

## Forming A Foundation

### Prologue

It was a picture perfect Friday afternoon as General Tom Rains, the Commandant Of The Marine Corps sat on a fairly secluded park bench on The Mall in Washington, D.C., with his boss, General Chuck Lockard, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Both men were seasoned veterans, having spent time in Vietnam and Grenada. With an education at Heartbreak Ridge, they fully understood the necessity of having a well trained military. The only thing that could make it better in their opinions would be to have a unit that could do things that were considered a bit unorthodox.

"I know what you mean, Tom," the Chairman said. "Other government agencies have done this in the past. Why not have a military organization that can eliminate certain threats as determined by the military world?"

"Because the damn politicians would have a shit fit if we went out there neutralizing military threats. Every damn one of them would insist on having their own say in what this group should do as well. And you know if they had their way, the group would only act in their own best interests."

"Isn't that the truth. Personally I think we should still put together something like this. Maybe now wit a better president in office we can get something done."

"I think that if nothing else, we should poll the president for something like this in the beginning of August," the Commandant said. "And that only a select few can actually give movement orders."

"And you'll agree that this should be a platoon of Marines."

"Right you are, oh Chairman."

Being both Marines with an extensive background in military affairs and operations, neither one trusted the Army to do anything, even a simple occupation of a country. There was just something about their occupation of Kosovo after the Marines left that had put a sour spot in both of them. The Air Force earned their pay by performing as few high level, low risk bombing runs as possible. They both thought it would be a good deal of a challenge to get them to do it after 1630 on any given day. The Navy, in their view, was the best other effort, being the chauffeurs to the Marine Corps. But who really wants to be the military's version of a limo driver? Plus both Generals agreed that the Navy Seals were the single most valuable asset, aside from the Marine Corps.

It was time the Marine Corps held a single asset as precious to the Department Of Defense as the SEALs.

Through the past decade, the majority of which being Democratic President years, little was done to prevent up rises of terrorist groups and their supporters. In fact, President Clinton had gone so far as to support Yasser Arafat, leader of the terrorist organization known as the Palestine Liberation Organization. But then the President set out to denounce terrorist acts in the middle east, all the while harboring this friendship.

All the while terrorist intentions grew and inevitably set their sights on the United States.

In February, 1993, a group of such terrorists detonated a bomb in the underground garage of the north building of the Twin Towers. Enough explosives were used to open a hundred foot hole through four sublevels of concrete. The Islamist extremists were rewarded in their heinous acts when six people died and over a thousand were injured. Six of these terrorist rebel conspirators were convicted of the crime and given prison sentences of over two centuries each.

Some twenty six months later American born terrorists detonated another bomb in front of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. On April 19, 1995 people were arriving to work on another sunny day. But at 9:02, a truck bomb, made from a potent mixture of fertilizer and a fuel oil, exploded in a truck in front of the building. The blast blew the front side off of the building and collapsed floors, burying victims.

Rescue workers pulled 169 bodies from the rubble, some of them children from a daycare inside the building. Hundreds more were injured.

However, the United States was not just being attacked at home. There were acts of violence and terrorism against U.S. assets abroad as well.

At about 1300 on April 18, 1983 a van, which had reportedly been stolen form the American Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, in June of '82, pulled up to that embassy carrying a ton of explosives. The blast tore through the front portion of the seven story building, killing sixty three occupants, seventeen of whom were Americans. Most of the victims were at lunch and were killed by the building's collapse. Of the American deceased were State Department officials, a reporter, CIA Agents, Army trainers, and a U.S. Marine.

Some six months and five days later on October 23, at 0622, a sizeable distribution truck drove to the Beirut International Airport. After turning onto an access road leading to the Marine Barracks, the driver tore the vehicle through a barbed wire fence, sped between two sentry posts, crashed the gate and slammed into the lobby of the barracks. The driver then detonated explosives with the power to equal more than six tons of TNT, destroying the four story building.

220 Marines and 21 other U.S. service members were crushed to death while they slept.

These men had been sent there in peace, to help keep the peace in a nation torn apart by war.

Terror attacks were happening at home and abroad, but the United States was doing nothing about it. Upper leadership in the government had been too worried about foreign policy and public opinion to worry about foreign intervention.

## Forming A Foundation

Now, with new leadership, there was a chance that these two Generals would have their platoon that they so badly wanted. After all, these were the people that understood that sometimes you needed to do something that wasn't in the popular opinion to do the best for people.

Chapter One  
Presidential Orders

Thursday May 20, 1999

0920 EST, White House, Oval Office

"Gentlemen, I agree with a report I received from the Secretary of Defense. We need a group of young, top notch military men that can go out, kick ass, not worry about names and accomplish the missions that we need accomplished here in the Executive Branch. I'm not trying to take any personnel away from the military for our egos here, but they will report to SOCOM, who reports to us. Just need to eliminate the middleman. You know how it is." When President Matt Martin spoke, he presented his authority, but he also presented an enormous amount of respect to those he spoke to. He made sure he was understood and would be obeyed, without belittling anyone. "We need a platoon formed that can best know how to follow orders, and get the job done. Basically, mission accomplishment as directed by, as you gents call it, 'higher authority.' General Lockard, being a Marine I'm sure you'll understand my choice, but I wanted you to hear it from me. General Rains, I want a platoon of Marines formed."

"Consider it done, sir," the Commandant of the Marine Corps responded.

"Good. I didn't think you'd argue. So far as yet, the Marine Corps doesn't have an official Special Forces group, so it's time to get one started. The Navy's got the SEALs and the Army's got the Rangers and the Air Force has those Airborne Commandos. It's time for our premier fighting force to have a similar group. Admiral Jones, naturally, the Marines will need someone to take care of them and get them around, so we'll need some of your corpsmen and fine Navy folks."

"Roger that," came the reply from the salty Chief of Naval Operations.

"I didn't figure there would be any arguments. After all, as I understand, two Marine Generals aided the SecDef in this report. General Rains, General Lockard, would you know anything about this report?"

"Yes, sir," they both replied.

"Good. I don't mean to undermine you gents, but you know how it is for a former military man like myself. I still like getting involved in the military. If the public wouldn't want to impeach me for it, I'd pick up a rifle and go out with an infantry platoon anytime. As far as funding for this platoon, consider it done, but completely black. Admiral Williams, that's why you're here. They will fall under you there at SOCOM."

"I figured as much, Mr. President," the commander of Special Operations Command replied firmly. "Probably the best place for them is Phoenix Company."

"Good thinking. I think we're all tracking along the same lines right now with these fine Marines. The call to action will come from me, the Vice President, the National Security Advisor, Secretary of State or Defense. That's it, the only five people. Their funding comes from the black ops pot. If they have to do anything unorthodox here in the States, I'll grant them full pardons for any crimes they may have to commit. As far as in other countries, they'll get full non-extradition rights. After all, since this is black, we didn't do anything. I want a fresh new group that can handle anything at home or abroad that might come up. With that, I think I'll leave the rest to you gents. I know you don't want the boss telling you how to do your job, so I'll just let you four do it. General Lockard, please give me an update tomorrow afternoon. Thanks for coming by."

The military high brass took their cue and filed out of the Oval Office. Naturally, they didn't start talking until well clear of the President's workplace. Martin was fairly young for a President, only forty-six, but well respected. In the elections the year prior, he had received the military vote, being a retired Navy Captain. His work during Desert Storm had given him the image of a national hero, authorizing and flying in a daring rescue of a squad of Marines stuck behind enemy lines. This action gave him the respect of veterans and military families, as well as the Navy Cross.

His budget proposal, based on Regonomics, would create more than a billion dollars in budget surplus before the end of his first term. So far, in the first six months, the plan was already taking shape in action. Growing up in Aurora, a suburb of Chicago, he was used to the fast paced hustle and bustle, and was no stranger to working long hours prior to the military.

He had got the vote of the working class by proposing a major overhaul on income tax. The new plan, which was expected to be voted on in the next few weeks, would create an across the board tax on any income made. The public appreciated the fact that the poor would not be over taxed and the rich would get all the breaks. Count in the votes of the working middle class.

In his election campaign, he admitted to smoking marijuana in college on two occasions. This got him the vote in California.

His actions for tax credits for families with kids in public schools got him the vote of parents.

## Forming A Foundation

After one term of office as Governor of Illinois, he was elected President.

“Well,” General Rains said a good distance down the hall, “I’m glad someone’s finally wanting to get something like this going. I don’t really care what service or organization they came from, but I’ve been saying that we need a group of young, top notch, ass kickers. Chuck, I’m sure you feel the same way I do, though, that I’m glad it’s going to be mainly Marines. Not that I’m trying to play favorites on the Navy, Marine Corps team.”

“Sure, Tom,” came from Admiral Williams, “You’re still upset you couldn’t be a Seal.”

“There would have been a good bit of pride for a Marine like me to be able to wear the Budweiser insignia on my chest. Let’s meet this afternoon at my office to try and get more of this straightened out.”

1330 EST, The Pentagon

“Alright, so let’s get on with this,” General Lockard commented, fairly impatiently. “What exactly are we going to need for what the boss wants and what’s going to be the best way about getting it?”

“From as best I see it,” began General Rains, “we’re going to need forty eight Marines, and four Docs to make up the ground combat element, or GCE. All things considered this will be the basic backbone of what the President wants. Of course, they’re going to need support from other elements from time to time. Question is, how are we going to tie in the extras for air, sea or combat service support elements? We can’t very well have this pulled off in secret by allocating major resources.”

“Well, Tom,” chipped in Admiral Williams, “You could always do it just like my Seals do. Appropriate various assets from time to time as ‘Mission Essential’ but those assets’ commands write off the expense as a training exercise. You know how it is, pilots love to go on joy rides at the cost of mere millions to the taxpayers.”

“True enough, Chet. But I don’t think a plane or two will always be the answer. We may need an aquatic vessel from time to time. Maybe a Mark 5 could get appropriated. Or better yet, this could be just the opportunity you’ve been waiting for to help develop and test that new Sea Shadow.”

“You know, you’re right. But don’t let that go to your head. The last thing we need here in the Potomac Puzzle Palace is another Marine with an oversized ego. I personally know a couple fine ship Captains that have been waiting to put the Shadow through some paces. Currently, we have plans for five of them brewed up for various separate functions including communications, short range weapons platforms, electronic warfare, anti-surface and anti-sub warfare and troop insertion.”

“Now hold on a second, Chet,” interrupted General Lockard. “You’re going to have to explain to me the Sea Shadow again. I remember getting a brief lowdown on it a while back, but as for now, I don’t remember too much. Hell, I probably couldn’t even hardly pick it out of a lineup, and I had to help you pitch its reactivation to SecDef.”

“Well, Chuck, it’s basically an amphibious version of the F-117 Nighthawk. Radar absorbent skin, with no vertical surfaces to return a radar image. There’s plenty of angles on it to reflect the radar emissions away from the craft, but nothing that will return a signal to the radar. The hull itself is made of a fiber steel blend. That is, a nice blend of fiberglass and steel. Strong as steel, but has the reflectivity of fiberglass. Something the size of a carrier will look to them like the SS Minnow.”

“Now that’s impressive, I don’t care who you are. Too bad we can’t just have this stuff put on all the rest of our ships.”

“You know congress wouldn’t go for that. The military comes far after padding their own pockets.”

“Damn straight. Now who’s gonna be the crew? Chet, how about those Research And Development folks of yours?”

“Chuck, that’s exactly what I was thinking. And you know, now that I think about it, they do have a small ship squadron of Mark 5’s down there that we can acquire from time to time for training and testing purposes. We could even get the platoon to act as research and development personnel as well. Get them to test out new ideas that they get to try and better the stuff they use. After all, they are the ones that have to use it.”

“Good idea,” General Rains said. “Call up the Commander down there and tell him that as of tomorrow, the Sea Shadow is back on duty. No more testing and research nonsense though. We need the sneaky thing ready to go. Now, for the most important part of this. The platoon itself. How are we going to pull together fifty two Marines for these four squads?”

“Actually,” General Lockard replied, “I think you’re meaning to say, forty eight Marines and four Corpsmen. As I was thinking, each squad should have it’s own designated Doc.”

“That sounds logical enough. Now what about the actual personnel. I don’t think it can be all infantry.”

“True enough. We should have a good representation from all areas. Have someone there that can handle a little bit of every thing, but a whole lot of one thing. Each person will have their expertise in one area, but be able to help out in others.”

“Good call. That way one hand can help scratch the other. What about rank spread?”

“That’s where we can really stir things up. The President said he wanted a top-notch, fresh, young group, I say we give him just that. Lance Corporals as squad leaders, the rest of the squad as either Private or Private First Class.”

## Forming A Foundation

“Now hold on,” Admiral Williams interjected. “You’re saying you want to put an E-3 in charge of E-1s and 2s, and expect them to handle things of the top national security?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying,” General Lockard replied. “I’ve been in the Marine Corps for twenty eight years, and I’ve got to tell you, I’ve seen no one get the job done better, quicker, more efficiently or with more style than a Lance Corporal. Non Commissioned Officers may be the backbone of the Corps, but Lance Corporals are the heart and soul. In my not so humble opinion, for what we need, the only choice, and I repeat only choice, for a squad leader would be a Lance Corporal. They’re the ones that can handle getting this done in a quick and orderly manner. The Privates and PFCs will listen to their Lance Corporals out of respect for the rank that they soon wish to be.”

“Alright,” Admiral Jones said. “I think I can agree with you there. Lets start devising up the job skills each is going to need.”

“I think,” General Rains chimed in, “that it should have an infantry man as a sniper, or designated marksman, a communications guy to handle both radio and computer, an admin, supply, EOD, armorer and MP. Does that sound about right?”

“Great, now everything is taking shape,” the Chairman said. “We should be able to get through this today, I hope.”

1630 EST, Norfolk Naval Station, Research And Development (RND)

“RND, Chief Howard,” the gruff old Navy Chief barked, answering the annoyance of a phone call this late in their working day.

“Chief Howard, the perfect person for me to talk to. This is Admiral Williams. Is Captain Mulich there by chance?”

“No, sir. He had come in real early this morning for more bullshit meetings, so he left early.”

“Chief, if nothing else, I appreciate your direct approach.”

“Thank you, sir. It’s nice to be noticed.”

“Believe me, Chief, we notice up here. You’re one of the most respected Chiefs I’ve ever known. Say, since the Captain’s not there, I’ll just pass this to you. I know you’ll be the one doing all the grunt work on this anyways.”

“Alright, sir. What can RND do for you today?”

“Not so much today, Chief, but tomorrow. Effective 0800, the Sea Shadow is back on active duty.”

“Outstanding.”

“I figured you would appreciate that. You gents will also get the funding for two more of those ships.”

“Oh really? I sense some sort of if and or but here, sir.”

“There is one small catch. These three ships will not be simply for testing purposes anymore. Each one will need to be fully combat ready.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard, sir. We’ve got the plans built up for other variants. The one we’ve got now should be able to take a the adjustments without too much trouble.”

“Good, Chief. That’s exactly what I wanted to hear. Tell Captain Mulich to call me in the morning and I’ll give him the full rundown. After all, it’s his unfortunate job to deal with me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And it’s your unfortunate job to have to provide the miracles I expect.”

“I’m used to it now, sir.”

“And you’re good at it too.”

The two said their farewells and hung up the phone. They had most certainly held a long working relationship. While Admiral Williams was now commanding Special Operations Command, he had rose through those ranks as a SEAL officer. All too often, his job had been made easier with gadgets, trinkets and trash devised or revised by the research and development crew in Norfolk.

The RND building looked very presentable on the outside, as well as walking through the halls. Offices and common areas were well kept and the personnel took great pride in this.

Research rooms were completely different. Every inch of available counter space seemed to be used in every active room. Books were opened to show research, facts and findings, binders held plastic protected developments from projects, notebooks held the current steps taken. Test equipment was scattered where the project wasn’t.

Across the street, in a harbor front building, sat what RND referred to as ‘The Wharf.’ The building was a very large covered facility that acted as a dry dock and temporary pier facility for test craft. With six piers jutting out into the water, each was capable of holding a Los Angeles Class Submarine. Likewise, they would be more than capable to hold the Mark V’s or Sea Shadows that SOCOM was now requesting.

Next door held ‘The Marina,’ the docking facility for the crafts, ships and boats not currently being tinkered with by personnel. Its high vaulted ceiling, sturdy walls and bay doors kept the vessels cleared from the prying eyes of satellites. Chief Howard entered The Marina a short while after the day crew had departed after their shift. Through this evening and tonight, as most nights, there would simply be a skeleton crew of workers, plus the usual complement of security personnel outside.

## Forming A Foundation

So much time and effort had turned ideas into reality in this pair of buildings. For centuries man has been traveling across the seas at escalating speeds. New ideas were introduced and put into reality by RND which made speed enhancement possible. Researching hydrofoils and air cushions, higher speeds were indeed achieved. Of course this only comes with the drawbacks of increased power requirement and fuel consumption. The major necessity for power is caused by drag, more than half of which is caused by water friction. To the brilliant minds at RND the obviously simple solution was to minimize water contact.

The vehicle with the least amount of drag would be a boat that would not contact the water. Win In Ground effect, or WIG boat, is a boat with wings that sails above the water surface. It floats on a pad of high pressure between the wings and the water. This is created by the ground effect, the relations between the two surfaces. The ground effect is essential to the operation of WIG boats, providing the difference between them and aircraft. The smaller the vessel, the smaller the cruising elevation.

While he had to walk the entire length of the building to get to the right pier, to Chief Howard the trip out of his way was always worth it. Slip twelve held a strange dark figure, sitting peacefully in the water.

It was the eerie dark figure of the Sea Shadow.

This craft had been built in twenty seven months by Skunk Works for the small sum of \$200 million. It operated secretly in the late 1980s and looked like a water bound F-117 Nighthawk.

The Sea Shadow was first unveiled to the public in 1993, and with only a sketchy amount of its short history being revealed. Construction of the Sea Shadow had apparently taken place inside the Hughes Mining Barge, HMB-1, between '83 and '85 in Redwood City California. Night tests were performed over the next two years off of the Santa Cruz Islands in Southern California. The Barge held the ship under cover for maintenance and replenishment during hours of daylight.

In late 1986 tests were suspended and were not begun again until 1993 when the ship was officially disclosed to the public. In late 1994 the tests in the San Francisco Bay had concluded. The Sea Shadow and Hughes Mining Barge were moved to San Diego, where they docked at the 32<sup>nd</sup> Street Pier.

The Hughes Mining Barge, HMB-1 was originally built for a CIA project in the early '70s. After this covert operation it had been put in mothballs for years. As the tale was told in later years, the CIA's venture was an effort to retrieve a Russian nuclear sub that had gone down off the coast of Hawaii in the late '60s.

While the Hughes Mining Barge was now anchored on the other side of the country, further down the channel, the next generation of warships floated gently before Chief Howard. From bow to aft, the ship was a fairly lengthy 164 feet, with a 68 foot beam. It had a 14.5 foot draft and displaced 560 tons with a full load. Its ten man crew had a fairly easy job with such a high tech ship. The crew was little more than babysitters to the computers.

This particular craft, when first launched in the 1980s was only capable of a top speed of ten knots. However, that had all changed in 1993 when it had undergone propulsion upgrades after its release to the public. Speed then had gone up to a top cruising speed of thirty knots. Plans had been drawn up, but not yet tested, with a minor refit of certain parts now in the engines. These plans could very well double the speed of this high tech aquatic dream.

One thing that the Sea Shadow lacks that Naval predecessors have had is a traditional rudder. Navigation is controlled by aft stabilizers and forward canards set up on the inboard side of its submerged twin hulls. Along with the angled sides, it is an aid that allows the ship to stay stable in water up to sea state five, meaning waves of 18 feet.

Fifteen years ago, a young Seaman Howard had worked on this very vessel in the navigation department because of his far above average capabilities with navigation and sonar systems. After tours of duty on virtually every type of Navy ship on the seas or under it, Chief Howard found himself aiding an officer in heading up Research And Development, once again due to his numerous knowledgeable capacities. Finally, he had found a spot where his creativity wasn't chained, but instead allowed to run free.

Chief Howard patted the nose that stuck over the raised platform he stood on and spoke to the ship he believed had a soul of its own.

"It's about damn time someone else came to appreciate you. Maybe now you'll finally get commissioned and someone will use you like they should."

Chief Howard then walked back to the exit door of The Marina and took one last look for the day back to the far end of the bay. The sloped black snout was all that was visible. Pride soared in the salty Chief Petty Officer and he left the building with an extra spring in his step.

Friday May 21, 1999

0930 EST, RND

Chief Howard had been prompt to tell Captain Mulich of the great news. Preparations had begun on readying the Sea Shadow for its renovation. Contractors had been contacted in preparations to begin construction on the next two hulls.

Captain Mulich contacted Admiral Williams to get the full lowdown, the information not passed to Chief Howard. Construction of the next two ships was needed to begin in the next week. All three ships were needed in full form by June first of next year, so the construction would need to be completed rather quickly.

## Forming A Foundation

At half past nine, Captain Mulich had the wheels in motion when he crossed the street to The Marina. Walking the inner distance of the building, he walked up the gang plank that had not been in place for at least a year. Walking across the top of the fiber steel ship, he descended the boarding ladder and walked ten feet forward to the bridge, the control center for the ship.

“Couldn’t wait to get going, huh Chief?”

“No, sir. With as much as we’ve just let her sit here unnoticed, I figured I’d get going on the systems diagnosis. I thought the best place to start would be the computers, see what bugs might be lying in wait there.”

“How long has it been since they were last turned on?”

“About a year as far as I know, sir. Even with as much as I love this old ship, I haven’t had much time in recent months to come over here.”

“I know I’ve been working you too hard. I’ve been stealing a plank owner away from his beloved ship.”

“Well, sir, maybe now I’ll get the time to work with her a little more.”

“Right you are,” Captain Mulich said. “How long do you think the revisions Admiral Williams wanted will take?”

“Seeing as how the girl was designed with some of that in mind originally, it shouldn’t take too long. Most of the space is ready and available for the systems. With the revisions for torpedoes, surface to air, surface to surface, should be able to have all that ready in about six months, while the other crews are working on building the other two from scratch.”

“Six months? Do you really think that’s feasible?”

“Sure do, sir. We’ve got a real knowledgeable crew here that can make the changes.”

“But you and I are probably the only ones with a real knowledge of the Shadow.”

“That may be true, sir, but take a look at the plans we’d devised up for the other five, especially the two we mainly wanted to float first. The systems are all things that are crews have put in place to several other vessels. They were able to take them from one ship to another with pretty much minimal outside support.”

“But naturally, you’re planning on directly overseeing all three hulls, aren’t you?”

“Naturally, sir,” Chief Howard said as the second computer finished its full diagnostics. “But as it looks so far, I doubt I’ll have to oversee all too much. The old girl seems to be almost ready to help us as much as she can.”

Throughout the whole day, Chief Howard never left the ship once. Each computer system checked through all of its programming little by little and bit by bit. Small bugs had presented themselves but the diagnostic abilities of each computer corrected them fully within minutes of their discovery. Another member of the research crew brought Chief lunch so that he wouldn’t have to loose any time leaving. By 1630, the normal quitting time for the day, every system had been checked over from the computers to the electrical systems, engines to the power plant.

The engines had been given the final test of the day, a brief check to ensure their ability to move the ship. With minor power pushed from the throttles the water could be seen churning at the back of the ship. The lines tying the ship to the dock pulled snugly with the minor forward movement of the ship. While it was time to go home for the day, home for the weekend at that, Chief Howard couldn’t help but want to take the good old ship out into the bay. Out to it’s proper home.

Alas, while it was a high tech ship capable of conducting operations with a small crew, a one man crew really couldn’t run the ship as well as would be needed in its first run back to sea in nearly five years. With as much as he wanted to take her to sea tonight, he knew it could and would wait until Monday. Then the proper crew would be on board for the beginning of the sea trials.

Monday August 16, 1999

1020 EST, The Pentagon

Flag officers, those officers with stars on their shoulders, rarely, if ever, knocked on each others doors. They simply walked in, most times announced, many not. The later was the case today as Admiral Williams paid a visit to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Of Staff.

“Perfect,” Admiral Williams said entering the office. “General Rains, this info will be for you as well, so I’m glad you’re here.”

“What do you have for us today, Chet,” General Lockard asked.

“I had already briefed Admiral Jones and he was as equally impressed as I am. This morning I received word from Captain Mulich that the first Sea Shadow, without any serious unforeseen problems, will be ready for trials December first.”

“Really,” General Rains said quite surprised. “I figured they wouldn’t have that ready until at least the beginning of next year.”

“Apparently, Chief Howard had the usual number of tricks up his sleeve,” Admiral Williams said. “Having worked with him for so long, I almost expected this out of him. The two new hulls should be ready June first as needed. Those are already taking shape in their dry docks. According to Captain Mulich, they’ve got people working twenty four seven on getting this done.”

“Don’t they have anything else to do,” General Rains inquired.

## Forming A Foundation

“Sure, but most of their crew is beyond excited about this project. The majority down there don’t mind putting in extra hours to help out on the Shadow, just to have a part in it.”

“Sounds like some dedicated people down there,” General Lockard said.

“They all know the history of this ship and what it could do for the naval service. Everyone seems to be glad to have the chance to be involved in making history.”

“I’m glad to hear we have so many hard chargers out there.”

“Now that we have the money to give them what they want, morale is most definitely improving.”

And things were most definitely improving. With almost three months into the work on the two new hulls, each was just barely under a quarter of the way completed. Most importantly, they were being built on schedule. The new engines were in the first hull and had already been set in both new hulls. A full compliment of weapons had been added into the designs and could now be used with these ships. The AIM-54 Phoenix, Penguin anti ship missile, Sparrow and Mark 46, 48 and 50 torpedoes were being installed for use. A new auto loader was being used for the systems which could also be used with ease by the crew, should the computer controls not work.

The Mark Vs were also ready and fully functional. Being of the same basic design as the standard Mark V, the only major difference with these RND crafts was the fibersteel skins, making their radar signature very limited. The high speed craft, capable of fifty knots, is in standard use to carry Special Ops Forces. While these are more often than not SEALs, it is used to take these troops into and out of areas where there is a low or medium threat. There are also times when this swift ship will support the coastal patrols normally taken care of by patrol craft.

Until the introduction of these newly operable Sea Shadows, the Mark V was the newest and most versatile high performance craft introduced. The combatant ships have greatly improved maritime special operations abilities.

A Mark V detachment contains two boats and their crew. They can be delivered into their area of operations by two C-5 Galaxy aircraft or by a well or flight deck equipped surface ships. Of course they can also get there on their own power and deploy within 48 hours. These versatile 82 foot long, 17 foot wide vessels can operate from a shore facility or from well deck equipped ships.

### Chapter Two

#### Roll Call

Monday October 15, 1999

0715 EST, Naval Air Station Pensacola, Old Warehouse

The old brick building they came up to had obviously seen better days. The mortar between the cracked but hardly faded bricks was crumbling and looked in bad need of repair. Proof once again of the previous President’s lack of interest in supporting the military. All too often Democrats had spent more time money and efforts worrying about themselves and their own best interests, all at the cost of the military. This building stood, although just barely, as a testament to this truth.

Lance Corporal Jack Jackson looked around and noted that there were only a couple of other Lance Corporals there. Everyone else was a PFC. If a platoon was being formed out of this as he had heard was suspected, he figured he’d wind up being a defacto squad leader, just by way of rank. He stood at five and a half feet and was set at a fairly stocky one hundred sixty pounds. His hazel eyes scanned the crowd to see if there were any familiar faces or anyone else of the same rank. Just noting the same ones from before, he went in to take his seat.

Born in 1978, Jack had joined the Marine Corps after college had become boring. College on the south side of Chicago seemed to have as many distractions as it did learning lessons. At least with his marketing and communications classes, he was doing better than he did in high school. To the satisfaction of both his parents and himself, Jack was proud of the change in grades when he could actually take classes he was interested in. During High School his grades were never very good and he came close to failing several courses, although never did.

Trying work in the civilian sector proved few chances for advancement. He worked as an Assistant Manager at a motivational store that he’d worked at through high school. Just to help pass the time and for a little more money, he also worked as the Assistant Manager at a Radio Shack. He had first worked at the store to help out his friend who was the manager. They were in pretty desperate need for another sales associate and Jack stepped up to help out. He also helped out on weekends and evenings producing sports shows and games for a radio station. The Sports Director had been one of the hosts of a sports show Jack had produced at another radio station. When another producer left this other station, Jack had again stepped up to help a friend. But it all seemed to provide the same route for the future.

Looking into other options, the military seemed to be the best. He contacted all of the services, tried all the routes. The Coast Guard and Navy didn’t like a small medical problem he’d had in the past. The Air Force recruiter never returned phone calls. The Army recruiter was calling twice a day.

The Marine recruiter, however, was very helpful, always had the answers to the questions right on hand and called once a week “just to check up and see if you had any questions” and said “if questions come up or you decide to go ahead, just give us a call.”

## Forming A Foundation

Jack appreciated the no bullshit, no hassle attitude that the Marines were giving him.

*What the hell, Jack thought. I've never taken the easy way out before. Why start now.*

Jack enlisted on Memorial Day in 1997. Boot camp, while a definite challenge to him, was nothing near impossible. While he wasn't the top graduate of his platoon, he was definitely in the upper parts.

Going through Marine Combat Training, or MCT, Jack picked up the weapons systems they taught with relative ease. Patrol formations were a little more challenging, remembering the names and the formations they formed. The communications hand signals were easy, having been a communications man for five years.

Upon graduation from MCT Jack reported to Avionics Technician School at NAS Pensacola. The Marine Air Training Support Group Commander, Colonel Larsen, had been stationed with Jack's uncle, a retired Colonel. After the CO pulled a few strings, Jack was assigned to the Blue Angels. Instead of going through all the schoolings for his job, Jack would learn what he didn't know through on the job training. After two months, he was determined to know the tasks of the job and received the job code rating.

When their season ended late that fall, Jack was sent through the course to become a Field Radio Operator. With his uncle having been a Chief of Staff for a few select highly placed and highly respected Generals, Jack was given two Military Occupational Specialties (MOS), instead of most Marines single job.

Jack had excelled there as well as in his avionics training and reported back to the squadron at the conclusion. He was just in time to get the planes back and fully ready for the 1998 season. That season wound its way eventually to an end, with Jack having traveled many places stateside he had always wanted to visit. Now the 1999 season was drawing near an end and he was looking at a new job.

Most of those told to be present seemed to show up within two minutes of each other. There were some that had arrived earlier and those who straggled in a little later, but most were there at 0715, the standard Marine Corps issue fifteen minutes prior. The usual congregation of smokers stood outside one door to the side of the building, marking it as the evident entrance to the meeting point. At 0730 with everyone present and in a seat, the room was called to attention as Major General Henry Oztrike entered the room.

"Good morning, Marines. Please take your seats," he said walking to the front. He reached the podium just as the scuffing of bodies and chairs stopped. "Good morning," he started and received the same greeting mumbled in reply. "My name is Major General Henry Oztrike. I am the Commanding General of Phoenix Company, Special Operations Command. Judging by the looks scattered around the room right now that brings to bear some light on the mystery of why you're all here.

"You may have seen some gentlemen in suits and ties poking around your commands, or had heard about them talking to people in your hometowns you knew and grew up with, including your parents. This was not, as the suits had said, just a follow up inquiry for your security clearances of joining the military and staying on active duty in your respective MOS. They were in fact checking upon you for a higher security clearance than you already have, for a job most of you have thought about on many occasions.

"I'm fairly certain everyone here has pictured themselves on some top secret mission far away from home in a land you couldn't hardly find on a globe, doing a dangerous job and saving the world for democracy once again. This may be your chance of a lifetime.

"Gentlemen, this briefing has been classified Top Secret. The discussions, facts and information passed in this brief have been classified in the interest of national security. The information discussed here in today shall not be discussed outside of a secure location or to those without proper authorization.

"With that Bravo Sierra done, I can now tell you this. You have all been selected for a top secret, completely black op platoon. Each of you will be asked a series of questions and put through a sequence of tests, should you choose to potentially accept a spot in this platoon. You will then be placed in a squad and given a task in holding with your skills and abilities, most likely in the MOS you have now.

"Some of you will be communications techs, working with radios and computers. Some of you will be intelligence analysts, processing information that we receive. Others, motor transportation, doing both the driving and fixing of military vehicles. A few will be explosives ordinance disposal, both making and defusing bombs and other explosives. Then there will be a very select few that will be scout snipers, capable of shooting the enemy at the distance of one mile or greater.

"The training will be intense, the targets will be hot and the enemy unaware. Before we move further, there is one thing that you need to be sure to ask yourself. Could you look your enemy in the eye and kill him? With that in mind, what I'd like you to do is put your head down on the desk in front of you. Now if there are any conscientious objectors, that is, if you would have a problem killing someone, please stand and leave the room without fear of being seen and judged by your peers."

To his amazement, the General watched as everyone put their heads down on their desk, but no one left the room. Nodding his pleasure, the General spoke again.

"Very well. Now take a look around you. You will see that everyone is still here. So far it looks like we may have picked the right group of Marines. Now I'm going to turn things over to Sergeant Major Blair, who will give the scoop on what's going to be happening the rest of the day. Sergeant Major, their yours. Just carry on when I leave."

## Forming A Foundation

“Good Morning Marines. As the General said, I am Sergeant Major Blair. The first thing we’ll be doing this morning is taking a test similar to the ASVAB. It is simply an aptitude test to see how your skills and abilities can be put to use in the best possible way. We’ll take a lunch break after that and come back this afternoon and run you through some tactical decision games to see how you think. Sergeant Kerry is now passing out these tests. Once you get one and pass the rest on, you can begin. Bring your tests and answer sheets to the front when you’re done. At that point you’re on your lunch break. Be back here at 1300. Begin.”

The Marines and Corpsman there quietly began their tests. As promised, it was yet another aptitude test that they had all seen so many of in their young lives. From the ASVAB they took before enlisting, to the SAT or ACT and various other aptitude tests in High School, this was just one more of those endless fill in the bubble tests.

Some two hours later, they began to finish one by one and left to begin an early lunch.

1050 EST, Chow Hall

The doors would be opening soon, allowing the hard working Marines, Sailors and Airmen stationed aboard NAS Pensacola to get their noon meal.

Among those waiting was a tall, skinny Navy Corpsman with brown hair sitting at one of the tables, patiently reading a magazine. His brown eyes looked down at the magazine he had purchased the night before.

Hospital Corpsman Apprentice Dave “Spazz” Spazito was born and raised in Detroit. During elementary school he had developed a passion for helping feel better. Cuts and scrapes on the playground were easy fixes for him, even when band aids weren’t around. In High School he had gone to school at night, taking EMT classes at the local college. Coming from a middle class family, somewhat strapped for money, if it hadn’t been for the local EMS unit sponsoring him, he wouldn’t have been able to afford the higher cost training.

All they asked in return was that he work for them for two years.

Naturally, he had jumped on the training and was a licensed Emergency Medical Technician Paramedic at the age of eighteen.

However, he was still in Detroit, a city that, while he loved, he wanted some time away from. That’s when the military began to play into his thoughts. Dave Spazito had never taken the easy way out in his life and he certainly didn’t want to start now. His first choice was the United States Marine Corps.

Disappointment followed when he found out that there were no medical jobs in the Marine Corps. All of those jobs, he was told, were taken care of by Navy Corpsmen. There were, however, Navy Corpsman stationed with Marine units who did the job of Marine Medics, just in the uniform of the U.S. Navy.

The Marine recruiter walked him next door to the Navy recruiter and explained the situation. Dave Spazito was told he could become a Navy Corpsman and joined on the spot. Three days later, after leaving his beloved job as a Paramedic and saying goodbye to his friends and loved ones, he was on his way to the Naval Training Center Great Lakes.

He breezed through basic training and was the top of his class in Corpsman school. Being the top graduate, he received his choice of duty stations and an advanced school. Spazz chose to go through Field Medical Service School in North Carolina. With the winter nearing, he decided it would be nice to be somewhere warm for once. After FMSS he was off to the Branch Medical Clinic, Naval Air Station Pensacola.

His true hopes now, the ones that would lead him to being with the Marine Corps as fully as he had originally hoped for, would be to become a Recon Corpsman. These were some of the top rated Docs that weren’t on a SEAL team. He knew, at least greatly hoped, that becoming a part of this platoon would bring him to his recon qualification. Being that he had gone through field medical training, Spazito could rightfully go to a Marine unit now, but he might just as well get stationed on a Marine base at the Naval Hospital. If his suspicions of this platoon were correct, he would be forever more with a Marine unit. If nothing else, it would bring him into the element he had wanted since he first spoke to a recruiter.

As he closed the latest copy of Aviation Journal and set it down, a Marine Lance Corporal strolled nearby and noticed it.

“Is that this months copy, Doc,” asked Lance Corporal Jackson unsurely.

“Yeah. Just picked it up last night. Didn’t really have too much of a chance to read through it ‘til just now.”

“You mind if I take a look?”

“Go right ahead.”

The Lance Corporal sat down and flipped through the pages one by one, glancing briefly at the contents of each one.

“I’m gonna pick one up at the exchange later, I just wanted to see what was in it.”

“That’s cool,” the Doc replied. “Hey, you were over there for that brief with the General this morning, right?”

“Yeah, can you believe all that?”

“It’s pretty far out there man. By the way, I’m HA Spazito, but everyone calls me Spazz.”

“Lance Corporal Jackson. Call me Jack.”

“Well, I think we all joined to change the world in one way or another. Looks like this group we’re with might just have that chance a little more than anyone else.”

## Forming A Foundation

“Not too much danger now, though. Not in the world of moderate peace we have now. There’s no wars going on that we’re involved in.”

“But you never know what might come up soon. At least I know what my job will be.”

Jack chuckled before saying, “I just hope I can stick around something high tech. I’m sure that test will tell them that just like the ASVAB did. I’ve been a techie for five years now. It’s pretty much all I really can do best.”

“I know what you mean. I’m an EMT Paramedic and rescue tech. That’s why I became a Doc. It’s what I know.”

“Well, now that the doors are open, let’s get something to eat.”

“Good call.”

The two walked in and got their food. Navy mess halls on air stations had notorious reputations for being the best in the navy, second only to submarines or carriers. Made to order eggs and omelets in the morning and burgers cooked to preferences in the afternoon and evening. Nothing to shrug at, especially for the Marines that had just come from combat training, eating their MREs. MRE stood for Meals Ready to Eat, but were referred to by Marines as Meals Rejected by Everyone. Preprocessed food served out of small bags was not a Marine’s idea of good eating. Especially with the unpleasant process of using the bathroom after a week straight of them. Many Marines that had to live on MREs for extended periods would rather kill and cook their own dinner than dine on the bag nasties.

They had taken their provisions and found a seat when the Doc asked, “So where you from?”

“Chicago. Lived there for fifteen years before I enlisted. You?”

“Detroit. Born and raised. Coming out here is quite a change for me. I’m used to the hustle and bustle of the big city, as I’m sure you are too. This is a small town compared to what I’m used to and it’s just so laid back here.”

“Yeah, but I could sure live with the laid back for the rest of my life. I love how we can go to the beach and be sweating here in October. You know we could never get away with that where we’re from. I could get used to this, and I guess I have in all the time I’ve been here.”

“I could get used to it too, and I guess I really am. Most of my weekends and even some of the evenings when I’m not on duty I’ll be on the beach. Things at the clinic just keep me working so hard I need to do something to just chill out.”

“I know what you mean. Just being able to kick back and drink a couple cold ones on the beach could help just about anyone relax.”

“I never was much of a drinker before, and not just because I’m too young.”

“If you’re old enough to serve and die for your country you should be able to drink. So long as you don’t get too drunk and do something stupid.”

“True, and I really do agree with that. But I’ve found myself drinking more and more lately. Worst part is, I’ve kinda been enjoying it. Mark and John from over at the Coast Guard Station have been meeting me out there and we’ve just been having a good old time chillin’ and drinkin’.”

“Well Doc, that’s just good old friendship too. Camaraderie can go a long way, even if it is with the Puddle Pirates.”

“It sure can. And I’ll tell you, they’re some pretty good folks over there. Got a crew of sixteen working that station. Last week I went out with them on their rigid raider and would you believe that those nut cases water ski behind that thing?”

“I can believe it. I know John and I could picture him pullin’ off something like that.”

“Man it’s getting crowded now.”

“Sure is. I recognize a couple of these faces from earlier, too. Say, you work over here at the clinic, right?”

“Sure do,” Spazz said.

“I thought I’d seen you around here before. I just wasn’t sure if you were clinic staff or over at the hospital.”

A new figure walked slowly, eyeing for a table to sit at. He was a couple of inches taller than Jack, and almost as skinny as the Doc. He looked down with his eyes the color of steel.

“Y’all mind if I sit with you,” came a slow southern drawl.

“No,” Jack said. “Go right ahead. I’m Jack, this is Doc Spazz.”

“I’m Miller. Y’all were over there this morning for that brief with the General, right?”

“Yeah. What’d you think of all of that?”

“Well, should be interesting. They’ll probably tell me the same thing the recruiters told me though. ‘About all you can do is shoot.’ That’s what I’m perfectly happy with. I mean, hell, I’m from the north part of Orange Beach, Alabama. I’m a country boy if ever there was one, and all I’m good at is shootin’.”

“So my likely guess,” commented the Corpsman, “is that you’re infantry, most likely an 0311.”

“You got it Doc. Never dropped more than five points on the rifle range. Always hit black though.”

“You oughta go for scout sniper if you’re shootin’ that good,” said Jack.

“Been wanting to. My battalion’s supposed to be sending me soon. Hopefully this shit’ll speed up the process.”

Private First Class Brew Miller truly did hold abilities in little other than shooting. About the only thing else he could do if he tried, was being a leader.

Born and raised in Orange Beach, Alabama in March of 1981, he had been a hunter all of his life. His dad would take him deer hunting every fall, where Brew would always bag the bigger deer from the larger distances. Given a good

## Forming A Foundation

hunting rifle, rather than a rusty shotgun, Miller was able to hit deer way beyond the range of any other hunter known to his family.

Upon graduating High School, Brew Miller knew that he only had two choices for a career. It was either the military or SWAT Sniper. He really wasn't sure if he had the capabilities of standard law enforcement. After two days of solid soul searching, he decided on becoming a Marine. If he was going to be in the military as almost his only option, he may as well be the best.

He enlisted and shipped off to boot camp two weeks after graduating High School. Being in good physical condition, he wasn't challenged very much in that perspective in basic training, neither was he in the School Of Infantry. The only challenge for him was remembering all of the information thrown at him in so many classes.

Brew Miller may be of average height and build, but he has more strength than the muscles on his frame may show. While he may be what some would call skinny, his strength, both physical and inner, could rival almost anyone's. Being from LA, or Lower Alabama, the Orange Beach native is what his infantry squad views as the epitome of redneck. He has a simple lifestyle with only the basic needs.

The better parts of his inner strengths are his discipline and respect. His actions and attitudes emanate these traits at all times. Even when he lets loose to have a good time, he still has a well disciplined manner. His attitude brings out the same qualities in other people as much to a commanding effect as a good old boy can. Much the same he demands respect of his friends.

He has the ability and the know how to be a squad leader, but doesn't want the job because he's "too simple minded." He prefers to simply focus on the job at hand. As a second in charge in his infantry squad in SOI he was very much an authoritarian, demanding respect from others for his squad leader and he is very insistent that the squad leader's orders be followed.

It's not that Brew is stupid by any means, he's just more of a simple person. He needed to keep things around him as simple as possible to be truly happy. The same could definitely be said for his job. Point the weapon, shoot the weapon.

Miller knew that things worked out for the best, he couldn't stay in the Marine Corps for the rest of his life. He was hoping to become a scout sniper before he became a Non Commissioned Officer, or NCO. That way at least he would have the long range shooting training done far before the time ever came for him to apply for a police department, let alone SWAT.

Although, if things worked out for the worst, he would stay in the Marine Corps for the rest of his life and die in some foreign land. He 'sure as hell hope that never happens.'

The three continued their lunch conversing as new acquaintances would. Each of them could feel a friendship growing in their own way. This meant something special to each of them, as friendships are the most important thing you can have in the military. A friendship is the sole thing that helps a person keep their sanity in their demanding lives.

Friendship in the military, especially in combat units, provides the stability that allows each individual to continue day to day. The duties required of each of them can be more demanding than most people in American society realize. Sixteen to eighteen, even twenty hour work days are not uncommon, while their counterparts in the civilian world might work eight to ten hours a day.

It isn't just the long hours that wear on them. After a time of being deprived of rest on a regular basis, the body can put forth a full day of work on a few hours of sleep. What is a bigger drain to combat Marines and Corpsman is the mental strain of staying locked on a task for those long hours. It is the demand of having to be a subject matter expert in one area or another. Problems can arise where these Marines are told simply to fix the problem and are left to accomplish the mission with their knowledge and sometimes very limited resources. The mental wear can tire them out more than the physical labor they may need to perform in their tasks. The little problems can seem very mundane until the time comes when rounds begin to fly.

The biggest strain for these combat Marines and Corpsmen, the one that most adds fuel to their desire for a close mutual friendship, is the emotional toils and traumas. When a mission is planned out, casualties on our side are not factored into the plan. The brass does not plan for one person or another to give his life in certainty. It is accepted that it might happen, but it is not planned on. However, no plan ever survives first contact with the enemy.

Before entering combat, each person must ask themselves the inevitable. It was the same thing that the General asked them to do this morning. Could I take someone's life? If it came down to it, most would take the life of someone else if it meant preserving their own. As General Patton had said, "No poor bastard every won a war by dying for his country. No, they won wars by making the other poor bastard die for his country."

Watching a person die is not a pleasant site to see and it is a long time coming before you can get those sometimes very horrific sites out of your mind. They can come back to haunt you in your dreams for years to come. The part of this massacre that hits these men of combat the most is when their friends or squad members die. Whether you hold them as they go, watch them die or see them in post mortem, it is something that you would no sooner forget than your own name. When someone you know dies in combat it weighs on you, for you knew them as a person, as a friend, not just a warrior.

This is why these relationships are more than friendships. They are more closely a brotherhood, bound by blood, sweat, tears and an unspoken creed to back up your comrade in their time of need. They are brothers in arms.

## Forming A Foundation

1300 EST, Old Warehouse

As slowly as they had filed out, the Marines and Docs came back at the appointed time. Feeling renourished and somewhat relaxed from the monotony of another aptitude test, they took their seats and prepared for the afternoon.

Sitting off to the side was one of the four Lance Corporals in the room. Ryan McCoy had joined the Marine Corps in hopes of improving his self confidence. He was just over six feet tall and very skinny, although he was fairly muscular, so he knew he could handle well enough with the physical aspect. Growing up he had always been the one that was quiet and shy, not feeling at all assured in himself. His dad had never paid much attention to him, and Ryan knew he most likely would have suffered regular beatings if his dad wasn't too busy neglecting and completely ignoring him.

Ryan wasn't exactly a book worm or a nerd by most standards, but he did have a good deal of sense and knowledge to him. What he didn't have was the means to afford his way through college. He was expecting what he had got from his dad on his eighteenth birthday.

"Happy birthday," his dad said. "Your eighteen and you're an adult now. Get out."

After the years of mistreatment and mental abuse, Ryan was glad to oblige. Unbeknown to both of his parents he had been talking to the recruiters for the previous month. Ryan moved out all of his belongings and spent his first night of adulthood at his best friends house. His best friend, whom he'd known practically all of his life, was the only person that provided Ryan a sense of belonging and any substance of pride in himself.

Once upon a younger year, Ryan had a conversation with Jeff about how worthless his dad made him feel. He was an only child and it seemed like his parents didn't even know he existed.

"Don't worry, Ryan," Jeff told him before making a small cut in both of their right palms. When the blood began to pool in their cupped hand, the two friends clasped them together. Jeff then continued, "We're brothers now. You mean more to me than anything I could ever hope to explain."

That had been when they were twelve. Now, six years later, Ryan told his friend Jeff of his plans. To Ryan it was not so much in trying to explain his future, but more to ask permission.

"Hell yeah," Jeff had said. "I think you should definitely do it."

Over the next two days, Ryan had completed the process of enlisting, which could be quite a laborious process. By talking his friend Jeff into joining as well, Ryan enlisted and shipped off to boot camp as a contract PFC, skipping over the rank of Private. With a good bit of fortune in their favor, the two friends were placed in the same boot camp platoon. Through boot camp Ryan surprised not only his platoon but also himself in becoming proficient in whatever task was at hand. With a good score on the knowledge test, the highest rifle score in the company and the highest Physical Fitness Test score, he was promoted to Lance Corporal at the end of boot camp as his company's Honor Man.

In fact, the only thing he had not excelled in was leadership. He was still quiet and shy, but fortunately it wasn't as bad as it had been in High School. Combat training had put him as a squad leader in his platoon by way of rank. He was yelled at quite often for not taking as aggressive of a stance with his squad as his infantry NCOs would have liked. With the help of two people from his boot camp platoon that were now in his squad, he managed to make things at least appear right to the NCOs. Naturally, Jeff was one of those two. His two assistants did the brunt force of the work to make their friend and squad leader look good. Ryan tried to learn what he could from them about being a squad leader, but he had trouble putting it into action.

In school to become an administrative clerk, he would have been in charge of the whole class if there wasn't a Corporal going through the class with them. The Corporal, on his second enlistment, was changing MOS's and knew a great deal of leadership and passed on to his assistant what he could.

But knowing the skills didn't always mean you could do them proficiently. Ryan knew he still had a lot of work to do to become a leader as all Marines are supposed to be capable of being. He slid into the groove in his new section and tried to grow little by little more assertive with leadership. Being the new guy, and the junior rank of his shop on top of that, he didn't get very many chances for that. Now that he was with a platoon like this, he knew it was the time to truly get serious about being a leader. That thought more than anything was on his mind as he brought himself back to the warehouse after lunch.

Sergeant Kerry passed out sealed envelopes in the same manner as the tests of that morning. All were told to leave them sealed until further instructions from the Sergeant Major. Fortunately for curiosity's sake, those instructions came shortly after.

"Good afternoon," began Sergeant Major Blair. "I trust all of you had a nice extended lunch and you're all ready for your next challenge. My fine Sergeant handed out sealed envelopes that hold the tactical scenario you will need to explain your way through. When I give the word, you will open your envelope and read through the scenario. Once you've done that you will need to devise a plan and write it out on the paper provided for you. Make sure you're as thorough and descriptive as possible. I know some of your writing skills may not be that good, but you're being judged on your ideas, not your grammar. Be sure to put your rank and name at the top of each page, as well as your scenario number. Please put the page number at the bottom.

## Forming A Foundation

“When you’re done, bring them up front to Sergeant Kerry and you’re secured for the evening. Tomorrow morning be back here at 0730. We’ll be dividing you up into your squads then. Any questions? Seeing none, open your envelopes and begin.”

Each person opened their envelope to find a scenario based on an actual event. Each one was different, but required a good deal of thought and planning. Some scenarios were given a platoon of Marines, some a squad and others only a fire team of four Marines. The personnel provided depended on the difficulty of their mission.

The room was very quiet for fifteen minutes as no one wrote, but everyone thought. They might not be as experienced in war fighting methods as someone with the seniority of the Sergeant Major that had stood before them, but each had been chosen at least in part for their creativity in the past while accomplishing tasks. Each person there was known at least in some way for outside the box thinking.

While some of them plotted out a five-page mission plan, others took up to twenty pages. Through all of this and their evening of liberty, each Marine and Corpsman wondered who from this room would be in their squad. They thought about if they might be a squad leader or one of the squad. Each wondered about the officer that would be assigned to their squad.

