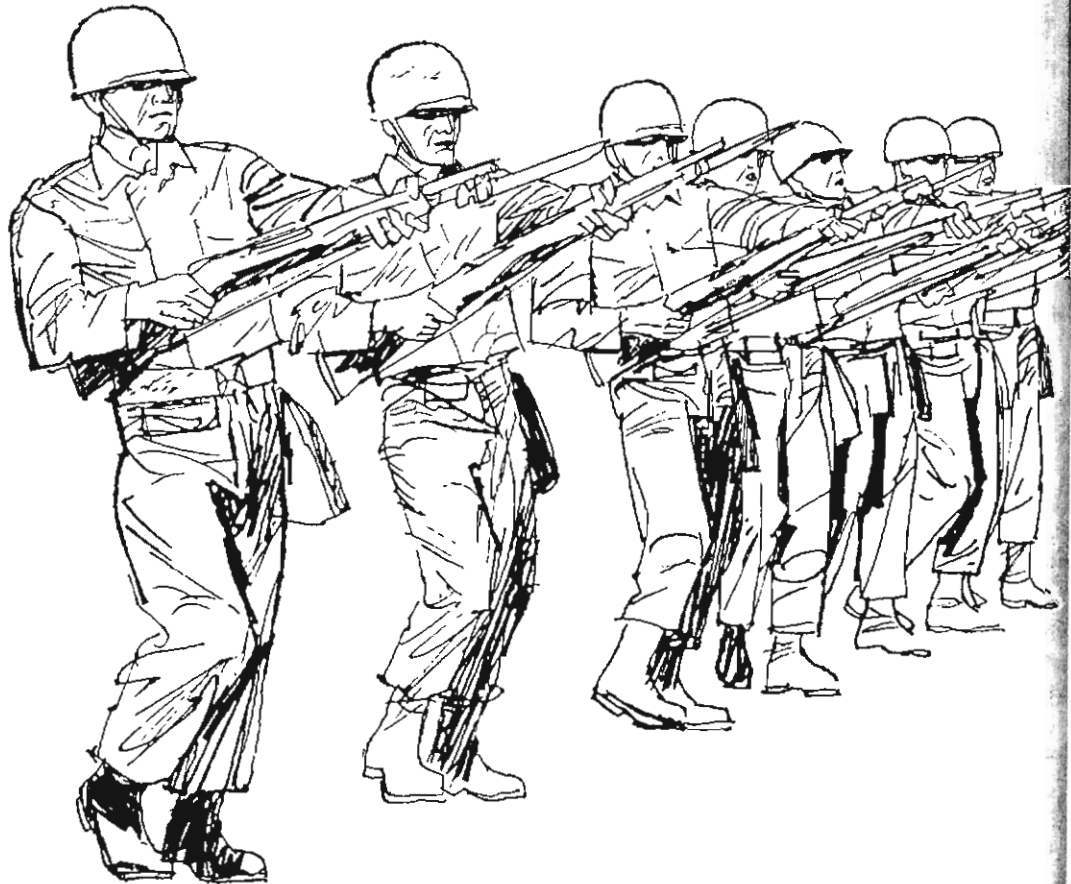
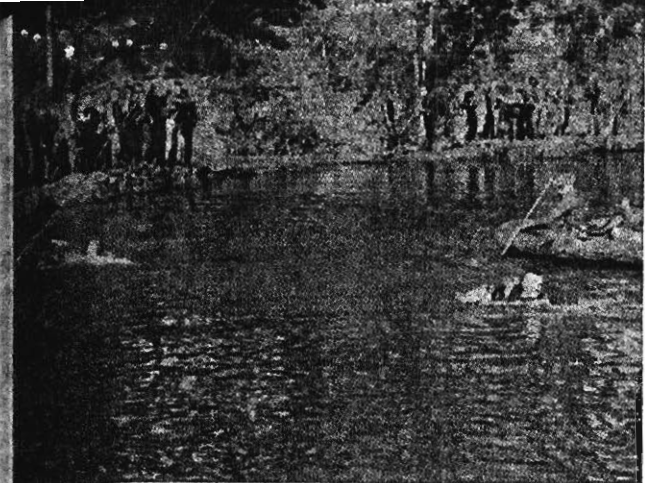




