



ARMY OFFICER CANDIDATE SCHOOL

What is Officer Candidate School: Officer Candidate School was a daring gamble during WWII to take men with little formal education and limited military experience and turn them into effective junior officers in just 13 weeks, or ninety-one days. The OCS system had as one basic aim, the substitution of a comprehensive and democratic system for the rather haphazard selection of officers from a social and intellectual elite as was done during WWI where gentlemen, usually college graduates, could enter training schools with no previous military training or experience and even become Field Grade Officers after only three months of Officer training.

The OCS program to be implemented was narrowly focused on the knowledge and skills required of entry level junior officers. No attempt was made to prepare officer candidates to fill specific types of assignments within their branch. A single curriculum was designed to prepare him for any of the duties which may be encountered in his branch. There would be no classes in geopolitics, comparative government, literature, or history and the like during OCS.

World War I Predecessor: Shortly after the sinking of the Lusitania in May 1915 about 100 men mostly Harvard alumni met at the Harvard Club in New York City to consider ways to alert Americans to threats to their interests and Ideas. General Leonard Wood, Commander of the Army's Eastern Department agreed to provide officers and equipment for "The Military Training Camp for Business and Professional Men," at Plattsburg, New York. The public called them "tired businessmen's camps." Funding for the camps was paid for by private donations. These camps, referred to as the Plattsburg Movement resulted in a deep conviction that good combat officers could be produced only by a rigorous course of field training.

The Military Training Camps Association organized in late 1915 received funding in 1916 which legalized and formally recognized the camps as part of National Defense and they were turned into Officer Training Schools in 1917. Sixteen 3-month camps opened at Army Bases throughout the United States with additional camps opened in Puerto Rico, Hawaii, the Philippines and Panama. Graduates from these camps were the first time in American History that individuals commissioned as line officers other than West Point or ROTC would receive common training. A number of these graduates were commissioned as Field Grade Officers.

Although no Black men attended either the first or second camps, an Officer Training Camp was established at Fort De Moines, Iowa in June 1917, which commissioned 779 Black officers. The Armistice of November 1918 abruptly closed the wartime training schools which had commissioned 80,568 line officers, accounting for over 60 percent of officer strength.

There was also a series of annual four-week summer military training camps from 1921-1940 called Citizen's Military Training Camps. Although about 370,000 attended these camps only 5,000 were commissioned before WWII ended the camps. These camps were very useful in acquainting the men with the military needs of the nation and generating much favorable publicity for the Army.

The OCS Program: In late 1940, as the United States came closer to becoming involved in WWII, Army Chief of Staff George Marshall began vigorously promoting an Officer Candidate School program but was opposed by all the Chiefs of the Combat Branches in the War Department and Brigadier General Courtney Hodges, the Commander of the Infantry School at Fort Benning.

Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Under Secretary Robert P. Patterson wanted a large program of WWI type Officer Training Camps. General Marshall realized just how disruptive such a move would be and told Secretary Stimson that the day he did that he would resign. Under Secretary Patterson felt opposition to the training camps was simply

a mark of incompetence and narrow-mindedness, but Secretary Stimson later admitted the OCS Program was the most democratic and effective way of securing Junior Officers.

Beginning of OCS: In February of 1940, General Marshall called Lieutenant Colonel Omar Bradley and told him he had been promoted to Brigadier General and assigned as the Commander of the Infantry School at Fort Benning – and to get the OCS Program going. Upon arriving at Fort Benning BG Bradley found a prototype OCS program of two classes that were poorly organized and instructed and consisted of elitist draftees or volunteers, graduates of Ivy League colleges or descendants of distinguished wealthy Americans. He got to work and by March 24, 1941 his plan at Fort Benning was approved by the War Department and became the model for all other OCS programs. The initial OCS plan in March 1941 was for 4 schools to open: Infantry, Cavalry, Field Artillery and Coast Artillery.

Expansion of OCS: In April 1941, the War Department announced OCS would expand to ten Branch Schools, all scheduled to begin classes between 1 July and 8 July 1941.

