

**NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICER CANDIDATE COURSE**

**by**

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**for**

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The Chief of Staff General Johnston approved noncommissioned candidate course with the endorsement of first Sergeant of the Army William O. Wooldridge. The noncommissioned candidate course provides a unique chapter within the history Noncommissioned Officer Corps. I had served over twenty years within this institution and never heard of this unique course. The course tested the senior noncommissioned officers ability to adapt to changes and commissioned officers ability to provide guidance.

During the Vietnam era, the military was ill equipped to fight the jungle style tactics of the enemy force. Many senior noncommissioned officers training consisted of the conventional fighting tactics used during World War II and Korean War. Most of the senior noncommissioned officers were unable to perform the daily physical challenge of jungle fighting. There was a shortage of senior noncommissioned officers to perform the critical daily duties as fire team leader and platoon sergeants due to separations, high casualty attrition rate and 24 months stateside stabilization policy (Elder 10). The Vietnam War presented a new fighting style of war. Noncommissioned officers fought at the tactical level, which required the squad leaders and platoon sergeants to make life-deciding decisions at a moment notice.

Col (R) Hackworth implemented the noncommissioned officer candidate course as the same concept as the officer candidate course. If the military can train candidates to be platoon leaders through the officer candidate course, then why not, train recruits to be noncommissioned officers was his philosophy. Colonel (R) Hackworth won his battlefield commission during the Korea war. Col (R) Hackworth, one of the most decorated officers during the Vietnam War, was one of the most outspoken officers against the fighting tactic<sup>2</sup> of United States. He publicly criticized his superiors and the actions of the war (Hogan 13).

The purpose of the noncommissioned officer candidate course was to provide qualified noncommissioned officers within the theater of Vietnam. The high casualty attrition rate, senior noncommissioned officers separating from the service, <sup>and the</sup> 24 months stateside stabilization policy created a shortage of senior noncommissioned officers in Vietnam. The fighting tactics of the Vietnamese soldiers presented a new challenge to the Army fighting techniques. Career senior noncommissioned officers were not physically able to keep up with the agile Vietnamese soldiers and the old school training was inadequate for this war.

The nation was at war and the military had two problems to solve. The first problem was to put qualified senior noncommissioned officer on the battlefield. The second problem was to maximize the usage of the draftees. The draft of new recruit was for a two-year commitment. The noncommissioned officers candidate course was the perfect solution to maximize the usage of the draft of qualified new recruits. ~~The noncommissioned~~ course would train qualified new recruit <sup>upfront</sup> before sending them in combat as senior noncommissioned officers. This training would provide first hand tactics training as seen in Vietnam. The Army would provide a solution to both of its problems with the noncommissioned officer candidate course.

The noncommissioned officer candidate course consisted of two phases of training. The first part of phase I, training consisted of a 10 weeks training session at five designated training location<sup>s</sup> in the United States. The location<sup>s</sup> of part I training took place at Fort Bliss, Fort Sill, Fort Leonard Wood, Fort Knox, and Fort Benning (Russell 3). Vietnam's veterans taught the academic portion of the noncommissioned officer candidate course to ensure first hand and relevant training taught at the course (Arms 10). The second part of phase I training was conducted at different stateside ~~location~~ <sup>posts</sup> serving as platoon sergeant. <sup>The</sup> This additional weeks of training was designed to hone the skills of the newly graduates as leaders.

This additional training was also 10 weeks. The phase II of the training was the final examination, which occurred in the theater of Vietnam. Noncommissioned officer candidate course graduates served as fire squad leader, platoon sergeant, and some cases as platoon leader due to the high attrition rate. During the duration of the noncommissioned officer candidate course, the Army graduated over 33,000 recruits to the noncommissioned officer corps (Arms 4).

The average pay grade of noncommissioned officer candidate course's recruit was private second class. The average time in service for newly graduates of the noncommissioned officer candidate course was five ½ months. Several ranks were associated with the noncommissioned officer candidate course. Going through the course, the soldier would by-pass the corporal rank and be promoted to sergeant or staff sergeant. This policy, combined with the increased use of specialists, lessened the overall number of corporals authorized in the Army. (USHRC 1). In essence, the noncommissioned officer candidate course reduced the number of corporal throughout the Army during the Vietnam War.