By Maj. Gen. Melvin Zal

THE NEW NCO





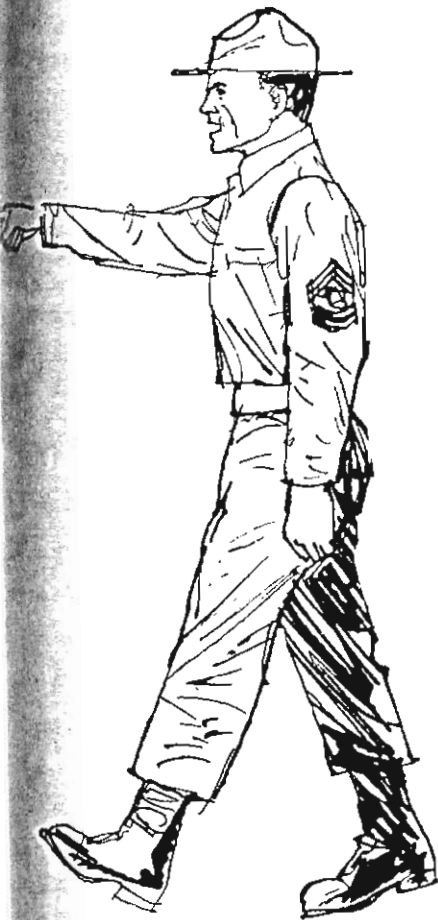
through the ranks. Men learned their jobs and earned their stripes through the rough-and-tumble school of experience and hard knocks. Their ability was usually directly proportional to the quality of the men from whom they learned. Some of the Army's finest noncoms have been produced this way.

But such a system has shown itself to be best suited to a peacetime army or one that expands with the infusion of reserve forces to meet full-scale mobilization.

In an army that must build from within to meet the requirements of a limited war without the benefit of a mobilization, previously accepted training and promotion concepts must be changed, just as counter-insurgency warfare dictates changes in conventional doctrine and tactics. The peculiar nature of counter-guerrilla warfare has required major adjustments in the Army's tactics, equipment and training. If we had continued to be guided only by past experience, we would still be fighting from trenches with bolt-action rifles. Instead, the soldier of today flies to battle in helicopters and engages the enemy with rapid-fire rifles made of light alloy and plastic. Like industry, to remain competitive the Army must be prepared to take advantage of technological advances.

The challenge of Vietnam has demanded that the Army break with past practices that are obviously outmoded. Unlike World War II, Vietnam is not a senior commander's war covering large expanses of terrain. It is a junior leader's war, limited to small areas, with the brunt of much of the fighting falling directly on the noncommissioned officer. It is truly the war of the platoon sergeant, squad patrol and fire team leaders.

Most important of all, until lately Vietnam could be called the Regular Army's war, since it was being conducted without a call-up of reserve forces. Consequently, much of the impact of expansion to meet the required buildup generated by Vietnam has been absorbed by the regular NCO corps. In order to meet the unprecedented requirements for noncommissioned leaders, the Army has developed several solutions. The most imaginative, and the one expected to have the most far-reaching results, is the one establishing



One day last September, at Fort Benning, Ga., a new kind of soldier stepped forward to take his place in the ranks of the U.S. Army.

This man was the first to enter the first class of the newly established Infantry Noncommissioned Officer Candidate Course (NCOCC). He was soon joined by hundreds of others, and eventually the Army's tactical units will begin receiving thousands of NCOCC graduates—not only infantrymen but tankers and gunners, as Fort Knox (Armor) and Fort Sill (Artillery) also begin graduating these new combat leaders.

The NCO candidate program represents a bold departure from previously accepted military training policies. In the past, the Army has relied on the time-honored and tradition-bound system of progression



noncommissioned officer candidate schools.

The genesis of these schools is rooted in the simple economics of war: the demand for experienced junior combat leaders simply began to exceed the supply. The attrition of combat, the 12-month tour in Vietnam, the 25-month stabilized tour in the rotation base and the administrative erosion of separation and retirement combined to reduce the flow of qualified replacements to a trickle. The Army was faced with the unpleasant alternative of sending career men back into action sooner or filling NCO requisitions with unqualified lower-rank personnel.

Concept of the Course

Out of this dilemma grew the concept which quickly took form as the NCO candidate school program. Basically, the concept is no different from that already proven by officer candidate schools. If a carefully selected soldier can be given 23 weeks of intensive training that will qualify him to lead a platoon, then other selected individuals can be trained to lead squads and fire teams. The OCS graduate is commissioned a second lieutenant upon completing his training; the NCOCS graduate is promoted to the grade of sergeant. (The top five per cent of the honor graduates can be promoted to staff sergeant. Candidates become corporals when they begin training.)

The noncommissioned officer candidate training program was designed to maximize the tour of the two-year soldier. The length of time required to complete basic combat training and advanced individual training, plus necessary leave and travel time, established one yardstick. The 12-month tour in Vietnam set another. There was just so much time left in which to train a man to lead others in battle. Army staff planners settled on 21-22 weeks as the optimum period.

