

Galaxy *of* Fire

PILGRIMAGE TO AN
ANCIENT SPIRITUAL WORLD

BY
JAY LATHAM



GALAXY OF FIRE
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by Jay Latham

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For Seekers of the Truth, Whoever They may Be.

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Preface

When I first started writing this book I thought it was going to be a story about my spiritual adventures throughout the Himalayas of India, Nepal and Tibet, with lots of beautiful photos of mountains, temples, and people—basically a story about the most beautiful experiences of my life. When I started to write, however, something unexpected happened. I couldn't find a starting point from which to launch the book. I kept regressing further and further into my past until, after a full year of writing, I got to 3 May 1967—Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, South Carolina. Now I know that this is where my life pilgrimage actually started.

From that point on my writing took on a very different character. Rather than being the story I had originally envisioned, it became a confession of sorts, a catharsis—one that brought up powerful emotions and impressions that I had buried deep in my subconsciousness; once the process began I couldn't stop it, no matter how shocking the stories I was writing became. I had no idea I was going to drop my “image” and tell the truth. But the result, for me, has been enlightening. I came to understand and accept my real feelings about what I went through in my life—feelings I did not particularly want to feel again—whether they were about love or hate. But having felt them, I came to a resolution about the most important people and events in my life—especially the ones I wanted to forget—the ones concerning personal relationships and my spiritual path.

Many people have asked me, “How can you write a book about pilgrimage to God and talk about the Marine Corps and the dark and crazy times in your life? How will people be able to

make the connection between those two extremes?”

The answer is simple—we are all in the dark, and by the grace of God and the enlightened masters who have walked this earth, the light comes to us. Every seeker’s path is from darkness to light. This, I think, is why I was compelled to tell my real story—at least the portion of my life that this book covers, 1967 to 1985—so that people can relate to it. It is all true, at least, as far as my own perceptions and recollections are concerned and in the reports of things people told me. I have had to change some names to protect people’s privacy.

As for my experiences in the Marine Corps, I am very thankful for the training I received there. It provided me with the understanding of how to punch through the dross of the world and get to higher states of consciousness as well as the most powerful places of holiness in the world. I have had many people read the manuscript, to test it out and give me valuable feedback, and some have had a hard time getting through the first chapters that deal with my military experiences. In fact, some people skipped that part to get to the “good stuff.” One girl from India, a local student and friend of mine, had a hard time reading that part and told me so. I thought she just wasn’t “into” the book—it was too “American” for her. But the next time I spoke with her, she told me that she had finished the manuscript and that it was the most inspiring book she had ever read.

She said, at first, she just couldn’t figure out where the book was going, but that she was glad she read it all, because in the final analysis the first section laid the foundation for the tremendous spiritual awakening that comes later and ties everything together.

From my side, the Marine Corps laid the basis for my entire

life and taught me things that would become invaluable to me, not only in my development as a tour-guide leader in Asia and the Himalayas, but, more importantly, for my development as a man—a process which continues to unfold. They also sent me to Southeast Asia; that experience alone was worth the price of admission—countless times over.

I know that nothing has ever been written about the Transcendental Meditation Program, or its founder, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, in the context that I have written it. For that reason it is important for me to say that I am not representing either. The truth is, I have no idea how Maharishi or his organization will react to my story, but my sincere desire is that it will help in some way.

In fact, I wrote the book for people all over the world who are searching for something they have not yet found in the hopes that it will strike a chord of truth in their hearts. Basically, I wrote the book for you in the hopes that it will inspire you to dream a much, much bigger dream—for yourself and for the world.

Blue Shiva

Some walk around naked, except for a loincloth, with four-foot strands of roped, matted locks piled up like a coiled cobra on top of their heads, their bodies completely covered with white-gray ash, taken fresh from the morning's dhuni (sadhu's fire, considered holy) or from the human ash remains of the cremation ground. Some walk around with a trident, Shiva's weapon of choice, with a monkey-drum tied to the top; or with their crude, cast iron dhuni tongs they use to work the logs in their morning and evening fires.

In 1991, I saw a fabulous Shiva Yogi standing on the front steps of Kedarnath Temple, 12,000 feet in the Garhwal Himalaya. He was painted bright blue from head to foot, with the exception of his throat, which was painted black-blue, symbolizing Shiva's drinking off the poison from the ocean of nectar at the beginning of time to save the world from harm. Although the temperature at that altitude with the sun setting was only around 35 degrees fahrenheit and dropping fast, the man was naked and barefoot, save for a one-foot wide, yellow-spotted leopard skin tied around his waist.

The leopard skin was beautiful, with white and black spots over brilliant yellow fur. He had secured it with a scarlet silk sash that was wrapped around his waist, then hung from a knot about two feet down his left thigh. His body was Himalayan strong, seemingly impervious to the foreboding chill in the air as night approached. His hair was knotted into floor-length dreadlocks—flowing like snakes down to the stone under his feet. In his right hand he held a giant silver trident, about eight feet tall with three flat 8-inch wide blades, barbed at the ends. The trident looked to

be a very old heirloom imbued with the power of Shiva and ancient India; it was pure silver with ornate hand-working all along the shaft. On his brilliant blue forehead, right above and between his eyes, was a vertically painted, red and white third eye.

The great yogi stood timeless, still as a statue as wind blew his hair around his legs. Can you feel the power of this man, standing on the front landing of the most powerful Himalayan Shiva shrine in the world?

Let me help you. Kedarnath Mandir is nestled amongst spectacular Himalayan peaks at the end of a long, winding jungle valley that follows the Mandakini River to her source. Looking straight up from the front of the temple you will see, towering above and right behind, a 22,000 foot wall of the Trans-Himalaya range with Kedarnath Parbat (23,000 feet) right in the middle. Pink and gold cloud banners blow off her summit in the jet stream. There is snow catching every hue and shade of light imaginable on those peaks, changing in color and intensity with every tick of the sun's transit. It is the most powerful and spectacular place I have ever been. Seeing this magnificent blue Shiva standing there, like a being from another world, stopped my mind still.

He was the hardest yogi I ever saw. He looked like he'd wandered to this spot from somewhere out in no-man's land because there is nothing beyond the temple but passes, glaciers and peaks. Perhaps he descended from some celestial Kaivalya (heaven) to pay homage to the Jyothirlinga.

When I first saw him, I had just completed a long, hard day—trekking the fourteen kilometers from Gaurikund to Kedarnath, 9,000 ft. to 12,000 ft., with a sixty pound pack on my back. I was breathing hard and tripping on the clarity of the air, the climax of the exertion, and the power and beauty of this God-

intoxicated place. Before me stood stone steps leading twelve feet up to the temple's front terrace. I dropped my pack, removed my boots, and walked up. As I crested the top step I happened, quite unawares, to look to my right and there he stood, staring two holes straight through me—blue Shiva! Everything stopped. He was Lord Shiva. The very sight of the being twisted my heart and wrung it like a wet towel. My brain could not register what I was seeing. His eyes held infinity; they held the Unmoving. This was a real Shiva Yogi, who had captured the essence of Lord Shiva through a life of identification, isolation, meditation and wandering in the mountain wilderness. Looking at him was like looking at the bottom line of the Universe.

Authors Note

After much experimentation among friends, I know that this first five chapters dealing with my experiences in the Marine Corps is interesting to men, but for women, it's not always that way. They naturally wonder, "Where is this thing going?" And, "Why don't you just start the book at chapter 6 or 7 since the spiritual experiences and lessons from that point on are the main thrust of your story?"

The first five chapters are truly rough and full of bad language, especially when considering a general audience. I wrote about it because of the good things I got from the Marine Corps in terms of accomplishing goals—especially in regards to experiencing higher states of consciousness and completing pilgrimages to remote shrines in the Himalayas. The Marine Corps also gave me my first experience of SE Asia and it really put the hook in me. I greatly enjoyed writing about my experiences with Susie, the girl I fell in love with on Okinawa. She opened me to a world of new possibilities in terms of love and loving that pulled me back to Asia many times, forming much of the material that is presently being put into a sequel to the story you are about to read.

If you find Part One to be offensive, just skip to chapter 6 or 7 and begin reading there. You can always come back to Part One if you so desire.

*My Lord
Eternal is my hold on Thee.
And steadfast is Thy grip on me.
For I in Thee
And Thee in me
We both go on together
In the Unity of two lives, nay,
Nay, not in the Unity of two lives,
But in the Unity of One life.
In the natural Oneness of Existence
Thou hast accepted me
And I have absorbed Thee
In the Oneness of life.
I, in the Oneness of Thy Life;
And Thou in the Oneness of my life,
Stand absorbed,
Thou in me
And I in Thee.
Now, the Eternal Stream of life is to go on
As long as it is to go on,
And I know
It is to go on for all time.
For they say,
In the countryside they say:
“When the agreement has been made,
The gentlemen do not break.”
—Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, *Love and God**

Part I

From the Darkness...

CHAPTER 1

PARRIS ISLAND

3 May 1967

“I’ll kick any goddamn D.I.’s ass that fucks with me. Nobody fucks with me,” a drunk and obviously stupid kid from Tennessee, sitting just ahead of me, kept yelling, “What an idiot,” I thought, feeling sharp pains shoot through my head with each outburst. I had a bad hangover, not to mention the fact that buses made me sick to my stomach. But those irritants were minor in comparison to the reality of my immediate future. From a black place deep inside I watched a vision of me, speeding towards the edge of my world, soon to be catapulted into something vast, dark and dangerous.

I’d left the previous day from Raleigh, North Carolina, on a bus full of recruits en route to MCRD—Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, South Carolina. The whole way down “Tennessee” had bragged with incredible conviction how he would kick any D.I.’s (Drill Instructor’s) ass who messed with him. The concept was so utterly ridiculous I sat spell-bound, knowing that in a few short hours this skinny, blond, foul-mouthed teenager would have his chance to prove all of this and more. The sheer audacity of the man made me aware that there were fools among us. For the most part, the other young men on the bus were recovering from their last good drunk in Raleigh and were now terribly hung over and chain smoked cigarettes in anticipation of what lay ahead. It was a

quiet, pensive night for the most part and one of the lowest of low bus rides I would ever take.

