

My Summer in Georgia

Richard E. Ecker

When the Korean War started in June of 1950, I was a 20-year-old employee of the family greenhouse in Waverly, Iowa. Two years earlier, right out of high school, I had made an attempt at going to college, but that attempt failed miserably. It wasn't that I lacked the gray matter to make it as a college student. It was just that, given the unique circumstances of that experience, I was not sufficiently mature for the challenge. As a high school senior, I had qualified for appointment as a midshipman in the U.S. Naval Reserve. I had selected as my college of choice for NROTC training the toughest engineering school available in the program—Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY. It was a bad choice; first, because it was too far from home and I wasn't ready for that abrupt a separation from my family; and, second, because I had breezed through high school and had no study habits, which were an absolute necessity at Rensselaer. I dropped out in the middle of the first semester.

In my exit interview with the Navy captain that was the head of the NROTC program at RPI, along with a rather detailed description of exactly what he thought of me as a human being, he advised that I would never again be able to accept a commission in any U.S. military service. That was fine with me. All I wanted was to be out of Troy, NY, and back to hearth and home.

Two years later, with the Korean War now underway and having been classified 1A by the local draft board, I was certain to be on the short list for induction into the Army. So, like many guys in my situation, and with a shrinking interval before I could expect to receive my "Greetings:" from the Selective Service, I visited the Army recruiting center in Waterloo to see what alternatives were possible. For obvious reasons, I hadn't considered the Navy. I'm not sure now why I didn't check with the Air Force. For one thing Air Force enlistments were for four years at the time and I only had to serve for two if I were drafted into the Army—and only three if I decided to enlist. In addition, having spent much of my adolescence in the years of WWII, I remained inspired by the propaganda that glorified combat service in the Army.

The Army recruiter looked over my records and then made what seemed to be an impossible suggestion.

"You are obviously in very good physical condition and your high school record is excellent. I have a program that should fit you perfectly. There is a special regulation that allows us to recruit individuals like you and offer a civilian commitment to Officer Candidate School."

"Hold on," I interrupted. "I can't go to officer's training."

"Why not?"

"Because I was a midshipman in the NROTC program at a college out east and I quit. The commanding officer there told me that, because I quit, I could never hold a commission in any U.S. military service."

"Didn't you get an honorable discharge?"

"Sure," I replied and handed it to him.

He looked it over and declared, "What he told you is baloney. Your record is clean and I can enlist you in our program without any problem."

He went on to explain that the program he was recommending selected potentially qualified civilians to go through an elimination process that, if successful, put the individuals on a track that would conclude with graduation from Army Officer Candidate School. That track included fourteen weeks of Infantry basic training, four weeks of leadership school, four weeks

of practical leadership experience in a training company and 17 weeks of OCS. In addition, if at any time I failed to “complete the prescribed course” (that is, if I washed out or decided to quit), I would revert to my status prior to selection to the program—i.e., civilian. If I completed the specified requirements, and became an officer, I would be required then to serve an additional two years of active service. He also advised that, to become qualified for enlistment under this regulation, I would have to pass an extensive physical exam, a battery of intelligence tests and an interview by a personnel officer.

It didn’t take me long to decide that this was as good a deal as I could hope for, with the draft board breathing down my neck and no education beyond my high school diploma. So I applied for enlistment under the “civilian commitment” regulation and soon received an invitation to Fifth Army Headquarters in Chicago, where they tested and interviewed me for selection to the program. A few weeks later, I received a letter confirming my appointment to the program and instructing me to appear on October 2, 1950, at the induction center in Des Moines, where I would be sworn in as a recruit in the U. S. Army.

After enlistment, I was sent to Ft. Riley, KS, location of the only Officer Candidate School in the Army at that time. At Ft. Riley, I would be expected first to go through basic training and leadership school at Camp Funston and then be assigned to an OCS class at Camp Forsythe. However, while I was still completing the required preliminary training, and with an increasing need for officers in the combat arms, the Army re-activated two WWII OCS locations—one at the Artillery School in Ft. Sill, OK, and one at the Infantry School in Ft. Benning, GA. The school at Camp Forsythe would continue to produce officers for the other branches as a general OCS, from which graduates would go on to further training as officers in their assigned branches. The reactivated OCS facilities would each offer a 22-week training program, from which the newly commissioned, and now branch-qualified, officers would proceed directly to assignments within their branch.

