

Roots in Ripon

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Echoes of Boot Camp – Random Experiences

This will be my final article for this series on my experiences in Marine Corps boot camp, nearly fifty years ago.

With the presidential election only a few weeks away, I will have a few things I want to share on that four-year event in the next several articles.

Since I began these boot camp stories, I've had a number of fellow Marines, both those I have served with and some I've come to know in later years, tell me that I make boot camp sound like fun. That certainly was not my intent, nor is the experience "fun" in the sense that makes a person say, "Wow! That was fun! Let's do it again!" like a ride at an amusement park. I think I speak for most Marines when I say that I'm proud to have endured boot camp, earning the title of United States Marine. But, I would never want to go through that training again!

Last week's article was focused on our two weeks at the rifle range. One of the stories that emerges from my memory bank was when the drill instructors informed us that we were going to have a "Hog Contest". Any recruit who wished to do so could place a picture of his girlfriend/wife on the board to see if she might be selected as the best looking "hog". I don't know just how many pictures were submitted, but it was a lot. As our time at the range drew to a close, we were allowed to pick our favorite "hog". This was certainly not a very complimentary term, but the idea was for all of us to decide who of the fair damsels was the most attractive. As it turned out, my girlfriend was chosen, although I'm not sure I ever revealed that to her. And, no, it was not Isaura. I would not meet Isaura for another five years or so. I will say this: that had it been Isaura, she would have won, hands down.

One of the recruits in our platoon had to have been one of the homeliest guys around. So when he put his girlfriend's picture up on the board everyone was curious to see what she looked like. It was frightening, really. We didn't know whether to laugh or cry. We just figured they were cousins.

Well, as the time on the range was running out, some of us (Joe Harden and Larry McEntire come to mind) took this girl's picture off the board, and snuck it down to the rifle range. Since part of our time learning to shoot included "manning the butts", we took our turn hidden below the targets, running up scores and changing target sheets. When our buddy's turn to fire came up we taped his girlfriend's picture in the center of the target. We're firing from several hundred yards away, so you can't see a wallet-sized photo. We waited in anticipation to see if he'd make a direct hit on his girlfriend's image. Then, "Pop!" Sure enough - dead center on the picture. We found this to be hilariously funny, although I will admit it

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was mean and unkind. When he found out later what had happened, he was, shall we say, none too pleased.

During our final physical fitness test, three of us from the entire series (four platoons - better than 200 men) scored a perfect 400 points on the first four events going into the fifth and final event. Now, this was going to be a problem for me because I've never been a fast runner, and this event was a sprint. The three of us were all from the same platoon, so our drill instructors were really excited about our chances of at least one of us possibly scoring a perfect 500 points. So they took the three of us aside to give us a pep talk, or at least the equivalent of one as much as a drill instructor could give. I don't remember the distance of the sprint, but I think it was 220 yards. To score 100 points meant you ran under 30 seconds. I knew there was no way on God's green earth I could run that fast. The other guys mumbled the same sentiments. When we lined up I was determined to run as hard as I could. When the gun went off I started pumping my knees, feeling as though I was flying on the track. Then I realized I was pushing so hard that I might fall flat on my face. I even wobbled a bit, which scared me just a little. None of this mattered because I came in at 41 seconds, well off the 100 points needed for a perfect score. The other two guys came in at 35 and 37 seconds, as I recall. I was just glad I didn't wind up face-first sprawled on the dirt track!

Our platoon was highest in scoring on everything throughout boot camp. When we marched toward the drill deck for graduation, our guidon was festooned with streamers. It was a proud moment for us all. Family and friends had come to San Diego to witness this transformation of boys to men and we sure puffed out our chests. However, I almost didn't get to march with the platoon. During boot camp the drill instructors are allowed to meritoriously promote 10 percent of the recruits. That worked out to five or six of us, of which I was one. I was a squad leader, had scored very high in physical fitness and was high shooter for the platoon. So I had to turn my uniform in to have PFC (Private First Class) stripes sown on in time for graduation. Unfortunately, mine did not get done in time. The drill instructors deliberated over my being allowed to march with the platoon. My green blouse jacket for the Class A uniform did not have the stripes, but my long-sleeved shirt that goes with the jacket did. Eventually, the drill instructors agreed to allow me to march with the platoon wearing just the shirt. I stood out, marching at the front of the platoon leading my squad with my light, khaki-colored shirt while everyone else was in the dark green blouse jacket.

It was great to have my sister Joy, and my folks and grandmother come from L.A. for the graduation. But in a few days we would begin Infantry Training at Camp Pendleton. And that's another set of stories for another time!