

## OC Bde Ends at Knox; 4294 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants Graduated in Two Years

By LT Steven T. Strawbridge

The sound of taps echoed strongly last Friday in the ears of all who had maintained even a passing interest in the Armor Officer Candidate Brigade of the Armor School.

On that day 100 candidates of company B-1 marched in final review, signaling the end of an historic era at Fort Knox – the phasing out of Armor OC which had started here in December 1965.

Since that December day 4,294 candidates had traveled the grueling road to a second lieutenant's gold bars to become part of a tradition that had its roots first entrenched in the now misty epoch of World War I.

The First World War produced the first true process in the United States for selecting, training and commissioning enlisted men as officers. At the outset of World War II, the experience of the Officer Training Camps of World War I was used to set up Officer Candidate Schools which produced more than 136,000 officers for all branches of the army. At the war's conclusion, all Officer Candidate Schools except the one at Fort Benning, Ga. were phased out. The conflict in Korea again produced a requirement for a larger number of officers than the existing systems could produce. Officer Candidate Schools were once more established at branch service schools to train officers for the specific branches.

From 1951 to 1954, the Armor School trained and commissioned 12,200 Armor officers. Between 1954 and 1965 the procedure of training selected enlisted men to be officers was kept alive at Fort Benning, Ga. and Fort Sill, Okla. Plans for future mobilization included reactivation of the schools which had produced so many capable leaders during the First World War, the Second World War and the Korean conflict.

On August 26, 1965, as a result of President Johnson's decision to commit American ground combat units in South Vietnam, the Armor School was ordered by the Department of the Army to activate an Armor Officer Candidate School at Fort Knox.

Preparations for the program at the Armor School required the organization of a command unit to house and administer the candidates and provide for their leadership training and evaluation. The staff and faculty of the academic department of the Armor School had to be increased. In some academic departments the number of classes and instructors doubled. A brigade organization (the Officer Candidate Brigade) consisting of eight companies of two classes each and a headquarters company was organized Sept. 10, 1965, with Colonel Paul C. Root, Jr. in command.

The first full class of 105 candidates began on 9 December 1965, with 77 Armor commissions awarded six months later on 24 May 1966. From that date until last Friday, 4,294 candidates took the Officer's Oath, thus completing the Armor branch quota for officers.

Upon arrival at OC, a candidate had already been through a stringent screening and evaluation process including mental and physical tests interview by commanders, appearance before a board of officers, and a security check. These processes, highly refined since World War II when there was no fixed standard for entrance into OCS, insured that only those with the highest quality and potential to become officers arrived at the Armor Officer Candidate Brigade.

The potential of the enlisted man entering Armor OC was further evaluated by his tactical officer (usually a second lieutenant), his commanding officer and the fellow candidates in his platoon. Extremely high standards of discipline, personal appearance, maintenance of barracks and individuals equipment were required.

Initially, candidates were often bewildered by the number of things they were required to do in the small amount of time allotted. Learning to properly budget time, determine priorities and accomplishing tasks with the maximum efficiency became rote for the candidate aspiring to become an officer.

### **Dealing with Others**

Performance of tasks in itself, was not sufficient for a candidate to warrant a commission. The effective accomplishment of tasks dealing with people required the constant application of knowledge, leadership principles and sound judgment. To develop effective performance, the candidate was placed in leadership positions which included Company Commander, Executive Officer, First Sergeant, Platoon Leader, Platoon Sergeant and Squad Leader. These positions were rotated every three days to afford Tactical Officers maximum opportunity to counsel, guide and evaluate each candidate. During each tour of duty in a leadership position, the candidate was closely observed by his Tactical Officer and fellow candidates in the chain of command. Following the tour of duty the Tactical Officer used his written evaluation of the candidate and the performance of duty reports written by other candidates in the chain of command to counsel the candidate on the effectiveness of his performance, and to suggest actions he should take prior to and during his next tour of duty in a leadership position.

The assignment of missions, spot corrections and the counseling on performance were the tools used by the Tactical Officer to improve the performance and leadership capability of the candidates. This technique proved highly effective since the candidate chain of command actually ran the class during its tour of duty.

### **The Demerit System**

The high standards required of candidates were maintained by the assignment of demerits and restrictions for infractions of regulations. Serious infractions resulted in dismissal from the 23-week course. Each day the tactical officer inspected the personal appearance and the living area of each candidate for whom he was responsible. The candidate received demerits for each item improperly displayed and maintained.

### **A Look in the Mirror**

Four times during his stay in Armor OC, each candidate was required to rate himself on those character traits that have been found over many years to contribute to leadership ability. He was also rated on his standing in the same character traits by his peers, the other candidates in

his platoon. When he received his ratings by fellow members, he graphed a comparison of their ratings against his own ratings to assist him in seeing himself as others saw him.

Half of the candidate's total grade was derived from his evaluation by his tactical officer, his company commander and the contemporaries in his platoon.

Leadership evaluations took place four times during the 23-week course. The rating of the "Tac" counted 50 per cent of each rating while that of the company commander counted 30 per cent and the rating by candidates were weighed at 20 per cent. If a candidate failed in leadership evaluation, he appeared before a panel of officers headed by the Commanding Officer of the Brigade. The "Panel" considered all information available on the candidate and made subsequent recommendations to the Assistant Commandant for the Candidate's retention in or release from the OC program.

The remaining half of a candidate's total grade was determined by his performance within the academic departments of the Armor School.

### **The Honor Code**

An officer is bound to his word by the traditions of his profession, by his devotion to duty, honor, and country, and by the oath of his commission. The honor code, as administered to by a Brigade Candidate Honor Council, was a means by which excellence of character was developed with the candidate. The maintenance of its high standards was the responsibility of each candidate and the Honor Council. The Honor System was established within the brigade and patterned after the honor system at West Point.

### **The Social Side**

Many candidates brought their wives and families to the vicinity of Fort Knox while attending the course. Their wives and children were able to visit them in the company areas during the early part of the course and they were free to be with their families during the latter part of the course. The candidate wives in the area attended classes, style shows, and ladies' functions sponsored by the officers' wives of the Officer Candidate Brigade.

There were three programmed social functions conducted by the candidates during the course to provide a break from their rigorous routine, to acquaint themselves with officer social customs, and to celebrate the changes to intermediate status in the eleventh week, senior status in the eighteenth week, and their attainment of officer status just before graduation.

Last Friday marked the last graduation of candidates within the Officer Candidate Brigade.

And thus the era is over. All that remains is the poignant memory of the hushed tramp of feet marching along an arduous road to the muffled beat of destiny's drum.