

Chapter 1

“On Your Knuckles, Bitch.”

“Navy or Marine?” a gruff voice asked from behind the Military Assistance counter at the San Diego International Airport.

“Marine,” I responded.

“Shut up. Stand over there and don’t get in anybody’s way,” the Marine ordered from behind the counter.

I obeyed, but was a little confused as the spot he pointed to was in front of a drinking fountain. How was I supposed to stay out of everybody’s way?

I had felt uneasy most of the day. My father had gone with me to the Armed Forces Entrance Examination Station in downtown Omaha, Nebraska. His eyes may have teared up as he said his good-bye. I was already anxious and it didn’t help when the Army sergeant behind the table where the processing was to begin looked at my orders and shouted at a Marine standing several paces behind him.

“Hey, Mac. Here’s another bullet stopper for you.”

It was March 14, 1969. The military buildup in Vietnam was at its peak. I was eighteen, having graduated from high school the previous May. Ed Watson, a high school buddy of mine, had enlisted and gone to Boot Camp shortly after graduation. We had talked about joining the Marines together, but my father insisted that I should either get a job or go to college for at least a year before enlisting. Although I turned 18 that July and could have enlisted then without his permission, I respected his wish. College was a problem. I had no money to pay for it. My grandfather had offered to help with the costs, but I didn’t feel ready.

Getting a job was no easy matter either. Most employers wouldn’t hire anyone under 18 so I spent most of the summer doing nothing except checking in at the unemployment office from time to time. I was finally hired by the Campbell’s Soup Company as a laborer in their division which produced frozen food dinners. The work was physically demanding and the workdays seemed incredibly long. From day one I searched the want ads to find something else. I found a job as a shipping clerk working in the stockroom at J. C. Penny. I had only worked at Campbell’s Soup a month when I quit there and took the job as a shipping clerk.

My brief career at Campbell's Soup, however, inspired me to try college, so I signed up to take the first semester of Calculus. It was an evening class, but the thought of spending my life in a job like the one at Campbell's Soup motivated me to seek something better.

I liked working at J. C. Penny, but it got hectic at times. The Christmas season was really rough, but it sure beat Campbell's Soup. There were several female employees who were cute and we teased each other from time to time. I had no plans to leave that job anytime soon when tragedy struck.

My grandfather, who had been my closest friend, died after a short hospital stay. As a result of the loss, I reexamined where I was going with my life. I wasn't doing well in my Calculus class. I just couldn't seem to understand the stuff. I was also classified as 1-A by the Selective Service. With the war in Vietnam going full tilt and the body count in the hundreds each week, I knew it would only be a matter of time until I was drafted. I talked with my father again about enlisting in the Marines. He agreed and a few days later I enlisted.

I enlisted on a 120 day delay program so I continued to work at J. C. Penny from November, when I enlisted, until a couple of weeks before I was to report for duty.

After trying to shrug off the comment about being a "bullet stopper," I spent the rest of the day at the station taking tests, undergoing a physical examination, and being sworn in. There were only two of us headed for the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego. The other was a Native American, named Al White who was about two years older than I. Al had been in trouble with the law, so I was given the responsibility of seeing he got to his destination. I shivered at the thought of trying to force him to go if he decided to bolt. As it turned out, he behaved himself, although he wasn't all that friendly.

At the San Diego Airport, Al and I had to wait for other recruits to arrive. I believe it was several hours. I don't exactly remember when, but some time during that time, Al and I were taken out to a cattle truck used to transport new recruits. I was ordered to sit on a bench facing an open door and collect the packets of papers the recruits carried as they piled on the truck. I was told to get a count and I'd better not be wrong. Pile on they did. They came running at me so fast I was sure I'd miss the count, but I didn't.

It was night as the truck wound through the streets of what I guessed was downtown San Diego. I caught a glimpse of the world outside from time to time. It appeared we traveled through an area where the streets were lined with bars. When the truck finally, we were ordered out by screaming Marines and told to stand on the yellow footprints. These were painted on the asphalt pavement in pairs with each pair forming a forty-five degree angle.