There were four senior Lieutenants that were going to be in the platoon, one with each squad. The officer in charge of each squad would rotate on occasion to diversify the training and leadership of each squad. This was just one more way that this platoon would make military history.

Every other platoon had only one officer per platoon, not four. Most platoons of this size had at least a dozen NCOs. This platoon had none. Most platoons, once you were placed in them, you were told to go there with no say of your own and you were stuck there. With the demands required here, it was completely voluntary, and anyone could leave at any time.

This was truly a platoon unlike any other. Naturally, they would be taken and trained, farther than Marines were in boot camp. It wasn’t necessary for them to be the most physical of all warriors. This group would be further trained in how to out think their enemies, how to out gun them. They would outsmart their foes by ways and means of unconventional maneuvers.

Those outside the box ideas were taking shape already as the Marines and Corpsmen put the pen to the paper. Their plans were much more elaborate than anyone in the seniority would have expected. More importantly, their plans were more detailed and more feasible than any had hoped for.

1445 EST, Blue Angels Hangar

“Jackson,” Chief Schulze bellowed.

“Yes Chief,” Jack replied.

“It’s about damn time you got back. Been slacking off all goddamn day. While you’ve been off lollygagging around somewhere I’ve had to deal with a busted plane and a know it all pilot.”

“Good to see you too, Chief. Now if you don’t mind, I’ll just grab my tool box and fix my plane.”

“You’d better goddammit. And keep Hobstock away from me.”

“You got it Chief.”

Jack wheeled his toolbox out to the corner of the hangar where his beloved number two plane sat. No matter how many times he saw it, it still humbled him to be able to call this beautiful sight his own. He may not be a high ranking person, but he was still the lead avionics and electronics tech for “The Duce,” and the one over all responsible for getting things done. Chief Schulze, being one of two Chiefs there, was responsible for four planes, the Duce being one of them.

Towing his toolbox along side the plane, Jack unconsciously patted the nose as he always did. Call it superstition or call it work habit, he believed it kept the plane working with as few problems as necessary. After a short while, Jack had one of the side panels open and was about to begin his tests to fix what was developing into a normal, routine problem.

“Jack,” called one of the pilots. “Where you been?”

“Avoiding you, Hobs.”

Major Hobstock was the pilot of the Duce and an even more annoying problem than any electrical faults. Notorious throughout air wings in the military was the belief that the planes belonged to the enlisted crews that kept the planes working. They were just loaned to the pilots who flew them.

“You gonna get some work done on this old girl? Correct a few problems?”

“There wouldn’t be any problems if you’d quit fiddling with it all the time.”

“I don’t fiddle with it. So do you think you can fix that problem we’ve been running into?”

“Sure. At least I know what I’m doing.”

“If you knew what you were doing I wouldn’t have to fiddle with it all the time,” Hobs joked.

“That sounds like an admission of guilt right there, flyboy.”

“Whatever Jack. So can you teach me a little more about how to fix this? I’d kinda like to learn a little more.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s just what Chief Schulze and I need. Another pilot running around thinking he knows everything.”

## Forming A Foundation

Jack showed Hobs some of the procedures in testing various problems. Hobstock did know a good deal about it, having a degree in aeronautical engineering. Jack, along with most of the enlisted men everywhere, believed that smart in a book isn't always smart in the head. Granted this wasn't always the case, but it was true more often than not.

Especially with officers.

Tuesday October 18, 1999

0730 EST, Old Warehouse

“Attention on deck!” Sergeant Kelly bellowed.

General Oztrike entered the room followed by a Major and four First Lieutenants.

“Seats,” called the General. “Good morning once again. We really need to stop meeting like this.”

The Marines chuckled at his humor. It brought out a respect from them that he could make these jokes. He didn't try to act superior or play his hand with a heavier collar. Some people in leadership positions acted as if you should fall at their feet and lick their boots because they were senior to you. All too often Lieutenants fell into this mold. Fresh out of OCS, Officer Candidate School, these Marine Lieutenants would believe that they were God's gift to the Marine Corps and knew everything. However, the only difference between a Second Lieutenant and a PFC was that the PFC had been promoted.

“Marines, this is Major Ingram who will be your platoon commander. These four Lieutenants will be the squad commanders, simply your OIC. They are Lieutenants Jardine, Green, Gasper and Williams. They're all pretty gung ho and ready to go. Now we're going to divide you up into your squads, which were chosen by your skills, abilities and most importantly I'm sure you'd think, your personalities.

“First squad, OIC Lieutenant Jasper, squad leader Lance Corporal Cline. In the squad are PFCs Slocum, Willis, Barney, Gunn, Shott, Allen, Atkinson, Ball, East, Minisci and Sean Murphey.

“Second Squad, OIC is Lieutenant Green, squad leader LCpl Jackson. Squad members are PFCs John Murphy, Miller, Stanley, Turrentine, Pile, Holewinski, Riggey, Cooney, Hillery, Carlson and Goldman.

“Third squad OIC is Lieutenant Gordon, squad leader is Lance Corporal Sturgil. Squad Members PFCs Cofske, Harper, Clevenger, Dennis, Lafon, Kirklighter, Brandon Johnson, McLelland, Messina, Minard and Rice.

“Fourth squad OIC is Lieutenant Williams, squad leader Lance Corporal McCoy. They'll be in charge of PFCs Sharp, Rogers, Willis, Keim, Ricks, Tomasini, Caldwell, Campbell, Jeremy Johnson, Martin and Santos.

“Corpsmen for the squads will be Docs Zurek, Spazito, Johnson and Collins, respectfully. With all that said and done, I'm going to leave all of you to Major Ingram and your Lieutenants. Again, carry on when I leave. I hate all that attention shit. I'll see all of you again in two weeks.”

“Good morning, Marines. I'm Major Ingram, your platoon commander. Gunny Fields, who will be your SNCOIC (Staff Non Commissioned Officer In Charge) and myself will be overseeing the progression of training over the next two and a half weeks. You will be given periods of instruction on many new topics, plus advanced course on several topics you've been through already. Some of these will be course credits with the Marine Corps Institute and can even transfer over to college credit. But there will be a lot of work. It will take a lot of blood, sweat and tears. But you all made it through boot camp or OCS, so I know you can make it through this.

“There will be no head games, no messing with your minds. We're not here to degrade you, just to make you better. The information you will be learning and the problems thrown at you will definitely challenge you mentally. You're all in good shape, which is a plus, since you will be challenged physically as well. I will encourage this of you; work smarter, not harder. It's better to out smart your enemy than to have to try to out gun him, or out muscle him. Using brute force is something I know most of you would like to avoid if at all possible.

“Your Lieutenants have been individually briefed on what's gonna be happening and can give you a better idea of the training schedule. They'll be taking you off somewhere for a getting to know you session with the squad leaders first, and then the squad. Are there any questions for me? Seeing none, let's have first squad here in this corner to my right, second squad in this corner to my left, third in the back right and fourth in the back left. OICs take charge and carry out the plan of the day.”

Each person tentatively made their way to their corners, unsure of those around them. Sometimes there can be nothing worse than a nervous Marine. To them danger can be sensed, smelled in the air. Once danger is perceived, they go into defense mode, which can alternately and ultimately be viewed as attack mode. They will do whatever they feel necessary to eliminate any threat to their well being, or to the well being of their friends. While this situation was not that intense, it did have the Marines somewhat on edge. However, this was more due to the fact of each Marine's fear of the unknown.

Second squad had gathered in their corner to begin their work together. In the approach, Jack shook hands with Miller and Doc. At least he knew he could count on two other people having what he had deemed to be the right attitude. Gathering around their OIC in a makeshift circle, they sat on top of desks or leaned against walls or shelves.

## Forming A Foundation

“Well, squad,” Lieutenant Green started, addressing second squad, “I guess this is all of us, so let’s get started. I’d rather not go through all of this here, though. We’ve got the rest of the day to take care of this, and since we can go elsewhere let’s do so. The E Club should be open right about now, so let’s head on down the street. Lance Corporal Jackson, I’d like to talk to you once there.”

0830 EST, Enlisted Club

“I don’t know if a lot of the rest of the folks would take too kindly to a Lieutenant hanging around here, sir.”

“I just hope,” Lt. Green replied, “That you can hold them at bay, Lance Corporal.”

“You can just call me Jack, sir. Everyone else does.”

“I’d read that in your file. Just decided not to go by your real first name?”

“My last name just got ground down into a nickname and it stuck. Happens a lot in the military. Mine just got passed down from my uncle, really.”

“That’s right, Colonel Jackson. From what I understand the only other Marine in your family and the first CO to our Commanding General.”

“That’s right sir. They must have a pretty good file on me.”

“They gave me one on each person in the squad. What I’d like to do is just run through them one by one and see how they are in person. It’s hard to get an idea of little quirks and quips from a piece of paper.”

“Right you are.”

“What I want to do first, since the squad seems happy playing pool for right now, is to just talk to you first, then we both talk to the squad, one member at a time.”

“Sounds good, sir.”

“Alright then, let’s get started. I see you’re an avionics tech and a communications tech, both radio *and* computer. That’s a rare combination.”

“Made even more rare by the fact that I actually have FCC licenses to do this sort of thing.”

“So I see. General Mobile Radio, Ham radio and Restricted Radiotelephone. Pretty good clearance stuff there.”

“Never hurts to better involve yourself in a career you enjoy.”

“True enough. And let’s see here, you worked at several radio stations around Chicago where you grew up.”

“Yeah, this is what radio people really look like. I also worked as the Assistant Manager at a Radio Shack. One more place to pick up techie stuff.”

“So tell me Jack, how do you think we should run this squad?”

“Tell you what, I’ll worry about the men, you just worry about the Major, sir. I can take care of the majority of what needs to happen. Most of these guys are hardly right out of Combat Training and MOS school. They really don’t know how to act around officers. Trying to just play the nice guy would be a good start. Whatever needs to get done just let me know and I’ll get it done. With my uncle I’m used to dealing with military officers.”

“So basically, you just want the LT to stay in his office?”

“That would be nice.”

“Well, I’ll do that as much as possible. Now, on to the squad. Do you know any of these guys?”

“Three of them. I work with Murphy now. Had lunch with Miller and our Doc yesterday.”

“And you all wind up in the same squad. So tell me about Murphy.”

“Well, he’s an admin clerk from Toledo. Pretty quiet guy, but gets along well. He’s pretty much the kind that avoids confrontation. He leave’s the room when some of the rest of my guys get going with wrestling or sparring. I’m afraid he might be a pacifist, but I’ll give him a chance at this. Now Miller, as far as I can tell, is a hard-core, well-disciplined and well-trained grunt. I understand he’s a damned good shot with pretty much any weapon in the arsenal. He’s wanting to be a scout sniper pretty bad.”

“That can probably be arranged now. At least it’s a pretty sure thing.”

“Good. That would sure make him happy. And Doc seems like a shit hot Corpsman. He’s an EMT Paramedic with two years on the job before he entered the Navy. He’s planning on getting a couple other medical certificates to go along with being a Paramedic. I’m fairly certain he can handle all of our medical needs.”

“Alright. That gives me the basic gist on those three. What we’ll do is talk to the rest of them, saving those three for last. Then, probably about eleven thirty or so we’ll all change into civvies and go get some lunch and the squad can get to know each other. You know a good place we can go?”

“Sure do. The Dock over on Pensacola Beach.”

“Alright. Maybe do some volleyball for PT. Now why don’t you call over one of the squad so we can get to know him.”

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“PFC Stanley. All-State swimming in California three years straight. I’d like to get into the FBI or CIA. I joined the Corps because I figured being Intelligence here would give me good job training and a lot of discipline. And what better place to get it than where I can travel while doing it.”

## Forming A Foundation

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“PFC Turrentine. I’m a grunt by trade from New York City. The Bronx can be a war zone enough as it is, so I figured I might as well do something to earn my freedoms. I may be a small guy, but I’m used to wrestling around with the bigger grunts of my platoon.”

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“I’m PFC Pile. I joined the day after my eighteenth birthday for college money. I’d graduated high school at fourteen, got a bachelors in physics at sixteen and a master’s the day before my eighteenth birthday. I joined to get the GI bill for my Ph.D. I’m EOD by training, so I guess I’ll be handling all of the pyrotechnics for the squad.”

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“I’m PFC Holewinski. Folks just call me Ski. I’m from just outside Branson. I’m an armorer by trade. I’ve been a licensed gunsmith and knife smith since the age of sixteen. I’m pretty familiar with most of the weapons we’ll be using, both fixing and shooting, so I’ll be able to help out the squad with that.”

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“PFC Jason Riggey. My nickname’s the Mighty Midget. I’m an avionics tech with HMX-1. I grew up in Lansing, Michigan. I joined along with my best friend. It just seemed like a good thing to do.”

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“I’m PFC JP Cooney, I’m from Upstate New York. I joined the Corps because it’s a family tradition. I’m a supply clerk by trade and I’m looking forward to getting this done and kicking some ass with the squad.”

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“I’m PFC Ray Hillery. I’m from Memphis, Tennessee. My family has a long history of law enforcement and military. I figured I’d just combine the two and become an MP. I hope in the near future I can go through Dog school and be qualified to work with the Military Working Dogs (MWDs).”

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“I’m PFC Josh Goldman, All-State wrestler from Philly. I’m an Motor Transportation Mechanic. My biggest ambitions in life are to be a body builder or professional wrestler. I like the ideal of the Corps being a warrior organization because as a wrestler I always saw myself as kind of a warrior.”

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“I’m PFC Adam Carlson. I joined the Marine Corps because I got in a little trouble with the law and I didn’t want to get put in prison or on parole. I’m an admin clerk, but that doesn’t mean I’m some non-hacker. I grew up just outside Tucson and had to fend for myself most of my life. I’m not saying I’m a bad ass or tough guy, but I can handle my own.”

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“Well, Jack,” Lieutenant Green said, “it’s an interesting group isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” Jack replied. “It’s one of the most unique groups I’ve ever seen.”

“I’m just concerned about a couple of them.”

“Who, sir? What’s sparked you off?”

“Well, Holewinski apparently has a drinking problem. He’s never gone to AA, but it’s well known that he’s a serious drinker. Pile, while a certified genius, has had a problem with his temper from time to time. Then there’s Carlson and his run in with the law. He was arrested for breaking and entering. When charged with B & E he did a little plea bargain to avoid felony charges. Every one of them seems to be a first class wrestler or at least capable of it.”

“Well, sir, I can see how that might spark some concern for a lot of people. But the way I see it is this. The Marine Corps was born in a bar, what better place for a drinker? With what we’re likely to get tasked with in the future we could use someone with a little experience with breaking and entering. Name one person who doesn’t loose their temper from time to time. I think they’re a fine group of ass kickers and will do just fine.”

“Alright, I’ll let you take charge of them. Like you asked, I’ll let you handle them without me looking over your shoulder all the time. I do ask that you pick an assistant though to help keep things straight.”

“Alright, sir. Miller.”

“Even with Murphy having already been your assistant? Didn’t you jump to Miller pretty fast?”

“Sir, a leader should make quick and timely decisions, weighing all options in an expedient manner, then stick to it. If you question yourself, others will do the same. Second, it just feels right to me that Miller would make a damn good assistant. Third, I want Doc to have the same authority.”

“Alright. I trust you. Now tell the squad to get changed into civvies and bring beachwear to play volleyball. You drive the van over and I’ll follow in my car. I want to talk to Miller and Doc on the way over there, as well as Murphy.”

“Alright, sir. I’ll tell the crew. I’ll let Miller and Doc know about what we talked about as well.”

1130 EST, Pensacola Beach, The Dock

After the drive across two sound crossing bridges, the squad arrived at The Dock. They all thought about what they knew about the Special Operations Training Group (SOTG) that they would be working with over the next few weeks.

## Forming A Foundation

SOTG Courses vary from specialized demolitions and close quarters battle. There was also climbing and other assault training.

“Good morning again squad,” Lt. Green said. “I had a brief chance to meet all of you this morning to get to know you, but you didn’t really get to know anything about me. Obviously, you already know who I am. I’m from Indianapolis, born and raised and a Naval Academy graduate. I’m an intelligence officer, which I know all of you think is an oxymoron.” This brought a combination of snickers and nods. “Every male in the Green family since America’s beginnings has been a Marine, so that explains why I’m here.

“I know from many dealings that enlisted don’t always like officers, Lieutenants especially. From what I could gather, and from an urging of my squad leader, it would be best if I just left all of you alone as much as possible to do your work.” Nods circled once again. “Lance Corporal, you called it right. Well then, that’s what I’ll do. Granted, I’m going to need to know what’s going on in the squad, but I’m sure Jack can handle most of that. With that in mind I’m going to turn things over to him, but I want all of you to remember this. If you want the LT to stay in his office, the Lance Corporal has my authority. Just respect that and remember that what he says goes, alright?” Everyone nodded in agreement. “Jack, take it.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m Lance Corporal Jackson, your newly appointed squad leader. I’ve been in charge of enough Marines in the past to know that this is a shit hot group right here. We’ve got a good representation of personalities and a great selection of skills. We’ve got a good collection of tough guys as well, so I can almost see this squad forming a wrestling tournament before too long. To reiterate what the LT said, if you want to keep the brass at bay, I’m the way. Just do what you’re told without question and we’ll be fine. If you want to know why you were told to do something, or what the purpose of it was, you can ask me and I’ll explain it. But *only after* you do it.

“This goes the same for two other people here. First off is Miller, as he will be my assistant squad leader. Second is Doc. You might not like having to listen to a squid, but if he says something, it’s for your own well-being, so do it. Any questions?”

“I got one,” said Private First Class Holewinski, raising his hand.

“Go ahead Ski.”

“So what’s the next few weeks gonna hold for us?”

“The LT will cover that after lunch and give you the day to day lowdown. Once he’s run through that, we’re gonna play some beach volleyball for PT. Now that’s one other thing. I’m a bit of a beach bum, and I’m sure everyone else is too, at least if only in a small way. If we keep our shit locked on and squared away, I think we could be able to swing out to the beach on a Friday afternoon for some PT. Right Lieutenant?”

“Should be possible,” he replied.

“We’ll be running down the duties over lunch so you can get to know what to expect out of your new assignment. It will also give you an idea of who’s doing what around the squad. We’ll need to get familiar with each other’s jobs, so pay attention and see what you can learn from whom. With that, let’s order lunch.”

The squad ordered lunch and chatted in general amongst themselves until their food came. It was at this point that the Lieutenant pulled out some notes for the squad.

“Now here’s the deal for everyone. Tomorrow we’ll be issued all the gear we’re going to need. That’s gonna include a pack, ruck sack, flack, Kevlar, cartridge belt, magazine pouches and a second chance vest, also known as a bullet proof vest. You’ll also get issued a Motorola squad radio. Importantly, you’ll also get issued a pair of safety boots and a flight suit, the standard special ops type. That should take up the morning. For the afternoon, we’ll be getting issued the weapons. There’s nothing else on the schedule so we may be able to get loose early. Thursday we’ll be getting everything packed up and organized. That will give everyone a good chance to get their gear situated right and feeling good.”

“Everyone make sure to wear you new boots right when you get them,” LCpl Jackson suggested. “Wear them exclusively and as long as possible to get them broke in before next week.”

“Good point,” Lt. Green replied. “Then on Friday, we’re going to run through the known distance course of fire on the 9 mil and M-16. Everyone will need a qualifying score to be able to continue. We’ll brake for the weekend and kick things off 0600 Monday morning with a twelve-mile hump. That’ll take us a round about way over near the flight line. Once there, we’ll set up our base camp and defensive positions. We’ll get a class on night patrols and tactics, then after dark try to raid another squad’s positions. We’ll also have to defend our positions from other squads. This will go on throughout each evening.

“Tuesday we’ll get classes on the MP5 and 40 cal pistol and in the afternoon a familiarization fire. Wednesday is the full course of fire for both weapons, both known distance and field fire. Thursday is Military Operations on Urban Terrain, where we’ll be working the urban terrain of combat town. Friday morning we’ll work more MOUT, and then in the afternoon, hand to hand combat training. Saturday and Sunday we’ll be in the classroom for training classes from the Marine Corps Institute. There will be two classes each day and these will count towards the five you can get points for on your cutting score.

“Monday morning we’ll run a PFT then take a few classes on explosives. In the afternoon, hand to hand training once again. Tuesday, air ops, jump qual, SPIE and HALO work. Wednesday and Thursday will be combinations of the past training evolutions as well as a few other survival courses. Thursday morning will be the final trip to the bear pit as well.

## Forming A Foundation

Friday is the big day. We'll be run through the quals. Most of the big stuff over any day's training will be answered that day, and I'm sure you can adjust from there. Are there any questions right now?"

"Yeah," Ski said, "What's a bear pit?"

"Squad versus squad," Jackson answered. "Everything goes. You've got to get a person from the other squad either pinned down or thrown out of the pit."

"Basically the warriors effort," the Lieutenant continued. "Now anything else? Seeing none, let's finish off lunch and enjoy the beach."

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"Hey, Jack," Murphy called. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure, Murph," Jack responded.

"I've just been thinking this past couple days."

"This isn't because I didn't pick you as my assistant, is it?"

"No. It's not that. But it is about being here. I don't know if I'm cut out for this."

"What do you mean? You passed all the physicals and tests. Somehow we all even managed to not fail the psych eval."

"No. I don't think I could knowingly go out there to cause harm. I mean, if it's in defense, sure, I'll do whatever I need to. But going out there unprovoked...I just don't think I can do it."

"Alright. I'm not gonna twist your arm to try to get you to stay. Granted, I'd like to have you around. We've been good friends and associates for a while now. We've got a good relationship, and we've taken charge of things pretty well in the past. I'm just glad you said this now, before we really started counting on you for the final go."

"I'm sorry, man. I just can't do it. I just hope I'm not letting anybody down."

"The only way you'd let people down is if you decided this out there in the thick of it. I'll tell the LT, and later I'll talk to the squad. Don't worry, I'll break it easy."

Jack had expected just this situation. Murphy was a very capable Marine, good at many different tasks. However, being made to go out to some foreign land to destroy things and kill people wasn't everyone's idea of a good job.

The second squad leader had just predicted the very Marine who wouldn't want to live up to the trade.

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"Well, it was almost to be expected."

"And exactly the person I'd expected it from," Jack confirmed.

"As I understand, they've got somebody on standby for just such a case. So when I call the Major to let him know in a moment, I'm sure he'll provide this new Marine to us tomorrow."

"Alright sir. Let's go play some volleyball."

1700 EST, The Dock

"Well, gents," LCpl Jackson stated. "Couple quick things, then we'll have dinner and call it a day. First good job out there. Outstanding job playing volleyball. Everyone put out a good effort and seemed to be making a workout out of it. I think we can definitely play more often. Next, and on a bit more somber note, PFC Murphy has decided to leave our squad. Now his reasons are legit and very understandable. But he is not to be judged or looked at in a condescending manner because he didn't follow through on this. He at least was man enough to back out before it could have caused a problem to this squad, and that is to be commended. Murphy, we'll miss having you around, but I'm sure the other Murphy will take your place enough times.

"Finally, I don't like to end things on a down note, so here's a perk up. As the LT mentioned earlier, we'll be graded all throughout this training exercise and then on qual day. Well, we've already got a damned good reason to pass, but evidently the Wizard of Oz, also known as our Commanding General, has apparently pulled off a motivation factor of troop welfare after we accomplish our mission. Are there any Jimmy Buffett fans here?"

Nods circled through the squad. Some replied "Yeah" and it seemed as though all fourteen of the squad were in liking of the man's music.

"Good. The Friday we qual, we'll be going to his concert, right here on Pensacola Beach. That's in order to let the whole platoon blow off steam. But it gets better yet. The super squad, the ones that come in the top slot, will get all access passes and a 96. That's right, four days off and all access passes. Now second place--"

"Is the first loser," Ski blurted.

"-But will still get to go to the concert, and will still enjoy a 96. Third place squad will go to the concert and get a 72, and fourth place goes to the concert and each member will get a ten-dollar gift certificate to the exchange. Any which way, not a bad deal, but I think we'd all be happiest being recognized as the best."

"Damn straight," came from more than one mouth.

"So let's just go out there and kick ass on this and do what we came here to do. Next. Here's what we've got for each of you on a more personal motivator.

## Forming A Foundation

“Stanley, if you pass you qual, you’ll be sent to the CIA’s Photographic Interpretation class. Good high level security training there. When we come back from all of our training you will obviously be handling the intelligence assets.

“Turrentine, you pass you’re being sent through Recon training. Miller, same with you, but with your shooting abilities, you’ll be sent to a scout sniper school that will cover both recon and sniper. I know you’ll be able to put that training to good use. You two will basically be the operations and planning crew for the squad

“Pile, you’ve already got a great handle on explosives, so you’re being sent to demolitions school. You’ll get to learn more about blowing up structures. For the squad, you’ll be responsible on being able to blow things up as well as disable anyone else’s bombs we may encounter.

“Ski, cross training with the FBI and CIA. They’ve got a combined course going soon at Fort Fumble teaching some of the finer points of new weapons and old ones. Just some stuff you might have missed while you were savoring your beer. Obviously, you’ll be our main man in charge of keeping our weapons in the best working order possible.

“Riggey, you were being spun up a little further on rotary wing aircraft by your squadron, so we’re getting you the fixed wing side. Mainly fast attack birds such as the F/A-18 Hornet and the little unmanned drones. You’ll be responsible for keeping good maintenance on the drone we get for the squad. From time to time when we have aviation assets, you’ll be in charge of fixing those as well

“Cooney, you’ll be cross trained in logistics and embark, so you can order it, pack it and load it.

“Hillery, canine school. They’ll train you to work with the Military Working Dogs. Transfer’s great into the civilian sector.

“Goldman, you’ll be going through the schooling for fourth echelon maintenance. Get you a little more knowledge so you can fix the trucks better.

“Carlson, you’ll be sent through the armorer’s course. This way with your admin knowledge, you can back up Ski if he should need some help and you’ve got your paperwork done.

“Doc, you’ll be getting to go through that sports med training you wanted. After that, we’ll start training each of you in various other areas of the squad so that one person can have more than one MOS. You’ll be working with the person in our squad who handles that particular area and we may be able to get you the credit for OJT.

“Stanley and Ski, I’ve got something a little extra for you two. As you’ll be dealing with CIA and FBI, make some friends there. See if you can get some good relationships going so that way we can have some added assets going just incase. You never know when we might need a favor. With all that said, everyone have a good evening.”

They made their way back to the van. Enroute, Doc pulled his squad leader to the side.

“So far as I can see,” Spazz said, “Everyone should be good. Murphy was the only one I’d developed a concern about, but that worked itself out.”

“Unfortunately. From what I see, this group is a bunch of knuckleheads. If my thoughts come to play, I think our day to day life will be a lot like a three ring circus.”

Doc laughed. “Well, I just wanted to let you know that.”

“Thanks, Doc. Let’s head on home.”

2000 EST, On Board C-12 Huron Enroute From MCAS New River To NAS Pensacola

He had been whisked away from his command at literally a moments notice. One moment PFC Joe Mustard was sitting happily in his room in one of the many enlisted barracks on Camp Lejeune, relaxing after another long day, about to read a book. Not more than forty five minutes later, he was taking off from a runway on the adjacent Marine Corps Air Station New River. It all happened so quickly, he didn’t even think to look at what kind of plane it was. All he knew was that it was small.

He had just gotten out of the shower and dressed in PT gear when there was a knock at the door of his room. *Man*, he thought, *all I wanted to do was read a book. Now someone’s got to come and bother me.* Opening the door, he was shocked to see the Command Duty Officer, a Major he’d never seen before, was standing at his door with an unhappy look on his face.

“Are you PFC Mustard,” the Major asked, fairly annoyed.

“Yes, sir,” he replied nervously.

“You need to pack up all of your things and come with me.”

“What’s going on sir?”

“Just pack all of your things into a sea bag, put on cammies and come with me. I’ll be at the Duty NCO office when you’re ready.”

He quickly threw all of his worldly belongings, which wasn’t much for a PFC, into his single sea bag and quickly got dressed in his cammies. The whole time he was thinking, *what have I done? What’s going on? Why won’t this Major answer that?*

Reporting to the Duty NCO hut, he was as quickly whisked off in a staff car. They drove quite rapidly down Holcomb Boulevard, the main stretch of Camp Lejeune, and down Route 24 to Route 17 in Jacksonville, North Carolina. The sentries at the front gate of MCAS New River quickly waved the staff car through the gate.

## Forming A Foundation

Taking a right turn and driving through the woods on a winding road, they came to the flight line. Winding to the far side, the dark sedan pulled into an access road and up to a small plane that was already running. The Major told him to get his sea bag and get onboard the jet. He did as ordered, more out of fear of not knowing what was happening than out of sheer obedience.

He got on the plane and walked back to the center of the cabin. He set his sea bag down and turned to find someone standing there in a flight suit. PFC Mustard jumped, scared at not having heard anyone come near. Looking at the flight badge, Mustard saw that this was yet another Major.

*The only place he could have come from was the cockpit.*

Looking towards the cockpit he suddenly realized someone else was there, pointing a gun at him.

“Let me see your ID, son,” the Major said.

Mustard fumbled in his left breast pocket to produce it. That’s where they were supposed to keep their ID when in uniform. In the pocket that bore their beloved insignia, the Eagle, Globe and Anchor. He was alarmed to find that his military ID wasn’t there. He always kept it there in uniform. He’d had an instructor chew him out thoroughly in combat training because he hadn’t kept it there, but in his wallet. It had been there ever since when he was in uniform. But now, in its greatest time of need, it wasn’t there.

Fear washed over his face. Someone was pointing a gun at him and he couldn’t do the one thing he was told. He could not find his ID. Patting himself down, he found it in his right hip pocket. *What was it doing there*, he wondered, *I never put it there*. He was relieved at least when the Major had what he was looking for.

“What’s your social?”

Mustard rattled it off quickly as the Major verified that it was the same as that it was on his ID card. Double and triple checking that the face before him was the same as on the card there was only one other check.

“Let me see your dog tags.”

When at first he couldn’t find the chain around his neck, he wondered, *now where else could that go?* But there it was, hiding beneath his shirt. He never took them off, not even when he was asleep or in the shower. He knew those had to be there. Double-checking the information, the Major, who’s flight badge said Hobstock, let go of the dog tags and handed back his ID. To Mustard’s liking, the gun disappeared behind the curtain to the cockpit.

“Get your sea bag stowed in that compartment there, son, and we’ll get underway.”

“Yes, sir,” Mustard replied. “Sir?”

“Yeah.”

“Where are we going?”

“Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida.”

“Why am I going there?”

“If I told you, son, then I’d have to kill you.”

Although it was meant as a joke, Mustard’s heart almost broke.

To calm it over, the Major said, “You’ll find out from a representative there.”

“Sir, one more question.”

“Shoot.”

Taken back from the sight of the gun earlier he didn’t quite know what to make of that comment. He then hesitantly asked his question.

“Can I get my book out of my bag?”

“Sure. We’ll have about a three-hour flight. It’ll help keep you occupied.”

*Yeah right. I’m occupied enough wondering what the hell’s going on. I just want the book to get my mind off this.*

The door, which doubled as the boarding ladder, was pulled closed and latched as Mustard stowed his sea bag in the front compartment and took a window seat on the port side first of four rows.

*At least this way I can know somewhat of where I am if I can’t know what’s going on.*

They taxied to the end of the runway and slid gracefully into the friendly American skies.

He tried reading unsuccessfully for the first half hour. He couldn’t concentrate to well with too many unknowns running through his head.

This is the first time he’d ever been in a situation where he didn’t understand what was going on around him. While he wasn’t always too outgoing, he had been through a great deal of events. He’d always basically known what to expect, but now he didn’t.

PFC Joe Mustard, an eighteen year old administrative clerk from Philadelphia, he was in good physical shape and knew how to get the job done. Whatever the job was, he could do it, so long as he knew even just a little bit about it. Around people he didn’t know, Mustard could seem like the overly shy, bumbling klutz. With people he knew well and trusted, he could practically provide miracles.

He stood five foot eight and weighed only a hundred fifty five pounds. While skinny, he was tough enough to handle pinning some of the wrestlers in his high school that he had taken on from time to time. Joe also had a great deal of wrestling experience from tangling with his brother who was only a year young and a few friends.

## Forming A Foundation

His creativity kept his mind active and with some help he had even penned a few spell binding short stories. One had even won him a literary fiction award in High School. While he wouldn't fall under the category of 'geeky brain,' he was somewhat sophisticated and definitely smart.

His family had a tradition of Marines that ran all the way back to the beginning of the Marine Corps. One relative, a several greats Grandfather had been a Marine in one of the first two battalions of Marines. Ever since that day there had always been a Mustard on active duty, even to this day now nearly two hundred and twenty four years later.

Forty-five minutes into the flight, the Major slid through the curtain and walked to the back of the plane. When he opened a door, Mustard realized that he was going to use the head. When he emerged, the Major opened another compartment that proved to be a refrigerator.

"Do you want a Coke, PFC?"

"Sure. Yes, sir."

"Here you go." Noticing the young Marine's nerves were still on end, the Major said, "Just relax, son. You'll be fine."

"I'd just like to know what the hell is going on sir. No one's told me anything more useful than you telling me I'm going to Pensacola. I have absolutely no clue what's going on."

"Well, I can't tell you'll anything you'll need to know, really. But I can tell you this. I know someone down there that's going to take charge of you. He'll make sure you know what you need to."

"Well...I guess that helps a little sir."

"You want some rum for your Coke?"

"No thanks, sir. I'm not old enough."

"You're a Marine, kid. That's old enough in my book."

He chuckled and headed back to the cockpit, leaving the PFC once again to his thoughts and his book. For some reason, the Major's comments did seem to calm him down a little bit, and he was able to read for a good portion of the rest of the trip.

But then PFC Mustard found himself being shook by the Major. Immediately noting the lack of engine noise, he knew that they had landed. The door was just then being opened from the outside, causing an inrush of the cool night air.

"PFC," the Major said, "This is Sergeant Kerry. He's going to take you over to the barracks to get you a room for the night."

"Thank you, sir. Good evening Sergeant."

"Good evening, PFC. Grab your bag and throw it in the trunk."

"Aye, Sergeant."

"Have a good time, PFC," the Major called behind them.

"I'll try, sir."

The Sergeant took him over to a barracks unlike any he'd ever seen. To Mustard, this looked more like a Motel 6 than a military barracks.

Handing him a plastic key card, Sergeant Kerry told him, "You're in room 312. Don't get too comfortable in there. You're going to be changing buildings in the morning."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

"Get some rest. It'll be a long day tomorrow."

"Aye, Sergeant. Thank you Sergeant."

Mustard grabbed his bag and headed inside.

*Now just what the hell is going on here* was all he thought.

### 2200 EST, Enlisted Club

Murphy had gone over to the E-Club after taking a quick shower. He knew he had some deep soul searching to do after the afternoon he had just been through. Really it was over what had been going on the past two days.

He loved the accomplishment he had achieved in becoming a Marine. It was an achievement that no one in his family had thought him possible of. He had toughed it out just to prove them wrong.

While he lived in a good neighborhood and his parents had always provided for him, it wasn't the picture perfect, stereotypical life with the Waltons. There always seemed to be some animosity between Murphy and his dad, and a distancing with his mom. Being the only son, he naturally distanced himself slightly from his sisters.

But now, in a life that was his own, independent of any family, Murphy felt that he had let down the best friend that he had. To Murphy Jack was more than a leader, he was an inspiration. Jack provided the motivation and friendship that he had always wanted and had now looked up to. But then this assignment had come up and Murphy could not accomplish the mission. In all things that Marines do, accomplishing the mission is, was and always should be the top priority. But now Murphy couldn't do it. Down in his heart he felt that he had failed his best friend.

All through his life, Murphy had tried to make peace and had never been involved in a fight. While he was strong and capable of more than just handling himself, his mindset couldn't allow him to raise a hand to harm someone unless

## Forming A Foundation

properly provoked. How could he have joined the Marine Corps with this mindset? This weighed down on him tonight as he sat drinking beer after beer, shot after shot.

Wednesday October 19, 1999

0700 EST, Old Warehouse

“PFC Mustard reporting as ordered, Sir.”

“Relax, PFC,” Lance Corporal Jackson replied. “I’m a Lance Corporal. The ‘sir’ is in the office right now. You seem a little too nervous. You all right?”

“Yes Lance Corporal. It was just...just a little unnerving getting yanked from my command so quickly last night. I had only about a half hour to get all my stuff together.”

“Well, welcome to the real world. Things might stay like that. Just relax.”

“I’m sorry. I just get a little nervous around high ranks.”

“I only out rank you by one pay grade. The LT is alright, and I understand that you might not like officers. Fortunately though you won’t have to deal with him too much. I’m about the only one that will. You’ll just have to do a quick intro with him and the squad. Don’t worry, you’re the same rank as the rest of the squad, so I think you can get along well enough there.”

“Alright.”

“You got moved into your room this morning and got everything taken care of as I understand. Here’s our LT. Sir, here’s our new guy. PFC Mustard.”

“Well, welcome PFC. I’m Lieutenant Green, your squad commander. I know Jack is going to get you all spun up before we start here this morning. So tell me about yourself.”

“I’m PFC Mustard, from Philly. I’m eighteen and joined out of family tradition. Most of my family went through the Marines to either the FBI or CIA. I’m an admin clerk but I’m pretty knowledgeable in explosives from some of the things my dad and uncle’s training. I also know a little bit about fixing vehicles.”

“Sounds like you might be of some real good use to the squad. I’ll go let the Major know you’re here. Jack, get to know him and get him spun up.”

“Check, sir,” Jack replied. “Come on young Joseph. Let’s introduce you to the squad.”

0800 EST, Supply Warehouse

Due to the small space available for gear check out, only three Marines were allowed in at a time. To the platoon, it was no wonder all morning had been allotted for this evolution. One by one the squads flowed through, each getting their allotted gear and shoved it in their pack as it was thrown across the counter to them, trying to sign for it at the same time.

The squad leader was the last to go through, as leadership would have it. After all, a good leader wanted to make sure that his Marines got their gear before taking their own. In the same way the squad leader would always make sure that his Marines got their food before he did, he would always be the last to begin his meal.

Once inside, Mustard seemed befuddled as his gear was called off by the supply clerk and tossed haphazardly at him. He could barely manage to keep up, initialing each item as he caught it and attempted to stuff it in his pack.

*What am I getting myself into, he wondered. How can the rest of these guys be handling this so well? They got here a couple days before me. That must be it.*

1050 EST, Supply Warehouse

They had got their gear and were getting ready for lunch. Second squad, much like everyone else in the military, greatly appreciated and looked forward to their time off. Their squad leader just had one surprise for them before they had chow.

“Look,” he started, “I’ve got a little something extra for us and that’s why we’re the last ones here. We’re going through the supply room once more and we’re getting Ghillie Suits. Does everyone know what those are?”

“I don’t,” Riggey and Mustard said.

“They’re the suits that make you look like a walking talking bush,” Jack explained. “My source here in the supply warehouse has informed me we’re the only squad that will have them. So the only other way they’ll be out there for this evolution is if someone brought their own. Good enough?”

“You’re one sneaky bastard, Jack,” Miller said. “One hell of a leader.”

“We gotta do what it takes to get the job done. I’m just helping us do that.”

1300 EST, Armory

## Forming A Foundation

“Ski, you seem like a kid in a candy store,” Jack said with a smile.

“I sure am, Lance Corporal. You give me some weapons and let me play around with them, I’m perfectly happy.”

“I’d say that the Marine Corps was the perfect spot for you then.”

“Marine Corps Armorer. Arsenal all the way.”

With that, Jack led his squad through the check out process at the armory. They already had the appropriate magazine pouches for the weapons they would be getting. They just had to sign for the weapons they would be checking out next week, as well as three magazines, or clips as the civilian world calls them, for each of the weapons. They also took care of an inspection of each of their weapons. Each Marine and Doc looked over their weapons to make sure that there was nothing visibly wrong that they could detect. The armorers there had taken pretty good care of the weapons.

Jack had done a little bit of digging around for information on behalf of his Marines. He had found out that in January, after his course at Fort Meade and a Christmas break, Ski could be sent to the National Rifle Association’s Instructors course. These courses were very limited in nature, as you had to fall into the category of instructor for either military or law enforcement.

While a fairly demanding course, Jack knew that Ski would be able to greatly handle the expectations that this course would put on him. It was also known that he would do everything in his power to live up to the expectations that his squad leader put on him.

Ski had decided to join the Marine Corps as it would be a great place for him to hone his armorer skills. After all, Marines will always need people to fix their various weapons. His skills in fixing weapons could quite often be nothing short of magic.

Skill with these guns didn’t sit in simply fixing them. Ski is a regular expert with every rifle and pistol in the Marine Corps arsenal. A life member of the NRA he is truly dedicated to professional enhancement. He has taken several courses through the NRA and similar organizations.

Ski’s weapons talents also wielded themselves by way of knives and swords. An avid collector of infantry and throwing knives, he had the ability to wield and toss a knife with the best of fighting skills. It was something he wished to teach the rest of the squad, for everyone’s good.

1430 EST, Old Warehouse

The platoon gathered in their classroom for a class on infantry tactics. This would be necessary for what they would be expected to do in the near future. It would also be brief, for they all knew most of the information anyways.

The squads marched individually back to their barracks, fully expecting an inspection of some kind. Second squad was pleasantly surprised by their squad leader, who was more and more turning out to be someone they very much liked.

“Here’s the deal,” Jack started. “Tonight’s field day. That means you’ve got to clean your room like the good little PFCs you’re supposed to be. Now with three of you to a room, that shouldn’t be too hard to do. I’m gonna let you out early to take care of things. We don’t have any formation to go to like most of the rest of the Corps does, but I’m going to be coming around at eight. That will give you just a little more than four hours to get your room squared away, which is beyond plenty of time. I want a representative from each room to be there when I come through, but not all of you have to be there. Any questions? Seeing none, fall out and carry out the plan of field day.”

1600 EST, Old Warehouse

“Jack why aren’t the Marine’s getting their gear situated?”

“We’ve got all morning slated for that tomorrow, sir,” LCpl Jackson told the Lieutenant. “Right now they’re getting their rooms situated. After all, the Major’s going through them tomorrow.”

“They should be doing that tonight after getting their gear ready.”

“Sir, they don’t need us hounding over them. They’ll be ready enough after tomorrow morning.”

“I wish you would have talked to me about this before just releasing the squad.”

“Look, Lieutenant, if you don’t like the way I’m doing things, get another squad leader. There’s plenty of other Lance Corporals in the Marine Corps. I’m doing my job by accomplishing the mission *and* taking care of my Marines. As we had agreed on before, I’ll take care of the men, you worry about the Major.”

The tone in his voice was lightly respectful, but definitely forceful. It was the sound of a person fully intent on taking charge.

“Alright. I just hope you know what you’re asking for. It could come back to bite you.”

“I’ll worry about that, sir. For now I want to just finish up on this final review so we can have smooth sailing come Monday.”

1930 EST, E-Club

## Forming A Foundation

Jack walked in to the E-Club to get a drink before checking his Marines rooms. While he had only been in charge of them for two days now, he was already beginning to feel a good connection to them and starting to get to know each of them. Even if only slightly.

As he walked into the dimly lit club, he spotted his faithful friend and assistant sitting at the bar. Jack took the seat next to him and ordered a beer.

“Murph old pal,” Jack said. “How’s life?”

“I’m waiting for the movie.”

“That doesn’t sound like the guy I worked with. Something in your voice tells me something’s up. You need to talk?”

“Nah. I’m just trying to figure out my life right now.”

“Murph, you’re drunk aren’t you?”

“Yeah? So what if I am? I’m old enough.”

“Sure, you’re old enough and completely legal to drink. I just don’t think drinking while trying to figure out your life is always the best thing to do.”

“I’m not sure what’s the best thing to do right now. That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

“Any way I can help you out?”

“Nah. There’s just some things I need to sift through.”

“Alright, man. I gotta go inspect some rooms. If you need anything, you know how to get a hold of me.”

As Jack walked out, he took a look back at his friend, who sat now with his head hung. It definitely seemed like a different person than the one he had spent so much time with. Down in his heart, Jack felt bad that there wasn’t more he could do right now, but if someone didn’t want the help there was sometimes no use in trying. Marines could most certainly be stubborn enough to outright refuse what could very well be the best for them if it isn’t what they wanted at that given moment in time.

2000 EST, G Barracks

The enlisted barracks were an H style building, three floors with a hundred rooms on each floor. There were small lounges at each of the ends of the wings, plus a main common area in the center of the cross. The rooms, designed for three people, had a head, which was just a bathroom with a toilet and shower, between a pair of rooms. Each room was accessible to the room next to it through the head, almost making it like a two room, one bathroom, six man apartment. There were no kitchen accessories but did have a small refrigerator and two desks. Being relatively new buildings, the accommodations were much better than these Marines would have expected on a Marine Corps Base.

Jack walked out of his room to inspect his squad, which took up four rooms other than his own. Being the squad leader, he rated his own room. The first stop on the trip was four doors down the hall, past the rest of the squad to PFC Holewinski’s room.

“Ski, how’s the room look?”

“Ready for inspection, Lance Corporal.”

“Good. Let’s take a look at this.”

Inspecting the room, there were only a few select spots of dust and a streak on the mirror. Marine Corps units conducted field day, the practice of cleaning your room, on a weekly basis, most units on Thursday.

Satisfied that Holewinski’s room had only a couple of minor discrepancies, he walked through the head, the bathroom that separated one room from the next. It almost caught Hillery off guard, as he turned and was slightly startled.

“Ray Hillery, PFC of Marines. How’s this room looking?”

“Good. Should be just fine.”

“So where’s your roommates?”

“Goldman’s over at the gym, Carlson’s at the exchange. I wanted to watch TV, so I told them I’d stay back.”

“Taking one for the team, huh?”

“Something like that. Jeopardy’s just getting going now, so I’m happy.”

“Ah. Another brain child, huh?”

“I don’t know about that. I’m definitely not as smart as Pile is.”

“Good. This squad only rates one certified genius.”

“Is it true that he’s got an IQ of 180?”

“It’s something like that. The guy’s smarter than I could really hope to be.”

“Lance Corporal,” PFC Holewinski said coming into the room, “I got those discrepancies fixed.”

“Alright, Ski, I’ll be there in a minute. Ray, your room looks good. Keep it up.”

“Thanks, Lance Corporal.”

Jack walked back through the head and double-checked that it was clean.

“You’re good, Ski. Enjoy your evening. Now, who’s you’re roommates?”

“Riggey and Cooney. They’re both over at the exchange.”

## Forming A Foundation

“Alright. I’ll be at my room in about fifteen minutes if any of you need anything.”

“Good to go. Thanks.”

Jack walked out of the room and walked to the next pair. Upon knocking, the door opened to show PFC Pile in PT gear and a rag in his hand.

“You ready for me, Pile?”

“Yeah. Just finished up. There might be a couple spots, I was just trying to double check everything.”

“Alright. I’m sure if there are any spots, these old hawk eyes can find them. You know, it’s already floating around the squad about our ‘certified genius.’ You’ve got the squad feeling mentally humbled.”

“I...I’m not really a genius. I’m just smart.”

“That’s not what your IQ says. Just don’t make anyone feel like an idiot. Some of these characters wouldn’t think twice about kicking your ass.”

“I can handle myself. I was that smart, geeky kid that got picked on in school. Being a skinny kid I was an easy target. After a while I kinda got stronger and stronger. After a little more I really started to be able to handle my own. Nowadays, you get me in a wrestling match with some of these guys, I’d be able to at least hold my own if not beat them.”

“Good. Just what we need. Mr. Wizard meets The Rock.”

“Nah. I’m too skinny to be The Rock.”

“And too smart to be Mr. Wizard. Who are your roommates?”

“Turrentine and Stanley.”

“Alright. Just so you know, Hillery’s next door watching Jeopardy. You might go over there and keep each other in brilliant company.”

“Cool. We don’t have a TV here, yet. But I love Jeopardy.”

“Well, there’s your way to watch it. Your room’s good. Go watch Jeopardy and make yourself smarter. At least make Hillery smarter.”

“Aye, Lance Corporal.”

Walking through the head, the squad leader gave it the cursory glance and made it to the last of the line.

“MUSTARD,” he said a little more emphasized than intended. The eighteen year old PFC jumped up from the chair he had been sitting in and spun around. Just as quickly he snapped to parade rest.

“Yes, Lance Corporal.”

Deciding to play it off a little further, he kept his voice just as on edge. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I...uh...just finished cleaning. I was just...uh...going to watch...uh...TV.”

*Oh, man, Mustard thought, wrong answer. Now he’s gonna think I’m some slacker.*

“So I’m not going to find anything wrong with this room, am I?”

“No, Lance Corporal.”

“Which now means if I do find any, I can NJP you for lying to me. You know what NJP is, right?”

“Non Judicial Punishment. Yes Lance Corporal.”

“Good. Let’s see if we get to fry us some PFC.”

Mustard stayed at parade rest and seemed scared. He was the newcomer to the squad. An outsider.

“Uh oh. Lookee what we have here, Mustard. Dust on top of this shelf. What am I gonna do with you, Mustard?”

“Please don’t NJP me Lance Corporal. I thought it was good.”

“Well, you didn’t think right.”

“Please don’t kick my ass Lance Corporal.”

“Why do you think I’m gonna kick your ass?”

“Doc and PFC Miller were talking about you being a black belt in Taekwondo. They said that you were registered as a lethal weapon.”

“Yeah, I sure am.” Extending his middle finger, Jack said, “And I can kill you with this one right here. Wanna see something really cool?”

*I’ve done it, Mustard thought. I’ve just signed my own death warrant. I’m a dead man.*

Hesitantly shifting he said, “No...Negative...Lance Corporal.”

*Enough of the charade, Jack thought. This kid’s scared shitless and he needs to be better than this for the time coming.*

Exuding a complete air of calmness, Jack said “Mustard, calm down. Why are you so nervous?”

“I...I don’t know Lance Corporal. I’m eighteen and I never in my life imagined being in a situation like this.”

“Well, kid, you did join the Marine Corps. Not the Peace Corps. We do have to take lives from time to time.”

“I know. I just didn’t really think I’d be getting into it when I joined. I mean, there aren’t any wars going on now.”

“Not that are publicized. But from time to time Special Forces do have to go places to keep the world safe.” Jack paused for a moment, thinking how best to proceed. “My uncle is a retired Colonel. Being that I now have a security clearance high enough to hear some of it, he’s told me about some things that happened in the past, and just because you don’t hear about it, doesn’t mean that it doesn’t happen. It just means that it wasn’t on CNN.”

## Forming A Foundation

"I guess I understand. I'll make it through. But the past twenty-four hours has just been a real rude awakening. Just getting yanked from my unit up at Lejeune and a half hour later being on a flight here was a little unnerving. I can't even tell you what kind of plane I was on, and I know a lot about that."

"C-12 Huron."

"Huh?"

"The plane you were on. It was a C-12 Huron. I know that because I watched several of them come and go over at Sherman Field. I worked over there with a Hornet squadron before all of this started. Really, I guess I still do work there. I haven't received orders out yet."

"I didn't know they had any Hornets here. I thought they just had the small trainers."

"No, there's one squadron of Hornets here. Nice bright blue ones. With yellow trim and all."

"Wait a minute. You're talking about the Blue Angels."

"Yup."

"No way, you work with the Blue Angels?"

"Yeah. I work on the avionics and communications systems. My plane is The Duce. The number two plane."

"Your plane?"