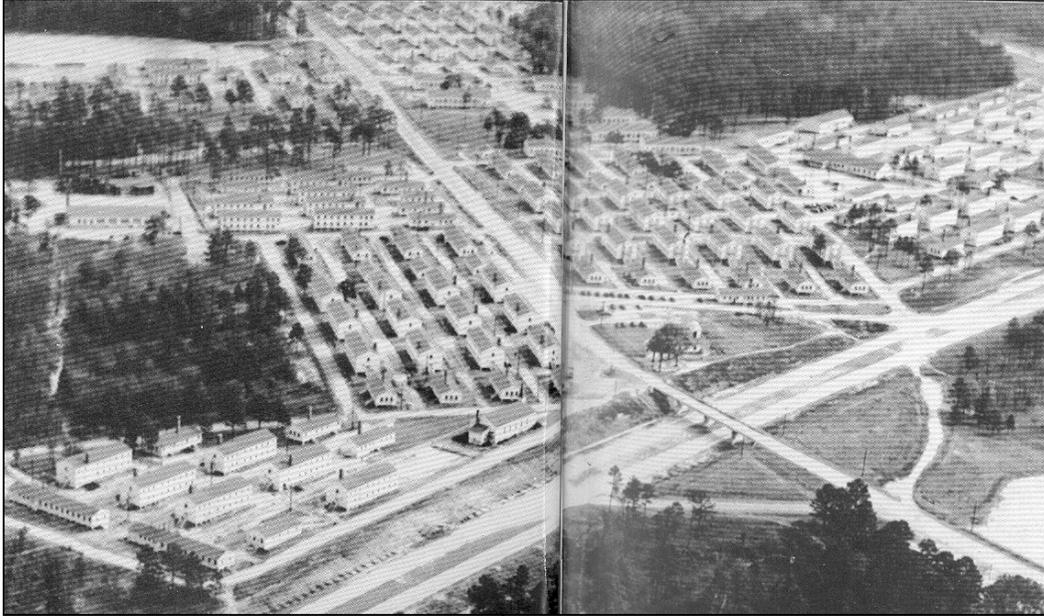
So it was that, in May of 1951, having completed all of the required preliminary training, I was issued orders to report to the Infantry School at Ft. Benning, where I would be assigned as a member of Officer Candidate Class #4 and begin my training to become an officer in the infantry. This was the beginning of one of the most fascinating and memorable experiences in my life. Although it has been sixty years, a lot of those memories remain personal highlights and I’m delighted to be able to share them in this series of recollections. However, I must confess that my mother (who seldom threw anything away) kept all of my letters home while I was on active duty, so I will draw on them frequently to provide details that have faded from my memory. I also took some photographs while I was there (and acquired a few from classmates), and I will include some of them where it seems appropriate.

Shortly before I got my orders for OCS, I acquired title to my first automobile—a 1941 Oldsmobile club coupe that I bought from my older brother. This was the means of transportation that carried my friend, Doug Gill, and me to Ft. Benning to begin our adventure in Georgia. Doug had been with me from the very beginning on the path to The Infantry School. I met him first in Chicago, as part of the group that was being examined for qualification to the program. Then we were in the same basic training company, attended the same class at Leadership School, did the practical phase of our leadership training in the same company, and we were on the same assignment order to OCS. On the way from my home in Iowa, I picked up Doug at his home in Indianapolis and we traveled together to Georgia.

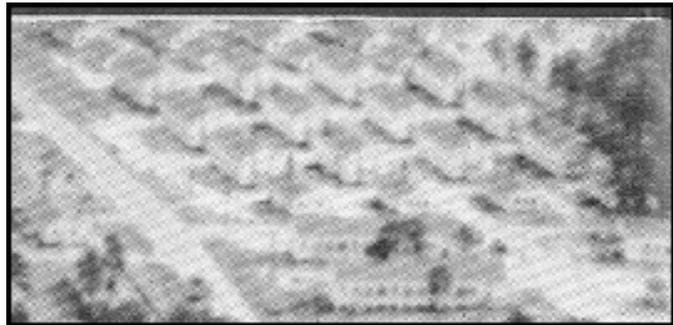
Here is an extract from my first letter home, dated May 14, 1951:

*Arrived last night with no troubles. Took more time to find where we were going after we got here than it did to get down here.
Quite warm in Ga at the present time, but gets colder than hell at night.*

When you look at an aerial photograph of the area we heading for, it's not surprising that we had trouble locating our destination. Below is a photo of that area of Ft. Benning known as Harmony Church. The First Officer Candidate Battalion, to which we were assigned, is the area



at the top, just to the left of the crease. The 4th Officer Candidate Company was the line of six buildings to the far right, nearest the crease. The adjacent photo is an expanded view of this battalion area. The buildings in each company area are, from bottom right to top left, the day room, the 3rd platoon barracks, the 2nd platoon barracks, the 1st platoon barracks, the orderly/supply room and the mess hall. The orderly room is the company headquarters. Our company street—the



area on which we assembled to begin and end each day—is a paved roadway to the right of these structures. Across the company street is a parking lot, where my car took up space for the next 22 weeks.

I was assigned to the 1st platoon and to the second squad, which was on the first floor of the barracks, on the side toward the street. On the left is a picture of my squad area, obviously taken when no inspection was expected. There were 166 candidates in the

company when we started, which broke down to 14 men in most of the four squads in each barracks. With the need for a desk and chair, a wall locker and footlocker for every man, we had pretty tight quarters to start with. I'm sure the people in charge anticipated that space would not remain a problem as the program took its toll among the more faint-of-heart and slow-of-wit that occupied those bunks. That anticipation turned out to be accurate.