Next we were ordered to file into the barber shop. Here every recruit got a haircut. It only took about three passes of the barber's clippers to shave every recruit

bald. Ironically, there was a sign in the barber shop that said something about us not being allowed to tip the barber.

Things were a blur by now, but I think the next trip was filing by a counter in the receiving barracks to get our initial issue of clothing. This consisted of a sea bag, underwear (skivvies), green utility trousers, socks, tennis shoes, a gray sweatshirt, and a Marine Corps cap (thereafter referred to as a cover). Following this, we were ordered into a large room where we were told to strip off all our civilian clothes and pack them in a box provided to be shipped home. As we were doing this, the Marines in charge of us were constantly shouting. The words: "How would you like me to knock you the fuck out?" were used most often. One recruit near me cried out begging for a transfer to the Navy. That only incurred additional wrath from the Marines who were our troop handlers.

We were ordered into a shower as a group. There were so many of us in the shower at one time that I remember thinking it was stupid to think we would come out clean. I think all the water that touched me had rolled or splashed off the recruits next to me.

After the communal shower, we dressed and were taken to a room with multiple bunk beds the Marines refer to as "racks." We didn't get any sleep though that night. It seemed every ten to 15 minutes someone would come in shouting about one thing or another to make sure we couldn't sleep.

The next two days were worse. We were lined up on stairs and told to remain standing at attention. Saturday was the worst. I think we were standing on those stairs foresight to 12 hours straight, only breaking for meals. Sunday, however, I believe was a little better. From time to time groups of us were called away to perform work details such as shining brass pipes in the restrooms, called "heads." I remember one of the troop handlers coming one time and asking if there were any college graduates among us. When they didn't get a response, they asked if there was anyone with any college experience. Since I had a whole semester of Calculus, I raised my hand and was put to work sorting papers. It was such a relief from standing on the stairs!

I think it was the following Monday when our Drill Instructor (DI) came to collect us. I can't remember which one it was, but I think it was Gunnery Sergeant Lopez, the head DI or Platoon Commander for our platoon. He was a fairly tall, lean man of obvious Hispanic descent who looked to be as old as my father. We were formed into a group of four rows outside the receiving barracks. It would probably appear to be a strange looking bunch. We were all dressed in the green trousers and gray sweatshirts with black and white tennis shoes and the green caps covering our bald heads. The first command from the DI was, "Ok ladies, join arms."

At this command we interlocked our arms with each other.

The DI then commanded us to march, and began to count cadence. Thus we traveled to a series of Quonset Huts, referred hereafter as billets, which were our

primary homes for the rest of boot camp. Once we arrived, I believe we were introduced to the other two DI's. I can't remember the name of one of them, but the other was Corporal Bobo. Corporal Bobo, promoted to Sgt. Bobo later during my time in boot camp, was the "bad ass" of the three. He was short, but muscular and had the loudest mouth.

That evening I believe we were marched to a building to receive an initial indoctrination by our Series Commander, a Lieutenant whose name I can't remember. I think the main purpose of the lieutenant's speech was to scare us into compliance by telling us what could happen to us if we didn't shape up. The first of the horrors which we could face was the brig. This was the punishment a recruit could face if he did anything from disobeying an order to trying to go "over the wall." To make his point, the Lieutenant had a recruit brought before us who had refused to do physical training (PT). The Lieutenant assured us this recruit would remain in the brig until he changed his mind. The brig, of course, is a military jail. All the time spent there is considered "bad time," meaning the time spent in the brig doesn't count toward the time a recruit must serve to satisfy the term of their enlistment. Later I was to learn of other horrors encountered in Marine Corps brig.

Next to the brig, the most horrible thing a recruit could face was Corrective Custody Platoon (CC). This was the Marine Corps version of hard labor. I don't know what criteria was used to send a recruit to CC instead of the brig, but from first hand stories I heard later from recruits sent to CC, it sounded like this was a more severe punishment. They labored from dawn to dusk doing hard manual labor with little food or water.