"Yeah, the one I fix. You see, it's actually the enlisted guy's plane. We just lend it to the officer to fly it. Every now and then they take us up for a joy ride."

"No way!!" he exclaimed joyously like the youngster he was. "You got to go for a joyride in an F/A-18?"

"Yeah, several times. I'll never forget the first time. My uncle was the group commander's first CO out of OCS. Needless to say, I found out the hard way that little bit of information. But anyways, my pilot takes me up. We see that the Colonel was up as well, and Hobs got a brilliant idea. He told me that he was going to pull up next to the Colonel on his left wing. At that point he wanted me to look over at the Colonel, smile and wave. Then, he was going to flip over inverted on top of the CO, at which point I was supposed to give the CO the Hawaiian good luck sign."

"What's that?"

"You extend your thumb and middle finger."

"Oh, no. He wanted you to flip off the Colonel."

"Oh, yes. I was hesitant, but Hobs said he'd take the heat for it. Anyways, we went through with it, and the CO was waiting by the hangar when we landed."

"Oh, man. What did he do?"

"He just looked at me and said, 'Jack, what the fuck were you thinking?' I just said, 'Sir, Hobs told me to do it.' He replied, 'I thought so. Major, come this way.' Hobs complained later that I got him in trouble. I had to remind him that it was his idea."

"Man, that sounds like so much fun. I'd love to do that sometime."

"Well, I can take you over to the headquarters building tomorrow so you can give the old man the bird."

"No, not that," he exclaimed excitedly. "I meant flying."

"Tell you what," Jack replied. "If it will help you relax, you got it. I know they'll be doing some flying Saturday morning to warm up for the show in the afternoon. Maybe, just maybe, I could get Hobs to take you up in Seven."

"That would be so cool. Thank you."

"No problem, Mustard. Just remember this. You'll be alright. You're in a good squad, and your roommates are two top notch fellas."

"It kinda threw me off having a Navy Corpsman as a roommate."

"But Doc Spazito is one of the best Docs in the Navy. Trust me, I've checked up on it. He's an EMT Paramedic. He's also studied Psychology. He's just as qualified to listen to your problems as I am, and he'll do it in confidentiality, just like me. Alright?"

"OK Lance Corporal. I am feeling a little better now. Just having a chance to talk to you for a little while."

"Bullshit sessions are almost always good for morale."

"Yes Lance Corporal."

"Alright. I'll be next door in my room. When Doc and Miller get back, tell them I want to see them."

"Aye, Lance Corporal," he acknowledged. "They went to the lounge to get something from the vending machines. They'll be back soon I hope."

"Just tell them to come see me. And you just let me know if you need to talk. As your squad leader, I'm here to help you."

"Thanks, Lance Corporal."

*This kid's so green, he thought leaving the room, I swear it's like looking at Kermit.*

2045 EST, G Barracks

*Knock knock knock.*

"Coming," Jack called. Opening the door, he saw his two assistants. "Come on in, gents."

## Forming A Foundation

“Mustard said you wanted to see us.”

“Yeah, Doc. Just wanted to check up. Get yourselves some good nourishing snacks?”

“Damn pogie bait’ll make me fat if I don’t get out of here soon,” Miller said menacingly.

“Don’t worry, Miller. You’re skinny enough and I know you run enough.”

“Yeah, much as the road doesn’t like me pounding on it all the time. So what’d you want to see us about?”

“I wanted to see what you thought of our squad so far.”

“They’re a good group,” Miller said. “With a little love and luck, we may even get to know each other real quick and become a top notch squad.”

“Just like in the infantry, huh?”

“It ain’t always perfect there. But we’ll basically be an infantry squad.”

“Special ops squads are a little different, but yeah, basically the same. Doc, you’re thoughts?”

“Well, they’re all in good physical shape. Couple minor previous problems, like knees, but nothing we can’t take care of.”

“Motrin and water,” Jack and Miller said simultaneously.

“Exactly. Vitamin M. Seems like every one of them is a wrestler at one way or another. I think they’re all good.”

“Great. Just one other thing. Keep an eye on that roommate of yours. Kid’s a little unnerved getting uprooted and yanked down here so quick. Try to keep him calm as much as you can and get him to relax.”

“You got it boss,” Doc said.

“Yeah, sure thing Jack,” Miller said.

“Any ideas for how we can get to know each other and get the squad working a little more cohesively?”

“Huh? ‘Cohesively?’ Man, Pile’s already wearing off on you,” Miller jested.

“Sorry, I know those big words confuse you southern boys. How can we get them working more smoothly.”

“Man I know what cohesively means,” he said. “I just don’t know if I could spell it. How about some more beach volleyball? The gang seemed to like it yesterday.”

“Sure. We could go out to the Dock again. I think it would be a good weekend tradition. Blow off some steam.”

“Only this time, no LTs.”

“Good point Miller. Doc, you seem awful quiet. What’s on your mind?”

“Just happy that no problems have presented themselves. We seem to have a good squad.”

“Sure do. Well, I’ll let you two get on with your evening. Don’t give Mustard a hard time.”

“We wont,” Miller said. “We heard you already gave him enough of a heart attack.”

“Oh, really? Who snitched?”

“Pile. He heard you through the head. Said you were laying it on pretty thick there at the beginning.”

With a smile Jack said, “Yeah, I guess it was. The kid was so nervous and jittery I couldn’t help myself. Take it easy on him and try to get him to lighten up. If you need me, I’m right next door. Or you could just use these handy dandy phones they provide in every room here at the Motel 6. Miller, you know how to used these things?”

“Yeah,” he said extending his middle finger. “Punch the numbers with this finger too. We’ll see you in the morning.”

“Not if I see you first.”

Jack made sure the door closed behind them and went back to his desk. Leaning back in the chair and kicking his feet up on the bottom drawer he turned on the TV. ‘Who Wants To Be A Millionaire’ was nearing its end with yet another face from an endless selection trying to decide on his final answer.

Jack was just opening a bottle of coke when LCpl Cline walked in through the head.

“Hey, Jack,” he greeted.

“What’s up Dan?”

“Not much. We just haven’t gotten a good chance to get to know each other yet, so I figured I’d come over for a little while. How’s second squad,” he asked while taking a chair.

“About as good as can be hoped for right now. You want a Coke?”

“Sure, thanks.”

Lance Corporal Dan Cline, a San Diego native, joined the Marine Corps because he knew he could travel around the world, but be stationed close to home. When he went to boot camp he stayed home, at least in his hometown. Much like most others in his platoon and company, he felt the homesickness of being separated from family and friends. Cline’s seemed to be intensified due to the fact that he could see so much of his hometown, but he wasn’t allowed to go and visit it.

While there were no other service members in his direct family, Cline felt it was the right thing to do out of the patriotism he always felt. Whenever he would walk by an American Flag, pride would flow from the deepest part of his heart. In high school, he knew he had to do something to give back for these feelings that he felt.

After graduating in ’96, he joined the Marine Corps and became a tanker. At five foot seven and a hundred thirty pounds, he could be what many considered overly skinny, he was still regarded as good looking. Good looking even though his ears stuck out funny. Although he was always modest about virtually everything, even he would admit that. His choice

## Forming A Foundation

of the Marine Corps, along with it being the most prestigious, was the fact that he thought it had the only uniforms that looked as good as him.

His appearances may make him look scrawny, but his muscles seemed to be hidden down in his bones. Through Tanker school and in his unit, First Tank Battalion, he had been able to handle himself with the majority of hand to hand training. The same could be said with the wrestling matches that emerged in the training as well.

“Say,” Cline said. “I heard about Murphy.”

“Yeah. Just didn’t want this life. Oh well. It’s not for everyone. How’s fighting first squad?”

“Good. Just trying to work out the bugs.”

“So are we. That’s really what the next couple weeks are for. We’re going to the Dock Friday for another bonding session. Play a little beach volleyball, get smashed and pass out face down in a sand dune. Seemed to be a pretty enjoyable time yesterday when we went there.”

“Our squad went right down that way to Hooters. Always a good old Marine Corps stand by.”

“Sure. Well, I’m gonna try to get some sleep here after doing one last check on my Marines. I’m trying to get back into a good swing of running every morning. I’m thinking in the morning just doing a marina run. From here to the base marina and back is about three miles. Maybe eventually I’ll work my way up to a lighthouse run.”

“That’s gotta be what, twelve round trip?”

“Roughly. Fortunately I’m one of those that can keep running. I’m like a diesel engine, man. It might take me a while to get warmed up, but when I get going, I can run for a long time.”

“Man, I’m like most Marines. More like a bottle rocket. Whoosh...pop. And I’m spent. Well, I’m gonna check up on my Marines too. I just wanted to see how things were with your squad.”

“Alright, man. See you tomorrow. If you wanna run, I’m gonna step off about 0530. That’d give time for breakfast afterwards.”

“I might do that.”

“Sounds good. You need anything, just let me know. You know how to find me.”

“Alright man, see you tomorrow for that run.”

When Cline had disappeared from sight, Jack kicked back and sat in thought for a few moments. He tried to sift through as much information as possible about the Marines he hadn’t spent too much time dealing with. What he knew of Mustard, Miller and Doc’s past came to mind fairly easily. It had seemed that these three seemed to be the ones the Squad Leader dealt with the most recently. Jack had to think back to the files to recall most of the rest of the information.

PFC Josh Stanley came to the squad from Los Gatos, California. Josh was an All State Swimmer in his Sophomore, Junior and Senior years of high school. Having been an athlete for so long he was in great shape when he joined the Corps. He still takes a good deal of his free time to swim. If it weren’t for his love of the Marine Corps, he would follow the desire of becoming a Navy SEAL. That desire had come from their strong swimming qualification.

He is mature enough to realize that he can’t swim forever. Josh’s plans for the future lie now at mere hopes for the FBI or CIA. Marine Corps intelligence proved a good combination of the athletes effort and the intelligence community. His dream of becoming an Intel agent came from watching a few too many movies and reading a few too many books when he was growing up. Those caused a very active imagination.

Infantry Rifleman PFC Chad Turrentine, best friends with Stanley, showed his past unit that there are two sides to every coin. On one side is the relaxed, easygoing teen. It presented a laid back attitude in him no matter what was going on. Whether it was playing golf on a familiar course or a routine training exercise, the relaxed attitude stayed present.

The other side presents the wild child. This side of Chad, when it rears it’s head, causes a serious adrenaline rush. Chad, while small, skinny and not too muscular, can handle a good physical challenge when “the juice is loose.” The wrestler in him could grapple with the best back at home, not to mention the rest of his squad.

Regardless of the mood he could be in at any given point, Chad would always step up to defend a friend. In his view everyone else in his squad are his friends. They are the ones he would stand up for at any time or place.

PFC Jason Riggey was dubbed the Mighty Midget by his last unit, HMX-1, the President’s squadron. Jason’s assignment there was due to the efforts of his uncle, a Republican Senator, who also chaired the Senate Military Committee. Being seventeen and placed at the highest profile squadron in the Marine Corps nearly took a Presidential order.

Riggey was barely allowed to join the Marine Corps due to his limited height. Throughout his entire life, with every challenge, he had been viewed as the underdog. He always gave everything he could, and still does, to every fight or cause he gets involved in. What he lacks in height, young Jason makes up for ten times over in heart.

The quiet type at work, he is a wild child when he cuts loose. Well disciplined at work, most of it carries over to parties and trips to the bar. Every once in a while he will get boldly trashed and wildly out of control, but nothing that would get him in too much trouble.

PFC John Paul “Pope” Cooney was a warehouse worker in his hometown of Watertown, New York in high school and joined the Marine Corps for college money. While not a genius by any means, he is intelligent enough but couldn’t afford to continue school on his own.

Having worked as a clerk in a warehouse in life before the Marine Corps, Supply was a natural job choice for the man known as Pope. His nickname, obviously, came from his patriarchal namesake. First given the nickname in High

## Forming A Foundation

School, it has stuck ever since. Proficient in his job and devoted to his duties pope takes pride in his accomplishments and truly respects his friends and squad members.

PFC Ray Hillery joined the Marine Corps from Memphis, Tennessee to become a Military Policeman. This would allow him to combine his family's backgrounds of military and law enforcement. His discipline and devotion to duty helped to inspire his friends. Ray's big hopes upon joining the platoon is becoming a dog handler, a hope that will come true when he passes the quals with the squad.

Ray, in his training, learned not only the fundamentals of law enforcement, but also many interrogation techniques. In most cases he can tell the difference between the truth and a lie when it is spoken. He is also well experienced in restraining techniques that help in detaining frisky subjects. It is a skill that has also helped him break up several bar fights and brawls.

PFC Josh Goldman was an All State wrestler all four years of High School in Philadelphia. His desires for future employment were either to be a body builder or WWF wrestler. Wrestling in High School he viewed himself as a physical warrior.

Josh worked his way through High School at a shipping plant, loading and unloading shipments for various retailers. The lifting of boxes and pulling of pallets along with a health club membership helped to keep him in top physical shape.

Goldman's prior work experience in shipping was a natural tie in for embarkation, the military packers and shippers. Instead, he decided to try his hand in a new field that he had always wanted to get more knowledgeable in. He entered the diesel maintenance world. Throughout his short time in the Marines it just didn't seem to fulfill his desires. He itched for something more.

PFC Adam Carlson had all too often been the mischievous youth that seemed to be in trouble more often than out of it. In middle school and the early part of High School he was in a fight every week. Adam's last two years were constantly laced with truancies.

Smack dab in between his eighteenth birthday and High School graduation, he was caught breaking into a house that sat in a neighborhood recently troubled with burglaries. Other than the admission of guilt by Carlson and their location, the only links in the robberies was that there were no visible signs of forced entry.

Not even scratch marks where the locks had been picked.

In a plea bargain attempt to save his young life from prison and parole, Adam accepted a punishment of military enlistment to avoid the felony charges. Even though that is not supposed to be an acceptable punishment under the current legal and judicial system, it still happens from time to time.

Carlson chose to be an admin clerk, as that was where he thought he could just slide through his time with the most ease.

Walking through the rooms once more, Jack found all of his Marines accounted for in their rooms. This was amazing enough to him, including they did not have a curfew. But here they were, all in their rooms at 2100.

Riggey and Cooney had got back from the exchange where they'd bought a TV and oversized stereo.

"You know, you two could have saved some money and trouble by just walking through the head. I'm sure if you asked them really nice, they'd let you watch TV with them."

"This one's got a DVD player and VCR in it," Riggey said. "They didn't have that next door."

"Ah. I see said the blind carpenter as he picked up his hammer and saw. I also see that you've got yourself an alarm clock capable of waking up the whole barracks."

"Yeah. We were thinking about blasting reveille at about 0500."

"Riggey, if you do that, I'm going to body slam your midget self off third deck."

"Why's it always got to be the short guy?"

"Because you and Turrentine are the only ones in the squad shorter than me."

Leaving it be with that he walked through the head to check up next door. Hillery and Goldman were wrestling in green on green PT gear, green shirts and green shorts. They were having a little difficulty with the tile floor due to wearing only socks.

"Don't mess this room up throwing each other around," Jack told them.

"They just decided to clean the floor with each other," Carlson replied.

"Just tap out the pin quick, ref."

"Believe me, I will. They've been going at this for about twenty minutes. No one's got a pin yet."

Shaking his head, Jack walked out the door to the next room. Pile once again answered the door.

"You get Hillery all good and edjumacated?"

"Yeah. He got mad at me because I got the final Jeopardy question and it had him baffled. After all, it was about thermodynamics."

"Something I don't doubt you learned about in all those physics classes."

"Yeah. I kinda feel bad. I guess I used his brain as a small soft punching bag."

"Yeah, now Goldman's using him as a punching bag in a wrestling match."

"Tonight ain't his night."

"I guess not. And I see the bash brothers are back."

## Forming A Foundation

"We went out for a run after the room was clean, Lance Corporal," Stanley informed him.

"I bet you could run Turrentine into the dirt, Stan. Your legs are a good bit longer."

"I hold my own Lance Corporal," Turrentine said, somewhat offended. "He may be eight inches taller than me, but I can hold him off. Even in a full contact wrestling match."

"Alright, Terp. At least they kept you two together pulling you from your unit, huh?"

"Yeah," Stanley said. "I'm glad I get to keep my bitch."

"Fuck you, Stan."

"Now you kids play nice," Jack said. "It's bad enough Hillery and Goldman were already going at it. Now get some rest tonight, because it may be a long day tomorrow. Then again, it may not. You never know what your squad leader might decide."

"Ah, come on Lance Corporal," Pile begged. "But then there's Friday. It's the day every PFC wants to get out early."

"We'll see, Pile," Jack said and walked through the head to the final room on the trip. "Oh Corpsman my Corpsman."

"Hey, Jack."

"Studying hard I see."

"Yeah. Sports Medicine. Trying to get a handle on some of this before heading out to that course. You know, for when we pass."

"I like how you think Doc. There isn't any 'ifs' about it."

"Damn straight. So the best way I could figure I might as well start reading through some stuff about being a trainer if their going to send me through the school."

"Good. Keep up the good work. And Mustard." Looking over, Jack saw he was in his rack, lying very still, eyes closed. "Good God, you killed him."

"No, Jack," Miller said. "As tempting as it was, he just went to sleep a little bit ago. Good kid. We should be able to get a little more out of him now."

"Did you get him all relaxed?"

"Yeah," Doc replied. "I slipped some valium in his Coke."

"That ain't right," Jack said, mocking a typical Corpsman line. "Well, I'm going on a run with Cline tomorrow morning at 0530 if you two want to join in."

"Sure," Doc said. "I could use a good run. It's been a while. I'm in."

"Me too," Miller said. "But I think we'll have to worry about keeping up with Doc. He told me he runs about a fifteen minute three mile."

"Jesus, Doc," Jack said. "I thought you were a Corpsman, but you're flying like a pilot."

"What can I say? I just use my long legs to my advantage."

"I guess so. Well, see you two out front of the barracks tomorrow then. Let me know if you need anything."

"Yeah, Jack," Doc replied. "And you let us know if you need anything."

"Sure will. And by the way, Doc, you might check on Hillery and Goldman. They were going at a pretty good wrestling match. They may be a little sore tonight or tomorrow morning."

Thursday October 20, 1999

0530 EST, G Barracks

Second squad had made its showing a little early. Doc, Miller and Jack were out in front of the barracks stretching to prepare themselves for their morning run. The sun wasn't up yet, and didn't look to be for a while. Just when they were beginning to wonder, Cline came out to join them.

"Some days I just can't get going," he told them. "Just give me a quick minute to stretch and we'll go."

A moment later they stepped off towards the marina, which lay a mile and a half away. They fell in line, two by two and kept a decent pace. Small talk kept them going where running cadences would normally fill the pre dawn area. Arriving at the marina they rounded the point and took the same route in reverse.

Running was the typical unit exercise of many military units, as it was the easiest thing most could do as an entire unit. However, it was also the most destructive to knees. Most people upon leaving the military suffer from one knee problem or another, many landing on some sort of disability because of it.

Other units found different ways to work out their personnel. Some played soccer, basketball or second squads new favorite of volleyball. Less pounding, less shock on the knees meant less problems and more ease for the Doc.

0610 EST, G Barracks

## Forming A Foundation

Mustard lightly stirred, slowly waking up. Sitting up he looked around and saw a startling sight. He found he was alone. Where were his roommates? Had he missed a formation? No, Jack said 0730 over at the old warehouse. So what was going on? If there was some change Miller or the Doc would have said something to him. They would have woke him up.

Wouldn't they have?

0630 EST, Chow hall

"Get this," Doc told Jack. "Mustard thought he was UA for a formation. Kid thought we'd gone and left him behind. Left him to fry after the hard time you'd given him yesterday with how nervous he's been."

"Poor kid," Jack said. "And all that time you were just getting some PT."

"He had just got out of the shower when we were coming in. He was glad to see that he hadn't fucked up. He was a little upset about having rushed through a shower, though."

"I wasn't sure, but I thought I spotted him leaving as I was coming up. Couldn't really tell since it was dark."

"Yeah, he did come over, and here comes the other roommate."

They talked through breakfast and joked about their new Marine. As the leaders of the squad, it was important for them to share the information and opinions they might have. Jack, with the Lieutenant agreeing to keep his distance, was overall in charge of the squad. While he was the top enlisted man of the squad, he wouldn't always be around to supervise everything. That was the key reason that the Lieutenant had tasked him with picking an assistant.

Doc and Miller had gladly stepped up to help their squad leader, on the sole condition they wouldn't have to do all of his work with all of his responsibilities. They would help him out so long as he took the responsibility of being a squad leader serious. Jack assured them that he was not the kind of leader that would stab his Marines in the back like that.

If they wanted clarification or a second opinion on that, they could just talk to Murphy, who had unfortunately made the choice to leave.

All three knew that communications between them would be one of the key points between them. If they didn't share information and observations, one might get left behind and might not know exactly what's going on. They might not know what they need to know. If that started happening, the subsequent events could very well lead into a Pearl Harbor type scenario. They all needed to know as much of the same information as possible to be the best leaders they could.

As they discussed the newest addition to their squad, they all agreed he could be broke of his nervous habits once he got used to the people around him. It seemed to them that his heart at least was in the right spot.

0730 EST, Old Warehouse

Second squad was all present with all their gear that they had been issued the day before. With once last satisfactory passing glance through the squad's rooms, Jack had made his way to the building arriving right at 0730.

The squads were arranged in various spots around the open area inside the building to get everything situated. They left considerable space between themselves and the other squads. Lance Corporal Jackson lead his squad in by showing them how to place the appropriate gear on its appropriate spot. Magazine pouches were placed on the right hip, 9mm, 40 cal, M-16 and MP5, from front to back. Their individual first aid kits were placed on their left hip and two canteens were placed at the sides of their back. This would give their pack proper placement to sit. A pistol holster would strapped to their right leg. This would be for their designated pistol, the 40. They would also be getting a shoulder harness for the 9mm.

Jack found it very interesting that each member of the squad had acquired another weapon for use. Each of them had a Kabar, most of them purchased recently, for their own personal use and protection. From it's humble beginnings in the 1940's until today, the name Kabar has stood out with Marines and Special Forces as the optimal style of fighting knife. The knives are known for their rugged dependability, classic styles and ready supply. Most of these had the Eagle, Globe and Anchor emblazoned on the leather scabbard, and USMC on the blade itself. These proud knives were attached on their LBV, or Load Bearing Vest, on the left side, hilt down, ready to be grabbed and extracted.

By 1000, squad members had been thoroughly inspected by their squad leader and the Lieutenant had given them a cursory glance.

"Well, Lance Corporal, it appears you were right," Lieutenant Green said. "The squad is ready."

"Like I said, sir, just let me take care of the men. I'm a Lance Corporal. I make shit happen."

1300 EST, E Club Pavilions

"Good afternoon squad," the squad leader began, right on time. "I am still Lance Corporal Jackson, and I am still your squad leader. I will be conducting this class on the PRC-113, or prick one thirteen, radio and Basic Radio Communications for the Fleet Marine Force Marine. I will be conducting this period of instruction using the lecture method, aided by a PRC-113 field radio and a Motorola SPR-12. The purpose of this period of instruction is for you to gain an

## Forming A Foundation

understanding of the PRC-113 radio and basic voice communications as used in the United States Marine Corps. At this time, do I have any questions on who I am, what we will be covering, how it will be covered, or what we will be using?"

He looked around and noted that everyone seemed to be following along so far.

"Very well, let's get started. These pieces you see scattered here on this table combine to form the PRC-113 field radio. This box is the RT-1319 receiver transmitter. These are two BB-590 batteries, which are inserted as such into the battery box and attached like this to the back of your 1319. You must have two BB-590 or BA-5590 batteries inserted to operate this radio. Otherwise the electrical circuit cannot be completed and the radio will not work. This is the H-250 handset, which is attached and screwed the front slot here. This is your wire whip UHF/VHF antenna, which attaches here.

"The technical aspects of the PRC-113 are as such. Its frequency selection is manual, using the keyboard and the eight manual presets. It has a frequency range of 116 to 149.975 Megahertz, abbreviated as MHz, in the VHF range and in the UHF range it can receive and transmit on 225 to 399.975 MHz. It draws between twenty-four and thirty volts of direct current. Low power will transmit two watts and high power ten watts. It can operate in AM voice, AM secure voice and direction finding modes. Are there any questions as of yet? Seeing none, I want everyone to make sure you can see the front here as I show you how to program the radio."

For the next hour and a half the squad took turns programming the radio, assembling and disassembling the radio. When they weren't actively working with the radio they were allowed to smoke or go inside the E-Club to get a snack or drink. At 1500 they gathered back together after a short break to continue their learning.

"Now that you know how to operate the radio, you need to learn how to operate your voice. I know that you think you know how to do that, and you've been doing it for years. Now while that is true, it's time you learned how to use it in the Communicators sense. First, it's time to learn how to count. Zero, won, too, tree, fo-fer, fife, six, seven, ate, niner. Ten and above don't exist. It's won zero. Not one oh as some of you might say. Oh is a letter, not a number. If there was an emergency and you had to make a phone call about it, you would call niner one one.

"When writing these, always make a horizontal line at the bottom of the number one. That way it won't get confused with the lower case lima. You should also cross your Zulus so that they wont get confused with the number two and cross the center of a zero so that it wont get confused for an oscar. In your handout there is also the phonetic alphabet, as set out by the International Telecommunications Union, or ITU. It is important to use these as not everyone might understand the other phrases you might be trying to use. Any questions?

"Seeing none, we'll move on to pro-words. Each pro-word conveys a specific meaning or phrase, which is intended to eliminate any verbal misinterpretation. This allows you to keep transmissions limited to a few short seconds. They are listed in the handouts that you have been given. Any questions on them? Good. Now pro-signs are simply the Morse code versions of pro-words and they are listed on the next page of your handout.

"Message traffic will generally fall under one of four categories. The four message precedence categories that are effective for US Military use are flash, immediate, priority and routine. Their pro-signs are listed in your book, along with situations when they would be used. Now are there any questions on anything covered so far? Good, fortunately this is pretty much self-explanatory, and I know that's a good manual you've got. I've been through it on more than one occasion being a field radio operator and avionics tech. It is a very good resource for all types of communications. Now let's take a ten minute break. When we come back we'll be talking about some of the security side."

The squad headed inside with the exception of Doc and Miller. Jack, having the pistol required to guard equipment when outside in situations like this, naturally had to stand guard.

"Mustard," Jack beckoned before he could go too far.

"Yes Lance Corporal," he replied, turning and trotting back to his squad leader.

"Here," he said, handing Mustard a dollar bill. "Get me a Coke from the vending machine."

"Aye, Lance Corporal," he acknowledged.

This was a tradition dating back through naval history. Sailors, and soldiers of the sea like these Marines, responded to an order with 'Aye Aye' or the shortened version to signify that they had received and understood the order that they were just given. It was a matter of showing respect to those who were there and the authority they held.

"You know, Jack," Doc said approaching the front table, "I never realized how much I liked this com stuff. It's pretty interesting."

"Yeah, I figured someone else out there would get their attention perked by this."

"I'm thinking I might have to get more involved in com. When I was working as a paramedic in Detroit we had a lot of good com guys that really knew their stuff and had some good stuff set up sometimes with some of the emergencies. I never really realized how much I picked up from them, but this was making me think it would be a good thing to know with how much of my life in the past was an emergency."

"It really can help, Doc. I know what you mean. Being a ham radio operator, I've helped out too. Communications is a very needed background in this day and age. A lot of Hams I know are weather spotters too. Many of those, like myself, are storm chasers that like to go out there and chase tornadoes around. Communications can be a really fun area and most of it's so simple even a guy like Miller could understand it."

"Hey," Miller said, taken back, "Don't insult my lack of intelligence. I'm keeping up pretty well here."

## Forming A Foundation

“Yeah, I know. I figured there’d be more questions, but I know it’s a pretty detailed outline you’ve all got, so I think most are just going to study it over the weekend or in the future.”

“Yeah,” Doc said. “But if there’s any chance, I’d like to go to a course on this with you.”

“We can probably arrange that, Doc. We’ll see what happens.”

“Now I’ve got one question for you here, Jack,” Miller said, hesitantly handling the radio. “One of my instructors at the School of Infantry was able to fiddle around with this and got a TV station. How’s that work?”

“Well, stations like that actually broadcast on two frequencies. They broadcast on one frequency for the video and one for the audio. It’s just a matter of getting a hold of that audio frequency and getting it programmed in to the radio like I showed you before. All too often over at the hanger, I’ll pull out this or a PRC-119 and get the downlink from MSNBC.”

“Downlink?” Miller asked.

“The audio signal that comes down from the satellites. Here let me show you.”

Jack punched in the frequency and turned up the volume. Before they knew it, they were getting an update from the MSNBC news desk in New York City.

“I don’t care who you are,” Miller said, “that’s cool.”

“Yeah,” Doc said. “When we’re off in some foreign land, we’ll be able to keep up to date on what’s happening in a non shit hole country.”

“Sure will,” Jack said. “Including these broadcasts are beamed down from satellites all over the world. It’s just all a matter of getting the right frequency for the right area.”

As the squad came back, they were all in mild amazement, or at least a good amusement, that a news broadcast was able to be picked up by a Marine Corps field radio. As they started heading back towards their seats when Jack turned down the volume, he had a question for them.

“Now being that some of these satellites will send down these signals encoded for cable TV, such as MSNBC here, how is it possible that we’re able to get the audio on this radio here?”

“By using the encryption filter,” Pile answered, “Which is described...lemme see...page seven of our handout.”

“Good work Pile. I hadn’t covered any of the encryption stuff, as it’s not really essential information for this basic class, but I’m glad someone picked it out of the notes. Now, someone else tell me what the basic purpose of encryption is. What does encryption do when transmitting?”

“It makes it more secure,” Hillery answered.

“Good. An MP knowing another side of security. And who can tell me how many levels of security classifications there are?”

“Four,” Stanley answered.

“Good. That’s right, there are four levels. Can someone else tell me what they are?”

Holewinski hesitantly raised his hand.

“Go ahead, Ski, give it a shot.”

“Well, Top Secret, Secret and Unclassified are three. I forget the other one.”

“Right, those are three. There’s one more that goes between Secret and Unclassified. Anyone? Confidential. Now let’s take a rundown of what these mean. Top Secret means that it is national security information or material and it requires the highest degree of protection. This classification is given to things that could cause exceptionally grave damage to national security if let into the wrong hands. By this I mean that it could cause harm against the US or its allies. It could disrupt foreign relations, compromise vital national defense plans and even compromise complex cryptology and communications intelligence systems.

“The Secret classification is given to national security information that requires a substantial degree of protection and can cause serious damage to national security. Some examples would be a disruption of foreign relations significantly affected, a significant impairment of a policy or program or a revelation of significant military plans or intelligence operations.

“Confidential simply covers national security information or general material that requires protection.

“Unclassified material is information that does not require any increased protection. It can’t result in any harm to the US if it falls into the hands of unauthorized personnel. Any questions on these classifications? Good, I know it’s pretty much self-explanatory. Moving on.”

The course covered up until 1530 and gave all of the Marines there a deep knowledge of communications operations and security. There were few questions, but most knew they could pull the information as needed from either their notes or their squad leader. Looking at his watch, Jack addressed his squad with a sense of relief washing through him.

“We’re doing good. We’re learning a lot and we’re moving forward in a good manner. Tomorrow morning everyone needs to be at the warehouse at 0630. We’ll be going to the rifle range for our courses of fire with the rifle and pistol. Remember, everyone needs to qual, so if you have any questions, see me, Miller or Ski and we can help you out. I’m a range coach, Miller’s a damn hot shooting grunt and Ski’s a crack shot armorer. We’ll get you straightened up.

“I need one person to help me take this gear back over to the building, everyone else is secured. You all know how to get a hold of me if you need anything. I’ll just be around my room most of the night. If I’m not there, you can reach me

## Forming A Foundation

on my cell phone. If you don't have an outside access number set up on the phone in your room, you can call free from the front desk. They know to let my Marines call me from there. Have a nice evening."

Pile came up and volunteered to help take the gear back. It was only two blocks to the warehouse, but it could be long enough with two packs of gear. Plus a pistol.

"Thanks for volunteering to help, Pile," Jack said. "I didn't want to be an asshole and have to voluntell someone."

"No problem, Lance Corporal," he replied. "I actually wanted to ask you for some help."

"Sure. What can I possibly do for you?"

"Well, we all know you're a black belt and a lethal weapon and all. It's kinda why everyone has been so eager to please and trying extra hard not to piss you off. Everyone's kinda afraid you'll kick their ass."

"I'll only do it if I absolutely have to. Only if they really fuck up."

"Yeah, we know. But it is why I wanted your help."

"OK. Go on."

"Well, this morning I was over at the gym. Goldman was looking for a wrestling partner and I figured I'd give it a shot. After the first minute or so we were just getting hot and bothered by our shirts getting in the way so we took them off. After the next minute or so, the only reason I was able to keep going was from being all hot and sticky. Being sweaty I was able to just slip away from him. He wound up pinning me in like three minutes."

"OK. Sounds like you held him off for a little while."

"But it was just because I was able to slip out from being sweaty. I know Taekwondo is different from wrestling, but I was wondering if you could help me out and teach me some things."

"Sure. Were you wanting to learn more about wrestling or hand to hand fighting?"

"Both actually. I just didn't want to ask Goldman to teach me about wrestling. I didn't want him to think I was more of a puss than I looked like this morning. I mean, that's why I was there at the gym in the first place. To lift weights and get stronger."

"I understand. You just kinda feel embarrassed and you know I'll keep it to myself."

"Pretty much, Lance Corporal. I knew you'd understand."

"Alright. When did you want to start and what did you want to start with?"

"Well, I'd like to start tonight if possible. Maybe with some wrestling so I can better handle it if Goldman wants to give it a go again."

"Alright. Were you two going at it collegiate or full contact?"

"Collegiate. There was some joint manipulation there though."

"OK. I can work with you on that."

Reaching their building, they put the gear in their gear locker. Walking across the street, Jack turned in his pistol, which would be back in his possession that next morning for the range. He walked back to the barracks with Pile talking about techniques and strategies for fighting and wrestling.

1630 EST, G Barracks

Knocking on the door to the room next to his, Jack got the Marine to answer he was wanting.

"Mustard, just the Marine I was looking for. Come on, let's get something to eat."

"I'm not too hungry, Lance Corporal," He said. "I was just going to get something from the vending machine later."

"Boy," Miller prodded him from inside the room, "Your squad leader says eat, you go eat."

"Right. Sorry. Let me just get my wallet."

They walked out the side entrance to their barracks, which left them with only about thirty yards to the door for the chow hall's fast chow side. Fast chow was the part where the personnel assigned to the base could get things more to the liking of burgers and fries. Slow chow was more like a cafeteria at a college or business. This particular chow hall had two lines of each style.

Walking up to the door to fast chow, Jack said, "I figured a skinny kid like you would eat quite a bit. Most of the rest of the skinny bastards in our squad have such a high metabolism they're needing to eat at least every couple hours."

"Normally I'm pretty much that way. I'm just not too hungry now. I had a big lunch. It was the first time in the past couple days I haven't been too nervous to eat anything."

"Yeah. I know you were put through a pretty good scare. Not too many people would really know how to act in a situation like that."

"The weird thing was a conversation I had with the pilot that flew the plane down here. He told me he knew the person that was going to be taking charge of me down here and that he was going to take care of me. Now I see that you, my squad leader and the one in charge of me, you're taking good enough care of me. It threw me off thinking about that earlier. How the hell did that pilot know so much about what was going on when I knew so damn little?"

"Well, all too often Majors know more than PFCs."

"How'd you know the pilot was a Major?"

"Lucky guess," Jack said.

## Forming A Foundation

“Wait a minute,” Mustard said with the wheels turning in his head. “Do you know that pilot?”

“Mustard, remember I worked in the air wing before this little evolution. I know a lot of pilots.”

“Right. It just all seems a little ironic. He was the only one that evening that told me anything useful. The Command Duty Officer up at Lejeune didn’t tell me anything except to pack up all of my stuff. That pilot at least told me where I was going and that the person that would be in charge of me was going to take care of me. Sergeant Kerry didn’t tell me anything but to not get too settled into my room in E Barracks because I wouldn’t be staying there but that night. That pilot was a nice guy and he kinda helped me calm down a little bit.”

They had picked their way through the food line and were getting their drinks. With the chow hall having just opened, there were plenty of seats to be had. Jack ushered his way to a booth with a good view of the TV. This one, like most every other TV in government installations was tuned to CNN. Pretty much every set in a chow hall or other military installation was turned either to CNN, or their squad’s favorite, MSNBC. There was just something about the National Broadcast Company’s syndicate that those thirteen enlisted men in second squad just liked better. Maybe it was just a more accurate and just coverage of the military, which had seen a downfall with President Clinton in office up to that past January.

“So how have your roommates been treating you,” Jack asked.

“They’re cool. Been treating me pretty nice. Once I got there I thought I was going to be treated like an outcast. Fortunately everyone’s been pretty cool. I’ve been getting to know a couple of the guys on the squad. I think I’m starting to fit in.”

“Good. I just wanted to make sure you were fitting in now and getting used to everything. Doc and I were talking about you and as you know we’re here to take care of you. So what are your plans for your future?”

“I don’t really know. I haven’t been in the Corps too long, so I know I’ve got a couple years to figure it out. I’d like to get into some explosives work. The stuff my dad showed me was pretty cool.”

“We can most likely arrange that. Seeing as how you’ve already wolfed down those French fries you got, I guess I’ll let you get on with your evening. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow, Lance Corporal.”

Mustard gathered his tray and walked out. Jack watched him go, slowly chewing on his hamburger. *The kid’s gonna make it, he thought. Now that he’s finally calmed down.*

1830 EST, Fitness Center

“The best thing you can do,” Jack was telling him, “is to get your arms and chest good and strong. Plus your abs. Most of your power wrestling around, especially with someone like Goldman, is gonna come from there. That’s one of those few times I’m going to tell you that you might have to out muscle them. From there, you just work some of that manipulation we were talking about earlier. With that knowledge you should be golden, alright?”

“Cool. So what are you going to start me off with?”

“Lifting some weights. I want you to do this while you can. The next couple weeks we’ll be spending most of our time in the field, so you won’t have a chance to do this. That’s when I’ll work a lot of the techniques with you. Now, I’m gonna show you the best machines to work on and what to do. It’s up to you from there.”

“Alright. Sounds good.”

Cal is of average height, and while fairly skinny is still pretty strong. His quiet manner and peaceful temperament fit his boyish looks. His blue eyes and sandy blonde hair razored to the scalp on the sides give him the baby face that reiterate that he is a youngster.

Growing up, Cal always proved himself to be a good deal smarter than others his age. He excelled through grammar and middle school before graduating high school at the age of fourteen. Placed on an academic fast track, he received a bachelors in physics at the age of sixteen. Cal then received his masters degree the day before his eighteenth birthday.

The very next day, he got the only birthday present he wanted. He married his girlfriend of four years. Amanda, just two days older than cal, shared the same love for her husband that was given to her.

They agreed to postpone their honeymoon so that Cal could follow his other dream in life. Becoming a Marine. The day after their marriage, Cal shipped off to basic. He at least got to spend his first night as a newlywed in the arms of his bride. That thought helped him to keep his peace of mind through the mental torture of boot camp.

An hour later Pile felt that he had made a good impact and set forth on the right workout. He was sore, but he knew to expect that.

“You did good,” Jack told him. “You’re off to a great start. Just keep working at it.”

“Yeah,” Pile responded. “You know I will. I don’t want Goldman to be able to beat me as easily as he did before.”

“And if you want, we could give it a go right now.”

“I don’t know. My whole upper body’s sore. I’ve got muscles hurting I didn’t know I had. I don’t think I’d stand any chance against you in a wrestling match right now. You’d pin me too easy.”

“Alright. You go and get some rest. We’ve gotta be up a little earlier tomorrow.”

2000 EST, G Barracks

## Forming A Foundation

After taking a shower, Jack put on PT gear and sandals and went to check on his squad. Walking down the hall four rooms, he knocked on door number one. Holewinski opened the door and invited his squad leader in.

“We all have a good evening gents,” Jack asked.

“Yeah,” Cooney said and Ski echoed. Riggey was lying in his bed snoring softly.

“Ski, did you get anyone asking any advice for tomorrow’s range?”

“Yeah. I actually helped Riggey there for a little while.”

“Now I see he’s working on his prone position.”

“Yeah. Right. Goldman was here for a little bit too. Hillery popped in for a little while but he pretty much knew it all anyways. He just wanted to see if I might have any tricks he didn’t know already.”

“MPs get more weapons training than you’d think,” Jack said.

“Especially with pistols. I think Miller helped a couple people too.”

“Good. I’m glad everyone’s working together as a team. It’s good when you can get help from the people in your squad.”

“I think we’re all kinda getting to know each other better,” Cooney said. “Getting some friendships going.”

“Great,” Jack said. “The squad that plays together stays together. If you can count on your squad off base, you know you can count on them on base.”

“And we’ve been spending enough time on base these past couple days,” Ski said.

“Well you weren’t really required to stay on base,” Jack told him. “It was just strongly encouraged. We’ll be getting off base tomorrow and going back to The Dock. I know it’s been a long and pretty unnerving week for everyone. This will be a good relaxer time for everyone.”

“I think I speak for the whole squad when I say I could sure use it.”

“I think everyone would agree with you Ski. I’m going to get on and check on the rest of the squad. You all know how to get a hold of me if you need me. If any of you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask. It’s my job to take care of you goofballs.”

Jack walked through the head to the next room. Goldman was just changing into PT gear, having just taken a shower. The Squad Leader had spotted him earlier heading towards the gym to work out, as he and Pile were leaving.

“Did you have a good workout Goldman,” Jack asked.

“Sure did,” Goldman replied. “Kinda ticked I missed you and Pile. No one else over there wanted to wrestle.”

“Pile was a little too sore to wrestle you after out workout. He was saying he hoped you wouldn’t show up and challenge him. He didn’t want to have to back out.”

“Probably figured I’d do a bunch of shit talking.”

“That’s what Marines are good at.”

“Yeah, but I’d have let him be. I know how you can be sore after a good work out.”

“So how are the roommates doing here?”

“Good Lance Corporal,” they replied in unison.

“Hillery, did you and Pile catch Jeopardy tonight?”

“Yeah. He came in just in time from the gym for Double Jeopardy. He was happy enough since there was a physics question on final jeopardy.”

“I’ll take he got it right for a thousand, Alex.”

“Of course Mr. Wizard got it right. With as smart as he is, I don’t know why he joined the Marine Corps. Or why he’s not at least an officer.”

“Wanted to be a part of the working force I guess. Taking the slack out route is only for those who want the money of officers. The rest of us almost enjoy getting more done for less money.”

“Speak for yourself, Lance Corporal,” Carlson said. “I had hoped for a good steady paycheck. It sure would be nice to get a bigger one.”

“I know,” Hillery said. “Here we are defending the country, and congressmen will vote themselves pay raises long before anyone else.”

“Well, if you all have any questions about shooting, make sure you talk to Ski tonight. After all he’s right next door. I’m gonna continue on. As always, let me know if you need anything.”

He walked out the door as they all said their good evenings and acknowledged their knowing that their squad leader would take care of them.

Knocking on the next door down, he found another roomful of his Marines resting up for their day tomorrow on the range. They all knew to get good rest in order to be in full focus on their targets the next morning. Turrentine and Stanley were playing a video game and Pile had a magazine he was flipping through.

“You sore yet, Pile,” Jack asked.

“Kinda, Lance Corporal. Doc had this spray stuff that cooled off my muscles and helped them relax.”

“Spray on muscle relaxer. I know he’s got a pretty good medic pack next door. Whatever he doesn’t have I know he can get from the clinic here.”

## Forming A Foundation

“My wife would love him if he could get me some viagra.”

“You’re young. I don’t think you need to go all that far yet. How’s your wife taking your getting yanked away from her so quick?”

“She’s alright with it. She knew it was a possibility. With as rough as things can be, we try to make the best of things. We haven’t even taken our honeymoon yet. I shipped out for basic the day after we got married. Then off to MCT, MOS school. The most time we’ve really had was the ten days of boot leave. About all we did then was hold each other. We had to make up and show our love for each other. We really didn’t even have the wild and crazy sex you might expect from newlyweds.”

“I understand. Young pups in love. How long have you two been married now?”

“Seven months. It’ll be eight in about a week and a half.”

“Just keep this attitude and you’ll have everything going for you.”

“I will. I love her, she loves me. That’s all that counts in my book. Both of us want kids.”

“I’d recommend waiting if at all possible. You don’t want your kids to be half your age when their in high school.”

“We’re thinking about four years or so.”

“Good. Everybody ready to shoot tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” they all said.

“I was gonna get some guidance from Miller,” Pile said. “I know physics and chemistry, but he knows shooting.”

“That he does,” Jack replied. “Well, I’m gonna go check on him if you wanna come and ask him for some help.”

“Yeah, I’ll be there in a minute.”

Jack walked through the head to find the five foot eight Mustard standing with his shirt off by his wall locker.

“Mustard put a shirt on. We don’t want to see how skinny you are.”

“Sorry Lance Corporal,” he said, noting that it was only a joke. “It wont happen again.”

“It better not. You and your damn slicked back hair. You look like a damn guinea with a high and tight.”

“I actually am ninety percent Italian.”

“Great. Just what we needed. A guinea with access to machine guns.”

“I ain’t no fuckin’ wop,” he said with a defensive tone in his voice.

“It’s alright Mustard. Just a little poking between the squad.”

“Sorry. I just don’t like being called a wop. Directly or not.”

“Everyone here alright?”

They all gave their confirmation.

“You worked Pile too hard Jack,” Doc said.

“He told me he had to come see you. I had to put a little muscle on his skinny body.”

“I think that’s what his problem was in the first place,” Miller said. “A *little* muscle.”

“True enough Miller. Doc, your medical supplies holding up well enough?”

“Yeah. If I need something I can just get a hold of Chief Gibbs. He knows to hook me up.”

“Good. Sounds like you got some blackmail on him.”

“Somethin’ like that,” Spazz replied sarcastically.

“Miller, anyone come to you for some shooting advice?”

“Pile said he wanted some later. I was gonna teach him and Mustard at the same time.”

“Sounds good. Well, I’m right next door if you need some help or another person to look over them.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“No problem. I’ll be next door if anybody needs me.”

He unlocked the door and settled into the chair at his desk where he made a phone call. When his business was finished, his next door neighbor and first squad counterpart appeared through the head.

“Working hard, Jack,” Cline asked.

“Just a little troop welfare. Using a couple connections to hook up my Marines.”

“That’s cool. Taking ‘em out to get drunk?”

“Yeah, back to The Dock. They got a Buffett cover band playing tomorrow night and most of my guys are pretty good fans, so it all works out.”

“Cool. We may have to go over there to check that out. Slocum talked me into going back out to Hooters with our gang.”

“Has he been working out as a good assistant?”

“Yeah. We’ve got a good relationship going and we share a lot of the same ideas. I take it you and Miller are getting along good.”

“Pretty much the same as you and Slocum. Doc’s been stepping up quite a bit too. Really a good working team. I can’t wait to see what they show to be capable of in the field evolution.”

“Same here,” Cline said starting to think. “What I’m not looking forward to is the five days of SERE training. A condensed version of getting our asses kicked and tortured.”

## Forming A Foundation

"It's part of the training. I haven't talked to my Marines about that yet. I figured I'd wait until we're through with the quals first. One step at a time."

"Usually the best option. I just hope all of us can make it through all the training. It's a great platoon from what I've seen. Lot of really good people."

"Yeah. Well, I'm gonna get some rest. Could wind up being a long day tomorrow."

"Alright. We'll see you at the warehouse."

Friday October 21, 1999

0730 EST, Rifle Range

Each squad had been taken over to the rifle range in the van appropriated for their squad. An hour prior they had been at the armory on the Naval Air Station to withdraw their weapons. Each Marine and Corpsman would carry their rifle with them enroute. Federal regulations required there to be at least one loaded pistol or rifle to guard these weapons. Jack, being the squad leader and senior man, naturally held the responsibility for the squad and all of the equipment. He also had the responsibility for carrying the Smith and Wesson .40 caliber pistol.

The squads had been positioned in front of their targets. They would not have to worry about pulling the targets, the disliked duty of pulling down the targets and marking where the shots hit. There had been a working party from the schoolhouse at NAS tasked with this. This allowed the platoon to worry solely on their shooting. The squads were lined up five targets for each squad, three relays deep. The squad leaders knew how to act as rifle coaches, as did one other person in each squad and these two would aid in their squads firing for the day.

Confident that his squad was capable enough in their abilities to shoot, Jack took a spot in the last relay regardless. He wanted his Marines to get up and shoot first, where he could provide the instructions they might need. Coaching was discouraged, as it would not necessarily be readily available in combat. Any which way, it was still allowed. With this in mind, the squad leaders still took their appropriate positions in order to be available to their squads.

Receiving their rounds, each Marine knew how many rounds to put in their magazines, as they had gone through the instructions enough times to be able to handle it well enough on their own.

"Good morning shooters," came from the tower over the loudspeakers. "Through your course of fire today remember to apply your four basic safety rules while on this range. Treat every weapon as if it were loaded, never point your weapon at anything you do not intend to shoot, keep your finger straight and off the trigger until you intend to fire and keep your weapon on safe until you intend to fire. First relay, that first relay make your way from the ready boxes to the firing line and assume a sitting position. This will be your first stage of fire, the two hundred yard line slow fire, firing five rounds sitting, five rounds kneeling and five rounds standing in a time limit of twenty minutes. Your one minute of prep time begins now."

While the rules on the positions were a little more relaxed here than they would be on a standard qualifying range, the coaches still corrected a few minor points that could be expected to aid the shooters. They were also doing their best to calm down the nerves that might be on edge. First and second squad had both placed their concerned shooters on the second relay and their coaches on first and third relays. This would give two available aids to correct firing deficiencies. Naturally, the squad leaders had collaborated the night before and not come up with the same conclusion separately.

"Shooters on the firing line, stand. With a magazine of five rounds, load."

All down the firing line, the Marines took a magazine from their cartridge pouches and inserted them into the magazine well of their M-16.

"Make ready."

They all pulled the bolt back and chambered a round.

"Shooters on the firing line, you may commence fire when your taaarget appears."

The person giving the commands placed the same emphasis on the word target that all others seem to. When the targets, resembling a silhouette of a person in the prone position, rose over the birm, the shooters dropped to their sitting position and fired five well aimed and well placed shots at their targets. Each target was a black silhouette which took its shape on a piece of paper, six feet wide by six feet tall, giving the appearance of what might be the general area the enemies movement might cover.

With minor corrections and adjustments, and even fewer coming from the coaches, the first relay made their way through their fifteen rounds.

"Ceeease fire, cease fire. Unload, show clear. Coaches, saved rounds or alibis on the left? None. Saved rounds or alibis on the right? There are none. Coaches, is the left clear? The left is clear, is the right clear? The right is clear. All clear on the firing line. Shooters stand, assume strong side sling arms back away from the firing line. That second relay, make your way to the firing line, you're on your prep time when all targets appear."

The process repeated through the second and third relays without incident or delay. The coaches had to make very few corrections to the shooters abilities in order to correct their problems. The Marines and Corpsmen there seemed to be able to handle their shooting on their own well enough.

## Forming A Foundation

The first relay had once again prepared three magazines of five rounds, only two of which would be immediately needed for the next stage of fire.

“First relay, that first relay approach the firing line and assume a kneeling position. This will be the second stage of fire, the two hundred yard rapid fire, firing two magazines of five rounds in a time limit of seventy seconds. Your prep time begins now.”

