

Off to Vietnam as an NCO

By R.W. Trewyn

Receiving my draft notice two days before Christmas in 1967, the possibility of going to Vietnam seemed inevitable. Whether I would go there as a lieutenant or a sergeant never crossed my mind, but both opportunities were presented to me early in my abbreviated 19 month Army sojourn.

Officer Candidate School (OCS) was something I had at least heard of before getting drafted. As for the Army's Non-commissioned Officer Candidate Course—known as “Shake ‘N’ Bake,”—I had nary a clue.

So how did I end up choosing the NCO route and a half-century later, why does that still rank No. 1 among my lifetime accomplishments?

Reporting for duty Jan. 16, 1968, it was off to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, for basic training. The new draftees had to complete a multitude of aptitude evaluations, after which we were given the opportunity to sign up for additional years of service—to enlist. Doing so would allow us to choose our MOS.

The downside was that our two-year active-duty obligation would increase to three years or more as a result. But as a plus, the dreaded infantry in Vietnam could be avoided.

An interesting approach. Not bribery exactly, but close.

Decisions, Decisions

As a 24-year-old draftee who had graduated from a two-year business school and completed 3½ years of college, OCS also

was offered to me. However, it also required three years of active duty.

Fortuitously, I had scored highly on some of the tests, so the Army evaluator/recruiter reviewing my options with me thought it was likely—“98% certain,” were his exact words—that I wouldn't end up in the infantry anyhow. I'd probably be assigned to a medical or chemical lab technician specialty, since my scores for those were outstanding and both required months and months of specialized schooling.

My recruiter figured I could go to work immediately in either, or some office specialty, with minimal on-the-job training. He even suggested the Army would be “nuts” to put me anywhere else based on all the money they'd save on training.

My undergraduate classes and labs in biology and chemistry were looking like lifesavers. So, at “98% certain,” why sign up for an additional year or two? That made no sense. Besides, I wanted to get back to school as soon as possible.

Although I had made the less-than-intelligent decision to take a semester off from college, which is how I got drafted, I knew I wanted to go to graduate school when I completed my undergraduate degree. At age 24, the clock was ticking.

About-Face

To my surprise, the test scores meant nothing, nor did the theory about the Army saving money. When the assignments came down toward the end of basic training, my MOS was 11B:

Infantry. That's what graduating from a two-year business school and 3½ years of college will do for you: nothing.

Not only that, I was on my way to Advanced Infantry Training (AIT) at Tiger Land, a training area at Fort Polk, Louisiana. From there, the next stop was automatically Vietnam.

First, there was a two-week leader preparation course at the Fort Polk Academy. That was followed by nine weeks of AIT in Tiger Land, an interesting place, to say the least. You probably couldn't find a better place than the swamps of Louisiana to get ready for slogging through the Mekong Delta. The mucky, slimy terrain was certainly appropriate.

Best Fit

Approaching the end of that adventure is when the sergeant option arose, a chance to attend the infantry NCO Candidate Course at Fort Benning, Georgia—the 12-week “Shake ‘N’ Bake” school. I don't think any of us offered the possibility had ever heard of it before. That snide, but valued, title is on today's monument to the course at Fort Benning.

Promotions of enlisted personnel into the sergeant ranks normally require years of on-the-job experience. However, Vietnam produced a massive shortage of squad leader and platoon sergeant NCOs, creating the need for “Shake ‘N’ Bakes” to fill the void.

Significantly, the active-duty service commitment with the NCO school remained two years.

So, with real life-or-death combat lurking in my immediate future, I figured the additional training couldn't hurt.

But it hurt plenty. Army Rangers doled out lots of pain, beginning with what seemed like endless physical training and hand-to-hand combat practice. The first few weeks also included instruction in weapons, first aid, communications, map-reading and indirect fire, all critical for the infantry.

Next came weeks of tactics for fire teams, squads and platoons, with the vast majority of that training conducted in Benning's badlands. And, lastly, everything wrapped up with a grueling week of land navigation, patrols, defensive perimeters and ambushes. At the end of a final forced march, each candidate got to request permission to drop nearly 50 feet into Victory Pond after doing a pull-up to kiss the Ranger tab on the rope they were clutching.

Somehow, I managed to survive 12 weeks, graduating as a staff sergeant, one of eight making that rank. The others who endured to the end of the marathon, roughly 160, came out as sergeants.

In the Field

Then, after pushing troops through AIT, an additional nine weeks at Fort Ord, California, and a thirty-day leave, it was time to head out to apply the lessons learned. I arrived in Vietnam Jan. 7, 1969, and a week or so later, I was in the field with Company D, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), 199th Light Infantry Brigade.

Groundhog Day morning, I was the 3rd Squad leader in Delta Company's 2nd Platoon, and we had seen no action since my arrival. By the time the sun went down, the Delta troops remaining had experienced a lifetime's worth of combat, and I was 2nd Platoon leader, taking over for our lieutenant, who became the company commander when our captain was killed in action.

It was a bad day for Delta. I put close to 1,000 rounds through my M16 and could have spit on the enemy when it all began; he was close. And what initially was reported to be an ambush by a Viet Cong squad was revised in an after-action assessment to have been a battalion of North Vietnamese Army regulars.

My time in the field in Vietnam ended April 18, 1969 when a major tripped a booby trap behind me. Hit by three pieces of shrapnel, the one 2 inches from my heart got me evacuated to Okinawa, Japan, the next day. In August, my wounds contributed to my discharge from the Army five months early.

From Feb. 2 until my departure from Vietnam, I spent roughly half the time as platoon sergeant in 2nd platoon and half as platoon leader of 2nd and 3rd platoons due to frequent casualties. There was even a stretch where I was the ranking NCO in Delta, so for five days, I was the acting company first sergeant.

Looking back a half-century later, I'm convinced "Shake 'N' Bake" NCO was the right choice for me. From my vantage point, the 12 weeks of training at Fort Benning provided the skills necessary to do the jobs intended,

squad leader and platoon sergeant, as well as those of platoon leader, i.e., those taught at OCS.

There's no question, though, the longer OCS training was also superb based on the performance of our "usual" 2nd Platoon leader. "Lt. Rock," as the troops nicknamed him, was absolutely rock solid.

Importantly to me, "Shake 'N' Bake" had the advantage of shortening my service time in the Army. That got me to my coveted doctorate decidedly faster, with a five-month shrapnel assist.

Nonetheless, I'm still more proud of my staff sergeant stripes and combat service in Vietnam than I am of the Ph.D. and 44 years as a university professor. Yes, there's pride with those also, but the results were not life or death. Plus, post-Vietnam there was never a selfless brotherhood surrounding me like that found in combat; brothers willing to give their lives to save brothers nearby.

Selfless service is something ethereal—almost spiritual—that few experiences other than military combat can deliver. And once you've been immersed in it, you'll treasure it always.

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