As we neared the base the driver seemed to tense up and let his conversation with the forward passenger die out. I can't explain it exactly, he just seemed to emotionally separate himself from us as we got closer to the base. We crossed the long bridge that formed the only connection between Parris Island and the mainland, arching over waterway sound and swamp. The bus stopped at the MCRD main gate for a minute where an immaculate MP checked papers and waved us through. The guy was sharp, all business, like a well-lubricated, perfectly functioning machine; I sensed a sharp tension in the air and realized that this gate was the boundary line which separated my childhood fantasies from reality. I wondered if the horror stories I'd heard about Parris Island were really true; I started getting the feeling they were.

As the bus slipped through the humid darkness, our headlights eerily lit up Spanish moss that hung like tentacles from big trees—brushing over our front windshield like ghost drapings. I saw a light up the road and we soon pulled into the parking lot of a low, squat, ugly, whitewashed building with floodlights lighting up the blacktop which surrounded it. In those floodlights were pairs of painted yellow foot prints for people to stand on. Five drill instructors, wearing green Smoky-the-Bear hats and matching green web belts, paced up and down like hungry vultures, eying the bus impatiently, slapping black billy clubs in their hands. Each was dressed in perfectly pressed and tailored tropical khaki Class A uniforms. One was bigger than the others and built like Charles Atlas with huge arms, chest, lats and shoulders and a tight waist.

When the bus came to a stop, the big Marine jumped on the bus and started a raging diatribe.

“When I tell you to disembark from this bus you will do so in one motion. Put those goddamn cigarettes out! No chewing gum! There are yellow footprints in front of the receiving station right outside the bus door. Get on a pair of yellow footprints and don’t move, talk, look around, or fuck up or I will personally beat the shit out of you. NOW GET OFF THIS FUCKING BUS!”

Everybody got up at once crashing into each other, pushing hard to get to the door. The fellow I nicknamed “Tennessee” was right in front of me. When he hit the door and stepped the first step down, the big D.I. caught him with a hard right punch to the mouth. Tennessee rocketed back into my legs; I instinctively grabbed him under his armpits. The cigarette he’d failed to put out was smashed into his bloody teeth.

“I TOLD YOU, NO FUCKING CIGARETTES, WHORE!” He then looked up at me and said, “DROP HIM AND RUN!”

I dropped the man and hopped over him as I sprinted towards the footprints. Just behind me I could hear Tennessee groan with pain as people tromped over him to get off the bus. “Yeah, he’s going to kick some D.I.’s ass all right,” I thought way in the back of my mind, a fleeting thought if there ever was one. My real concern was this new, horrible world I’d just woke up in.

The D.I.’s started yelling simultaneously to get on the yellow footprints. We all jumped on the nearest pair and stood at rigid attention with the blinding spotlights glaring in our eyes. One D.I. slapped a recruit hard across the face down the ranks, but I didn’t dare look that way. I heard more punches and slaps and wondered, “Is this hell?” I went into shock, separating from my body. It felt like I had descended to a bizarre, demonic astral

plane, replete with harsh screams and ugly noises—the garbled sounds of demons. The flood lights now appeared to be made of sharp lances of light that cut into my brain.

No drug could ever duplicate the horror of the bad trip I was now on. For the next two hours the transit drill instructors worked us over emotionally and physically. Every other word was a profanity, with liberal use of the word “fuck.” At one point they went through a process of determining who had had the most education in our group, comparing major subjects and overall grade point averages. I figured they were sorting us out in order to assign military occupational specialities. After about thirty minutes of sorting and comparing, they decided I had the most education. They assigned me to come to the front of the platoon and count the men. That was it, just count the men. Thirty minutes of careful selection for this one stupid task. I was learning fast that it wasn’t getting someplace that was important here, but the process that counted most. For instance it took two hours of furious harassment to move our group the hundred meters to our transit barracks where we were finally allowed to lay down in the dark on top of our racks with all our clothes on. We weren’t allowed showers so we all stunk to high heavens after the long bus ride and night of torture. Reveille was at 5:00 A.M., one hour away. It had to be an all-time emotional low for everyone as we lay on our racks a mass of trembling, suffering protoplasm. Everyone surely was thinking the same thing, “What in God’s name have I gotten myself into?” I passed out.

“GET THE FUCK UP! GET THE FUCK UP!” was the next thing I heard along with thunderous banging noises coming from a twenty-pound industrial trash can as it crashed down the center

of the squad bay. Lights popped on, raping eyes and minds. D.I.'s banged hard with their billy clubs on the steel uprights of the double bunks as they ran down the squad bay in a rage. "GET THE FUCK UP YOU PIECE OF SHIT!" I watched in shock as a D.I. grabbed a bunk across from me and threw it to the ground with two recruits waking up in midair. They slammed to the floor hard enough to break bones. I got my ass out of bed. This was the rudest wakeup of my life; my nervous system jangled like I was made of shards of splintered glass that cut and pierced me with every tiny move.

"WHEN WE GET TO THE CHOW HALL YOU WILL HAVE TWENTY MINUTES TO EAT FROM THE MOMENT THE FIRST PUKE WALKS IN TILL THE LAST PUKE WALKS OUT. TAKE ONLY THE FOOD YOU PLAN TO EAT. NO LEFTOVERS. KEEP YOUR MOUTHS SHUT! NO TALKING!"

We had not yet been trained to scream "YES, SIR!" and "AYE AYE, SIR!" to let the D.I.'s know we understood and would comply. We were herded out of the squad bay and into the dark night out front of the barracks. Then we were herded a few hundred yards to the front of a big mess hall. Other platoons of new recruits also dressed in civilian clothes stood huddled together like frightened sheep in their separate platoon groups waiting their turn to go in. When ours came the D.I.'s started yelling and shoving us into the small building.

The room was hot and steamy and filled with a hoard of straining, sweating bodies. The guys at the tables were being eyeballed by their vulture D.I.'s and then pushed and yelled at to eat faster and no talking. I was in a line that moved to a stack of metal serrated trays. Everyone grabbed one and held it at port

arms, side-stepping to the first food station. I learned by copying the men ahead of me that the tray was to come horizontal and be extended in front of a server only if one wanted that particular food choice. If we didn't want something we were to hold the tray back. The servers were yelling and screaming directions at the confused adolescents in front of them. I saw a drill instructor grab one confused recruit by the back of his shirt collar and throw him and his tray out the door we'd come in—food flying everywhere. I focused all my attention on extending my tray only for the food I thought I could eat. It consisted of chipped beef on toast (“shit on a shingle”); green, powdered, scrambled eggs; grits, mashed potatoes and bacon.

Having gotten our food, eight of us gathered at a table and stood at attention looking straight ahead as we'd watched a previous group do. A transit D.I. came to our table and yelled, “Ready, seats.” We all sat down and started cramming the food in our faces. Somewhere in the midst of our mad feeding I fully disconnected from my body and witnessed the surrounding scene as being hilariously funny, like watching a movie. I laughed out loud and was shocked when I suddenly realized the person laughing was me. “Damn!” I thought. “I hope none of the D.I.'s caught that.”

People ate as if this were their last meal, even to the point of grabbing any unfinished morsels off the the trays of passersby heading for the garbage cans. Within five minutes we were done and headed to the cans with our empty trays. As we dumped them the D.I.'s inspected each one to see if anyone had leftovers. A man ahead of me, standing in a corner, pushed chipped beef on toast down his throat, trying not to gag. My tray was clean.

The D.I.'s then moved us outside and told us to stand “ass-hole to belly button” in “closed herd formation.” I was amazed at

how dark the night was here in South Carolina, especially under the huge old trees that had Spanish moss hanging off of them. The place looked spooky. Later I'd come to know of the tiny red bugs inhabiting the moss which dropped down on us, got under our clothes and bit hard; I would also learn about sand fleas—fleas which actually lived in the sand and were absolutely torturous to the man standing at attention. Rumor had it that during World War II if a recruit slapped at a flea he had to find the “body” and then bury it in a six-foot hole.

We waited at attention for about thirty minutes while our transit D.I.'s ate their breakfast. I felt like fainting and puking. I'd never seen a morning so purposefully shattered in my life. It wasn't like it had been orchestrated by individuals; this had been organized and executed by an all-powerful, unfeeling, uncaring war machine that was utterly Absolute.

I heard a D.I. walk around the back of our group and then up our right side behind me. “Blue shirt, gray slacks,” he said quietly. He was walking up the ranks slowly to get a look at each man's clothes. I could feel the man behind the voice. This was an experienced man, a hard man, dark and deep and firmly in control; he exuded a quality of maleness I'd never felt before. It's amazing how much information came to me from this single voice in the dark. “Blue shirt, gray slacks. Where are you blue shirt, gray slacks?” Now he was standing just to my right while I faced straight ahead at attention. I felt his eyes pour all over me as I had the horrible realization that I was wearing a blue shirt and gray slacks.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? Didn't you hear me say, ‘blue shirt and gray slacks?’”

“Yes Sir! But I forgot I was wearing them, Sir!” I replied.

He pushed rudely through the bodies separating him from me, and with his right hand, he reached up and grabbed my throat between his thumb and fingers, then closed them like a vice, shutting my throat flat. I heard a noise like straw breaking as my windpipe collapsed.

“WHAT’S SO GODDAMN FUNNY, MAGGOT?”

I had no idea what he was asking me. I tried to respond but no air could come out and none could come in. I was being asphyxiated. I tried to cough and to puke, but all I could do was spasm in his unbelievable grip. His forearm looked like a mass of intertwining steel cables.

“EVERYTHING LOOKED LIKE A BIG JOKE TO YOU IN THE CHOW HALL, HUH PUKE? TELL ME NOW, WHAT’S SO GODDAMN FUNNY?”

So that was it! I’d completely forgotten about laughing in the chow hall, but he’d obviously caught it. I convulsed on his hand trying to breathe and cough at the same time. The pain was unbearable. I could feel the veins popping out of my head and my lips swollen blue, twice their size. He finally let go and let me get a few gasps before shutting me down again hard.

“BIG FUCKING JOKE, HUH SLIME BUCKET? IS IT A BIG JOKE NOW?”

He let go just long enough for me to sob out a breathless, “No Sir.”

“Since you can’t even talk you damn sure better not be laughing anymore,” the D.I. said, as he mercifully let go and moved on. I choked and gagged for awhile not believing what that bastard had done to my windpipe.

