

## Army Officers in the Making

DONALD J. Mc NASSOR

THE STRENUOUSNESS of the program in an Army officer candidate school and its damaging results on the lives of some men are consistent with the purpose of a school whose aim is to select only the strong and reject the weak. The feelings of men in OCS and some thoughts for education which grew out of observing the men as they struggled through eleven interminable weeks of emotional unrest and chaos are recounted here. The article is intended as an objective description, and no part of it should be construed as criticism of OCS training by the author.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Men Come Self-Assured*

The men who came to the officer candidate school were about as well-equipped to successfully complete the course as one could reasonably expect. For each of the hand-picked applicants who was accepted for training, nineteen were rejected. All of the candidates had held positions of leadership as enlisted men in their camps and stations for a period of six months to two years. They had become oriented to military life and were accustomed to its rigors. Most of them were very bright; their scores on the Army General Classification Test clustered around 120 to 130,

and they would probably be ranked in the upper 10 to 15 per cent of the population on one of the standard intelligence tests.

The candidates represented a fairly stable and emotionally secure group of people. Any disposition for them to become acutely weak with fear and anxiety would indeed have to be the result of severe and shocking experiences. Talking with them, one was impressed with their confidence and self-assurance. Most of the older ones were married and had families. They had backgrounds of good work histories. Most important of all, they had made the difficult transition from civilian life to the Army with better than average success.

### *Pressures Feed Insecurity*

The conditions under which the men lived at OCS afforded an unusual set-

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*Lieut. Donald J. Mc Nassor of the U. S. Army—on leave from the Division of Research of the Philadelphia Board of Education—finds an amazing parallel between the basic reactions of men striving for a second lieutenant commission in the Army and boys and girls working for a passing grade in high school algebra. Lieut. Mc Nassor shares his personal knowledge of Army officer training with readers of Educational Leadership in this candid analysis of the response of officer candidates to the stringencies of their schooling.*

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<sup>1</sup> Since what happened to the men in the school under discussion is not unlike what happens to officer candidates everywhere, the name, branch of service, and location of the school are omitted.

ting for testing human endurance and weakness. The types of threatening pressures and insecurity-producing situations were many and continuous. Intensity of feeling toward what they were going through was characteristic of all of the men, and the amount of destructiveness to their personalities varied with individuals and the extent to which they had previously built up resistance to shock and threats.

From the second week until the end of the course the men worked continuously under pressure. They had little time in which to consume vast amounts of Army literature, the reading of which was made compulsory by frequent examinations. Several military subjects were studied concurrently so that preparation for examinations was always in terms of several examinations rather than one. Much of the subject matter was new to many of the men and full of highly detailed facts that had to be mastered cold for the examinations. The study program was so heavy for the majority that few of the men found the nightly two-hour study period sufficient for covering assignments. It was common to see men studying in the shower room long after barracks lights had gone out or snatching a few minutes for study between breakfast and the first class and during the brief rest period following lunch. The great amount of studying partially was a symptom of insecurity and fear, but it would have been necessary even in a less-threatening situation.

In addition to the study program, other demands were made on the time of the men. For example, during the course of one week, many men took three major examinations, stood guard

mount all of one night, served KP for a day, carried on the regular housekeeping chores, and took a two-day, twenty-four mile march with full field packs. These activities, together with a heavy study program, brought upon the men pressures that few of them ever had lived under before or may ever experience again.

#### *Fear of "Washing Out" Haunts Men*

There was not only a volume of demands and pressures that made each day a race with time; the effects of pressures were further complicated by the presence of other threats, chief among them being the inner, gnawing fear of "washing out," a fear sometimes objectively justified and at other times an unwarranted anxiety. The desire for a second lieutenant commission, the fear of not being able to obtain it and, thus, of being defeated in one's own eyes as well as in those of friends back home, and the contemplation of social condemnation by the immediate group were such powerful forces that one cannot easily find their counterpart situations in civilian life. The humiliation of failing college courses or of being fired from a job cannot compare with what happens to the feelings of some men who wash out of OCS or, for that matter, what happens to their feelings when they contemplate the possibility of washing out.