Infantry	Fort Benning, GA
Signal	Fort Monmouth, NJ later moved to Fort Gordon, GA
Armor	Fort Knox, KY
Field Artillery	Fort Sill, OK
Coast Artillery	Fort Monroe, VA then Camp Davis, NC
Quartermaster	Schuylkill Arsenal, PA then moved to Fort Lee, VA with another school located at Fort Warren, WY
Medical	Camp Barkeley, TX and Carlisle Barracks, PA
Engineer	Fort Belvoir, VA
Cavalry	Fort Riley, KS
Ordnance	Aberdeen Proving Ground, MD

By the end of 1941 nearly 2,000 candidates had graduated from the 10 branch schools.

Additional OCS Programs began in 1942:

Transportation Corps initially operated three Officer Candidate Schools at Fort Slocum, NY; Camp Stoneman, CA; Mississippi State College, and later moved to New Orleans, LA

Chemical Warfare	Edgewood Arsenal, MD
Adjutant General	Fort Washington, MD
Judge Advocate General	University of Michigan
Finance	Duke University and Fort Benjamin Harrison, IN
Anti-Aircraft Artillery	Camp Davis, NC

Seacoast Artillery Fort Monroe, VA
Tank Destroyer Camp Hood, TX
Army Air Force Miami Beach, FL then San Antonio, TX and Maxwell AFB, AL
Women's Army Corps Fort Des Moines IA and Fort Oglethorpe, GA (1943)

Overseas OCS Programs:

Pacific

Noumena, New Caledonia
Fiji Islands
Brisbane Australia

Europe

Shrivenham, England
Sant' Agata de' Goti
Fontainebleau, France

All OCS programs with the exception of Anti-Aircraft Artillery and Army Air Force Admin were 13 weeks until July 1943 when they were expanded to 17 weeks. AAF started with 12 weeks then to 16 weeks in 1943. The program in Fontainebleau France was the result of losses during the Battle of the Bulge in 1945. The course was only eight weeks for candidates and a special course of three weeks for battlefield commissioned officers.

Why the need for OCS: When the United States began to mobilize in 1940, the Army only had 14,000 Regular Officers and there would be a need for officers, especially junior officers required for all branches of the Army which was to expand to 8,300,000 men and women.

Each year prior to mobilization ROTC commissioned approximately 9,000 officers and West Point approximately 450. In fact, by the end of the war OCS had commissioned 280,000 officers and West Point had graduated only 12,600 during its first 140 years. Other sources of Officers were those who had received some training in peacetime military agencies such as National Guard and Officer's Reserve Corps but with the very lean training budgets during the interwar period few had the opportunity to upgrade their military skills. Many officers were overage in grade; twenty two percent of National Guard First Lieutenants were over forty and 919 Captains were over forty-five. Another source of commissioning other than West Point or ROTC was Direct Commissioning. This

accounted for approximately 100,000 officers about half of which were Doctors, Dentists, and Chaplains. The remainder of which were for technical and administrative positions.

Upwards of 288,000 officers were commissioned through the US Army Air Forces (USAAF) Aviation Cadet Program as pilots, navigators, bombardiers and flight engineers during the War. Contrary to some mistaken beliefs, the Aviation Cadet training was entirely separate from the standard Army OCS program. The USAAF OCS program instead commissioned 33,593 officers for ground and administrative duties.

Qualifications for OCS: Initial appointments to these schools came from commanders of troop units. It is important to note that Army OCS was integrated from the beginning of the program even though every other aspect of the Army, including the Army Air Forces Aviation Cadet training remained solidly segregated throughout the war. OCS was the Armed Forces first deliberate experiment with formal racial integration in the twentieth century.