For the next day or two we picked up Marine gear from various warehouses during regular working hours; all through the

night we shined brass door kickers and waxed floors in some sorry, dimly lit administration building. Every time someone came down the hallway we had to freeze in place after mashing ourselves to the bottom of the wall on our hands and knees. They kicked us if we didn't do it right. It was a lowest-piece-of-shit-servitude-thing they were working on us. In a dark fog of fatigue I worked like a dog through another sleepless night, but in the morning I thought I was going to break down. It had been four or five days since I'd had a decent night's sleep, with all of the processing in Raleigh and prior worry about coming into the Marines. The whole night I just kept telling myself to push through it. I recollected that I was in good shape. I'd lifted weights, worked out hard and ran every day for years prior to this. I could do a standing press with 195 pounds, squat with 400 pounds, and bench press 270 pounds. My stomach was like a washboard from doing vertical hanging sit ups with a fifty pound plate behind my head. I'd also learned discipline in military school, but this sleep deprivation was unbearable. It took will to fight it and the fatigue sapped my will. I felt so tired my heart hurt as it beat in my chest. All I wanted to do was pass out on the floor.

At this point the only thing on my mind was getting off the island, even though we'd been told that it was dangerous to attempt escape because of alligators, water moccasins, and rip tides. Sometime during the endless night of bare light bulbs, floor wax and brass polish I'd decided that this was not the American military. It couldn't be. I'd died and gone to hell or something; this wasn't even America, not any America anyone I knew knew about. It was a Nazi torture camp. I had no idea until a few days later that others around me were thinking the same thing and planning an actual escape.

The next morning about 8:00 A.M., our transit D.I.'s lined us up with the duffel bags and clothes we'd been issued sometime during the previous jumbled two days. I was so tired my memory couldn't piece together night or day or what we'd done. I vaguely remembered having my head cut bare. Some kid ahead of me with a Beatles haircut had only one side of his head shaved so he wouldn't "feel so bad about losing his girl's hair." He had to go for two days looking like a lopsided deranged freak before they cut the other half of his hair off. Then they'd had us strip down to our underpants and numbered each of us on the chest with a crayon. That was the administrative preparation for walking us through the inoculation line and getting hit in both arms simultaneously with high-pressured injection guns at various points along the way. Regardless of which warehouse we entered, the staff of these places took massive delight in yelling insults at us. I gathered that we were to be addressed only in the feminine gender until we graduated from boot camp.

Now we stood sweating it out on the asphalt grinder in the blazing sun. Two recruits passed out and fell on the pavement. The D.I.'s had them pulled into the shade. I gathered from this that there must be rules concerning negligence. Parris Island may be the best kept secret in the world, but I could see there were limits.

We were told we'd get more gear when our real D.I.'s came to pick us up in a few minutes. The transit D.I.'s warned us that the new D.I.'s, who'd be training us for eight or nine weeks, would not treat us as well as they had because they had the job of turning us into Marines instead of the whores, sluts and faggots we were now. I took this new information in and thought about it. This was important information, critical information. I

couldn't believe the new D.I.'s could be worse than these guys. Obviously, I had been entertaining fantasies and suffering from shock instead of grasping the fact that the world I'd left beyond the bridge was gone. I was still playing catch-up ball and struggling to be where I was—an astral hell filled with demons. My cherry was being busted, good and hard.

Out to our front three figures shimmered in the heat waves rising off the sun scorched parade deck. They got bigger as they came directly our way. It was our three drill instructors and they were coming from across the quarter-mile wide pavement to get us and take us back to our barracks in the First Marine Training Battalion. I made out their features. One was short and wiry and had the most stripes on his arm. He looked like a snake or a weasel, dangerous. The second one was tall and thin, yet muscular, and had a wild, unhinged look in his eyes. "Uh-oh," I thought. The third was younger and didn't have the Vietnam battle ribbons above his chest pocket that the first two had. He looked inexperienced. They stopped in front of us and fanned out. The transit D.I. spoke quietly for a moment with the new skinny, older D.I., and then he and his assistants left. We were now alone for the first time with our real D.I.'s. The skinny one spoke.

"My name is Staff Sergeant Avery; I'm your Senior Drill Instructor. This is Sergeant Armstrong; he's your Assistant Drill Instructor, and this is Sergeant Carver, your other Assistant Drill Instructor. You're now a part of Platoon 170. Welcome to the world of shit. Let's get one thing straight right now. You sluts aren't Marines just because you joined the Marine Corps. You don't respect our traditions. You look like shit because you are shit. You are scuzzy civilians. Unfortunately, when you crossed that bridge you left all that behind. Mommy and Daddy can't

help you now. YOU ARE OFFICIALLY OFF THE FUCKING TIT! IS THAT CLEAR?"

"YES SIR!" we replied *almost* in unison.

"DON'T SAY ANOTHER FUCKING WORD UNTIL YOU ARE TAUGHT HOW TO SPEAK TO A DRILL INSTRUCTOR! NOT ONE MORE FUCKING WORD!"

"You are scuzzy fucking civilians, but you're not in America anymore. You left that behind when you crossed that bridge. What this means exactly, so you won't get confused, is this: If you write your congressman you will pay like you never thought possible, because in the Marine Corps, payback is a motherfucker. YOU'LL NEVER GET OFF THIS ISLAND! We've had 'em down here before and if we have them again YOU WILL NOT SPEAK TO THEM UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES! GODDAMIT, YOU WILL NOT TALK TO ANY CIVILIANS AT ALL! The traitors and pussies who wrote their congressmen and senators wish they never had and I can guaran-goddam-tee-you that! Understand this. If you fuck up during your eight weeks of basic training you will be recycled into the next oncoming platoon. We can do this for your entire enlistment and then some. And believe me when I tell you that being recycled is a one-way ticket to the psychiatric wing of Charleston Naval Hospital right over there across that water. SO DON'T WRITE ANY SENATORS OR CONGRESSMEN ANY GODDAMN LETTERS BECAUSE WE'LL BE READING YOUR MAIL BEFORE IT GOES OUT. And don't be thinking about complaining to Mom or Dad or that fucking whore of yours, Sally Rotten Crotch, either. If you ever want to get off this island, do every fucking thing you are told."

"Our barracks is right over there. Since you don't understand

how to march we're going to teach you the basics. First you need to know why we march. That's the first lesson. **NOW GET ASS-HOLE TO BELLY BUTTON. CRAM TOGETHER, GODDAMIT, AND GET THOSE SEA BAGS ON YOUR SHOULDERS.**"

We all slammed into each other. I was practically knocked down by someone's sea bag hitting me in the eye. It was the result of a chain reaction of people smashing each other in the head with the tightly packed, seventy-odd pound duffel sea bags.

"Now face in my direction," the D.I. yelled.

We adjusted and did another group head bashing.

"NOW MOVE FORWARD!"

We all tried to step forward at the same time but were crammed too close together. I stepped on the man's calf ahead of me and he yelled. We all fell down in a heap, slamming each other with our sea bags. The D.I.'s frenzied the moment we went down and as I looked up I saw the lunatic eyes of Sgt. Armstrong as he kicked a man in the stomach and then kicked everybody he could get to on the outer edge of our pile. I saw that he was quite mad. The other D.I.'s screamed a torrent of profanity.

"WHO THE FUCK TOLD YOU TO FALL DOWN?" Armstrong screamed. **"GET UP! GET THE FUCK UP!"**

I rubbed gravel out of my face and eye as I got up. I'd scraped my head and someone had stepped on my hand. Worst of all the parade deck was burning hot from the sun. Sweat poured off of us as we all got up breathing hard and crammed "asshole to belly button" again.

"MOVE FORWARD!" Avery yelled.

Everyone tripped over each other in unison and fell down, slamming sea bags into bodies and limbs. I trampled a man's head into the hot grinder. **"WHO TOLD YOU THE FUCK TO**

FALL DOWN? GODDAMN, CAN'T YOU WHORES FOLLOW ORDERS?" We lurched upward, painfully hoisting our sea bags to our shoulders. Some of the smaller men had a hard time getting underneath their bags. Everyone tried to move forward now in a panic. Limbs and heads got stepped on, a tall guy near me fell to his right side and plowed into a man trying to stand up, knocking him down. Sea bags scattered everywhere and some unplanned exchanges got made. We looked like an accordion of chaos. The three D.I.'s kicked and punched anyone lying on the ground—this was another clue, another piece of invaluable information—the D.I.'s only frenzied on a man down, a weak man; *they went berserk at the sight of weakness.*

For the next thirty minutes we lurched, crashed, fell, and tripped our way to the front of our new barracks. The sun shone hot as a furnace as it burned into the bleeding, gravel sewn scrapes on our faces and arms. We were one ragged mess. Christ, these D.I.'s were a hell of a lot worse than the first ones!

Avery yelled, "Now you've learned Lesson One. Why we march. Now you'll appreciate *learning* to march and if you don't we can always do it the civilian way which is what you've just experienced."

The man's teaching method was the most effective I'd ever been exposed to. So far every instruction had been administered in such a painful way that it was impossible to forget.

Since I'd learned everything about marching and the "manual of arms" rifle drill at Fork Union Military Academy, I felt something solid to grab onto. I had already learned skills that would now be a major part of my training. My spirit soared as I imagined just how much ahead I was over the rest of the pack. Sergeant Avery interrupted my train of thought.

“The second lesson we’re going to teach you is this: If any one of you fucks up the rest of you pay. It’s what we call the hundred percent system. We’re going to teach you maggots how to do everything as a unit. We’ll demonstrate this for you just as soon as we get into the privacy of our own barracks so we won’t be disturbed.”

Armstrong’s eyes lit up on this last note. I caught it again—lunacy bubbling over. Now I knew everything was truly hopeless. No matter how well I did I’d pay for the sins of the slow learners. And judging the crudeness and dumbness of some of the kids around me, many from poor rural areas or inner city ghettos, I knew I would suffer from impatience and boredom more than anything. We looked like a pile of pimply teenage refuse.

We were herded into our squad bay on the second floor of a fourplex, H-shaped barracks compound. Everyone was issued a rack and oriented as to where everything was. The D.I.’s began unfolding before us the simple steps of survival we’d need to get through our new life in the Corps, a life by the numbers. I felt like a child learning to walk all over again. I’d already picked up a few gems of valuable knowledge concerning this machine, such as not showing weakness, not falling to the ground, keeping answers to the simplest truth possible, never laughing, talking or looking around, and listening to every word these people told you because they didn’t waste one word. Every piece of information was to be used for getting myself out of this place. That was all it was about.

