

The Shake 'n Bake Sergeants of Vietnam

by Jerry S. Horton, Ph.D.

On a vacation flight to Florida I bought a book called *The Teams: The Story of the Army Special Forces in Vietnam*.

About three-quarters of the way through the book I came upon a startling passage: “*A Shake 'n Bake sergeant was one of the lesser-known evils to come out of the Vietnam War and infect the Army. These twerps would attend some NCO school for six to eight weeks and come out of it an E-5, buck sergeant. No experience, little skills, but a great big attitude.*”

Damn. Someone had actually written this for publication—and maybe for millions to read.

I had been one of those Shake 'n Bakes. Was my experience in Vietnam a sham, an illusion? True, I had been a greenhorn to war—as had thousands of officers—but, I had excellent training. I had not thought about my tour in the Nam for thirty years.

This statement initiated my journey back in time to recover my past as a Shake 'n Bake. There was quite a story to be told as I found out.

The NCO Problem and Solution

As early as 1956 the Army officially knew it would not have enough NCO's for a sustained war. A staff study asserted that in the future the need for enlisted leaders would far exceed the number available and that at the commencement of, and during hostilities, the need for leaders might be so pressing as to make it necessary to appoint leaders before their ability could actually be proved on the battlefield.

It was also recognized in Vietnam that it was not a senior commander's war, it was a junior leader's war. There were over 200 combat sergeants turning over each week and many men were one tour enlistees or inductees. The Army faced the problem of sending career men back or filling NCO positions with unqualified men. The demand for experienced NCO's in Vietnam exceeded the supply. In Vietnam the Army was trying to meet these shortages by making a two-grade substitution of personnel. This means the platoon leader in combat is forced to pick the brightest PFC he can find, declare him the sergeant, and entrust the lives of a dozen men to his care.

The Army had to do something different.

How it was started

The Noncommissioned Officer Candidate Course came about as a result of a conversation between Lt. General Jonathan O. Seaman, Commanding General, II Field Force, and SGM William Wooldridge, the SGM of the Army at that time, This was December 1966. SGM Wooldridge relayed the conversation to the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Harold K. Johnson. As a result, a memo was drafted for approval that resulted in the development of the course.

The Concept

Under the NCO Candidate Course concept, this same bright young PFC will be the man selected for intensive leadership training. Now, he will be given the opportunity to undergo 21 weeks of additional seasoning prior to assuming responsible leadership positions. The purpose of the Infantry Noncommissioned Officer Candidate Course was to fill the Army's critical shortage of junior NCO's with the best qualified and best trained men available.

Upon completion of 21 weeks of training, the individual would not only be technically proficient but would have developed those intangible qualities that combine to make him a leader of men.

School Design

Its design and implementation was shepherded by Hank Emerson and Colonel David Hackworth.

They modeled their new program on the Officer Candidate School (OCS) program and used much of the OCS support system, including the same instructors and the same curriculum. The first candidates in this new school were volunteers, who had completed both basic and AIT training, and whose leadership potential was considered to be exemplary.

The NCOC course gave these handpicked soldiers an additional twelve weeks of training, one-third of which took place in the evening hours, followed by nine weeks of on-the-job training, called OJT. OJT involved the actual running of functioning squads, at various training centers throughout the country. These "instant" sergeants were then ready to be assigned their tour in Vietnam. *This training program for sergeants was virtually identical to that given to officers, except that it was abbreviated to five intensive months, rather than six.*

School Beginnings

The first class began around the first of August 1967. The Infantry Noncommissioned Officer Candidate Class Number One graduated on November 25, 1967. Sergeant Major Wooldridge, the Sergeant Major of the Army, addressed the newly appointed noncommissioned officers.

To quote Sergeant Major Wooldridge, "at first there was opposition far and wide. The mail and phone calls were hot and heavy. In late August I had to prepare a message in the Army Digest giving my view on the course and responding to the major concern of NCOs in the field regarding promotion." Wooldridge went on to say, "Army leaders have great regard for the promise of the course and they were never disappointed with their results."

Monday, 1 April 1968 Becoming a Shake 'n Bake (excerpt from the book *Shake 'n Bake Sergeant*)

My training took place at the NCO Academy at Fort Benning, Georgia. When I graduated this time I would have earned the rank of E-5, known to everyone in the military as an instant NCO. An instant sergeant. A *Shake 'n Bake sergeant*.

Most noncommissioned officers rise through the ranks in the Army after years of service. When I—and others like me—will go from an E-1 to an E-5 in only six months, I will become a *Shake 'n Bake*. This

nickname was taken from the Betty Crocker quick-mix product for baking chicken and had become very popular during the sixties. In three short months, the Army produced instant sergeants . . . *Shake 'n Bakes*.

My initial pride in being chosen for NCO training was soon blunted because I couldn't find anyone on the post who liked us NCOs. The name simply meant a noncommissioned officer *candidate* . . . a sergeant *in training*. We would not be promoted to the position of a noncommissioned officer until we had completed a twelve-week training period plus our on-the-job training.

