

## Autobiography of Charles A. Seland

### Chapter 5: Officer Candidate School Class 16-67 (17 February – 2 August 1967)

The 80 officer candidates in Alpha Company gathered in the new, one-story, metal pre-fabricated H-shaped barracks which we now called home. Each two-person cubicle had two foot lockers, a set of bunk beds, two small tables and two chairs. Our wall lockers (two each) were in the hallway. Once our cubicles were assigned, we settled in quickly while assessing the environment and the other candidates.



Following the evening meal at the nearby Dining Facility, we returned to our billets to assemble and adjust our belongings in the foot and wall lockers in accordance with the standards of the Officer Candidate School (OCS). Then three lieutenants arrived, called TAC Officers (Train, Advise, and Counsel). They had recently graduated from other OCS's. They knew the standards and were hell-bent to "advise" us. Right! Within minutes they tossed our gear into a jumbled heap on the hallway floor. The TACs delightfully screamed and scolded us, their faces inches away from our faces, for ignoring OCS standards. Of course we had the OCS schematics right before us with the precise rules. But that didn't matter. When we replaced our clothing and gear into the lockers, the TACs again yanked everything out. "You are the *dumbest* Soldiers I've ever met. What the *hell* is the Army turning into! How the *hell* did *you* get into OCS?" They acted as gods or devils, depending on one's viewpoint. And they loved their power and the sense of submission displayed by the new arrivals. "Sir, Candidate Jones.

Yes Sir.” Or, “Sir, Candidate Smith. No Sir.” Ironically, none of this fazed me. I passively accepted the situation because I knew clearly that the TACs had a job to do—nothing personal--and they would soon go home and leave us alone. After replacing our gear in the lockers to the TAC’s satisfaction, we took the mandatory two-minute (each) shower before lights went out at 2200 hours. Then the TACs left “this pig sty” while surely chuckling at the anguish, commotion and confusion which they had caused.

At 0530 hours the following morning, our “friendly TACs,” as they liked to be called, “greeted” us by flicking on the lights and screaming. “Get out of bed! NOW! Put on your PT (physical training) uniform, NOW! Straighten out your cubicles! NOW! Get outside and into formation, NOW!” The intervals between the “NOWs” were only seconds apart. As “basic” candidates, we scurried about madly--adamant to follow all of their directives.

The TACs soon had their respective platoons sweating during a fast-paced multi-mile run. Actually, during the first six weeks of “basic” candidate status everything went quickly. We had to run everywhere and we never seemed to accomplish all that we had been ordered to do. We rushed through the Dining Facility, took showers in two minutes (for the first week or so), and followed a not-so-easy academic program which exacerbated the “hurry up” environment. On the other hand, the atmospherics of rushing not only made the time go by quickly but nurtured the candidates’ sense of accomplishment. We can do it! The few who couldn’t were dismissed.

Actually, I had a bit of a physical advantage. I had weight lifted competitively in college (148 pound class) and scored second highest in the final PT test in my Basic Training company. I was in shape. I only had to seriously contend with the psychological and educational aspects of OCS.



**CPT Don Stiles (seated); I'm in the in the foreground in the 'Front Leaning Rest' position**

Normally, we showered and put on our fatigue (work) uniforms after PT in the morning and ate our meals in silence in accordance with OCS rules. At the dining table we lowered our heads to look at the food, and then looked straight ahead while chewing it. Eye-balling (looking around) guaranteed punishment from the ever present TACs. We cleaned the barracks (again), gathered our books and ran in company formation to the nearby school building to attend formal classes. At noon we ran back to the barracks, ate lunch, and ran back to the school. When not in the company area or classroom, we ran or rode buses to the range for weapons training, to the PT test areas, to the gas chamber which taught us how to react (and lead others) during a gas attack, to various bivouac sites, and to the rail yard, truck terminal, or air-load mock-up sites. At about 1700 hours we returned to the barracks, checked the TAC's demerit form which listed our shortcomings for the day, ate dinner in silence, cleaned the barracks (again), then settled down to a two-hour study period within our cubicles. Personal time lasted from 2100 to 2200 hours, and then the lights were turned off.