Now we were standing at attention in front of our racks facing straight ahead and a storm was brewing in the center of the squad bay. It was Sergeant Avery, who everyone now had solid respect for after his performance on the grinder.

“Are there any black belts in Karate or other martial arts in the room? No? No one is a martial artist?” No one said a word. “Are there any boxers in the herd? COME ON! IS THERE ANYBODY HERE WHO IS A BAD ASS AND WANTS TO PROVE IT NOW? COME ON YOU FUCKING PUSSIES. COME OUT HERE AND KICK MY ASS OR ANY D.I.’S ASS RIGHT NOW. ITS ONE ON ONE! THIS IS YOUR CHANCE TO KICK A D.I.’S ASS AND IF YOU DON’T DO IT RIGHT NOW, YOU NEVER WILL. SO LET’S GET IT ON!”

Armstrong paced up and down the squad bay, fists clenched, his eyes wide and wild, looking each man directly in the eyes to see if he could find a taker. No one moved or said a word. It was clear that they were dead serious.

Armstrong and Avery wanted to fight. They taunted us with jibes for fifteen minutes while everyone shuffled around uncomfortably. We had some very big, strong men in the platoon, some rough looking customers to be sure, but at this moment, everyone of us backed down. Even if I felt I could beat Avery or Armstrong in a one-on-one fight, and I thought my chances were good, I knew I couldn’t beat the monster machine that produced them and the many more like them. Everyone else figured it the same way, too, not the least of whom was “Tennessee.”

“Let’s get one thing straight right off,” Armstrong said. “Platoon 170 is my last platoon in my two-year tour of duty as a drill instructor. For this reason you *will* win the drill competition and the battalion field day meet. All of you *will* qualify with the M-14 rifle. Every one of you *will* complete the three-mile run. You *will* win a ribbon in each competition and be my best platoon ever. In return, I *will* make Marines out of you slimy whores. That means *I am willing to lay my stripes on the line to train you*

properly! If I have to beat you with my fists or kick you, I will do it to make you a Marine and so will my assistants. We are going to break you down completely. Once your scuzzy civilian ways have been eradicated, we'll build you back up.

“Now strip down out of your civvies and put a towel around your waist. You maggots smell rotten. You're going to take a shower. DO IT.”

We all got stripped down as the D.I.'s ran around creating havoc. They whipped it up good. Once we were back at attention in our towels in front of our racks, the D.I.'s walked up and down the squad bay to inspect each man. The atmosphere was filled with the acrid smell of raw fear.

There was a kid standing a few bunks up from me who was so fat that he couldn't get the small G.I. towel around his waist. Armstrong honed in on him like a wolf. He got right in his face and started laughing an insane laugh and rolling his eyes in front of the boy, scaring him out of his wits.

“Oh, look at this! ARE YOU BEAUTIFUL OR WHAT, SWEET PEA? ARE YOU BEAUTIFUL OR WHAT? Hey, Staff Sergeant Avery. We got a fat body. Come check it out!”

Avery ran over and gawked at the fat boy. “YOU FAT FUCK! WHY HAVE YOU COME INTO MY MARINE CORPS LIKE THIS? WHAT DID YOU EXPECT US TO DO WITH YOUR FAT FUCKING BODY, PUKE?”

Armstrong jumped up and down in place, yelling with an exuberant whoop, then got nose to nose with the boy and said in a sing-song voice, “FAT BODY PLATOON! FAT BODY PLATOON! DON'T UNPACK YOUR SEA BAG SWEET PEA. YOU'RE GOING TO FAT BODY PLATOON! AH HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HAAAAaaaaaa!”

SLAP! Avery hit the boy who immediately started blubbering. “YOU BETTER GET USED TO THAT SHIT, MAGGOT, BECAUSE WHERE YOU’RE GOING YOU’LL BE TIED TO THE BACK OF A JEEP AND PULLED THROUGH THE SWAMP. YOU’LL EAT LETTUCE AND WARM WATER FOR FOOD. AND YOU’LL LOSE A HUNDRED POUNDS OF UGLY FAT IN TWO WEEKS....IF YOU LIVE THROUGH IT.”

“YOU’RE FUCKED! YOU ARE TOTALLY FUCKED NOW!” Armstrong yelled at the kid with glee. The man was truly on a wild ride through the Marine Corps.

I then heard screaming and some sort of commotion coming into the squad bay from the adjacent one. The drill instructor from Platoon 171 charged through the door, dragging a big fat boy by the ear who was crying. The boy had two towels tied around his waist.

“Goddamn Bob, you aren’t going to believe this,” the other platoon’s drill instructor said to Sergeant Avery. “I’ve got the ugliest recruit in the history of Parris Island. Check my piece of shit out. I guarantee you you don’t have anything this ugly.”

Armstrong looked at the fat kid from Platoon 171 and then ran up and down our ranks to see if there was anyone uglier. Our own fat recruit stood blubbering like a baby as he faced the other even fatter boy. They were both overweight and would be sent to the Fat Body Platoon for two weeks of starvation and torture. The Fat Body Platoon was the worst thing, even worse than Motivation Platoon—even Correctional Custody. We all heard about it two days later when a recruit came to our platoon from Fat Body Platoon in exchange for our own fat body. He’d lost sixty pounds in ten days and his skin hung from his body as if the

fat underneath the flesh had been sucked out with a vacuum cleaner.

“TWO GODDAMN TOWELS! CAN YOU BELIEVE HE JOINS THE MARINE CORPS AND HE NEEDS TWO GODDAMN TOWELS? BITCH, YOU WILL PAY FOR YOUR SINS. YOU ARE NOTHING BUT A FAT PIG. BUT NOW YOU’RE GOING TO BE A SKINNY PIG!” the other D.I. screamed. He then slapped the boy in the face while Avery watched with a cold-hearted, calculated eye. The boys were both crying hard now and I felt sorry for them. Things were getting really ugly. Our D.I.’s failed to produce the ugliest man and so the other D.I. pulled his fat recruit by the ear back over to the other squad bay. Sergeant Avery then looked down onto a piece of note paper and said,

“Where is Private O’Hara?”

“Here, Sir!” O’Hara answered.

“Front and center puke. Right now!” Avery said.

O’Hara ran to the center of the squad bay and stood at attention next to our fat body.

“So you were a seminary student, huh O’Hara?”

“Sir! Yes sir!”

Avery drew an imaginary circle on the floor and said, “Do you love God more than you love my Marine Corps, Faggot?”

O’Hara hesitated to answer the question. SLAP!

“I ASKED YOU A FUCKING QUESTION, QUEER! DO YOU LOVE GOD MORE THAN YOU LOVE MY MARINE CORPS?”

“SIR! NO SIR!”

“DO YOU LOVE JESUS CHRIST MORE THAN MY MARINE CORPS?”

O'Hara hesitated, seemingly in turmoil. He closed his eyes hard as if this were a bad dream and by squinching his eyes could make it all go away. SLAP!

"I ASKED YOU A GODDAMN QUESTION, WHORE! DO YOU LOVE JESUS CHRIST MORE THAN MY MARINE CORPS?"

"Sir. No Sir," O'Hara answered in a weak, pitiful voice as tears streamed down his face.

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU, GODDAMIT!"

Sir. No Sir," O'Hara said a little louder.

"I DON'T BELIEVE ONE WORD COMING OUT OF YOUR LYING SHITTER, PUKE! DO YOU ACTUALLY THINK YOU CAN FOOL ME?" SLAP!

"Sir. No Sir," O'Hara blubbered with snot now running down over his mouth and chin.

"I JUST DREW A CIRCLE ON THE FLOOR. THAT CIRCLE REPRESENTS GOD AND JESUS CHRIST. SPIT IN IT!"

"Sir?" O'Hara asked in a haze of disbelief. SLAP!

Now Armstrong had slapped him and slapped him hard. The boy's cheeks were beet red. I couldn't believe what sadistic animals these D.I.'s were.

"SPIT IN THE CIRCLE! SPIT ON YOUR JESUS AND PROVE TO US YOU LOVE OUR MARINE CORPS MORE THAN YOU LOVE HIM!" Armstrong screamed like a lunatic with both his fists tightly balled.

The boy really thought about it as he stared in horror at the imaginary circle on the floor. God was one thing, but oh, how he struggled over renouncing Jesus.

"YOU PIECE OF COLLEGE SHIT! YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO BELIEVE IN AND YOU KNOW IT! IF YOU'D

WANTED TO BE A PRIEST, YOU WOULDN'T HAVE QUIT YOUR FUCKING SEMINARY AND JOINED THE MARINE CORPS. NOW SPIT ON THE GODDAMN FLOOR BEFORE YOU GET THE SHIT BEAT OUT OF YOU FOR REAL!"

O'Hara looked as if he'd been struck by lightning as Avery's words penetrated him to the quick. His doubt had been fully exposed. At the moment of realization he went through an internal metamorphosis and turned mean, right on the spot. I could see his fear replaced by hatred and anger. No more ambiguities! The D.I.'s were pushing him beyond his fickle confusion! O'Hara spit venomously right into the middle of the circle. The entire process was probably a human rights violation, but I could now see that Staff Sergeant Avery was definitely going to make Marines of us even if it killed us. O'Hara had gone through a major life change before my very eyes.

"I know what you sluts are thinking," Avery said. "That I'm the most heartless motherfucker alive for doing what I just did. YOU'RE GODDAMN RIGHT I AM! NOW I TOLD YOU I WOULD LAY MY STRIPES ON THE LINE TO MAKE YOU MARINES AND THAT'S WHAT I'M GOING TO DO! SO DON'T THINK OF WRITING YOUR SENATOR OR MOM AND DAD ABOUT THIS. THIS IS PRIVATE BUSINESS! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"SIR, YES SIR!" we all screamed at the top of our lungs.

"YOU IDIOTS ARE GOING TO VIETNAM! YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THAT MEANS. IT MEANS GOD AND JESUS CAN'T HELP YOU AS MUCH AS MASTERING YOUR WEAPON. IT MEANS YOUR SCUZZY CIVILIAN POLITICIANS WON'T BE THERE TO HELP YOU—THEY ONLY START THE GODDAMN WARS! IT MEANS AMERI-

CA CAN'T HELP YOU! YOU ARE OFFICIALLY OFF THE GODDAMN TIT. DO YOU UNDERSTAND THAT?"