The groups of rapid fire all proved to be well placed shots. Some had two separate groups of five shots, but the groups themselves were very tightly placed groups.

Moving back to the three hundred yard line brought a few minor corrections by each squad’s coaches. The shooting was good, all hitting their targets, but it could have been better. Minor functional corrections were to be expected with any large range detail like this. Sight settings, or the dope on the weapon, needed to be changed for some of the people. It could be expected that someone would be uncomfortable in a certain firing position, especially with the rigid expectations that could be placed on them.

In combat no one worried about whether your position was correct or not. What mattered was hitting your target. There were so many ways you could tweak a position for personal comfort. Other parts were bound to be uncomfortable no matter what you did. In the kneeling position your knees would hurt regardless. In the sitting position your legs would surely fall asleep before the time came for you to stand. In the standing your off hand was bound to shake and lose its stability in fifteen seconds, and that estimate being generous.

Miller’s shooting had been so accurate all through the courses of fire on both the two and three hundred yard lines that Gunny Fields had taken notice. Miller had shot the shot spotter at least a dozen times and had shot the spindle that held it up six times.

“Miller,” Gunny Fields said before Miller stood to back off the firing line. “Here’s one extra round. Get in the kneeling position and aim in at your target.”

Miller did as told.

“You may notice that between the eyes a dime has been taped to your target. I want you to hit it.”

“Good to go, Gunny.”

“Fire when ready.”

*Bang.*

Sure enough, as Gunny Fields looked through his binoculars, the dime had been shot from where it was taped. The Gunny just shook his head.

Minor corrections once again were made as all squads made their way back to the five hundred yard line. The prone position they would now shoot from was by far the most stable and easiest to shoot from. It was also the position that provided the least amount of mobility.

It was the easiest for the majority of Marines to hit their target, as was the case today. Jack, in full swing of the rifle coach mentality, kneeled next to Mustard and observed his shooting and how everything was plotted in his rifle data book. He saw that Mustard was now down to his last shot, having hit seven of the last nine.

“Mustard,” Jack said, “I’ll make you a deal. If you hit this last shot, you can go for a flight with the Blues tomorrow.”

“You serious, Lance Corporal?”

“Of course. You think I’d lie to one of my Marines?”

“No, Lance Corporal.”

“They’ve got to be in Panama City Sunday, but they’ll be here tomorrow doing some practice flights. If you hit this shot, I’ll get Hobs to take you up in Lucky Seven.”

“How’d he get that nickname?”

“Condensed version of his last name and his liking of cartoons.”

“Ah.”

“Well,” Jack said. “There’s your target. Let’s see if you can hit it here.”

“No pressure or anything.”

Mustard took his shot and the target went down into the pits to get marked. When it came back up, the shot spotter had been placed right at the heart of the silhouette.

“Good shot, Mustard,” Jack said. “Do you always work this well under pressure?”

“Yeah, I guess so. This really isn’t pressure though. I mean, those targets aren’t shooting back at me.”

“True enough. Unload, show clear.”

Mustard did as directed.

“Good,” Jack said. “Make condition four and back off the firing line.”

The last relay of the day made its way to the five hundred yard line. Jack walked over to where Miller was settling in his place.

“So Miller,” Jack said, “Are you gonna piss off the Gunny by hitting all black from back here?”

“Come on man,” Miller replied, “It’s the prone position. How can I miss that big paper target?”

“Deer hunting?”

## Forming A Foundation

“Tempting. Tempting.”

“Shooters on the firing line,” blared from the loud speakers, “this is your fifth and final stage of fire, the five hundred yard line prone, firing ten rounds in a time limit of ten minutes. With a magazine of ten rounds, load. Make ready. Shooters you may commence fire when your target appears.”

The targets rose and Miller did indeed hit the black silhouette all ten times. Five of the shots were between the eyes and the other five went through the heart. Needless to say, Gunny Fields noticed this and had yet one more challenge for the best shooter of the platoon.

“Miller, again, here’s one more round,” he said. “I’m having them tape a quarter over the heart of the target. If you shoot it, you’re getting a meritorious mast.”

“Good to go, Gunny.”

At least he was a simple person. Everyone in the platoon, regardless of where they grew up, agreed that the simplicity attitude of the south was infectious. It seemed they had all caught the bug of the laid back lifestyle. Most had caught the beach bum bug as well.

Miller’s target reappeared with the quarter placed as advertised. With Miller being the only one on the firing line, all eyes literally were on him. Word had spread quite quickly about him shooting the dime, and it was now just as quickly spreading with his new task.

With the round in the chamber he settled into his prone position. When the echo target reappeared a very small smudge was visible glaring at the heart of the target.

Barely.

At least it was visible if you squinted just right. As fortune would have it for Miller, the coin was taped at the center of where his previous group was. It also cast enough of a reflection to show its position.

Miller looked back at Jack and Doc, mouthing the words ‘Watch this shit.’

He sighted in, took a deep breath and squeezed the trigger. The single shot echoed through the range.

“Shit,” Gunny Fields muttered while looking through his high-powered scope. “Miller, not only did you shoot the quarter, but you clipped Washington’s head. You’re definitely proving to be our smartest choice for scout sniper school.”

“Thanks, Gunny. Just doin’ what I’m good at. I would like to keep that quarter if at all possible.”

“I’ll let you keep it just so you won’t shoot me.”

1030 EST, Pistol Range

Word had spread of Miller’s accomplishments and respect had grown for him in his abilities. His pistol abilities were notable enough, but not nearly as much as with a rifle. Corrections were made and time was used well considering very few had fired pistols prior to this week. Being that there were few that had fired pistols prior, there were fewer nasty habits brought in.

Shortly before one, with everyone quailed, they were cleared to their vans. All they would need to do would be to turn in their rifles and pistols at the NAS armory and conduct a safety brief. With that done, they would be free to enjoy their weekend, a weekend they were all looking forward to, as it would be their last time off in what would prove to seem like an eternity.

1330 EST, G Barracks

They had just piled from the van and gathered around their squad leader, who stood leaning back against the van. Miller, his assistant squad leader, stood to his right, and their Corpsman stood to his left. Jack knew that this would be the time to make it or break it as a squad leader for these Marines. What he said now could prove crucial to taking charge of these Marines.

“It’s been a long couple days for us. It’s been a challenge to accept the reality of what we’re facing. I don’t think it was easy for you to get uprooted from your commands and taken down here so quick. I think so far we’ve made a good effort of it, and we can beat the problems that will come to us in the next two weeks, no matter what the odds. I have full faith and confidence in all of your abilities to accomplish the mission. We are smart, damn smart. Worst off we’re creative, crazy, confident and cocky. C4. It’s an explosive combination. So far, I know all of you have accepted me as your squad leader. I thank you for that and I want you to know this. I’m here for you. All of you are more important to my future than me. It’s the least I can do. As a squad leader I need to make sacrifices of myself to better my Marines and to help them. I ask you to do that for each other as well. That’s the only way we’ll make it is to help each other out. You may know something that the guy next to you needs to know. Ski, excellent job of stepping up with weapons. That’s exactly what I mean. Miller, same thing and Doc, good job looking out for health issues so soon. When I’m not around, Miller’s in charge. If he says something, consider it’s coming from me. Same thing from Doc. He knows how to take care of you and that’s his job.

“Now here’s the deal for this weekend. As promised we’re getting out a few hours early. Once I cut you loose I want everyone to shit, shower and shave and meet out by the van. We’re gonna go back over to the Dock for booze and

## Forming A Foundation

burgers. I talked to the manager last night and I got us the hot tub reserved. We'll have it all to ourselves to help relax. They're gonna have a band tonight. And I know we're all Jimmy Buffett fans, so we'll like The Dockers that will be playing there tonight. Here's the better part. Drink up, eat up and most importantly, live it up. Mike at MWR, or Morale, Welfare and Recreation, has offered to pick up the tab for us. Seems that they've got an extra couple hundred bucks sitting there that they need to lose today. Tomorrow and Sunday will be the relax days. I don't want anyone out doing too much to strain themselves. I know you're not really gonna like this, but I want everyone back by 2100. I know you don't think you should have a curfew being Marines, but drastic times call for drastic measures. This is a pretty drastic period we're coming up on. Any questions for me? Seeing none, Miller, you got anything for them?"

"One thing. Look, it's cool and all you're letting the Lance Corporal get your respect so easily. Importantly enough, and we learn this in the infantry, is that his authority is not to be challenged. That's grounds for an ass whoopin'. Do what he says and keep going like you've been going though and we'll be the most shit hot squad in this platoon. Work together and as a reggae singer said, 'With a little love and luck, you will get by.' We'll get by just the same with a little brotherly love. Next, I'd like to suggest we go to Peg Leg Pete's tomorrow evening for drinks and dinner."

"It almost sounds like you've got a hidden agenda Miller," Jack said.

"Well, what's left of Skynard's playing."

"I think we can do that. Doc, anything?"

"Yeah, one quick thing. Look, like Jack said, I'm here to take care of you. I'm an EMT Paramedic and a Navy Corpsman. I'm here to take care of you and look out for your welfare. It's something I enjoy doing too. Just like Jack, I'm here to listen to any personal problems you might have. I do fall under the doctor patient confidentiality clause, so I can't talk to anyone about any problem without your say so. I will encourage this though. Don't hold anything back from the squad leader. He needs to know what's going on with all of us to be the best leader for us he can be. If you'd feel more comfortable talking to me about it, then do so and I'll talk to him. If you've got any problems now, I'll stick back here for a minute before going inside. Let me know and we can talk about it. Any aches, pains or problems, mental, emotional or physical. Jack."

"Alright. Now, is there anyone that feels that me telling you to go eat out tonight for free is an unlawful order?"

"Hell no," they chimed.

"And is there anyone here, whether of drinking age or under, that feels it is an unlawful order for me to look out for your welfare and tell you to get trashed off your ass tonight?"

"Fuck no," they yelled.

"Then one more thing before I cut you loose. I think everyone here has at least one friend in the squad so to speak. From here on out, libo buddies are the law. You don't leave base without someone else from the squad being there with you. I want you to have someone there with you at all times, not because I don't trust you, but because I want to have someone who can cover your six. Now, does anyone have any bitches, moans, groans, whines, complaints, questions, comments, concerns or inappropriate statements? Seeing none, be back here in a half hour. Squad attention!! Fall out."

Doc did hang back as promised. Forty five minutes later, the baker's dozen were back at the van. Spirits were high on the ride to the Dock. Once they were seated out on the pavilion, Jack pulled Doc aside.

"Anyone have any problems, Doc?"

"Nope. And I'm not holding anything back confidentially either. The squad seems to be good right now. About my only concern for the time being is Carlson. His Dad dying recently seems to be kinda eating at him, but it's not doing anything too bad for now."

"Alright thanks for the heads up. Anything else?"

"Yeah. I think that if a couple of these guys get in any bar fights, someone's gonna get their ass seriously kicked. Or killed."

"Any of the squad already sticking out in your mind?"

"Ski and Pile."

"Why Pile?"

"Quiet guy until he snaps. He kinda fits into the mold."

"Alright. I'd have to agree with you that he has the capability of really kicking someone's ass. He went head to head pretty well with Goldman, who was an all-state wrestler. If he can use his fists as well as he can wrestle, Pile could be quite a fighter. Same with Goldman. I know they're all crazy. That's why their in the Corps. They're a good group of goofballs that will keep things interesting and positive through the worst times. They'll be playing pranks before you know it. Damn knuckleheads. Now let's enjoy the evening."

Throughout that evening and the rest of the weekend, the squad blew off a great deal of steam and relaxed. They enjoyed all the food and drinks they could polish off and calmed down even more as the band got going. There seemed to be a bit of humor amongst the group as The Dockers played "Love and Luck" by Jimmy Buffett, thinking back to Miller's comment earlier that day.

Beach volleyball began before too long and pretty much all of the squad was out there. Doc volunteered to be the ref, Miller and Jack were the captains and it was perfectly set up for six on six. They played on through the evening with a

## Forming A Foundation

couple of breaks to jump in the gulf or to have a drink to cool off. Through the games, the band played and the squad sung along.

Saturday October 21, 1999

0800 EST, Sherman Field

“There he is, under the wing of Lucky 7,” Jack told Mustard as they walked to the dual seater.

“This is so cool.”

“Please don’t tell me you didn’t think I could pull this off for you.”

“No, I knew you could do it. After all you worked here.”

“Still basically do. When I haven’t been around the squad, I’ve been around the squadron. Funny story about Hobs. We got talking one day about various benefits of different things. I aimed myself towards the wingtip, which sits just over my head. He didn’t notice what I was doing, but stayed just off my left shoulder as we were walking towards the plane from the front. At the right moment I asked him, ‘Well, you know what I like about being short in the wing?’ He said, ‘What’s that,’ and he smacked his head into the leading edge of the wing. I just kept walking and said ‘No ducking.’ He got pissed and yelled at me, ‘You set me up.’ Chief Schulze came from behind the plane and said ‘No, sir, I’d say you walked right into that one.’ That just made him even madder. It was a joke that still circulates around the squadron. He’s knocked his head on the wing more times than I can count.”

“That’s a funny story. So it’s true that officers can do some really bonehead things sometimes.”

“I could write a book about it. Well, let’s see if we can get this bird to fly.”

As they neared the plane, hobs was standing under the wing, attempting to dig something out of the bag at his feet.

“Yo, Hobs,” Jack exclaimed.

Startled, Hobs sprang upright and smacked his head on the wing.

“Dammit,” he muttered, rubbing his head.

“You really gotta stop that,” Jack said. “You don’t have that many brain cells to spare.”

“Son of a bitch,” He muttered.

Hobs turned and when he faced them Mustard’s chin almost hit the deck.

“It’s him,” Mustard gasped.

“Yeah it’s him,” Jack said. “This is Hobs, the pilot I work with.”

“No, I mean he’s the pilot that flew me down here.”

“How’s it goin’ kid,” Hobs asked.

“It’s going alright sir,” Mustard said, still shocked. “Been adjusting pretty well.”

“I told you Jack would take care of you, didn’t I?”

“Yes sir. You were right.”

“Well, as I understand it, you want to go for a ride.”

“Yes sir.”

“And I see you’re already in a flight suit, so why don’t you go ahead and climb up and hop in the back seat. Jack, if you would, help me do a pre flight.”

“Well I sure can’t let you do it alone. You might overlook something. Like a missing wing.”

The pilot and his tech circled the plane, checking certain things at various points, making sure everything was satisfactory and within standards for flight. When they had made a complete loop around the plane they both climbed up to the cockpit. Once there, Jack checked that both occupants of the plane were strapped in properly and set to go. After removing the safety pins from the ejection seats, Jack climbed down and gave the signals to start engines and taxi.

Lucky Seven taxied to the end of the runway and came to a stop at the centerline. Mustard was as ecstatic as a PFC could be. He was trying to soak in as much as he could of both the sights and sounds from inside the plane. There were so many knobs and displays around him, but he knew not to touch them.

“Good morning and welcome to Sherman Field. I am Major Hobstock and I’ll be your pilot today as we fly the friendly skies over the panhandle and LA. If you are a member of the Blue Angels Frequent Flyer Program, you will be earning fifty sky miles for this flight. At this time, please fasten your seatbelt by placing the metal tab into the metal clasp, and tightening the straps. Should there be a sudden loss of cabin pressure, you’ll be wearing an oxygen mask anyways so there should be nothing to worry about. In the event of an emergency landing, place your head between your legs and kiss your ass goodbye. In the event of a water landing, your flight attendant can be used as a floatation device. Please keep all hands and feet inside the plane at all times and at this time please return all seatbacks and tray tables to their fully upright and locked position. Flight attendants prepare for takeoff, and thank you for flying Blue Angles Air.”

Mustard chuckled as he saw Hobs engage the brakes and heard a definite change in sound when the engines were brought up to take off power. Through the headset in the helmet he wore, Mustard heard the pilot request clearance for takeoff and then listened as the tower granted it. The brakes were released and the plane slid forward down the runway

## Forming A Foundation

picking up speed. Just more than halfway down the runway, Lucky Seven gracefully slid from the runway with the majesty only a Hornet could have.

The upward progress stopped fifteen feet above the runway until the last of the concrete slipped from below the plane. Hobs then pulled back on the stick and sent the plane skyrocketing nearly vertical. The change threw them both against their seats. The excessive G forces grew, the overload of gravity that drew them back toward the ground they just departed from.

Over the next half hour, Hobs took Mustard through every twist and turn he could think of, including some of the Blue Angels maneuvers involving close calls with other planes. Upon landing, they taxied toward the hangar and followed the ground guide signals given by Jack, the lead tech of The Duce. The ejection seat safety pins were replaced after the shut down was completed.

Climbing down the ladder and setting his feet on the tarmac, Mustard noticed that he had problems standing up and walking. While he was not nauseous, he was a little weak in the knees. Jack noticed this and couldn't help but pick on him.

"Mustard, I thought I told you it was a non drinking flight."

"Just a few too many twists and turns I guess. I think my stomach's still at about five thousand feet."

"It happens, I got it the first time I went up too," Jack said. "That was a wild flight. You remember that, Hobs?"

"How could I forget," the pilot replied. "You got the Colonel to chew my ass."

"No, fly boy," Jack said, "You got him to do that all by yourself."

"That sounds like it was an interesting experience," Mustard said.

"It is. But don't worry, you'll get stories of your own sometime soon that don't start with 'And this one time, in boot camp...'. Those will come soon enough."

"I hope so. I'd like to be able to tell my friends and family more than just what I do in the Corps. I'd like to have some funny or interesting stories."

"I'd say you have one now. Well, we'd better get going. We've got to get back and head over for the show."

"What show you going to," Hobs asked.

"Skynyrd. Or at least what's left of them. They're playing over in Orange Beach at one of Miller's hangouts."

"Good enough. Just don't party too late. Remember you've got to go to Panama City with us tomorrow."

"Yeah and you assholes better not to another JATO without telling me."

"What's JATO," Mustard inquired.

"Jet Assisted Take Off. They basically attach oversized bottle rockets on the ass end of larger aircraft to help it take off on shorter runways. They decided to do one when I was sitting sideways in one of the sling seats without telling me we were doing one. Well, when there was an explosion at the back of the plane, the nose shot up about forty-five degrees and I wasn't expecting it, out of the bucket I went and skittered across the floor. Naturally I freaked after that and yelled 'Abandon ship, women and Lance Corporal's first.' When I saw the dirty and confused looks everyone was shooting me I realized it was a JATO that no one decided to tell me we were doing. Well Hobs, don't touch my plane. It's fine for tomorrow."

"Lemme talk to you over here for a second."

"Yeah, sure," Jack said. "Mustard, you just hang out and don't touch anything. Wait, what am I talking about, it's not my plane to fix. At least I can just blame it on Hobs."

Jack walked around to the back of the plane where Hobs had wondered off to.

"What's up, jet head," Jack asked.

"You gotta do something about your old pal Murphy."

"Oh, really? What's his problem now?"

"He's been late to work every morning this week since Tuesday, skipping out to lunch early and coming back late. When he is here it's just like he's simply going through the motions, not really paying too much to what's going on. The only thing he really seems to give a shit about is getting out of here and going to the E-Club to drink."

"Alright," Jack said. "I'll talk to him and see if I can find out what's going on."

"Thanks. I knew if anyone, you'd be the right one for the job."

"I do what I can."

"Sounds good. Off till tomorrow. See you bright and early."

"You aren't bright, so you better be early."

### Chapter Three

#### Fields of Screams

Monday October 23, 1999

0530 EST, Old Warehouse

They had all made it through the weekend after two good concerts. Second squad was well rested as they took their seats in the same general area in the platoon room.

## Forming A Foundation

The bonds had been formed within the squads. While they still had friends in other squads, they preferred to deal with those in their own squads. After all, these were the people they would work, fight and die with. They all hoped it wouldn't come to that, but they all accepted the reality that it could.

Jack had tried to find Murphy, but to no avail. Sometimes there could be no one harder to find than a Marine that didn't want to be found. As concerned as he was about his friend and squadron counterpart, he now had twelve others that needed his complete and undivided attention for the next two weeks.

Gunny Fields walked in the room to address the platoon, giving the rundown for the qualifications.

"In just a few moments we'll be stepping off on a twelve mile hump. You've all been briefed as to the schedule. Squad leaders have a copy of the schedule in their notebooks. Any questions so far?"

The platoon remained quiet.

"Next week on Friday will be the last day and our qualification day. Each person will be graded on their work that day, as well as the squad as a whole, to determine Special Operations Capabilities. You will be graded throughout our training evolution and given a score after each event. The super squad that wins it all will get a 96 that weekend as well as all access passes to the Jimmy Buffett concert that night on Pensacola Beach, plus a hundred fifty dollar tab per Marine at the Dock, picked up by MWR. The squad leader will get a meritorious mast. The second place squad will get a 96, third place squad a 72 and the fourth place squad will each get a ten dollar gift certificate to the exchange. Any questions?"

Lance Corporal Cline, first squad leader, raised his hand.

"Go ahead, Cline."

"Yeah, Gunny, how are these events getting graded?"

"Well, the weapons scores and PFT scores are just going to be taken pretty much straight up. If you scored forty points with the M-16, qualifying you as a sharpshooter, that's forty points for your squad. Take your PFT score and divide it by six. That's your score there. The rest of the events will have a checklist with items graded as explained that day. That will give a possible combined total of a thousand points per person. There will be four chances throughout the ops to pick up five points for freeing a hostage. Your squad total possibility is averaged out from everyone's individual scores, perfect being a thousand points. The qual course is worth a total of five hundred points, that's per squad. Does that cover it sufficiently?"

"Yes, Gunny."

"Any other questions? Seeing none, let's get started on this."

They stepped off and made their way twelve miles looping around the air station. While most forced marches of this nature would entail a ten-minute rest every three miles, this group of top notch warriors kept their pace going over four before stopping. They repeated that process, only taking two breaks in twelve miles.

### 1030 EST, Platoon Encampment Area

Jack and Doc Spazito had made their way around the squad both during movement and on both breaks. They did this not for their own good, but for the good of the rest of the squad. The extra effort they expended would undoubtedly hurt them later, whether by lost energy or by sore joints and muscles, was still necessary to motivate their Marines and help keep them going. After all, they were the two primarily concerned for their squad's health and welfare.

Gunny Fields called the squads together after a ten minute break in order to divulge their next tasks.

"We are now in the Platoon Encampment Area, or PEA. Your squads leaders have independently been assigned a general area in which they can set up your Squad Encampment Area. Your squads are responsible for guarding your SEA from attack. Bonus points will be added on to your score that we talked about earlier if you can essentially kill off another squad. With these laser sensors that we'll be using it will register kills and set off a warning when you're dead. You are allowed to run two offensive maneuvers against each squad, but you are not required to. They are simply optional to let you think on your feet. Any questions? Seeing none, squad leaders take charge and set up your encampment areas."

### 1100 EST, 2<sup>nd</sup> Squad Encampment Area

"This little box here," Jack said, "is the main computer for our laser trackers. Yes, these little things we had to clip onto our gear actually hold a purpose. If the laser that tracks out from our rifles when a blank is fired hits the general vicinity of these, it will register a hit. Now while this isn't an exact science, thanks to modern technology, it's pretty close. Granted it can be a couple inches off and we all know a couple inches can mean the difference between life and death. When one of your sensors registers a hit, you will start beeping. This signifies your mock death. Again, not a perfect science since not every shot would kill you. This main computer will store the information on who was killed when and who they were killed by. In the event that any squad is completely killed off, it will emit a tone that sounds like a dual blast of a car horn.

"As you can see by the map," Jack continued, "And by looking through the tree line, we're about three quarters of a mile north of the air strip. I'd rather not set up the shelter half's we were issued. It makes us more visible. Even though they are supposedly camouflaged, even someone like me who's color blind can pick them out. Now here's what we're gonna do. All the squads are gonna want to get settled in to their areas just like we want to now, right?"

## Forming A Foundation

They all nodded as they followed his chain of thought.

“So they probably won't be on guard as well as they should. They'll be moving around and probably not practicing good noise discipline like they should. What we're gonna do is I'm gonna take four of you and we're gonna attack first squad. After a while Miller's gonna take another fire team and go for third squad. Then Doc's taking the last team out after fourth squad. Any questions?”

“Who gets to kick ass first,” Pile asked.

“Pile it will be you, Goldman, Ski, Mustard and myself. The rest of you stay here, set up your areas and some defensive positions, and for Pete's sake stay on your toes. Pay attention and don't let anybody get at you.”

Before they left, Jack and his fire team gathered around the map where the squad leader laid out his plan.

1150 EST, Near 1<sup>st</sup> SEA

They crawled on their stomachs towards the expected encampment area. Before long they noted people moving about.

“Just as expected,” Jack whispered over their radio net. “They picked the clearing.”

*Sometimes you can be just so shocked that someone you hardly know could be so predictable, Jack thought. He sure set himself up for this one.*

They were spread out in a roughly straight line with about fifteen yards between each of them, the squad leader in the center, flanked by two on either side. The fire team from second squad was as invisible as they could be without being transparent. Their Ghillie suits made them look as if they were just another part of the woodland floor. In reality, that's all that they were.

Jack thought quickly how to make the best advance at the objective.

“Alright team, here's how we do this,” he whispered into the tactical mic. “You four are going to get a little bit closer and we're gonna form a half circle around them. Just for their demotivation factor we'll close the distance to about a hundred yards. I'll give the first shot. That will be your cue to open fire. None of you shoot Cline. He's my kill.”

“Takes a squad leader to kill a squad leader,” Pile said. “Good call Jack.”

It was the first time someone in the squad other than Miller or Spazz had called him by his first name. So far, the squad was performing so well, Jack figured he'd let it slip. They were bonding now and growing as a team and a family. Nothing should stop that now.

“Remember, move slowly. Get into positions.”

Jack slid forward, keeping an eye on the members of his squad. They all slithered just as slowly, being careful not to be noticed. Once he saw that they were close to where he wanted them he whispered again.

“One's in position.”

“Two,” Pile replied.

“Three,” Goldman replied.

“Four,” Ski called.

“Five,” Mustard said almost hesitantly.

“First squad leader in sight,” Jack said, aiming in at Cline. As soon as he had squeezed off the blank that 'killed' their squad leader all hell broke loose. Suddenly, the woods came alive with gunfire and first squad had been wiped out before they could fire more than a half dozen shots.

Low beeping tones echoed through the woods signifying who had just become deceased. All thirteen from first squad realized their doom before the five bushes arose. It would have been the perfect ending, had one of them not been beeping.

Mustard's head had been a little too high and presented the rifle barrel, giving the last shot fired by first squad an accurate target to acquire.

The squad leaders turned off the beeping with their 'magic wands' that they had been issued for these scenarios.

“Damn Jack,” Cline said, “You killed my squad. Didn't even see it coming. Nice get up, by the way.”

“Thanks,” Jack replied. “You're just way too predictable, picking the clearing and all.”

“And we didn't even have time to set up.”

“All part of my plan, DJ.”

“Good call.”

The fire team made their way back to their encampment by way of a standard two by two patrol with their squad leader at the point. They began their trek with the encouragement of their squad leader.

“Damn fine job Marines.”

“Yeah,” Pile said, “But let's not forget that had this been real, you'd have to call Joe's parents this evening.”

“That's something I'm prepared to do if I have to, but hope I never do. Thirteen killed by five, with one infliction on our side. I'd say that's damn good odds.”

“Hell yeah,” Ski commented.

## Forming A Foundation

They walked the rest of the way in silence, observing nature around them for signs of an ambush that never came. They all thought about how they almost lost a friend.

1300 EST, PEA

“Well Gunny,” Major Ingram stated, “That was a somewhat disturbing radio contact.”

“What’s that, sir,” Gunny Fields inquired.

“Sergeant Kerry just received a report that a five man fire team from second squad just killed everyone in first squad.”

“That’s sure interesting. An entire squad wiped out by a fire team.”

“Apparently,” Major Ingram explained, “It was a well placed fire team in Ghillie suits. Well hidden, well disciplined and well planned. I know Jack and I know what he is capable of. Hearing how this played out I knew he was at the charge of the attack before the word came over. It looks like some of these young Marines are starting to take to the outside the box thinking we’re looking for.”

“Yes indeed sir. Personally, I’d say they’re just trying to get the back stage passes for that concert.”

“Be that as it may, Gunny, it’s why we have that incentive for them. To inspire them to be the best they can over the next two weeks. Second squad is just proving themselves sooner to be the motivated ass kickers we need.”

1310 EST, 2<sup>nd</sup> SEA

Their victory had been the first in the platoon. The radioman in each squad had received the news on their radio when reported to Gunny Fields. Jack had radioed in the report of their sweeping victory over first squad and it had been taken as a bit of a shock.

It had surprised the Gunny and Major that a squad was already on their game. It disturbed them that five of them had just wiped out an entire squad. The sheer math of it worked out that each man in that five-member team had killed at least two members of the opposing squad.

To second squad it signified a great start. When the fire team had returned to their encampment, a good deal of the work was already in place. Six defensive positions, also known as foxholes, were being dug in a circle around their area. The occupant of each one would monitor the area in a ninety-degree zone. The Marine to either side of them would also view the outer edges of their area of fire. Four eyes were better than two in early detection.

In the center of their tree rich area was an over growth of vines and what would in a civilized area be called bushes. It didn’t resemble that here though. With a little work, they had cleared out the center and turned the foliage into an herbal command post for them. It was big enough for half of the squad to comfortably be in at the same time, and after the dirt from the foxholes was put over the stumps and with the padded rolls unfurled on the floor it would even be suitable for them to sleep in.

It was working toward five that evening when they had completed their work and were settling into the shift rotations developed by their squad leader. Jack was the second one into their hut and he was concerned when he saw Mustard sitting on his field chair with his head hung down.

“Mustard,” he said, “What’s up?”

“Nothing, Lance Corporal,” Mustard replied. “Just thinking.”

“Don’t do that. It’s not your job. That’s why I’m here.”

It was meant to be a joke, but it didn’t help to ease the youngster’s mind.

“What’s on your mind,” Jack asked. Doc paused at the door and seeing what was going on motioned that he would stay outside and keep the rest there with him.

“Just how close I came to death,” he replied in a somber tone. “I mean, if this was real, I’d be dead now.”

“But you’re not dead. This is just a training evolution. You’re not gonna be thrown to the wolves to fend for yourself. You’re here to get ready for the real thing. Did you learn something from our encounter?”

“Yeah, keep low.”

“See? That’s what this is for. To make us ready and give us the knowledge we need for everyday life in a combat zone. You’ll be alright, Mustard. You’re alive and you’re learning. All I’ve ever asked of my Marines is that you give your best efforts and learn from the mistakes you make. Plus it’s always a wise idea to learn from the mistakes of others because you won’t live long enough to make them all yourself.”

Mustard chuckled at the comment and Jack continued.

“Now get some rest. We’ve got some more to do later.”

Jack rose, patted Mustard on the back and walked out. When he exited, the squad members that weren’t in a hole guarding their area went inside to rest. Only Miller and Spazz remained outside.

“So what’s up,” Doc asked.

## Forming A Foundation

“Kid’s just getting over his first near death experience,” Jack explained. “Nothing big. I explained to him that this is merely a learning experience and that him getting shot in that attack was nothing but a lesson to be learned. Keep your head down.”

“Always smart,” Miller said. “That’s what we’re taught throughout SOI.”

“School Of Idiots,” Doc poked.

“School Of Infantry, Squid,” Miller replied.

“Alright you two. Let’s knock off the sibling rivalry. We’ve got that class on night maneuvers at 1800. Let’s try to get a little rest between now and then. Miller, remember you’re running your attack against third squad around 2200 and Doc yours against fourth squad will be at 0300. Rest up while you can.”

1800 EST, Platoon Encampment Area

The squads had gathered for their class. Word had spread through the platoon about how easily second squad had over run, or run over, first squad. The platoon was determined to be more offensive in their defense. They would now be more alert in protecting their area.

Gunny Fields gave a quick period of instruction on how to conduct night tactics. This was a refresher course from the one they had all received in combat or infantry training. It also helped to offset the training they had all received last week in day tactics.

Each person in a patrol would need to look for several things when they were out in an engagement. First and foremost was the enemy. While a person would not always present themselves fully, there were always certain things that could be spotted, whether it was a certain body part or the general outline of a body.

Other things that could give away threats are the spikes of land mines or thread thin trip wires. All very dangerous items, to a point more so than humans. At least there is a greater chance of defeating enemy personnel that are accidentally stumbled upon. Mines are slightly more uncompromising.

Infantry tactics had been on their minds quite often lately. Each squad had been given a book filled with Tactical Decision Games. These TDGs helped to expand the thought processes each Marine and Corpsman went through. They all began to think and plan like other members of their squad and work together better since they were thinking together better.

As they had proceeded through the class quicker than expected, Sergeant Kerry gave a class covering forest survival. Covering dangers that might arrive in certain areas and what was edible from the forest, the class was a need to know for any platoon like this.

Their class concluded and each squad was sent back to their SEA. Major Ingram and Gunny Fields didn’t know where the squads had taken their shelters except for a general quadrant. Each squad leader knew this general information as well. This was how Jack was able to conquer first squad so quickly.

The squads had a cease-fire until 2000. After that point they were free to resume their attacks against the other squads. They also had to act as stand ins with the security detail at the airfield. Each squad would be tasked with a night to provide two man teams to patrol the flight line. Two separate teams would walk the perimeter on two-hour shifts for that night. The MA Company would have various tests to check the aptitude and ability of the guards. These would be anything from a ‘staggering drunk’ to a shoebox marked ‘BOMB.’ While not every shift was guaranteed to have a problem, the tasks that would be delivered would be nothing that the sentries could not handle with the training they had.

1935 EST, 2<sup>nd</sup> SEA

“Jack, I’ve got a quick suggestion for you,” Miller commented with his inner redneck showing in his voice.

“Yeah, Brew. What’s up?”

“Well, we’re all gonna rely on you as the squad leader around the clock through this thing really. Other than you we’ve got twelve in the squad. Divide that in half and put me in charge of one group and Doc in charge of another. Then you can be there to back us up when we might need it.”

“Good idea. Let’s make it so. Now the way I’m looking at this, we’re ‘supposed’ to have eight hours of down time. With this two-team setup in place, the best way to arrange the guard setup for the night would be to have the first team there from 2100 to 0100. The second team will stand in from 2000 to 2100, then from 0100 to 0500. Now granted each person will have to work a full day off of four hours of sleep, but I figure it’s better than trying to stagger it every two hours. At least this way they can get a better quality quantity sleep.”

“Sounds good.”

“Alright. Get the squad around inside here. It’ll be a tight fit, but I want everyone to eat in here and we’ll have a quick squad meeting.”

“Roger that.”

The squad hunched into their makeshift clearing and took a seat where they were facing their squad leader. They had all placed their Gillie suit on top of their pack outside around the base of the igloo like shrub to add to the camo factor. When they all had taken their place with their brown bag Meal-Ready-to-Eat in front of them, Jack addressed the squad.

## Forming A Foundation

“Well, enjoy those MREs while you can. You won’t be able to stand them next week.”

“Meals Rejected by Everyone,” Ski joked.

“Meals not Readily Expelled,” Miller corrected.

“Meals Resented by Ethiopians,” Doc continued.

“I think we all have a name for them,” Jack interrupted. “The important but unfortunate thing is that this will be what we’re living off of through next Friday. Now here’s what’s gonna happen. First off, good job to all. We’re ready to go as of right now. Our positions are ready, and we’ve already kicked ass. No other squad can say that. I don’t think any of them have the amount of work done that we do. Good work. Keep it up. I think all we might need to do is get the foxholes a little deeper, but they’re pretty good now. The main question I have is this. Can everyone handle themselves well on about four hours of sleep, throw in a few catnaps?”

Everyone nodded.

“Now your not just telling me what I want to hear, right? We can all do this?”

They nodded again.

“Good. But if anyone can’t I need to know now. Or at least as soon as possible when a problem starts presenting itself. Here’s the schedule through tomorrow morning. Doc and his group of five that he has will man the positions starting at 2000. That’s in about twenty five minutes. They’ll be there for an hour. Miller and a fire team are going to go and kill off third squad. Miller, I want you and your team to leave as soon as you’ve finished eating. I want you in position in no more than a fifteen minutes. It may sound like a rush, but due to their presumed close proximity it’s possible. Gunny Fields is going to sound an air horn when the cease-fire ends. Right when that horn goes off, you open fire.”

“That’s completely mean, cruel-“

“-And unexpected,” Jack interrupted Miller.

“That’s why I like it,” Miller said.

“Now I have a good idea where they are from the quadrant they were assigned and I think you’ll agree with me, but I’ll leave the planning of it up to you. At 2100, the Miller crew will take over our defensive positions, while Doc and his crew get some sleep. At balls, 0000 or 2400 hours, whichever way you choose to look at it, Doc’s crew will head out to attack fourth squad. I think we’ll be the only squad to attack everyone else tonight, but I think we need to catch everybody once before they get too settled in. Plus this is the only time we’ll be able to get everybody in the same night. When we do flight line watch we won’t have to worry about our defenses, so that will be our night to catch up on sleep. Our nights are Wednesday, Sunday and Thursday. We’ve got the best night. Next Thursday, we’ll get to rest up better before the big quals. Now, eat up and prepare yourself for what you’ve got ahead of you.”

1950 EST, Outside 3<sup>rd</sup> SEA

Miller led his three men through the dense woods that surrounded the flight line. When they got to within a half a mile of where Third Squad was predicted to be they began crawling through the occasionally thick foliage. Each member took a position five hundred yards from the spot they had marked. Figures moved in the distance.

“Fire team,” Miller said, “Report in position.”

“Two,” Riggey said.

“Three,” Cooney said.

“Four,” Hillery checked in.

“Two one, this is two two,” Miller said over the squad frequency.

“Two one,” Jack replied.

“Fire team Bravo in position. Standing by to engage on signal.”

“Roger that, two two. You are cleared to fire on signal.”

They had taken their positions under the cover of dusk and the added camouflage of their bush like suits. They checked in with Jack via their radio link and found they had about five minutes to spare. Shadows again moved in the distance. It was third squad going for their foxholes.

1955 EST, 3<sup>rd</sup> SEA

Lance Corporal Sturgil and his Marines were just getting ready to settle back in to their positions. Their shelter halves had been set up in an even row, one next to the other. Lighter branches had been draped over the top of them in an attempt to camouflage them. They had been looking out into the forest that surrounded them from time to time, seeing nothing that would give the hint of an impending attack.

“Keep on your toes,” Fish told his squad. “Lookouts, be sure to keep a sharp eye out. We don’t know what the rest of the platoon might try against us. Especially second squad.”

1959 EST, Outside 3<sup>rd</sup> SEA

## Forming A Foundation

“Get ready,” Jack said over the radio link. “You’ve got one minute. Remember, the horn means that you’re free to fire. Once it sounds, that’s your sign to open fire. Forty five seconds.”

Miller’s fire team kept track of the general time in their heads. At ten seconds, they took their weapons off safe. With five left, their fingers curled around the trigger. When an air horn sounded, breaking the silence of the night, all hell broke loose. The twilight erupted with gunfire followed by the beeping of mock death.

A quarter of the squad was dead before fire was returned at the ghosts in the woods. As good of hiding as they had done, Miller’s team would not in real life been able to hide the flashes of their muzzles. However, being that they were firing blanks and had the Blank Firing Adapter over their muzzles that aided in the laser system they were practicing with, those flashes were not present. They watched the shadows move in the distance and picked them off one by one. The only ones they couldn’t get were two in foxholes on the far side. Those two made the mistake of leaving their foxholes to go to the other side to help in the battle. They were shot in their movement.

A tone sounded twice, signifying the entire squad had been killed. Miller quietly checked in to his squad leader.

“Two One, Two Two.”

“Two One,” Jack once again responded.

“Objective secure. Fire team Bravo returning to base.”

“Roger Two Two. Good work.”

Miller, Riggey, Cooney and Hillery turned and crawled away from the area of engagement. They were never seen by their enemy and were hardly heard.

2010 EST, PEA

“Echo Five Kilo, this is Two One” Jack’s voice came over the radio.

“Go ahead Two One,” Sergeant Kerry replied.

“Third SEA is down, repeat, Third SEA is down.”

“Roger that,” Sergeant Kerry acknowledge in shock. “Three One, can you confirm?”

“Echo Five Kilo, Three One confirms,” LCpl Sturgil said.

“Roger that Three One. Echo Five Kilo clear.”

“Two One clear.”

“Three One clear.”

“Sir,” Sergeant Kerry said to Major Ingram. “Second squad struck again. They just wiped out third squad.”

“What the hell? Are they gonna let anyone in this platoon live?”

“Before you know it,” Gunny Fields said, “They’re gonna over run the Command Post.”

“I sure as hell wouldn’t put it past them.”

2020 EST, 2<sup>nd</sup> SEA

Jack was standing in a foxhole next to Mustard when four shadows could be seen approaching their position. Their M-16s were carried in an alert carry. They were at a distance of fifty yards when Jack initiated the challenge and response sequence. When prompted with a word or phrase, you had to provide the proper response or you would be engaged.

“Delta Alpha,” Jack challenged, the phonetic phrase for dumb ass.

“Foxtrot Uniform,” Miller replied, phonetics for F U.

“Proceed,” Jack told them.

They entered The Shrub and Jack came in behind them.

“Good job, gents,” Jack said. “I could almost tell that the Major was pissed through Sergeant Kerry’s voice. We’re kicking serious ass.”

Tuesday October 24, 1999

0010 EST, Outside 4<sup>th</sup> SEA

Lance Corporal Ryan “Mickey” McCoy shifted restlessly in a fighting hole next to one of his Marines. Mickey had heard the reports that second squad had wrought hell on the other squads. Every instinct in his young body told him that something would be happening to his squad at the hands of second before the end of the night.

“Four one, Sharpie,” PFC Tony Sharp whispered.

“Go,” Mickey replied just as softly.

“I could swear I just heard something, but I can’t see anything that might have caused it.”

“Good to go. All sentries stay on the lookout.”

Maybe his inner fears were justified. Someone may very well be trying to pull something right now.

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## Forming A Foundation

Doc, Carlson, Stanley and Turrentine were now in a position covering almost a half circle around fourth squad. They had departed their encampment area early, in an anxious anticipation of what they were undertaking. Their attack was planned just as the last ones were. All they had to do now was check that they were in positions and report to their squad leader.

“Fire Team Charlie, report in position,” Doc told them.

If they didn't have such a good relationship with each other already, there might have been a little bit of bad blood for Marines to be taking orders from a Navy boy. Squid.

“Two,” Carlson checked in.

“Three,” Stanley said.

“Rock and roll,” Turrentine said. “I mean, four.”

“Roger. Two One, Two Three.”

“Two One,” Jack said from inside the hut. It was said in a whispered tone so that if any opposing squad's members were near by it would be less likely to be heard.

“Fire Team Charlie in position,” Doc whispered. “Request permission to engage.”

“Roger Two Three. You are cleared to engage.”

“Fire Team Charlie,” Doc said, “Engage.”

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The night again erupted in gunfire. Those who were asleep bolted upright and were shot while they were a fresh target emerging from their tent. Those in foxholes were shot while they were spinning around looking for targets. Those in the foxholes on the far side stood higher to fire over their encampment. Their silhouettes gave an easy target.

The tone sounded from the squads box, signifying they were all dead. Lance Corporal McCoy yelled an obscenity as he realized they had been massacred.

0020 EST, Departing 4<sup>th</sup> SEA

“Two One, Two Three,” Spazz called once more.

“Two One.”

“Mission complete. Objective neutralized.”

“Roger, Two Three,” Jack's voice swelled with pride. “Return to base.”

“Roger. RTB.”

Fire Team Charlie slithered through the woods and left the area in the same ghostly manner they entered.

Pride had grown through the Squad Leader due to the capabilities of his Marines and Doc. Those under his charge had so far fulfilled every expectation that he had set out for them. Their abilities to accomplish the mission had by far been better than what he had hoped for at the beginning of their squad.

Jack had also taken great pleasure in the fact that Miller and Doc were stepping up to the plate as leaders. While sometimes there were too many Chiefs and not enough Indians, there were also cases where there were too many Indians and not enough Chiefs. One occasional failure in leadership was due to the fact that it was not there. Now, Doc and Miller were stepping up to be leaders when Jack wasn't around. As far as Jack had seen, Doc was acting just as much as a Marine as the rest of the squad.

0030 EST, PEA

“Echo Five Kilo,” Jack's voice came over the radio, “This is Two One.”

“Two One, Oscar Four India,” Major Ingram replied, shocking Second Squad's leader. “Go ahead.”

“Oscar Four India, Two One reports Fourth SEA down.”

“Roger Two One. Four One, Oscar Four India, can you confirm.”

“Oscar Four India, Four One confirms.” The disappointment was very evident in his voice.

“Roger that.” Major Ingram shook his head. “Oscar Four India clear.”

“Two One clear.”

“Four One clear.”

“Well, that sure does it,” Major Ingram commented to himself. “Three quarters of my platoon has just been wiped out by the other squad. I'll be don't know if this means things are starting off good, bad or worse.”

0515 EST, PEA

The platoon had gathered in PT gear for their first run as a platoon. There were no offensive actions against other squads other than what second squad had done. The other three squads had their morale verge on being mortally wounded by the swift and would be deadly attacks. None launched a counter attack for fear of their base being attacked in the absence of

## Forming A Foundation

a fire team. They all felt they needed every asset they could have to protect against the potential ravages of their unseen enemy, Sneaky Second Squad.

Rather than encourage the mass slaughter of their platoon, or lecture people for not paying well enough attention, Major Ingram and Gunny Fields left the events of the previous night unsaid.

After a run around the flight line, the platoon was allowed to shower in one of the rarely used hangars. They then made their way back to their encampment areas to change into cammies. They had a morning of classes and an afternoon of familiarization fire to tend to.

0800 EST, PEA

The morning instruction that they gathered for was presented by various instructors. The instructor backgrounds ranged from Marine Corps infantry to SWAT officers from throughout the country. While these Marines had heard of Special Weapons And Tactics teams before and some had even worked with some SWAT officers, few knew anything about how the need arose for these teams.

On August 1, 1966, Charles Whitman Barricaded himself at the peak of a clock tower at the University of Texas in Austin. Before all was said and done, he had shot 44 people and killed fourteen. It took the police nearly an hour and a half to find a way to storm the tower and kill him.

The Texas Clock Tower Massacre uncovered the need for law enforcement agencies to institute a paramilitary force for such incidents and SWAT was created for just that purpose. SWAT teams around the nation can be called in for any number of special assignments. Whether it's crowd control, suicide attempts, hostages situations or any other time that necessitates special skills, SWAT readily steps up to the challenge.

SWAT teams hold teams within themselves. From snipers, recon and containment, entry and crisis response. The call to arms provides many situations that are common to the military as well. Both institutions use the same term, hurry up and wait. Upon getting the call, these officer zip to the scene, lock it down and can wind up waiting several hours.

Through various jobs, they all work their way to the goal of a peaceful resolution. Armed standoffs, suicidal people or hostage situations are not uncommon for these intensively trained people to deal with. When reason fails we see how well coordinated their movements can be, instead of the haphazard three ring circus it had seemed to be in the past. Many plans and officers truly use the element of surprise to their favor. After all, they all realize that lives are on the line, their own included.

A good deal of the information passed was common knowledge to them, or common sense, from the weapons training they had all received in the past.

The MP5 compact submachine gun was something for them all to learn. Commonly used in close quarters engagements for its compact size and easy manipulation, they all thought they had better become comfortable with it soon enough.

The precise weapon they were learning to use was the HK MP-5/10. This MP5 is designed especially for law enforcement purposes, which operation and function principle are identical to other HK MP5s. It was designed to fulfill the escalating needs of military and law enforcement agencies. The need was for a compact and accurate submachine gun that would remain faithfully reliable.

Abundant enhancements were integrated into the design, inspired by comments of current and past users. A transparent magazine now allows the shooter to see how many rounds they have remaining in the magazine to go along with the catch that holds the bolt to the rear when empty. Using a specially developed material, the magazines are a third lighter and have reduced risks of corrosion.

Unlike most weapons, this comes standard with the ambidextrous trigger group. The safety selector switch is easily accessible by right or left handed operators, so as to allow them to take the weapon off safe without having to change firing grips.

The combat proven recoil function provides exceptional dependability under every condition imaginable and an extreme accuracy range of 150 meters. Being compact in size, it is easy to carry through buildings, vehicles and other space restricted areas. Through all the action, it is an ideal low weight weapon. As opposed to shotguns or pistols, the MP5 increases both the range and accuracy for the shooter.

As far as dealing with the forty-caliber pistol, that was easy enough for them. They had all had a decent amount of pistol training earlier in this evolution. For the most part, regardless of caliber, a pistol was a pistol. There were very few differences in the operation and firing of each one. On most pistols, operation was connect the dots, point and click.

When they finished the classes, each squad gathered by themselves at a point around the outside of the building, taking up positions in the grass.

1130 EST, PEA

“Ski,” Jack said, “that wasn’t you I heard snoring was it?”

## Forming A Foundation

"I don't think so," Ski answered. "I hope not. It was a little boring for someone who's dealt with these weapons enough."

"Alright. I'll let it slide this time. Next time try not to be so loud though."

"Is it just me," Pile said, "or does anybody else feel like the other squads hate us right now?"

"Hate is such a strong word, Pile," Goldman said. "But I would agree they strongly dislike us."

"People will always be jealous of those that are superior," Jack said. "And right now I think they're afraid we might kick their asses in front of the rest of the platoon. At least when we wiped 'em out at their SEA, no one else saw it."

"Yeah," Miller said. "Even they didn't live long enough to see it through."

The squad laughed. They were off to a good start in proving themselves. To a good point, they were feared and respected in their platoon. They ate their MREs in the chatter and company of their squad. When they had mostly finished, Cline approached from First Squad.

"Hey Jack," he said walking up. The squad made quiet jokes under their breath along with booing and hissing noises.

"Hey," Jack said to quiet the squad. "Don't kill him."

"Can't kill someone who's already dead," Miller said.

"I guess I deserve that," Cline said. "I just came over to tell you all good job. You surprised the hell out of us yesterday. Never saw it coming. Evidently, neither did the other squads."

"Yeah," Jack said. "But at least three and four could blame it on darkness."

"Man," Cline sighed, "I just keep setting myself up and shooting myself in the foot."

"Not the only shot you've taken," Doc said.

"I think we'll be better off next time," Cline said.

"That almost sounds like a challenge," Jack said.

"Ding," Miller chimed. "Round two."

"Anyways," Cline said defensively, "Good job. You all deserve it. Jack, can I talk to you over here?"

"Yeah," Jack said. They walked out of earshot of the platoon.

"How the hell did you do that," Cline inquired.

"Do what?"

"Kill off almost an entire platoon without a loss."

"We had a loss," Jack corrected him. "Remember, one of your guys shot Mustard."

"True enough. But compare your one loss to the other thirty-nine. That's impressive."

"It's just discipline plus infantry and fire team tactics."

"And the real kicker," Cline said, "is that the scouts from other squads couldn't find your position. I suppose you wouldn't tell me where you're at."

"We are in our designated quadrant of encampment."

"That's what I thought."

"Can't blame you for trying," Jack confessed. "If I'd been in your shoes, I'd probably try the same thing. See if I could get you to slip me even the slightest shred of evidence."

"Anyways, good work."

"Thanks."

They shook hands and headed back to their squads. Back with his squad Jack faced what an outsider would view as hostile conditions.

"Conspiring with the enemy, Lance Corporal," Mustard asked.

"No, Joe," Jack said. "But he did have the guts to ask where we were camped."