OCS at Ft. Benning had only been in operation for three months when we arrived, so things didn't always come off as smoothly as they would have liked. Following is an extract from a letter home dated May 22, 1951:

"...Things are still pretty well balled up here since this is a brand spankin' new company, so they can't be on us for being screwed up until they straighten themselves up.

We're still processing—which simply means a small amount of processing and a lot of dismounted drill and sitting on our cans.

One thing—they don't know the meaning of at ease. I spend half the day standing at parade rest. [Like being at attention, except with your feet spread and hands behind your back.] You run everywhere you go. And when you get there you stand at parade rest. You say you want to go look at the bulletin board. Why sure, run like hell down and look at it but make damn sure you stand at parade rest while you're doing it, and when you finish, run like hell back..."

The duty uniform for an officer candidate was an olive drab jump suit with legs bloused into combat boots, and an olive drab helmet liner. There was an "OCS" emblem on the front of the helmet liner. A leather nametag was buttoned to the right breast pocket. We wore no insignias indicating our rank. Some members of the company were Army veterans and came into the program from assignments in which they had served as senior NCOs. But, although they continued to receive the pay they drew prior to selection for OCS, we were all equals and were identified by one title—"CANDIDATE." At right is a photo of some of the men from the 2nd Platoon, in uniform and waiting for the call to assemble on the company street, which is shown at the left, with the parking lot beyond it.

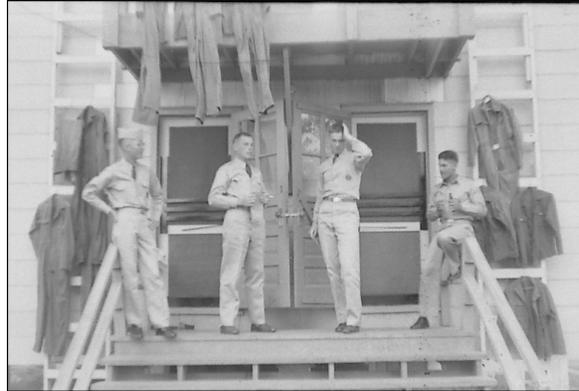


In the matter of pay grade, a lot of us came into the program at the rank of Private (Grade E-2). However, because a multitude of additional expenses were involved in maintaining the standards required in OCS, those of us who entered at a rank below Corporal (E-4), were automatically promoted to that rank when we were assigned to an OCS class. Then, a couple of weeks after we got there, I reported home with news of an additional change:

I got to OCS at the proper time. Starting the 1st of June, O/C's will be jumped to the 5th pay grade (Staff Sgt), if they don't already hold a rank that high.

So now I'm a Sergeant. It means an extra \$20 a month in pay, which will bring my pay to \$137.50 a month. Not bad, considering the fact that they never give you time to spend it. A sergeant in 8 months and I'll never wear a stripe.

Actually, we did have time to spend some of that money, although our movements were pretty well restricted for the first couple of months. We still had to get our hair cut and our laundry done. If our hair got longer than a quarter of an inch, we might not pass Saturday inspections, so every Friday evening I got the past week's growth removed. In the matter of laundry, although we all had several jump suits to work with, we had to be wearing clean ones when the company assembled each morning. Laundry service was too slow for that schedule, so we improvised. The photo at the right shows our solution.



Dress uniforms (khakis—being worn by the four candidates in the photo) were required in the evening for retreat and for Saturday inspections. We sent them to the laundry because, whenever we were wearing them, they had to look like they had never been worn—particularly for those inspections. I can still recall vividly the Saturday morning ritual of breaking out a freshly-pressed and heavily-starched khaki uniform and standing on my foot locker to put on the trousers to assure that I didn't get any extra wrinkles in them before inspection.

My clearest memories of Saturday inspections are mostly unpleasant. In my earlier training, I had stood a lot of inspections. On those occasions, the only times you had to stand at attention were when the inspecting officer arrived, when he left and while your squad was being inspected. When Officer Candidate Company #4 was inspected, we all braced at attention for the entire ordeal, which was a couple of hours—although it seemed like a lot longer. Summer mornings can get very hot in Georgia and occasionally some of our mates would pass out. If that happened to the guy standing next to you, it was considered an offense to blink.

Although my letters home seldom emphasized the kinds of pressures represented by these inspections—and other harassment intended to see how we would react—they were a way of life in OCS and a part of the process of evaluating the commitment to discipline of the candidates. They contributed to attrition in two ways. Some candidates would get fed up with the pressures and would quit. Others would react in ways that marked them for removal. I can recall one of my platoon mates, after a particularly frustrating day, took a butt can (a #10 can from the mess hall that hung on a post in the barracks to collect cigarette butts) and kicked it the full length of the barracks.

A lot of the information in my letters home described the content of our training; things like map reading, methods of instruction, leadership, physical training, weapons and the like. In reading through these letters, I found it of more interest to share some of my reflections on events outside the classroom and field exercises. Here is an extract from a letter dated June 14:

At the present time I'm on Battalion CQ (Charge of Quarters). Mostly it's just flunky for the Duty Officer. I have to stick around Bn. Hqs. until tomorrow

morning when they start functioning around here again. It gives me time to catch up on my correspondence. I have the honor of being able to hob-nob with the duty officer, who, I have just discovered is not an extremely friendly individual—so hob-nobbing will be kept to a minimum.

