



## **A Weekend Warrior's Army Basic Training Memories**

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**By**

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"Lean, Mean, Fighting Machine"

*Dewey Oxburger (John Candy), Stripes*

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### **Beginning My Military Odyssey**

One of the things that is now history is the compulsory military service faced by young men of my generation. Compulsory military service was enforced by the United States Selective Service system which managed the draft, aka conscription. The draft officially ended in 1973 as the United States transitioned to an all-volunteer military. (You can read background information in my McHugh Reflection, "McHugh's Memories of His Military Service" <https://tinyurl.com/rscaz2l>)

I suppose everyone who served has many memories of their military indoctrination as it is an alien world to civilians. Many young men of my generation, and now women, have memories of their first taste of military life; namely, US Army basic training or some kind of boot camp.

Army basic training has been rated the second toughest with the Marine Corps being the toughest and the Navy and Air Force following. I am not telling you how hard basic was but rather why all these years later I remember my Army basic training and mostly the humorous aspects of it. Let's start with the beginning of my military service.

### **"Warm and Breathing"**

In April 1964 of my senior year of college I took the military preinduction physical at the Chicago Federal building and was qualified as "warm and breathing," which entitled me to sign a waiting list for an Army reserve unit, the 327<sup>th</sup> Military Police Battalion in Chicago. In October of that year, I enlisted for six years in the United States Army Reserve. In November I received my orders to report on January 4 of the New Year (1965) for eight weeks of Army basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky, about 20 miles south of Louisville.

The Army also sent a letter instructing new recruits "to leave your narcotics, switchblades, brass knuckles, and guns at home and to bring only the clothes on your back." "Damn," I thought, "that's reassuring that my new colleagues will have none of those things."

A historical note: some of the young men who "volunteered" for the Army or Marine Corps did not quite volunteer. In the past, when a troubled young man, who committed a few misdemeanors, would appear before a judge, many times the judge would offer the young defendant the following option at sentencing. "Young man, you can make a choice, serve X months in the county jail (or reformatory) or enlist in the Army or Marine Corps." The judicial thinking was that military discipline would straighten out the young miscreant, and in most instances it did the trick.

### **Off to Fort Knox, Kentucky**

On January 4, 1965, my dad dropped me off at the Greyhound bus terminal in the Chicago loop to use the travel vouchers the Army sent me for my journey to Fort Knox. At the bus depot, I met three colleagues from my reserve unit for our trip to Louisville. We four became instant buddies.

We arrived at the Louisville bus terminal about 5:00 p.m. and at 6:00 p.m. we boarded another bus for the last leg of our journey from Louisville to Fort Knox, about 24 miles. We were then driven to the "New Recruit" area of the Reception Center. I expected to be greeted warmly, "Welcome new colleagues. May we offer you a beverage and a snack?"

### **Not a Warm Reception at the Reception Center**

Our so-called "reception" involved shouting and cursing at us by the sergeants in charge who seemed to be angry at us. For example, the NCOs screamed: "MOVE you stupid MFers." "Shut your bleeping mouths, trainees." "I have never seen such a mob of pathetic pussies." "You all look like a bunch of disgusting faggots." I thought, "First we are 'pussies,' then we are 'faggots' what next?"

Cursing back then in Army basic training by our drill instructors (DIs) would make the Sopranos look like the Catholic Women's Altar and Rosary Society.

I wondered, "Why the anger, are we some kind of enemy in civilian clothes?" This felt more like an "Unwelcome Center."

The next three days were an endless blur of sleep deprivation, in-processing; long lines, interviews, paperwork, medical examinations, shots, and clothing issue. Each night we were moved to different temporary barracks for our sleeping accommodations. The biggest guy was appointed our platoon guide, which is sort of like recruit platoon sergeant nominally in charge. I was appointed a squad leader in charge of 10 men, which pleased me, as I could demonstrate my mastery of military science acquired during my two years of college ROTC.

### **What Did "FTA" Stand for?**

As I looked around my new surroundings, I noticed that on many wooden structures the inscription "FTA" was carved. I wondered what this ubiquitous carving meant.