"Ballsy bastard," Ski said. "Gotta give him credit for that."

"Listen," Jack said implying the authority tone in his voice. "One quick point of order. Shit talking is all fine and good, and squad rivalry is like sibling rivalry. But just remember, when it comes down to it, they're on the same team we are. They deserve our respect just for being here and having made it this far. Poke fun, make jokes, whatever. Just make damn sure you show them the respect they deserve. Especially Cline, since he is a Squad Leader, and as a Lance Corporal and he does out rank you punks. The same goes for the other squad leaders. Just make sure you treat them with respect. A humble attitude will go a long way. Become friends with them, as well as those in the other squads, because you never know when you might need their help. With that said, rest up for a few more minutes before we have to go over to the ranges."

"Hey Lance Corporal," Hillery said. "I've got a question for you."

"Go ahead, Ray."

"Well, I was just curious as to how you knew exactly where the other three squads were camped out?"

"Occam's Razor," their Squad Leader said simply. When he noticed 'The Scooby Doo' look from a few of his Marines, Jack continued. "Who knows what Occam's Razor is?"

A few of them raised their hands, showing they at least had heard of it.

"Riggey, can you tell the rest of the squad what it is?"

"I can't really put it into words, but I've heard of it."

## Forming A Foundation

“Fair enough,” Jack said. “Occam’s Razor states that one should not increase, beyond what is necessary, the number of entities required to explain anything. Basically, in the easiest terms, provided any problems, all things being equal the solution that tends to be the simplest is usually the right one. In other words, you shouldn’t make any more assumptions than you absolutely have to. It’s also, from time to time, referred to the principle of parsimony, which bring about all scientific modeling and theory building. Basically you need to get rid of any variables that are not really needed to explain the situation. In doing that, things will become much easier and there’s a lot less chance of introducing an inconsistency. Is everyone following so far?”

The twelve gathered there nodded their comprehension.

“When I looked at the map, I took a look at who was supposed to be where, removed the unnecessary assumptions, and came to what I had determined to be the simplest answer. When it came time to set forth on those missions, the simplest solutions tended to be the right ones.”

“So it’s really that easy,” Holewinski asked.

“Not always,” Jack admitted. “After all, would looking in a hollowed out bush for us be the simplest solution?”

“No,” Ski replied.

“So you see that it’s not always true. That’s why I said that the simplest solution is *usually* the right one. Ninety nine out of a hundred times it will be. Or in our case here, three out of four.”

In order to increase the thought process of his intelligent subordinates, Jack continued the discussion with them. Scenarios were taken from real life and viewed from the standard public view and then by applying Occam’s Razor. Those that were new to the thinking of William Occam, as well as those who hadn’t divulged too much into his thinking, began to take a liking to this thought process. After all, they had each seen in person through their Squad Leader’s usage of it how well it can be applied.

1300 EST, Rifle Range

When they reached the rifle range they at least got a change of scenery. Even just a day’s worth was enough. For them to think that they would be spending so much time in the near future in the field but yet so close to home was slightly discouraging. They all wanted the life that was being offered to them, more or less, but they wanted to be in a nice comfortable barracks more often than in a forest.

Each squad grabbed the five rifles and five pistols and took the weapons that they would be using and went to the field range. With enough weapons for just under half of the squad to fire at one time, some would be on the firing line, on this range a stomach high table, while the other half would be behind it able to get their questions answered and the assistance they might need.

Various fake targets had been placed at different distances to give the shooters something to target. It seemed that everything that could provide a reasonable target had been placed there. Seemingly oversized lawn jockeys to gnomes and deer had been placed to be shot. An old car had been placed behind the old front porch classic lady bending over. Other paper standup targets had been placed at random, depicting bad guys that were aiming back at them, some trying to hide and even one giving the finger.

“Rusty cars, a tire swing,” Doc said. “Miller this looks like your front lawn.”

“Combined with Dr. Seuss’ worst nightmare,” Pile said.

“Oh, so that’s how it is,” Miller said. “Ok, fuck all of you.”

“Sorry, redneck,” Goldman said. “We ain’t related.”

Miller shook his head and walked away. “Pick on the redneck.”

The SWAT instructors had taken more time from their busy schedules to accompany the platoon there in order to show their tricks and tactics with live ammunition. The platoon was shown the near real life tactics for rounding corners, crossing windows, passing doors and clearing rooms. They would be getting further instruction on these topics in two days, from these very instructors.

Before 1630 had come and gone, each member of the platoon was comfortable enough with the weapons. Granted some wanted to be a little more comfortable. They were allowed to continue until the sun began to approach the horizon. Before long, the solar rays glared into eyesight and their shooting ability was diminished.

The weapons were turned in and they proceeded back to the platoon encampment area.

1900 EST, PEA

They had eaten their MREs and now gathered around Gunny Fields. They knew what to expect from his previous speeches.

“Good evening, platoon,” he started. “Day two in the books, night two begins. I think everyone can learn a lesson from last night. Keep on your toes. Tonight, first squad has the guard duty around the flight line. This means they are off limits for any attacks. On the other hand they can’t be on the attacking end either. Third and Fourth Squads you may want to keep a sharp eye out. It seems as if no one knows where Second Squad is hiding. As much as I might like to suggest the

## Forming A Foundation

opposite, we all know it is against the rules of engagement to follow them back to their hideout. With that in mind, fall out and head out to your areas.”

1915 EST, PEA

Second Squad, just like the rest, had a designated watchman walking backwards at the rear of their formation. They, along with those watching the left and right of the formation, would have their eyes constantly on the lookout for anything out of the ordinary. The more than dozen pairs of eyes would be watching for anyone following them from the encampment area, as well as anything that would indicate an upcoming ambush.

With members of the squad staying back in positions at key intervals, they arrived back at their encampment area unwatched and undisturbed. The first shift took up their positions in the fighting holes. Just as they had last night, those occupying the positions draped the Gillie suits over them in order to completely hide themselves. This and the strict noise discipline that they had been enforcing were what had allowed them to go undiscovered in their first night of encampment.

It wasn't that the other squads weren't looking, they had indeed come by. In fact, a member of a squad, although which one is unknown, had actually come within twenty yards of the hollowed out bush. Mustard had first reported that contact. Jack had whispered to the squad over their radios to not fire the first shot, which would in effect give away their position. Since it was only a single member, there was little chance that the one pair of eyes would spot them. They were only allowed to return fire.

The throat microphones and ear bud headphones that had been attached to their radios allowed this information to be passed without any sounds being heard more than a yard from the one speaking. It was yet another hookup that had been taken by the squad leader. Now he was waiting for one more item to disperse amongst the squad. A code phrase would be dropped on the radio at the time in which the items were ready to be picked up at a predetermined location. Jack had hoped that his contact would be able to deliver tonight.

Jack crawled to each of the positions to pass along words of encouragement to his Marines. They had all done a damn fine job so far and deserved all the credit they were being given. And then some. Jack ensured that he told all of them this information.

“Now Mustard,” Jack said to the last Marine he came to. “You've got some good eyes here. Keep 'em peeled just like last night. You spotted and tracked every contact we had while you were on watch. Keep it up. We're relying on you.”

“I'll do my best, Lance Corporal,” Mustard whispered. “It's just kinda hard trying to see in the dark.”

“I guess I'll have to see what I can do about that.”

Jack crawled back to “The Shrub” as it was now being called. With Miller in a fighting hole and Doc resting for his shift, Jack would be resting as much as possible with Pile manning the radio. Jack had Calvin lean in close so he could whisper quick instructions to him.

“It's an easy job, Pile,” Jack said, “but tonight it's important. You can rest up, but keep your ears peeled and listen sharp. If you don't know what to make of a transmission, just talk to me. If I'm asleep, wake me up. Any questions?”

“No, Lance Corporal,” Pile said.

“Good. Now just listen sharp. Anything out of the ordinary comes up, let me know.”

“Roger that.”

Pile didn't know what exactly was going on, but he knew to expect the unexpected. The tone in his squad leader's voice and what he emphasized indicated that something unusual was going to happen tonight without a doubt. More than likely it would happen on his shift.

2330 EST, 2<sup>nd</sup> SEA

“Lance Corporal,” Pile whispered.

His squad leader didn't wake up.

“Lance Corporal,” Pile whispered again.

Again his squad leader didn't wake up. Pile figured a little shake would wake him up. But when Pile put his hand on his squad leader's shoulder, suddenly he was wide awake. With a couple of blinks, he seemed to have grasped everything going on around him.

“What's up Pile,” he asked.

“I've been getting an unusual transmission on the guard frequency. He's been transmitting every five minutes. Exactly. His first transmission was eleven minutes ago. Then again six minutes ago. Then again just a minute ago. It sounds like he's calling someone, but their not answering.”

“OK. What's his call sign?”

“Vehicle.”

“And who's he calling,” Jack asked.

“Duce,” Pile said.

## Forming A Foundation

Jack smiled. Even in the dark, Pile could see the self assured smile on his squad leaders face. He got the feeling that he had just done something really good.

“Great work Pile,” Jack said sitting up and patting him on the back. “Out fucking standing.”

“Ah, Lance Corporal, who’s Duce?”

“What plane did I fix in the Blue Angels?”

“The number two,” Pile said. “But the nickname was The Duce.”

“And what squad are we?”

“Second,” Pile said, a little confused, and trying to make a connection.

“And a slang for that would be?”

“Duce. Shit, he’s calling us, isn’t he?”

“Yuppers.”

“So who’s ‘Vehicle’?”

“He’s the friendly stranger in the black sedan, won’t you hop inside his car.”

The song lyrics his squad leader was reciting immediately came to Pile and he continued.

“He’s got pictures, got candy he’s a lovable man and he can take you to the nearest star.”

Jack picked up the handset and pushed the button to talk.

“Vehicle, Duce.”

“Duce, Vehicle,” came the reply. “The presents are under the tree. Merry Christmas to all, and have a hell of a night. Elvis has left the building. Vehicle clear.”

“Thanks Vehicle. Duce clear.”

Jack smiled. Their good fortune was continuing.

“Ah, Lance Corporal,” Pile said with a tone of confusion. “What the fuck was that about?”

“Christmas came two months early, Pile. We’ve got some presents waiting for us. Wake up your replacement. They’re going on shift fifteen minutes early. You, Miller, Mustard, Goldman and myself are going to pick up a package. Great job getting that. If you were a chick, I’d kiss you.”

“Aye Lance Corporal.”

He had no idea what the hell was going on. He had no choice but to follow orders, whether or not he had a clue.

2333 EST, PEA

Sergeant Kerry had heard the brief conversation on the guard channel. Both he and Major Ingram were burning the midnight oil, revising plans for the upcoming training. Sergeant Kerry just shook his head, dismissing what he had heard.

“What’s the matter, Sergeant,” Major Ingram asked.

“Just caught a brief conversation on guard, sir. I can’t be totally sure, but one of those voices sounded like Jackson.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me to find out that slick bastard was up to something. What was the gist of the conversation?”

“Well, this guy he was talking to, Vehicle, said that the presents were under the tree. There were a couple other things said, but I think that’s the only line that might mean something.”

“The presents are under the tree? Christmas isn’t for two months yet. Oh well. I doubt he’s going to do something against us here, but maybe just against the other squads. Keep an ear out.”

“Yes, sir.”

2337 EST, 2<sup>nd</sup> SEA

Seven minutes after Jack had been awakened, the fire team was nearly ready to go. They had only received the information from the squad leader that they had a special package to pick up. The four that were accompanying the squad leader had all heard the term ‘package’ used in terms of people before, but that almost didn’t seem right here. Surely they wouldn’t take another person back to their encampment area. There were only thirteen people that knew where that encampment was, and they were the only ones that needed to know. Since arriving in the field, Jack had dropped hints that they would be getting another piece of equipment that would help them. This ‘package’ may be more of the conventional use of the term, and probably included this equipment.

They stepped off, following the guide of their squad leader. Ten minutes later, they were still in their quadrant, but out of view of their encampment site. Miller, facing in the direction they were headed, saw a strange boxlike shape at his eleven o’clock.

“What the...”he gasped and his squad leader cut him off.

“There it is,” Jack said. “Merry Christmas, boys.”

“What the hell is this,” Pile asked.

“Well, it’s sure a strange thing to be here in the middle of these woods,” Miller said.

## Forming A Foundation

They went to the box. They took a knee, facing away from the box to watch for incoming people. Jack cut the tape off with his knife. When he opened the top and removed one of the baker's dozen items, Miller looked and identified the item immediately.

"Shit," he gasped, trying to see in the low light. "Night vision goggles? I don't fuckin' believe it."

"Well, try 'em on, Miller," Jack said. "I'm sure you'll believe it then."

Jack handed him a pair and Miller quickly looked them over.

"Ain't nothing like I've ever seen before though."

"It's a new breed," Jack said. They looked like a skier's mask with dark tint on the lens. "Low light and infrared. And this little toy has the batteries included."

"Sweet," Miller said, trying them on.

Jack handed the rest out to the other members of the fire team. They all put the goggles on their face and turned the equipment on. The night-shrouded forest turned green in their eyes. The goggles simply magnified the little light that was there, giving the wearer a better view of the world.

Jack put the rest of the goggles in his pack and broke down the box. It was placed in Miller's pack to be destroyed later. They all knew it would be best not to leave any evidence lying around. The fire team made their way back to The Shrub. They walked in a diamond-spread formation. Jack walked in the middle facing the front, lead by Miller. Pile walked backwards ten feet behind. Ten feet to Jack's right Mustard faced outboard as Goldman did on the other side.

"Delivery inbound," Jack reported over the squad radios.

He knew the verbal challenge would be said by someone in a fighting hole to check that it was really them moving through the woods.

The challenge and response was a time-honored test for verifying identities. In some cases one word would be used in a sentence and another had to be used in reply. If 'hound dog' were the appropriate phrase, the challenge could be "Who's the hound," with a response being "Just a dog." In other cases a number would be set, such as the case was now with eleven, and the challenge and response would add up to that number. Jack being the leader of this mission would be giving the response momentarily.

The green glow of the night vision goggles allowed them to see the shapes of their fellow squad members hidden holes at a reasonable distance. Knowing what and where they were was the only thing that allowed the fire team to identify them for what they were. Otherwise, even with the light enhancing devices, the positions would have been written off as part of the forest floor.

"Four," came Doc's voice.

"Seven," Jack replied.

"Proceed," Doc told them.

"Aye, aye, Corpsman," Jack joked.

Only between friends could they joke so much without it being taken in offense.

Inside their defense zone Jack decided to play tricks with his mind and his eyes. Using a special feature of the goggles, he let the left eyepiece remain on night vision, but changed the right eyepiece to infrared. In infrared mode the goggles would display warmer things brighter, allowing the viewer to distinguish a warm human body from the cooler night surroundings.

Satisfied that they had arrived alone, Jack went into the shrub and took off his pack. The rest of the fire team had proceeded him and were preparing to bed down for a short time.

Jack retrieved a handful of the NVGs from his pack and went outside. With a look around he was satisfied again that no prying eyes were in the woods. Jack walked to Doc's fighting hole.

"What the fuck, Jack," Doc gasped at him. "Get down. You wanna give away our position?"

"Relax, Doc," Jack said. "There's no one out there."

"Man, how the hell you know that? And what the hell's that on your face?"

"Answering both of your questions with one answer, these are night vision goggles. If there is anyone out there I'd pick 'em out in IR mode."

"Sweet shit, man," Doc said. "So can the rest of us play with those? You know, those of us that actually have to guard this lawn ornament?"

"Well since you asked so nicely," Jack said sarcastically. "And so eloquently, here you go."

Jack knelt down and gave him a quick rundown on the operation of the goggles. When he was done Jack proceeded to the next foxhole and repeated the instructions.

When every position had one, Jack went back inside the shrub. Miller was laid out, snoring softly and Pile was back at the radio.

"Good job catching that contact, Cal," Jack told him, using his first name. Reassurance and reiteration were quite often the best praise he could give. "Damn good job. Keep it up."

"Aye, Lance Corporal."

"I'm gonna catch some sleep. You wake me up when you need some rest."

"Roger that. I'll be good for a while. Hey Lance Corporal, I've got a quick question."

## Forming A Foundation

“Yeah. Shoot.”

“I’m not trying to question your authority, just trying to find out the thinking and the reason behind this. Why did five people need to go get that box.”

“It’s really quite simple if you think about it. While that box was in our quadrant, you never know who might have been out there, possibly waiting for us. I didn’t want to risk, and I don’t think the squad would want to risk, going off into a suicide situation. At least if we’d been ambushed out there, five people wouldn’t have died as quick as one. There would have been fire returned. Make sense?”

“Sure. I see it now. Just like you said on Friday before we went out. You know, about libo buddies. That way we’re there to protect each other.”

“That’s right. We need to protect each other first and foremost. As long as we do that, we can accomplish almost any mission.”

“Good to go.”

“You’re a smart man, definitely when it comes to physics and such. I know before too long you’ll become pretty smart in warfare too. As always, if you need something, let me know.”

Jack said it in a manner of departing for his rest. All was set in with the squad and they knew their tasks and what to do. Squad members knew not to sleep in their hole, but to get a replacement.

They were now responsible for waking their relief when they needed the rest. It was the best way to ensure that each person would be rested enough and on their toes when they needed to be. Some might need more rest than others, and the rest less. Jack and Miller had decided to let the foxhole members work it out between each other. When one needed rest, they radioed it in and a replacement was sent out.

They waited in their foxholes, eyeballing the area, getting replaced when necessary through the night. They all had their senses peeled for an attack that never came.

Wednesday October 25, 1999

0630 EST, Weapons Ranges

They gathered at the ranges once more for their shooting. The platoon knew when they joined the Marine Corps that they would have to keep current in their shooting abilities. No one in this group thought it would be in this many weapons.

They were waiting for a little more sunlight to engulf the range when Cline came up to Jack.

“So Jack,” Cline started. “No slaughtering last night?”

“Nah,” Jack responded. “Had to give my mass murderers a night of relaxation. You know it’s not easy being a bunch of baby killers.”

They chuckled at the mentioned that so many peace loving bunny huggers had used against the military on many occasions.

“So how do you do it man? No one in the platoon outside your squad knows where you’re hiding. And naturally your squad is very tight lipped about it.”

“They’re smart men,” Jack confirmed. “They know what they’re doing and they’re already damned professionals.”

“We may have to train along side your squad some day. I think it’d do my guys some good to learn from the best we’ve got right now.”

“I don’t know about all that.”

“Come on Jack, you’re squad’s the best in the platoon right now. You’ve killed off every other squad. You’ve snuck up on everyone’s position completely unnoticed. You slipped away from Third and Fourth without being seen at all. And on top of all that, you’ve managed to hide your own encampment all the way through. Your guys are probably the best of the new guys in our company.”

Jack shot him a disapproving look.

“At least in our platoon.”

“Alright, I’ll give you that for now. After all, someone’s got to teach you a lesson.”

“Aw, now you’re just being cocky.”

“You started it.”

“You know, three days into it, a lot of my guys are getting to anxious to get back to the real world.”

“Huh,” Jack chuckled. “And we’re only a week and a half from getting what they want.”

“Yep. Sure hope they can make it.”

“I think they can. I’ve talked with a few of them and they seemed like pretty tough bastards.”

“Yeah, they are. East and Ball were Gold Glove boxers. Slocum was all state wrestling and football. Good top quality guys, all of ‘em.”

“Too bad they’re dead,” Jack joked.

As they laughed at the friendly rivalry between squad leaders, the third came up.

“Hey gents,” Sturgil said.

## Forming A Foundation

“Hey Fish,” Jack and Don said.

“Too bad you guys can’t do any killing Fish,” Jack poked.

“I think I speak for everyone, Jack,” Sturgil said, “when I say we’re just glad we didn’t get killed ourselves last night. I don’t know about anyone else, but we were just trying to figure out a few good new tactics. Something you might not be expecting.”

“Well sure, Fish. But if you expect the unexpected, the unexpected will never happen.”

“He’s got you there,” Dan said. “I’m just glad my squad was off limits.”

“Not that recon on your area was prohibited,” Jack said.

“Damn it. Were you spying on us?”

“Man, ‘spying’ is such a harsh word.”

“Mother fucker,” Cline said shaking his head. Before he could get truly pissed Jack continued.

“No, we didn’t go anywhere near you guys. Although it was tempting to just peek around.”

“And at least they didn’t go after anyone else,” Sturgil said.

They chuckled and headed back to their perspective squads. Through the morning they fired through the known distance course of fire. Naturally they were all proficient shooters, it was part of why they were selected for this particular platoon. Still, there were small matters of correcting positions and getting used to new weapons. Even if they were the same caliber or similar style weapons, there were still subtle differences that needed to be understood to make the best use out of the weapons.

But these men were professionals.

With the morning finished off, the platoon took a brief lunch break and munched on MREs. With as much as the platoon griped about eating them, the members still consumed the barely edible contents.

1200 EST, Weapons Ranges

“Hey, Jack,” Lance Corporal McCoy said.

“Hey, Mickey. How’s Fighting Fourth?”

“Good. They’re just glad we didn’t get ransacked last night. Hey listen, I wanted to ask you something. I mean, seriously, how is it that you were able to get both Fish and my squads without us ever actually seeing you? We heard the shots, but never saw anyone. How the hell did you pull that off?”

“I plead the fifth commandment.”

“Thou shall not kill?”

“Something like that. We mutilated. But seriously man, it’s just discipline. The better you train it into your Marines, the better they’ll have it. The better discipline they have, the better they’re devotion will be. The better devotion to duty, the better they’ll train, the better they’ll do in the real thing. Following me?”

“Yeah. I’m just trying to learn as much as I can in a short period. I graduated boot camp as a Lance Corporal. I mean, I don’t have the experience as a Private or PFC of having ‘been there, done that’ and now I’m paying for it. I don’t wanna tell my guys ‘I don’t know.’”

“That’s never a good thing to have to do. And you’re perfectly right for feeling this way. It’s basically the new guy nerves. You’re new to leadership. The other squad leaders have been around it for a while longer. Me I was doing it before the Corps, being an Assistant Manager at a couple places. Don’t worry though. It’ll come to you. Just do what you’re doing and learn as much as you can. That’s good. But remember, always keep your confidence in yourself high. If you have confidence in you, your squad will have confidence in you. Cool?”

“Yeah. Thanks. I knew I could talk to you. A lot of the guys have told me that you’re really down to earth and have helped them out.”

“Well, my squad needs to learn when to shut their mouths.”

“Nah, man, it ain’t even just from them. Some of the guys from other squads have been saying it too. The advice you’ve given around the platoon has really helped the people you’ve given it to.”

“Well, Mickey,” Jack said, “That’s why the ‘Lance’ is at the tip of the spear. Well, I gotta get back over and check up on my squad. If you need anything, just let me know. The squad leaders definitely need to help each other out. And one other thing. My guys said they heard you yell an obscenity pretty damn loud when you were all dead. You can’t go and loose your cool like that.”

“Yeah, I know. It just all happened so quick. I really appreciate your help. But if I do have anything else, I’m gonna talk to you only off to the side. I’m afraid if I go near your squad they’ll kill me.”

“Or brutally injure. We’ll talk later.”

They went back to their separate squads and got back to the duties of being in charge.

1215 EST, Weapons Range

“Conspiring with the enemy again, Lance Corporal?”

## Forming A Foundation

“No, Miller,” Jack said. “And if he comes close to our squad, feel free to hog tie him with duck tape.”

“Aye, squad leader,” Miller said with an evil smile on his face.

“But be nice about it. I mean, he does out rank you.”

“Oh I’ll be gentle. Can’t speak for whoever takes the tape off, though.”

Jack chuckled.

“Y’all would like to get a couple of the other squad’s members hog tied, wouldn’t you?”

They mumbled an agreement or nodded their heads. Jack already knew how his Marines and Doc thought. Indeed, they were all of the same mindset, even Jack. The bond was growing tight with them. They were thinking on the same lines in play and in work.

1230 EST, Weapons Range

Unlike the KD courses of fire, the field fire used targets at various distances, the length of which wasn’t always known. The shooter had to use judgment as to the distance for the settings on the sights. The sights of any given weapon had to be lined up just right and sometimes set for a certain distance, to hit the target. Although sometimes you didn’t have to adjust the sights, but instead apply a little Kentucky windage and muscle the weapon around.

Each squad had proved themselves with the M-16 fire and with the basics of the pistol. The only reason for further work with the 40-caliber pistol was just extensive training with a higher power pistol. Now the platoon felt comfortable with these pistols, but had to get used to the fact that the style of Smith & Wesson pistols that they were using did not have a safety. That would leave the firing protection mechanism to being their trigger finger.

They learned to deal with that just as they learned to operate any weapon. Everyone in the platoon put special care into their training time here, as they knew that what they learned and practiced here would have an impact on saving their life later on.

1800 EST, PEA

“Second squad,” Gunny Fields said, “You have the flight line watch tonight. As for the rest of the squads, we’d like to see a little action tonight. We here at the big top were a little disappointed last night when nothing happened. At least none of you got annihilated by a certain group here. I have a feeling though, that starting tonight you’ll all start getting a little more rest at night as you get settled in to the routine of our schedule.

“Most of all, I want to pass on this from all of the command element. Great work so far. Keep it up. You’ve met or exceeded our expectations the whole way so far. Encampment defense is all that seems to be in need of improvement, but that will come with more practice. Every thing else is superb. We can’t ask for much better than what you’ve given us.

“On the range today, I asked a Marine from Fourth Squad to hit the target with at least eight of his ten rounds. He hit all ten. Keep it up. Keep exceeding the expectations. Every one of you is capable of great things. Now were gonna take a little break for dinner. In a half hour Sergeant Kerry will be teaching a class on survival. It will continue the training on how to identify and catch food, build tools, start fires, and construct shelter. Any questions on anything I’ve said so far?”

There were none.

“Good. Then tomorrow morning, afternoon and evening you’ll be getting extensive training on SWAT tactics. We’ll have the pleasure of turning you over to instructors and SWAT teams from the LAPD SWAT department, the best in the country if not the world. They are recognized throughout the world as an expert group when it comes to operations on urban terrain. Keep your ears open tomorrow and learn from them. And of course if you have questions, ASK. They’ll throw a lot of information out to you. They know it all by heart and they don’t always know if you don’t know something. A lot of this knowledge will be coming to you for the first time and you might not understand it. If that’s the case don’t feel stupid for asking a question. They’ll help you out as much as they can. Now eat your little bagged nasties and relax for a little while.”

1945 EST, PEA

With their stomachs comfortably full, the platoon refined their patrol skills and checked over the local area for what could be used for food, what might make good tools and other tricks taught earlier. The infantry Marines had learned this knowledge in the school of infantry, while the rest of them had learned some of it in combat training. Their work with this class tonight is merely a refresher. They were instructed on formations, hand signals and most importantly what to look for.

Their refresher course in the books, they were sent to their respective squad’s encampment area. Second squad had the flight line patrol and would begin their patrols in roughly a half hour. This would give each of them plenty of time to take a breather before they settled into the night routine.

2300 EST, Sherman Field

## Forming A Foundation

Goldman and Ski were circling the airfield counter clock wise, while Turrentine and Stanley circled clockwise. This would give any enemy personnel less likely of a predictable pattern. First squad had informed them that last night there had been nothing more difficult than an ID challenge. Apparently the commander of one of the flight schools was working late.

"I hope we don't get anything too much of a challenge tonight," Ski told Goldman. "Same for the rest of the squad. We've got enough shit coming up."

"Yeah, but if they try to pull any tests on us tonight, it'll only help us for the real thing."

"True, but I just really don't feel like dealing with anything tonight. I think they'll just let us fight amongst the squads to start, then next week come at us on flight line once we've worn out the novelty of going after each other."

"Probably," Goldman said. "Sounds logical enough. I mean, after all, we started it Monday night."

"Didn't wait like the rest of the platoon. No one came back at us Monday or did anything last night."

"Any which way, let's keep our eyes and ears open and do this right. You never know if someone like Major Ingram or Gunny Fields might come over just to see if we'll challenge 'em."

"True dat."

2330 EST, 1<sup>st</sup> SEA

Cline knew he had to do something. He knew that in himself and his Marines he had the capability to do things almost to the level of second squad. While he respected Sturgil, he knew that there was a slight lack of initiative there. Mickey didn't really have the best of experience yet. Cline knew that left it up to him to fuel the fire for the rest of the platoon.

He and a fire team were now leaving their area towards where third squad was in hiding. Cline had hesitated against going against fourth squad, being that Mickey needed a confidence boosting victory rather than a morale deflating defeat. Second squad still couldn't be found were off limits tonight anyways.

Low crawling through the brush approaching Third Squad, the four Marines took their cover behind a fallen tree.

"Everyone engage on my signal," Dan told them. "Hold...Engage."

The crackling stocatto of gunfire emerged from the woods, then from the encampment. When all was said and done, two of the fire team were registered as 'injured' and three quarters of the squad was dead. First squad slipped back again into the night.

Thursday October 26, 1999

0730 EST, Combat Town

There were no serious threats to second squad around the flight line. There was only an ID check when Major Ingram did indeed come to see if the roving guards were doing their job.

As far as the inter squad rivalry, First Squad finally worked up the nerve to attack Third. It worked out as a good sneak attack, but third defended themselves well.

The platoon now gathered for their training on Military Operations on Urban Terrain, or MOUT. Combat town was a mock city, merely building shells with minimal facilities inside. While not worthwhile to ever live in, it was perfect for their purposes today.

These purposes were the very same that many military units face at one given point or another in aiding foreign countries keep their own securities. All Marines have received some training in this field, but in the world of relative peace that exists here in this day and age, with no U.S. led wars, these urban tactics go mainly forgotten. The main tasks at hand for the majority of the Marine Corps is keeping themselves, their units and their equipment at a ready status, just in case.

The Marine Corps first came into heavy street to street fighting in Vietnam. Since that time, MOUT has been taught so that the problems of that conflict could be remembered and not relearned the hard way.

Today, as promised there were a dozen SWAT members from the LAPD who joined other assorted instructors from additional agencies. They were gathered to show the platoon how to do such things as enter buildings and clear rooms safely. The knowledge they would learn today and put into practice tomorrow would go far above and beyond what most Marines are taught in combat training or infantry school. In effect, after their training today, they would be able to clear a building with a four-man fire team. At least they would have the know how. With the practice they were sure to get in the coming days, they would be a very thorough, swift operating unit quite quickly.

After all, they were already properly trained and had the right mindset for this kind of operation.

The first period of instruction they received that day covered planning. The first thing they needed to know was how to go about the entrance and movement inside a building. After an hour and a half, they had thoroughly soaked up as much information as they could. Very few questions were asked, and those were simply minor issues of refining a certain point. The Marines and Docs present could reasonably figure out most of the information with the application of a little common sense. What was covered was a reminder and an informative session of how to properly do things.

## Forming A Foundation

After a half dozen techniques were shown, the platoon was taken to an area in the town and allowed to practice the maneuvers. There were enough places throughout the deserted town, and enough instructors to match, so that there was essentially no waiting. Those that wanted the practice could do so without standing there for an indefinite period.

Throughout the day they worked through scenarios on clearing rooms, properly rounding corners, going up and down stairs and safe entries into rooms. There were hand signals that went with all of these and it came natural enough with the movements. By nightfall they had accomplished a lot of learning and even more practice.

Friday October 27, 1999

0730 EST, Combat Town

For the fourth day straight, the platoon had gone on a run around the flight line. After a brief cool down, they were allowed to take a two liter shower; a washing with the water from a jug of that size. They toweled off and returned briefly to their squad encampment areas to gather the gear that they would need for the training ahead that morning. It would be hardly anything new, but merely more refinement of the now well honed skills.

They had proven themselves well in the day prior and they had shown the proper skills in covering urban territory. Some of the instructors had taken an early part in what would continue today, taking posts as hostages, terrorists and assorted felons and friends.

The training would be the same today, testing the traits of the present platoon, trying them to see if they were as good as they said they were. With a good bit of fortune, they had already proven themselves in many situations and scenarios. It was now time to prove themselves in a few more.

Jim Fitzpatrick, known fondly to the platoon as Fitz, had built a tough reputation with them as the hard assed SWAT Commander from the LAPD. While he was no nonsense and down to business, he still presented a relaxed attitude so long as the work was done and done right. Starting off this morning, he was reviewing all of the information that was covered yesterday in practical application situations.

“Now, you two have cleared the hallway coming from opposite ends,” he said to two members of First Squad. “You come to this door and you can hear two tangos conversing quietly, but you can’t quite tell where in the room they are. How do you go about clearing this room of terrorists and not harming any innocents that might be there that you don’t know of?”

“Well, easiest way would probably be to pop a flash bang grenade,” PFC Grimes said. “Blind them and stun them for a second. Then we come in, weapons at the ready.”

“Good,” Fitz replied. “But with that you run the smoke factor. That might hinder your ability to distinguish a tango from an India. PFC Shott, what’s a good way around that?”

“Round the corners double wedge,” Shott replied. “Keep to our respective sides but moving quickly enough to prevent one of us being there without the other’s cover fire.”

“Right. And why’s that?”

“Well, they could be right in the center of the room. If I was coming in behind Grimes, one of them could open up while he’s engaging the other, Grimes is down and I’ve got to get the other tango or both of them before they get me. A two one trade isn’t too good. I’d have to try to fire either over his shoulder or off his side.”

“Good planning. I think in most cases that would be avoided though, because they probably wouldn’t be in the center of the room.”

Several planning and execution sessions took place throughout that morning as members of LAPD SWAT helped grill the platoon and run them through each maneuver. After the morning’s routine, they knew several of the instructors would be there for the afternoon of hand-to-hand instruction.

The Marines had been looking forward to the afternoon of good hand-to-hand training. What some of them weren’t looking forward to was having to go all out on their friends. They all knew that this was simply training, but you have to train like it was the real thing. It would put a bad image into their minds to look at how they would kill the ‘enemy’ before them, when the foe has the face of their friend. It is hard for them to hurt a friend, even if they are in a rival squad.

1300 EST, PEA

The platoon was now gathered for their hand-to-hand training. Some of the Marines present had already obtained a good deal of training in an outside martial art, whether it was aikido, kendo, karate, judo or Taekwondo. There were a half dozen of those that were capable instructors. With this knowledge being held by the platoon leadership, they had been asked, if not a little more told, to help out with instructions and refining the points of instruction.

Granted, if several instructors were teaching several styles, there wouldn’t be a standardized method for the Marines and Corpsmen to battle hand to hand. The higher ups understood this and deemed that this method was perfect. While one person may have a strong upper body and be able to exercise better hand techniques of karate, another may have stronger legs and be able to better use the kicks of Taekwondo. Some may better be able to use the weaponry of aikido, while others may be better at using the grappling of judo.

## Forming A Foundation

PFC Pile was quick to find his squad leader in order to continue his training in Taekwondo. In spare time over the past four days, they had worked on proper techniques, and Pile was progressing nicely.

“I think you’ll be ready to promote when we get out of the field,” Jack had told him Wednesday night.

“Really?”

“Sure. All we’d have to do, really, is get you a uniform and I can get you the belt. Being that I’m an instructor, I can test you myself.”

“Cool. How long after that do I have to wait before I test again?”

“One step at a time, grasshopper. You haven’t even been promoted to yellow belt, don’t worry about orange yet.”

They had continued to work and refine, but there was little doubt in Jack’s mind that when they got out of the field, for the whole day and a half between their quals and SERE training, that Pile would be ready to possibly test for his orange belt. He was definitely proving to be a good student.

Throughout the afternoon they worked on techniques and learned about the style of fighting that seemed to fit them most. Aside from his work with Jack, Cal worked with the judo instructor to learn grappling techniques. Although Goldman had been working there as well it was much to Pile’s relief that they weren’t matched up.

Cline worked with Taekwondo and judo as well before he decided later in the day to round it off with karate training.

“With as scrawny as I am,” he said, “I’d better get as much training as I can.”

Not that his being scrawny meant that he was weak. He was capable of, if nothing else, holding his own for a beyond reasonable time frame.

When the day wore down, they made their way to the combat town bear pit. It was time for them to put to the test what they had been working on. The bear pit was a dug out trench twenty feet wide and forty feet long. It sloped down and the deep end held walls on either side. The walls didn’t allow for anyone to be thrown from the pit and added the extra challenge of only allowing a pin to the ground. Fortunately it had been dry the past week, otherwise it would have been less grappling and fighting and more full contact mud wrestling.

First and second squad charged each other from opposite sides and matched up with an opponent. Strangely, with twenty-six people charging at each other, the squad leaders managed to match up with each other, as did the Corpsmen.

One by one, people left the pit as they were pinned down or thrown out, sometimes all too literally. The last four in the pit were the squad leaders and Docs. Doc Zurek managed to throw Spazz from the pit before charging at Jack to help his squad leader. Jack managed to step forward and check the Corpsman with a strong shoulder, which drove him to the ground. Jack knelt on his shoulders, pinning him down, as Cline came charging back after a short lived break.

Unfortunately he was too little too late to save his Doc, but was able to knock Jack to the ground where they tangled up. They rolled through various spots of the pit until Jack wound up slamming Don’s back against the wall. Freeing up his right hand, Jack put his index finger to just above Don’s collarbone and pressed with almost all his might.

Through his gasps, Cline realized that this was a combination blood and air choke. Less air was going into his lungs, thus less was going into his blood. His adrenaline surged, causing an accelerated heartbeat with less oxygen. Ten seconds after his finger had touched, Jack had knocked a fellow squad leader unconscious.

Jack lowered Cline to the ground and placed his forearm to Don’s chest in order to stop his flipping in the minor seizure that came with his regaining consciousness. When his twitching had stopped, Jack helped Don to his feet and out of the pit, second squad being the victors.

Third and fourth squads matched up with similar battles between matching members. Body slams, DDTs and pile drivers ran wild as the squads battled each other gently. After all, they didn’t want to seriously injure their friends. Once again, it came down to squad leaders, with Mickey barely being able to throw Fish from the pit before collapsing in near exhaustion.

They took a fifteen-minute break before first and third squads battled it out, to the metaphorical death of the squads. It came down to Messina and Minard from third squad against the sole member of first squad, their leader. Cline, the underdog, managed to finish off the last two members of third squad, giving his squad the third place finish.

As he stooped outside the pit and gasped for air, he spoke quietly to Jack.

“Man, do me a favor,” he gasped. “Kick fourths ass. If I have to have lost, I want it to be the best.”

“Cline, no offense, but I’m gonna win it anyways. I don’t give a damn if it’s for your ego.”

Jack reassuringly patted his friend’s shoulder and went out to make good on an unspoken promise. Unlike his last time up, Jack didn’t go head to head with a squad leader right off, but managed to take down a third of the opposing squad with the help of his Marines. Fourth squad was down to their squad leader, while second had a four-man fire team. It nearly seemed choreographed but was very unplanned when Stanley and Miller each grabbed one of Mickey’s arms and Goldman grabbed the legs.

With the defensive limbs taken out of the picture, Jack slid under his opposite number and put him in a chokehold. Mickey had tried to tuck his chin to prevent the full hold from being placed. For Jack it was a simple matter of placing his finger under his opponent’s nose and lifting to defeat the opposition. While Mickey nearly broke free on a few occasions, he eventually did succumb to his inevitable defeat.

Congratulations went around the platoon and Jack found Cline, who was growing to be a good friend.

## Forming A Foundation

“There, that one was free,” Jack said sarcastically. “The next one’s gonna cost you. And it’ll cost you dearly.”

They slapped hands as Cline said, “Thanks man. I’ll buy you a beer out of sheer gratitude.”

“Cool. But if you really wanted to thank me, you’d better just quit being a loser.”

Cline laughed at the joke he knew it was and they made their way back to where their squads had their gear. It was time for a brief break. When they had grouped themselves in their squads, most movement stopped. Virtually all, that is, except for the Corpsmen. The four Docs moved throughout their squads checking on any aches and pains that may have appeared in their hand to hand battles.

The squad leaders were also checking up on their Marines. They had gone through five tough days. It was not always the most physically demanding thing they had ever been through, nor the most mentally challenging. But combined, it had drained a good deal of energy from everyone.

Some chatted softly with the people around them, others laid back on their packs and took a quick catnap. When the Corpsmen and Squad Leaders had finished checking over their squads they too took a well deserved break. As a Squad Leader or Doc they knew their Marines come first in basically every respect. They get their food first, their gear and their welfare always comes before the Squad Leader.

The Squad Leader that makes his or her Marines the center of their life will earn their respect by showing them that the priorities of the squad come before the leaders own needs. It is a complete act of selflessness that shows the true importance of a squad. After all the one Squad Leader can do only a fraction of what the twelve others in the squad do.

Saturday October 28, 1999

0730 EST, Old Warehouse

They had been given an hour in which they were allowed to go back to their rooms to shower and relax after their morning run. With six people per shower, they took their approximate ten allotted minutes. Those that weren’t bathing were eating their MRE breakfast.

As it was the weekend before a payday, most of the barracks had spent the last night in the barracks. With so many occupying the building, the vending machines had all been emptied of the finer contents. This broke the hearts of the platoon, as they had greatly desired something other than the same old meals they had been eating for the past week. They would, however, be allowed to go to the chow hall for lunch and dinner. They were looking forward to that, as it would be a real taste of the civilization they missed so much.

For most of them, seeing other people was reminiscent enough. It reassured them that what they were doing was for a cause. They were stepping up to do what other Marines couldn’t or wouldn’t do. After all, not everyone had the mindset for this kind of job, not even all Marines. Even some of the ones that did have it wouldn’t want to join in on a ‘Suicide Squad.’

For those that chose this job the only way they could truly get on with life was to be able to look their death in the face and accept it. Many have had the good fortune to have walked away from situations where they had told themselves ‘My death is here, and I am at peace.’

During the week, most of the Marine Corps would be coming to work at the time that the platoon was beginning their class. Being that it was a Saturday morning at 0730, most of the rest of the base was still asleep. The platoon had gathered for their morning period of instruction over Marine Corps leadership, which would be given by Sergeant Kerry. The Sergeant, who handled the majority of the administrative side of the platoon, had rarely been seen since the field evolution started.

“Good Morning Marines,” he started and received a grumbled but motivated reply from the platoon. “I am still Sergeant Kerry and I will be giving you this period of instruction covering Marine Corps Leadership. I will be giving this period of instruction using the lecture method, aided by this slideshow. During this class you will learn about leadership in the military, leadership in general, the leadership traits and principles as well as measurements and techniques of leadership. At the end of this class you will be graded by being given a multiple-choice test. At this point are there any questions on what will be covered, how it will be covered or how you will be evaluated?”

It was a seemingly drawn out introduction, but it was the standard Marine Corps introduction that covered the majority of what each Marine was to expect. As usual, there were no questions as the information had been presented properly the first time.

“If you remember no other way to summarize leadership, I want you to remember this. Leadership is a combination of the qualities of intellect, human understanding and moral character that enables a person to inspire and control a group of people successfully. It may seem like a complicated statement, but it is very true.”

The first hour of his class covered various styles of leadership in general as well as leadership within the military. Leadership, as it is called in the military, is referred to as management in the civilian world. While there are many differences, there are just as many similarities. The leader, or manager, still has to take measure of the situation and assign tasks to the group in order to accomplish the desired objective. They then have to supervise the group in order to ensure they are completed in a correct and timely manner.

## Forming A Foundation

Few managers, however, will have to worry about being shot at on a regular basis as military leaders do.

"In preparing yourselves to be leaders," he began after a short break, "you should remember these fourteen words. Judgment, justice, dependability, integrity, decisiveness, bearing, unselfishness, courage, knowledge, loyalty, and endurance. Can anyone tell me what those are?"

"The leadership traits," Pile said after raising his hand.

"That's correct. Those are the fourteen leadership traits. If you endow the true meaning of those words, it is difficult for you to go wrong as a leader. Now let's take an in depth look at what each of them means."

It took the next hour, but everyone was able to develop a thorough knowledge of each trait. Though they were not instructed to, everyone there evaluated their own attributes to those qualities. After another ten-minute break, the course continued with more notes.

"I want everyone to jot down the following statements that I make. Be sure to leave room for notes as we go over each of them. First, be technically and tactically proficient. Know yourself and seek self-improvement. Know your Marines and look out for their welfare. Keep your Marines informed. Set the example. Ensure the task is understood, supervised and accomplished. Train your Marines as a team. Make sound and timely decisions. Develop a sense of responsibility among your subordinates. Employ your command in accordance with its capabilities. Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions. These, as you probably know or have figured out are the eleven leadership principles. Let's take a few moments to discuss each one of these."

After yet another hour had been completed, a break was taken and the platoon closed the red books that contained the lesson material. They had covered half of the sections containing the pertinent material, but the last three were fairly simple. Those last few mainly handled special situations that might come up from time to time and gave scenarios that they could discuss in terms of proper leadership.

At 1130 they were released for lunch. Sergeant Kerry himself marched the platoon to the chow hall in an example of leadership. The knowledge of drill was just one part of the essence of leadership that they had been learning all morning. In the five hundred yards between the warehouse and the chow hall, they had been put through all the motions of drill, challenging their memory of how to perform each movement.

They were released in front of the chow hall and told that they had just over thirty minutes to eat, after which they would form up right where they were released.

1150 EST, Chow Hall

"I don't care who you are," Miller said, "that's good. After the week we've had, this is like a five star restaurant."

"Just imagine what this will seem like if we've got to go overseas for a couple months," Jack continued. The squad leaders and their assistants had gathered along with the Docs of each squad. They sat at their own long table at the side of the chow hall and were nearly all finished with their food.

"Kinda an important class for all of us to pay attention to, huh," McCoy asked.

"Yeah," Cline said, "but it's all really common sense if you stop and think about it."

"It's just pretty much putting into words what we've all been trying our best to do," Sturgil added.

"Between us," Jack said, "I hope we're all really the good leaders that our squads think we are."

"I don't know Jack," Miller said mockingly. "I think our squad's figured out what a dirt bag you are."

"Very funny Miller," Jack said. "Just remember, I know where you sleep."

"Yeah. But it's too bad none of the other squads do. At least they'd be kind enough to kill me."

"Right you are. I'll just make you suffer for the rest of your life."

They discussed various topics of leadership that they might come in contact with and the appropriate actions that might be taken. They all agreed that Non Judicial Punishment, or NJP, which was the military's version of punishment under a legal system, was not the preferred way to discipline their Marines. It would be used as a last resort, after all other options had been used. After all, the NJP would remain on their permanent record of life in the Marine Corps, and one honest mistake could wind up leaving questions or a tarnished reputation.

There were places in the Corps, and surely as well in other services, that going astray from the straight and narrow was not uncommon. A service member screwed up, got hammered by the CO, or 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. They then paid their dues and returned to work, hopefully having learned their lesson.

Many a Marine went on to become noteworthy leaders and retire from the Corps, who were once complete screw-ups. The difference in other places seems to be a lacked talent to recognize the good potential in what is all too easily called a bad Marine, Sailor, Soldier or Airman.

"The way I figure," Miller said, "the best way to correct someone who screws up is just a good old fashioned ass whoopin'."

"Leave it to a grunt redneck to put it simply but right on target," Jack said.

"I think he's right though," Slocum said. "A few people in my old platoon had fucked up. The squad leader just took them out back and beat the living shit out of 'em. They didn't fuck up again for a while, if ever."

## Forming A Foundation

They continued to chat until the time came for them to get in formation again. Back in the classroom they finished the last little bit of their class and took the test. Everyone knew that these tests would count towards the composite score that helped get them promoted to Corporal and Sergeant. Being that they were mostly Corpsmen or the rank of PFC, not too many of them worried about that for right now. They also knew that it would help in the potential for their squad to help win the super squad contest.

1400 EST, Old Warehouse

"I'm glad that's over," Spazz said. "I don't really like tests."

A group that had finished the test was outside enjoying a nice afternoon while they could. After all, most of the rest of the Marine Corps was enjoying this as a day off, as was ninety nine percent of the base. The Marines and Sailors on duty, along with this platoon, made up that last percent.

"I don't think many people do," Cline added. "At least not these fill in the bubble tests. The tests we've got on Friday I'm looking forward to."

"Yeah," Miller added. "The hands on, do something type test. Those are better for me too. Don't require as much thinking, just a lot more doing."

"Less thinking," Jack chuckled, "yeah, that's right up your alley alright."

"Always gotta pick on the redneck," Miller mumbled as everyone else laughed. "Bastards."

A half hour later, they were back inside to begin their next class, this one covering financial management. They had been given a class covering much of the same information in boot camp. This course, however, was a little more in depth and counted for college credit. Later in life for most of them, it would count as promotion points. It covered the basics of how to balance a checkbook and manage expenses. Just the basics for those now out on their own, most of them for the first time out of the aid of their parents.

The platoon and company leadership, had always wanted the youth that were now serving their country to be able to better serve themselves. This could be said as well as those higher up in the Marine Corps and Department of Defense

With the tests complete they were bussed back out to the PEA. First squad was back on flight line watch and the rest had planned on at least the possibility of attacking someone else. They had fallen into the routine and were used to guarding their area. Now it was time to think like the combat able Marines they were supposed to become.

2300 EST, 2<sup>nd</sup> SEA

"Crap," Mustard grumbled. Fortunately it wasn't picked up by his radio and transmitted to the rest of the squad. He knew his squad leader would have chewed him up one side and down the other for not using proper radio discipline. Mustard hit the VOX button, making it so that his voice would activate the radio and transmit his message automatically by him speaking now.

"Hostile in view, bearing 180." Directly south of their position. "Range one hundred fifty yards."

"Direction of travel," Joe heard his squad leader ask.

"Zero niner zero. Two more following in rough combat spread. Looks like the lead member is Lance Corporal McCoy."

"Good to go. Keep an eye on them and notify of aspect changes."

Taking a low profile position in the doorway of The Shrub, Jack looked out through binoculars. Even without the NVGs he was able to identify the Fourth Squad leader.

*Good try, Mickey,* Jack thought. *But not good enough.*

2330 EST, Flight line Access Road

PFC TJ Slocum and PFC Tom Gunn both heard it at the same time, but they couldn't identify the location. They knew it was a vehicle's engine and it seemed to be heading their way. Suddenly, the headlights popped on and they were able to see a Jeep heading towards them at a distance of fifty yards. They were able to safely stop the vehicle. Slocum approached the Jeep on the drivers side while Gunn stayed back a safe distance with his rifle at the alert.

"Good evening, gentlemen," Slocum said. "Could I see some identification?"

"Sure, officer," the driver said through slurred speech. The occupant of the passenger seat failed at suppressing a laugh. Behind the driver another gentleman sat fairly still with his hand in a cereal box. The driver fumbled with his wallet and wound up dropping his ID on the ground. When TJ bent down to pick it up the passenger in the rear pulled the trigger on the gun he was concealing in the box, firing a blank. Gunn was quick to aim his rifle and squeeze off a double tap at the would be assailant, before yelling at the other occupants.

"HANDS UP!! GET YOUR HANDS ON TOP OF YOUR HEADS. STEP OUT OF THE VEHICLE!!!"

## Forming A Foundation

Other than his partner being 'killed' it was pulled off in near perfection. They both learned the valuable lesson that so many in police and security forces phrased so accurately. In God we trust, everyone else keep your hands where I can see them.

Sunday October 29, 1999

0730 EST, Old Warehouse

"Hey Mickey," Jack called. "Got a minute?"

"Sure Jack. What's up?"

"I didn't want to say anything to you in front of your Marines, but nice try last night."

"What? You knew we came looking for you?"

"Yep. Sure did. You were close enough for me to identify you though my small binos. I'd say probably from about two hundred yards."

So he lied about the distance, but any closer and McCoy might know too much.