As long as I have the opportunity, I'll go thru a typical day here in OCS. We rise at 5:30AM. Reveille at 5:55. Chow at 6. We eat by platoons rotating daily. Within the platoon the squads rotate at every meal. One squad marches into the mess hall while the other 3 stand at rigid parade rest...When marching into the mess hall you stand at parade rest until the man in front of you moves up. Then you come to attention march a couple of steps forward—halt and again assume the position of parade rest until the man in front of you again moves up—and so on into the mess hall. The mess hall has a series of 4 or 6 man tables. When you enter with your tray, you set your tray on the table and stand at attention behind your chair until the table is filled at which time you may be seated and begin eating.

After chow and until 7:30 you clean up the barracks (We have an inspection every day while we're in class). At 7:30 we fall out for classes. From 7:30 –7:45 we have mass commands in the company area. This is a quaint little setup where you get practice in giving commands and executing them too. For instance—the candidate in charge will say—“Face the platoon to the right – Command” at which time the whole platoon says “Right, face” and executes it. This is done with about all phases of platoon drill.

At 7:45 we again reform in company formation and either double time off to a class in a classroom in the area or we mount trucks to go off to the range or some other class area. Most of the time we stay in the same classroom or area for each 4 hour period.

At noon we return for chow. At 1 PM we again fall out for class—no mass commands this time. We spend the afternoon at class. At 5:05 PM the day is theoretically over. We return at that time and move into the barracks, change into class “A” uniform (dress uniform) and fall out at 5:35 for retreat. At 5:45 chow is served. After chow we have until 7:00 free. From 7 till 9:30 we have study hours in the barracks. You cannot leave the barracks. You must be quiet and you must study—or if you don't have studying to do, you clean your rifle, polish your boots etc—but you will be quiet. From 9:30 till 11 is your own time. Taps at 11 and the day is over. That's a usual day at OCS.

That free time—from 9:30 to 11:00 every evening—was only “free” in a most liberal sense. The assigned study hours were intended to help us develop our brains, but that was only a fraction of our anatomy that required development. During the third week of training, we had had our first of five PE tests. Here is how I described the test in a letter home the following weekend:

...It includes pull ups – squat jumps – push ups – sit ups and a 300 yd run in 5-60 yd shuttles. You get 100 pts. each for doing (1) 20 pull ups (palms forward) (2) 75 squat jumps...(3) 54 push ups (4) 65 sit ups in 2 minutes (5) 300 yds in 44 sec. (not so easy as it sounds – those turns knock off a lot of time). This

test is done in combat boots, fatigue trousers and T-shirts. The events are done in the order named with no rest in between. Pts are knocked off for anything less than the maximum. 500 pts is almost an impossibility. The class average for the test was below 200 pts. I made 290...

The only problem of having a score to write home about was that there was a caveat in the rules about PE tests. You had to improve with each one taken. So, although I started out with a high score, it had to keep getting higher. Thus, that “free” time before taps was typically spent working through the phases of the PE test (except for the run). Fortunately, the overhead plumbing pipes in the latrine were very secure, because they had candidates doing pull-ups on them virtually every night.

Periodically during our time in OCS, we were provided a card indicating our class ranking at that time in the course. The first card was issued after we had been there six weeks. Mine is shown on the right. At this time, only two candidates had been dropped from the program. I should point out that it was my understanding at the time that the class standing was weighted strongly by academic performance, which was the aspect of training that I found easiest (although at this point, I hadn't found any aspect of it particularly difficult.) One advantage of being identified by my fellow candidates as a “brain”—and my willingness to be a tutor for those who were struggling—was the potential for a positive influence on my “buddy reports.”

HEADQUARTERS THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
FORT BENNING, GEORGIA

SUBJECT: Class Standing
TO: Richard E. Ecker

This is to inform you that you ranked number 14
among 164 students of Officer Candidate Class
No. 4, conducted during the period 18 May 19 51
to 28 June 19 51 at Fort Benning, Georgia.

FOR THE COMMANDANT:

2716 FT. BENNING, GA. 2 FEB 51 5000 P-27

At periodic intervals during the course, we were required to submit an evaluation of fellow candidates—first those in your own squad and, later, in your section (two squads) and finally the whole platoon. Doing an individual evaluation was difficult enough, but then we had to rank each man and give reasons for the ranking—hence the title “buddy reports.” It was one of the toughest assignments in the whole program. They used these reports not only to determine how your bunkmates viewed your potential to be a leader, but also to test your ability to make sound judgements about the leadership potential of others.

After six weeks, we earned the privilege to go to town on a weekend—although we still had to be back on the post and in bed by 11:00. On July 4, I wrote home about my first venture into Columbus, GA, the previous weekend.