The threat of a failure periodically was buttressed by reminders from the staff that, according to past mortality, some men would not make the grade, by board hearings on cases being considered for reassignment, and occasionally by actual washouts.

It cannot be stressed enough that the

men were after a highly coveted goal. The jump from being one of millions of enlisted men to one of only thousands of commissioned officers may be compared with the difference in adult standards between elementary school and college graduation. Future promotions beyond second lieutenant will never involve the feeling of personal worth and the tremendous ego boost that goes with being commissioned after having lived for months as an enlisted man.

### *Manifestations of Insecurity*

Personal insecurity was shown through the usual behaviors of depression, exhibitionism, and noisiness, irritableness, aggressive outbursts upon the slightest provocation toward other members of the group and toward the school, and a progressive increase in profane language and other such forceful means of relieving feelings of frustration and hostility. The famous sixth week of the course, during which failures were washed out, gave a picture of one of the most insecure group of men possible to imagine, short of initial adjustment to actual combat.

*Depressive and regressive behavior* was most pronounced following the posting of examination grades or after a lecture which stressed the dire consequences of coasting on one's oars. On days when examination grades were announced, there was usually a stampede to the bulletin board, although some of the men indicated their concern by putting off seeing the grades as long as possible, by waiting until they could go to the bulletin board secretly, or even by publicly denouncing grades as a way of measuring a man's worth.

Numbers were used in place of names on the examination rosters, but one had merely to stand by the bulletin board and watch the faces of the men as they scanned the list for their numbers and grades to see the depth of their concern. Men who obtained very high marks left the bulletin board with all the customary feelings of superiority, and those with low marks would return to their barracks feeling despondent or merely disappointed, depending on the number of other low grades and the class average. On days when the entire class did poorly on an examination there was a noticeable lack of such despondence.

Whenever there was a range of scores, however, conversation in the barracks and the slump in morale indicated the extent to which the men were comparing themselves with each other and judging the competency of friends in terms of their test scores. Some of the men became so depressed and fatigued that they would lie down on their bunks and fall asleep at any convenient time during the day or early evening. Actually they had not done very much physical work, but they had used up tremendous stores of energy in anxieties and conflict, and the result was a deep craving for protection.

There was relatively little desire for social outlets and a noticeable amount of staying to oneself with one's private thoughts and feelings. The men gradually turned their feelings of inadequacy inward, closing the world and training program out of their lives. During the last part of the course particularly, when the strain was greatest in its cumulative effect, there was a striking lack of normal social intercourse. In a few classic cases there was such complete social

withdrawal that men appeared numbed and dazed, and their fear of washing out actually was less intense than before. In the reshuffling of social groupings some men who were known to be failing or receiving low marks began to associate more with each other; to a lesser extent, the good students were drawn closer together.

Various *escape reactions* were in evidence. The candidates not only were anxious to leave the post for the week-end, they literally ran away from it after their last class on Saturday. A typical procedure in town was to rent a hotel room and spend Saturday night getting intoxicated and Sunday getting sobered up. Week-ends in town were indispensable; the only thing that could have been worse than being restricted to the post over the week-end would have been to be washed out of school. Other forms of escape included the strong desire to be absent from class or formations. Many ways of justifying such absences were found—participating in class play rehearsals and committee meetings, donating blood, acting as barracks charge of quarters, and going to the hospital for physical check-ups.

*Aggression and hostility* developed between certain men, partially as a result of the competitive system. Intense likes and dislikes for certain people began to show up where none had existed before. In one dramatic case a man who had previously been accepted as a member of a small group eventually was rejected by his friends because of his grades. Had the competitive elements in the program been minimized or based on something other than grades, there would have been an entirely different

organization of friendships, cliques, hostilities, and likes and dislikes for people. Some of the men who were outcasts, for example, would have been leaders if drill or marksmanship or dramatic ability had been emphasized more than grades.