I asked a friendly corporal, "What does FTA mean?" "Maybe" I thought, "it was the initials for the Army's slogan, like the Marine Corp's 'The Proud and The Few.'"

The corporal, about my age (22), who probably was a draftee, responded, "Son, FTA means 'Fuck the Army' and soon everyday you will feel that way." I thought, "Hell, I feel that way now."

### **Our New Army Home**

We were finally marched to our new home, a two- story wooden barracks heated by one coal- fired pot belly stove. I guessed our barracks were built as "temporary" barracks around 1940 to accommodate the rapid expansion of the US Army during World War II. The barracks held about 40 plus soldiers, on two floors of open squad bays, with each floor accommodating two squads of 10 men. We were second platoon, E (Echo) company. A platoon is about 40 plus men led by a platoon sergeant, usually a staff sergeant (E-6) and commanded by a platoon leader, a second lieutenant. Recruits were private E-1 and paid \$78 a month.

I was on the first floor, which was the same floor as the latrine. The toilets were not divided by stalls so you were right next to your neighbor, conversing with your neighbor, bitching about the Army and having a smoke. For some of my colleagues it was a major adjustment. For me, it took me about two days to perform. Maybe it was the Army's way to promote bonding among trainees. We were assigned bunks

alphabetically. I had the upper bunk, and my bunk mate was Al, a good guy, a National Guardsman from Berwyn, Illinois.

### **We Meet Our Drill Instructor (DI)**

The big moment had arrived as we met our drill instructor (DI) Sgt. (E-5) Donnie Donaldson. Sgt. Donaldson was a slightly built, freckled, sandy-haired guy, with dull brown eyes, about 5' 8" or 5' 9" and 155 pounds in his early 30s. He looked sharp in his tailored olive drab DI winter outfit complete with the famous DI hat; also known as a campaign hat. I couldn't place Sgt. Donaldson's accent but it wasn't southern like so many lifers. He sounded like he was from the country and probably a small town guy.

Sgt. Donaldson told the platoon that the smoking lamp was lit. He was a Marlboro Man, who took hard drags on his Marlboros like the boys at my Christian Brothers (all-boys) high school who wanted to come across as "hard guys." (I was a Lucky Strike man back then, about a pack a day.) It was mildly traumatic meeting our DI for the first time but not soul-crushing.

Sgt. Donaldson told us how things would be and if any of us had any problems with him or the Army, he would gladly "take us in back of the barracks." I often wondered if one of the big college football players or Chicago South Side gang members in our platoon had taken Sgt. Donaldson up on his offer, who would emerge victorious.

Sgt. Donaldson wasn't a serial curser like our other DIs, but he did like the F- Bomb as a noun, adjective, verb, and adverb and maybe used it as a part of speech not yet discovered. His favorite admonition was, "Son, when you gonna get with the bleeping program?" Sgt. Donaldson's other daily admonition "Son, when are you gonna get your bleeping head out of your bleeping ass?"

We trainees had to call him "Sir," to get used to addressing officers as "Sir." As time progressed I came to the conclusion that Sgt. Donaldson was a competent soldier, a decent guy, and it was a stretch for him to come on as a mean, hard-assed DI.

Sgt. Donaldson taught us military courtesy (how to salute, etc.) how to march, and the manual of arms. He also taught the proper display of toiletries in our foot locker and likewise our uniforms in our wall locker. We were issued two combination locks and ordered to memorize the combinations.

### **My First Mile Run**

On our second day in our training company at 0600 on a cold (10 degrees) January day, we put on our long johns and winter gear and were introduced to our daily run, which was initially one mile.

I had never run a mile in my life. I thought, "Holy bleep, this is going to be torture." And it was. As I entered what figured to be the third quarter mile I

thought I was dying. But over a week or so I built up the endurance and the daily morning run wasn't as traumatic.

Speaking of running, trainees were required to run everywhere in the company area — to the mess hall, to the orderly room, to the company track— yelling our unit motto, "E-10-4 Every Man's a Tiger." Maybe our unit motto should have been, "E-10-4. Every Man's a Pussy."