I did finally get to town last Sunday. I had breakfast and spent most of the afternoon swimming. Had a blind date with a WAF in the evening. Went over like a lead balloon. After 7 weeks of confinement, I was confused considerably as to the proper way to conduct myself in the presence of this strange creature known as the female – Her strange talk (she was a southern belle) served to confuse me more and to cinch it she was dumb as hell.

Every platoon in the company was under the supervision of a “tactical officer,” who was the officer responsible for assigning duties to the candidates, evaluating their progress, inspecting the barracks and, when necessary, providing encouragement and support. In the matter of tactical officers, the first platoon definitely drew the short straw at the start of the course. Ours should

never have been given that kind of responsibility. He couldn't handle the job and, about eight weeks into the course, he got the sack—to the cheers of every man in the platoon. His replacement was as good as he was bad. Lt. Adams was a Native American, a West Point graduate, a combat veteran and an ideal example of what good leadership should look like. The transformation in our platoon after he came was remarkable. Within weeks, we went from the worst platoon in the company to the best.

The primary attrition among the candidates was either because they “washed out” or because they decided to resign from the program. The process of washing out was, in many ways almost as traumatic for the rest of us as it was for those who disappeared from among us. Every so often, a retention board would meet and consider the tenure of candidates whose performance records were less than desirable. On the days the board met, those candidates that were up for review were held back from training. The rest of us went to the field as usual. Sometime during the morning, a truck would show up at the training site with those comrades that passed the review. The others, we never saw again. When we got back to the barracks, all of their stuff was gone and the bunks, desks and lockers were relocated to accommodate the space where they once had been. It was like they never existed.

There was, regrettably, one other way in which candidates could find themselves removed from the program. In our company, the most blatant example occurred when five guys brought a woman into the parking lot one night and had their way with her well into the wee hours. Of course, it's hard to keep something like that quiet and it didn't take long for their secret to leak out. In a letter home dated August 1, I wrote:

Today, the old man got wind of the truth and tomorrow 5 heads will roll—that is, immediate relief with the possibility of court martial. As if that isn't bad enough, \$130 was stolen from the third platoon last night and the CID is making a huge investigation. The disappearance of the money brought out a lot of petty thievery that has been going on in the 3rd platoon, which was never reported, because no one wanted to raise a stink. Now the whole thing is out in one enormous smell. Thank God the 1st platoon limits its activities to such minor things as a fight in the barracks resulting in one broken jaw and one summary court [court martial]. Oh yes indeedy. Life is active these days.

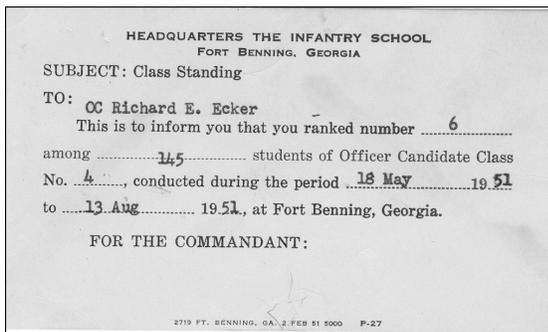
A week later we started the 12th week of training, which marked the end of what they called the “plebe” period of our candidacy. The course was divided into three periods. During the first 12 weeks, or “plebe” period, privileges were limited—but so were responsibilities. It was a time when personal development (academics, physical training and discipline) was emphasized. In the intermediate period, from the 13th through the 17th week, leadership was a greater emphasis and it was during this period that we could expect the largest loss of numbers from our class. During the last four weeks of the course, the remaining members of the company would become “senior” candidates. Seniors wore a slightly different uniform (blue helmets and blue tabs on their shoulders) and merited a salute from the junior candidates in the battalion area—and they took over some of the responsibilities of the battalion officers.

The first class had become seniors six weeks after we started in the course, so by the end of our plebe period we were pretty well accustomed to dealing with (and, when possible, avoiding) blue-helmeted upper classmen. And, of course, we looked forward to our own 19th week, when we could don those helmets ourselves. Meanwhile, we were approaching that

intermediate period when the big cuts came, and in this 12th week, we were facing the next round of “buddy reports,” evaluating every man in our section; i.e. all of those on the ground floor of the 1st platoon barracks. These reports would be expected to help determine who did (and who didn’t) make the cut. As I wrote in a letter home on Monday, August 6:

The roughest thing in this course is now staring me in the face...I must evaluate, to the best of my ability, some 25 men on a number of different qualities & characteristics, such as command ability, attitude, intelligence etc. It took me 2 days to do it on 13 men. Must have it in Wednesday nite. Going to have to put forth a little effort.

These evaluations were, in fact, the most demanding requirements of any I faced in my 22 weeks in OCS. I took no pleasure in having to give low rankings to guys I had lived and worked with for the past three months. But, everybody had to have a ranking...and somebody had to be last. It was heart-wrenching to realize that my reports might well contribute to one or more of those guys being numbered among the missing after the next meeting of the review board. On the other hand, my own tenure in the school depended on the quality of the judgements I made in those reports. It was a very hard job.