A few of the men exhibited aggressive reactions by deliberately disregarding the well-known standards for weekly barracks inspections or by openly challenging authority, either directly or in disguised ways, as by "sharp shooting"—a way of asking questions to put the instructor on the spot or in some way to embarrass him. The group as a whole showed its aggression through passive resistance toward school authority. On several occasions when the men were called upon to engage in some activity on a volunteer basis, there was almost unanimous lack of response.

*Compensatory behavior* could not be observed easily. The chief forms in which it existed were striving to excel in personal and barracks inspection, unusual tidiness, and demonstration of superior military leadership ability through close-order drill. Compensatory behavior of this sort was dramatically evident in the actions of some of the men who were doing poor academic work. Poor grades invariably were rationalized after the grades had been posted, and the prediction of grades before they appeared usually was optimistic.

Insecurity was widespread—clearly not confined to a small number of individuals. The up-and-down sort of life being lived by the candidates was reflected in the uneven flow of group morale. On some days the men appeared

rested and fairly confident. On other days they were restless, disturbed, touchy. There were times when they showed a remarkable ability to master the situation through a sense of humor, ability to joke about their dilemma and problems. At other times such humor was markedly absent and any attempt at it fell flat with the group.

### *How Can We Give Security Through Education?*

A close-up study of men at an officer candidate school does not reveal new or startling implications for education. It does, however, stimulate in a rather emphatic way certain thoughts that bear careful attention at a time when schools can easily lose their balance and go off the deep end for untenable beliefs and practices fostered by war atmosphere.

In these times the danger is great that in our struggle for personal security and group solidarity we will want to return to practices that afford outlets for aggression, security through the "fundamentals"—the three R's and the exact sciences—and self-acceptance through impulses to discipline something or somebody. If the danger is great now, it may be even greater later on when our people recover from the rather abandonistic form of existence in which many of them live during a war period.

### *Childhood Behavior Reactions Persist Through Adulthood*

One of the inescapable outcomes of studying men in OCS is recognition of the deep-rooted, persistent nature of the way in which people react to situations that provoke feelings of fear, discomfort, and inadequacy.

If a good job has been done in the care and education of the child, he can assimilate such shocks and blows without showing symptoms of disintegration. If a poor job has been done, the individual may be expected later to react with intense effort and not too much success to situations that produce insecurity for him.

The men at OCS were experiencing feelings and impulses that most of them had experienced before. When they were adolescents in high school or children in grammar school they were responding to certain threats and humiliations with feelings ranging from mild anxieties to hysteria. Now, years later, when they are physically mature adults with adult viewpoints, they react to the same basic types of situations in much the same way that they reacted earlier. In fact it was difficult at times to realize that they were not high school sophomores. The hostilities toward each other and toward school authority, the ever-present feeling of being a potential failure, the class arguments following examinations to gain an additional point or two can readily be observed in any younger high school group.

### *Growing Up Is Serious Business*

An implication for education to be found in the persistency of these reactions is a need to take more seriously the disturbing experiences and problems of school pupils and to realize that growing into adulthood does not automatically solve these problems. We must accept the fact that most pupils are having disturbing experiences, that these experiences further fortify destructive impulses within the individual and weaken his capacity for resistance.

We should not compromise an effective, professional approach toward personal counseling and guidance by thinking we have solved the problem when we place a counselor and "guidance department" in every school. A "guidance program" cannot serve as a substitute for "teachers who understand." The best guarantees that pupils will adjust well to future situations are experiences that are pleasant, adult standards of behavior that are consistent, competition that is not so threatening that it depletes wholesome energies, and teachers who are understanding, firm, and strong-purposed but affectionate. Motivating the proper personal adjustment of a pupil to his world of things and people unfortunately has taken a back-seat to our emphasis on "mental development," whereas it should be a purpose of everything the teacher does in her classroom. The big challenge to a teacher is to be able to contribute to the school's part in developing strong people whose capacity to live under pressure with ease is far above that shown by a group of bright young officer candidates working under severe strains.

