

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

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Parris Island

Taking the bus across the causeway from Beaufort, S.C. with four or five other people, I enter the MCRD (Marine Corps Recruit Depot) gates and arrive at the Parris Island induction bus stop in the spring of 1967. A smiling Marine sergeant wearing a smokey bear hat immediately hops aboard and politely speaks to the driver and all the other civilian passengers as they get off. Beginning to think that this smiling marine is going to give me a friendly welcome and point me in the direction that I should go, I smile. But the sergeant's face transforms right before my eyes. In fact his whole demeanor changes to one of hatred as he screams for me to get off the bus. Moving as fast as I can, but not fast enough for him, I scurry off the bus in a state of fear and shock.

I am in the middle of what looks like a large parking lot in front of a big square three story wooden building. On the asphalt are painted pairs of white footprints. Telling me to stand in a pair of footprints and not to move unless I want to die, the sergeant quickly disappears into the wooden building.

After what seems like a long time another sergeant comes running out the door, leaps to the ground from atop the access steps and stops just about a foot from me. Sneering directly into my face for about thirty seconds, his mean black eyes make it plain that he does not like what he sees.

Not nearly as tall as me but extraordinarily fit looking in his tailored uniform, he is the epitome of a small packaged stick of explosive. The name tag under the many decorations and rifle and pistol medals says that his name is Sgt. Ramos.

Twenty six years old and a married father of a small child, Sgt. Ramos quit school and joined the Marine Corps some years before. One of the ribbons he carries is the purple heart with two stars which indicates that he has been wounded three times.

Sgt. Ramos walks around me, telling me how to stand at attention and ridiculing me for my inexperience. Suddenly he leans to within an inch of my ear and says, "You remind me of a girl, slime ball. A big weak pussy. Are you a girl shit head? Are you trying to sneak your weak pussy into my beloved Corps, lady?"

Turning my head to reply, I am cut short by Sgt. Ramos' scream.

"What the fuck do you think you are doing!! Get your eyes front and center!! Are you trying to eye fuck me, pussy!?! Are you queer for me, lady?"

"No Sir," I reply.

"I can't hear you civilian slime, you're not loud enough pansy ass! Pick up your bag and get your ass into that building when I tell you."

Turning and walking toward the reception building, turning only his head, Sgt. Ramos shouts over his shoulder, "Do it!"

Getting inside, I discover two other drill instructors waiting for me.

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

One is Sergeant Decker, a barrel chested Marine of medium height and build. The other is Corporal Star who resembles Sgt. Ramos in height and build. Both are unmarried and about the same age as Sgt. Ramos.

All three DIs are yelling for me to get up the stairs to the next floor while snapping at my heels like a pack of wolves after a wounded prey. Reaching the top of the stairs as quickly as I can, I pass through a couple of swinging doors into a squad bay. It is a huge hall-like room with bunk beds or racks lining every wall. Standing in front of their racks like stone statues, staring straight ahead, and looking scared shitless, are fifty or sixty recruits of all shapes and sizes. These shocked souls constitute platoon 144 of the 1st. battalion, MCRD, Parris Island.

After about an hour of harassment, a tall much older Staff Sergeant Rhiner walks in. He has a wrinkled tired looking face that shows several pockmarks. The manner he exhibits is one of confidence and disinterested discipline. Sgt. Ramos introduces him as our senior drill instructor and indicates that his word is law. Trash like me and the others are not worthy of such a distinguished drill instructor he maintains. And if ever we embarrass our senior drill instructor he will personally make us regret it.

Staff Sergeant Rhiner promptly orders us at ease and tells us to gather around and sit on the deck. At ease for the first time since I got here, I notice that something new is about to happen. The difference between Ssgt. Rhiner and the other D.I.s is like night and day. Showing no emotion one way or the other, he informs us about where we are, where we are going, and what he expects of us. Indicating that he will get what he expects or, failing that, he will get rid of us one way or another, he assures us that he will have his way. Otherwise, he continues, if a bad apple is allowed to exist, it will hurt those around it. And Ssgt. Rhiner is not about to hurt good marines because of some turd. Looking like he is somewhere else, his eyes tell a story that I have no trouble believing.

Finishing up his introduction, Ssgt. Rhiner nods to the other three drill instructors standing off to the side and slowly walks out the swinging doors of the squad bay.

