

Roots in Ripon

Chuck Roots

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Echoes of Boot Camp – Rifle Range

The rifle range is the pièce de résistance for every Marine recruit. This two-week training evolution, which occurs somewhere about half-way through your boot camp experience, is critical. Why is it critical, you ask? Because Marines are known for their rifle marksmanship. To fall short at this point leaves a bad taste in the mouth of those who fail to make the grade.

Every Marine memorizes The Rifleman's Creed which was first implemented in World War II by Major General William H. Rupertus. It is also known as My Rifle, or The Creed of the United States Marine. *"This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine. My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life."* It goes on like this for several more paragraphs, concluding with this final sentence: *"So be it, until victory is America's and there is no enemy, but peace!"*

Prior to my platoon's time on the rifle range, we were taught how the rifle basically works, which includes knowing every part of the weapon. In 1969 the rifle used by the Marine Corps was the M14. Prior to the M14 rifle, the M1 Garand was used. In 1965 when the Marines changed to the M14. In 1970, the M14 was replaced by the M16 which is still in use today but with updated versions and variations. Today, the M4 Carbine seems to be gaining in prominence over the M16. Regardless of the type of rifle, Marines are expected to learn to shoot the rifle and hit their target.

Along with knowing everything about your rifle, you must take exquisite care of it. Cleaning your rifle is akin to a religious experience. In a combat situation dirt and other foul stuff can interfere with the performance of your weapon. If your rifle jams or for some reason fails to operate properly you will need to correct the problem at that moment. Your life and the lives of those around you may depend on it. This is why every recruit must learn to completely disassemble and reassemble his rifle. Once he has shown his ability to take his rifle apart to the drill instructor's satisfaction, the room is darkened and we are blind-folded. This is the crucial test. We must once again disassemble the rifle and reassemble it satisfactorily. Why is this necessary? Because in a combat situation you may be slugging it out with the enemy in the darkness of night, or when rockets and mortars are kicking up large clouds of dirt and debris and smoke. If your rifle jams you'd better be able to clear it and get back in the fight in a hurry. You do not have the luxury of calling "time out" while you fix your rifle!

The rifle range for recruits at MCRD San Diego is located at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton. Known as Edson Range, our platoon made the 35-mile drive to the range where we would spend the next two weeks. Merritt Austin Edson,

known as "Red Mike", joined the Marine Corps in 1917 and retired in 1947. During WWII he was assigned as the commanding officer of the vaunted Marine Raiders. Edson was awarded the Medal of Honor, along with numerous other medals throughout his illustrious career.

Our first day at Edson Range basically consisted of settling into our new barracks and receiving a "welcoming talk" from our drill instructors. The barracks area is located close to Highway 5 which leads north to Los Angeles. The drill instructors informed us of this, suggesting that even though we could scale the fence and be in LA fairly quickly, we are half-way through boot camp, so why quit now? Though we were anxious to be done, and we longed to be free from the rigors of training, no one made the attempt.

The first week there is called "snapping in". We would spend hours encircled around large cylinders painted with target figures that we would later see once we began live shooting on the range. Lying prone, sitting, or standing were all positions we had to learn in the process of shooting our rifle. We would aim at the diminutive targets on the cylinders and become familiar with holding our position. After a week of this we were very anxious to actually get to fire live rounds on the range!

Physical training did not stop while we were at the range. Three-mile runs were part of our daily regimen. Also, climbing the 30-foot rope was a favorite, along with push-ups, pull-ups, bend-and-thrusts, and a wide variety of exercises the drill instructors had in store for us.

When our second week began, known as "qual week", meaning we were going to fire live rounds all week with a final day where we would be shooting to qualify. The center of the bull's eye was ten points, with concentric rings moving out from the center in decreasing value (9, 8, 7, etc.). There are four categories within which a recruit can attempt to qualify: Expert, Sharpshooter, Marksman, and Unq. Everyone wants to shoot expert, but it's not as easy as it appears. The range is very near the Pacific Ocean so we have winds blowing at times where the shooter must adjust his windage device on the rifle to counter the turbulence of the wind. You're shooting from three positions: Standing position from the 200-yard line; Sitting from the 300-yard line; and Prone from the 500-yard line. All three positions are added up for your final score. A score of 220-250 points is expert. 210-219 is sharpshooter. And 200-209 is Marksman. To fail to score 200 or better means you acquired the dubious distinction of Unq, which means you failed to qualify, or as we would say, "you went unq". A few always do, but it's hard on any Marine who does so. Shooting badges are issued to those who scored between Marksman and Expert. They are proudly worn on the uniform.

Though I had not been shooting particularly well all week, on qual day I managed to get a good score. I fired expert, and was the high shooter for my platoon. Later in my career I would qualify expert with the 9mm pistol.

Next week I'll share some final stories, mostly about Christmas in boot camp!