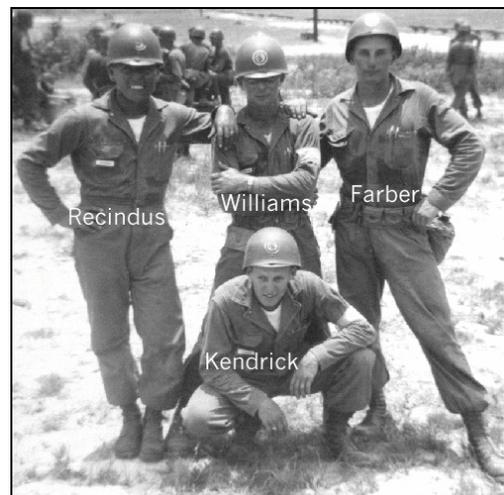


At the end of the 12th week, the second report of class standing was issued. As can be seen in the copy on the left, I had moved up and the size of the class had moved down. We had lost 21 from the company in 12 weeks, and if tradition was a good predictor, the worst was yet to come. Of course, five of those losses were only because some

guys just couldn’t keep their flies zipped.

Looking at that attrition rate, one has to keep in mind that officer candidates were not simply selected at random from a pool of prospects. We all had had to jump through a lot of hoops to get into the program. The training of officers was an expensive endeavor—and officers were badly needed for the continued mobilization for the war. Those that were dropped from the program were not let go to satisfy some kind of quota. We were not pawns in some kind of game—although we often felt that way. We were there preparing to lead men in combat and decisions on retention were based on that reality.

I expect that one primary reason that the greatest attrition came in the final 10 weeks of the course is that this was the time when hands-on leadership was emphasized—at least for those in the class that had given the officers reason to take a second look at them. From the outset, we were assigned leadership positions within the company on a rotating basis. Duty rosters were posted on the bulletin board periodically (probably weekly, but I don’t now recall), with every position from squad leader to company commander assigned to a specific candidate. This photo shows four candidates,



three wearing the leadership arm bands. Everywhere we went and everything we did was under the command of the assigned student leaders—from the company commander on down. I clearly recall the dread of being assigned as one of the high profile company officers—where screwing up was most visible—but I only remember being assigned as the platoon leader one time—and never as company commander.

By this stage in our training, we had been granted sufficient privileges that we were allowed to travel farther away from the post when we had time off. One place I remember well was the swimming pool in Pine Mountain, about 30 miles north of Ft. Benning. What I recall most about that pool was that it had a diving tower 30 feet above the water. I did go off that tower, but I'm not sure I ever went head first. Then, on Labor Day, I wrote the following in a letter home:

Wouldst that I could describe the hell that I have encountered during the past week. It seems that these people save up all the little bits of crap and then unload it on you all at once—they decided that we were beginning to look a bit too contented so they harassed the hell out of us for about 4 days. I'm just beginning to come out of it.

I just spent the afternoon swimming in the Gulf of Mexico and basking in the Florida sunshine. Wonderful pastime.



One of the reasons the summer of 1951 remains such a memorable time in my life was the friendships that were molded while we were sharing that experience. In fact Dean Denmark remains a good friend to this day, as does C. A. (Mac) McComber, (right) who occupied the bunk next to mine for those 22 weeks in the 1st Platoon barracks. Mac once short-sheeted my bunk while I was sitting right next to it studying. I don't know whether that

I took my camera along on that Labor Day visit to Panama City, Florida, where I went with three of my comrades from the 1st Platoon. They can be seen, somewhat out of uniform that day, in the picture at the left. Left to right in the photo they are Farber, Boyd and Denmark.



speaks more to Mac's stealth or my ability to concentrate. I do remember that it was a complete shock when I climbed into my bunk that night. My bunk (with helmet liner and recently received laundry) is behind Mac in the photo.

By the second week in September, the trucks delivering to the field those probationary candidates who had had interviews with the review board continued to arrive missing some of our comrades—and all evidence of their existence was gone when we returned in the evening. By this time in the course, most of our class work involved the study of tactics. In a letter home on September 10, I offered my appraisal of that subject and anticipated our forthcoming elevation to the senior class:

...Not too much to tactics, if you remember not to read anything into the problem. If you pick the simplest and most logical solution you'll be right 9 times out of ten even without being an expert on tactics.

In two weeks 4th OC Co. will become the senior class. The one particularly good part of that is not having to put up with senior candidates. They can put up with me for a while. I can run around the area with my pretty blue helmet and blue shoulder tabs looking down at these lowly junior candidates—eating them out at my own convenience—making life miserable for them. Ah, sweet revenge.

However, although I tried to convey a tough guy image to the folks back home, I was not about to jeopardize my own candidacy by dealing unfairly with subordinates. Becoming seniors did not suddenly remove us from scrutiny. In fact, those last four weeks were going to be a critical time of winnowing for the men in OC4.