After getting a haircut, our first meal, and supplies, we are herded to the PX, or post exchange, to purchase our health and comfort gear such as bath and laundry soap, toothpaste etc. And cigarettes to smoke during the rare times that the smoking lamp is lit. The cost of these articles will be removed from our first \$78.00 check, the monthly amount a private earns in the U. S. military.

The squad bay for platoon 144 is located in a small white wooden building just big enough to house a platoon of marines. Situated along the edge of a swamp that runs to the sea, our squad bay faces the huge parade deck. In the back between the squad bay and the swamp are a long row of concrete scrub benches with water spigots for doing laundry. Inside the set up is like it was at receiving except that there are localized showers and toilet facilities. This part of the squad bay is called the head. Also there is a small office area with a cot for the lone duty drill instructor at night.

I first learn to travel without moving here. Looking at the fixed eyes of the private across from me, I turn into my mind and return to places I visited or make up things to turn over. This eases the tedium and gives me

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

my first encounter with the possibilities of meditation. I learn that it is not such a mystic endeavor shrouded in hazy principles but one that can be very practical for relieving stress.

A couple of privates have nervous breakdowns during these first few days and are taken away in straight jackets never to be seen again. One minute we are standing at attention waiting for whatever is next and the next minute one of us is squirming on the deck, screaming and kicking until carried away. Some go that way. Others go other ways.

In front of a marching platoon is the guide that carries the guidon, which is a long staff that flies the platoon pennant. It is the guide that reports to the drill instructor and is responsible for the actions of the platoon. Eventually I am ordered to the front to carry the standard and guide the platoon.

After we get the hang of close order drill we are issued M-14 rifles and learn to drill with them as well. Wearing a full transport pack, helmets, and carrying M-14s, our load is considerable. Consequently I lose about thirty pounds quickly.

About halfway through the week of live firing on the rifle range I witness a scene that the movie director Stanley Kubric takes to the extreme in one of his movies: Full Metal Jacket. A full metal jacket is the cover for the 7.62mm projectile that the M-14 fires.

As the score is being tallied for a series of rapid fire, I notice that in the next lane, Pvt. Munsey is continuing to have trouble with not jerking the trigger. This time he doesn't even get off his full magazine. And Sgt. Decker, the D. I. manning that part of the firing line, is giving him hell.

"What the fuck is wrong with you dip shit, you act like a scared little pussy jerking her meat instead of firing a rifle! Can't even hit the target you swine head, and you think you can be in my Corps!?"

Munsey, a small thin kid, just can not get comfortable with his weapon. As the guide I know that he did ok prior to coming to the rifle range. But here he is spooked and just can't seem to get over it.

Standing over Pvt. Munsey, who is still in the prone position on his stomach, Sgt. Decker continues to give him hell.

"Answer me shit face!!! You want to go and get my good marines killed because you can't use a weapon properly don't you scum bag!?"

Munsey suddenly stands up as Sgt. Decker continues to rant and rave about his character. Munsey's face comes to about the level of Decker's chest. And his eyes never waver from that chest as he silently steps back and raises the muzzle of the still locked and loaded M-14 to point at Sgt. Decker's heart. Decker freezes mute in mid sentence and the last drop of blood immediately drains from his face. An instant later, politely and quietly, Sgt. Decker finds his voice again.

"Just take it easy Munsey. It's just discipline and training. It's just part of the game, nothing personal."

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

Big tears begin to run down Munsey's face as the shooting coach and another nearby D.I. slowly move closer to the scene. Decker can barely be heard as he almost whispers, "Just put the rifle down Munsey, we can work this out. No harm done. There's no need for anybody to get hurt. Listen to me Munsey, just lower the muzzle to the deck."

After a frozen silence private Munsey lowers the muzzle, drops the rifle, and starts screaming. At the same time the shooting coach grabs the rifle, flips the magazine out, and ejects the chambered round while the two D. I.s try to restrain Munsey. He is really out of it and even the coach has to help hold on to him. With three men holding him down, Munsey screams over and over for a full two minutes and continues to be pinned to the deck for another 5 minutes. Finally a white ambulance arrives and all of them get Munsey into a jacket, strapped to the stretcher, and in the back of the ambulance. I watch the ambulance as it slowly drives away down the firing line and wonder at the pressures being brought to bear. Beginning to fully realize that it is not just a game as Sgt. Decker had pleaded, I know that it is serious business. And that people could and will die accordingly.