The TACs controlled us. If they didn't like someone, he (there were no females in our class) got treated as if hell were a better option than OCS. But in their favor, the TACs knew how to transform us into disciplined officers. They were the equivalent to Drill Sergeants but, in my opinion, were nastier in their verbal and mental assaults. They got in your face and they got personal. Yelling in a candidate's ear was common, as were the several-mile runs and the nit-picking about uniforms and cleanliness in the barracks. They found faults which a mother could not, and they advertised our deficiencies by reminding us in explicit speech and calibrated body language that we, as OCS candidates, were a sub-species of humanity. We could only achieve officer status, they swore, if we implicitly listened to their commands and followed their guidance without question. We were assured that our acceptance into OSC in the first place was not founded on our officer potential but most likely on (1) our political, military or social connections; (2) an act of divine grace; (3) a horrendous administrative error; or (4) a Communist plot. They feigned disgust that some of us had been allowed into OCS merely to waste their time. Even so, they reminded us, if we listened well and obeyed them, then we might get a commission. Encouragement consisted of, "There might be some hope for dregs like you."



**Barracks Inspection**

Why all the harassment? Character building; and to train us to think and act rationally under stress. In combat one might feel exhausted, hungry, thirsty, cold (or hot), and concurrently experience incoming enemy fire. Regardless of conditions, an officer needed to execute the mission. The lives of Soldiers may depend on the decision of someone wearing a shiny gold lieutenant's bar. If a candidate did not adjust to the demands of OCS, then he should withdraw and leave the business of military leadership to others.

To relieve some of this stress, Candidates Daniel (Dan) Russo and Arthur (Art) Spina formed the Sneaky Pete's Club within our platoon. They formed a fraternity of selected members--those willing to take risk in order to bring a bit of fun into the daily routine. To do this, they organized Pokey Bait parties—a time when we could eat “illegal” food which had been brought into the barracks. These parties were meant to raise morale. For instance, if we missed an evening meal we could throw a party by getting food from McDonalds. Well, I volunteered to be the one who ordered the food and subsequently had it delivered to the participating candidates. I became “The Pokey Bait Officer,” knowing full well that getting caught could mean dismissal from OCS.





**Candidate Russo talking to 2LT Toy Hill while Candidate Spina salutes. Both are wearing their Sneaky Pete's beret.**

When Russo and Spina decided to have a party, they gave me a list of participants and the food items which were to be ordered. I then sneaked into the company HQ, a nearby building, at 2000 hours sharp, called the nearby McDonalds and ordered the food. The party participants had already paid Russo or Spina exactly \$2.00—no more and no less. At 2300 hours a station wagon driven by a retired Army NCO would arrive at the barracks. I quickly paid the driver then had my two 'servers' carry the Pokey Bait to my cubicle. The servers would then deliver the food to the participants as I directed. The servers subsequently disposed of the delivery boxes.

On the evening of our ninth party, a second lieutenant from another OCS company happened to stroll into our barracks. He saw me dispensing food to the servers and

rushed to my cubicle. "Candidate," he barked at me, "I'm going to kick your ass out of OCS!" I jumped up from my seat on the foot locker in a state of shock. "Sir, Candidate Seland, Yes Sir." I responded in perfect OCS protocol.

Noise in the latrine area, the cross-section which connected the barrack's left and right corridors, diverted the excited Lieutenant to that area. Big mistake! While he interrupted that platoon's Pokey Bait party, Russo and Spina directed me to trade bunks and T-shirts with a black candidate while they hurriedly pushed the boxes of food away from my cubicle. The T-shirts had our names stenciled on them. When the lieutenant returned to our area, he flicked the lights on and screamed out, "Pokey Bait Officer...REPORT!" Silence. He screamed even louder. Again...silence. A barely audible voice, probably Russo or Spina, finally responded from the middle of the barracks. "Sir, I am the Pokey Bait Officer." Several others repeated the admission. The rattled lieutenant then ordered all of us to stand in the hallway for his "inspection." Well, as he walked slowly down the hallway and "inspected" us, my heart started to pump double time—and the closer he got the more severe the throb. I was about to explode when he got to me and glared into my eyes. But apparently he couldn't comprehend the fact that I would be so far away from his original sighting. He then walked a second time up and down the line of candidates who now chuckled *almost* inaudibly. In frustration, and I guess wanting to avoid further embarrassment, he ordered the undelivered food to be placed in the office of the company commander, Captain Don Stiles. I guess that he anticipated that Stiles would punish the company in the morning—and undoubtedly catch and discipline the Pokey Bait Officers (PBO). (I don't know what happened to the other PBO.)