"Shit, man. You're the only squad we've gone after. I thought last night that it would help us feel better to at least get back at you. Even just to stumble across your area and get one or two of your guys."

"Well, better luck next time," Jack told him. "I know you're trying your hardest to get up to speed with the rest of the Lance Corporals, and you're doing good so far. Tell your Marines they're doing good too. Now let's get in here and learn something."

Through the course of the morning they were given a period of instruction covering the inspection and repair of pistols, specifically the M-9, the standard issue 9mm. In basic training they had been taught the basics of the same for the M-16. Now that a sidearm would be part of their required weapons, they would need to know this information as well.

While they were not being expected to know how to fix the problems that would arise with any weapons, they would be able to at least give a thorough inspection and be able to note problems. Any corrections would rightfully be done by the armorer, of which each squad had one.

In the afternoon they were given a class on communications security. Second Squad brushed through it with ease, having learned most of the information prior to their field evolution. With their squad leader being a communications tech, they had heard him preach enough about it.

With both courses and tests completed they headed back to the PEA. Every member of the platoon wanted to get as much rest as possible on this night. They all knew they would need to perform well on the Physical Fitness Test, or PFT that was scheduled for first thing that next morning. Everyone was in good shape, but they wanted to make sure they were rested enough to perform well in each of the three events.

Unknown to each other, no squad leader had the intent of going after anyone else tonight. They wanted their Marines to be able to rest themselves. It was a relief to them all that second squad had the flight line watch. They would at least be immune to an attack from the mischievous men who had plagued havoc on the rest.

Monday October 30, 1999

0100 EST, Blue Angels Hangar

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Mustard said, stopping in his tracks. "What's this?"

He pointed to an object lurking in the shadows, which was slightly larger than a shoebox.

"I'll radio it in," Pile said. "You check it out."

Only one went for an up close inspection in order to protect the observers. If one stayed in a position to observe, there were better chances to continue their defense. Mustard checked his watch and his heartbeat accelerated when he read the box. "THIS BOMB WILL EXPLODE AT 0115." They only had fifteen minutes to get this bomb defused. This information was relayed over the radio by Pile. Moments later an SUV came around the corner towing what some EOD folks called a Bomb Bubble.

The EOD personnel, portrayed by Gunny Fields and Sergeant Kerry, picked up the box and carefully placed it in the bubble and locked it tight. A collective sigh of relief could be heard.

They had one minute to spare.

While Pile was qualified to be able to defuse the bomb himself, they needed to follow the proper procedures that most others would. It was little more than practice

0600 EST, Flight line

"Hey Doc," Cline said to Spazito. "Try not to embarrass the rest of us."

"Yeah," Jack said. "Try not to finish in under ten minutes."

## Forming A Foundation

The platoon knew the quickest member of their ranks was HA Spazito, capable of running three miles in approximately fifteen minutes. Everyone knew who would be the first one in and some were determined to be not too far behind him. They had already finished the pull-ups and crunches and were now ready for the final part of their test, a three-mile run.

The vast majority of the platoon, squad leaders included, were very near placing themselves in a high first class score. Two from each squad had managed to maintain perfect scores through the first two events and were hoping to prevail here. These seven Marines and one Doc had done twenty pull-ups and a hundred crunches. The final task for them to complete would be finishing this run in less than eighteen minutes.

There was little doubt Spazito would be able to do it, along with Miller and the others aiming for the perfect score. If nothing else, they all had the heart to be able to finish the best they can. They would quit long after most people would have been through.

They all ran their hardest, with a few crossing the finish line before the eighteen minute mark for the full hundred points they could receive. Jack, Cline and Miller were nearing the line as the clock wound toward eighteen. They pulled out a last minute sprint in hopes of beating their challengers across the line. Oddly, they all crossed the mark, side by side, exactly eighteen minutes after they had departed. They were precisely three minutes behind Doc Spazito.

Everyone cooled down and stretched out again before heading back to take a gallon shower. In the course of about an hour they would begin enduring a class right up the alley of almost any Marine. Explosives.

During this training the Marines learned the properties of explosives from the plastic explosive C4 to that of TNT. They were shown how to defuse bombs of moderate to somewhat intricate design. The platoon also paid close attention as they were shown how to make bombs out of many household items. Granted, these were not the most powerful explosives they would have access to, but they would certainly aid in a time of need.

The information covered had been absorbed so well by the platoon, their instructors continued into the early afternoon with an advanced demolitions course. During this period, they were taught about how to demolish walls, doors, locks and, to an extent, structures.

After their extended instruction in explosives, their training continued with an art just as deadly. Their education in martial arts went through the afternoon and into the evening, training them how to use their hands, feet, and virtually every part of their body in an offensive or defensive manner. Through their hand-to-hand work with some of the best instructors in the military and law enforcement, they were greatly improving their combat abilities.

When the platoon had completed beating on each other, the squads headed back to their encampment areas to settle in for the night. At 2<sup>nd</sup> SEA, Spazz became engulfed in troop welfare, checking up on soreness in more than one Marine after the culmination of a week straight of physical demands.

“Hey, Doc,” Pile called. “You got any of that spray muscle cooler?”

“Yeah,” Spazz replied and tossed him the can. “Just don’t use it all up. You gotta save some for everyone else. Plus you might give yourself frostbite using too much.”

“You know, Doc,” Jack said thoughtfully, “You might think of taking some massage therapy classes. You seem to know a good bit about some of it now. Might help the squad out with some of this muscle pain.”

“I’ve learned some from Chief Gibson. Gibbs teaches us whatever he can, whenever he can. He’s a good Chief. It’s just too bad we’ll be separating. I’ll be heading up to Lejeune with the squad and he’s pulling orders somewhere too. He doesn’t know yet, but he’s hoping to stay on the east coast.”

“Maybe he’ll get the Naval Hospital there at Lejeune. Then you could learn some more from him. But definitely pick up some more massage therapy from him. I’m sure it’ll help with the squad.”

“Much as these guys probably might not admit to wanting me to give ‘em a rub down.”

“Now ‘rub down’ is a little harsh. You know as well as I do it’s troop welfare and it’s part of your job. Besides Doc, you make ‘em feel better, they won’t complain too much.”

“True.”

They spoke for a while longer and got settled into the routine for defending themselves that night. The squad leaders had all congregated earlier in the day and agreed for as near truce conditions as could be expected. Everyone was more concentrating on getting through the qualification process than on attacking each other. That didn’t mean that it definitely wouldn’t be happening.

Tuesday October 31, 1999

The nerves of the platoon were slightly on edge with the coming training of the day. While the training would require no more courage than becoming a Marine, many of them had a small fear of heights. Thirty thousand feet in a free fall would frighten a lot of people, but today the training would bring them to that height for their air ops training. After their course on how to properly use their parachutes, they continued their learning on High Altitude, Low Opening, or HALO. Before going up in the plane, they also conducted the course over SPIE, or Special Insertion and Extraction.

## Forming A Foundation

SPIE work over the years had proven to be one of the best ways for those in the military afraid of heights to overcome their fears. Dangling by a rope on the underside of a helicopter showed to be a relative rush to many people that enjoyed seeing the sights of the world.

They boarded the only C-130 permanently stationed at Sherman Field, the very plane Jack had been on several times before, as it was attached to the Blue Angels. Fat Albert, as it was affectionately known, was the only Marine aircraft permanently attached to a Navy squadron. Today, it would be loaned back to the Marines to take them up several times in order to get accustomed to the military version of sky diving.

The platoon, with the instruction of the jumpmaster, exited the rear of the plane one by one. Jack and Mustard were the last two left inside the cargo bay. Mustard was hesitant in approaching the hatch.

“Let’s go Mustard,” Jack yelled over the noise.

“I’m...” Mustard hesitated, “I’m scared of heights, Lance Corporal.”

“So am I.”

“You’re scared too, Lance Corporal?”

“I don’t like heights either. Now you either jump or I’m throwing you off this plane. You know I will kick you square in the ass with my steel toed boot if you don’t do this on your own. One way or another, we’re both doing this.”

Mustard saw that his squad leader was serious about tossing him out, especially giving him a good swift kick, but he knew that his squad leader would be right behind him as always. Once they were on the ground, Mustard found his squad leader.

“I did it, Lance Corporal,” Joe proudly stated.

“Yes you did. And a damn fine job it was too.” Jack moved close to the young Marine and spoke so that only the two of them could hear it. “No matter how scared you are, you have to accomplish the mission, because the rest of your squad is counting on you to do it. They’re always behind you all the way to support you. I want you to remember that the next time you get scared. That’s what fights my fears. Understood?”

“Yes, Lance Corporal.”

“Good job. Now we’ve just got to do it another eleven times.”

On the way back to Fat Albert, Jack found himself once again side by side with Lance Corporal Cline.

“Another one scared of heights,” Cline asked.

“Who, me or Mustard?”

“Either. Both.”

“Just a good case of nerves. I think it’s against every natural instinct to jump out of a perfectly good airplane. But what the hell, we just do what we’re told, normal or not.”

Each member of the platoon completed a dozen jumps, landing on a grass strip between runways each time, then loading back into the plane with a new parachute. It was a little redundant, but the repetitive motions would cause good muscle memory.

The sun grew lower to the horizon when four CH-53 Super Stallions began hovering overhead with SPIE ropes dangling beneath. After hooking and dropping a half dozen times, each squad had been cleared as having done the proper techniques and were all dropped at the PEA.

1900 EST, PEA

The platoon shed its SPIE gear as Gunny Fields began the daily recap and prep for the next day. At the conclusion came a statement that was unexpected, and a bit unnerving to those it pertained to.

“Head back to your encampments. Squad leaders, I need to see all of you.”

The appointed heads of each squad gathered in front of their Gunny with a collected anxiety.

“The training is basically complete. The next two days ahead of us will mainly hold refinement of the skills before qual day on Friday. It seems as though everyone has gained all the knowledge needed and all the squads are working together well. The Major and I just wanted an extra test. We wanted to see how well our squad leaders could work together.

“Your challenge, whether or not you choose to accept it, is to take over a guarded building here on base. The building can be of your choice, but we would prefer it be a barracks as that’s what we’d gotten the friendliest clearance for from the base CO. Any questions?”

“We’ve basically just got to overrun a barracks and neutralize the guards,” LCpl McCoy asked.

“Correct. And you’ve got this fire team to do it.”

“Gunny,” Jack started, “I’d like to bring Carlson if we can have one more person. He’s got some experience I think we could put to use.”

“Do I want to know?”

“I’ll explain after the fact.”

“Bring him. The planning and execution is up to you. I don’t much care how you go about this so long as no one is hospitalized. Go to it.”

## Forming A Foundation

The squad leaders departed the general area of the Gunnery Sergeant before Jack got on his squad radio and called Carlson back to the PEA.

“So Jack,” McCoy started, “I’m curious now. Why Carlson? You must have a plan running through your head.”

“Well, it was quite simple really. Gunny said he’d prefer we do a barracks, a living facility. A while ago Carlson was arrested breaking into a house. In a plea bargain, he was given the choice of either going into the military or going on probation. He chose the Corps. The only reason he got off so easy was that he didn’t get anything off the house and, this is where he comes in here, he broke in and got past the security system without leaving any trace to getting by it.”

“So, basically, he can break into a building without leaving a trace of himself?”

“That’s right Mickey. I know the fire escapes are locked to the outside world, as would be most of the windows. I’m sure he can probably get around this fairly easily.”

“Alright,” Cline said. “So how are we gonna do this? I’m sure you’ve already got a good plan.”

“A rough draft at least. I’m thinking we attack G Barracks.”

“You want to attack the Ghetto,” Mickey asked. “The barracks we live in?”

“Yeah. I don’t think it would be a wise idea to just walk right in through the front door, guns at the ready. Too obvious and someone would have time to set off an alarm, whether one of the duties or a bystander that happens to see us charging up the walk.

“First thing I figure we do is cut the power. I know that the incoming power is at the first deck fire escape by the chow hall, on the side away from the street.”

“You sure about that,” Sturgil asked.

“Yeah, I’ve seen it a couple times when the Air Force punks set fire to the building smoking back there. I’ve been on barracks duty when it happened and dealt with the fire department when they found the smoldering cigarette butt right beneath it.

“So we cut the power here,” Jack pointed to the crude drawing of the barracks he’d made in the dirt patch they surrounded. “With the power out in this building, the people in the building not on duty will most likely leave to another area where they see things haven’t gone Amish. Like moths go to a light, I think they’ll go to the E Club or the exchange.

“We give it about fifteen minutes lurking low in some of the bushes. They aren’t going to be looking at the bushes, as they get mad at the power outage. Even if they did, with the Ghillie suits I can get us, it would take an up close inspection to reveal a person lurking in the shadows.”

PFC Adam Carlson came up to his squad leader at just the time his part in the plan could be perfectly laid out.

“Hey, Lance Corporal,” Carlson said. “What’s up?”

“Perfect timing, Carlson. We need you to do a little B & E.”

“I don’t know, Lance Corporal. Last time I did that I got in some pretty serious trouble.”

“Anything trouble that might come up, I’ll get rid of.”

“You could do that?”

“Sure. After all, you were just following orders.”

“Cool. So what’s the plan?”

Jack recapped what they had gone over so far and came back to the timing and placement of entering the building.

“With five of us, I’m thinking that three go first floor, one second and one third.”

“That would put a one to one match, wouldn’t it,” Cline noticed. “One of us to one guard?”

“Sure would. But the thing is, we have the advantage. We know where each of the duty personnel is. With a ninety percent positive rate, they won’t even really be expecting us, so they won’t have their guard up. They’ll just think it’s another problem with a poorly done government contracting job. Someone screwed something up, and the power went out in the building.

“Now usually, the ID watch on the first deck quarterdeck is just standing there at his podium, checking the ID’s of who comes in, otherwise just looking around. Most of them have a magazine set there on top of their logbook. The guy at the desk usually has his face in a book or magazine and is otherwise oblivious to the world. The same could be said for the wing watch first deck. The two other deck watches are right at the middle ladder well, right at the quarterdeck of their deck. When they’re not reading something too, they’re watching the stairs most of the time anyways, so they’d see an attack coming. We’d have to come in off the sides.

“So here’s how we’ll do this. Black flight suits for the uniform, making us blend into the shadows once we get inside. I’ll get us the Ghillie suits for outside, but once in, they’re off. Adam, I’ll need you to open the windows here and here, letting myself and Mickey in to be able to slip behind the desk watch and ID watch to take them out.

“Before we take them out, Cline will go in through the side door here where the wing watch is. The door is supposed to be locked, but most of the time people prop it open so they can slip in the side drunk undetected by the ID watch. Cline, you just open the door and ask him if he’s got a light.

“I know from looking through the drawer there that there’s usually a few matchbooks there. With any luck, there will be a smoker on duty that you can coax out into having a smoke. Once he’s up and out of view down the hall, you get him down. Hog tie him with duck tape and put a strip over his mouth. One guard out of action. You good with that?”

“Yeah. Where do you want me to stash him once he’s out of action?”

## Forming A Foundation

“Behind the dumpster. It’s an enclosed area, and I doubt someone’s gonna take their trash out at night. Most Marines take theirs out in the morning, going to work or to class, ‘cause they won’t be producing any more for a while.

“Now I can get access to some NVGs for us to use inside the dark building. Mickey, you and I will have to hit the other two at the same time. They’ll be able to see in the direction of the other one, and potentially see an attack coming on their counterpart. We’ll just use a little radio communication and I’ll signal the go. You come out of this end room closest to the ID watch and take him down.

“Probably the best way to do it is to put a piece of tape on your hand, and put it on his mouth before putting him in a choke hold. That’ll prevent him from being as loud to tip off the guards on second and third deck.

“That will take care of first deck. Adam, after you get us into first deck, I want you and Fish to go up these stairs here. This will allow us to all be on the same side of the building, in a smaller area, less room for detection. The podiums on second and third deck face in like this to view down the stairs. I’m having you two come in off of this fire escape because it will allow you to come up behind the watch and better catch them off guard. Just take ‘em out like Mickey and I are gonna be doing.

“Is everyone clear so far on their part in this?”

Everyone nodded their assurance.

“Fish and Carlson, you work your way inside and wait in the corner lounge until you hear Mickey and myself go. When we go, you move quickly through the hall. It’ll be dark, so you most likely won’t be seen, just heard. I’ve got access to some night vision goggles that will really help us out moving around inside.

“Once you two get the guards neutralized on second and third deck, bring ‘em downstairs. We’ll get the one from behind the dumpster and put all of them in a nice little row on the quarterdeck. Then we’ll call the Officer Of the Day and tell him that we’ve taken over his barracks.”

“It’ll piss off the Air Force Commander when he finds out in the morning,” McCoy said.

“Joke ‘em if they can’t take a fuck,” Cline said. “They got a country to defend too and they’d damn well better get used to it.”

“Good attitude,” Jack said. “I’ll get on the radio then and let Major Ingram and Gunny Fields know. They’ll pull us out of any trouble we might have raised.”

“And I get away with breaking and entering,” Carlson said.

“Just don’t do it in the future unless I tell you to. Now let’s all take a little time to go back to our squads. Meet back here in a half hour.”

Each went in the direction of their encampments. It was then that Carlson addressed his squad leader.

“Lance Corporal, do you think it was a good idea to tell them we have night vision goggles?”

“I didn’t tell them we had NVGs,” Jack told him. “What I said is that I have access to them. I never said where I was getting them. The Ghillie suits, however, they all know we have already. I didn’t give them any information that might compromise our squad in any way.”

“You are one conniving Squad Leader.”

“Thank you.”

“That’s one thing I really like about you Lance Corporal,” Carlson admitted. “You don’t show your hand unless you absolutely have to and you only show what you need to.”

“All part of my style.”

They got back to their encampment and got what they needed. Jack put Miller in charge in his absence and got back to the PEA before anyone else. He passed out the NVGs and suits to the other squad leaders as they came up.

“How did you get NVGs so quick,” Mickey asked.

“I plead the fifth,” Jack replied in a very sly manner.

Cline told Gunny Fields that they were ready to go. He took them in a van over to the barracks that was affectionately known to its residents as The Ghetto. When no one was in the area watching, the five walking bushes quickly made their way up to the side of the building.

Cline stayed close to the door he would be going in while the other four low crawled slowly around the corner to the power switch.

“Jack, why don’t you do the honor,” Mickey said. “After all, this was your bright idea.”

After checking that no one was watching, Jack stood and cut the power to the building. It was literally nothing more than a flip of the switch. Bringing the lever down, the lights in the building went off and a bright idea turned dim. If you listened closely enough, you could almost hear the collective swearing of the occupants of the building.

Over the next quarter of an hour a good number of people did leave the barracks. These were the ones that wanted to have something to do on a Tuesday evening. Some went to the Enlisted Club while others went to pick up supplies at the exchange. Few others went across the walkway to Fox or Hotel barracks and others to Juliet Barracks to watch television in the lounges there or just relax with friends that might live in those buildings.

As Jack had planned, the only ones that remained in The Ghetto were those either on duty, asleep or reading by flashlight.

## Forming A Foundation

The fire team moved to the first window away from the doors. Looking through the NVGs Carlson verified the room was empty. In all of thirty seconds he had the lock unlatched and the window opened for Mickey to slip through.

The outside of the building was dark enough to further cover the three moving shadows that then slid across the walkway up to the barracks. The third window on the opposite side, which was a duty section leader's office, was opened by the platoon's would be criminal, who then moved on with the last squad leader available.

Jack let a reasonable amount of time pass. When he figured enough had passed, he pushed the call button on his radio, which set off a ringing in everyone else's ears.

"One's up," Cline said.

"Two," Jack whispered so the desk watch wouldn't hear down the short hall.

"Three," Fish said on second deck.

"Four," Mickey whispered, perched at the door on the other side of the quarterdeck.

"Crook," Carlson said.

"One, go," Jack said, sending Cline on to capture the first guard.

This guard, who could see the ID watch from his desk, was needed to be out of the way so that he couldn't see Mickey go for the watch on the quarterdeck. If he was there to see it, he could very well sound an alarm to the OOD or Squadron Duty Officer.

Cline opened the door slightly and spoke to the wing watch.

"Hey man, you got a smoke?"

"Yeah," he got up and made the three steps to the door. "Might as well have one myself. Ain't anything else going on."

When his left foot hit the concrete outside the door, his world exploded. Cline wrestled him to the ground in all of three seconds before the tape was put over the guard's mouth. Cline took the right hand that he had been holding in an arm bar and pinned it to the foe's left hand. Breaking free the tape that had been secured in his leg pocket, Cline quickly secured the guard's hands then just as swiftly took care of his feet. With a few wraps around both wrists and ankles, the nameless guard was lifted and hidden behind the dumpster.

"Wing secured," Cline said over the radio. He then looked down at the guard and said, "Sorry, man. No hard feelings."

"Mickey," Jack called, "Are you set?"

McCoy turned the handle of the door he was crouching behind and opened the door slightly. If it weren't for the eerie glow of the NVGs, he would have had trouble seeing with the emergency lights spread few and far between. They definitely weren't covering this part of the hall well.

"Yeah," McCoy whispered, closing the door without latching it. "Four's ready."

"Go."

"Three, go. Crook, Go."

Slipping silently from the shadows, they both repeated the same process the first squad leader had just a moment ago. Each guard predictably saw the shadow of movement behind the other guard. Through swift movements of the attackers they were wrestled to the ground, but still fought. Soon enough they were both handled, hog tied and completely silenced. No one else was on first deck.

Both PFC Carlson and LCpl Sturgil trotted swiftly and silently through the corridor and approached the Deck watch of their deck. It was then that Jack called to Cline.

"Cline, bring your guard up."

"Check," came the terse reply.

Cline brought the guard to the desk and set him beside where the other two had been placed by Jack and Mickey.

"You two guard the doors," Jack told Cline and Mickey. "No one comes in unless I ok it."

"Roger," they both said and took their posts outside the doors on opposite sides of the quarterdeck.

Within three minutes of being dispatched, both Sturgil and Carlson had neutralized their guards and brought them down the stairs, placing their captured guards, including a very frightened U.S. Air Force Airman, beside the desk. Every guard was lined up out of view from the exterior world.

"Alright," Jack said. "Looks like the mission is accomplished. If you two could just sweep the barracks to double check."

"Got it," Fish said.

"Roger," Carlson replied.

"Uh, Adam," Jack said, approaching his Marine. He asked quietly, "Why is the Airman's back pocket messed up?"

"I was trying to get his wallet. Didn't have any money."

"You're not bullshitting me are you?"

"No. If I'd got something I'd use it for beer money for the squad."

Jack thought for a second before saying, "Good thought."

Carlson went to check the side of first deck opposite of Fish while Jack keyed up his radio.

"Echo Seven Foxtrot, Two One."

## Forming A Foundation

“Go,” came the reply from Gunny Fields.

“The ghetto is secured.”

“Roger. Notify OOD.”

“Roger. Two One clear.”

“Echo Seven Foxtrot clear.”

Jack picked up the phone and dialed the number for the Officer Of the Day, OOD.

“MATSG OOD, Captain Reading.”

“Sir this is Lance Corporal Jackson, Special Security Forces. Per Major Ingram’s instructions, Golf barracks has been taken by force. My Marines now hold it. Per the Major, please come and collect your guards.”

“I just spoke with Major Ingram a few moments ago. I’ll be there momentarily. Thank you for calling.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Jack tried to be as respectful as possible, but it was hard when the job was this easy. Fish and Carlson came back to the desk as Jack hung up the phone.

“Carlson, be good and go turn the lights back on.”

“Aye, Lance Corporal.”

“Jack,” Cline said over the radio, “got someone coming up the walk. Looks like Major Ingram.”

“Good to go. Make sure to challenge him and don’t let him passed without seeing ID and radioing me.”

“Got it.”

Outside Cline was trying to mentally prepare himself for this. It was a job he knew he had to do right, and he had every right to challenge the Major. He just hoped his platoon commander would not take it as disrespect, but as proper procedure and protocol. When he was twenty feet away, Cline challenged him.

“Halt,” Cline said in a firm voice. The Major stopped. “Who goes there?”

“Major Ingram, Lance Corporal.”

“Do you have your ID, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Please place it on the ground and take five steps back.”

The platoon commander did as was requested. While he was walking backward, Fish came out and stood beside Cline. He would guard the door while Cline checked the ID.

“Please stay where you are at, sir,” Cline said walked forward. He picked up the military identification card and verified its authenticity. Cline then looked up and saluted his commander.

“Sir, Lance Corporal Cline reports Golf Barracks secure in our occupation. We have five guards in custody. Three PFCs, one Lance Corporal and one Airman. All general and special orders are in effect. Lance Corporal Jackson is in charge of this detail, sir.”

“Very well,” the Major replied and returned the salute.

“Two, One,” Cline said into the radio after taking out the plugs.

“One, Two,” came Jack’s voice over the radio’s small speaker. “Go ahead.”

“Inbound with Major Ingram.”

“Very well. Proceed to the desk.”

“Roger, One clear.”

“Two clear.”

The lights to the barracks then snapped back on. Lance Corporal Sturgil saluted while holding the door open for the Commander.

“Jack,” Major Ingram bellowed on the quarterdeck.

“Sir.”

“How many prisoners?”

“Five sir. These three PFCs, one Lance Corporal and one Airman. The OOD will be here momentarily sir. He said he had spoke to you.”

“Yes he had. I told him to expect a call from you explaining a problem with barracks watches. Apparently you didn’t let me down.”

“Never had before, sir. Didn’t figure now would be the time to start.”

“Right you are. It’s no wonder Chief Schulze didn’t want to let go of you. Evidently your abilities to accomplish missions is quite essential over there.”

“And who would have thought a Marine would be overly happy with a Navy squadron? I just do my best, sir.”

“Which is why you came so highly recommended. People have been saying great things about you.”

“People like to talk too much, sir. I couldn’t have done it without the other four Marines. Especially Carlson and his burglary tactics.”

Carlson had just walked in prior to that statement.

“So I understand. I must admit, I didn’t want someone in this platoon who had been put up on felony charges. But after some discussion, I saw that tactics such as this may come in handy. Good work, PFC.”

## Forming A Foundation

“Thank you, sir,” Carlson said. He looked as if a huge weight had just been lifted off his chest.

“Jack,” Cline said through the front door. “Captain Reading is here.”

“Send him in, Lance Corporal,” Major Ingram said, taking charge of the situation.

“Aye, sir.”

Captain Reading came in and saluted the Major.

“Captain, would you like to have your barracks back?”

“Yes, sir. It would be nice.”

“Lance Corporal Jackson, how long did it take you to secure this building?”

“Ten minutes from the time the first Marine entered the building, sir. Twenty five minutes after the lights went out.”

“Captain, you can have your barracks back, but I would strongly suggest that you emphasize to every watch tonight the importance of guarding their buildings and the importance of their duties. If I’m not misunderstood, their general orders include something about being especially watchful at night and during the time for challenging, to challenge all persons on or near their post and to allow no one to pass without proper authority. Lance Corporal Jackson, were these Marines and Airman especially watchful tonight and during a time for challenging?”

“No, sir.”

“Did they challenge all persons on or near their post?”

“No, sir.”

“Did they allow you to pass without proper authority?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Captain, I strongly suggest you make sure the General and Special Orders are being enforced, before General Oztrike feels the need to court martial a few Marines for dereliction of duties. Take charge and carry out the plan of the night. Jack, let’s go.”

“Aye, sir,” Captain Reading replied, saluting.

The flight suited Marines followed the Major out of the building to the van. No one spoke until the Major addressed them.

“Who was responsible for the planning and execution of this?”

“I was sir,” Jack said.

“You authorized the rest of these Marines to hog tie those guards with duck tape and line them up like prisoners of war?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you think that might have been a little excessive force?”

“No, sir. If we hadn’t, one of them could have set off an alarm and our operation could have gone south. We used no more force than absolutely necessary, sir.”

“You didn’t slam any of them around a little harder than might have been needed?”

“No sir.”

“Didn’t, maybe, drop one to the quarterdeck there from a little higher than necessary?”

“No sir.”

“Didn’t rip the tape off their mouths and put it back on just to watch them squirm?”

“No sir.”

“You were tempted to do that last one, weren’t you?”

“Yes sir.”

The Major laughed. Everyone else smiled, noticing their platoon commander’s pleasure at their mission accomplishment.

“For all of your hard work and dedication,” the Major said in a more serious tone. “For being able to accomplish a mission tasked to you,” he looked at his watch “in under two hours from the time it was tasked to you and handling it with extreme professionalism, you will all be issued Meritorious Masts at the release brief after quals. With leadership like this, it’s no wonder this platoon is taking shape so well. Get in the van.”

They all got in, prouder of themselves than they had been in a very long time. It was important for them to know that they were doing well in their work. It was what gave them the fuel to continue on their trek. That along with the knowledge that they were doing right by their Marines.

Wednesday November 1, 1999

0530 EST, Flight line

As they formed up for their morning run, the members of the platoon talked amongst each other and throughout the squads. Word had spread of the squad leaders’ accomplishments. The Assistant Squad Leaders were indeed curious about why their leaders had been whisked off so quickly the previous evening without much adieu.

## Forming A Foundation

When the five had returned to their squad's encampment areas the members involved were quick to tell the tales of their first mission against an unknowing foe outside the platoon. While the inter squad rivalries had produced insurgencies against each other, this was their first test against an outside force.

And it had proven successful.

While Jack had planned it, he did make the humble but honest point that he couldn't have done it alone. He would have needed, and did get, the help of the others on the team. Each person played their part in the play. Although Jack and Carlson did play slightly larger parts.

The forty-eight Marines and four Corpsmen made their lap around the airfield with the rousing cadences of their platoon Gunny. It was a great relief to them that they had all made it this far. There were no injuries that had taken anyone from the team, no last regrets of being there and nothing that made them quit. They were and would be there for each other.

It was also a relief to them that they had made it through all of the training that they would need for the Special Operations Qualification. Other than water survival, this day and the next would be mere practicing and sanding off the rougher edges. Without covering up self-doubt, each person knew he would be able to do what he had to in order to pass the test.

The SERE training laid out of their minds for the near future. In each of their opinions, it was best to take it one step at a time. At this point they didn't want to consider the fact that they would be willingly submitting themselves to the torture.

They would be dropped into a certain zone and would need to make their way to the safe zone alone, undetected and uncaptured. There was only one problem that awaited them.

No one had ever made the safe zone.

The instructors for this certain SERE training center were experts in man tracking. They knew how to follow someone who didn't want to be seen without being detected.

After having showered off, they were taken to the pool and almost literally thrown in and left for their own survival. The morning was packed with the re-training of water survival training that they had been shown in boot camp. By 1300 everyone was completely worn out, but water survival qualified.

As they continued through the day, refining their skills in various areas of training, they did not think of their impending doom. They instead set their sights on the various ways they would aid their squad after the next two days of training.

Thursday November 2, 1999

0530 EST, Flight line

The platoon now gathered for their ritual morning run. It was becoming easier by the day for them to run long hours with little rest. Even in getting little sleep, they could now continue through the day, taking care of the tasks that might be required of them. Granted they did take catnaps throughout the day as time allowed, but many people in the same situation would do the same.

After completing their run the day would hold once again refresher time, allowing them the ability to polish up rusty spots or smooth out the rougher edges. They were already executing maneuvers in the proficiency of five-year veterans. They were ahead of any schedule that could have been set for them.

Those members of the platoon who were martial arts instructors continued training other members of the platoon in their respective art. For them it was also a learning experience at the same time as a teaching one. They might pick up a little quirk from one of their students and be able to put it to use in their own practice or be able to suggest it to someone else.

After their continued excellence with the flight line watch, they would not be required to do any more of the work. This would only effect second squad, as they would have been the ones to stand it tonight. The spirits were high, but the tension was growing.

The first major step in the paths of their future lay in the day that would follow. Many of them had the desire to leave the Marine Corps at some point, either after four years or twenty some. Their dreams of 'life after the Corps' mostly included a job in something to the extent of law enforcement or security.

A Special Operations Capable rating would transfer very easily for them into a SWAT qualification within police departments, or a Special Response Team in other government agencies.

This didn't mean that any of them had expectations of leaving the Marine Corps at any time in the foreseeable future. After all, they would need to get through the next eight days first.

2100 EST, 2<sup>nd</sup> SEA

"Alright here's the deal," Jack started. His squad was gathered in The Shrub for a rundown on their last night in the faithful foliage. "We've done one hell of a job here. Two weeks in the same spot and no one has a damn clue as to where we are. That's impressive. I must admit I'm a little split on what could possibly be coming our way tonight.

## Forming A Foundation

“My first instinct is that everyone is going to want to rest up tonight for all the expectations of tomorrow. If that’s the case, we can expect very little action out and about in the woods.

“My other instinct is telling me that the other squads are wanting us to think that so we’ll let our guard down. If that’s the case, we can expect someone to come and pay us a visit.

“Anyone got any thoughts?”

“One here,” Miller said. “Are we going after any of the others?”

“No,” Jack replied. “I’d thought about it, but we’ve already proven ourselves. We overran everyone the first night. Third and Fourth never saw it coming and never saw us going. First saw us only because we stood up in broad daylight. There’d be only one other thing I’d set out on, but it would be really risky, bizarre and unusual. Plus it could get us in a bit of trouble. I couldn’t ask anyone to do something this risky. It could very well mean a serious ass chewing.”

“You may not ask us,” Ski said, “but I think I can speak for anyone here when I say this for myself. I’d follow you even if it meant me getting my ass chewed by the General.”

“Thank you Ski. It’s good to see I have such good trusting Marines.”

“Personally, Lance Corporal,” Mustard said, “I think I’d prefer to go with the bizarre and unusual. It’s worked out for us so far.”

“So what’s this trouble,” Carlson asked. “You got me started wanting to raise hell on Halloween.”

“Well,” Jack said thinking. “The only ones that have been safe this whole time is the command element. I’d kinda been thinking about it the past day or so, and I was thinking it would piss someone off if we proved our ability so much as to being able to pull one over on the Gunny and Major.”

“I don’t care about getting in trouble,” Goldman said. “That would be worth the ass chewing.”

“I’m in,” Pile said. “I don’t care what anyone says about trouble.”

“We’re all misfits anyways,” Carlson said. “You know I’m in.”

“I can’t let you go out there alone,” Miller said. “I’m in.”

“I have the bad feeling one of you is gonna hurt someone,” Doc said. “I’m in.”

The squad continued their commitments to the mission. When everyone was dedicated to completing an attack against the command element, Carlson directed the attention back to the squad leader.

“Lance Corporal,” he said, “You came up with a good plan on Halloween. It worked out perfectly. I think everyone in the platoon knows how smooth things can work out with your ideas. Let’s have another one.”

“My first idea is that a crew needs to get out there into the holes for guard. I’ll formulate things up and see what percolates. In the meantime, if you’ve got the watch, get out there to your holes. If not, get some rest. Pile you’re on radio while I think.”

They moved into action swiftly and silently. After an hour of careful consideration, Jack had developed a plan that just involved a few simple booby traps that would come back at the head honchos in the morning. However, there was one minor problem.

Getting the supplies.

“Pile, let’s see if we can manage a little more magic on the radio there,” Jack said.

“Another bit of supply and demand, Lance Corporal?”

“Correct. I demand, our friend supplies.”

“Can Vehicle work quick?”

“He’s never failed me so far, and I’ve known him for two years. Now let’s see if he can pull another one out of his bag of tricks.”

Jack picked up the handset and keyed up.

“Vehicle, Duce.”

No response.

“Come on man,” Jack said under his breath. “I need you to hear me. Vehicle, Duce.”

“Duce, Vehicle. Please authenticate Sierra Ocean Bravo.”

“Duce authenticates Mike Foxtrot.”

“And what can the man of mystery do for you tonight, Duce?”

“Well, I could sure use about six flash bangs, ten yards of five fifty chord, two boxes of ceran wrap and a five eighths inch crescent wrench.”

“What is this, a scavenger hunt?”

“Best Buy Bingo. We’re trying to turn this place into aisle seven of Sam’s Club.”

“You knuckleheads.”

“Do you deliver?”

“Ninety minutes or the next one’s free. Check out lane seven has no waiting. Vehicle clear.”

“Duce clear.”

“Shopping,” Cal asked as if his squad leader had lost his mind.

“It’s all part of the game.”

“Good to see some people can joke around while the rest of us have to buckle down to a task.”

## Forming A Foundation

“Well, those of us that have been around a little longer know that it’s important to keep a sense of humor about you. Next lesson young Calvin, if you can’t laugh at some point during the day, you’ve wasted that day of your life.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“I’m always right Pile. I’m a squad leader.”

“I’m not doubting you Lance Corporal, but I don’t think you can always be right.”

“I may not always be right, but I’m never wrong.”

“Touché. So what do we have to do now?”

“Obviously, in an hour and a half we need to pick up the stuff I’d requested. From there, it’s back here. At a later point we’ll go and set up a few booby traps.”

“Booby traps?”

“That’s what I said. I said we’re setting booby traps,” Jack said imitating the kid from Goonies. Pile chuckled and got back to his radio.

2300 EST, Approaching Sherman Field

The same fire team as before paced through the woods. Miller, Pile, Mustard and Goldman accompanied their squad leader to pick up something else. That’s all that three of them knew. Pile and Jack were the only ones who were aware of the contents.

They approached the Blue Angels brightly painted planes. They were parked on the tarmac in their usual numerical order, lined up with the number one plane closest to them and seven farthest away.

As the group walked past each plane, they remained keenly aware of their surroundings and if someone might be watching them. Instinctively, Jack patted the nose of his beloved number 2 plane, The Mighty Duce.

Just as Vehicle had promised, a box was sitting on the ground next to the nose wheel of the number seven plane. The group gathered and knelt around it facing away as they had before. Jack withdrew his pocketknife and opened the box. The contents were all there as requested. Taking a flash bang grenade in each hand, he extended them and spoke.

“Cal, Miller, I know these will look familiar.”

“Holy fucking dog shit, Batman,” Miller gasped. “How the fuck did you get a hold of flash bangs? Or do I want to know?”

“Probably not. Load up. Let’s get going I want to be able to get some rest tonight.”

“Ditto,” Goldman said.

They were able to get back to their encampment without being ambushed. Goldman was afraid that he had spotted a figure three hundred yards to their left. After they had all dropped to the ground and waited, it showed to be nothing of a threat.

Entering The Shrub, Jack called over Miller, Pile and Ski.

“Alright,” he said in his serious tone, “you three are my weapons and explosives experts. Here’s what the plan is. We’re gonna go over to the PEA and set a few booby traps. The first will be right outside the doors. Just a flash bang with a tripwire. Miller and Pile, I want you two to set this one up. It should be easy enough. Ski, you and I at that point going to be rigging their Hummer. I’ve got this wrench so that we can disconnect the battery. We’re going to remove it and put it in the back. We’ll then booby trap both doors so that when opened, they’ll set off a flash bang.

“The final two will be rigged under the vehicle so that they’ll blow when they drive off.”

“I’m tracking so far,” Miller said, “but what’s with the cellophane?”

“This is the fun part. We’re gonna wrap it around the doors of the hummer, sealing it off and making it hard for them to get in. That way they’ve at least got a warning that it’s not safe. We’ll do the same thing to the doors. They’ve got the outer posts on either outer side of the tent flaps and we’ll just wrap it around there. It doesn’t necessarily have to create the permanent seal all the way around, but enough to make it a nuisance. Any questions? Seeing none, let’s get this done. Remember, swift and silent. Someone will be awake in the tent, so we can’t tip them off.”

They made their way off and set up all of the traps. In their fortune, they heard Major Ingram and Sergeant Kerry in the tent talking to each other. This aided them in being able to accomplish their tasks.

When they were back in the shrub, Jack woke up those sleeping and gathered everyone together that was not in a foxhole. To those on watch he spoke through the radios so they would hear as well.

“I want everyone to remember this. You know nothing. If anyone asks what you know about the Command Post being booby trapped, you know nothing. You did not take part in anything and you have no idea who did. Am I clear?”

Grumbled affirmations.

“Is there anyone who feels I’m telling you to do something unlawful?”

Silence.

“Good. They might get very pissed off, and if they do honesty is not the best policy. Just shut up about this. That’s all.”

They all went back to what they were doing prior to the quick speech. They would be able to actually sleep in until 0700, and everyone was looking forward to a little extra rest.

## Forming A Foundation

Friday November 3, 1999

0400 EST, 2<sup>nd</sup> SEA

“Two One, Two Four.”

Turrentine had to wake up the squad leader. As he was on radio watch, he caught Mustard’s transmission from the foxhole.

“Two One,” Jack finally answered.

“I’ve got a bogey inbound, now at two hundred yards, walking directly at my position. If he stays on track, he’s going to fall into my hole.”

“Good. Let him. Do you have your pack?”

“Check.”

“Get your duck tape out,” his squad leader instructed him. “When he falls in, you ambush him and get him subdued. Get some tape over his mouth as quick as you can so he can’t yell for help, and then get his hands behind his back. We’ll take him into The Shrub when he’s secured.”

“Roger. I’m now able to ID him as Lance Corporal Cline. Will proceed as instructed. Two Four clear.”

“Other than Cline, does anyone have any other contacts?” Silence. “Good, hearing none, Two One clear.”

The shock of a five-foot fall aided Mustard in subduing his prey fairly quickly. The tape was very swiftly placed over the rival squad leader’s mouth and after a solid punch to the stomach, Cline’s hands were secured behind him after he buckled.

Jack appeared beside the hole and helped lift out his first squad counterpart. With the NVGs it was very easy to see Cline’s eyes go wide when he was led inside a hollowed out bush. It was then that Jack addressed his prisoner.

“Now the way I see it, when I take that tape off you could do one of two things. First you could yell and scream for help. Or you could be a good boy and cooperate. One will lead to you getting seriously beaten, the other to us treating you nicely. I think you can figure out which would lead to which. Now if I take this tape off, are you going to be good?”

Cline nodded. Jack ripped the tape off, hoping it hurt just a little.

“Fuck,” Cline cursed at his facial discomfort. “So this is where you bastards have been hiding yourselves.”

“And after two weeks, someone finally stumbled upon us. Literally.”

“Yeah, and I’ll tell you this. Whoever’s foxhole I stumble into has got one hell of a punch.”

“That was Mustard,” Jack said.

“Tall, skinny Mustard,” Cline asked in complete shock. “Damn that kid’s got some power.”

“And I can’t blame him for roughing you up.”

“Neither can I. I deserve it and I’d have done the same if one of your guys came after my squad.”

“But now, you realize that you are a prisoner of second squad.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Good. Then I hope you’ll understand that we can’t just let this go. Miller, I want you, Goldman and Hillery to strip him down to his shorts and shirt, hog tie him and put him on the hood of the Commander’s hummer.”

“Aye Lance Corporal,” Miller replied with an evil smirk on his face.

Even the Corpsman got into the act. After snapping a rubber glove on his hand he said, “Just try to relax.”

“DOC,” Jack exclaimed as quietly as possible.

“Sorry,” Spazz replied. “Just having a little fun.”

Cline was stripped of his flight suit and hog-tied in his green shirt and shorts. He was instructed that he would get them back at a later point in the morning.

“Sorry Cline,” Jack said when his Marines were ready to haul off their prisoner. “No hard feelings. Miller, come here for a minute.”

When the two head honchos of second squad were off to the side and out of ear shot, the squad leader addressed his assistant.

“I want you to make a little show of not knowing about the booby traps. Add a little plausible deniability to our charade.”

“Good idea.”

“I thought so,” Jack said. “Little does Cline know he’s helping us out. Get it done.”

“Roger that,” Miller said. “And might I say it’s a pleasure carrying out your demented schemes.”

“And likewise, it’s a pleasure presenting them.”

Miller picked up the first squad leader and slung him over his shoulder. Three people were tasked with taking him as it may require defense, plus the fact that they would need a chance to take a break as they made the trek.

They made it to the Command Post unchallenged. As his squad leader had requested, Miller took the lead and played off that they had no idea of what happened here earlier.

“What the hell is this,” he stated softly. “Looks like someone’s beat us to having a little fun with the higher ups.”

## Forming A Foundation

“Yeah,” Hillery said. “Wish I could have thought up something like this. It’s pretty elaborate.”

“Sure is,” Goldman whispered. “Now let’s get out of here before someone hears us.”

Miller gently set Cline up on the hood of the Hummer.

“Now, Lance Corporal,” Miller said, “I just want you to know this. Lance Corporal Jackson was standing up for you. No disrespect, but if it were me, you’d be left here in only your boxers. Plus I’d have made sure to gut punch you a few too many times. Lance Corporal Jackson stood up for you and said we couldn’t mess with you any more. Just remember that and speak good of our leader.”

The three of the detail tore off back through the woods. They were properly challenged approaching and once inside their perimeter went to the squad leader.

“Mission accomplished, Lance Corporal,” Miller said.

“Did you play off our previous engagement?”

“Yes, sir.”

Normally enlisted didn’t take too kindly to being called sir. However, in some cases, it was allowed as a true sign of respect between good working relations. The same could be said for saluting. Not only were these good working relationships, they were becoming true friendships.

“Alright,” Jack said. “Good work as always. Now let’s get some rest.”

Through the last hours of the rest period, the squad rested while they could. They knew full well it would be the most trying effort of teamwork they would have experienced thus far in their lives. They all just hoped they would not let anyone down.

0645 EST, 1<sup>st</sup> SEA

PFC Slocum was now officially worried beyond belief. He had never been this worried before in his nineteen and a half years of life. His squad leader had left over three hours ago. Cline hadn’t come back, he hadn’t checked in, he hadn’t answered the radio.

Lance Corporal Cline had disappeared.

The thought had crossed Slocum’s mind that his squad leader might be out there somewhere lost in the woods. Or worse. His squad leader and good friend could be seriously injured or dead.

The concern was growing minute by minute and was almost unbearable.

*I’ll give it another fifteen minutes, Slocum thought. And then I’m gonna have to do something. I just hope I’m not too late. God help me if I am.*

0655 EST, Enroute to PEA

Slocum was just now leaving his Squad Encampment Area, running for the PEA. He was now worried as if it were one of his own family that were missing. It had been over four hours since anyone in the squad had seen their leader.

“I should have told someone sooner,” he told himself. “Now this is gonna come back and bite me.”

When he was five hundred yards from the tent at the PEA he heard an explosion.

0700 EST, PEA

Major Ingram opened the flaps closest to their Hummer. The cellophane glistened the early morning sunshine and caused a good deal of confusion to a college graduate.

“Now what the fuck is this,” he said, getting the attention of the other two tent occupants. Gunny Fields and Sergeant Kerry looked and were equally confused. Gunny Fields took his pocketknife and cut the three-foot tall strip of cellophane off before walking through the tripwire.

*BOOM.*

“ALRIGHT,” Gunny Fields yelled. “WHAT THE FUCK?”

It was only just then that he saw the HMMWV with cellophane wrapped around the two doors, and a hog-tied squad leader lying on the hood.

*BANG.*

Sergeant Kerry set off the booby trap at the other door after not learning from the mistake of Gunny Fields. The Gunny cut the plastic wrap from the doors.

He walked to the front of the vehicle and looked Lance Corporal Cline in the eyes and ripped off the tape.

“Boy, you’ve got some serious mother fucking explaining to do.”

The Gunny’s nostrils flared. If looks could kill, this one would have.

“Gunny, I didn’t do this and I have no idea who did. I stumbled into second squad. They took me prisoner and put me here. When they took me here, it was already like this. They didn’t do it.”

## Forming A Foundation

"Let me understand this," Gunny said, finally calming down. "Second squad took you prisoner, took your flight suit and boots, hog tied you and then put you here like a damn hood ornament?"

"Yes Gunny."

"So someone finally found second squad. Where the fuck were those sneaky bastards?"

"In their encampment area, Gunny. They cleared out the inside of a damn big ass bush and set up their camp in there. They had Ghillie suits draped over their fighting holes to camouflage them. I just happened to fall into one of those holes. That's when they stripped me down to this, and put me here."

"And I bet you learned a good lesson, didn't you?"

"Yes Gunny."

Gunny Fields cut the tape off and helped the first squad leader down. PFC Slocum then came up from around the tent.

"Lance Corporal," Slocum said. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," Cline said and they walked out of site around the side of the tent. Out of sight, Cline punched his assistant's stomach as hard as he could.

"Fuck," Slocum grunted. "I deserved that though. Lance Corporal, what the fuck happened?"

"Well, I stumbled across second squad. Literally. Those bastards took me prisoner, took my flight suit and boots and put me on the hood of the truck like a damn hood ornament. What the fuck were you assholes doing? Did anyone even bother to leave to look for me?"

"Yes, Lance Corporal. We looked through all the SEAs but couldn't find you. Naturally we couldn't find anyone in second squad, but we talked to third and fourth. No one had seen you. I didn't know what to do. I tried calling you on the radio and I didn't want to call the PEA because I knew someone would get pissed that our squad leader was missing. Granted I was kicking my own ass for that on the way over here."

"Well, I've got to go to second squad to get my stuff back with the Gunny. Go back to our squad and get everyone over here. I'm gonna cover for you on this, but you fucking owe me."

"Yes, Lance Corporal."

Cline went back to where the Gunny was standing.

"Now we're gonna drive over there and have a little chat with second squad at their little hideaway. I want to see this thing before they go and leave it this morning."

"Good to go Gunny," Cline said. "I'd kinda like my clothes back."

Cline opened the door to get in the passengers seat after being motioned there by the Gunny. Gunny Fields opened his door at the same time.

*BOOM. BANG.*

"I'm not lucky enough to die," Cline said. "Those bastards haven't had the chance to humiliate me for this incident."

The aggravation returned to the Gunny when the vehicle wouldn't start.

"It doesn't sound like there's any electrical power, Gunny," Cline stated.

"No shit, Sherlock. Check the batteries under your seat."

Cline exited the vehicle and picked up his seat.

"Uh, Gunny... There are no batteries."

"NOW WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON? WHO THE HELL STOLE THE BATTERIES?"

"There they are, Gunny," Cline said. "They're in the back."

"Hook 'em up, dammit. Let's go."

A moment later the vehicle was successfully started and the Gunny shifted into gear. Even with the booby traps of earlier, he hadn't yet learned his lesson.

*BOOM. BANG.*

"DAMMIT JACKSON," Gunny screamed. "I KNOW YOU WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS."

0705 EST, 2<sup>nd</sup> SEA

*BOOM.*

"And there we have it, gentlemen," Jack said to his Marines. "We have officially started some serious shit. Just remember this. No matter what, no one admits anything of this. *EVER*. Are we all clear on this and completely agreed?"

"Yes, Lance Corporal," they all said in unison.

"Good. Now everyone get all of your gear. Let's step off to the PEA."

0715 EST, 2<sup>nd</sup> SEA

"Gone," Gunny Fields said. "Just what I'd expect. They're already off to the PEA. At least I get to see this."

## Forming A Foundation

The Gunny walked around and paid close attention to the work that second squad had done. If you weren't looking for it specifically, you would never have seen it. Which is exactly how it had gone unnoticed for almost two full weeks.

"Absolutely amazing," he commented. "This is some truly astonishing work. This really takes the cake on new thinking. Too bad I'm gonna have to kill him for booby trapping my tent and truck."

"Gunny, I really don't think they did that," Cline said. "If they did, their guys wouldn't have been acting like they were when they put me on the hood."

"What do you mean?"

"They were admiring the work and it seemed really sincere. If they had done that and they were trying to put off the fact, their statements would've seemed phonier. Not so genuine like they were."

"I don't know. Who else in the platoon do you think could have pulled this off?"

"No one. But who says it was someone in the platoon? I mean, who has access to flash bangs? I don't even know if Jack could pull off something like that. It would be my guess that it was an outside job. Maybe someone you know just playing a prank on you."

