Memories of OCS

As the years go by my memory gets worse and worse (my mother, 94, has had dementia for more than a decade and I fear I am heading in the same direction). I look at the list of names in our class and remember only a few. Quite sad. But here is some of what I do remember about OCS….

I was terrified. I’m pretty sure I was terrified from the first day at Belvoir to the last. I think mostly I was afraid of failure, and in such cases fear can be a powerful motivator. I remember right at the beginning someone saying, “Look at the person to your right, and the person to your left. One of you three is not going to make it.” I didn’t want to be part of that one in three.

Within the first couple of days I remember standing in front of Silhasek’s desk, and he said to me, “Gagarin, you’re not at Harvard any more.” The implied message being, I’m going to be extra hard on you. Sweet.

Best thing I did to get ready for OCS? I went through basic (at Ft. Dix) and AIT at Ft. Knox (tank school) with Bill Oster, and at some point we found out we were going to the same OCS class at Belvoir. I don’t know whose idea it was, but we decided it would be good to learn how to march troops. So a couple of times we went out and took turns marching each other around, yelling commands, learning the timing. I got tapped as platoon sergeant the second week, had to do a lot of marching off to classes and back, and the experience helped a lot. I still remember the commands for crossing to the other side of the road (starting from when you were double-timing) – Quick time, march. Road guards front and rear, post. Right flank, march. Left flank, march. Road guards, recover. Double time, march. Some things you never forget.

Food, or lack of it. Going around the table, one person eating at a time, and just a tiny bit each time. Right away the letter to home, send food every single day. And before long the packages were coming, never opened until the Tacs had left and the lights were out, and hopefully you got one or someone in the next bunk did. I went in the Army at 140 pounds. By the time I finished AIT (a lot of eating, not much exercise) I weighed 152. After 6 weeks of OCS I weighed 129. (By the way, I’m still 140.)

I never could spit shine my shoes. I never really tried. I thought a little extra sleep was more important. It was.

First time ever having to pee and shit quite so out in the open. The whole platoon showering in 60 seconds.

Classes were the one respite from hell. You were safe. The rest of the time you were fair game for whatever they wanted to do to you.

At some point in the first 6 weeks or so I got pneumonia. Went into the base hospital for two days I think. Heaven. Slept about 16 hours a day. Came out and was put on “no PT” for a week, no running, even though by then I was the one in charge of leading PT for the platoon. Sort of ironic. Also had the land navigation test that week. No running, but finished first, a sign of things to come? I always could read a map.

There was a fellow from Arkansas in my platoon, name of Charles Smith I believe. If there was ever a guy who had a command presence it was him. Well over 6 feet tall, lean, strong voice, wonderful at calling cadence. But he just couldn’t pass the tests. I got assigned to tutoring him for the final infantry test, did everything I could, he still flunked, and then was gone. A shame.

The pushups. All these years I thought the standard was that we dropped for 50. Was it only 20?

You couldn’t just ask a Tac a question, first you had to ask permission to ask a question. I remember one guy forgot, so the magic word – Drop – which meant everyone dropped for the standard 20 (50?). All done, we’re up, the guy forgets again, we all drop again. Isn’t there supposed to be a learning curve?

Most vivid memory of the whole time is the Escape and Evasion at Camp AP Hill. There were rumors in advance about the Agressors, and what they were going to do to you, so I was terrified as usual. They dropped us off from the trucks just before dark and we scattered into the woods. I think we had a map, a compass, and a little flashlight? I went in a couple hundred yards and then sat down for a moment to think about what to do. And promptly fell asleep. Woke up, no idea how long I’d been out, quite relieved to discover only about 45 minutes. It turned out to be excellent tactics, if unintended, because now I was well behind, and the Agressors had already picked up their quota of victims for the POW camp. I didn’t know this, so I was still terrified, both of the Agressors, also of snakes I imagined in every stream I had to cross, especially the one or two waist deep. Pretty soon I figured it was faster and easier to use the road that ran along the boundary of the map, ducking into the trees every time a vehicle came along. That worked like a charm. The moment of truth was right at the end, there was some sort of bridge over a stream (or swamp?) that was the access to where our barracks were. I didn’t know if there would be Agressors there, but there weren’t and I was home free. And, as it turned out, despite my nap, first one back. I loved it.

I didn’t really like the demolitions class, but the one thing I never ever wanted to have to do was retrieve a mine field.

We built bridges and houses and roads and all sorts of other things engineers did even though I think most of us weren’t going to be commissioned as engineers. I certainly had no engineering skills. I was supposed to be commissioned in the Ordnance Corps. I also had no skills in anything that might be related to ordnance, but it seemed preferable to infantry when I signed up. Throughout OCS I always tried to do as well as possible. I’m not sure why, I think I just figured it wouldn’t hurt. I always was good at taking tests, so the academics was easy, I was just good enough to max the PT test, and my amorphous leadership scores were good enough, so I seemed to be first in the class on that fateful day, maybe a month before the end, when they announced out of the blue that there was one opening for our class in the Finance Corps and one in the AG Corps, and they would be granted based on class rank. Both sounded better than ordnance. I had about 10 seconds to decide my future, and stuck up my hand, Finance Corps, sir.

I remember spending much of the last month being pissed off. We were almost done, we were just about to be officers, and they – especially Hanna – were still treating us like shit. Really pissed me off.

But we made it.

Oh, and Hanna, one mean son of a bitch? Silhasek was pretty good, had a job and did it. But Hanna….

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