"SIR, YES SIR!"

"When you go to 'Nam you'll only have each other for survival. You fuck up and somebody else dies. THAT IS UNACCEPTABLE TO ME! That is why you are being trained this way. AND IT'S GONG TO GET A LOT WORSE, MOST RICKY-FUCKING-TICK. The only thing you'll be fighting for in Vietnam or anywhere else is the United States Marine Corps. Not the politicians and not the President of the United States. Scuzzy civilians come and go but the Marine Corps will go on forever! The Marine Corps is your new god!"

"Because we've got some fuckups here, one being a fat body and the other not knowing who God is, you girls must be punished. It's time to learn the hundred percent system. Again. If any one person fucks up, everybody pays. Now close those portholes, goddamnit! Oh Jesus Christ! Don't you idiots know any goddamn thing? The ceiling is the overhead. The floor is the deck. The toilet is the head. The windows are portholes and the walls are the bulkheads. In case you idiots didn't know, the Marine Corps is a branch of the Navy. So get those portholes closed now!"

The men closest to the windows closed them. Our squad bay was on the second floor of a wooden barracks and began to heat up immediately. I wondered if we were going to take our showers when Avery spoke again.

"Put on your scivvies, your socks, your boots, your utility trousers and shirt. Button the shirt up to the top button. Then put your raincoats on top of that and button it up to the top."

Everybody scrambled to get the job done as the three D.I.'s

exhorted us to go faster with screams, slaps and kicks. In five minutes everyone was dressed.

I started pouring sweat underneath the non-breathing nylon raincoat that broke around my knees.

“Sergeant Armstrong is going to demonstrate the exercise called bends and thrusts. It’s a full body movement that you will execute in four counts. One, two, three, one. One, two, three, two. Like that.”

Armstrong demonstrated the simple but physically demanding squat and kick exercise and we practiced along at his command. Once Avery thought we’d gotten it he continued, “When I give you the command it will go like this, ‘Bends and thrusts. Four count. Fifty of them. Do it!’” You will then say, “Sir, Aye aye, Sir!” You will say ‘Yes Sir’ and ‘No Sir’ only to questions that can be answered only with a yes or no. If you are given a command you will say ‘Sir, aye aye Sir,’ and then execute. Do you understand?”

“SIR, YES SIR!”

“BENDS AND THRUSTS. FOUR COUNT. ONE HUNDRED OF THEM. DO IT!”

“SIR, AYE AYE, SIR,” we responded in unison.

We all started to do bends and thrusts in place in front of our racks counting the count in unison. Soon the area in front of each of us was wet with the sweat that poured from our heads. The heat of the day was at least ninety degrees in the shade and the humidity of the near tropical island started kicking in. With the windows closed and our raincoats on, I could see that this was going to be an endurance test. As we got to a count of twenty-five some of the weaker recruits around me started to execute the movements poorly or even partially. Avery, Armstrong, and

Carver started running to those who were falling out and slapped them or punched them in the body. A skinny kid across the way started to wobble unsteadily on his legs. Armstrong was immediately on him.

“BITCH, ARE YOU CRIPPLED? DID YOU NOT HEAR THE SENIOR DRILL INSTRUCTOR GIVE A COUNT OF ONE HUNDRED?” Armstrong said.

“Sir, I can’t,” the skinny man said breathlessly.

“WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU SAY?” SLAP. Armstrong slapped the boy so hard his head bounced into the double bunk behind him. “CAN’T? CAN’T? NEVER SAY CAN’T IN MY MARINE CORPS. NEVER! NEVER! NEVER!”

The kid tried to do more bends and thrusts, but after only two or three more he collapsed to the floor. At this point Avery ran over and he and Armstrong started to kick the man as he curled up into a fetus on the floor. The kicks got harder and harder until the man screamed out in pain. I thought they were going to break his ribs, arms, or legs.

“THAT’S RIGHT, PUKE. IT GETS WORSE WHEN YOU QUIT ON US. WE WILL KILL YOU IF YOU DON’T GET THE FUCK UP OFF THAT DECK RIGHT NOW! QUITTING IS NOT ALLOWED IN THE MARINE CORPS.”

Armstrong said this orgasmically as he kicked the man on the floor until Avery reached down and pulled the boy up before any bones were broken. The kid’s mouth was bleeding and he was crying. Things were really heating up! Other recruits tried to fall out but got the same treatment all up and down the squad bay. Armstrong was completely in his element. The man searched out weakness and when he found it, frenzied on it. Thank God I was in good shape!

For the next two hours the bedlam continued as we learned new exercises such as four-count push ups, side-straddle hops, and a few torture positions such as “sitting in place” and “the thinking position.” Sitting in place was accomplished by sitting in an imaginary chair with one’s arms straight out to the front to keep balance. This position burns the upper thighs within a minute or two and leaves one shaking spasmodically. The thinking position is executed by lying on the floor on one’s stomach, then raising the body off the floor so that only the toes and elbows are touching. The hands cradle the chin making it appear as if one were in a horizontal thinking position. This position works the stomach.

At the end of the ordeal one of the recruits who was bleeding was sent to sick bay. The D.I.’s told him to say that his wound had been caused by falling down a flight of stairs if any Naval corpsmen or doctors asked him what had happened. Believe it or not, the entire ordeal had generated a sense of loyalty in most of us now that we understood that the D.I.’s were laying their stripes on the line for us. That meant that they could be busted in rank, or worse, for using violent disciplinary techniques. So far, they had avoided seriously hurting anyone and I felt Staff Sergeant Avery basically knew what he was doing after two years as a drill instructor and, as he later told us, two tours of duty in Vietnam. There was a method to his madness. After all, we were kids who’d grown up in the most affluent society in the world and our enemies in Vietnam were of much harder stock, used to living and surviving in rugged mountains and jungles. Sergeant Carver was just following along to learn the ropes and that left Sergeant Armstrong. His motivations seemed to me to be generated by some inner, deranged, sadistic streak that had

been exacerbated by his combat experiences in Vietnam. He was the one to watch.

Our first session with our D.I.'s had taught me something and it was a turning point for me. I could see that I was in much better shape mentally and physically than a lot of the recruits around me; I had proven to myself in that long two hours that I could endure. I was one of those standing strong at the end of the ordeal, but there were others, and I'd secretly made fleeting eye contact with them. We silently conveyed to each other that we would prevail even if others didn't. Unfortunately, some of the recruits in our platoon had already been psychologically defeated by the sleep deprivation, hazing, slapping and kicking and the torture session in raincoats. The D.I.'s had pushed them beyond the threshold of what they thought they could endure.

We spent the rest of the day running everywhere we went; we were issued our weapons, the M-14 assault rifle, as well as marching packs, ponchos, canteens, helmets and other military gear. The amount of information we received that day was extensive. A new life involves new rules of behavior, new language, and a new philosophy. We had to start at the beginning, learning how to talk, eat, walk and sleep. There was a protocol that had to be followed even in the tiniest details of life. For instance, we weren't allowed to address ourselves or others as "I" and "you." I learned this in my first dialogue with Sergeant Avery when he was teaching us how to communicate to a drill instructor about specific things such as using the toilet, receiving mail, and going to sick bay. Of course, every word spoken at Parris Island by a recruit was done at top volume.

"SIR, PRIVATE LATHAM REQUESTS PERMISSION TO MAKE AN EMERGENCY HEAD CALL, SIR!"

“Who the fuck do you think you’re talking to, Puke?” Avery parried.

“YOU, SIR!”

“DO YOU MEAN TO TELL ME THAT YOU ARE CALLING ME A FEMALE SHEEP (a ewe)? ARE YOU A SHEEP FUCKER, MAGGOT? I WANT TO KNOW RIGHT NOW IF YOU ARE ASKING ME IF YOU CAN FUCK ME?”

“SIR, NO SIR!” I replied, horrified. I was digging my own grave.

“I’M NOT A EWE, GODDAMIT. I AM A DRILL INSTRUCTOR. THE FIRST WORDS OUT OF YOUR SHITTER WILL BE, FROM THIS MOMENT ON,

‘SIR, PRIVATE SO-AND-SO REQUESTS PERMISSION TO SPEAK TO THE DRILL INSTRUCTOR.’ IS THAT CLEAR, BUCKET OF WORMS?”

“SIR, YES SIR!.....SIR! PRIVATE LATHAM REQUESTS PERMISSION TO SPEAK TO THE DRILL INSTRUCTOR, SIR!”

“SPEAK, PUKE!”

“SIR! PRIVATE LATHAM REQUESTS PERMISSION TO MAKE AN EMERGENCY HEAD CALL, SIR!”

“SHIT OR PISS?” Avery asked. This was a divergence from what he’d previously instructed. I’d asked the question correctly.

“SIR, PRIVATE LATHAM REQUESTS PERMISSION TO TAKE A SHIT, SIR!”

“YOU WILL NOT SHIT IN MY MARINE CORPS, SCUM BAG! YOU WILL DEFECATE LIKE A GENTLEMAN. IS THAT CLEAR?”

“SIR, YES SIR!” I replied. “SIR, PRIVATE LATHAM

REQUESTS PERMISSION TO DEFECATE, SIR!”

“DEFECATE! DEFECATE! YOU MUST HAVE GONE TO COLLEGE. IS THAT RIGHT, PUKE?”

“SIR, YES SIR!” I said, recalling my one semester of college.

“SO NOW WE’VE GOT A COLLEGE BITCH WHO IS TOO FUCKING GOOD TO TAKE A SIMPLE SHIT! I GUESS WE’VE GOT OFFICER MATERIAL HERE, HUH SERGEANT ARMSTRONG?” Avery asked.

Sergeant Armstrong stood directly in front of me and put his nose to mine while his eyes went whacko. He demanded to know where I stood on the issue.

“ARE YOU TOO GOOD TO TAKE A SHIT, MAGGOT?”

“SIR....” Whack! As soon as I’d opened my mouth, Armstrong slammed his fist as hard as he could into my stomach. He weighed about 175 pounds to my 200. I’d tensed as soon as I saw the punch coming and it landed solidly. He’d tried to knock the wind out of me by hitting me as I spoke, but it hadn’t worked. My stomach was rock hard, with perfectly defined muscles that didn’t yield.

