

EXCERPT

Chapter 1

My first impression of Sgt. Robert F. Starbuck was a worm's-eye view of the soles of his boots. They came crashing through the double swinging doors in the middle of the Parris Island Recruit Receiving Barracks at about 3:00 a.m. January 14, 1966.

I was sitting on the floor of a squad bay along with eighty-four other recruits, having been told to do so by the sergeant major of Parris Island, who had left us there only a minute before.

Then there was a rumbling noise, like thunder, or maybe a herd of buffalo on a rampage, and Starbuck kicked through the door, both feet off the floor. He saw us sitting there and his face turned to a twisted, red picture of pure anger.

“Get up, get the fuck up. Get on your goddamn feet. Who told you maggots to sit down? Get up!” His voice had the depth of a bottomless well and the pitch of an acre of gravel.

Starbuck was six feet tall and about 185 pounds. He had legs like tree trunks and a perfectly V-shaped upper body, with wide shoulders and a narrow waist. His head was shaved damn near as closely as ours were, because he wanted it that way. Starbuck looked like what I'd expect a U.S. Marine drill instructor to look like.

I'm sure that thought went through my mind at the time, but it took second place to one other thought.

He was pissed! Somebody made the mistake of trying to say, “But the sergeant major told us . . .”

“Shut your hole, maggot. I don't want to see your green teeth or smell your rotten breath.”

That was just the beginning. Right behind Starbuck was a short black corporal named Jonathon L. Sparks, and he was carrying a footlong piece of iron pipe. A long, lean staff sergeant, whose name I can't remember, rounded out the trio.

They were all yelling like madmen, and nothing could be said or done correctly.

It was a setup of course. We had arrived on the island at about midnight, after a bus trip from Charleston, South Carolina, where I had gotten off the train that had brought me from the North. There I joined what was to be the rest of my platoon. A few guys who thought they were smarter than everyone else had been drinking in the back of the bus on the way. They paid later.

When we stopped at the receiving barracks, a drill instructor named Sergeant Wilson

came on board, laughed a minute with the driver, and then turned on us like a wolverine.

“You maggots have ten seconds to get off this bus,” he bellowed. “I’m going to count down from ten. Anyone left when I get to zero is going to die. Now move!”

Talk about people scrambling. The fun was abruptly over. He kept counting, and believe it or not we all made it. Outside it was more of the same. “Line up. Stand straight. Close it up. Toe to heel. Dick to tail. Asshole to belly button.”

The terminology was unquestionably different than anything I’d been exposed to previously.

The country needed a lot more Marines in 1966 than it had, thanks to Vietnam, and there was no delay in processing us. In the next three hours we stripped, showered, had all our hair cut off, identification pictures taken, and uniforms issued. We were given seabags for stowing our extra uniforms and other gear, and we packed away our civilian clothes. All contraband was confiscated, and I sneaked a small laugh when they found a pack of rubbers in one guy’s pocket.

“What the hell do you think you’re going to do with these here?” was the obvious question.

A few recruits who had arrived from New York City together had knives and razors, but they went in the garbage, too. Then it was into that long squad bay, and a friendly talk from the sergeant major. He had a chest full of medals, hash marks—telling how long he’d been in—running from his cuff up to his elbow, and the stripes he’d accumulated running from his shoulder down to his elbow.

“Sit down men,” he said in a quiet voice. “It’s been a long night. You must be tired.”

He told us of the challenges facing us, how difficult they would be, that many others had come to Parris Island just like us and made it through. He told us to keep trying and never quit, and we could make it, too. He seemed like a really decent guy. Our seabags were on the tables in front of us, so we wouldn’t have to hold them while we were sitting on the floor listening to his steady voice.

I started to feel mellow. I felt so warm, so good. It had been 12 degrees above zero when I left Albany, New York. It was about 70 degrees now. I was going to like this place.

“I’m going to leave you now,” he said quietly. “In a few minutes your drill instructors will come and take you to your barracks. They’ll show you where to sleep and start your training in the morning.”

What a great bunch of guys, I thought. I can’t wait to meet them.

“This is the last time you’ll be spoken to in a normal tone of voice until you graduate,” he

added. It should have been a warning, but I didn't pick up on it.

“Just remember, you can make it.”

A definite warning. I still didn't pick up on it. I remember thinking, this isn't so bad. I remember asking myself, what about all this breaking you down business I kept hearing about?

I actually thought that, except for the physical training, the worst was already behind me. I thought the DIs would come out, shake our hands, welcome us to Parris Island, and be happy we were there.

I mean what the hell, that was the impression I got from civilians on the way down who congratulated us on serving our country. And now look. Here was the sergeant major of Parris Island telling us what wonderful things to expect in the next few months. I was pleasantly tired, ready for a good night's sleep, and primed to go out there and show them what kind of Marine I could be.

God was I stupid. That was when the rumbling started. That was when the floor started shaking. That was when Starbuck came blasting through those doors, and life as I had known it ended forever. And I clearly remember that within seconds, my thoughts had changed to one simple question.

How in the hell did you get yourself into this?

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