Motivation Platoon was probably as physically demanding as CC, but the recruits sent there were ones I believe the DIs classified as screw-ups. These recruits were ones who failed some test or another and the DI determined they weren't sufficiently motivated. In Motivation Platoon the recruits were forced to do undergo grueling tasks that would make them want to return to normal recruit training. There were cases where a recruit would die in Motivation Platoon.

Then there was the Physical Correction Platoon. This was more commonly known as the "Fat Farm." Recruits sent to this platoon were the ones who couldn't pass the minimum physical fitness tests to continue training with the platoon they'd been assigned to initially. At one point I was afraid of being sent to this platoon because I had difficulty climbing the rope. The recruits sent to this platoon did physical training nearly the entire day. Our billets were located near the "Fat Farm" and we could hear them working out.

The greatest fear of being sent to one of these platoons was to have to spend additional time in boot camp. Everyone wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. I especially felt sorry for those who got dropped from their initial platoon for illness or injury. It meant they would have to be there that much longer.

Much of our first week as a platoon was occupied with processing. We had shots, physical examinations, dental exams, and took tests so the Marine Corps could determine our aptitudes for different occupational specialties. A couple of incidents happened to me that week which I thought noteworthy.

The first of these was my dental exam. The dentist looked at my teeth and asked, "You're from Nebraska, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir, how did you know that?" I asked.

"Your teeth are in such good shape, I figured you were either from Nebraska or Kansas." He responded.

Then he called a couple of other dentists or maybe technicians to show them my teeth. Afterwards he smiled at me and ordered, "Get out of my chair, private."

The second thing I vividly remember that week was the test I had to take to see if I had the aptitude to be a radio operator. My father was a radio operator throughout his service in the Navy during World War II and Korea, so I thought I might have inherited that talent – not so. With earphones on, we were to respond to beeps transmitted over the wire. As I remember it, there were two signals that were supposed to sound different, but I couldn't tell one from another. I'm sure I flunked that test.

That week we also were issued additional uniform parts, most noticeably a green utility shirt and boots. At least now we appeared to look a little more like Marines. Then we got our rifles and cartridge belts. The rifle was an M-14. In a letter home I described the M-14.

The M-14 fires a 7.62 mm bullet, has a chamber pressure of 50,000 pounds per square inch, muzzle velocity of 2800 feet per second, a maximum range of 3,725 meters, maximum effective range 460 meters, and can be fired semi-automatically or automatically. Its barrel is 22" long, total length 44-1/8" and has a cyclic rate of fire of 700-750 rounds per minute.

I believe that first week we took our initial physical fitness test. The components of the test and the maximum number of points achievable for each were as follows:

Test	Test Measure	Maximum Points
Pull-ups	18 Repetitions	100
300 Yard Dash	32 seconds or less	100
Push-ups	61	100
Squat Thrusts	41 or more in 1 minute	100
Sit-ups	85 or more in 2 minutes	100

This test was significant because if we didn't achieve a minimum total score which I think was 250, we would be sent to the "Fat Farm." Actually the term "Fat Farm" is a misnomer because a skinny kid who failed to achieve the minimum score would be sent there also. I don't have a record of my scores but my performance was as follows:

Test	Test Measure
Pull-ups	10 Repetitions
300 Yard Dash	43 seconds
Push-ups	33
Squat Thrusts	15 in 1 minute
Sit-ups	68 in 2 minutes

I escaped the "Fat Farm," but my ability to do squat-thrusts would plague me throughout Boot Camp – and we did a lot of squat-thrusts. It was the DI's favorite form of punishment. It seemed like every time someone in the platoon screwed up, the platoon was ordered to do squat thrusts. Typically a session of squat-thrusts would go like this:

"Face half right," the DI would order. This command would be followed by: "Squat-thrusts, 15 repetitions, cadence count."

