

# Tailview

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traditional Marine Corps camps in San Diego or Parris Island. A friend who went through in 1965 told me that the lieutenant colonel in charge of the military department revealed that he had personally interviewed and recruited that year's cadre of DIs. I doubt that continued to be so as the program gathered momentum during the Vietnam years, but I believe these men were among the most dedicated professionals I ever met.

And for the sake of discussion, the movie "An Officer and a Gentleman" portrayed AOCS to a tee—the pressure, the physicality, the intense indoctrination, and, of course, the DI. Lou Gossett Jr. deserved his Oscar. Yet there were a lot of inaccuracies, obviously for the sake of drama and story line.

But AOCS is now finished, and of the thousands of people who passed through it at the beginning of their naval careers, I doubt there is anyone who could not write his own memoir. In 1994, the Navy combined the OCS in Newport with AOCS, deleting the "A" and calling it simply OCS. The final AOC class was O2-94 and was commissioned in March. That change didn't have the impact that this latest development will have. The battalions were still there, and although the Marines shared responsibil-



**A view from Batt III, as the regiment forms up behind the small band during a morning inspection.**

ities with their counterpart Navy chiefs, Pensacola was still where you went to gain a commission for flying. Now, though, even that distinction is gone. If you want to fly for the Navy and you didn't attend Annapolis or an ROTC class in college, Newport, Rhode Island, is your destination. And why? Cost-saving. The Base Realignment and Closure Commission, or BRAC, decided this. But that's too simple, I think. Perhaps other considerations will come to light later on. So, goodbye Batt III and Gunny, and thanks for the memories and all your hard work. It was just what we needed. ■

## Tailview By Capt. Peter B. Mersky | Photos by ?????

# Farewell to Pensacola

In September 2007, Class 20-07 was the last to graduate from Aviation Officer Candidate School in Pensacola, Florida. It had the distinction of being the last in a long line of more than 55,000 naval officers trained and commissioned in this cradle of naval aviation. It's hard to think of Pensacola without its khaki-clad hopefuls, lugging around their huge book bags, or marching to the cadence of that most unique of all military personalities: the Marine Corps drill instructor (DI).

When I stood looking up the long flight of stairs outside the Indoc Battalion on the damp Tuesday night of February 8, 1968, I had no idea of what lay ahead, or, indeed, of the traditions behind the fun-house screams and noise coming from the building. There was only the unexpected reality as I climbed the stairs toward the main door, now flung open, and a smiling young face greeted me, "Hi! Come on in."

It was very much a "... said the spider to the fly" situation because in the next few seconds, my small duffel bag had been launched across the quarterdeck and a pair of yelping young candidate officers—men who would graduate that Friday—had attached themselves to me doing their best to rattle me in my first few minutes of military life. They succeeded. By the time I tumbled into my bunk at 0200 hours, I was thoroughly confused and quite annoyed. I had come to fly and not to be yelled at. It was only the beginning.

The Aviation Officer Candidate School (AOCS), begun in 1955 as a 15-week course, supplied a stream of commissioned flight crews to supplement the traditional sources that came from the Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, and from the numerous Reserve Officer Training Corps classes at various colleges. A decade later, as the Navy's role in Vietnam increased, losses of flight crews mounted. With the growing number of carriers and in-country squadrons requiring a greater roster of pilots and flight crew members, college-age men were quickly inducted and brought to Pensacola. (The first female naval aviator received her wings in 1973, and the first female AOCS graduates were commissioned in 1975. The first female naval aviator and astronaut were chosen in 1992.) In fact, the pressure of the Vietnam War was such that by 1968, the course had been reduced to 11 weeks, much to the annoyance of those who



The author snaps his first salute to the regimental First Sergeant on May 24, 1968, shortly after he had received his commission.

had completed the longer stint only to watch the new arrivals, like me, take the first shortened courses.

AOCS combined physical and mental training that focused on providing the basis for a pilot or naval flight officer (NFO). Yet, in those first three months, our world was ruled by the DI as we learned how to function in a uniform.

I can't say enough about the drill instructor, although at the time I regarded this tough, immaculately dressed individual with trepidation. He was the first person I saw in the early morning of a Pensacola dawn, and his was the last voice I heard at 2200 hours as he shouted, "Good night, ladies," just before "Taps" and "The Marine Corps' Hymn" sounded over the PA system. My DI yelled at and cursed me and pushed me to do things I never thought I could do. Some were better at it than others; but I always felt that my "Gunny" was better than any of them. Most of the DIs at this stage were just returning from initial combat tours in Vietnam. My DI had three Purple Hearts, and he smoked incessantly. He imbued us with phrases and terminology we use even today, some 40 years later. Our young minds were perfect receptacles for his teaching, and his imprint was as strong as that of a father or mother or a favorite uncle.

We had class officers, mostly Marine captains, usually helicopter pilots, who had also just returned from Southeast Asia, and a few Navy lieutenant NFOs, F-4 RIOs and A-6 BNs. The officers were mainly for admin and to accompany the DIs on their daily inspections; it was definitely the Gunnys and staff sergeants who ran the show. (Even now, writing this, I chuckle at the lasting impressions these dedicated, hard-driving men left.) The DIs were experienced, having come off previous tours in the

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