These 21-22 weeks of training are divided into two phases. Phase I consists of 12 weeks of intensive formal instruction that emphasizes the "hands-on" application of the skills the candidate is expected to master. The successful "student" receives his stripes and enters Phase II, a 9-10 week period of practical experience where the newly appointed sergeant actually leads other men. This phase of training is carried out in a training center or a unit and gives the man an opportunity to gain further confidence, poise and maturity before his next assignment.

Candidates accepted for training all are volunteers. Men who want to apply for the program may do so by notifying their unit leaders. In many cases, commanders may already have spotted traits of leadership in

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certain soldiers and have suggested that they request training. Often, too, the potential noncom has been singled out as a possible leader at the induction center because of achievements in civilian life. Counting basic and advanced training, the soldier could be wearing sergeant's chevrons within 30 weeks of starting training.

Any time that a new program or piece of equipment is introduced, the American soldier quickly finds a catchy new name for it. Such words as "jeep," "bazooka," "long Tom" and "90-day wonder" have become colorful parts of the military lexicon. Unfortunately, the NCOCS program was quickly dubbed with the term, "Instant NCO Course."

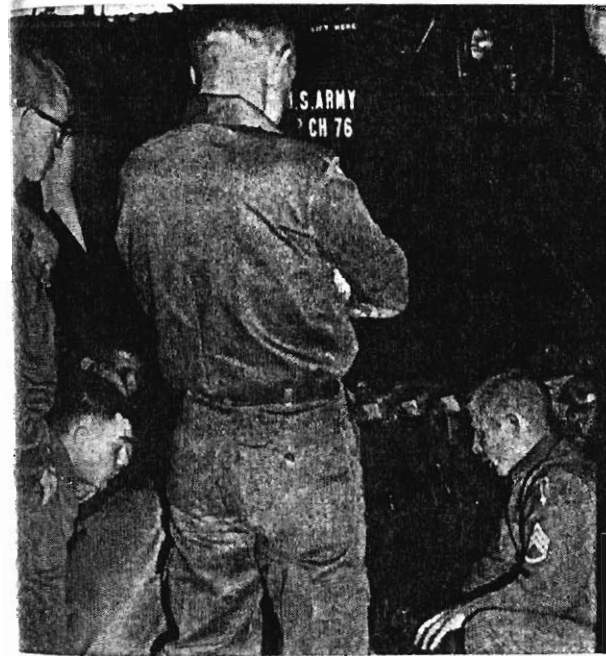
This euphemism does a great disservice to the high-caliber young men who are selected for noncom training. The weeks of rugged training they will go through, the microscopic scrutiny the rest of the Army will subject them to, and the close parallel to officer training programs do not justify the word "instant." The only thing instant about this program was the speed with which it was put into execution. Gen. Harold K. Johnson, Army chief of staff, approved the concept 22 June 1967 and the first class commenced training on 5 September 1967 at Fort Benning. This first class finished the formal phase of training on 25 November 1967, and immediately went to several Army training centers for the practical application phase. This phase was finished in mid-February and the graduates were deployed to the Far East.

Nor was there anything easy about those early days of training at Fort Benning, as the term "instant" implies. There was a 34 per cent attrition rate in the original class of 200, although the Army expects to do better than that as the caliber of student improves. Most of the NCO candidates are from the infantry; Fort Sill takes in 48 men for artillery units every two weeks and Fort Knox starts 120 through armor-oriented training every three weeks.





Their demanding training of these first candidates is behind them, but their greatest challenge still lies ahead. Although the challenge of combat in Vietnam poses a serious and menacing threat, the greatest obstacle yet to be met is acceptance on the part of their fellow NCOs. A sergeant major of 25 years' service once had the rare opportunity to admonish a group of young lieutenants. The occasion was the graduation from their branch basic course. "Gentlemen," stated the sergeant, "you don't accept us; we were here first. We accept you and when we do, you'll know." This same sort of recognition must be given to the new NCO candidate graduates before their niche in the Army is firmly established. An examination of the alternatives to the NCOCC program will hasten this recognition.



A program as revolutionary as NCO candidate training is bound to cause some resentment—particularly among middle-grade NCOs. These men worked for years to get where they are. They survived in the harsh school of experience. They got their stripes because they were better than the men who did not get promoted. Their chevrons also reflect an investment of several hash marks. Now the Army has developed a plan that will make a sergeant of a man with less than two years of service. With luck, these new NCOs may earn one or two more stripes in Vietnam.