Ssgt. Rhiner, the senior drill instructor, is roaming the firing line as the final scores are tallied. Seeing me remove my shooting glove and rifle sling, he comes over and asks what I shot from 500 yards. Replying that I had shot a possible, which was a perfect score, I try to stay cool as I watch Ssgt. Rhiner crack the smallest smile and do a little jump. It is the most emotion I have ever seen from him. Only one other marine in the whole battalion shoots higher. From my own platoon, he is a stocky square faced Mexican with thick glasses that make his eyes look like saucers. Having shown no remarkable ability at anything else during training, this feat will still earn him the private first class stripe upon graduation.

The one private in our platoon who fails the most important test in boot camp is living a life of hell. All the D.I.s are constantly harassing him and telling him that he is not worthy of the marines and that they wish he would die or simply go away. They no longer call him by his proper name, which is Pvt. Renske, but instead call him Pvt. douche bag. He is a nervous little scarecrow looking kid with a face full of pimples. Since we have been back from the range he has once been made to shave with a bucket on his head, cutting himself several times. And after chow this morning he is not allowed to make the routine head call. It is the time that the whole platoon is conditioned to have bowel movements and Pvt. Renske is made to remain at attention while the rest of us file into the head and do our business.

A short while later Pvt. Renske again pleads, "Sir, the private request permission to make a head call."

Sgt. Ramos, the duty D.I. this morning, walks over to Renske and sardonically inquires.

"Do you have to take a shit, Pvt. douche bag?"

"Yes sir," Renske replies.

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

Sgt. Ramos strolls back and forth in front of Renske and in a booming voice yells, "Platoon at ease! I want you to take a good look at this piece of shit who will get good marines killed because he can't handle a weapon!"

All eyes turn toward Renske.

"Which do you want to do the most douche bag," Sgt. Ramos continues, "urinate or defecate?"

"Defecate sir." Renske answers as he slightly bends and stares at the deck.

Sgt. Ramos continues to stroll back and forth while pretending to be in deep contemplation.

"Are there any swinging dicks in this platoon that think private douche bag should get a head call?"

Except for the click of Sgt. Ramos' boot heels on the polished deck there is complete silence. Staring at the deck while holding his hands behind his back, Ramos paces a couple more turns and stops. Suddenly calling the platoon to attention, he rushes over to scream in Renske's face.

"Listen here you douche bag!! You are worse than worthless! You are a dangerous hazard to my good marines because you can not fight! While you are blindly filling the air with lead from your useless weapon marines will die. I hate you!!! I want you to disappear so as not to besmirch the honor of this platoon and get good men killed! If you have a shit attack and it kills you, good fucking riddance!! Permission to use the head is denied douche bag."

Pausing an instant with a final hateful look, Sgt. Ramos spins around and returns to his office.

A heartbeat later Pvt. Renske convulses a couple of times as a stream of watery shit splashes out of his un-bloused trouser leg onto the shiny deck. The stench immediately fills the squad bay.

Called to by the gagging marine next to Pvt. Renske, Sgt. Ramos returns and orders Renske to clean it up with his bare hands.

"Guide!!" he yells to me. "Get your ass over here and make sure this worthless piece of shit does his job!!"

Hopping to, I rush to that area of the squad bay but immediately I am taken a few steps away by Sgt. Ramos.

"Guide, this is your platoon," he says in a whisper. "This shit bird doesn't belong in it. Make him clean this shit up and make him go away."

Locking my eyes, as if it were a done deal, Sgt. Ramos dusts his hands, and walks away.

Renske is crying with shit all over himself when Sgt. Ramos returns with that same sadistic smile that I first experienced coming aboard Parris Island.

"You can have him later guide," Ramos says. "Take him out back now and get him cleaned up."

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

Taking Renske to the laundry benches near the swamp, I have him take his scrub brush and begin to clean himself and his utilities. While Renske cleans I tell him that he had better get his ass out of here. Indicating that he is in for much worse than today, I tell him to get while he can.

Before Renske can get anywhere near clean Sgt. Ramos sticks his head out the back door and calls us back inside. Returning to attention in front of our racks along with the others, for perhaps an hour, we remain in that position. Only the sudden sound of the slamming back door screen breaks the silence as Private Renske runs for the snake infested swamps. Immediately Sgt. Ramos is alerted.

Looking genuinely happy, Sgt. Ramos tells the platoon that he will give douche bag a good run before reporting him. That way he will never come back to platoon 144.