Before entering the mess hall, trainees were required to traverse the 14 horizontal bars (monkey bars) at the mess hall entrance. At first the bars were difficult for me, but again after a week I mastered those. Once in the mess hall, I found the food to be tasty, plentiful, and a decent variety was offered. Given the physical nature of Army basic, we were always hungry.

### **Other DIs**

Our training company had five platoons of 40 plus men each with their own DI. Two of the DIs were older, higher ranking sergeants who looked like burn-out types and our platoon had little interaction with them. We did have daily interaction with two younger DIs who were the same rank as Sgt. Donaldson, E-5s. One of them, Sgt. Nathan Washington had a mean streak and I avoided him. I was glad he wasn't our DI. Sgt. Washington addressed us as "MF-ing Maggot Trainees."

The other DI, Sgt. Isaiah Davis, was about 6'1", handsome, with an athletic build, looked like he had been a football player in school, and wasn't as formidable as Sgt. Washington. Sgt. Davis habitually referred to us as "dickheads" with a slight smile. One of my squad members was an amateur cartoonist and he drew a few renditions of a soldier with a dickhead— use your imagination.

### **Other Memorable Training Cadre**

Our company first sergeant was Master Sergeant (E-8) Randle McPherson. Sgt. McPherson had a persona like Col. Nathan Jessup (Jack Nicholson) in the movie *A Few Good Men*, not exactly a warm and cuddly type.

Sgt. McPherson would call the formation to order, with "shut your MFing mouths trainees" as we formed our ranks at 0600 on our company street. He was always in a foul mood with a foul mouth to match his mood. I figured he was probably hung-over or maybe he had severe hemorrhoids or had a terrible marriage, or perhaps all three. One thing for sure, we avoided Sgt. McPherson whenever possible.

Our company commander (CO) was Capt. William Sledge, whom we trainees nicknamed "Percy," after a pop singer of the time, Percy Sledge, who had the hit song, "When a Man Needs a Woman." He was about six feet tall, athletic, clean good looks, and was paratrooper qualified, which explained why he ran with us most mornings, as paratroopers love to run. He also wore the Combat Infantry Badge (CIB).which means he probably did a tour in Viet Nam as an advisor. When Capt. Sledge addressed us he was firm, respectful, and gave us encouragement. We all felt Capt. Sledge was a good guy and felt lucky to have him as our CO.

### **Our Training: "Every Man a Tiger"**

As weeks progressed, we mastered our martial skills. We were issued the M-14 rifle (then the standard infantry rifle for the Army and Marine Corps and successor to the iconic M-1 Garand rifle of WW II and Korea fame), taught to dismantle and reassemble the M-14. Most importantly: we were taught how to clean our M-14 and our rifles were subject to daily inspection. Days were spent qualifying on the M-14.

We also survived the gas chamber. No one managed to blow up the instructor as we tossed a live grenade. We learned the bayonet thrust movements and how to use the stock of the M-14 as a weapon. We had four hours of hand-to-hand combat. We practiced squad and platoon infantry movements. We had to do the confidence course complete with a belly crawl under barbed wire, in sloppy mud, under live machine gun fire. (Some of us thought the live machine gun fire was BS and were really blanks.) Of all the physical tasks, the low crawl was the most difficult to perform as it required lots of upper body strength.

### **The Last Day Arrived: Graduation**

On March 19, those eight plus weeks were over. We trainees, now bona fide soldiers, donned our Class A (dress) uniform and after we paraded before our training regiment commander, we were assembled for our graduation ceremony. It was over; the United States Army molded me into to a "Lean, Mean Fighting Machine."

Each year when January rolls around, my mind returns to memories of those freezing days of Army basic training in the hills of Fort Knox. All in all, I am glad I had that experience, even though at the time I sure as hell didn't feel that way. But the memory of the severe cultural shock of Army basic training will always be part of me.

### **For More McHugh Reflections**

**[http://johnbmchugh.com/reflections\\_list.htm](http://johnbmchugh.com/reflections_list.htm)**

### **About Jack McHugh**

Jack McHugh is a publishing executive living in Glendale, Wisconsin. He has many opinions and he enjoys writing in his spare time. McHugh hopes that you will find what he has to say is interesting and, perhaps, useful and even entertaining.

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