John,

I have noticed that several of your articles (which I enjoy greatly) say that OCS-sourced officers are less well-educated than West Point grads. I would like you to reconsider this blanket assumption, especially in light of differences in the OCS program over time.

You characterize OCS candidates as coming from the enlisted ranks, whose members are mostly not college graduates. That may be true now, but it was not true during the Vietnam War, when I served.

I completed Army Engineer OCS at Fort Belvoir in 1970. Every candidate at that time had to be at least a college graduate, and my platoon of 60 candidates contained two lawyers, three architects, and numerous other men with one or more degrees beyond college. Many classmates also had real-life career experience and other credentials. Overall, their education and experience levels surely outclassed any West Pointer with no education or life experience other than academic work through a bachelor's degree.[Out-aged is more accurate. I have often described my West Point class as “The class the professional degrees fell on.” Shame on us for not acquiring those advanced degrees while we were still in college. Arguably, if you have a law degree, and you are in the Army standing next to a West Point grad who is several years younger and the same rank as you, you are the one who has been “outclassed.”]

It is technically true that all of my OCS class came from the enlisted ranks, since OCS candidates in those years were required to enlist and go through two months of Basic Training and two months of Advanced Individual Training before entering the 23-week OCS program. During OCS, candidates were paid as E-5s. Those who completed the program, after a total of about a year of training, were discharged from the enlisted components and launched into their two or three year commissioned officer commitments.

OCS can actually be a difficult path for long-time enlisted personnel. In my OCS class, there was only one enlisted man who had not initially enlisted for OCS under the standard Basic/AIT/OCS program. He was a Specialist 6 medic who had been to Vietnam and looked like a recruiting poster. During the three weeks that we had to wait "on deck" for our class to start, he was assumed by the group to be the most likely person to emerge as the star of the class. He quit after two weeks of the actual program. The consensus was that he was too old – about 25 – to hack the program. A better theory might have been that, by the time someone reaches E-6, he is likely to be culturally frozen in the enlisted mindset and be incapable of putting on the mantle of officer status.

You correctly note that, because of their enlisted service (even though it is mostly training), OCS graduates have a greater understanding of Army life in general than USMA grads and a lesser inclination to the "Cream of the Crop" illusion that afflicts USMA grads.[Cream of the Crop is an illusion when West Pointers compare themselves to Ivy League and other highly selective college grads, but not when you compare West Point junior officers to OCS and run-of-the-mill ROTC guys. The admissions and graduation standards for those programs are simply far lower than for West Point. I am not familiar with honors ROTC. There were no such officers when I was in the Army.]

Best regards,

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