As we progress toward graduation and the end of boot camp our time for mess duty comes, as with all training platoons. Having no designated position, I usually post myself on the serving line if I have no other orders from the mess sergeant. On the serving line I get the rare opportunity to see women as the BAMs, short for broad ass marines, file through for their mess.

Women drill instructors are just as mean as the men. Asked for more mashed potatoes by a chubby woman recruit, I don't have time to respond. Her female D.I., a thin sergeant as tall as me, overhears the request and rushes over to tell the girl that she better keep her mouth shut and never speak to a male mess recruit. I think that she is going to jump in my shit too but she just quickly throws her head back, sites me down her nose and moves away.

Near the end of training, any time a member of the platoon fucks up in some way or another, I will get called for it. A roar will be heard coming from the D.I.s office.

"Guide, get your ass in here!!!"

Each time I hear that my ass puckers. Running to stand at a right angle to the office door, I slam the bulkhead with the heel of my hand three times and scream, "Sir, Private Hayes reporting as ordered."

One of the D. I.s will reach out the door, jerk me into the office, and shut the door. Informing me that my platoon is fucking up and that I had better do something about it, the D.I. will knock me around. If there are two D.I.s they will take turns yelling and threatening me while knocking me from one to the other. Many such beatings do I take. The sessions usually end with me screaming just as loud as the D.I.s that I am going to fix the problem.

Dismissed, I return to the platoon, find the offending private and vent my rage upon him. However never do I strike him. Nor does he ever try to buck my authority despite the awful rhetoric I pile on him. Some in the platoon could pass for bodybuilders with huge chests and arms, while I am just a tall skinny guide full of rage. Yet they do not think twice about a rebuttal. For me this is enough, and as the beatings grow more intense and the insistence that I have to kick ass grows stronger, I resist the idea that I

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

have to strike a private to get him to perform better. For me it is a principle that is a part of my aloofness. And the D.I.s must see this for they never let up.

Measured for the fancy dress blue Marine Corps uniform, I figure that I might be a pick for the Leatherneck Award. That is it. Nothing is said about it but everyone knows that one marine from every platoon is designated as the outstanding marine of that platoon and is awarded a dress blue uniform with one stripe for graduation. I take the beatings, proudly carry the guidon, and excel on the rifle range. And, at the request of my D. I.s I risk my integrity by helping others who can barely read or write pass the written tests that otherwise they would fail. But I do not show that I can fight.

Nothing about this situation is ever put into plain words. It is, of course, against Marine Corps policy to kick ass when training troops. But like so much that has come before, I can see the whole picture here where the rubber meets the road. I begin to waver in my principles.

A couple of weeks before the end of boot camp Ssgt. Rhiner calls me to his office. Ssgt. Rhiner, the man with the dead eyes and no emotion, the top of the tight knit platoon command, and the old D.I. who can run all day and never sweat. The leader of us that are a part of this quick stop on the way to a folly greater than any of us know. One who stretches back to the old Corps and times that were cast in a different light.

I am told to stand at ease. In a normal, calm, and flat voice Ssgt. Rhiner says that the platoon is doing ok but it can do better. To win the honor of the best platoon in the company is important to him and to do this we have to get better. Honor demands struggle and fighting is part of the struggle. Where there is no fighting there is no honor. I listen and know what is being said out loud. And what is being said underneath.

Ssgt. Rhiner asks me if I really understand what he is saying and I quickly reply in the affirmative. Looking away, he tells me to get back to the platoon and make sure that honor gets its due.

That evening in the shower I am pissed that I am apparently failing to meet the standard of my superiors. Crowded in the shower as usual, I am in no mood for the grab ass jokes that sometimes occur. And it just so happens that another marine lets out a whoop when someone turns the hot water to cold. Much like me in other respects, tall, thin, and fit, he is a black private from Mississippi. Telling him to shut up, I watch him dance out of the cold water, his eyes losing their merriment as they change to dark hostile circles. He faces me.

"You motherfucker," he says.

Our eyes lock, we both take a step forward on the slippery shower deck, and unload right hands at the same time. I weave away from his and deliver a glancing blow that brings us slipping and sliding into a clinch. However I am quicker and manage to get a head lock with one arm and deliver slight punches with the other while we slip all over. Most of my swings do nothing as the other private struggles to free his head. Hearing someone call for attention, we look up to see Ssgt. Rhiner standing in the shower room door. Immediately I release my hold as all of us naked souls

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

stand to attention. Ssgt. Rhiner tells me and the kid from Mississippi to get our skivvies on and report to his office.