“I CAN’T HEAR YOU!” Armstrong yelled.

“SIR....” Whack! Again he slammed his fist into my stomach, pissed off that he hadn’t knocked the wind out of me the first time—no go again.

“SIR, NO SIR!” I yelled in the lull.

“ARE YOU TRYING TO SAY THAT YOU ARE TOO GOOD TO TAKE A SHIT, MAGGOT? WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU SAYING?” Avery interjected.

“SIR, PRIVATE LATHAM REQUESTS PERMISSION TO TAKE A SHIT, SIR!”

Avery looked over at Armstrong with a look of total disbelief

on his face. Armstrong was getting more excited by the moment as momentum built in this insane exchange. I was now squirming I had to take a dump so bad. Armstrong took the lead again.

“YOU LOW-LIFE FUCKING ANIMAL! YOU PIECE OF FILTH! AFTER THE SENIOR DRILL INSTRUCTOR TAKES PRECIOUS TIME OUT OF HIS BUSY DAY TO INSTRUCT A WORTHLESS PUKE LIKE YOU IN HOW TO MAKE A HEAD CALL, YOU DARE TO ASK IF YOU CAN TAKE A SHIT LIKE A COMMON ANIMAL. MARINES DO NOT SHIT! THEY DEFECATE, GODDAMIT!”

I asked permission to defecate one more time, receiving the response that I was too good to take a shit like a real Marine and only queers defecated. By now I was close to going in my pants. I'd been constipated ever since I'd gotten off the bus three days ago. Finally Avery said, “Do it,” and I ran to the head and did my thing just in the nick of time. Defecating in boot camp would become a real problem for me. We'd be given fifteen minutes each morning for eighty men to sit on ten or twelve toilets all in a row with no partitions. Everyone would yell at you to hurry up and my body eventually shut down for a solid week, until I had to go to sickbay and get a one or two-quart enema from a psycho Navy corpsman. He'd nearly split my bowels open by making me take the entire amount of liquid before he let me sit on the toilet. I truly wanted to beat the crap out of that pimply faced wimp because he was a bottom-level Navy enlisted man hanging on the apron strings of the Marine Corps, pretending he'd earned the right to harass the recruits like a drill instructor when, in fact, he was nothing but an undisciplined, untrained, rear-echelon teenager.

When I got out of the head I ran back to my bunk and resumed the position of attention. Armstrong, Avery, and Carver

were administering another lesson in dialogue etiquette to a thin recruit across from me. He had requested making an emergency head call and Armstrong had been putting him through his paces when the kid could wait no longer and pissed in his pants. Now he stood crying with the legs of his trousers soaking wet and smelling. Armstrong was beside himself.

“WHO THE FUCK GAVE YOU PERMISSION TO PISS IN YOUR PANTS, GODDAMIT?”

“SIR”...Whack! Armstrong slammed his fist into the recruit’s stomach and knocked the wind out of him. The kid doubled over, head pointed towards the floor. With no hesitation Armstrong hit the boy in the face with a right uppercut whipping the boy’s head up and dropping him to the floor, stunned but conscious. The scene uncorked both Armstrong and Avery; they started kicking the kid as he squirmed on the floor.

“GET THE FUCK UP! GET THE FUCK UP!” Avery yelled as he moved Armstrong away from the kid.

The kid got up with a bloody nose, sobbing. Once again, I recognized the pattern. Armstrong and Avery only frenzied on weakness. I hadn’t doubled over and even after Armstrong had hit me as hard as he could he saw that he didn’t have the strength to knock the wind out of me. That earned his respect, albeit begrudgingly, and I’d actually seen that in his eyes. Thank God for those intense workouts at the Greensboro Health Club. This kid, on the other hand, was blubbering like a little girl and they’d been drawn to his weakness and fear like a carrion eater to a corpse.

“GO IN THE HEAD AND CLEAN YOURSELF UP, YOU WORTHLESS LITTLE BABY. I TOLD YOU, GODDAMIT, YOU ARE OFFICIALLY OFF THE TIT! NOW WAKE THE

FUCK UP!” Avery yelled as he looked wildly around the squad bay.

On this night and every night hence we got a full night’s sleep, going to bed at 2200 hours and waking up at “zero dark thirty.” The sleep deprivation would come during our third month of training, at Camp Geiger, North Carolina, for Basic Specialist Training.

The next day we were instructed in some of the basics of close order drill, including standing at attention and parade rest, and the execution of left face, right face and about face. It would take some recruits a couple of weeks to learn the simple movements I’d already mastered in military school, because many appeared to be hopelessly dysfunctional or had simply never learned their left from right before now. This lack of basic human education staggered me. The Marine Corps, however, had obviously come up against this before because they’d developed one heck of an effective program to deal with the problem and it involved the special use of head gear. We were issued silver colored plastic helmet liners that are actually the inner shell of the Marine and Army combat helmet. The Marines painted them silver to perhaps ward off the tremendously hot sun during the summer training months and they were called “chrome domes.” Whenever we practiced close order drill we had our chrome domes on, except when we were inside because Marines never wear a “cover” indoors.

That day we were given the command “Right face,” by Sergeant Avery while Armstrong and Carver prowled the ranks to see if everybody got it right. Every time he said it, one or two recruits would be frozen in place, facing the opposite direction as

everyone else. One was not allowed to move again in order to right the wrong. One was to execute the movement, then freeze in place. This was nerve racking for those recruits who didn't know their left from right.

On the first round, the fellow next to me got a left face wrong and ended up facing me as well as the rest of the platoon. Armstrong ran over, punched the man with a hard right to the left side of his chrome dome and knocked it twenty feet down the street. As the punch landed, Armstrong yelled, "YOUR OTHER LEFT, SHITBIRD!" and then, "NOW POINT TO THE SIDE OF YOUR HEAD THAT HURTS!" The man pointed to the left side of his head. "THE NEXT TIME YOU HEAR LEFT FACE, YOU TURN IN THE DIRECTION OF THAT HURT, IDIOT! WHEN YOU HEAR RIGHT FACE YOU TURN IN THE DIRECTION THAT DON'T HURT!" To my amazement the man did it right for the next two days or so until the hurt wore off and Armstrong had to re-administer the lesson.

Some weeks into our training we were made to get up at 6:00 A.M. to do our usual five-mile run before the sun came up. Only for this run the drill instructors decided to play a very dirty trick on us. They didn't allow us to take our morning piss. About five recruits pissed in their trousers during the run and I suffered terribly holding it in, feeling like something bad was happening in my bladder. When we finally got back to the barracks we were allowed to piss. The only problem was that something had gone wrong in me, and I continued to drip after pissing for about five minutes before it would stop. Unfortunately, the damage was permanent and would never be corrected. (At the end of my four years in the Corps, I went to sickbay and attempted to get partial

disability for the problem—big mistake. A Colonel ran a thick, stainless steel, hollow pipe into the end of my penis, then pushed it all the way into my bladder as I screamed in excruciating pain. After he took it out, he had some sadistic corpsman do a bladder enema through a soft catheter, again through the penis, while the jerk said gleefully, “Feels like you just drunk a case of beer, don’t it? Ha ha,” as I yelled at him to release the fluid before I burst. When the session was over, the Colonel let me know that if I wanted disability, he’d be glad to repeat this process. I bled out of the end of my penis for the next two days.)

Later that day we went to some administrative buildings where we took written tests to determine our level of intelligence. I wouldn’t find out until the last day of basic training that these tests determined the military occupational specialties (MOS) we’d be assigned regardless of what we’d written down as our preferences. They would also determine whether or not a recruit was qualified to go directly into Officer Candidate School at the end of basic training. I’d volunteered for infantry, MOS 0311, and Vietnam, thinking that would be the only thing taken into consideration in determining my job. I ended up in a related field, MOS 2311, Ammunition Technician.

In one lifeless barracks we were all seated in school desk chairs and given yet another test to take. At the front of the class was a partition behind which sat a woman Marine officer, a major. I didn’t understand the need for the partition but knew better than to question anything either. At the end of our test we were given instructions to carry our papers to the woman behind the partition, one at a time. My turn came and when I rounded the partition I was confronted with the ugliest woman I’d ever laid eyes on. She was wearing a .45 automatic pistol around her

waist, as if we were hardened convicts and she needed the added protection. She oozed a pure, undiluted hatred as she quickly graded my test scores. When she was done I went back to my chair and, as I sat down, I whispered to the fellow sitting behind me, “That’s the ugliest woman in the world.”

I figured I was safe because there was only one enlisted administrative clerk in the room watching over us, standing by a wall. I looked at him and he looked at me and then he quietly walked out of the room. Within moments, Sergeant Armstrong came running into the room with the little squealer in toe. The wimp pointed me out and when Armstrong recognized who I was a leer crossed his face.

“Guess What? Ha Ha HA! Guess What?” Armstrong asked me as if on the threshold of sexual climax. “YOU’RE GOING BYE-BYE! YOU’RE GOING FUCKING BYE-BYE! HA HA HA! OOOOOooooo! PRIVATE SHITBIRD IS GOING FUCKING BYE-BYE.” He sang this last bit as a nursery rhyme for the criminally insane. Then he leaned over my desk and put his nose to mine, wild-eyed, and said in a soft, psychotic way, “You’re going to the brig for this. Yeah, yeah. The admin puke told me what you said. OOOOOoooo! He told me what you said and now you are going bye-bye.” Then he sang like a coo-coo clock, “BYE-BYE! BYE-BYE!BYE-BYE, BYE-BYE! AND NOT ONLY ARE YOU GOING TO THE BRIG, BUT YOUR PARENTS ARE GOING TO THE BRIG AS WELL! Now let’s go out that door and get started.”

As I got up to go into the other room I looked daggers at the administrative worm. He knew full well that I’d beat the crap out of him under any other circumstances than these, and due to that, had a big grin on his face, an ugly chickenshit look of exultation.

When we got into the next room I saw another recruit standing at attention, nose bleeding and crying a mewling sort of cry. It made me sick. He was a kid Armstrong had taken out earlier, also for whispering to another recruit.

