

Roots in Ripon

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Chuck Roots

12 September 2016

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Echoes of Boot Camp – Sick Call

So the drill instructor was standing in the doorway (hatch) of the supply tent, hands on hips with elbows akimbo, giving Larry and me a look that said, “You two are toast.” We both sat there very much wide awake at this point wondering when our execution was going to take place. Wide-eyed, we knew he had us dead to rights.

The silence in the tent was overwhelming. At this point I figured it didn’t really matter what either of us did, so, looking directly at the drill instructor, I cracked a silly grin. It was the sort of grin that acknowledged we’d been caught red-handed. I don’t remember specifically, but I think Larry grinned at him too. I mean we were totally at his mercy having been caught sleeping while assigned to the mess hall supply tent. Larry and I held our breath, not knowing what was coming next. What did come next totally baffled both of us. The drill instructor, never losing his authoritative stance, looked us over one more time, then turned and walked out of the tent.

Larry and I continued to stare at the hatch waiting for the drill instructor to come blowing back into the supply tent bellowing like a wounded water buffalo, reminding us of our questionable heritage and various other unflattering descriptions of us, no doubt fully intent on working us over with innumerable pushups, bends-and-thrusts, and various other physical forms of punishment which would cause us to never, ever consider falling asleep again on duty. Several minutes passed and we were still alive, so we looked at each other in relief and gratitude for the fact that we were still breathing.

Mercifully, our week of mess duty ended without further dramatic incidents. You may be wondering whether the drill instructor remembered us and still inflicted some form of punishment on us. Who knows? We weren’t even half-way through boot camp at this point. There was still plenty of time to make our lives more miserable.

Sometime not long after our mess duty a new mess hall was opened. This was a big deal! No more long wooden tables for us! No sir! We now had small four-man pre-fab tables where we could actually interact with each other, sort of. We still had to eat in a hurry and get out on the road posthaste. A new facility such as this made all of us perk up. I’m sure the food was the same, but to us it tasted much better.

One of the unfortunate unintended consequences of this new chow hall was a gift I was given - much to my chagrin. After inhaling one of our “three squares,” I began to feel somewhat out of kilter. My stomach felt terrible; I became feverish and sweaty; and I couldn’t keep anything down. This lasted for more than a week, despite a trip to sick bay in hopes of some medicine that might bring me some relief. I jumped out of the rack each morning as though nothing was wrong.

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Because of my trip to sick bay a week earlier for this problem, I missed out on having my picture taken for the boot camp book with the rest of the platoon. These are individual shots in which you wear a prepared set of Marine dress blues which was to be slipped on over our sateen's. Because there was a cut-off for having the picture taken, I was sent alone to the photographer's studio so I could have my picture included in our platoon book.

I was miserable. I didn't trust myself to go into the studio for fear that I would blow my cookies. I stood outside for several minutes before sucking it up and taking the plunge. Despite the fact there was no one else in there at the time, I still had to wait a while, feeling worse by the minute. Finally, I was directed to slip into the dress blues jacket, while a white frame-cover hat was plopped atop my head. Smiling for the picture is strictly verboten. And at this point, I definitely didn't care. When the last picture was taken, I slipped out of the jacket and told the photographer, "Sir! Private has to go outside, sir!" I was in a near panic as I moved as quickly as I could to the door. My condition at this moment was such that throwing up was definitely going to happen – I just wanted it to be outside. I made it to the gutter and let fly. Later, when I received my boot camp book, I saw my picture and was struck by how utterly miserable I looked! Needless to say, it was not my finest moment.

Another time when I encountered an illness was in the first few weeks of boot camp. I had developed strep throat. I'd had this before in my civilian life, so a shot of penicillin from my doctor always knocked that bad boy right out. Boot camp was different. I could not swallow, or eat very much, and struggled with sleeping at night. Since it was still very early in our training the drill instructors were in the process of determining who the sick, lame and lazy recruits were. I did not want to have them thinking of me in that way! I knew if I could just get to sick bay where I could get a shot of penicillin I'd be fine. Reluctantly, the drill instructors granted permission for me to visit sick bay. Once there, I waited in line along with a number of other recruits from the various training commands. I finally was seen by a corpsman (core-man, which is an enlisted medical person, much like a nurse) who gave me some pills and sent me back to my platoon. They were useless to me since I couldn't swallow. A few days later I again requested permission to go to sick bay, but this time I explained to the drill instructors that I needed to see a doctor for a shot of penicillin. It worked! I got my shot and the strep cleared up in a couple of days.

Because of this illness in particular, I was concerned that I might be held back from continuing with my platoon. If that happened, I'd have to wait to be picked up by another platoon that was not as far along as we currently were. I definitely did not want that. In fact, before I ever started boot camp, I determined not to let anything interfere with or get in the way of my completing boot camp with the platoon I began with.

Despite the two nasty illnesses, I hung in there and graduated with the guys I started with: Platoon 2193, December 30, 1969.

Next week: Two weeks on the rifle range at Camp Pendleton.