CPT Stiles was not one to be crossed. He was a lean, mean fightin' machine—a Ranger with two combat tours in Vietnam. Gruff and unsmiling, he simply didn't put up with any crap. Surprisingly, he didn't accuse me of anything over the next few days, although he must have known. He came behind me in formation one morning and whispered in my ear, "I know something," before he walked away. Then he punished the company by having our Basic Candidate status extended for two weeks. This denied us the expanded privileges afforded to Intermediate Candidates which we would have been in a few days.



### **Captain Don A. Stiles**

At the end of the Basic Candidate cycle, all of the candidates had to evaluate the members of their respective platoons. This is a standard OCS policy designed to get us familiar with the Officer Efficiency Report (OER) system. The evening after our platoon had submitted the completed reports to Second Lieutenant (2LT) Toy Hill, our platoon leader, Stiles summoned me to his office. As I waited in the hallway of the company HQ to see him, Hill handed me a toy grenade. "When Stiles kicks you out of OCS," he said with a North Carolinian accent and a sly smile, "pull the pin. Stiles doesn't like to see anyone cry." Well, Hill liked me and wouldn't say this in malice, so I sensed that I might escape with a mere reprimand. But when I reported to Stiles he was in a foul mood. He stared at me with disgust and revulsion. "What have you done?" he growled from behind his desk. "Confess!" The facial expression and voice inflection sent a crystal clear message. I'm screwed!

In a second or two, however, I recovered and moved into full survival mode. My brain was in overdrive. "Don't quit. Don't quit. Don't panic. Don't panic." That's all it took. I instinctively decided to flight. I took a deep breath.

Then it hit me. Why is he demanding a confession? He surely knows that I'm the PBO since I was the only one summoned to his office. Why doesn't he simply show me the proof and then just kick me out of OCS? But maybe he doesn't have solid evidence. And why did Lieutenant Hill give me that grenade with such a satirical grin? I got suspicious. Where is the other PBO? How much pressure is higher headquarters putting on Stiles to resolve this mess? If cornered, would I name Russo and Spina, the servers, and all of the others who participated in the parties? Could I ask for legal advice under the UCMJ (Uniform Code of Military Justice? On the other hand (although

not likely), I could be perceived as an aggressive and brave candidate who stuck his neck out to enhance the OCS environment for my fellow candidates.

With these fleeting thoughts I responded with a “what have I got to lose” attitude. “Sir, Candidate Seland. To what should I confess?”

It’s strange, but at that moment I strangely felt relieved. I felt good. I knew what I had to do--dig in and show resolve; don’t crumble and don’t show weakness. The ball is on the one yard line. If he scores, I lose the game. But what the hell. I didn’t get here by being a pussy willow. I had enough of this crap and I’m not giving in.

Stiles angrily waved the OERs in front of my face. “Seland,” he blurted out, “I’m going to read these evaluations to you. But before I do, do you have anything to say?” I declined to self destruct. “Write down the positive things they say about you, and in another column the negative things.” As required in OCS, I had a notebook and pen ready.

Exactly how long could my pulsating heart endure his tedious reading of the reports. He read without emotion and I busied myself with writing. When he got to the last report he subtly asked, not demanded, if I had anything to say. I responded as before. My heart may have skipped a beat, but I’m going to stay tough. I waited for the bomb to explode as he slowly, very slowly read the last report.

What? The report parroted the others -- no mention of Pokey Bait. “Show me your list,” he demanded. I turned the notebook around and pointed to the long string of positives and the short string of negatives. “That can’t be true,” he growled authoritatively, “That’s not right. You wrote it wrong.”

Well, his ball didn’t cross the goal line and I sensed that he had just lost the game. My faltering courage was now reinforced.

“Sir. Candidate Seland. Yes Sir. I apologize. I had the notepad turned upside down. Let me correct it.” (I turned it upside down while trying to hold back a grin.) “Sir, it’s now corrected. Here is the negative list.” My index finger gleefully highlighting the long column. “And here is the positive list which, as you can see, is much shorter.”

Then, for the first time ever, he looked at me respectfully. And with a much softer voice he said, “OK, that’s all for now. You’re dismissed.” I snapped a salute to him, left-faced smartly towards his office door and marched out.