The top five percent graduates of the noncommissioned officer candidate course were promoted to the rank of Staff Sergeant with the remaining graduates being promoted to rank of sergeant. This is remarkable considering the time in service of the newly graduates.

The top five perfect graduates of the noncommissioned officer candidate course would have the option to attend officer candidate course with a six-year commitment. Many graduates declined this option due to the nation was at war.

The noncommissioned officer candidate course known playfully as the "Instant Noncommissioned Officer Course" or "Shake and Bake Noncommissioned Officer"

The instant noncommissioned officers or shake and bake noncommissioned officers were trained specifically to serve in the infantry (Russell 5). The first time in military history, the noncommissioned officers were fighting the war at their level. The Army needed qualified senior NCO in the infantry branch to fight the Vietnamese jungle style tactics.

The noncommissioned officer candidate course produced four Medal of Honor recipients during the Vietnam War (Russell 5). On 3 March 1969, Sergeant Stone, Lester Jr. “observing the platoon machine gunner fall critically wounded, Sergeant Stone remained in the exposed area to provide cover fire for the wounded soldier who was being pulled to safety by another member of the platoon. With enemy fire impacting all around him, Sergeant Stone had a malfunction in the machine gun, preventing him from firing the weapon automatically. Displaying extraordinary courage under the most adverse conditions, Sergeant Stone repaired the weapon and continued to place on the enemy positions effective suppressive fire, which enabled the rescue to be completed. In a desperate attempt to overrun his position, an enemy force left its cover and charged Sergeant Stone. Disregarding the danger involved, Sergeant Stone rose to his knees and began placing intense fire on the enemy at point blank range, killing six of the enemy before falling mortally wounded” (Russell 6).

Staff Sergeant Robert J. Pruden, 29 November 1969 “deployed his men into two groups on opposite sides of a well used trail. As the groups were establishing their defensive positions, one member of the team was trapped in the open by the heavy fire from an enemy squad. Realizing that the ambush position had been compromised, Staff Sergeant Pruden directed his team to open fire on the enemy force. Immediately, the team came under heavy fire from a second enemy element.

Staff Sergeant Pruden, with full knowledge of the extreme danger involved, left his concealed position and, firing as he ran, advanced toward the enemy to draw the hostile fire. He was seriously wounded twice but continued his attack until he fell for a third time in front of the enemy positions” (Russell 6).

On 27 June 1969, Staff Sergeant Bowen, Hammett Lee Junior’s “platoon was advancing on a reconnaissance mission into enemy controlled terrain when it came under the withering cross fire of small arms and grenades, from an enemy ambush force. Staff Sergeant Bowers placed heavy suppressive fire on the enemy positions and ordered his men to fall back. As the platoon was moving back, an enemy grenade was thrown amid Staff Sergeant Bowen and three of his men. Sensing the danger to his comrades, Staff Sergeant Bowen shouted a warning to his men and hurled himself on the grenade, absorbing the explosion with his body while saving the lives of his fellow soldiers” (Russell 6).

On 7 June 1970, Staff Sergeant Robert C. Murray’s “squad was searching for an enemy mortar that had been threatening friendly positions when a member of the squad tripped an enemy grenade, rigged as a booby trap. Realizing that he had activated the enemy booby trap, the soldier shouted for everybody to take cover. Instantly assessing the danger to the men of his squad, Staff Sergeant Murray unhesitatingly and with complete disregard for his own safety, threw himself on the grenade absorbing the full and fatal impact of the explosion” (Russell 6). Considering that the noncommissioned officer candidate course graduated over 33,000 recruits with less than 6 months time in service with four receiving the Medal of Honor for heroism is a remarkable accomplishment.

Transformation will always be within the military because the current blue to green program has the same principal as the noncommissioned candidate course. The Army made new recruits instant noncommissioned officers under the noncommissioned candidate course with training. Currently, the Army is making instant soldiers under the blue to green program by training prior airmen to soldiers with training.

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