#### *Misconceptions About Behavior*

*Misconception 1. It is natural for people to disintegrate when threatened.* A prevalent belief is that it is natural for a child or adolescent to have his upsets and struggles and to suffer a number of defeats during his life. There is some truth in this. But the belief usually is accompanied with the thought that these upsets and struggles are not to be taken seriously—"he'll get over it" or "it's just something he has to go through." Nothing could be more

harmful than to adopt this point of view. If we knew enough about a child's development, we could spare him those experiences with which he is not yet prepared to cope. We could help him develop an inner confidence and security that would fortify him against defeat.

The behavior of adult men at OCS is evidence of something we have known for a long time. There were things in their previous childhood training and education that made adjustment to OCS painful and in some cases impossible. A few of the men resisted the pressures and threats with ease. They did not feel threatened then, and it is likely that they had not felt threatened when confronted previously with crises that would have been disturbing to others. Adults, as well as children and young people, will tend to disintegrate under pressure only when conditions favorable to disintegration exist within the individual.

*Misconception 2. Intellectual maturity is a function of age and "good study habits."* Many of us still believe that adults know what is best for youth to learn in school and, therefore, that pupils need not know *why* they are learning certain subjects or engaging in certain school activities. We say that if they do not understand why, and are not active participants in classwork they automatically will understand and gain intellectual maturity when they reach adulthood. It suffices to point out that the officer candidates (many were men 25 to 35 years old) behaved much as they did when they attended public school. Their actions were characterized by little disposition to question why, elaborate and clever schemes for study-

ing for examinations and avoiding written assignments, inclination to study as little as possible during the first part of a subject, and intense cramming the night before the examination. The men were driven to adopt the means they used in order to survive the course, much as pupils in school do the things they do to survive.

Intellectual maturity, it is true, is a function of age, but this is only a partial truth. It is as much a function of emotional well-being. The OCS men were bright; yet they reverted to practices that school pupils use in order to show up well and to be spared humiliation. Observations of this kind should reveal the utter futility of trying to develop in pupils mature intellectual behavior without at the same time attending to their inner emotional entanglements.

*Misconception 3. People work well under pressure with goals of critical importance before them.* It becomes difficult to learn and to function to our maximum effectiveness when working under pressures that threaten or in any way negate our egos. Similarly the individual tends to get confused and to become erratic in his behavior if he over-emphasizes the importance to himself of the goal he seeks. It was so intensely important to the officer candidates that they receive commissions and so mandatory to them that they not wash out of school, that they were almost compulsive in their drive to graduate. The result was a grasping-at-straws kind of thinking. It was one thing to work under pressure and something else to work under fear of reprisals or of not attaining what one wanted badly.

Actually an individual can function

much better if there is some degree of purpose and motivation present with an underlying feeling that he has nothing of tremendous importance to lose. A comparison of the behavior of officer candidates at OCS and commissioned officers at an officer's school illustrates this point. The author had the opportunity to observe both types of schools. The two groups were very similar in age, military background, and intelligence. In the officer's school there were open challenges to authority, considerable indifference to examination grades, and a striking lack of fear reactions. Obviously the officers felt that their lives were not at stake and that there was nothing of critical importance to lose by not making good. (This is descriptive of their feelings, not fact.) It is significant that some of these officers had attended OCS three months before and had behaved at that time like most officer candidates. The change in their behavior as a result of a changed situation was completely dramatic. Whereas three months previously they were insecure, tense, and disturbed, now they were confident, assured, and relaxed.

It is necessary to be critical of any public school classroom where activities are based on reprisals and fear or on incentives and goals that become of life-and-death importance to the pupil. It is definitely a misconception that pupils work well under pressure and under anxiety over their status with the teacher and other pupils, particularly if the pressure is such that they are forced to admit weakness and inadequacy in themselves.

*Misconception 4. Only neurotic people show symptoms of weakness in*

*response to their threatening experiences.* The impressive conclusion at which one arrives after observing officer candidates is that quite normal, intelligent adults weaken under strains on their self-confidence. Most people have points at which the prospect of failure or the threat of life (not necessarily a physical threat) will cause temporarily such psychoneurotic symptoms as fatigue, mild hysteria, fantasy, compulsiveness, and social withdrawal. If the strains and fears are severe enough, as during prolonged periods of actual combat, more acute stages of emotional disintegration develop.

