
SIX

The Loony Bin

There were several episodes, during Basic Training, that made indelible impressions on me. One of the most memorable was the day when we new arrivals were transported from the reception center to our regular Basic Training units. These buildings were on a different part of the fort and much newer. They were more in the style of modern college dormitories—four-floors, red brick, large courtyards between them. Daily company formations were held in those courtyards, but they weren't called courtyards. They were the company area.

A convoy of canvas-covered trucks had picked us up at the reception center, each one of us now struggling with a fully-packed duffel bag.

I can't help but smile when I think back on that ride. It was no more than a mile, but the drivers, as part of the *initiation* awaiting us, had alternately hit the brakes and gas for almost the entire length of the way. Needless to say, that made for one hell of a jolting ride in the backs of those trucks. That was nothing, however, compared to what was in store.

When they pulled up in front of the Basic Training area, all hell broke loose. DIs (Drill Instructors), wearing the familiar Smoky-the-Bear hats, came to the back of each truck and started yelling at the tops of their lungs.

“You get down out of that damned truck, you candy asses!”

“Come on!...Move!..Move!..Move!”

We were gripped by a sudden sense of raw panic. If it wasn't so harrowing, it would have been comical,...which is exactly what it was for the DIs, although they never let on.

We half-climbed, half-fell out of the trucks while trying to maneuver our heavy bags. As soon as we hit the ground, the yelling, just inches from our ears, was to shoulder the bag and begin running along a paved walk from the street into the company area. That walk was a good fifty yards long and, for the entire length of it, every ten feet or so, a DI stood yelling as we rushed by.

“Move it!...Move it!”

“Come on!...Get the lead out, you candy ass!”

“You're not home with your mama now, boy!”

“You stop running and I'll put my foot up your rump!”

“Move!..Move!!..Move!!!”

It isn't hard to remember the numbing fear while I was struggling along that walk with my bag. Much as carrying it was a tremendous strain, I dared not stop or drop it. Out of the corner of my eye I could see some of those who had. When a guy stumbled and fell, several DIs gathered around and yelled down at him all the louder.

“Get up, you lazy-assed mama's boy!”

“If you don't get up, I'm gonna kick you until you do!”

They never actually did do anything physically, other than grab hold of the man's belt at the waist and jerk on it, but the unexpected raw antagonism was just too overwhelming. Some would actually lie on their side in a fetal position, head buried in their arms, openly crying. Strangely enough, though I was having enough problems of my own just then, I remember how sorry I felt for them. It was genuinely disturbing to see someone reduced to such a helpless state by a kind of verbal onslaught that none of us had ever experienced before. I could only be thankful I wasn't one of those who fell.

Eventually, they'd manage to get to their feet and drag their bags to the company area, where they fell into ranks with the rest of us.

The DIs never let up for a second. They moved through the ranks of the formations without mercy. One of them had stared directly into my face, the tip of his nose about an inch from mine, and spoken through gritted teeth.

“You wipe that grin off your face, troop, before I knock it off!”

In hindsight, it's amusing that anyone would think I could be smiling at a time like that. What he'd mistaken for a grin was the tightening of my jaw muscles with the extreme duress I was feeling. But under the circumstances, I didn't think it a good idea to plead my case,...so I just kept my mouth shut.

Eventually, the DIs made their way up to the front of each group of approximately thirty men. From there they barked out instructions as to what we were supposed to do when we got inside the barracks. But again, this action was deliberately manipulated so that nobody could make heads or tails out of what they were yelling. They used that typical drilling jargon that makes no sense to anyone but a well-seasoned military man,...and we boys were anything but that.

At the end of the barrage we picked up our bags and began running into the various barracks buildings. Since I had no more idea than anyone else about what we were supposed to be doing, I merely followed those nearest me into one of the buildings. It was a classic case of the blind leading the blind.

The scene inside was just as chaotic. Men were running in every direction at once with no organization whatsoever. Basically, what was going through everyone's mind, by this point, was simply to find a place of escape from the unceasing onslaught.

Still ignorant as to the lack of logic being demonstrated here, mainly because one would expect nothing but pure logic from the Army, I got the incredibly bright idea that the only way to find out what I was supposed to be doing was to ask someone. Without thinking, I approached a DI, a huge black man who could have easily been a linebacker for a professional football team.

“Excuse me,” I said, trying to be as civil as possible in this world of utter madness, “I don’t know where I’m supposed to be going.”

When he turned slowly to face me, I noticed that he had a half-dozen new men lined up with their backs against the wall of the hallway and they looked as though they had the fear of death on their faces. The big man leaned forward, so that his face was directly in front of mine and raised what appeared to be a billy club, as if to strike. He spoke slowly and deliberately through clenched teeth.

“You want me to hit you in the head, boy?”

It would be a tremendous understatement to say that I needed no more prompting than that. I did an immediate about-face and retreated, with all haste, back into the bustling throng.

Had I been more experienced, I’d have known that the club he was wielding was known as a “short-timers stick”. This was strictly a status symbol, carried by those who had a short time left of their military service and wasn’t meant to be used as a weapon at all. But you could have fooled me.

Somehow I managed to find a stairway to the second floor and raced up, half expecting to find that DI right on my tail. This floor was a bit less hectic and there didn’t appear to be anyone following me, so I made my way to one of the many doors lining both sides of the long hall, opened it, rushed inside, and closed it behind me.

For quite some time I just stood there with my back against the door, out of breath, eyes shut tight against the din I’d just escaped—thankful to be anywhere where there was some semblance of quiet.

When I did open my eyes, I discovered that there were six other men in the room all staring directly at me. From their dazed expressions, it was clear they’d all gone through the same craziness I just had and didn’t know what to expect of anyone coming through the door. Realizing I was just one of them, they relaxed a bit and we all sat down on the unmade bunks.

There was very little conversation, other than a few nervous remarks about the fact that this place was worse than a loony bin. We knew that sooner or later one of those DIs would be coming through that door and, when he did, the nerve-racking onslaught would begin all over again.

Sure enough, after some ten minutes of hearing the sounds of chaos still coming up from the first floor, a sergeant did open the door and step in. This one was a shorter, stockier man who took his time silently looking us over. Then he sat on the edge of one of the bunks and instructed us to gather around.

“In a minute I’ll show you how to make a bunk with what are called hospital corners. Now, this isn’t the movies, or the Marines, so we don’t expect a quarter to bounce on it. For now you can stow your bags in these lockers and someone will be around in the morning to show you how your gear is to be set up.”

He looked at his watch, “After we do the bunks, I’ll take you over to the mess hall. It’s just about supertime anyway. The duty day ends with supper, so when you come back here you can get settled in.”

Now we new men were just as confused as we’d been earlier, but in a different way. When this sergeant spoke, his voice was quiet and reassuring. We began to relax somewhat and ask questions, which he answered in an easy tone, much as a friend might. He conveyed the feeling that he knew what we’d just gone through, though he didn’t actually come out and say so.

This complete reversal of character, as well as our day-to-day contact with the DIs throughout the rest of training, would eventually make us realize that the whole frightening experience of our entrance into Basic had been staged. Its purpose was to let us know, right off the bat, who was in charge. And I must confess that it worked extremely well. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the trauma of that first day.