Cadence count refers to the fact that we shouted out the steps as we performed the exercise. It was a four part exercise as follows:

Count 1 – we squat down with our hands on the ground between our knees

Count 2 – we thrust our feet to the rear

Count 3 – we bring our legs back to the squatting position

Count 4 – we stand up.

I don't think we ever did just 15 repetitions. Part way through the first 15, the DI would say something like:

"Alright ladies, looks like you want to climb the ladder, 25 repetitions, cadence count." This could continue until we'd done a hundred or more. One time I believe we went up to 200. By the time we reached the end of those, we were staggering during the last of the repetitions like a bunch of drunks.

Harassment by the DIs was nearly constant throughout Boot Camp and the DIs could think of some ingenious ways to torment us, either as a platoon or

individually. Usually the whole platoon suffered when one private made a mistake. I think the DIs did this not only to embarrass the guilty individual, but to encourage the other platoon members to retaliate later, not an uncommon occurrence.

Some of the punishment inflicted on the single private included:

Elbow and toes: The private was told to assume a front leaning rest position similar to what you would do before you start a push-up except that your body would be supported by your elbows and toes. You would have to stay in this position until the DI told you to get up.

On your knuckles: You would assume a front leaning rest position for this one also, only you would support yourself on your knuckles instead of your hands. You would remain in the position until the DI told you to get up.

Marking time on your knuckles: This was a variation of “on your knuckles.” You would have to lift one arm then the other and count cadence as your arms went up and down.

Sometimes the DI would order a private to do one of these, not as punishment, but just for pure harassment. For instance at mail call when we received our mail, if a private got a perfumed letter from a girl friend, the DI would order:

“On your knuckles, bitch.”

This was a great amusement to all except the guy on his knuckles.

Guzzle hold: This was when a DI would grab a private’s Adam’s Apple with one hand and squeeze. I don’t remember what the private did typically prior to being put in the guzzle hold.

The thing that a single private probably feared most was a trip to the Duty Office. The Duty Office was the place where the DI resided when it was his turn to spend the night with the troops. Most calls to the duty office occurred at night when we were in our billets shining our boots or cleaning our rifles. It would start with the DI hollering from within the Duty Office.

“Private Schneider, report to the Duty Office.”

Then the recruits in the billets would repeat the call.

“Private Schneider, report to the Duty Office.”

I would sprint to the Duty Office. I would stop outside and knock on the bulkhead (wall) near the door, which was usually always open when the DI was inside.

“Who’s that rapping on my door?” The DI’s voice would come from within.

“Private Schneider reporting as ordered, Sir.”

“Get in here.”

What would follow would be a verbal chewing out, followed by being slapped or knocked around by the DI. On the occasion that Corporal Bobo called me to the Duty Office, he stood on a chair to slap me around as I was about six inches taller than him.

Now it was against the Uniform Code of Military Justice for a Marine enlisted or officer to strike another except in self defense, so when a DI hit you it was usually out of the view of witnesses. I suppose we could have struck back; none of us dared to because it would have brought on even greater retaliation. The pain we incurred was usually short lived, and the DIs were usually careful not to inflict any blows that would result in permanent damage or that damage that would be clearly visible (for example, a black eye).

The other alternative would be to "Request Mast." Request Mast meant we would be allowed to complain to a DI's superior, the Lieutenant I mentioned before for instance, but without a witness, I felt such an action would be futile. I did hear of cases where a DI would be demoted for striking a recruit, but those cases were rare.

One of the more unique types of harassment inflicted on the platoon was the time we had to perform the Manual of Arms with our footlockers. We were ordered to fall out on the street with our foot lockers. When we were all in the position of attention with our foot lockers in front of us, the DI gave the order.

"Right shoulder arms."

Since the required move was one you did with a rifle, I was confused how to start. Nevertheless, we all managed to clumsily maneuver the foot lockers through the entire series of commands the DI shouted.