In public school situations pupils will show various forms of unusual or "strange" behavior as a result of strains in their school, social group, or home environments. When such behavior occurs, it is well to look into it rather than to casually pass it off as "merely a mood."

#### *Security Motives of Individuals Determine Group Behavior*

The psychology of group processes is based on dynamic, changing relationships in which the struggle of individuals for security is the central note. At any one time a group can be described in terms of such factors as the standards by which it accepts and rejects new members, the status of its morale and inner cohesion, the values it emphasizes in its permission of leadership, disposition to accept or reject higher authority, codes that govern the inculcation of its ideas in its members, and actions that constitute transgressions and sins. These factors undergo change constantly from pressures outside the group and conflict between personalities within. The crea-

tion of a new competitive group or the appearance of conditions that endanger the security of members of the group can cause drastic changes in the group life and in the individual's status in the group. Or, the development of rivalries and hostilities between strong members of the group can bring about radical shifts in its values, morale, and leadership standards.

In the OCS student leaders were accepted as long as they played ball with the group and respected its sense of insecurity. A leader who appeared oversolicitous of faculty approval was quickly ostracized. He constituted another danger in a situation already in turmoil with fear.

The group began to develop anxieties after the first few days of school, and a strong group morale did not emerge until the end of the second week when a "freshman class" arrived. At this time the sophomore class began to assert superiority by trying to frighten the new class with such phrases as "you'll be sorry," or "go back before it is too late." The upper classes also enjoyed passing on to the newcomers the tricks of the trade, such as leads on examination questions or ways of fooling the Saturday morning inspecting officers. This seemed to help satisfy the hunger for security.

Some of the men most respected by the group were those who were skillful in obtaining examination questions from past classes and in successfully anticipating examination questions. The men most frequently rejected were those who in any way appeared to be faculty favorites and those who consistently failed examinations or received low marks.

Toward the middle of the course a student committee was organized to work with students who were failing their courses. The members of this committee were given the names of such men. Needless to say, an immense amount of hostility developed toward this committee since it represented a potential threat to all candidates, the extent of threat varying with the degree of insecurity. Members of the committee were called "teachers' pets" and "Gestapo." This hostility did not exist toward the faculty wash-out committee.

The basis on which friends were selected was enlightening. The men who slept above you in a double-deck bed and on either side frequently were your close friends, other things being equal. You were acquainted with men several aisles away, but they did not afford the security that those closest gave. The men on the other floor of your building likewise were your friends, but they were outside the family group. The men who lived in another building within the same company unit were almost strangers in the house. In a setting where so many imagined dangers existed, the close social groups were small in size and limited geographically. The need for father-and-mother security in a time of crisis was clear. These examples of how men act in a group at OCS illustrate the fluid, emotional basis of group behavior. The same sorts of processes exist in public schools, even though the motivations, incentives, and personality conflicts may differ.

#### *Teacher Must Know Her Pupils*

The school-teacher who is unaware

of the inner workings of her group is not in too favorable a position to do a good job teaching. She will have difficulty in understanding the motivations of certain pupils. She may easily become frustrated and unnecessarily discouraged with her progress during periods of low morale, strife within the group, or group hostility toward her. At times she may want to punish a pupil for actions for which he is not responsible, not realizing that larger forces within the group have caused him to show aggression or to withdraw from social and academic participation.

She may prematurely project her own choice of leaders upon the group and incur an opposition that may last for weeks. She may attempt to force upon the class a group activity that may prove completely abortive because the group is not ready for it. On the other hand, the teacher who is aware of what is going on in her group is in an excellent position to do a good job. Her attitudes toward members of the class can become more impersonal and professional. She does not promote projects that further complicate and intensify existing group conflicts. She lends moral support to pupils temporarily ostracized by the group without developing over-dependence in those pupils. She is more patient with the group at times when its morale has sunk low or more aggressive if the need for a shock is indicated. She ever strives to increase the security of each pupil and effect a harmonious group life.

All of her knowledge of the intricate, changing relationships in her group is used to increase the security of individual pupils and to effect a more harmonious group life.

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