Selection of Candidates for attendance involved age, physical condition, military service, capacity for leadership, learning ability, citizenship, character and education. Initially all OCS candidates were required to have six months of service but in 1942 it was reduced to three months. The most important requirement for selection as an Officer Candidate was proven leadership ability or leadership potential. Although the War Department never provided a precise definition of leadership and no truly objective test of leadership was ever devised. There are few words in the English Language subject to more differing interpretations than the word leadership, and the Schools recognized the impossibility of reducing the judgment of leadership potential to an exact science. ROTC students graduated from Infantry OCS at a higher rate than any other class of candidates but had a far higher than average leadership failure rate. Leadership potential was not a factor when they enrolled in ROTC but was the key factor in selection for OCS. In June 1942, the War Department approved commissioning of some ground forces OCS candidates who were deficient in leadership abilities as Army Administration Officers (withdrawn in 1943).

The only educational standard required for OCS was “such education or condition or military experience as would reasonably insure satisfactory completion of the course.” Even though there were no specific educational requirements set for admission to OCS, in practice the schools faced a hard fact. Many candidates lacked the educational background to deal with the material, especially the mathematics in the artillery and engineering courses. Field Artillery OCS was perhaps the most aggressive and effective school in identifying and securing qualified candidates, establishing prep schools in 1941 and developing a mathematic qualifying exam in 1942. Infantry OCS adopted a basic education test of reading, grammar, spelling, geography and arithmetic for new candidates. Chemical and Signal had special difficulties in securing qualified candidates because of the technical and scientific knowledge required of candidates to those services. Quartermaster Corps had an especially difficult time meeting its need for officers because it had only 700 officers to begin with and Transportation because before the war there had not been a Transportation Branch.

To conserve and commission as many candidates as possible the Army employed preparatory schools for potential OCS candidates and a turnback policy for failing candidates was promoted.

Operation of OCS: Operation of OCS was complicated in its twofold mission, Training and Selection. School instruction occupied the major portion of OCS time. Regular instruction and academic examinations were the responsibility of faculty instructors. Selection for commissions was the primary responsibility of the Tactical Officers, the key man in OCS, whose charge these men were assigned during the OCS course. In 1941 virtually all TAC Officers were Regular Army Captains and Companies were commanded by Majors. After the start of the war these men were urgently needed in troop training units and OCS had to rely on less experienced officers.

In all schools, the candidates themselves conducted the daily periods of drill and physical training. Rotation one or more times into every command position in the OCS Company, all under the critical gaze of their TAC officer and fellow candidates, quickly revealed

leadership potential, or lack of it, in every candidate. OCS was designed to weed out the timid, the weakling, and those who lacked the capacity for leadership. Each candidate was different, with different motivations, education and life experiences and often quite serious personal problems to be solved or referred to as professional aid.

The loss of a candidate involved chiefly one individual, whereas the selection of one incompetent officer potentially may result in the loss of life and the failure of otherwise sound tactical plans.

Graduates of OCS had far greater immediate value as platoon leaders than recent graduates of West Point or ROTC. The three months of intensive training undergone by an Officer Candidate under, as nearly as possible, wartime conditions were far superior to West Point or the four-year ROTC Course. Beginning in 1942 men who had not completed the full ROTC course were, upon induction into the Army, assigned to OCS and given the regular OCS course. In many ways the advanced ROTC students who completed OCS gave the Army the best of both worlds.

Full Mobilization: The end of 1943 marked the termination of a major state in the Officer procurement program and the preparatory schools were closed down, but they had served a useful purpose. The major problems in 1942 had been to secure enough officers to supply the great number of units activated that year. In 1943 the problem was to balance officer production against requirements as the pace of mobilization slowed down and the distribution of strengths among combat arms was governed almost entirely by the rate of attrition in which combat losses were the critical factor. Existence of an officer surplus did have the advantage of making possible a sustained policy of eliminating marginal individuals.

Then there was the Battle of the Bulge in 1945 which saw an increased need for officer replacements amid the increasing difficulties of securing candidates, qualified or otherwise. This was an ominous development with potentially disastrous consequences “everyone higher than a moron had been pulled for one reason or another lamented one

senior officer.” Because of the difficulty of securing even poorly qualified candidates, many graduates doubtless fell far short of the previous OCS Standards.

Infantry and Field Artillery OCS were the only two AGF programs that remained fully in operation throughout the war. Armor OCS operated throughout the war but on a very limited scale after late 1944.