Meanwhile, we continued our efforts to avoid the current class of seniors and to keep up with our class work. In a letter home on the 17th, I included the most recent class standing report. As the report indicates, the winnowing process continued to diminish the size of our class. We had now lost 37—and there were certainly more to come. Also in that letter, I hurriedly related some of my current activities:

HEADQUARTERS THE INFANTRY SCHOOL FORT BENNING, GEORGIA	
SUBJECT: Class Standing	
TO: OC Richard E. Ecker	
This is to inform you that you ranked number5.....	
among129.....	students of Officer Candidate Class
No.4.....	conducted during the period18 May.....1951
to11 Sept.....	19.51, at Fort Benning, Georgia.
FOR THE COMMANDANT: .	
2719 FT. BENNING, GA. 2 FEB 51 5000 P-27	

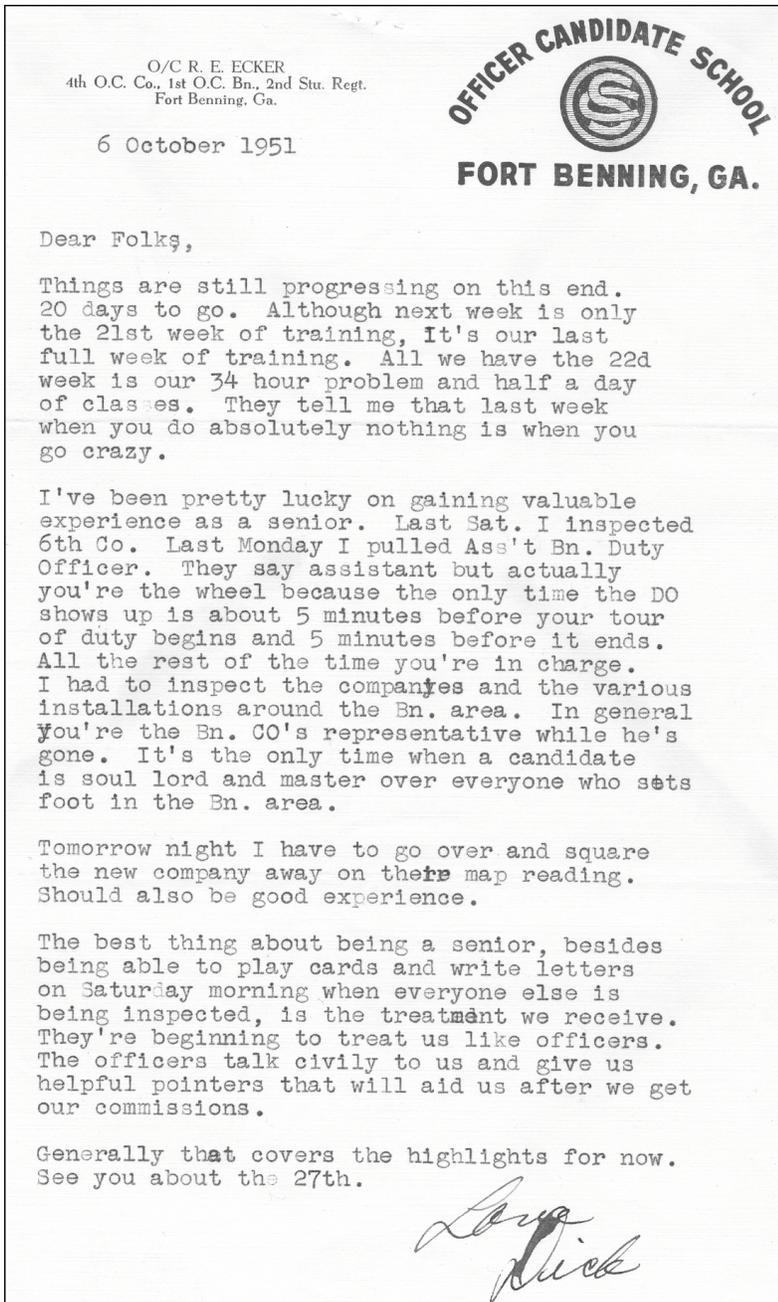
...Today I had the entire composing staff of the class book thrown in my lap. We have a Sig Comm [signal/communication] test tomorrow and I have to give part of a class on Wednesday.

By the end of our tenure in OCS we were expected to have produced a class book, illustrating our activities over the 22 weeks and providing pictures of the graduates in their dress uniforms as new officers. I was one of seven members of the class book staff. Most of us were from the 1st Platoon. My official title was “Managing Editor,” although I don’t now recall being that much of a prime mover in the project. We did produce a very good volume, due in no small measure to Burton’s terrific art work.

We became seniors the last week in September. At the end of that week, I wrote home with a report:

...The folly of being seniors has now worn off and we're getting down to those last 3 weeks of work. Yesterday I inspected one of the junior companies. 8 of us went over to look them over. Poor guys didn't have a chance. I was glad to be able to get the experience. I don't feel I did such an excellent job. But the tact officers were pleased and I did learn a lot.

The folly may have worn off, but there is no question that, after the 18 weeks we'd just been through, being a senior candidate was a great experience. And it was delightful to



share that experience with the good friends I had made over the months we suffered together to reach this goal. One of my special friends was Tom McLean, who bunked across from me, over in the first squad. Tom, shown on my left in the picture above, went on to become the honor graduate of OC class #4.

