

Roots in Ripon

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Chuck Roots

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Echoes of Boot Camp – Let’s Eat

Dear Reader, I should have seen this coming . . .

Several of you were a bit put off by the incidents I shared where physical force was used against Marine recruits during boot camp. Well, yes, these episodes did occur, and probably still do. There are sound, well-proven reasons for recruits being subjected to physical abuses during their training regimen. The primary reason is Marines are “the pointy end of the spear.” This means when the call to arms is given, the Marines are ready to go regardless of the mission or task ahead. They know, just as the point of a spear is the first part to enter its target, the Marines are the first ones to enter the battle.

Marines must be ready to respond at the precise moment the alarm is sounded. Boot camp is not a Boy Scout outing. We do not sit around camp fires and roast marshmallows, eat s’mores, and tell scary stories. Marine recruits must be transformed from boys to men in short order. Boys who were only days before probably loafing around their homes, working a part-time job at the gas station, hanging out with their buddies, and generally going nowhere in a hurry. A reality check is in order! Life, as we once knew it, would change forever for us. You learned to obey commands immediately. It was not for you to question that command. When each of us raised our right hand, we took an oath, promising to obey the orders of those senior to us. When you’re a Marine recruit, everyone is senior to you!

For boys to become men we must be remolded into warfighters. That is the objective of the drill instructors. If we’re not prepared for war and taking the fight to America’s enemies, then America suffers, and we are weakened as a nation.

Make no mistake – I didn’t always like it, nor did I appreciate the tough discipline administered by our drill instructors. Were they overly abusive at times? Unquestionably, yes. But you sucked it up; you pressed on to the goal of earning the right to be called a United States Marine. Or as we would say, “Lean, mean fighting machine.” Those of us looking back on those years long ago voice it a bit differently now, “Not so lean, not so mean, but still a Marine!”

Boot camp is designed to be tough. It is intended to find the weak ones, the “sick, lame and lazy,” the slackers and ne’er-do-wells and send them home. War is hell, and combat is grueling. The faint of heart need not apply. You want men toughened and prepared to fight America’s wars. That what Marines do.

Okay, so I was planning to write this week about the excellencies of Marine Corps repasts. Hollywood movies always seem to portray Marines and Army soldiers eating K-rations (field food during WWII and Korea), or C-rations (Vietnam). These pre-packaged morsels of culinary delight (gag!) were given various names over the years, names which I cannot provide in this article. In today’s military, we have MREs which means: Meals Ready to Eat. I’ve been retired for a while, but I believe

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there is a new type of field meal today that has superseded the MREs. One entire meal, from the entrée to the dessert, is packaged in a water-tight bag. These MREs are far superior to the old K & C-rations by a long shot. You can eat them cold right out of the bag, or heat them up with a watery chemical. If a company of Marines is to be in the field for an extended period of time, then hot chow is usually provided courtesy of the mess hall on whatever base you happen to be training. These meals-on-wheels, transported to us by deuce-and-a-halves, are a welcomed break even from the MREs.

But in boot camp we would march to the chow hall in the morning at like 5:30 for breakfast. We all knew that lunch was a long way off. We would march in, single file, back to belly button, with no talking, and hold our metal food serving tray out for the mess cooks to slop the chow on. We had wooden tables and benches protruding from the walls where we would seat at attention waiting for the drill instructor to come by our table with the command, "Ready - Eat!" We quickly learned to get that meal down as fast as possible because the drill instructor might come by two minutes later with the command, "Get up, and Get Out!" It didn't matter if you had eaten your meal or not - you stood to your feet, grabbed your tray and moved smartly outside where you dumped whatever was left of your meal into a trash can, then shoved your messy tray into another trash can of steaming hot water, only to then place the tray in a stack. From there you moved ran to your platoon formation. But before you assumed the position of attention you would drop to the ground and pump out 50 pushups as quickly as possible. Or 20 pullups, whichever command was given.

There is always one week during boot camp when each platoon goes on "mess duty." The majority of your day was spent doing the myriad of jobs necessary in feeding a lot of hungry recruits. I was assigned to work in the supply tent based upon my having attended college. The assumption was that I could keep track in a ledger the number of cans and other assorted food stuffs coming in and going out of the tent. We would be awaked at "O dark-thirty," which simply means an ungodly hour. I was usually in the tent by 4:00. It was November in San Diego and at that hour it was bitterly cold. I would sit at my small desk with the ledger book and pencil, huddled in my field jacket with my head scrunched down as far into the jacket as I could go, doing my best imitation of a turtle. The sun simply could not come up quickly enough, and even then it took a while to warm the tent. One of my buddies, Larry McEntire, from Texas, was originally assigned to wash out the big garbage cans, getting soaking wet every day. He faked being sick, so the drill instructors had him go to sick call whereupon the medical types said he should be on light duty. That simply means not doing anything strenuous. So the mess hall folks weren't sure what to do with Larry. Having seen the cushy job I had sitting in the supply tent, Larry suggested he might work in there. They agreed, so I now had company.

One morning when Larry and I were seated in that nasty, cold tent, snuggled into our field jackets, we both made the mistake of drifting off to sleep. I don't know how long we were resting this way, but something warned me that this was not a good idea. I opened my eyes only to see one of our drill instructors standing in the doorway of the tent, hands on hips, staring at Larry and me. Not good!

I'll tell you what happened in next week's article.