The OCS concept met a critical need during WWII and it remains the only source of commissioned officers in the Army capable of expanding rapidly to meet changing requirements for national defense.

WOMEN’S ARMY CORPS

Women’s Army Corps OCS, originally recognized as the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps was first established at Fort Des Moines, Iowa in July 1942.

Selection Process: Far more rigorous than male applicants were required to complete. Selection boards tended to put more stress on female candidates being well educated and well rounded, poised, cultured, and evidently possessed of “good character.” WAC OCS Boards were required to have two “prominent” local women and they were instructed to consider whether they would want their daughter to come “under the influence of this person.” Most candidates were between 25 to 39 and had one characteristic in common – 90 percent had been successfully employed in civilian life and nearly every recruit possessed civilian skills useful to the Army. In addition, many WAC candidates had finished College and only one in twenty had failed to complete High School.

Considerations: Problems with uniforms, clothing appropriate for men would scarcely be appropriate for women. Combat uniforms would not be appropriate for females doing office work in boots and coveralls (at that time women were not to be in combat units) and even if slacks were more appropriate for most of the jobs, at that time masculine appearance of female soldiers might cause considerable unfavorable public comments. When male soldiers were inducted they got closely cropped hair and ill-fitting uniforms –

not funny to female soldiers. Then there was the issue of shirts with ties or open collars, pumps or oxfords, stockings or socks, pajamas?, dress for physical training, open bays and communal bathrooms...

Course of Instruction: WAC courses were virtually identical to OCS for men, except for the omission of combat subjects. The first WAC class was only six weeks long but in 1943 the course was extended to twelve weeks. A disappointment to the women and an embarrassment to the Army was the caliber of instruction provided at the WAC OCS. Few, if any of the instructors were qualified for the exacting and unprecedented task ahead. Many had little or no experience in the Army topics they were teaching.

Utilization: Few WAC officers advanced beyond company grade rank. Many were assigned to General Officers as aides, secretaries, and chauffeurs. Many were often used in ways more suitable for a maid than an aide.

Legacy: They were the pioneers who paved the way for the women of today who fill virtually every position in the Army.

POST WWII

Army Ground General School: In August 1946, **ALL** Army Branch OCS programs were discontinued. The last Infantry OCS class started on 12 August and graduated on 9 December 1946. A 24-week duration Army Officer Candidate School (AOCS) was established at Fort Benning on 3 October 1946 with the first class graduating on 2 April 1947. The last of ten AOCS classes at Fort Benning graduated on 1 November 1947. The newly created school differed from the former Officer Candidate Schools in that it provided for commissioning candidates in any of the arms of service for the Army. Following graduation, the new officers were assigned to the officer's basic course in their arm of service.

All activities pertaining to OCS were transferred to the Army General Ground School at Fort Riley, Kansas during 1947. The first two Fort Riley AOCS classes ran concurrently with the classes already in session at Fort Benning and graduated on 23 November and

19 December 1947. This Branch Immaterial OCS at the AGGS would remain at Fort Riley until the last class graduated on 9 May 1953. A special 10-week National Guard class graduated on 29 August 1953.

Reactivation of Branch Schools: WAC OCS was reactivated at Fort Lee, Virginia in 1948 and moved to Fort McClellan, Alabama in 1954 with an 18-week OCS offered twice a year. OCS remained there until 1976 when it was absorbed into the Branch Immaterial OCS at Fort Benning. Six other OCS programs of twenty-two weeks were activated in 1951; Infantry, Artillery, Signal, Engineer, Ordnance, and Anti-Aircraft Artillery. These Branch Schools remained active until the end of 1952 when all were closed except Infantry, Artillery and Engineer. Engineer OCS was closed in 1954.

National Guard: One of the most significant developments in OCS since WWII was the increasing level of Army OCS control over the commissioning of National Guard Officers. Efforts began in 1949 to establish state officer candidate schools to teach the military subjects while at the same time providing a residential program designed to evaluate the leadership traits of potential officers for the National Guard.