The letter at the left is the next to last one I could find that my mother had saved. I had been using this stationary since some time in July, but this is the first time I had used a typewriter. I guess that RHIP (rank has its privileges) included senior candidates having access to such equipment.

The one experience I had as a senior that I never wrote home about—and that I shared with very few people—happened when I was in town (Columbus) running some

errands. I had parked my car on the street next to an Army staff car—and, as it happened, across the street from the police station. When I pulled out of the parking space, I carelessly creased the fender of the staff car. What should I do?

My training had been preparing me to think fast and act decisively. I cannot resurrect all of the thoughts that went through my head in the seconds following the incident, but those thoughts convinced me that the least risky course of action was to proceed as if nothing had happened—and that’s what I did. To this day I’m not pleased with having made that decision, but it certainly helped make my last couple of weeks in OCS less complicated.

Of course one of the thoughts that entered into that decision was the prospect of having to appear before the review board with such a short time till graduation. As I said, senior candidates were not immune to such action, and by the time the graduation roster was certified, another 14 of our comrades had been eliminated. That final roster numbered 115, of which my final ranking was No. 4.

Although the Ft. Benning Officers Candidate School did not have an official school song, some enterprising candidates had fashioned one, borrowing the tune from the well-known hymn of Cornell University in Ithica, NY; the one with a first line that begins “Far above Cayuga’s waters...” I don’t remember all of the words of our song, but I do recall the first stanza and a couple of lines of the second. Here is the first stanza:

High above the Chattahoochee,
By the Upatoi,
Stands our dear old alma mater,
Benning’s School for Boys.

The Chattahoochee River forms part of the border between Georgia and Alabama and is at the western extremity of Ft. Benning. Upatoi Creek runs through the post into the Chattahoochee. I do recall wading in one or both of them on maneuvers at one time or another.

To understand the thrust of the second stanza, you need to be aware that the motto of The Infantry School was “FOLLOW ME.” With that introduction, here is what I recall of the second stanza:

Ever onward, every upward,

Follow me and die.

In an earlier letter, I had asked my parents to send a number of items of civilian clothes. So, in my last letter (also typewritten), I acknowledged receipt of them and provided a concluding bit of news:

Received the clothes. Thanks. Didn’t care to much about driving that far in a dress uniform.

Speaking of uniforms, I went to the tailors yesterday for my first fitting. Fits like a glove. Pretty reasonable for a custom tailor job, too. He charges about 12 bucks less for OC’s than for the general public. The pink and greens [trousers and blouse] are going to cost me 89 bucks.

8 hours of class, a 34 hour problem and a week of processing and waiting. That's what left ahead of me. They've lifted all restrictions but no one wants to go out and raise hell. Too close to the end to foul up...

The senior banquet was held some time before graduation, but I don't have many lingering memories of it. It was held at the main officers club at Ft. Benning—and a page of pictures in the class book was dedicated to the event (I was even in one of them)—but for me it was a bit anticlimactic after all we had been through. By then, I had a single-minded focus on graduation and going home.

It was not possible for my parents to travel to Ft. Benning to attend my graduation. They were still struggling to make a success of the business they had acquired a few years earlier. So I had a decision to make—whom should I ask to pin on my bars after graduation? It was customary to ask your mother, your wife or your sweetheart. As I was unattached and my mother couldn't be there, I asked Doug Gill's mom to do the honors. She was not a stranger. I had been an overnight guest in her home when I picked up Doug on the way to Benning.

The graduation exercises themselves were particularly forgettable—as most are. The most memorable thing for me took place as we were lining up to file into the hall. One of my pals from the 1st Platoon (I think it was Kelly) remarked that, when it came his turn to receive his diploma, he was going walk up to the general, turn around, drop is pants, bend over and declare, “Give it to me this way general. That's the way I got everything else since I've been here.”

After Mrs. Gill pinned the gold bars on the shoulders of my new green blouse, I had one final decision to make before the ceremonies were officially over. I had to decide who would get the dollar that was traditionally given to the enlisted man that gave me my first salute. There was no shortage of candidates standing outside the hall that day. A line of company cadre stood there, all at attention, like statues, with their right arms poised in a perpetual salute and their left hands cupped to receive their payment. I knew all of them. They were the ones that made things happen in the company area while we were in training. The guy I selected to receive my tribute was a fellow who served food every day in the mess line. Mostly, he seemed to be assigned to serve potatoes. As the weeks passed, we began a kind of game. I'd ask him, “What kind of potatoes are these?” And he would always respond, “Au gratin,” irrespective of what kind they actually were. In time, I got to know him as “au gratin,” so it seemed appropriate that he should be the one credited with my first salute.

The next day, I hit the road for home—to enjoy a couple of weeks of leave before reporting to Ft. Riley, Kansas, and my first duty assignment as a second lieutenant in the infantry. I don't recall now whether I left Ft. Benning with a feeling of vindication after that colossal ass chewing I had received from that Navy captain at Rensselear, but I most likely did.