“Now that we’re alone let’s see how fucking tough you are,” Armstrong said. I could see he wanted payback for not doubling me over the last time and missing the opportunity to punch me in the face, but I also determined he had a loose screw when he’d said my parents were going to the brig. That had done it; I lost respect for him in that very moment because I intuited his game had less to do with training Marines, as was the case with Avery and Carver, than living out his sadistic psychosis. He started asking me questions and as soon as I uttered the first sound he slammed me in the stomach with all his might. I didn’t even flinch. It hurt, some, but I knew his best shot would never double me over and there was no way I was going to let this lesser man get over on me—no way. I was already pissed off at the sniveling recruit across from me. He was acting like a little baby, setting a bad precedent for the D.I.’s. Armstrong hit me five or six times and on the last time I looked with total hatred into his loony eyes and sneered. Furiously, he hit me another couple of times, to no avail. At this point we both knew that I could beat his ass, no problem. Without the Marine Corps to back him up, he was no match for me. How I longed to plow my fist into his gut and see how he’d stand up to that; and if I ever caught him with an uppercut, he’d never get up—that I was sure of. I was easily twice as strong as he was and he knew it. I fantasized catching him alone someday, far away from this place, where there would be no one but him and me.

I don't recall exactly what "Tennessee" did wrong the next day, probably it was "eye fucking" the area instead of looking straight ahead, but the punch in the mouth he'd received stepping off the bus wasn't his full payback for bragging about how he could kick any D.I.'s ass. He was taken into an adjacent room and made to put his wash bucket over his head while Armstrong and Avery beat the sides with two-foot long, one-inch thick, wooden poles. We all looked straight ahead as we listened to the sounds of banging and Tennessee screaming as if he were in hell.

Avery pulled him roughly by the arm back into the squad bay and said, "Tell them how it was out there, Bitch!" Tennessee choked out the words, "It..sob...was...sob....horrible.....boo, hoo, hooo, hooooo!" I fought the impulse to laugh, remembering what a complete imbecile he'd been on the bus. Oh Boy, was he ever going to kick some ass—all one hundred and thirty-five pounds of him. Right.

That night around 0300 hours I was awakened by the sound of a helicopter right over our barracks. The sound was deafening and the vibrations jiggled me in my rack. Spotlights threw brilliant flashes of light through one window then the next. It looked like the aliens were landing. The helicopter then moved behind the barracks to the swamp area and I heard a voice come over a super loud speaker, "YOU CANNOT ESCAPE THE ISLAND! GIVE YOURSELVES UP! DO NOT ATTEMPT TO ENTER THE SWAMP. THE TIDE IS OUT AND IT IS VERY DANGEROUS. YOUR LIFE IS IN DANGER! GIVE YOURSELVES UP IMMEDIATELY!"

This was followed by the barks of five or six German Shepherd dogs and the commands of their handlers. Suddenly

the lights in the squad bay were turned on and Sergeant Avery came in looking worried and tired. “Stay in your racks. We’re going to make a head count.” An MP officer came in and they proceeded to look in every rack. Seven were empty. Seven of our recruits had escaped! I couldn’t believe it.

The next day we were lined up and given the somber news. We were told that we’d never see the “traitors” again; that they were going to the brig or Correctional Custody, and would be replaced. I could understand why they’d tried to escape. After all it had been on my mind those first few days, too; but I’d come to realize that there was no escape—not for another four years.

The Pugil Stick Range

Part of our training involved learning bayonet skills at the pugil stick range. This was conducted with simulated metal frame rifles with attached bayonet-like points that we used on straw dummies to slash, jab, parry and butt stroke. We didn’t use our real rifles for fear of bending the barrels before the big shooting competition. A much more realistic method of bayonet training, however, employed the use of the pugil stick. That’s where the real fun and games began.

“I want to see blood! I haven’t seen blood in three days and that just gurgitates the hell out of me, ladies! Do you maggots realize that we haven’t had one broken arm or one broken leg out here in three solid months? THREE FUCKING MONTHS! That pisses me off, Goddammit! You worms are supposed to be grunts (infantry) and I do expect you to prove that to me today. I WANT TO SEE BLOOD! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME, LADIES?”

“SIR, YES, SIR!” all one hundred and sixty of us recruits cried in unison.

Two platoons, ours and platoon 171, were tightly packed around First Sergeant Surtees, Senior Drill Instructor of the pugil stick range. Sgt. Avery had already warned us to do well that morning saying, “First Shirt Surtees is one hard ass Marine who’s seen combat in Korea. He fought at the ‘Frozen Chosin’ Reservoir with the First Marine Regiment under Chesty Puller and he was a grunt platoon sergeant in ‘Nam. You aren’t worth the dirt under his boots. So do everything he tells you to do AND DON’T EMBARRASS ME OUT THERE TODAY UNLESS YOU WANT FUN AND GAMES WHEN WE GET BACK TO THE BARN!”

Surtees was lean and tough with cold blue eyes, killer’s eyes, that were hard as steel. He looked like a coiled rattler ready to strike. “Let’s say you’re in ‘Nam and you’re asleep and Zips get in the wire. You wake up and there’s a gook straddling your chest and he’s got his rifle raised and he’s gettin’ ready to thrust his bayonet into your throat. And you got no weapon. WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU GOING TO DO? HUH? Surtees looked around the group but no one had the answer. “YOU DUMB FUCKS! YOU GRAB THE COCKSUCKER’S ASS WITH BOTH HANDS AND BITE HIS BALLS OFF! WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU THINK YOU WERE GOING TO DO? DIE? A DEAD MARINE IS A WORTHLESS SACK OF SHIT!”

We all laughed, though somewhat mirthlessly, at such a grim possibility, and, for once, didn’t have to pay for it with calisthenics. This was Surtees show all the way, not Avery’s.

Surtees lifted a thick, three-and-a-half-foot wooden pole over his head, the ends of which were thickly padded and wrapped in canvas. “This pugil stick weighs exactly sixteen pounds and you will give it the love and respect that it deserves.

That is because this pugil stick is not an ordinary stick but your rifle with a bayonet attached to the barrel. As grunts you'll need your rifle more than anyone or anything else in the world. IS THAT UNDERSTOOD?"

"SIR, YES SIR!"

"I WILL TEACH YOU HOW TO LIVE. DO YOU WANT TO LIVE, LADIES?"

"SIR, YES SIR!"

"THEN YOU MUST LEARN HOW TO KILL! I will teach you how to jab, how to thrust, how to parry, how to slash, and how to butt stroke and you will perform these acts of violence on each other and produce blood for me today. DO YOU UNDERSTAND, LADIES?"

"SIR, YES SIR!"

"THEN GET ON YOUR FEET RIGHT NOW!"

"SIR, AYE AYE, SIR!"

We all jumped to attention. The D.I.'s arranged the two platoons in two long lines of men standing side-by-side, each platoon facing each other with about half a football field's distance in between. Our D.I.'s started running up and down the line threatening us and exhorting us to "kick ass" or else. Surtees stood in the field alone between the two facing platoons with a whistle in his hand.

"I want three recruits from Platoon 171 to put their protective gear on. I want one recruit from 170 to put his gear on." The other platoon's D.I.'s picked two big black recruits and one very mean looking white recruit, one of those heavy boned, hard-muscled coal miner types from Pennsylvania, to act as their 'volunteers.' Avery and Armstrong huddled for a minute, laughing, and chose a small recruit who was our resident hillbilly.

“O.K. Private Barnyard, now’s your chance to show us how tough a ridge-running moonshiner is! AND YOU BETTER WIN MAGGOT! IS THAT UNDERSTOOD?”

“THUH, YATHUH!” Barnyard garble in his lisped, Appalachian accent, doing his unintentional best to crack the platoon up.

All four men struggled as fast as they could to strap on their specially padded groin cups, football helmets with plastic face guards and huge, padded gloves before grabbing hold of the heavy pugil sticks. They looked awkward and apprehensive as they eyed each other nervously. My gut churned in apprehension with them. It felt like a storm was about to hit.

“In combat you will be using your bayonet if your position gets overrun or you run out of ammunition and it gets down to hand-to-hand combat. That means a lot of ‘Victor Charlies’ to deal with all at once. It’s not necessarily going to be one-on-one, so if you are the one being attacked, keep them all in a line, straight out from you. Always stay on the outside. If you get in the middle of them you are dead. Now when I blow this whistle you four will run into the middle of the field and commence to beat the shit out of each other. The next time I blow this whistle you will stop.”

Surtees blew the whistle and Barnyard sprinted to the attack yelling, “KILL!” at the top of his lungs. When they closed, Barnyard smashed the tallest black’s face mask with an unauthorized roundhouse swing. It landed with a thud, but didn’t knock the man down. The other two quickly got around him and the white dude knocked him down with a butt stroke to the back of his head. As Barnyard hit the ground, dust rose up in bellowed puffs; the three men then commenced to beat him on the ground

as hard as they could. In an instant Platoon 171's D.I.'s went wild.

"WE WANT BLOOD! WE WANT BLOOD!" they whopped and hollered as they danced around in ecstasy while their three men frenzied in a cloud of dust over Barnyard. Incensed by their raging D.I.'s, all of the men in Platoon 171 now joined in the blood orgy, screaming at the top of their lungs, encouraging their three big recruits to "KILL THE MOTHER-FUCKER!" Barnyard now lay in a protective ball in the middle of the storm. It looked like they were really going to hurt him just when Surtees blew the whistle.

Everything came to a stop. We stood in silence as gusts of wind blew dust clouds off the field, each of us wondering what our own turn was going to be like. Barnyard could hardly crawl off the field. I felt a wave of apprehension blow through our ranks.

Private Hostetter, or "Hostile" as we called him, was standing to my right. He was my bunk mate and my best boot camp friend and although he was one of the shorter men in the platoon, he was far stronger and more aggressive than Barnyard or any of our other smaller men. He'd told me of fights he'd won against much bigger guys in high school, which I believed, and how he and his buddies used to hunt "gators" in the Everglades of Florida south of his home in Gainesville. He was one of those short, stocky wrestler types who could do endless pushups and pullups with no sweat. Surtees must have picked up on this because he pointed him out and told him to put on his protective gear. Then he looked over to the other platoon and picked the biggest, tallest recruit, who stood about 6 feet, 3 inches, and weighed 220 pounds, and told him to get his gear on. Surtees was obviously doing a "David and Goliath" thing.