The first alternative to relieving this situation is to require middle-grade NCOs to go on short tours more frequently and stay there longer. A second choice is to continue doing what circumstances have forced us to do: require the platoon leader to pick the brightest young PFC he can find, declare him the sergeant and entrust the lives of a dozen men to his care. Under the NCO candidate concept, this same bright PFC will probably be the man selected for further training. Only now he will have 21 weeks of additional training and seasoning under his belt and will have the rank

A new NCO is schooled in a wide variety of subjects which help to develop leadership, physical stamina and a working knowledge of weapons and equipment. In the left photo candidates are instructed in mortar fire placement techniques. Wheeled vehicle operation and maintenance procedures explained to students in the above photos in the one on the right the rigorous obstacle-building log drill is in progress.



to go with his job of leading other soldiers.

The NCO candidate courses were originally developed to meet the requirements of the three main combat arms of infantry, artillery, and armor. But the concept was so favorably received and seemed to offer such a workable solution to meeting the NCO and supervisor requirements that plans are being developed to expand the program into other career fields. The entire program has become known as the skill development base and may eventually involve more than 60 MOS.

In retrospect, the fact that we needed such a program to meet the requirements of an army engaged in a "hot war" suggests that our entire noncommissioned officer educational system requires review. Current requirements to maintain a large standing army with world-wide responsibilities, but which is structured on a peacetime footing, militates against the present hit-or-miss practices of NCO training. This, coupled with more complex hardware, shows we need a viable educational program for the Army's junior-level leaders—the NCO corps. Furthermore, the higher educational levels and sophistication of the young men entering the Army today demand an NCO corps equally as educated and sophisticated.

The need for the skill development base has made one point patently obvious: the Army has entered the airmobile age with an NCO educational system that is woefully behind the pace. Accordingly, a need for restructuring the current NCO educational patterns is apparent. The skill development base represents the threshold of a radically bold new training concept with the recently established infantry NCO candidate course as its precursor.

Reasons for the Change

To understand the rationale for recent changes in the noncommissioned officer educational system and those further changes which are now under study, one must recognize an historical pattern. It begins with the officer corps.

Shortly after the close of World War II, while historians were still trying to evaluate the significance of what had just happened, Sir Winston Churchill quickly recognized the role that the United States Army had played. Great Britain's wartime leader observed: "I greatly admired the manner in which the American Army was formed. I think it was a prodigy of organization, of improvisation. . . . The rate at which the small American Army of only a few hundred thousand men shortly before the war created the mighty force of millions of soldiers, is a wonder of military history. . . . This is an achievement which the soldiers of every other country will always study with admiration and envy."

Churchill went on to say: "But that is not the whole story, nor even the greatest part of the story. To create great armies is one thing; to lead them and to handle them is another. It remains to me a mystery as yet

unexplained how the very small staffs which the United States kept during the years of peace were able not only to build up the armies and the Air Force units, but also to find the leaders and vast staffs capable of handling enormous masses and of moving them faster and further than masses have ever been moved before. . . ." "That you should have been able to preserve the art of not only creating mighty armies almost at the stroke of a wand—but of leading and guiding those armies upon a scale incomparably greater than anything that was prepared for or even dreamed of—constitutes a gift made by the officer corps of the United States to their nation in time of trouble, which I earnestly hope will never be forgotten here. . . ."

Those who fought in World War II know it for what it was: a broad scale conflict that involved whole continents and masses of troops organized into corps, field armies and army groups. It was truly a senior commander's war, and the officer corps that Churchill spoke of was a product of that war. The Regular Army officer corps in 1939 was a cloistered little group of around 15,000 men. By July 1945, there were almost a million officers in the Army, only two per cent of whom were regulars. Even so, these regulars formed the nucleus of the commanders and staff officers who led an army of 8,291,366 men to victory.

Who were these regular officers? In the main, they were a group that had adjusted to a way of life that they could understand—a way of life that kept lieutenants in a grade for 13 years and saw some men serving as captains for 17 years. In fact, it has been estimated that had it not been for World War II, the West Point class of 1917 would have all retired as majors with 30 years of service. It was a way of life suited to the world situation of the period. World War II changed all this, almost overnight. Officers coming into the Army in 1939 found themselves commanding battalions and regiments as lieutenant colonels and full colonels just a few years later.

The point to be made from this is that in a rapidly changing world situation, personnel policies must change just as rapidly if the Army is to survive. Because something remained in effect for 25 years does not necessarily make it right today. The prewar regular officer was mature enough to accept the fact that some men had suddenly risen to a rank that it had taken him 20 years to reach because the good of the Army demanded it. Naturally, there were gripes, but for the most part the regular adjusted to his new circumstances.

Just as the regular Army officer had to adjust his way of thinking at the onset of World War II, the regular NCO must now adjust to limited war. This means that the sergeants of today must not only have the skill to meet an unconventional enemy but must have the maturity to meet the challenges imposed by an unconventional education and promotion concept as well.