"Well, I'm still gonna interrogate Jackson," the Gunny said thoughtfully. "See what he or his Marines might know."

0730 EST, PEA

"So Jackson," Gunny Fields said. "What might you know about setting up a few little surprises around the tent?"

"All I know is what Miller told me, Gunny. When he put Cline on the hood of the Hummer, he saw that someone had set some up."

"But you wouldn't know who did that, would you?"

"No, Gunny."

"That's what I figured you'd say. I'm gonna let it slide. And by the way, I saw your little handy work with the bush. If I ever find out you did this, I'm gonna make you do my lawn for the rest of your natural born life."

"Good to go Gunny."

"Hey Jack," Cline said as Jack turned from the Gunny. "You got a minute?"

"Yeah, sure. I guess. Dead man."

"I deserve that. First, I kinda need my clothes back. Second, I need a favor."

"I've got to admit, you've got a lot of balls asking for a favor after your fuck up."

"Well it's not for me really, more to cover my assistant. Just help me on this and I'll buy you a case of beer."

"Provided it's not too detailed. What do you need?"

"Well, naturally, they didn't know what the hell happened to me. They sent people out to try and find me but couldn't. The fuck up is that they didn't tell anyone. I just need to cover this up a little bit. Can we just say that you told Slocum you had me?"

"So you're asking me to lie?"

"Just a little cover up. SLOCUM, GET OVER HERE."

Slocum came running up and snapped to parade rest.

"Yes, Lance Corporal."

"Jack, would you please? I'd owe you forever."

"Slocum, I had taken your squad leader prisoner. He was placed at the PEA. Satisfied Cline?"

"Yes. Now Slocum, did Lance Corporal Jackson tell you what happened to me?"

"Yes, sir," Slocum answered his squad leader.

"So you knew where I was?"

"Yes, Lance Corporal."

"And why didn't you come after me?"

"We did Lance Corporal. But we couldn't find you."

"And why didn't you notify the PEA?"

"Well...um..."

"Because it was relayed to you that I didn't want you to."

"Good to go Lance Corporal."

"Now Jack, can I please have my clothes back?"

"I guess," Jack said. "But you really owe me for covering your ass on this one."

"I know," Cline said. "And believe me, I'm planning on hazing the living shit out of Slocum tomorrow."

They walked over to where second squad was sitting, awaiting the qual brief. Jack reluctantly handed over the flight suit and boots. Cline donned his uniform rather quickly and laced up his boots before exiting the area quickly to go back to his squad.

0745 EST, PEA

## Forming A Foundation

Starting later than originally planned, Gunny Fields addressed the platoon. It was the moment that they had been waiting for, not out of excitement but more anxiety. Half of their worries would be taken care of by the end of the day.

“Good morning, Marines. You know why we are here today. It is a moment, or *the* moment, that your squads have been waiting for. It’s time for you to prove yourselves. More importantly, you’re on your own. It may or may not have been too pressing on your minds that your Lieutenants haven’t been around, save for a few select moments. I know all of you probably were glad to not have them looking over your shoulder. They have been off learning their own skills in Quantico. Be that as it may, you will be on your own for today just as you have been for the past two weeks. You have proven yourselves enough thus far, so I have full confidence in your abilities to compose yourself through today.

“It will be challenging because you will not know what you’re up against until the last possible moments. Therefore you will have to be able to react and make appropriate split second choices and it will be required that they are accurate. You will be given a mission and you will have thirty minutes to set your plan. After that half hour, which is not necessary that you use fully, you will be responsible for executing your plan.

“While there is no set timeframe for executing your plan, we will be running a clock. If you expect to truly pass, none should take more than a half hour to complete from drop off to exfil. That may sound unreasonably short, but when the fan gets spinning, I’m sure you’ll find that your time there will not be necessarily long.

“You will go in squad by squad. Only one squad will be able to go through combat town at a time and that is what will slow us down. I know that you are all concerned about your scores as of right now. Now remember, there is a thousand points possible right now, with fifteen hundred at the conclusion of the quals. Fourth squad, you’ve got 690 points. Third squad you’ve got 750. First squad, you’re totals were an amazing 790.”

As predicted by the Gunny, all of first squad began to cheer and holler like the wild animals the platoon was proving to be.

“HOWEVER COMMA,” he shouted over their ruckus.

“DRAMATIC PAUSE,” the platoon chimed in with what the Gunny deemed as the appropriate response.

“That score is not nearly as impressive as second squad’s total of 830.”

Poking back at Cline and first squad, second squad cheered and barked even louder than his group had just a moment ago.

“But let’s not forget, there’s five hundred points up in the quals today. That can really change things. At this point, I want each squad to gather up in an area around here and wait for your call to action.”

The platoon fell out and grouped by squads in the general area. Jack watched as LCpl Cline led PFC Slocum around the back of a nearby storage shed. Jack excused himself from his squad and proceeded in a nonchalant manner to where the other two had just gone. Jack felt a slight obligation to help his friend and colleague in a time of need.

As Jack cleared the corner he saw a startling sight.

Slocum was sitting on the ground with his back to the shed. It was obvious he had been hit in the stomach and face more than once. Cline now held a solid grip on a clump of his assistant’s hair. Speaking softly after moving his face close to his assistant, Cline addressed Slocum.

“If you ever fuck up like that again,” he said, “You’ll wish I’d just killed you. I sure as hell know you won’t like the trip to the hospital I’ll give you.”

Cline slammed Slocum’s head back against the shed, dazing him, but not knocking him out. Cline walked back to his squad.

“That mother fucker,” he mumbled as he passed Jack.

Jack went up to Slocum, who was just beginning to regain his senses. He breathed deeply and showed to be in a good deal of pain.

“Are you alright Slocum,” Jack asked.

“I’ll be fine, Lance Corporal.” He took a few deep breaths. “I fucked up and deserved ever punch I just took and then some.” Slocum shook his head. “I’ll tell you, Lance Corporal Cline may be a damn skinny guy, but he can sure as hell hit hard.”

“I know that,” Jack said. “He was a good opponent in the bear pit. You’re lucky, though.”

“How do you mean, Lance Corporal?”

“If you’d done that to me, you’d be on your way to the hospital now, not the next time.”

“I believe it Lance Corporal. I’ve watched you in the pit. I may be a wrestler, but I know I wouldn’t stand much of a chance against you. I’ve taken a lot of punches in my time, but the ones I just took were the worst.”

“Do you want me to get a Doc over here to take a quick look at you?”

“No, Lance Corporal. I just need a minute to get my senses back about me.”

After a short period Slocum indicated he would be alright. Jack helped him up and the PFC took a few more deep breaths.

“Here’s the important thing,” Jack told him. “Did you learn your lesson?”

“Yes, Lance Corporal.”

“Did you deserve the punishment you got?”

“Yes, Lance Corporal.”

## Forming A Foundation

“Are you going to let this happen again?”

“No, Lance Corporal.”

“Good, now take the lessons learned, don’t let this one mistake defeat you and walk back to your squad with your head up.”

“Aye, Lance Corporal.”

They walked back around to their squads. Back at second squad, Doc approached his squad leader.

“Is he alright, Jack?”

“Yeah, Doc, he’ll be fine. Just basically got what he had coming to him.”

“Alright. I just wanted to check. I could tell he’d been hit pretty hard by the way he was walking a little slower.”

“He’ll be fine, Doc. But thanks for checking up on him. Good initiative. I’m just gonna have a quick word with Cline.”

Jack walked towards that squad and called Cline from a reasonable distance.

“Hey, Cline. Got a minute?”

Cline walked over to his counterpart.

“What’s up?”

“Well, just wanted to talk real quick about your little punishment of Slocum.”

“Bastard only got part of what he’s got coming to him.”

“True, and I don’t disagree with your punishing him for his mistake this morning. I just think you should wait until the higher ups aren’t around. They might get the wrong idea and charge you with assault for kicking his ass.”

“True. Fortunately it was just the three of us that know about it.”

“Actually four. My Doc noticed Slocum walking a little oddly on his way back to your squad and had correctly deduced that he’d taken a beating.”

“Damn. You go one smart Doc.”

“Yeah, we do. He’s damn good.”

“I’ll say. He really knows how to identify injuries.”

“Sure does. We’ve had a couple guys with some aches and Doc could tell them just as much about it as they could tell him. Anyways, I just wanted to tell you, just whoop ass out of the area of the higher ups. I don’t want you getting in any trouble.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it. I know we share the same opinions and you have no problem with my disciplinary actions though.”

“Nope. I gotta get back over here to my guys. Make sure everyone’s got their game face on.”

“Same. Good luck today.”

“You too.”

They shook hands and went back to their squads. Jack figured it was about time he said something to motivate his troops. After all, they’d kicked ass so far and had made him look pretty good.

“Look,” he started, “I don’t like doing this, but giving pep talks to you mentally disturbed individuals is part of my job description.”

This got a few chuckles from the group.

“We’ve done great so far. We’ve taken the lead and all we need to do now is keep it. If we go through today at the same level we’ve done so far, we’ve got it in the bag. So again, good job and keep it up. If you do, I know we’ll have those back stage passes to the concert tonight. Any questions?”

“How soon can we get drunk off our asses,” Ski asked.

“If the squad kicks ass,” Jack said giving it some consideration, “and we flow through the schedule like it was plotted out last week, I think we should be able to start pre-fighting about 1500.”

“What’s pre-fighting,” Mustard asked.

“That’s where you start drinking before the actual event,” Miller told him.

“Got the name from people who’d drink before flying to help ease their nerves,” Doc explained further.

“So does that answer your question?” Jack saw it had. “Anything else? Good, keep resting and get ready for our call to action.”

0830 EST, Combat Town

In the essence of their training, each squad had been whisked away to combat town. They took their vans to Combat Town at five minutes notice, aiding in the rapid deployment training.

While it wasn’t the combat town they had used in their training, it was a similar deserted town that had been constructed for use by law enforcement agencies for purposes such as this.

First squad had only momentarily touched down before being called into the briefing room. Just under a half hour later they departed the small room and loaded into a pair of HMMWVs. They quickly tore out and headed to complete their objective.

## Forming A Foundation

Second squad would soon find out what that objective is, as Gunny Fields called them into the briefing room. When they were all inside they gathered around a sandbox and Major Ingram briefed the facts that were known. The plan would be up to the squad to develop.

The town itself looked just like a simple one road town. The main road ran north south and was directly bordered on either side by a single row of buildings. Approximately twenty yards behind the row on the west side of the road was a fairly thick wooded area at the base of a five hundred foot hill, while toward the east was a field, the overgrowth just under six feet.

There were other dirt roads that ran perpendicular to this main road and separated some of the buildings. The buildings on the outer edges were one story, while the majority in the center were two story. The three story building in the center was the town hall. Evidently, there were thirty hostages spread evenly between that building and the two on either side. There were ten terrorists, four in the main building and three in the other two.

Second squad's mission, whether they chose to accept it or not, was to free those thirty hostages. Each one escorted out by one of the squad meant five points to that Marine's personal score and would also be added on to the five hundred points for the squad.

"Alright, here's how we're going to do this," Jack said, addressing his attentive Marines and Doc. As he laid out the plan they all remained focused on the role they would play.

"Try to keep a couple of the terrorists alive so that the 2 can interrogate them," Jack instructed. "But if they get feisty and present a threat to you or the hostages, take them out. Seriously injure or kill, it doesn't much matter. Just make sure no good guys get hurt. Especially yourselves. Are we clear what's gonna happen?"

Everyone nodded.

"Then let's mount up. Keep your head down and let's do this right. Check in when you're at the door. We'll all execute at the same point. As we don't know the inside of the buildings, we will just have to play it by ear. Just remember what you were taught about clearing rooms. That's all you have to do. We've done it enough it should be no problem for anyone. Let's do this."

They trotted a bit anxiously to the two hummers that were there with the engines running. The route to the town was a bit more of a detoured diversion, in order to give first squad a little more time to finish and prepare for their exfiltration.

Finally they were dropped off as planned at the backside of the hill. The squad split as planned and traversed the base of the hill, half going north, the other half going south. Nearing the edge of the wooded area, they began to low crawl towards their objective buildings.

Miller, instead of cutting back north as the hill took its turn, cut straight east and made his way quickly across the road. He presented the lowest and briefest profile he could in order to not be spotted by the enemy and second to get to his observation point across the road as quickly as possible.

With another row of buildings between him and the enemy, he quickly ran to the building he would take post on. He tossed his hook to the roof, which successfully caught on the first throw. It was a quick and easy climb for him, someone who had done it in training several times before.

"Two Two is in position," he radioed from his vantage point.

"Roger Two Two," Jack's voice came back. "Stay in position. We're approaching the strike zone."

On the other side of the opposite row of buildings, the two teams taking the north and south buildings were just taking their crouched positions beside the doors. The other two pairs split off and converged on the three-story town hall. It was so far a well executed plan. There was no evidence that they had been spotted approaching or in taking their positions.

"Everyone ready," Jack asked over the radio.

"North ready," Ski called.

"South ready," Pile answered.

"Scout ready," Miller reported.

"Execute on my mark," Jack said. "Three, two, one, mark."

At two a representative from each group was up and ready to take out the door. At the mark, their foot was making contact with the handle, breaking the door down. At least they would have broken down, had they actually been latched. The teams followed through the doors and moved swiftly.

In the north building, Ski and Turrentine quickly shot two of the terrorists as they stood in the hall talking to each other and evidently paying no attention to what was going on around them. They had only just turned to observe the door swinging open when two well placed double tap shots hit their marks.

The military double tap shot is simply a two shot burst which was brought out by a simple philosophy. It simply stated that, in combat, anything worth shooting, is worth shooting twice. Ammo is cheap, your life is expensive.

Upon hearing the shots, the final terrorist stepped enough around the corner for Ski to place another well placed double tap to his chest.

Charging into the south building, the four man team had similar fate. Two terrorist guards were also in the hall talking. These two, who were sitting with their weapons leaning against the wall, hardly had time to sit up straight before they were taken out by Pile and Hillery. Those two took the lead and it was Pile who came upon the last hostage taker in their building, unarmed and alarmed at the intrusion.

"GET YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR," Pile yelled, making sure his instructions hit home.

## Forming A Foundation

He did and the terrorist was spun quickly and pushed maybe a little too forcefully against the wall. With one of his hands being held up against his back, the terrorist was searched for weapons. Only a pistol was found in his pocket. His hands were then bound behind his back with plastic zip ties.

In the central building the squad's fire team was fortunate enough to catch their four terrorists conferring in the hall about what to do with their prisoners. The only weapons were either holstered pistols or rifles that leaned against the wall.

"EVERYONE," Jack called out, "HANDS ON YOUR HEADS. NOW. MOVE FOR A WEAPON AND YOU'RE DEAD."

The terrorists moved their hands on top of their heads. Jack stayed back with his rifle at the ready while Mustard moved forward to search their prisoners. He approached the first from the front and patted down his torso then the legs. When Mustard was checking the calves of the terrorist, the radical's hands moved about the back of his neck and produced a rubber knife. As the terrorist began to swipe down to attack his captor Jack fired a single shot.

It was a single shot with brutal effectiveness. The miniature paintball impacted the terrorist's goggles directly between his eyes. Playing along, the terrorist fell backwards, dead.

Jack swept his weapon across the other three terrorists and asked them, "Does anyone else want to die? I've got no problem killing any of you if you pose a threat to anyone."

The rest were searched and two pistols were confiscated. No one else made any threatening move.

"Central secured," Jack radioed. This would bring the rest of the reports.

"North secured," Ski reported. "All terrorists killed. Ten hostages, all unharmed."

"South secure," Pile reported. "One prisoner, ten hostages. One will need minor medical attention."

"Roger that," Jack said. "Good work everyone. Bring all friendlies out front of central. Bring captives to central steps. Pile, bring your injured inside central for Doc. Miller cease and desist. Report to central for exfil."

"Two Two," Miller radioed, acknowledging.

"North," Ski radioed.

"South," Pile radioed.

While the 'hostages' were nothing more than mannequins and cardboard cutouts, they were still escorted out in the arms of their rescuing Marines and Corpsman. The Doc took a look at the make believe injury, which was nothing more than minor lacerations.

The squad made their way back out front of the central building. The two HMMWVs that dropped them off came cruising up the center street, stopping where the Marines were gathering. The terrorists were handed over to Gunny Fields and Major Ingram, who were acting as the MPs. The squad piled into the back of the high backed vehicles and leaned back for the ride out of town.

Spirits were high but the group was relaxed. They had just been through a serious adrenaline rush, something everyone in the SWAT world learned to live on. Epinephrine was the natural drug high that so many loved. Bungee jumping came nowhere near this level of high.

The two HMMWVs were unloaded back at the staging area and second squad went back to relaxing, leaning on their packs. Since the games had begun, they were not allowed to converse with the other squads. The higher ups, just as well as those in the platoon, didn't want anyone getting the advantage of outside help.

Doc checked over the Marines of the squad while Jack strode around the perimeter of the group. He was thinking of what they had just accomplished, trying to consider a way they could have done it better. Maybe just quicker or a little more thorough. Jack's memory replayed each moment with as much detail as possible. He scrutinized every little detail he could pull out and looked at what might have been done even the slightest bit different.

Had Miller gone far enough south? While the terrorists had limited view to the distance at which he'd crossed the road, it was still possible one of them might have spotted the camouflaged blur zipping across the road. Was there any other way to get him over there in what they had agreed was the best position for him to observe?

Looking back at it, sending a single man was probably a risky maneuver. If he'd been spotted, Miller would have been promptly shot at and could very well have been taken out of the picture. However, there were an even four in each building and if someone else had gone with Miller it would have robbed one of the building teams of a fire team member. While not everyone was needed in all of the buildings, there was no way to know that in the planning.

Had it been wise for them to execute their attacks simultaneously? In retrospect, Jack viewed that it was most likely the wisest choice. If the side buildings had executed first, the terrorists in the center building could have heard the fire or commotion and been alerted. The same could have been said if the buildings had been taken one by one.

It was true they could have lost a man when the terrorist nearly stabbed Mustard. Jack had been quick enough on the draw in shooting him. Would everyone else have been that quick and attentive? In the end, their taken course of action was determined by the leader to have been the right one.

Had enough training gone into the physical search of prisoners? Probably not, as Mustard had found out the hard way. Jack knew that reiteration would definitely need to be placed on situational awareness. Always be observant of everything that is going on around you. If you're not, the one thing you don't see could be the end of you.

If Jack hadn't been the point man in central, would someone else in the squad have had the quick reflexes needed to neutralize the would be killer terrorist?

## Forming A Foundation

Jack hoped so.

After all, in real life that knife wouldn't have been made out of rubber. It would have been a harder metal, capable of completely severing a spinal chord in a situation like that. As he paced around their area with that thought in his mind, Mustard approached. He kept a respectful distance until his squad leader acknowledged his presence.

"What's up, Joe," Jack asked.

"I just wanted to say thanks, Lance Corporal."

"For what?"

"Covering my ass back there. I could have been killed. Again. But you were quick on the draw and saved my ass."

"Any of the squad would have done the same. That's what I'm supposed to say, right? I think anyone here would have done just the very same as I did, Joe."

"I guess you're right. But anyways, thanks."

"It's no problem. It's our job now. After all, if you'd have been killed, you wouldn't have been any good to us from there on out. Dead weight never does a squad good."

"True."

"The most important thing is, did you learn something?"

"Hell yes. To pay attention to what the fuck is going on around me. Watch my ass as you would say."

"Good. So long as you learned something in training, it wasn't a useless day. In fact, I think it would be best if everyone learned from your lesson. Let's go help educate the squad."

They walked back over and Jack related the experience to those who hadn't been there.

"Does everyone agree on the course of action there," Jack asked.

They all approved and said so with a few explicit statements.

"Anyone fucks with my friends," Miller said, "they deserve to get shot."

"That's one way to put it," Jack said. "The main lesson to be learned is this; if your partner is doing something, you'd better be covering their ass. In cases like this, you'd better not do things alone. If we'd done that in the central building Mustard would be in a body bag right now. As much as I don't like him," the sinister smile came out, "I don't want to have to deal with calling his parents. Can anyone think of another way we've done this in the Corps?"

"I got one," Ski said. "On weekend libo when you told us to go out with libo buddies. That way we could watch over each other out in town."

"That's right. It makes a little more sense now, doesn't it? Now that we've seen another course of action with similar pairings. Well, relax for now and eat if you want to. Third's off doing their first round now, fourth is briefing. When their done in there, first is going back in, then it's us again. Take a break while you can. You've earned it."

While they were deep into their relaxation, Sergeant Kerry approached second squad with a slip of paper in his hand. When he came close he beckoned to their leader.

"Lance Corporal Jackson. Here you go."

"What's this, Sergeant?"

"A copy of your scorecard from round one."

"This ours to keep?"

"Sure is. You'll probably be going back through in about forty five minutes."

"Great. Thanks Sergeant."

As Jack looked it over even he was surprised. He knew he would be proud of his squad and the score their efforts brought from the first round, but it still threw him off.

"Well, gents," he addressed his crew. "I've got our results from the first operation. Bear in mind, there was a total possible score of 250 points. Our score was 245."

The squad cheered and yelled in their ferocious warriors cry.

"We only had one hit," he continued. "And that was from Miller crossing the road and not covering his flank. Apparently you were only watching in towards town and not in the other direction. Well, at least we know what they're looking for. Plus, we could have done a lot worse. This is one hell of a score. Only dropping five points isn't too bad. Sounds about like Miller's rifle score."

The squad laughed at that. They relaxed and took their last moments of peace before the inevitable second call.

After their modified lunch break they were called back in to the briefing room. The next incident proved to act a little trickier. There was a three story building in a clearing with one single road leading in from the south. The building was surrounded on all sides with a near perfect quarter mile circle of forest. The building itself was of fairly simple design, three stories with a hall running directly down the center, rooms on either side. Doors were on both sides of the ground floor with steps up to them. On either side of the stairway stood a guard armed with a rifle.

The first floor was offices with a front door and back door linked straight through with a hallway. Two guards were at each doorway. In the center there was a stairway, guarded inside the landing by one guard on the ground floor.

On the second floor was a large conference room with six guards and the thirty hostages. There was one on the landing by the door as well as one just inside the door. Four other guards were roving around the large area containing the innocent people who were at the wrong place at the wrong time.

## Forming A Foundation

The third floor was a smaller floor that held one office. This smaller area is what held the terrorist cell's leader and his assistant. They were to free all the hostages and capture at least the leader and his assistant.

"Alright," Jack said after careful consideration and deliberation. He laid out his plan for what he viewed would be the best way to do things.

After fifteen minutes of detailed explaining, everyone understood their role in the upcoming action. They had the confidence in themselves to be able to handle this more difficult challenge. Each person in the squad hoped they wouldn't be the one that would let the others down in the 'worst case scenario' situation.

Their hummers were out front as they exited the building from their planning session. No sooner than the last person had jumped up and the drop down hatch was closed behind, the vehicles sped away.

They were dropped off at an outer point north of the forest that surrounded this single building. The three story building in which the terrorists were producing their fear was just a shade greater than a quarter of a mile directly south of where they were dropped off. The planning of that was to be close enough to execute the plan quickly, but distant enough that the running engine wouldn't be heard through the thick plant life.

Upon exiting their vehicles Doc, Carlson, Cooney, Riggey, Turrentine and Ski headed in a south southwest direction. Jack, Mustard, Pile, Hillery, Goldman, Stanley and Miller headed south southeast. This took both teams in more or less a direction to a hundred yards from the edge of the forest. Once there, everyone got low and crawled to the border of the clearing. Miller and Ski, being the designated marksmen, took aim at the guards who were standing on either side of the outer doors. They just needed to check in to make sure they were both ready.

"East in position," Jack radioed.

"West team in position," Ski reported. Jack was glad his Marines had been ready every time he'd checked today.

"Engage," Jack said.

Miller and Ski both fired a single shot, shifted and then fired one more. The paintballs they were using as ammunition all found their targets. The guards slumped back and slid down the walls, casually playing dead.

"East guards down," Jack said over the radios.

"West guards down," Ski said.

"Proceed to the building."

Two by two on either side of the building the squad made their way to the three story structure. The pairs split and took a crouched position on either side of the stairs. When everyone was in position, Jack radioed again to Ski.

"Ski, check hall."

"Roger."

They both slowly rose, looking through the glass of the doors.

"Clear," Jack said.

"Clear," Ski echoed.

"Proceed."

They both opened the doors slowly, careful not to make any sounds. When they were able to walk through, the teams checked the rooms on either side of the hallway. Half checked left while the rest checked right, working from the furthest outside in.

A terrorist guard emerged from the stairwell and was promptly shot by Ski and Jack. Someone outside the military world might have said it was a bit more of an execution. The unarmed rebel would have never stood a chance against this squad, whether he'd been prepared or not.

All rooms were clear and there were no more threats to them in the stairwell at this level. They proceeded slowly up the stairs, Jack and Miller in the lead. When they rounded the corner on the landing, both Miller and Jack fired one shot, dead center at the guard. When the paintballs hit, he fell back against the door.

As Jack had thought in their planning, a guard inside heard his counterpart's fall. As he came around the corner of the doorway, Miller caught his temple with another well placed paintball.

Miller, Cooney and Carlson made their way on the right hand side of the stairway to the third floor. As they eliminated the guard on the top landing, Jack and Ski made their way through the second deck door side by side. They were followed by Stanley and Pile, all four were crouching to keep a low profile. Standing upright with a quick scan, they thoroughly eliminated all threats in the room very swiftly. A quick check through the hostages proved there were no sleepers, in other words a terrorist trying to hide in the mix until a specific point when he could cause a problem in a rescue team's process.

One floor higher, Miller, Cooney and Carlson had eliminated the guard and stormed into the leader's office. The leader, realizing the threat to him, hefted a pistol from the desk. Carlson, with the best angle of attack, shot the terrorist leader's wrist, causing him to drop the pistol.

"Get your hands in the air," Miller said.

When they had done as instructed, Miller continued.

"You onwards are now prisoners of the United States Marine Corps. You have the right to remain silent, so please, shut the fuck up. I sure as hell don't want to hear it."

## Forming A Foundation

When Miller lead the two leaders down the flight of stairs, Jack saw that the prisoners were on their way out. He radioed the command post that the mission had been accomplished. When the terrorists had been placed in a vehicle to be taken away, only to shortly return for the other squads, the hostage held mannequins were carried out in the arms of over capable Marines.

Second squad was carted away in the very same vehicles they had been brought in on and one of them was the very truck that had just 'taken away' the terrorists. When they got back to the holding area, their squad leader was informed to wait for their score, and then proceed in their van back to the PEA on the Naval Air Station.

Once the squad had settled down and taken resting positions, Jack addressed his Marines after a job well done.

"Well it looks like we did it again. Simply stated, and I wouldn't be surprised if the commander put it this way too, job damn well done. We've just got to wait here for our score, and then it's back to the PEA. We'll pick up the gear we left there, say farewell to The Shrub and deal with the final debrief. As I see the Major is headed our way, get to your feet. Just get to attention and I'll salute for all of us."

When the Platoon Commander approached within the proper six to thirty paces Jack rendered the salute for the whole squad and greeted the Major.

"At ease," the Major said. "Jack this was so good I had to deliver it myself. Gunny Fields and myself were watching the video feeds and were impressed all the way. Here's your scorecard but I'll break the bad news. A perfect score, two hundred fifty points."

The squad roared in approval of themselves. They had even outdone their own expectations of themselves.

"So what was the bad news, sir," Lance Corporal Jackson asked.

"That would be that I can't yell at you for fucking something up. I can't tell you to what to fix. Good work."

"I wouldn't call that a bad thing, sir."

"Not completely bad anyways. Head over to the PEA. Everyone should be back over there in a little more than an hour."

"Aye, sir," Jack replied.

He called the squad to attention and saluted the Major as he departed. When the Commander was well out of earshot, Jack continued his pep talk.

"I'm pretty sure I speak for everyone when I say that I think this gives us the right to get completely slap fucked up drunk tonight."

"Hell yeah," Miller said.

"Damn straight," Ski agreed.

Everyone was in agreement. They would have the perfect chance tonight, going to the Jimmy Buffett concert with \$150 worth of food and drinks paid for in the name of each Marine. That was a key motivation for every member of ever squad to get through these two weeks. It gave them something to look forward to, a relief to the stress they had been under.

The Commanding General, Major General Henry Oztrike, had been under pressure from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the President to get the platoon formed and combat ready as quickly and efficiently as possible. The Platoon Commander had been under pressure from the Commanding General to ensure the platoon was properly trained. The Platoon Gunny, Gunny Fields, had been under pressure from the Major to do the same thing, as was Sergeant Kerry. The Squad Leaders had been under pressure from Gunny Fields and Sergeant Kerry to guard their territories and ensure proper training and behavior of their Marines. The members of each squad had been under pressure from their squad leaders to perform above and beyond any job performances they had done in the past. The Docs had been under pressure from the squad members to keep them healthy and in good condition.

Literally everyone was feeling pressure coming from at least one source. After eleven straight days, sixteen hours a day or more, it was taking a serious toll on the mental and physical endurance of each person. It also was taxing on the morale of each Marine and Doc, the all work and no play days and nights their leaders were placing them in.

However, the immense stresses and pressures would all be calmed in the upcoming hours. The sun was shining high above them and each member of each squad was looking forward to relaxing on the beach in such beautiful weather.

"Now, look," Jack continued. "One last thing before we load up. I want everyone to know this, so listen carefully. Whether we win or lose, whether top squad or bottom feeders, I'm proud of what each and every one of you has done. Pile, your work on the radio was brilliant. Mustard, the way you spotted every contact while you were on shift was hawk like. Miller and Doc, your backing me up was a lifesaver. Carlson, your little adventures in crime really came in handy, making things easy on our Halloween mission. Terp, Hillery, Riggey, Stanley, great work getting the Shrub all set up. It literally was the perfect place. It fooled everyone including the Gunny. Ski great work stepping up and helping everyone with their weapons concerns. Goldman you did an outstanding job helping people with the hand-to-hand and wrestling realm. Cooney, you stepped up at every given chance to take up your fair share of the load in whatever was going on.

"Long story short version, here you go. Everyone was doing something to teach someone else. I just hope everyone learned something from someone else. If you didn't learn a shit load of information in every day of this procession, then that day was wasted. It should have made your head hurt. I know mine did and from what Doc told me he passed out a lot of Motrin and Excedrin. Also, everyone was doing something to help someone else. Without that this process would have been

## Forming A Foundation

a great deal more difficult. Great work. You've exceeded everyone's expectations. Now we just move onward and upward."

They loaded into their van, each a little more confident of themselves and their abilities. Their squad leader knew it was important to reiterate personally what each was doing right and would need to continue. This was just as important as correcting a deficiency. They must know what is right to do as well as what is wrong to do.

1300 EST, PEA

Fourth squad was expected back momentarily, followed by the Command element. With their impending arrival, hopes were high in expectation of what was to come. Naturally, every squad felt that they were the shoe in for the top slot, but only second squad could truly feel that way, as they had begun the day there.

Fourth squad finally pulled into the parking lot in their white government van. With the group completed, the squad leaders met up at a point more or less in the center of their squads.

"Gents," Jack started, "Good luck, not that any of us really need it."

"More like not that you need it," McCoy said. "We suffered a few casualties on both runs, and we needed those damn points."

"Yeah, Jack," Sturgil said. "It's not like we were eighty points behind you and needed some way to catch up."

"That beat my hundred and forty points behind I blew out my ass," McCoy said, taking the blame himself instead of pinning it on his squad.

"Hey," Jack said defensively, "it's not my fault your Marines couldn't hack at the pace of mine."

"Oh, come on," Cline said, looking offended. "We may not be as good as your guys, but that doesn't mean that we're non hackers."

"True enough. And I meant no offense by that. I'm just saying that maybe you and your squads should do a little better to keep up with mine in the future."

"We might be able to do that," Mickey said, "if every squad had someone that could shoot the change out of the General's pocket."

They all enjoyed a laugh at Miller's expense. Anyone who could shoot change that well would be picked on from time to time.

"Any which ways," Jack said, "We're all still Marines. We're all still here. We're all still damn good. No one will ever be able to take away the pride that's in our hearts. Now that I see the Commander's pulling up, let's get back to our squads."

The Major and Gunny disembarked their van and Sergeant Kerry shortly followed from behind the steering wheel. With the platoon gathered in sections by squads, they stood in the center of the school circle.

"I'm sure by now you all know why we're here," Major Ingram said. "And I'm sure you just want me to get on with it as quick as possible, then shut up and let you on your way. I'll be glad to do just that as soon as the General arrives, which should be soon. So I'll take this time to say once more, job well done. Each of you has exceeded the expectations that we'd set out for you. We couldn't have asked for anything better. Instead we got better than what we asked for and I made sure to brief that to the General at each possible chance.

"Here's what we have looking at us in the near future. As soon as the General gets here and conducts the brief, names the super squad and says his little bit, we'll let you loose for the day. The concert tonight begins at 1900 and you can show up to The Dock as early as 1700. I've had the chance to get to know each squad pretty well, and I'm glad I've been able to get to know so many of the members of the platoon. If my assumptions are correct, I'd say that most of you are planning to get the party started a little earlier. I'm not going to tell you not to do this since you've definitely earned your time to relax. I'm just going to discourage you from showing up to The Dock already a couple sheets to the wind."

The Marines chuckled at his comment. Every squad had indeed planned to get the party started as soon as possible. The sooner each of them could get tipsy the better they would feel.

"Then tomorrow," he continued, "Will be your much deserved day off. Relax and enjoy it. You'll need to take as much of a break as possible for our next step. Sunday starts our SERE training, which will conclude on Thursday morning. I know many of you have heard of SERE before, which stands for Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape. Those of you who have heard of it most likely know that other courses are just under three weeks long. So how can we be giving you the same training in a quarter of the time? Simple, you've already gone through many of the courses in conjunction with your classes in the past two weeks.

"Basically all you will have to do in the next five training days will be the evasion survival training. After you get dropped into the containment area, you will have to evade a group from the man-tracking course. Should you get caught, you will have to resist their persistent attempts to pull sensitive information from your brains. As everyone should in a POW camp, you will also be challenged to escape your captors.

"This will take us through Thursday morning and you should be released around 1400 for some more well deserved liberty. The only reason it will be that late is because we will need to run through a few practices for Friday. On that fine Marine Corps morning at 0900, November 10, we will be activating this platoon in fine Marine Corps manner. After the

## Forming A Foundation

activation, which should end around 1000, you will be secured for the weekend to enjoy yourselves after a few weeks of damn hard work that lasted almost a full month. That night we will be holding a Marine Corps Ball for you heathens to celebrate this fine gun club. Everything will be free of charge. You've definitely pushed your physical and mental envelopes to earn this. As I see the General's car arriving, attention on deck!"

A stereotypical government staff car pulled up and General Oztrike let himself out from the back seat. He strode confidently to the platoon and returned Major Ingram's salute.

"At ease everyone," the General said. "Sit, kneel, stand whatever, just relax so you can all get a good view of my ugly face."

Those closest sat, behind them knelt and back further stood. They were all interested in what their Commanding General now had to say.

"From what I understand," he continued, "I'm not the only one that has had a productive two weeks. I'm glad to see that PFCs still work harder than Captains and Lance Corporals still know how to lead as well as Generals."

They all laughed at his humor. His relaxed attitude continued to keep the respect of the platoon.

"I'm sure Major Ingram has told you this enough and you're probably getting sick of hearing it, but good work. I'm not going to sit here and waste your time by blabbering on, so here's your scores. Fourth squad, you had eleven hundred fifty five points. Third squad, twelve twenty five. First squad an impressive twelve seventy. And if you hadn't been able to see this one coming, Second squad were the top dogs with a score of thirteen twenty five. Now in case you don't remember, Second, you're getting the 96 and backstage passes. First squad you're getting a 96, third you're getting a 72 and fourth squad you're getting a ten dollar gift certificate.

"Now I must admit, I did provide a little false information."

Tensions visibly grew.

"You will not be getting the money you were promised for a tab."

Groans and grumbles quickly spread through the platoon. If a better reward wasn't given to them soon, the command element would have an unpleasant group on their hands.

"You will instead," the General said over the unspoken complaints, "be treated to an open bar."

The mood improved and good spirits exploded through the tension.

"All the food you can chow down and all the drinks you can sip, gulp or chug. Everything will be paid for and you'll just have to keep the mark on the back of your hand for that. I do have one other bit of presenting to do, and for that I'll need the squad leaders up front along with PFC Carlson. Everyone else, attention to orders."

The platoon stood at attention.

"On this date, November 3, 1999, Lance Corporals Cline, Jackson, Sturgil and McCoy and Private First Class Carlson were the subject of a Meritorious Mast. On the night of 31 October, 1999, these Marines conducted night operations upon Golf Barracks, Naval Air Station Pensacola. The operation was conducted in the finest of warrior traditions and accomplished successfully without assistance or supervision from the higher ups. These Marines exhibited the finest examples of traditions of the United States Marine Corps and the Naval Service."

The pieces of paper that held this citation were handed to the Marines and the General read one final reward.

"On this date, November 3, 1999, Lance Corporal Jackson was the subject of a Meritorious Mast. Through the field training evolution of his Marines and Corpsman, Lance Corporal Jackson lead in an unselfish manner and presented the finest image of mission accomplishment and troop welfare that a leader should."

Jack took his award and said a thank you to the General.

"At ease. To all of you and especially those who just received those Meritorious Masts, great work. That is the part of the job I will never get tired of. Rewarding very deserving Marines. With that I bid you adieu. Good work. Major, take charge and carry out the plan of the day. Carry on."

The salutes were exchanged and the Platoon Commander stepped back in front of the platoon.

"That's it, let's get on with our time off. Platoon, attention. Squad leaders, take charge of your squads and carry out the plan of the day."

"Aye, sir," all four replied.

"To the van," Jack told his Marines. It must have seemed to others that the order was meant for them as well. The rest of the squads moved for their vehicles as well. Weaving through traffic around town and onto base, they made their drive back to their barracks. When they unloaded, second squad stayed around their van, waiting for their Squad Leader's instructions.

"Alright, here's what we're gonna do," Jack told them. "Get in there to your rooms, drop your gear and get out of those dirty cammies. Take your turns in the shower. Scrub your nasty selves, get clean and enjoy a hot water shower. Just remember, there's others waiting to get in there too. If you want, start washing your clothes. Seeing as how we're right there by the laundry room it's easy enough for us to do it. Condense everything, get two peoples laundry in one load, have one person watching it, yada, yada, yada. Everyone following so far?"

They all nodded.

"Now this next part you might have a problem with. While I'm not going to confine you to the barracks, I'd rather we weren't all to the winds. It would be much easier if we were in a centralized location, easy to find. However, if you want

## Forming A Foundation

to go to the exchange or E-Club for something quick that's fine, just check out with me. I do have a very specific reasoning for this and you'll find that out once we get inside. At this time I want everyone to go inside and stay in your rooms until I get there. I won't be too long in getting to you, I will just need to pick up something out of my room. Anyone have anything for me? Seeing nothing, Miller?"

"Just a good job to everyone. We're well disciplined and damn good at our job. What I said after the rifle range that day when we were all in about the same spot we are now, we're about the best we can be. That's good. If anyone's got any problems, feel free to let me know. Doc?"

"Thanks, Brew. Hey, if anyone's sore, hurt, banged or bruised, let me know. I helped enough problems over the past couple weeks, I don't think there's anything I don't know about now. I hope all of you have seen I know what I'm doing and I know most of you do well and beyond trust me now. If anyone's got any aches, pains or strains, see me after formation in my room. Jack."

"Thanks, Doc. And good looking out for everyone over our field evolution. Anyone got any bitches, moans, groans, whines, complaints, questions, comments, concerns or inappropriate statements? Good, fallout."

They all hefted their gear and headed in the side door. Walking through, Jack and Carlson couldn't help but think of just a few days ago when they had been here. They were walking through the very door where Cline shanghaied the wing watch. Both of them smiled recalling that memory.

Each trio paused at the door to their room as it was unlocked by one of the occupants. Miller meandered to the next door past his while Mustard was unlocking it.

"So Jack," he said, "What's the big mystery in staying in our rooms?"

"Well, Brew, I'll tell you what. You give me about two minutes, I'll let you be the first ones to find out."

"Good to go."

Jack went into his room and found two cardboard boxes stacked one on top of the other sitting in the middle of his room.

"Just as promised," Jack said to himself. "Vehicle, you're worth your weight in beer."

Jack set all of his gear down to the side of his room and extracted his knife. Opening the top box, he extracted a bottle of Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville Margarita mix, pre made, alcohol included. Jack smiled as he did the math, two boxes of six bottles would make one for each of his Marines. Looking on the opposite side of the boxes, he spotted a brown paper bag, holding the bottle for the squad leader.

Jack picked up the phone and dialed the extension for the room next door. Sure it would have been just as easy to walk there, but he was tired of excess movement.

"PFC Miller," Brew answered the phone.

"Miller, Jack. Send Mustard over here to see me."

"Good to go."

Seconds later there was a knock on Jack's door, which had been propped open with the deadbolt.

"ENTER," Jack called.

Mustard popped through the door and said, "You wanted to see me, Lance Corporal?"

"Yes, Mustard my Perfect For Carrying Marine. Pick up that top box and carry it next door to your room. I'll be right behind you with the other one."

"Aye, Lance Corporal," Mustard said and lifted. "Jeez, this is a little heavier than I expected. No wonder you wanted my help. What's in here?"

"You'll find out in a minute."

They exited Jack's room and after knocking were let into the room next door.

"Gotta lock your roommate out, huh guys," Jack said.

"Security purposes, Jack," Doc said.

"Great, now you're sounding like a cross between Hillery and Miller. Doc why don't you have the guys across the head come over here."

Jack set his box down and told Mustard to set his on top of it. When Jack leaned back against the desk, with the boxes stacked right in front of him, Pile, Stanley and Turrentine walked in and stood to the side.

"As you all know, it is my job to perform troop welfare and make sure my Marines stay happy."

Doc intentionally coughed.

"And Doc. Doc, I think I speak for everyone when I say, from here on out, you're Marine. You can hack just as well as the rest of the squad and better than some of the other squad's members. Anyways, it's time I did something to reward you for your good work."

Jack began extracting bottles and tossing them to the waiting hands of his Marines.

"Sweet shit, Jack," Miller said.

"Yeah, Lance Corporal," Mustard said.

"Hey, Lance Corporal," Pile said. "I don't mean to sound like I'm asking for too much here, I appreciate this and all. But, you got some cups or something?"

"Sure, Cal. There's some plastic cups in there. Nothing fancy, but it beats what we've had the past couple weeks."

## Forming A Foundation

"Now I see why you wanted my help," Mustard said. "Drop one of these and it'd be alcohol abuse."

"That's right. Now I've got to get the other box to the rest of the crew. Don't let any outsiders see you drinking this. I don't want anyone getting jealous. If one of you could break that down and throw it away, I'd appreciate it."

Jack picked up the other box and took it two doors down. Hillery opened the door and let his squad leader in.

"Ray if you could get the crew next door I'd appreciate it."

"You got it Lance Corporal," Hillery said and disappeared through the head. A moment later he returned with Ski, Riggey and Cooney in tow.

"Well, gents, as I told the six in the other paired room, it's time I did a little troop welfare to make my top notch ass kicking Marines happy." He cracked open the box and dispensed the bottles. "Here's a cup to go with it. Everyone drink up. Just remember, this is probably the best margarita mix out there by far."

"Yeah," Ski said, "It's Jimmy Buffett brand."

"You guys earned the best by being the best."

"Lance Corporal," Hillery said. "I'd like to say something if I could."

"Go ahead, Ray. It is a free country."

"I know. But I'm just trying to be a little more respectful. Anyways, I just wanted to say this and I think I'm probably saying what the rest of the squad's thinking. Thank you for leading us all the way. You didn't tell us how to be the best, you showed us. You were right there with us, side by side, eating dirt with the rest of us. You spent several shifts on the radio or in a hole. Talking to the rest of the squads, you were the only Squad Leader who set foot in a fighting hole on their own. I just wanted to say it's damn motivating and I'm proud to have you as my leader."

The other five commented their feelings to be the same.

"Ray, thank you for that. It's good to know my Marines respect me. I'm just doing my job. The best leaders lead by example. When that's not an option, brute intimidation works pretty well, too." The group laughed. "I also told this to the other group. Don't let any outsiders see what you've got. We don't want anyone getting jealous. I'll be in my room if anyone needs me."

Jack made his way to the door when Ray pulled him aside.

"Lance Corporal," he said, "I don't mean to question your authority and all. But I'm not 21 and I don't think very many people in this squad *are* of legal age to drink."

"True enough," Jack said thoughtfully. "But this was cleared through General Oztrike."

"I'm just curious here, but how did you pull that off?"

"I used to work for him. When he was the Recruiting Command CG. Now, go figure, I'll be working for him again."

"Small world, Lance Corporal," Ray said, sounding almost disappointed.

"Look Ray, I know this is against what you've been trained to do. Your MP training says you should arrest people that drink under age and that you shouldn't drink yourself until you're 21. Relax. It's been cleared. We have permission to do this."

"Good to go, Lance Corporal."

"Good. Now I'll be in my room if you need me."

Jack walked back to his room and took off his cammie blouse with a sigh. He sat down and groaned even louder. *Man these old legs could sure use a drink*, he thought as he poured himself one. He grabbed a few ice cubes from the fridge and placed the bottle on the bottom rack. After taking a sip he leaned back, letting the refreshing alcoholic liquidity settle into his stomach.

When it had begun to digest and coarse through his blood stream, Jack leaned forward and untied his boots. He was just slipping them off when Cline came through the head.

"Hey, Jack," Cline said. "How's things?"

"Just fine, Dan. Just glad to have a break."

"Me too. How are you planning the day?"

"Do a little laundry relax until about five. Then head over."

"Probably about what I'll do with my squad. Whatcha got to drink around here," he asked, noticing the solo cup.

"Margarita. No you can't have any either. You already owe me booze. I'll be damned if your mooching off my supply."

"Alright, alright. Jeez. I'll just get something from the Coke Machine. Caffeine would probably do me good right now."

"You and me both. But alcohol is doing me better."

"I just might have to try and get some from the exchange and bring it back."

"Bring me some high quality rum. You do owe me after all."

"I know. I just might bring back a bottle of Captain Morgan for you."

"That's good," Jack said with a thoughtful smile and a nod. "The Captain's always a wise choice."

"Agreed. Well, I'll let you jump in the shower first, as you're closer to being ready for it. At least we can enjoy taking longer ones without having to worry about someone waiting on us."

## Forming A Foundation

“True dat. I was thinking about letting a couple of my guys come over to use ours while their roommates use theirs. Is that cool with you?”

“I was thinking the same thing. It’s fine by me, but they help to clean the head on field day.”

“Cool. I’ll take mine in a minute, and then you can jump in. My guys get first ins though. Being top squad and all.”

“Alright,” Cline said, hanging his head. “I’ll give you that one.”

“And hey, good work out there Cline,” Jack said extending his hand. “No hard feelings, man.”

“Never. You guys did great too.”

Cline walked back through to his room and Jack got ready to take his shower. Before he went in, he called next door to talk to Miller.

“Hey, one thing real quick like,” Jack told him. “You and Doc can shower over here. Help alleviate the shower burden between your rooms.”

“Good to go,” Miller replied.

Jack hung up the phone and turned on the shower. Closing the door to the other room, he stripped off his shirt and shorts. Giving the water time to warm up, the king of the squad sat on the throne. He flipped through the copy of Aviation Journal he had first borrowed from Doc Spazito.

“How time can change things,” Jack mumbled to himself. It seemed so long ago now that he had asked Spazz to take a quick look at it. Before that moment they had never met. Jack had seen Spazz at the NAS clinic, but had never talked to him and knew him no better than any stranger on the street. Then they were there together at that brief and had lunch together after Jack asked to see the magazine momentarily.

After they had started their training evolution, Jack hadn’t had the time or thought to pick up the magazine he had purchased that night. He felt changed inside, not for having been uprooted, but for having now taken his place in a position where he could influence younger Marines in a positive manner.

They would also most likely influence the world in a positive manner before too long.

Noting the steam drifting around the curtain, Jack finished his business and stepped into the warm water. When all the dirt was visibly gone and the water going down the drain was clean and clear, Jack stayed under the stream. He still felt as if he was covered in grime. Two weeks covered in dirt would make most people feel that very same way. The hot water also acted as a very useful tool, relaxing aching muscles.

“I’m getting too old for this shit,” he muttered the timeless joke. He may only be 21, but that was old compared to the 18 and 19 year old Marines he was in charge of. When he was toweled off, Jack wrapped his towel around him and opened the door to Cline’s room.

“It’s yours Dan,” Jack told him.

“Thanks man,” Cline replied. Jack walked back through and turned around when Cline continued. “I just hope you left me some hot water.”

“I did,” Jack said, looking at his counter part, clad only in green PT shorts. “You know, I never realized you’re that damn skinny.”

“Hey come on. I got a little muscle.”

“Yeah. A *little* muscle. Slocum said you could hit pretty hard though. Well, enjoy your shower. Trust me, it feels better than you remember.”

Jack closed the door behind him and sat down on his favorite chair. After a moment’s relaxation, he decided to stand and felt it was time to put on more than a towel. A minute later, dressed in a green PT shirt and green sweat pants, he called Miller before putting on his sandals.

“Brew dog,” Jack said. “You and Doc come on over. The door’s open.”

“Roger,” Miller said and hung up the phone. An instant later a quick rap on the door came and it opened to reveal his assistants. He invited them in and they both took a seat. Jack noted with a bit of amusement they both had come with bottle and cup in hand, prepared to continue their drinking. They had also brought their shower materials along with the shirt and shorts to change into. The bottles were placed in the fridge, cups kept in hand.

“Doc,” Jack said, “You sure you should be doing that? After all, you are our designated driver.”

“What,” Doc asked incredulously. “Since when the fuck am I the DD?”

“Just kidding. I’ve got a friend of mine that’s gonna be our designated driver. He’s going through the avionics school here.”

“That’s cool. Works out pretty well then.”

Cline poked his head out from the head.

“Hey, guys,” he said. “Shower’s open for whoever’s next.”

“Go for it, Doc,” Miller said. Doc put his cup on the desk and went to take his shower.

Jack and Miller shared small talk while Doc cleaned himself off. Some ten minutes later Doc walked out in his towel and shower shoes.

“Hit it, Brew,” Doc said.

Miller shed his shirt and walked into the head.

## Forming A Foundation

“Well, Jack,” Doc continued, “I know you’re interested and you’re going to ask me soon anyways. No one’s complained of injuries yet.”

“That’s good.”

“Definitely. I know there’s a few blisters on some feet. I’ll make sure those get cleaned up after these nice showers.”

“Sounds good. I just hope the rest of the crew doesn’t take too long cycling through.”

“Miller spread the word to the other pair of rooms that there would be two less showering in ours. They’ll probably be using ours.”

“Good to go. I’ll be walking through to check up on them once Miller’s done if you want to walk through with me with the medic bag.”

“Yeah. That’d be great. Now that I’m partly dressed here, let me walk next door to get my sneakers on. Just get me when you’re ready.”

“Sure will,” Jack said. “Thanks Doc.”

“Yeah, thanks for letting us use your shower. Helped to ease the congestion problem.”

Doc grabbed his bottle out of the fridge and went back next door. A moment later Miller walked out and started getting dressed.

“I don’t care who you are,” Miller said. “That felt good.”

“I agree,” Jack replied. “Just imagine how good it’s gonna feel sittin’ there in that hot tub this evening.”