In the hallway I exchanged a smile and head nod with 2LT Hill. “I didn’t hear the grenade explode,” he said with the biggest grin I had ever seen.

“Not today, Sir. Maybe next time.” I gave the grenade back with the biggest grin that I could muster.

Thankfully, the class put the Pokey Bait issue behind them and we eventually became Intermediate Candidates. And I knew what I had to do in order to graduate: keep a low profile and avoid getting myself into more trouble. I needed to be a good student, avoid demerits, pass the rigid Physical Training (PT) and rifle marksmanship tests, and try to avoid contact with Captain Stiles.

Russo, who had some carpentry skills, was tasked around this time to make two large wood frames, with plastic coverings, for each of the three TACs. The TACs would use the frames to display on their walls various statistical data. When Russo completed the job late one evening and had hung the frames in the three offices, he asked me to look at them. Well, I noticed that the frames for Lieutenant Hill were not as nice as the



ones in Lieutenant Pruitt's office. I quickly switched them. Like, who cares? They had been hung up only about an hour previously so the switch was a non-event.

Wrong. Pruitt discovered the switch early the next morning and then found out who did it. I was then called to his office and was, obviously, prepared for the worst. The fact is that Pruitt didn't like me.

When I entered the company HQ he rushed towards me in the hallway and frantically tried to pull the OCS patches off my uniform. He started to shout "thief," and "conduct unbecoming an officer." He became even more frantic and agitated when he couldn't pull the patches off because the threads were too strong. He continued to yell. "You're finished here, Seland. Take off those patches when you return to the barracks. We've had enough of you." By now the other TACs and Stiles emerged from their offices to witness the commotion. Oh my god!

When Lieutenant Hill arrived he calmly reminded everyone that it was going to be a long hard day. He suggested that the matter be resolved "Later today. After classes." Pruitt responded by telling Hill to reverse the switch ASAP (as soon as possible.) This was met by silent acquiescence and positive head nods from those who had gathered around, including Stiles. Hill agreed with Pruitt and then, as an afterthought, told me, loud enough for everyone to hear, to return his frames "to Lieutenant Pruitt's office within a half hour. And until they're returned, guard my office. Don't let anyone in. That's an order." Pruitt heard him but didn't do anything. Stiles remained silent the entire time.

Within seconds I became the model guard. I assumed a rigid Parade Rest position while standing just outside Hill's office door. I eluded an aura of extreme diligence. Pruitt, no doubt, would have killed me if he could. Anyway, he and Hill left the building about 15 minutes later and I made the switch.

Again no repercussions. I missed my second bullet.

About six weeks later the class became Senior Candidates. A red felt tab under our brass OCS collar pin signified the rank of so-called "Third Lieutenants." We got expanded privileges, such as the right to walk rather than run in the company area, week-end passes, and even salutes from the Basic and Intermediate Candidates from the other OCS companies.

As we approached graduation we submitted "Dream Sheets" on which we listed our three preferred choices for our next assignment and duty station. Most candidates wanted to work in a division transportation office. Right! Most want to Vietnam. Five of us got assignments to Germany, including Greg Salter, a free-spirited kind of guy from Reno, Nevada, and my best friend during the latter phase of OCS.

The final battery of field and academic-related tests were given soon before graduation. As I recall, everyone passed.

A few days before graduation the Company, including the TACs and Stiles, had an officially-sanctioned dinner party at the Strawberry Banks Motor Inn and Restaurant on the Chesapeake Bay, not far from Ft. Eustis. It was enjoyable to just relax and, after dinner, to go swimming in the pool. The party gave us the opportunity to compare and embellish our OCS experiences while attempting to predict what our future assignments would be like. Most of us drank alcohol—more or less.

As the party wound down around 2200 hours, it was clear that that Stiles had had too much to drink. Pruitt offered to drive him home. "No," snarled Stiles, "*he* can drive

me,” and with a faint wave of his arm he pointed directly to me. “He’s too drunk,” replied Pruitt as the other TACs nodded a tacit agreement. Stiles seemed not to have heard Pruitt as he tossed his keys to me while staggering slightly towards his new yellow Corvette.

Commotion. The TACs knew the consequences if something went wrong and showed a united front against letting me drive. They took Stiles aside and talked to him while the company looked on. A few minutes later one of the TACs asked me for the car keys. Well, I don’t recall exactly who drove Stiles home, but I remember the sensation of being singled out by Stiles. It made me feel special, as if all of the admonishments which I had received in OCS were now history. Gone! I finally got some respect..