Asked by Rhiner what happened, I state that the other marine made a remark about my mother and that I objected. Asking the other marine if that is true, Ssgt. Rhiner listens as the other marine confirms that it is.

Looking at us with that flat cold expression, Rhiner dismisses us and that is the end of it.

Consequently perhaps, only when some serious infraction is committed does my corporal punishment continue. Honor seems to have found its place and the D.I.s seem to be content about that. They begin to prepare us for our final competition, close order drill.

The drill competition is complete and the platoons are seated in four separate stands at the edge of the parade deck. Ssgt. Rhiner and I sit in front of our platoon, the guidon between us. As the higher ups are tallying the results Ssgt. Rhiner, without turning his head, says, "Guide, when they announce us as the winner I want you to stay on my right side and follow a step behind me to receive the award."

As I glance out of the corner of my eye, I can see that Rhiner is so sure of winning that he actually looks a little alive. It is only for a moment. The announcement is made and the award does not go to Platoon 144. It goes to platoon 145. As the guide and senior drill instructor of that platoon step forward Ssgt. Rhiner can not contain his disappointment.

"God damn it," he mutters, "we won that God damn show but he," meaning the battalion commander, "played his favorites."

I can plainly hear the bitterness coming from the murmurs beside me and wonder at the importance of winning. Obviously it is an insulting disappointment for the senior drill instructor but I feel thankful to just have it over with and be that much closer to graduation. However I know that we were perfect and believe every word that I just heard.

All four drill instructors are present in the squad bay. They call the platoon to attention and tell us to stand by for the reading of our MOSs or military occupational specialties. The MOS is a good indicator of where a marine will be heading after training. As the names and MOSs are read I notice that the people of color, especially the Southern blacks, are assigned to the positions of rifleman, machine gunner, or similar high risk jobs. I know this because some of the D.I.s have come from these same specialties. And sometimes as they read them off they make references to how risky they are, usually in a joking manner. But the look on the faces of some of the designees is not so funny. Almost all of these people, when finished with advanced infantry training, will head directly to WESTPAC (Western Pacific) and Vietnam. Hearing my MOS, I don't know for sure what it is. Nor does anybody else, except that it is in communications. It probably means training somewhere stateside before entering the fleet marine force and WESTPAC.

The weather is perfect for graduation day and all the hoop la. John Philip Sousa marches play over the loudspeakers and the platoons do a

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

pretty good show of moving past each other as we drill back and forth, finally coming to attention in a neat company formation before all the big brass of Parris Island. Standing forward of the battalion with three others, I am in dress blues as I receive the Leatherneck Award and promotion to Private First Class. Taking the award and warrant from the Battalion Commander, I shake hands and salute while photographers snap my picture for the hometown paper.

Ssgt. Rhiner and I stand together under the huge Iwo Jima monument of the marines pushing up the flag on Mount Suribachi. We shake hands as our picture is taken. A good bit taller than me, Ssgt. Rhiner looks down along the underside of his smokey bear cover with a genuine, almost embarrassed smile.

“Congratulations, you were an outstanding recruit P.F.C. Hayes. I really mean that. Very outstanding and I wish you luck as you move on in the Corps.”

After the grand hoop la of the ceremony, the simple congratulations of Ssgt. Rhiner humbles and honors me.

“Thank you sir.”

That evening when taps brings the day to a close we have our sea bags packed and ready to load onto Greyhound buses that will take us a good ways north to Camp Geiger and advanced infantry training. Sleeping lightly, I will hear the needle touch the reveille record one more time, over the loudspeaker just outside my window. I and others will do what every marine does after boot camp, no matter where we might be heading. We will learn the basic fundamentals of the infantry marine, the *raison d’etre* for every leatherneck.

Sitting at a window seat and looking out over the brilliant blue waters that surround the causeway out of Parris Island, I am no longer the same. I am young, only 20 years old, but still older than most on this bus. For the next three years my education is out of my hands. And because of this, I feel a loss. Yet, as the bus exits the causeway and enters the woods of the mainland, I realize that I have shown I can make the grade. I am good enough to get by and that is exactly what I will do. This certainty lulls me fast asleep.