I helped Hostetter get his gear together, and while he put it on I noticed that, rather than being concerned, he was in high spirits. He winked at me with a mischievous look on his face and said, "Watch this, Jay." He obviously had something in mind. Surtees then called them out to the center of the field and squared them off against each other, then blew the whistle shrilly. Without warning, Hostile threw his pugil stick on the ground and jumped straight up into the big man's chest turning sideways. He latched his left arm around the big man's neck and held it like a vise, his biceps bulging; with his right fist he began to pummel the man's face like a pile driver. Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam. The sight was unbelievable! It looked as if the big man had a crab-like alien attached to his face, devouring him, and now couldn't see or even retaliate because Hostile was in too close. The big man's arms flailed ineffectively while Hostile pounded the man with incredible force. The man staggered with Hostile's added weight, then fell on the ground, where he screamed and flailed, attempting to shake the mad hornet off of him. Nothing worked. Hostile rolled and flailed along with the man and his fist never stopped. It looked like he was trying to beat the face mask permanently into the guy's skull when the thing flew off. Hostile now pounded naked flesh.

Armstrong, Avery and Carver went totally berserk and ran right up to the two fighting men, dancing a victory dance around them. "PAYBACK IS A MOTHERFUCKER! Armstrong yelled as loud as he could. He then put his face about two feet from the thrashing bodies and screamed orgasmically, "YES!

YES! YOU ARE BORN AGAIN HARD! KILL THE MOTHERFUCKER! And Avery joined in, "YOU ARE MY HARD CHARGER! YOU ARE MY HARD CHARGER!" Now

everybody in our platoon screamed in ecstasy, jumping and leaping all over each other. I screamed, "KILL, HOSTILE, KILL!" until I was hoarse. Hostile continued to thrash the man until I suddenly felt sorry for the guy. He was no match for him. Finally Surtees blew the whistle, but our drill instructors had to physically pry Hostile off the man; he'd become oblivious to everything. The big man lay on his back, blood trickling from his nose. Surtees had gotten blood.

Our fear melted away in the raucous joy of Hostile's victory and everyone slapped him on the back as he rejoined our ranks. Our D.I.'s could barely conceal their pride. They knew we'd lose the three-on-one because the cards had been stacked against us. And the odds had been against us this time too, but the smaller man had unexpectedly prevailed in an incredible show of speed and strength. For the next five or six bouts the fighting was wild and furious now that the gauntlet had been thrown. Surtees arranged all sorts of combinations to feed his need for blood. He even arranged a five-on-one which turned out to be a massacre.

Finally my turn came. The two platoon's D.I.'s were instructed by Surtees that they could select only one man from their own platoon. The other drill instructors picked a black man that I'd seen before. His name was Fletcher and he'd grown up in a ghetto in some large northeastern city. I knew he hated whites and I secretly wished they'd picked another opponent for me as I knew something of the man already. I'd seen him fight another bigger, black recruit in his own unit and he'd looked formidable. Fletcher had become a double-armed windmill, charging straight ahead, hitting the big man all over his face and upper body. He never even aimed a punch, just wound his hundred and

eighty-five pound body into two vertical windmills gone berserk and attacked. I'd never seen any fighting technique like it before. The other recruit, a Private Mickey, had ended up with four or five painful looking lumps on his head and a bloody mouth.

Now I was standing directly across from this super-mean recruit about to go into battle. Surtees had us stand about fifty yards apart. He moved between us and lay one pugil stick on the ground. As we finished donning our protective gear, Surtees said, "When I blow the whistle you will both run to the pugil stick and the first one to pick it up will commence to severely beat the other man about the head and shoulders. Is that clear?" "SIR, YES SIR!" We both yelled. I looked across at Fletcher. His eyes were full of fire and hatred and his nostrils flared like a wild horse's. He was psyching himself up. My mind set went something like, "Don't give him a chance to wind those fists up; overpower him and don't let up...ever! Otherwise he'll kill me." My mind turned to steel.

Surtees blew the whistle and we both bolted like lightning. We were perfectly matched for speed and in an instant got within ten feet of the stick. Our eyes locked as our bodies hurdled through the air. In that split second each of our mental computers went into hyperspeed to make the crucial decision: go for the stick or go for the man? And in that nanosecond I saw a visible cloud of doubt pass over Fletcher's eyes as to which to do. Then he looked down to pick up the stick. All two hundred pounds of me flew into the man as he bent over to grab it, and as I hurtled into him, I added to the force of my momentum a powerful right upper-cut to the center of his face mask. The blow knocked his head straight up as my trunk rammed his body backwards. We both went airborne and I landed on top of him, actually sitting on

his chest with my knees pinning his arms to his sides as we slid in the dust two or three feet. His eyes looked into mine as I beat his face in a frenzied orgy of passion, slamming him as fast and hard as I could with both fists. There was no way he was going to do to me what he'd done to Private Mickey. I let go with everything I had, beating his face like a jack hammer. Victory coursed through my veins as I pummeled the man mercilessly, my fists combusting like pistons fueled by the nitro of my own raw fear.

Somewhere, way out on the periphery of my awareness, Surtees, Avery and Armstrong were going into multiple orgasms yelling, "BLOOD!" and "KILL!" and other madneses. Through it all a silence remained, and as a deeper part of myself looked on from an untouched, separate place above it all, I saw Fletcher glaring back at me, grimacing with pain, completely fearless. A whistle kept blowing like some sort of tertiary irritant but there was no way I would stop and let this wild animal up. My plan was to beat him until the job was finished, which meant as long as I could keep hitting.

Finally Avery and Armstrong pulled me off and I stood up. They were unable to conceal their feelings of pride and respect. The whole platoon was yelling, but I hadn't heard them until now. Surtees was in ecstasy, too. No broken bones, but enough blood to give him an adequate fix. Hostile greeted me warmly as I merged back into the platoon; our friendship was better than ever.

Rat Platoon

Three or four weeks into our training Sgt. Avery told us that there would be an official investigation concerning the men

who'd tried to escape that first week in the platoon. It was the heaviest talk we'd ever have with the man and I'll never forget it.

“When I told you I would lay my stripes on the line to make Marines out of you I meant it. I know the training has been tough, but I am preparing you for war, not a picnic. And I believe that my procedures, although hard, are effective in creating a combat Marine. Now my stripes are on the line.... and I ask you to put yourselves on the line for me. Seven chickenshits have ratted us out and are now trying to get out of the Marine Corps. One even told the colonel that he was a homosexual. Every one of these deserters was drafted, something I don't believe in, and that's why we've got this problem. There is going to be a military investigation. Each one of you will be taken before a legal officer and asked if you've witnessed any acts of brutality against recruits. You will tell them, 'No.' Is that understood?”

“SIR, YES, SIR!”

The next morning the drill instructors from the three other training platoons in our barracks complex came to speak with us. This was a shock in itself as we were in fierce competition with these brother units.

They told us that Sergeant Avery and Armstrong were both highly decorated Vietnam veterans and that Avery had served two tours. They told us that he had a perfect record as a D.I. and that he deserved to have it kept that way. Then they told us that we were already known throughout the First Battalion as “rat platoon,” and if we ever wanted to live that name down we'd have to go to bat for our two drill instructors (Sgt. Carver was never charged). Otherwise, “You'll never get off the island.”

I was all for helping Avery out of the jam even if it meant saving Armstrong. After all, I volunteered for this and knew it

was going to be rough, and regardless of how shocking the training had been thus far, my ego and expectations *demand*ed that it be rough; we were all proud to be going through this and couldn't wait until it was over so we could be addressed in the male gender and be called Marines.

After noon chow we were marched over to the legal offices of the base and individually sent in to see the colonel. He asked me if I'd witnessed certain acts of brutality to recruits in my platoon, naming each incident as it had happened. I said "No, Sir," thinking, "I've witnessed acts of brutality in every platoon; isn't that what we are here for?" The colonel let me know I'd given the right answer.

After each man was questioned we were marched back to our barracks. A few days later we got three new drill instructors, Sgt. Beatty, Sgt. Edwards, and Sgt. Hohnhorst. They would finish our training cycle with us. We didn't find out until graduation day, when Avery and Armstrong greeted each one of us personally as we climbed aboard the bus for Camp Geiger, that each had lost a stripe and was being shipped back to Vietnam. A year and a half later, Sgt. Carver came through my base on Okinawa from Vietnam and looked me up. He then told me a terrible tale. Sergeants Avery and Armstrong had both been killed and Armstrong had burned to death, slowly, in a tank that had tripped a white phosphorous mine. He said the Marines in his unit had had to listen to his screams of agony for a long time before he finally died. They didn't have fire-fighting equipment so far out in the bush so they couldn't get him out to save his life or even end his pain. It shook up his entire unit.

I never would have dreamed that Sergeant Avery had inadvertently laid his *life* on the line for his last platoon at Parris

Island. I think he had a wife and two young children, too. Except for not letting us urinate that morning, I personally didn't feel his training techniques were too hard for what we were being trained for.¹ Most of the platoon had volunteered for the Marines for the pure adventure of the thing, sharing a boy's vision of war as something for heroes and righteousness, a vision based on the good-versus-evil simplicity of World War II. In reality we were a product of isolated American thinking and propaganda and didn't know a thing about the people, history or internal politics of Vietnam. We recruits at Parris Island basically saw the Vietnam conflict as a clear cut "good guys—bad guys" situation because we'd grown up being taught about the horrors of communism. From our perspective, the Marine Corps and other American military services were the only real solution to the problem of communism taking over the world. Hard training, therefore, seemed logical to us and most everyone in Platoon 170 felt very ashamed about what happened to our D.I.'s

¹Two Marine grunts, who had just returned from Vietnam, visited Parris Island one day. We met them when they came around to the back of our barracks where we were washing clothes on the platoon's outdoor, concrete sink and told us that their experiences of combat in Vietnam were a million times worse than what they had gone through at Parris Island. They conveyed to us that no matter what we were experiencing in our training, it could never truly prepare us for the shock of combat. They told us that the enemy soldiers of the North Vietnamese Army were very tough and brave, well-equipped, and thoroughly at home in the rough jungle, mountain terrain. That piece of information dispelled one of the rumors we'd heard—that we'd be fighting natives with old muskets and bows and arrows. When the D.I.'s saw us talking with the grunts, they told them to leave the area. They then told us not to talk to them again because they had "bad attitudes."