

# Roots in Ripon

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Chuck Roots

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## Echoes of Boot Camp (Part 2)

Continuing from last week . . .

The first night in Marine Corps boot camp had its memorable moments. Right after marching (more like shuffling since we weren't trained in the fine art of precision marching as yet) we found ourselves formed up on a paved area alongside the Parade Deck, a.k.a., the Drill Field. This extensive bit of paved real estate was where we would spend countless hours learning how to march.

There we stood, bleary-eyed, at 12:30am, desperately wanting to go to sleep, hoping beyond hope that we would awake back home in our beds. Not so fast, cupcake!

As I mentioned last week, I, along with three others, were selected by the drill instructors (never call them a D.I.) to be squad leaders. A platoon is roughly made up of 65-70 men. The platoon is then broken down into four squads. Each squad occupied a Quonset Hut as their living quarters. But before we turned in at about 1:00am, the squad leaders were called into the Platoon Commanders hut. The Platoon Commander is the senior person, the boss, the head honcho, and you NEVER called him a drill instructor! The drill instructors work directly for him. To impress upon those of us chosen to be squad leaders, we were told in no uncertain terms what we were to do, when to do it, and the dire consequences to follow should we disappoint in any way or fail in our prescribed duties. To make the point, the Platoon Commander, Staff Sergeant Lynch, stepped in front of us, and with a balled-up fist, punched each of us square in the chest. That was his way of putting an exclamation point on his previous instructions to us. Other than rocking us back on our heels there was no damage done, but his point was made. Did I mentioned he used to be on the Marine Corps boxing team?

Back outside we each gathered with our squads to pass on the "scoop" or "dope" or "the word" as information of this sort was routinely called. I was scared spitless, afraid that I would oversleep and by so doing, fail to have my guys up, dressed and on the road by 4:00am, or what the Marines call 0400 (zero four hundred). Before we could hit the rack, we had to make our racks. Then we had to drag our wooden footlockers out to the center of the floor in a neat formation. We then stood at attention on our footlockers wearing only our white boxer shorts (Marine Corps issue). One of the rules we had been told earlier is all personal items (watches, rings, etc.) were to be locked in our footlocker each night. That was my first mistake . . .

The drill instructors would walk around us as we stood on our foot lockers, looking at us intently to see if there were any physical abnormalities, bruises, or other such apparent health related issues. As the drill instructors made their way around to my side of the hooch, I was startled by a sharp pain in my left side. The punch in my kidney area was administered by one of the drill instructors who then

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proceeded to rip me up one side and down the other. My error, I soon realized, was that I still had my watch on my wrist. Had I forgotten to remove it when I was preparing for bed? No. Since the drill instructors told us we were responsible for getting our own guys up and ready by 0400, and there were no clocks on the wall, I figured I would need to know what time it was during the night. I assumed – which was a big mistake – and assuming is not Marine Corps policy.

I jumped off my foot locker, tossed my watch inside, closed the combination lock and once again stood at attention atop my locker.

The drill instructors then ordered us into our racks, where we again assumed the position of attention. The lights went out with nary a sound but that of deep breathing.

Now remember – I was scared to death that I would fall into a deep sleep as I had always done back home. Not to worry! At this point I had been instantly cured of this malady – I just didn't know it yet. I laid there awake for a while afraid to sleep, but knowing I desperately needed the rest. I dozed off for about thirty minutes, jolted awake by the fear that I had overslept. We were not allowed to turn the overhead lights on which made fumbling with the combination lock on my foot locker very difficult. Fortunately, it was a clear evening, providing just enough ambient moonlight through a partially open window for me to see the numbers on my lock at which point I then would grab my watch and check the time. It was 1:40am. I would then tuck the watch back in the locker and fall back to sleep. Again I would awake in a near frenzy, grab for the lock, spin it open, check my watch, close my locker, and repeat this fearful routine several more times until about three-thirty when we got up and dressed, ready to fall out on the road at four. What a relief!

I still sleep well to this day and can fall asleep in a matter of seconds. But I have never been able to sleep quite as soundly as I once did when in my teens. I can command myself to fall asleep and wake up at a certain time regardless of how tired I am.

God made us to enjoy sleep, of this I'm certain. And I have always enjoyed sleeping. But what my experience taught me in boot camp was to appreciate sleep. There have been times in my life, particularly in a combat zone, when you do not have the luxury of sleep.

One story that accentuates this point occurred when I was a corporal. I had spent a couple of days virtually non-stop working in Da Nang, South Vietnam with our maintenance crew preparing our "Jammers," E-A6As, for sorties over North Vietnam. Weary to the bone, we boarded a C-130 troop transport which would take us back to Naval Air Station, Cubi Point in the Philippines. The three-plus hour flight was my first chance to relax. Even though I was in a jump seat (read: not designed for comfort), I really didn't care. I dropped my chin to my chest and was out before we took off. I woke up when I felt the plane preparing for descent. But something did not seem right. Opening my eyes, I realized my head had gradually leaned to my right, resting comfortably on a Marine captain's shoulder in the jump seat next to me! Recognition of this fact caused me to snap my head up. Thankfully, he said nothing to me. I gradually realized and then appreciated the fact that he fully understood the rigors of war and silently made himself available to a fellow Marine who desperately needed sleep.

Next week I'll take a look back at mealtime – boot camp style!