

Roots in Ripon

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Chuck Roots

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Echoes of Boot Camp

Even though it has been nearly fifty years since I joined the United States Marine Corps, the memories, shared experiences with my fellow recruits, and the era in which we joined are a permanent part of me. It was October of 1969 and I was off to MCRD San Diego. For the uninitiated, MCRD is the acronym for Marine Corps Recruit Depot, better known simply as Boot Camp. Parris Island, the East Coast boot camp, is perhaps better known to the public.

On the lighter side of recruit training, I thought I'd share some of my memories which echo yet in my mind, validating the adage, "Once a Marine, Always a Marine." The young men which comprised Platoon 2193 are yet in my thoughts nearly every day. I see their faces, though their names more frequently escape me. That's when I open my boot camp book and revisit these men from my long ago past. I have been successful in part in connecting with a number of these 65 guys who shared the rigors and trials necessary so we could claim the title of United States Marine. Joe Harden and Larry McEntire have stayed friends all these years. I'll have more to say about them later.

I arrived at the Induction Center in Oakland, California on October 27. After saying good bye to my parents I walked inside where I was processed and then placed on a bus headed for the Oakland Airport. There were eleven of us flying to San Diego. Seven were headed for Navy boot camp, and four were headed for the Marine Corps boot camp. I guess because I was the oldest at 21, I was placed in charge of seeing that all of us got on the plane and arrived safely in San Diego. I didn't know any of these guys, and figured if they wanted to change their mind and take off, there was little I could do about it!

On arriving at the airport in San Diego late that afternoon I spotted a Marine Staff NCO. I informed him that we had all just arrived. He looked at me as though I had just insulted his parentage, barking an order at me to get on "his" bus (The drill instructors always referred to everything as theirs.). Marines refer to this "bus" as a cattle car. We were instructed to sit at attention and look straight ahead. As we rolled onto the base after passing through the security gate, I heard someone call from one of the buildings we passed, "You'll be sorry!" in a sing-song manner, stretching out the "sorry" part which I still hear in my mind to this day.

The cattle car stopped in front of the receiving barracks. Still sitting at attention, we were startled by a drill instructor bounding into the car screaming at us to get off his bus and stand on the yellow footprints NOW! As one man we burst through the doors seeking the infamous yellow footprints. I was one of the first to step on the footprints only to have a drill instructor screaming at me for some unknown reason to me. I had no idea what he was saying. I did know however that he was not pleased about something and I was probably the nearest target to him at that moment.

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We stood there for what seemed like hours but was probably no more than an hour or two. I just remember thinking to myself, "I volunteered for this? I could be sitting home right now kicking back, relaxing watching Johnny Carson's nightly monologue." My world had changed.

Even though it was getting on toward midnight by now, we were waiting to have our first haircut. Yes, the barbers were there at that late hour to shave our heads with electric razors. I didn't mind this so much because I had had a "butch" haircut for many years growing up. After being properly shorn, we then began to pick up our initial issue of clothing. We then packaged our civilian clothes and personal items and turned them in to be mailed home. At some point in this process we were instructed to sit down and write a postcard made out to our parents (or loved ones) informing them that we had arrived and were doing fine. Yeah, right!

With a sea bag full of new uniform items from socks to covers (hats) we marched to our new home in what were called Quonset huts. These buildings looked like a Coke can cut in half length-wise and set down on the flat side of the cut. We stood outside in formation at attention while the drill instructors informed us of what we were going to do next. Four squads were formed and I was chosen as the leader of one of the squads. It was now sometime around 12:30 or 1:00 in the morning. We were assigned to Quonset huts where we would sleep and stow our gear. We were then told to hit the rack, but we'd better be up, dressed and ready in formation "on the road" by 4:00. The tone "Or Else" was very clear. Since I was the squad leader for the guys in my hooch, I was terrified that I wouldn't wake up in time. You see, I could sleep through anything. My mother used to get annoyed with me because when the alarm of my clock/radio would go off it had the most aggravating sound imaginable. Mom could hear it in the kitchen which was at the other end of the hall from my room. One day, hearing my alarm go off, she decided not to come in and roust me out of bed as usual. After listening to the alarm for thirty minutes, she couldn't stand it any longer. She marched into my room, blustering over my irritating alarm, and roundly excoriating me for not hearing it and getting up on my own. I swear to you, I never heard it!

So perhaps you can see why I was concerned that after only a few hours of sleep I might not wake up, placing myself and my guys in serious trouble at the outset of our Marine boot camp experience.

I'll let you know next week how that first night's sleep turned out, along with other notable experiences during our transformation from civilians to Marines.