In 1951 only South Carolina, New York, California, and Massachusetts had their own Military Academies. By 1956 there were ten state Officer Candidate Schools. In 1953 the Army announced that for the first time qualified Guardsmen could attend the Army OCS without having to join the regular Army and agree to an active duty tour as previously required.

National Guard Program: The National Guard has two programs. **State OCS** (Traditional) one weekend a month for 16 to 18 months plus two two-week periods conducted at State Regional Training Institute (RTI) and **National Guard Bureau Accelerated OCS** an eight week straight, seven days a week winter or summer session.

VIETNAM ERA REVIVAL

Reactivation: At the start of the Vietnam War only Infantry and Artillery OCS were operating. Additional schools were opened in 1965 with 23-week long courses: Engineer at Fort Belvoir, Virginia; Signal Corps at Fort Gordon, Georgia; Armor at Fort Knox, Kentucky; and an 18-week long WAC course at Fort McClellan, Alabama. In 1966

Transportation reopened at Fort Eustis, Virginia: Quartermaster at Fort Lee, Virginia and Ordnance at Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Maryland. Armor OCS initially provided 13 weeks of initial training to these three schools then they would complete the remainder of the training at the branch schools. In July 1966 Infantry, Artillery, Engineer, and Signal Corps OCS were further expanded after which the two-phase program was discontinued.

Infantry OCS continued to train officers for the other Branches and after completion of Infantry OCS they would attend the Basic Course for their commissioned Branch.

All schools were closed in 1968 except Infantry, Artillery, Engineer and WAC OCS. Engineer OCS was closed in 1971, Artillery OCS closed in 1973, and WAC OCS closed in 1976 and merged with the Branch Immaterial OCS at Fort Benning.

BRANCH IMMATERIAL / Federal OCS

The fourteen week Branch Immaterial Officer Candidate School was established at Fort Benning in 1973. In 2006 the program was reduced to twelve weeks then back to fourteen weeks in 2008. Then back to twelve weeks in 2008. In 1998 the name was changed to Federal OCS to help distinguish it from the National Guard State Schools.

The current program is conducted in two phases:

Phase One: Weeks 1-6 consist of physical and mental challenges to test leadership skills required of a commissioned Officer and also pass the Army Fitness Test, Leadership Reaction Course, and Combat Water Survival Test

Phase Two: Weeks 7-12 consist of putting the skills learned in the first phase to the test. Candidates are evaluated on their ability to lead a team during an 18 day mission in the field. This phase also includes Senior Leader Seminars and transitioning to becoming Commissioned Officers. Upon graduation, the Officers attend their Branch specific Basic Courses. It has remained to present the only Active Army OCS program in operation. OCS is currently providing over one half of the junior officers accessed by the Army annually. West Point and ROTC are providing approximately one quarter each.

This summary of Army Officer Candidate School is a “Cliff Notes” version of a book written by Milton M. McPherson, Ph.D., Infantry OCS Class 16-52.

He is the author of “*The Ninety-Day Wonders OCS and the Modern American Army.*” His extensive research, which stands the test of time, includes 100 articles and 89 books listed in the bibliography of this book published in 2001. The comprehensive OCS Historical timeline on display in the National Infantry Museum is pulled from this publication. Unfortunately, some of his work has been regrettably overlooked or misinterpreted over the years, despite his service as the US Army OCS Alumni Association Historian for many years.

Dr. McPherson writes:

“The greatest number of new officers were commissioned from Officer Candidate Schools (OCS). Enlisted men with as little as three months Army Service, slightly above-average ability to learn and the promise of sufficient leadership ability were given 13 weeks (precisely ninety-one days) of the most intensive scrutiny and training in the history of our Army...Those who survived the ordeal would be commissioned second lieutenants – members of the ninety-day-wonders” of World War II. By the end of the war there would be 280,000 of them. A momentous gamble for the Army proved to be successful.”

Dr. McPherson served as a USAOCSAA director and gifted the copyright of his book to TUSAOCSAA several years ago.

Updated on May 27, 2026