The older NCOs resented us because we would receive our stripes in school, and not in long-term service or combat. The enlisted men, whom we would command, resented us because we were inexperienced and we might have taken their opportunity for field promotion from them or get them killed while we matured on the job in combat. We were often treated with the same disdain by commissioned officers, although their training had been very similar to ours.

The essence of the problem was based on gut feelings. No one believed the Army could train a sergeant through schooling alone. A squad leader in Vietnam had to have real combat experience. Period. Shake 'n Bake sergeants would have rank and responsibility, but they would be absolutely useless . . . or so it was believed.

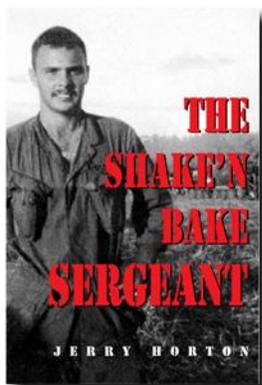
In the last two months my training was identical to that given officer candidates. Our classes took place in the same classrooms of the Infantry School. During this period, harassment and discipline continued, but the Army's goal was not to attempt to break us (to weed out those who were unable to become leaders) but to have us finish the program. They needed us in Vietnam.

Experience in Vietnam

History shows that the Shake 'n Bake sergeants performed well in combat. They served with distinction as leaders in our infantry units. They suffered high casualty rates in combat because they were assigned to units that experienced heavy fighting. There were 1,003 Shake 'n Bakes killed in combat out of 20,068 men trained. This casualty rate, at five percent, was considered to be extremely high. I had no idea that I was pursuing one of the Army's most dangerous careers but we were invented for only one purpose—to lead men in combat. And that we did. There were three Medal of Honor recipients graduated as NCOs.

Once I returned from Vietnam, I never heard the words Shake 'n Bake for thirty years until the day I read the book *The Teams* with Jesse Ventura's words. Forty years ago it seemed the world had the same negative opinion of us Shake 'n Bakes.

It turned out that the last Shake 'N Bake Sergeant graduated from Fort Benning on March 18, 1972. The Army concluded that the program was a success. Because of it the Army implemented two new, similar programs. These programs gave new opportunities for advancement to career soldiers returning from Vietnam. The new schools established at Fort Benning were BNCOC (Basic NCOC) and ANCOC (Advanced NCOC). The Shake 'n Bake program was the basis for all training of NCO's in today's Army.



Some Shake 'n Bakes' are still in the service today, but many have since retired as Senior NCOs and Officers. A number of NCOs completed their career in the Army and at least two of them attained the rank of Sergeant Major.

As part of the quest to recover my past I wrote a book entitled *The Shake 'n Bake Sergeant*. It was published in 2007 and is available for purchase at www.shakenbakesergeant.com. I have had several notable military authors and

experienced military veterans review this work and all have agreed with me that the Army was damned lucky to have the Shake 'n Bakes in the Vietnam war and that my book tells it like it really was.

Comments by the Arthur T. Hadley

Well know journalist, Washington Bureau Chief New Times Magazine Asst. Executive Editor, N.Y. Herald Tribune and White House Correspondent, Newsweek. Enlisted in the Army at 18th birthday in 1942 and rose to rank of Major, Four battle stars, Purple Heart, Silver Star with Oak Leaf Cluster and author of eight books on the military

In this fine book Jerry Horton has rehabilitated the "Shake and Bakes" the Vietnam privates who became instant Sergeants in three months after attending sergeants' school. Such works as "Company Commander" and "Band of Bothers" have already done this for the "Ninety Day Wonders" the officer graduates of OCS during WW 11. Both groups were unfairly derided in their time. A "Shake and Bake" himself, Horton has a fine eye and ear for jungle combat and a strong man's understanding and respect for different responses to fear and danger. In these days when courage has once again become a popular virtue, he provides an insightful guide into the territory of sacrifice. All this makes for not only an education but also a page turner.

Comments by William Wooldridge, Sergeant Major of the Army 1966-1968

What the title doesn't say, but what the reader will find, is that this book is a worthwhile history. It not only gives a personal account but also gives the history of the United States Army's Non Commissioned Officer Candidate Course. It offers an understanding of the American soldier in the 1960s and shows the important role of the Army's non commissioned officers then and now.

After reading so many exaggerated and misinformed books about Vietnam it is indeed refreshing to read the factual, non assuming words of this sergeant. He has done an excellent job of saying it like it was in his time. His first person accounts will bring you face to face with the realities of an infantry squad leader in Vietnam.

He says "I soon learned that being an infantry squad leader is the Army's toughest job. First of all, I would be solely responsible for my squad of seven to ten men. On a daily basis, I would motivate them, help them do their jobs correctly and efficiently, direct them under fire and assure the accomplishment of each mission and insist upon the completion of routine activities that they might consider unnecessary. I would have to do this while working beside my men..."

His memories are personal which makes them rich with the language and people of the time. Each chapter is a treasured accounting of the places and experiences similar to those that many of us professional NCOs have had. Horton's ability to capture the essence of the American soldier of Vietnam, especially the barracks banter, is remarkable. His clear strong voice gives rich new life to what many may have thought was an old subject until recent events. That makes this book even the more relevant.