My father and younger sister, Linda, attended the graduation ceremony on August 2, 1967. It was held in the auditorium of Hunter Hall, on Fort Eustis. As I crossed the stage to receive my commission certificate and a plaque for scoring the highest in the class for rifle marksmanship, I gave a slight head nod to the TACs and company commander who sat in the first row. My father told me later that I was the only candidate (of about 70) who smiled while crossing the stage. Linda corrected him. “He grinned.” Well, I honestly didn’t mean to do that. It just happened.

While going home to Scranton, PA, with my father and sister, I reflected on my Army experiences. I figured that I had paid my dues. I learned a lot about myself and reflected on the lessons I that I had learned -- the positive and the negative. I had stepped up a rung on the ladder, and I had gained the confidence to step up a few more.



**Reflections:** Did OCS achieve its intended purpose? Did it develop the leadership ability and professional skills necessary for me to function as an officer in the U.S. Army?

For starters, I grasped the role of an officer within an organizational structure of subordinates and superiors—respectful of all while leading the former and obeying the latter. I learned the complexities of decision making—how much latitude would my supervisor give me and how creative can I be in fulfilling his (or her) expectations. I learned that the by-the-book approach to problem solving can often be augmented with out-of-the-box creative thinking. I learned the value of talking risks, and the corresponding consequences of being foolhardy.

I could no longer blend in. I had to set the example and perform in accordance with the standards of an officer. Complaints or questions addressed to me carry the expectation that I had or could get a reasonable answer. Passing-the-buck is not an option. And a haughty demeanor coupled with avoiding subordinates' opinions is unwise.

I learned that I could not judge by first impressions. For example, when OCS started, I thought I knew who would do well and who would underperform. I was wrong. For me, judgement over time and observing people's reactions while under stress are paramount. I learned to forgive one's minor mistakes and to give everyone a chance to succeed.

I gained confidence that I could handle stress. And I developed a 'can do' attitude tempered by common sense and situational realities.

I learned that the lessons of OCS are relevant throughout life; they are precious regardless of one's occupation or social status.

I'm proud to be an alumnus.

**Epilogue.** Subsequent tours included:

- Platoon leader followed by command of the 595th Transportation Company (Heavy Truck). (Mannheim, Germany (GE))
- Departed the Army in October 1969 and then worked as the Assistant Field Director (AFD) with the American Red Cross (Langley Air Force Base, VA, and Phu Bai, Vietnam).
- Returned to the Army, while in Vietnam, in September 1971 and became the HHD Commander and Physical Security Officer in the 57<sup>th</sup> Trans Bn (Da Nang, Vietnam)
- Staff officer in the U.S. Army Material Management Agency in Zweibrucken, GE
- Installation Transportation Officer, Ft. Monroe, Virginia
- Staff officer, 1st Corps Support Command, Ft. Bragg, North Carolina
- Battalion S3, 507th Transportation Group, Ft. Bragg, North Carolina
- Director of Logistics, Giessen Military Community, Giessen, GE
- Commander, 6th Trans Bn, Ft. Eustis, Virginia
- G4, HQ V Corps, Frankfurt, GE
- Commander, 7th Corps Support Group, Crailsheim and Nuernberg, GE
- Deputy G4, HQ U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR), Heidelberg, GE
- Chief of Staff, United Nations Peacekeeping Force in what is now called North Macedonia.

- Retired from active duty in October 1997.
- Employed in the USAREUR G3 as a contractor. Wrote Lessons Learned, After Action Reports, and participated in special projects.
- Our son, Daniel, attended OCS in 2006 at Fort Benning and received a commission in the Transportation Corps. He left the Army in 2011 after serving two tours in Iraq.
- In May 2019, Margarete and I celebrated our 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

Don Stiles completed a 20 year career in the Army, retiring as a Major in 1974. He filled his last 18 years riding his quad and enjoying life to the fullest, on his own terms. At Sand Mountain, Nevada, where he enjoyed his last ride, he earned the title of The Lone Ranger.

Greg Salter left the Army 1969 after his tour in Germany but remained in the active reserves for another 10 years. He subsequently retired as a deputy district attorney in Reno, Nevada.

I still have contact with Art Spina, but no others from my OCS class.