“Ahhhh. I can almost feel it now. Doc go back next door?”

“Yeah. We’re gonna be checking over everyone in a little bit. He said he was going to doctor up a few foot blisters.”

“Oddly enough, you know what helps to prevent blisters on your feet?”

“What’s that?”

“You’re gonna call me a pervert for this, but panty hose.”

“Are you serious,” Jack asked.

“Serious as cancer. Works for me. You don’t see any blisters on my feet do you?”

“No, they look fine to me.”

“Proven method. I’m going next door now that I’ve got my clothes on. You coming?”

“Yeah. I might as well get this little inspection with Doc done.”

They walked next door, where Doc was already at work. Mustard was getting a good treatment of moleskin, a thicker than normal band aid which acted as the skin that was no longer there.

“Mustard,” Jack jested, “what did I tell you about walking around here without a shirt on?”

“Sorry Lance Corporal,” Mustard said through a smile. “Doc wanted to fix me up as soon as I got out from the shower.”

“Alright you damn skinny guinea. I’ll let it slide this time. But only because you’ve got a good reason. Other than that little blister, are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It may look like a little blister, but walking on it, the thing sure feels huge.”

“I know it does. I’ve had a few doozies like that. Evidently Miller had held back some information that could have helped us. Next time we’ve got to do some operations like this, wear panty hose.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, man,” Miller said. “Look at my feet, you don’t see anything bad. Not even a damn cut.”

“I’ll be damned,” Mustard said. “I’ll have to ask my girlfriend to send me some.”

“She’ll probably just think you’re getting horny and missing her,” Jack said.

“She wouldn’t be far off.”

“Well, Doc, since it looks like you’re done there, let’s go next door.”

Jack and the Doc walked through all the rooms and checked up on everyone. Blisters were patched and margaritas were drank. The squad was in high spirits in anxious anticipation of the night to come.

Upon returning to his favorite comfy chair, Jack noted that the second of Cline’s Marines was in the shower. Kicking his feet up on the desk, he leaned back as the TV warmed up. Flipping through the channels, the squad leader verified that there was nothing worthwhile to watch on this Friday afternoon. Next weekend, with veterans day being on Saturday, he knew there would be an abundance of war movies to watch.

The thought of that prompted his interest to watch something in the style of work they were training for. Jack opened his wall locker and removed a bootlegged copy of Clint Eastwood’s hit movie Heartbreak Ridge. Pushing it into the VCR inset in the TV and prepared to watch one of his favorite movies.

As the film began, Cline walked in through the head.

“I’m going over to the exchange,” he said. “Do you want anything?”

“Just the Captain Morgan you’d said you were getting me earlier. Maybe some chips too.”

“Alright. I’ll be back in a little bit. Maybe watch this movie with you.”

“Cool,” Cline said walking out through Jack’s door.

## Forming A Foundation

Before the door could close, Miller walked in with Doc in trail.

“Just coming back to our room with some snacks,” Miller said, “and I thought I heard my favorite movie.”

“Another Clint Eastwood fan, I see,” Jack said.

“Well,” Doc said, “we figure we’d need a good way to relax before heading out.”

A knock came on the door and Doc let Ski in.

“I’m going to the PX,” he said. “I just wanted to check out with you.”

“Thanks. Here’s some money, pick me up a case of Bud Light. Here’s the keys to the van, that way you don’t have to carry all that.”

“Great, thanks. I’m picking up some beer for a couple other guys too. I’ll be back in probably fifteen minutes. Would you mind if I watched the movie with you?”

“Sure, that would be fine. I’ll tell you what, we’ll hold the movie for you.”

Ski went out and made his way to the exchange. While he was making his shopping rounds, Jack invited the rest of the squad into his room for the movie. Some brought chairs, while others sat on the floor or bed.

When Holewinski returned, Jack’s beer was promptly loaded into the fridge for him. Cline appeared and passed Jack two bottles of Captain Morgan’s spiced rum.

“Two bottles, huh Cline? You must be really trying to buy me off.”

“Well, that little incident might not be over yet. I just figured I’d better get you one for the next time. You mind if I watch the movie with you?”

“Grab a seat.”

The movie was started as the just purchased snacks were spread through the gathered movie viewers. Bottles of beer were spread as well, complementing the alcohol they already had consumed. All but three of the margarita bottles had been completely consumed, creating the necessity for more refreshments.

After the movie was finished it was near the time for them to make their way to The Dock. They made their way to their van as the clock wound its way toward 1700.

Over the past hours second squad wasn’t the only ones that had begun drinking early. Third and fourth had met up at the E-Club, while first had claimed their squad leader and gone to Hooters. Spirits were high in the platoon as spirits flowed through them. Second squad met up at their van, prepared to head over to the concert. They would be receiving their all access passes from Major Ingram when they arrived.

Standing before his Marines, Jack introduced Rick, a friend whom he’d gone through boot camp with. Rick would be their designated driver, allowing all of them to get completely trashed that night.

Plowing into the van, the semi-intoxicated Marines and Doc got underway to the concert that would begin in just less than two hours.

When they arrived, Major Ingram produced their passes and again said his congratulations on their hard work. The thirteen of the squad sat at an elongated table they had designated as their own. Their DD respectfully kept his distance, knowing he was an outsider to these men. He knew he would be best just letting them have their fun that evening.

Settling down at the table, Jack addressed his men.

“Enjoy this,” he said. “I know I’m going to, and I hope all of you will do the same. God knows you gents earned this. We all did our part and kicked some ass. I know there were plenty of people throughout the DOD that would never have pictured that a bunch of Non NCOs could ever pull this off. Let alone with the scores we did. You earned these tickets and the 96 we’ll get next weekend. Blow off the steam I know all of you have built up. Also important is this. Keep safe. Always, always, always travel with someone from the squad. Make sure someone knows where you’re going. When you go out, if you think your libo buddy might be getting into some shit, make sure you’ve got his back. We are a squad now. A couple weeks ago most would have probably called us non-hackers. Now we’re a shit hot team. We’re damn good, too. We’re Marines.”

“I like what you called ‘em that night the last time we were here, Jack,” their Corpsman interrupted.

“What was that, Doc?”

“Knuckleheads.”

“Damn straight. That’s what we are. That’s a damn good way to put it. We’re Knuckleheads. Who’s with me?”

Unanimously and harmoniously they all chanted “YUTT” in a mighty warriors yelp.

Right then there came a voice from just off the steps.

“Yeah, I hear you won some tickets or something.”

They all turned to look and seeing the person there was a synchronous gasp of “Jimmy Buffett.”

“Congratulations and thanks for coming to the show,” Jimmy said. “So who’s in charge of this soon to be rowdy group of Marines?”

“I am, Jimmy,” Jack told him. “There a wild bunch of Knuckleheads once they get a few drinks in ‘em. You’ll probably be able to hear each of ‘em singing along to most of your songs.”

“So we got some Parrotheads here, huh?”

Everyone nodded and said something to assure him.

## Forming A Foundation

"I never realized there were so many Marines that were Parrotheads. I didn't know I had that kind of a following out of the military."

"You sure do, Jimmy," Jack said. "At least out of this squad."

"I just came over to get a quick bite before the show and heard you had gotten those passes. I wanted to say congratulations and thanks for what you guys do for our country."

"It's no problem, Jimmy," Miller said. "It's what us Knuckleheads are here to do."

"I've talked with a lot of military guys," he replied, "and I've got to tell you, they keep such a simple view on what they do. I sometimes just don't want to walk away from the conversation because it makes me feel pretty good sometimes."

"Well, Jimmy," Jack said, "As squad leader, I think I can honestly speak for my whole squad when I say this. If you want to join us for dinner, you're more than welcome to. We're just about to order our drinks."

Grabbing a chair from the table behind him, he swung it around, placed it to my left and said, "I think I just might have to do that. I'm glad there's some extra tables over here. The rest of the band will be over soon."

Mixed replies of "cool" and "sweet" came from the squad. They were turning out to get more of a reward than they had planned. Not only would they get all access to the show, all the food and drinks they could stand, but also now they were going to get to eat and drink with Jimmy Buffett and the Coral Reefers. They all felt the same way. It was a dream come true.

Their waitress came over and was startled at the face that had joined them. She picked up the routine quick enough though and asked them what they wanted to drink.

"Bud Light," ordered Ski.

"Corona," ordered Carlson.

"Martini," Cooney said.

"Bud Light," JJ said.

"I guess I'll have a Long Island Iced Tea," said Cal.

"I'll have a Screwdriver," Riggey said.

"Good choice, Riggey," Jack poked. "Your tiny little liver can't take too much alcohol."

"Oh sure," he said rolling his eyes. "Everyone's gotta poke fun at the midget."

"Boilermaker," Mustard ordered.

"Bud light," from Stanley.

"Budweiser," from Turrentine.

"Brandy Alexander," ordered Hillery.

"Sex on the Beach," Doc ordered.

"Alabama Slammer," Miller said somewhat reluctantly.

"ALABAMA," came the chorus from the squad.

"I'll take a Blue Hawaiian."

"Same as last time, huh, Jack," their waitress keenly noted.

"Surprised you noticed. Got to stick to what's good."

"Mike does make it good," she said. "Jimmy?"

"I guess I'll have to get a Margarita."

"Awwwww," came in unison from the squad.

Jimmy Buffett was having a Margarita. This was a classic moment for all of them.

"Alright," their waitress said, finalizing her notes. "Do we know what were gonna eat, or do you want a minute?"

"I think we're all ready," Jack said for the group. The meal orders went around the table the same way as the drinks. It stalled out at Doc.

"Come on, Spazz," Jack jested. "Make up your mind already or these skinny Knuckleheads are gonna starve."

"Yeah, yeah," he said dismissingly. "Alright, I'll take the roast beef sandwich."

"New York Strip," Miller said.

"Deluxe burger," Jack said.

"Alright," replied their waitress. "And Jimmy, let me guess. Cheeseburger, lettuce, tomato, Heinz 57 and French fried potatoes. Oh, and a big kosher pickle."

Looking around at the squad he said, "She's good."

"Jimmy," I replied, "I think you tipped her off by ordering a margarita."

"Good point," he admitted.

They talked over drinks until both the band and the food showed up. The Knuckleheads enjoyed good food and good company until the band had to go start the show. And what a show it was.

As promised the Knuckleheads sung along with most of the songs, louder and with more enthusiasm than the rest of the crowd combined. They became highly inebriated as the tropical drinks flowed through their inner systems. Jimmy had started it out, and they all got into the swing of life in Margaritaville.

The band took a break after an hour. Jack was leaning on the railing when he heard a familiar voice.

"Hell of a way to start a weekend, huh Jack?"

## Forming A Foundation

Turning to look, he saw Cline, the first squad leader coming towards him.

“Yeah, sure is,” he said. “How’s everything with your squad?”

“The guys are good. A little pissed, but they’ll live. They’re all floating around here somewhere.”

“I think mine are floating around in alcohol. The Knuckleheads are all beyond drunk. With the exception of my DD, a friend of mine from boot camp.”

“Your guys aren’t gonna kick my ass for coming over here on their turf are they?”

“Yeah, it’s what we’ve got planned for halftime.”

“Oh that’s real funny. About the last thing I’d need, getting my ass kicked by you again. Well, I saw you over here and figured I’d swing by and say hey.”

“Well feel free to come on back up if you want. This area’s open to the whole platoon. I’m sure when the sun goes down most of my crew’ll be in the hot tub if you wanna jump in.”

“Man, after the past two weeks, that sure as hell would feel good.”

“Won’t it though?”

“Hells, yeah. Slocum and I were talking about that earlier. Well, catch ya later.”

The band came back on stage for their second set as the sun was very close to the horizon.

“This may not be the most military of all towns,” Jimmy said to the crowd, “but I know we’ve got a few Marines out there tonight. We’ve got a couple songs we’d like to dedicate to them. This first one’s a different rendition than you’re all used to, and it goes out to all service men and women all over the world.”

Even though it was a different version, they all recognized right away that it was ‘Proud To Be An American.’ It’s a song every person in the military seems to know the lyrics to, and the squad was a little choked up when singing along. It had been a rough couple weeks and it summed up what they were feeling.

“It sounds like some of you have heard that one before,” Jimmy said. “Our next song goes out to a certain squad. I know that they’ve done a lot and will have a lot more to do. I just want you all to know that with a little love and luck you will get by, Knuckleheads.”

The drumbeat kicked off the song Love and Luck and the squad cheered like wild banshees once again, even louder than they had when they found out that they had won. Every Marine and even the Doc sung along, loud and proud.

“I knew you’d be singin’ along, Kuckleheads. Thanks for carryin’ the tune and a big thanks for that Cheeseburger In Paradise.”

The song he named in title kicked off and they sung right along once more. He looked over towards us at the hot tub before starting the next song.

“Hey, Knuckleheads.”

“Yeah!” they all yelled.

“What’s the best thing to wash down those Cheeseburgers?”

Each one knew what he wanted to hear and yelled “MARGARITAS!!!”

Predictably, Margaritaville piped through the speakers loud and clear. After an hour and a half set, they all took a break as a good portion of second squad was warming up in the hot tub. In a couple of moments, Jimmy emerged from around the pavilion with his sax player shortly in tow.

“Figured we ought to come over and rest our aching legs in the hot tub,” Jimmy proclaimed.

With their lower legs draped into the hot tub they talked for a while as the sax player kept fingering out notes on his brass instrument.

“What are you imaginarily playing there,” Jack asked.

“Ah, one of my favorite songs,” he said. “It’s gotten kind of a bad rap in later years, but if you listen to the lyrics and take in their true meaning it’s a real compelling song. It talks about having dreams and following through on them. Hell, I’m sure everyone here knows it, too.”

“Well, Mac,” Jimmy said, “Let’s hear it.”

As they listened, ‘Somewhere Over The Rainbow’ eloquently came from the sax. Within moments, the crowd had hushed and only the notes rolling from the sax and the waves lapping at the beach were heard. He was putting so much emotion into it, one instrument had silenced the few hundred people there on the limited access of the beach.

“Damn, that was good,” was all Jack could say. He wished his words could have been as elegant as the song had sounded, but sometimes there’s no such luck.

“Well, gents,” Jimmy said, “We gotta get back up to the stage. Got a show to do.”

They watched on through the night and left at around two thirty the next morning. It was a great relaxation to the whole platoon and would remind them of a much deserved and needed break in the most challenging and decisive points in their lives.

Saturday November 4, 1999

1145 EST, G Barracks

## Forming A Foundation

Later that day, much later, Jack made the rounds. He felt it necessary to check up on them after their night of over indulgence. It was ultimately his sole responsibility for their performance in the next training evolution.

He also had suspicions to pass on.

“And if my uncertainties are correct,” he told all of them as he passed through rooms, “We won’t be getting in formation for SERE training at 1100. I have a feeling that the command element is gonna try and put us through a react drill. I’m sure they’ll want to see who can respond to a call to arms the best.

“So they tell us to be there at 1100, knowing that’s what we’ll expect. I really wouldn’t be surprised if I got a call around 0800. So be ready for me to call you.”

He made his way through each room, passing the same information to his Marines. Some were asleep, but their roommates assured their leader that those Marines would get the information.

Time would tell if instincts of one particular Lance Corporal were accurate.

1200 EST, Oval Office

“So General,” President Martin said, beginning the individual briefing, “I take it the new platoon is progressing as planned.”

“Actually sir,” General Lockard replied, adjusting his notes, “it hasn’t.”

The President looked at his top military advisor with a look most near to disapproval as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff continued.

“The Marines are far above and beyond what we had hoped. I know I can speak for General Rains and the Admiralty when I say that too.”

“I’m glad to hear some positive news today.”

“It is good news, sir. The squad leaders are leading like they’ve been doing this for years. The PFCs are carrying out urban ops like they all have SWAT expertise. Their field warfare is also top rate. Even the Corpsmen are acting just like the Marines.

“I think for once we got the right group the first time.”

“Well I’m glad to hear it as well.”

“When’s their activation?”

“Next Friday, sir.”

“Great. So in one week I’ll have a new asset I can use.”

“That’s correct. Just like nukes, it’s a weapon I hope we never have to use.”

“You’re not the only one.”

Chapter Five  
Personal Hell

Sunday November 5, 1999

0805 EST, G Barracks

Jack was lying in his bed, dressed with the exception of his camouflaged top, half asleep. He was waiting to see if his suspicions would be proven correct. Just a moment before, he’d heard the phone ringing next door in Cline’s room. Since the doors were closed through the head, Jack couldn’t make out the words, but could vaguely hear Cline’s voice.

In a moment Jack knew he would find out how accurate he really was.

*RING RING.*

“Just as I thought,” Jack said before picking up the phone. “Lance Corporal Jackson.”

“Lance Corporal, Major Ingram. React drill. Proceed to the warehouse immediately with your squad.”

“Roger that, sir.”

Jack replaced the phone and made his way for the door. He proceeded to walk down the hall, knocking on the four doors of his Marines.

“React drill,” he told them when a head poked out from the door. “Get your shit and get out to the van.”

Amazingly, seven minutes later, the van was cruising towards the warehouse. The other three vans were still parked at the barracks, giving this squad one more sense of accomplishment.

Arriving at the warehouse, each person piled out of the van and into the building as quick as their tired legs could carry them. Most of them weren’t even fully awake as they made their way into the chairs. Once settled in seats, Major Ingram and Gunny Fields came out of their office.

“Jackson,” Gunny Fields said, “why am I not surprised you’re the first ones here?”

“Because we’re the squad that knows how to do this shit best, Gunny.”

## Forming A Foundation

The squad muttered comments to that while the higher ups went back to their office. A few moments later Cline walked in with his squad in trail.

“Well, well, Lance Corporal Cline,” Jack said mockingly. “I see first squad is fashionably late as usual.”

“Man,” Cline said shaking his head. “That ain’t even right.”

“No, it isn’t. Especially because you got the phone call before I did.”

First squad just ignored the verbal pounding and took their seats. When time had passed for the rivalry to settle Jack called to Cline.

“So who do you think showing up next?”

“Fish,” Cline said. “Then Mickey.”

“Agreed.”

No sooner had Jack said it, than the door opened and third squad piled in. Two minutes later fourth squad completed the platoon presence.

“Hey Mickey,” Jack said. “Come here for a minute.”

They walked to the side and McCoy said, “Yeah, what’s up?”

“Man you guys really need to get on the damn ball.”

“I know. This just really caught me off guard.”

“I bet it did. But it shouldn’t have. You need to be ready for this shit. If you expect the unexpected, the unexpected won’t happen.”

“But there’s always something you didn’t expect. I know what you’re saying though. In the van on the way over here, I knew I should have been expecting something like this. I was kicking my own ass for it and I wouldn’t blame you if you kicked my ass for it.”

“I’ll remember that when we’re done,” Jack said with a smile. “Just take this as a learning experience. You may be the FNG, but I’ll help you get over it.”

“FNG?”

“Fucking New Guy.”

“Ah,” Mickey said. “I get it now. Anyways, thank you. I appreciate all the help you’ve given me over the past few weeks. You’ve really been a leader to the leaders.”

“I try. Now let’s take our seats.”

Rejoining their squads, it was an instant later that Gunny Fields walked in followed by the Major. They all knew this was the beginning of the briefing they were dreading.

“Good morning Marines,” the Gunny started. “I thank you for getting here so quickly. I think some of you wish you had gotten here quicker though.”

Nods circled the room in all but second squad.

“In just a few moments, we will be departing to Sherman Field for a priority alpha mission. We will be loading into a C-130 and will be air dropping throughout this area.”

The Gunny showed them on a slide that had popped up on the screen depicting an area just north of the airfield.

“Your mission is to individually proceed to the Rendezvous Point that you will find in the packets that Sergeant Kerry is handing out. Do not, I repeat, do not work your way there with anyone else. No two RPs are the same. They are also in all different directions. It should take you between a day and a half and two days to reach your point. It may also take you a little longer than that. The reason for that is simple. There will be enemy man trackers attempting to capture you and hold you as a prisoner of war. You will need to avoid being spotted by them.

“If you are captured, all that you are required to tell them is your name, rank and service number. That had better be all you tell them. They will interrogate you, attempting to extract sensitive information about this platoon. If any of you give them any information other than name, rank and service number, you will fail. If you fail, you go home.

“If you are captured, remember that it is your duty to escape your captors. Do what ever you can to escape this prison and take other prisoners with you.

“You will not be provided any food for while you are evading capture. You will have to fend for yourself, feeding off of the forest. At this point, are there any questions? Seeing none, fold your maps and put them in your left breast pocket. They will be collected from you before you exit the bird. Load up and head over.”

In all four vans, no one spoke on the ride over. They were deep in serious thought about not letting their friends down. If they failed this training, they would not be failing themselves. They would be a failure to their squad. They would be sent back to the unit they had come down from and they would not be allowed to be a part of the platoon they had worked so hard to be a part of. They would most likely be looked at by their friends as a failure.

None of them wanted to be that guy.

Arriving at the airstrip, they all jumped out of the van and were quickly told by the Gunny to put on a parachute and get on the plane. No sooner than the last foot hit the floor of the cargo hold, the ramp was lifting and the bird was taxiing for take off. The rickety old C-130 slid gracefully into the air and five minutes later, after circling the airfield, made the approach to the drop point.

## Forming A Foundation

When the door opened, everyone stood and made their way to take their leap. Mustard turned and looked behind him at his squad leader with a sullen look of fear. Jack mouthed the words 'You'll be fine' and patted him on the back. Joe nodded and turned back around.

If only everyone were that confident.

1300 EST, SERE Containment Area

Jack slithered across the forest floor. It had been nearly four hours since he'd stepped off the floor of the plane.

Promptly upon touching down, he had disposed of his parachute as instructed. He donned his Ghillie suit and checked his map, which was not marked with his RP. With a confirmation from his compass, Jack began to crawl in the direction he needed to go.

Now, four hours later, he was only a mile from where his chute was stowed. Jack had watched several others land and head off in the same manner he had. However, he had not seen anyone in the last two hours. Not since he'd seen an armed patrol, out on a manhunt.

Jack's travels brought him in the vicinity of a berry bush. An up close and personal inspection revealed the small fruits were indeed edible. Fortunately it was a bush that had been covered in their survival training. It was shown as a prime example by Sergeant Kerry due to the fact that there was another bush just like this within five hundred feet of where their class was conducted. Jack stocked the ample cargo pockets on his trousers with enough of the small berries in order to have a small meal for later.

Filling both of them with as many berries as he possibly could, Jack knew that they would provide several meals. The platoon's training in the past weeks had taught them to make a meal off of a handful of food.

Jack then resumed his trek towards his pickup point. In order to avoid being spotted, he put the practice to the pavement and moved at only two inches per second. It was important to avoid visual contact of anyone who may be watching.

While the second squad leader had been checking all around him, no one had been spotted since the two man guards, now four hours ago. This didn't necessarily mean no one was there. It just meant they hadn't been spotted.

As the sun approached the horizon, Jack slithered between two bushes and prepared to bed down for the night. Although it would be a cooler night, he couldn't afford the risk of using a blanket that might give away his hidden location.

Jack slept soundly and awoke in the predawn hour. Although well rested and somewhat akin to his surroundings, something just didn't seem right to him.

Jack lifted his head straight back and found it pressed against cold metal. His intuition immediately told him that the small, round piece of metal was a gun.

"Put your hands behind your head," the voice said. "Now."

Jack did as instructed; knowing that if he didn't it would be certain death. He was quickly patted down while what he guessed was a pistol remained at the top of his spine.

After his Ghillie suit was removed and his hands secured behind his back, Jack was lead rather roughly to a waiting van. Before being more or less thrown face first into the vehicle, a blindfold was placed snugly around his head, blocking any view.

He was taken for what seemed to be a twenty minute ride, and then extracted from the van. While it seemed to be just more than a quarter of an hour, Jack couldn't be totally sure. The problem worse than tracking the time was tracking the route or distance. The ride could have taken several miles, or it could have been around in a circle.

Roughly handling the squad leader once again, the captors took him inside a building. Again, he could have been taken deep into the building or led in circles.

Finally stopping, one guard unlaced and removed Jack's boots, while another unbuttoned his blouse. His top was grabbed in a bunch between his shoulder blades.

With one swift motion, the plastic zip strip was cut and Jack was kicked into a cell. His blouse was pulled back, yanking his arms to the rear.

As the cell door slammed shut, Jack landed in an inch deep cold water pool. When the splash subsided, he ripped the blindfold off.

"Shit," he swore to himself.

Leaning back against the wall, Jack took an appraisal of the situation he now faced.

*I've let my squad down. They expected me to be perfect for them, to get to the extraction point. Well, I can't get pissed at them for being in here. Now I just can't break.*

Date and Time Unknown, SERE POW Camp

"Lance Corporal Jack Jackson, 751224."

"Who do you work for," the interrogator pried.

"I am Lance Corporal Jack Jackson, 751224."

## Forming A Foundation

Jack was backhanded hard enough to send him to the floor. When he was back in the chair, the interrogator tried again.

“Who do you work for?”

“I am Lance Corporal Jack Jackson, 751224.”

The squad leader was punched squarely in the abdomen, sending a rush of air from his lungs as he was sent backwards to the floor. He curled in a ball and tried to ease his pain. This didn't last long, as two guards replaced the captive in the chair.

“Who do you work for?”

“I am Lance Corporal Jack Jackson, 751224.”

“Put him back in the cell,” the lead man said. “Maybe he needs some time to think who is in charge now.”

Jack was blindfolded and thrown again into a cell. The water seemed deeper and colder now. He could not keep track of time and didn't even know if he had slept. There was nothing in him that indicated if he had slipped unconscious or not. The process he had just been through had been tried several times already.

He had been given no food, little water and very substandard accommodations. Being shoved in a small room with no lights and no window, he had no idea of what time of day it was, let alone how long had passed. As much as Jack had tried, the effort had become too great to bother. He gave up that effort and focused his energy on the more important task of not breaking his will.

Date and Time Unknown, SERE Containment Area

Mustard checked his map. He was nearing his extraction point and he knew it. Excitement was brewing inside him, but young Joseph knew he had to keep it in check. He couldn't afford any mistake now. He needed to get to the extraction point in order to have a chance of freeing those that had been taken prisoner.

He knew no one had ever done this before with these instructors and staff. That's why he was having so much trouble keeping calm.

Date and Time Unknown, SERE POW Camp Command Center

“Sir,” Sergeant Kerry said, “We've got everyone in the platoon except for one person.”

“And my guess,” Major Ingram replied, “is that it is someone from second squad.”

“Yes, sir. PFC Mustard.”

“Well, at least I'm surprised there. I figured it was Jackson.”

“That's what I would have thought too, sir. But Jackson is in containment. According to most estimates and calculations, Mustard should be able to reach his RP in the next hour.”

“Good to go. We've got to play it fair, though. As much as we might want to send every available asset out there to find him, we're technically not supposed to know he's there. If our designated man trackers find him, perfect. If they don't, it proves there is a first time for everything.”

Date and Time Unknown, SERE POW Camp

His captors again opened the door and blindfolded him. This time he was not just forcefully lead to the interrogation room. Now he was thrown into every wall the guards could find to slam him into. In the interrogation room, he was now tied to the chair instead of being allowed free from restraints.

Beyond a blinding light, the squad leader could see the silhouette of a body but could not make out the face. Its voice was soon to follow.

“Who do you work for?”

“I am Lance Corporal Jack Jackson, 751224.”

“We know who you are. Who do you work for?”

“I am Lance Corporal Jack Jackson, 751224.”

“Lance Corporal,” the voice said, becoming annoyed. “You may as well tell us what we want to know. PFC Mustard has already broke. He told us everything.”

“I am Lance Corporal Jack Jackson, 751224.”

“We will make sure you live in hell.”

There was no physical violence in this interrogation. He was, however, slammed repeatedly into walls again enroute to a cell.

Promptly upon being pushed in, Jack knew this cell was a different one. There was no puddle on the ground. The temperature had to have been well above a hundred and ten.

Date and Time Unknown, SERE Enclosure Area

## Forming A Foundation

Mustard was now five feet from the metal post that boasted a small wooded sign that said '2M.' Taking one last slow look around, he assured himself that he was not being watched or approached. He still had to be careful. He knew there could have been someone hiding in a nearby bush, waiting and watching just for him.

He slithered faster the final feet and wrapped his hand around the base of the post.

Private First Class Joseph Todd Mustard was safe. He was the first one to outfox the best SERE training crew in the Marine Corps.

He curled his left arm and dropped his head into it. Mustard, now hardened Marine, tough as steel and blood, began to cry. Pride pushed the tears from him. He knew he had now earned his due place in the world and had become the man his family wanted him to become.

Strangely there was one thing that was more important to him. He had become the man he wanted his squad leader to see him as.

Date and Time Unknown, SERE POW Camp

*Mustard wouldn't have broke, Jack thought. That kid knows I'd kill him if he did. That little bastard's tough. He wouldn't have broke. None of my men would do that. They're all better than that now.*

Jack was sweating profusely due to the high temperatures. Soon enough, he was blindfolded again and thrown to the interrogation chamber. When he was tied down to a chair again, he heard the voice.

"Are you enjoying the conditions of your new hell? Is it too hot for you?"

"I've been in hotter. I'm from Chicago."

"Are you going to tell us what we need to know now?"

"I am Lance Corporal Jack Jackson, 751224."

"We know that. If you cooperate we will take it easy on you. No torment."

"I am Lance Corporal Jack Jackson, 751224."

"Fine. Take him back to the cell. Turn up the heat."

They blindfolded him and threw him back into a cell. It seemed to be the same cell, but now it felt much hotter than any sauna he had ever experienced. The heat drew out what little energy he had.

*Keep going dammit.*

Who's voice was that? Jack heard it inside his head, but it wasn't his own.

*Don't give up on us dammit.*

It was Miller.

*If you let me down, I'm gonna fucking kill you. I'll shoot you twice for everyone in the platoon.*

"I won't fail you, Brew," Jack said out loud as he started to cry. "I'm not gonna fail."

Time and Date Unknown, SERE Containment Area

Mustard had composed himself and was picked up by a patrol. He would not let go of the post until he had made them very sure and that they understood he was safe.

Mustard was taken to a room that had a map on the wall.

"Your platoon is being held captive here," a man told Mustard. "There are no locks on the cell doors."

"I may have missed something," Mustard replied, "but if there aren't any locks, what's keeping them in the cells?"

"The doors will latch shut and there's no handle on the inside."

"Duh," Mustard said, feeling like an idiot. "Sorry. Probably just the lack of sleep."

"That's alright. Anyways, three doors down is a safe house. If you can free them, all you have to do is get them here to this building."

"Ok. As far as I can see, the only challenge will be getting in and getting them and myself out undetected."

"They have no outside guards. I have heard stories of the guards doing nothing but interrogating and sleeping. From what I understand, I don't think inside would be too difficult either."

"Alright," Mustard said, contemplating his options. "Do you have any weapons I can get?"

"I have one," the man said thoughtfully. "It is a good pistol. I will let you use it on one condition."

"What is that?"

"It receives care in your armory before you return it to me here."

Mustard extended his hand and said, "Sir, you've got a deal."

"Good. But you must understand, I can guarantee you no personnel."

"That's fine. I'll do this myself."

"You are very brave indeed," the man said.

"I am only this brave because my squad leader made me this way," Mustard said. "He'd expect and accept nothing less out of me right now."

## Forming A Foundation

“He sounds like a good leader.”

“He is. Mainly because he leads by example. He expects perfection and none of us want to let him down.”

Date and Time Unknown, SERE POW Camp

Due to the immense energy draining heat, Jack could not be thrown into walls during this trip to the interrogation chamber. He was drug there instead by two guards.

Jack was hefted into a chair and secured down at both wrists and ankles as well as at the waist. The voice spoke and directed him to lift his head. Although he barely had the strength, Jack did so and saw that in a chair in front of him was secured his assistant.

The faceless source of the voice stood behind Miller. Brew looked just as weak as Jack felt. It was obvious though that his muscles were tense as if expecting a beating to continue. Every so often there was a slight shudder in Jack’s friend.

“What do you think of your hell’s conditions now? Too hot?”

“I’m from Chicago. Go there in the summer.”

The voice chuckled.

“Now, Lance Corporal Jackson, we shall try this again. You will not answer our questions for your own good and well being. Maybe you will do it for Miller. Who do you work for?”

“I am Lance Corporal Jack Jackson, 751224.”

The voice put Miller in a chokehold.

“Who do you work for?”

“I am Lance Corporal Jack Jackson, 751224.”

The hold became visibly tighter. A moment later, the arm was removed from Miller after his body went completely limp.

“Who do you work for?”

Jack held back the tears as he answered.

“I am Lance Corporal Jack Jackson, 751224.”

“Take him to cell four.”

Time and Date Unknown, SERE Safe house

Mustard decided he would wait until dark. He wanted as much on his side as possible, and for once dark couldn’t hurt.

He now knew that the cells were in a long underground tunnel. Each person that he freed could help him free others. The only trick would be getting them out.

The stairway down to the cells was directly inside the front door. Just down the hallway was the main interrogation room and the recreation room used by the guards. If they weren’t careful leaving the building, they would all be in some serious trouble.

Once clear from the front door, they would just have to run like hell to the safe house.

Time and Date Unknown, SERE POW Camp

The voice was now a silhouette in the doorway of Jack’s new cell. The temperature was well below freezing. Jack was curled in the fetal position, shaking violently for warmth. Now Jack was the first to speak of this man’s ‘hell.’

“Cubs win the pennant?”

The voice laughed.

“On your feet.”

Jack was barely able to comply. He was dragged once again to the interrogation chamber, where he was dropped in and secured to a chair that faced his Corpsman.

“Maybe this time,” the voice said, “you will answer when we mistreat your Marines. Who do you work for?”

“I am Lance Corporal Jack Jackson, 751224.”

Doc was backhanded, sending him and the chair to the floor. Two guards put him back up. A tear rolled down his face.

“Who do you work for?”

“I am Lance Corporal Jack Jackson, 751224.”

The voice punched Doc hard enough to send him falling to his back and break the chair to splinters. Spazz curled into a fetal position and sobbed.

“ALRIGHT ASSHOLE,” Jack screamed, “YOU WANT ANSWERS OUT OF ME YOU BEAT ME.”

Jack’s enagement was visible for all to see in his face. It was also noticeable in his arms and legs that were straining against the small zip ties.

## Forming A Foundation

“HE DID NOTHING TO HURT YOU,” Jack continued, “AND I WILL NOT LET YOU TREAT MY MEN LIKE THIS.”

As if to reiterate his point, all four zip ties snapped as Jack finished his sentence. Before anyone could move, Jack picked up the chair and broke it over the head of the voice. He picked up a longer piece of splintered wood.

One guard came charging in, hands low, attempting to tackle the irate prisoner. Jack swung the makeshift baseball bat and connected with his temple. He then turned his attention to the last guard.

“Put your hands on your head or I’ll treat you worse than them.”

The man stepped forward as if to challenge this.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Jack said. With explosive speed, the bat swung without being seen and was smashed on the man’s head.

All three were now on the floor.

With their captors incapacitated, Jack knelt beside his Doc.

“Doc,” Jack said. “Get up. It’s time to free the others and get the fuck out of here.”

Doc slowly got up, but did and limped through the door with his squad leader. A chair from the hall was placed in front of the door to block it from opening outward, as it should. To the right, down the hall, they could hear two guards having a conversation at a distance. Jack figured it was a miracle that they hadn’t heard his irate comments to the voice. To the left was the front entrance to the building. As they approached the front door, the stairs to the cells were to the left of it.

As they approached the front door, a figure came trotting quickly up the steps outside the building. Just when Jack figured their escape was blown, the figure came into the light.

It was Mustard.

“What the fuck,” the Squad Leader gasped.

“I’m here to rescue you, Lance Corporal,” Mustard said in a whisper.

“They said you broke.”

“That’s a negative Lance Corporal. I’ve never been in here for them to interrogate. We don’t have much time. Let’s go.”

They hurried down the steps and began opening the cell doors. When all the prisoners were freed, they took positions on the stairs.

On the ground floor, Mustard took a post on the side of the front door farthest from the stairs. There was a cubbyhole he was able to hide in, while Jack knelt at the top of the stairs. They poised themselves to keep an eye out for guards that might come.

Each person now knew the plan, simply running full tilt boogie to the safe house three doors down. Jack and Mustard waved them on.

Amazingly, all of those in the stairs and in the basement left the building before anything happened. Jack and Mustard were just arising to leave when the interrogation room door started to shake.

“Get out,” Jack said quietly. “Go, go, go.”

They bolted out and ran hell bent for freedom to the safe house.

Date and Time Unknown, SERE POW Camp Command Center

The Command Center was next door to the POW Prison. It sat in a nearly identical building, separated by a narrow alley. Major Ingram was up pacing, knowing something wasn’t right. Just then, the phone rang.

“Major Ingram,” he said tersely.

“Sir, this is Captain Freeman next door. Your men have escaped.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes sir. Lance Corporal Jackson knocked out myself and two guards when we had him and a Doc in the interrogation room.”

“What happened?”

“Well, sir, we were trying to extract information from Jackson by roughing up his Doc. Evidently we were playing a little harder than Jackson liked and he broke out of the restraints. After breaking the chair over my head, he knocked out the two guards.”

“How was Jackson restrained?”

“Small, thin zip strips, sir. We didn’t figure he needed too much holding back. He was pretty weak.”

“And just how badly were you roughing up his Corpsman?”

“About a level 5.”

“I’d say you gent’s finally got what you had coming to you.”

“I guess so, sir. I’m amazed that he broke through the restraints, let alone striking back. I mean, he took out three people without us getting him back down.”

“These men are like wild caged dogs. They get pissed off and get loose you’ve got a serious problem on your hands.”

## Forming A Foundation

“Yes sir. Well, as I imagine, they’re probably at the safe house now.”

“Well, thank you Captain,” Major Ingram said, hanging up the phone.

Date and Time Unknown, SERE Safe House

The platoon sat inside and remained fairly relaxed. They had all managed to do what few before had done. Escape from their SERE captors.

Jack approached Miller, who was helping the Doc remain comfortable.

“Brew,” Jack said, “I’m really sorry you got choked out because of me.”

“No harm, no foul,” Miller said. “They were trying to get us to break. I don’t think any of our guys did.”

“I don’t think that would have lasted much longer.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“And how’s my Corpsman,” Jack asked.

“I’m alright, man,” Spazz said quietly. “I’ll make it.”

“Good. Again, sorry you got beat because of me.”

“If it wasn’t you, it would have been someone else in the squad. Oh shit, man,” Spazz gasped. “Look at your wrists.”

“Oh, yeah. From breaking through the zip strips.”

“Man I need to fix that shit up.”

“You relax, Doc. I’ll get Zurek to fix me up.”

“Fuck no, Jack,” Spazz said. “You’re my responsibility.”

Although Jack knew there would be some sort of response like that, he felt the need to look out for his Doc and give him the opportunity for a needed break. The squad leaders all knew that all of their Corpsmen would gladly help out someone from another squad. When it came down to it though, those in their own squads had the priority. A moment later bandages had been snugly applied.

“Att-“ Cline started to say.

“As you were,” Major Ingram said. “Where’s Jackson?”

“Here, sir.”

“Come here, Marine.”

They went into an unoccupied side room.

“Just what the fuck do you think you were doing?”

“Escaping, sir. Just like I was supposed to.”

“You gave three guards concussions. One of them is a Marine Captain. Do you realize that could be considered assault?”

“So would what he did to my Doc and my Marines, let alone myself.”

“Knocking a Captain unconscious by breaking a chair over his head could be considered a court martial offense.”

“Well then court martial me, sir,” Jack said defensively and forcefully, but barely with a respectful edge. “I was doing what I was supposed to do. My Marines and my Doc are MY responsibility. Their welfare is my accountability and mine alone. My Marines are a fine group of high quality and highly devoted men who truly understand the meaning of honor, courage and commitment. My Corpsman doesn’t belong in the Navy. He is every bit a Marine as the rest of my squad and deserves to wear the uniform as much as anyone.

“One of my Marines had been choked out before my eyes. My Corpsman was getting severely beaten, so badly that his chair had been splintered after he had been punched in the stomach. I sure as hell wasn’t going to let them get away with that, sir. If you want to court martial me for doing my job, fine. You can take my rank right here and now. But if you’re going to take my rank you might as well take the Eagle, Globe and Anchor away from me as well. That’s the symbol of a Marine and being a Marine is what I was trying to do. If you’re telling me that saving my Marines from further torment is not leadership and troop welfare, I don’t want to have anything to do with the Marine Corps.”

As Jack had progressed through his speech, his voice had become more and more firm and forceful. It barely remained respectful. It did, however, reinforce to the Major Jack’s undying devotion to the well being of his Marines that had become evident in the field.

“Very well, Lance Corporal,” the Platoon Commander said after consideration. “I’m not going to court martial you or even NJP you. I know that everyone here was beaten pretty badly. Personally, I’m glad someone snapped and gave those guards back a taste of their own medicine.”

The Major led Jack back into the small room where the platoon was crammed in like sardines.

“Marines,” Major Ingram stated, “fine job. A convoy of Hummvees will be here in a few minutes to pick you up and take you back to your barracks. Tomorrow morning at 0900 everyone will need to be at the Warehouse. Squad leaders, take charge of your squads.”

“Yes, sir,” they all mumbled softly.

## Forming A Foundation

Wednesday November 8, 1999

2200 EST, G Barracks

They had all just been dropped off at their barracks. Jack checked over all of his Marines before returning to his room. Doc and Miller were both very tired and very sore, but both could feel their strength returning.

Just before sitting down to undress, there was a knock at his door. Jack walked over and found PFC Tom Gunn, one of Cline's Marines, at his door.

"What's up Gunn," Jack asked.

"Do you know where Lance Corporal Cline is, Lance Corporal?"

"No, I don't. Why? What's up? This looks serious."

"It's PFC Slocum, Lance Corporal. He looks like he's really hurt. Willis and I had just come back from the vending machines when Lance Corporal Cline was coming out of our room. When we went in, Slocum was lying on his bed. He isn't moving and doesn't seem to be doing too good. I tried asking him how he was but he just kinda grunted at me."

"Alright, let me take a look at him."

Jack was let into the room, where he asked the other two roommates to wait outside.

"TJ," Jack said, "did Cline kick your ass?"

"Yes, Lance Corporal," Slocum whispered. "But I deserved it. I fucked up when you captured him."

"But he shouldn't have beaten you now. Good God. Let me get my Doc in here."

Jack placed a phone call and a moment later, Spazz entered and looked over the Marine as well. Questions were asked and answers given about sore spots and aches. When the checkup was completed, Spazz pulled his squad leader to the side.

"Jack, I think he needs to go to the hospital."

"Alright," Jack said. "That was pretty much my opinion, but I'm not the medical whiz you are. I'll tell him."

Jack knelt beside Slocum and said, "TJ, Spazz thinks you should be looked at in the hospital."

"Please, not now, Lance Corporal. I want to be with the squad tomorrow and for the activation."

"Slocum," Spazz said, "man, you should really be over there right now."

"Please don't. Don't make me go," Slocum begged. "I swear on my life I'll go after the activation."

"Alright, TJ," Jack said. "You damn well better, or else you're gonna have problems with both me and your squad leader."

Jack walked back to his room, letting the other roommates back in with Slocum with the specific instructions that he was to be watched and helped. Jack heard Cline next door.

He went through the head and pushed his counterpart so hard, Cline landed with his back to the floor. Before he could rise, Jack put a knee on either side of his torso and his forearm across Cline's throat.

"Now, Cline," Jack said softly but fierce, "how would you like it if I kicked your ass right now like you just did to Slocum?"

"That little rat bastard. Did that little rat fuck squeal to you?"

"No. One of his roommates got concerned after getting back in his room. He did the right thing and came and got me when he couldn't find you. Spazz took a look at Slocum and said he should be in the hospital. He wouldn't do it because he wants to be there for your squad in the next two days until the activation. After the ceremony, I want you to personally take him over to the hospital and baby-sit him through the whole process. Am I understood?"

"Yes."

"Good. If you don't, I'm going to beat you to within an inch of your life. That's not a threat, it's a damn promise. Have a nice night."

Jack kneed his counterpart's groin and departed for his own room.

Thursday November 9, 1999

0900 EST, Old Warehouse

Everyone that was there a few days prior was now back. No one had broke. The tough wills of the platoon had remained strong through the time when most would have broke. Granted, they hadn't been forced to endure the full version, as Mustard had played the hero, rescuing all of them from impending doom.

The squad leaders gathered at the side of the room.

"Well Jack," Mickey said, "it appears second squad pulled off a miracle again."

"Yeah, now just remember traditions."

"Which tradition would you be referring to," Fish asked. "The Marine Corps seems to have so many of them."

"That if someone pulls your ass out of the drink like that, you buy him a case of his favorite beer. Doing the rough math in my head, I'd say he rates fifty one cases of Bud Light."

## Forming A Foundation

"I'll tell my Marines they owe him," Cline said.

"Mine don't have a choice," Jack said. "We're all going to the exchange tomorrow and buying. I'm making them."

"I guess the rest of us will have to do that too," Mickey said.

"Sure," Cline said. "After all, we do owe him."

They returned to their seats as the Major and Gunny came in. They were instructed that today would simply hold two things. First, scheduling for their upcoming job training. Each Marine and Doc would be sent to the courses they were told of before the training began. Now it was just a matter of scheduling it.

The only other part of their day would be practicing for the platoon's activation. It was, they were told, a very simple ceremony and should only require a half dozen quick runs. Quick meaning no more than fifteen minutes for each one.

1400 EST, Old Warehouse

"Jack, I've been thinkin'."

"I really don't like hearing you say that, Brew," Jack said. He had learned that when his Marines got ideas, it was something strangely unusual.

"I was just thinkin'," Miller said, shrugging off the comment, "Now that we've passed all our tests and we're a squad now, how about initiations?"

"Initiations into a squad? Sounds like another infantry thing."

"Kinda like getting pinned when you get promoted. Only ours should be a little more involved."

"You know, Brew, some people would call this hazing."

"It's not hazing if they do it on their own free will."

"Alright, I guess we could do something like this. But no pressuring anyone into it. What did you have in mind?"

"Well, I know they went into the bear pit after we were finished and loosened up the dirt in it. With the rain of the past couple days it should be perfect for mud wrestling."

"So basically, you wanna do WWF Mud Mania?"

"Somethin' like that. I don't know how much of the squad would go for full contact, but I think the squad would go for a double elimination tournament."

"I'm just having a little problem with the math here. There's thirteen in our squad. That's an uneven match up. How do you wanna work around that, mud master?"

"I know you believe in leadership by example, so there's no way you won't get out there and rumble. I'd say you and me are the first match to start things off. Then you can act as ref for the rest of the matches."

"Knowing you, though, I'd say you got some other idea running through your mind."

"I'd just got to thinking that, to encourage winning, the loser of each match should get pied by the one that beat them. I think it would be cool to get someone slimed too."

"With a nice big bucket of Nickelodeon's green slime?"

"Yeah. I think it oughta be the big loser. The one who winds up in last place."

"Alright. I'll go along with it. But like I said, no one gets forced into it. I think everyone will be up for it though."

"So do I. So when can we do this?"

"I'd think after the ceremony," Jack said after short consideration. "We'll have plenty of time between the activation and the ball."

1600 EST, NAS Pensacola, Blue Angels Hangar

Jack had decided to go back to what could basically now almost be considered his old workshop. While he wasn't really detached from the Blue Angels yet, he might just as well be. For the better part of the next three months, he would be off doing training and wouldn't be here. Jack knew the day would eventually come when he had to leave the squadron he had learned to love and had admired beginning at a young age. Now, pulling his tool box up to The Duce, Jack realized this would be one of the last times he got to fix his 'girl.'

There was only one up gripe on the bird that needed to be fixed. An up gripe is a problem that was a nuisance, but wouldn't cause the plane to not be able to fly. Chuckling at the problem, Jack noted it was one that had happened several times before, thanks to the lack of intelligence on his pilot's behalf. After Jack had replaced the needed parts and completed the calibrations, Hobstock magically showed up, ruining his techs hopes of leaving early after only an hour of work.

"Well, Jack," Hobs said, "It appears you're not the only one leaving the squadron."

"What? Chief Schulze is way too important to leave."

"Very funny wise guy. I was talking about me."

"That's sure not much of a loss for the squadron."

"Alright, I see how it is. Always got to poke fun and think negative."

"Actually, I was thinking in the positive. My replacement wont have to do as much work as I did."

## Forming A Foundation

Hobstock just shook his head and sighed. Despite the constant heckeling of each other, they had a great working relationship and would miss each other in the separation.

“So what unit has to deal with you now, Hobs?”

“VMA-224. The Fighting Bengals down in Beaufort, South Carolina.”

“I know a couple people down there. I’ll have to give them the forewarning.”

“I’m sure you will too. But I understand there’s a little air of mystery about your new duty assignment.”

“A little bit. I’ll be stationed at Camp Lejeune. I can’t really tell you all too much more about what I’ll be doing, except that I’ll be a comm guy.”

“And as I know too, you’re a squad leader.”

“Yeah, just don’t go saying that all too loud,” Jack said in a mockingly secretive way. “I don’t want anyone to think I’m responsible or anything.”

“Speaking of responsible,” Hobs said changing the subject, “Your pal Murphy hasn’t been.”

“Still been showing up late?”

“Yep. And the quality of his work has really declined. The Adjutant is really getting pissed now.”

“I couldn’t find him after you’d first told me about this little problem. Sometimes people just don’t want to be found. And when a Marine gets like that, there’s a good chance you’re not going to find him.”

“I know how that goes. Fortunately I can usually find you.”

“Yeah, unfortunately for me.”

Pushing his toolbox back to the closet, Jack assured Hobs that he would talk to Murphy to find out what the problem was and do his best to reconcile the problem. After all, if Jack couldn’t do it, the probability was that no one could.

1700 EST, E-Club

The problem had weighed seriously on Murphy since he had told his closest friend that he couldn’t go on in this lifestyle. Now, in deeper thought about it, Murphy realized that it wasn’t just the Special Ops part he would have a hard time with. He remembered now something that his Drill Instructors had constantly driven home to his platoon in boot camp. Before anything else, a Marine is a rifleman first. That meant that even though he was an admin clerk now, if a conflict broke out, he could be picking up his M-16 in order to have to kill someone.

Every part of him hated the thought of that.

Now he was left with having to try to get out on a hardship discharge. His views as a conscientious objector were coming for too late, after his enlistment had been in effect for a year. There was nothing he could do now to change the decisions of the past. It was long since done and now water far under the bridge and long over the dam. He now had to focus on getting discharged and trying to get on with his life elsewhere. Of course the person he knew that had the best chances of helping him through this was the very same person he felt that he had failed so horribly.

All through the time they had known each other, Jack had always helped him whenever that help was needed. Jack had asked for nothing in return, just demanded his best efforts in everything he did and to be the best Marine he possibly could. This was nothing other than what Jack expected of anyone he was in charge of as a Deck Leader in G Barracks.

Jack, however, through his actions and attitude presented an image that truly demanded it out of you through ways you could only truly feel rather than explain. Those he was in charge of knew he truly cared about them and wanted the best for them.

But Murphy, deep down in every part of himself felt he had failed Jack because he couldn’t live up to what was expected out of him. Granted the expectations placed were very high and quite demanding, but there were nothing impossible. And now, this person whom he had failed was the one person best suited to be able to help him. How could he in good conscience expect Jack to help him?

That would only take yet more consideration.

1900 EST, G Barracks

Jack had returned to the barracks in his blue coveralls. While they would normally be looked at as a usual uniform for someone who is a part of the maintenance personnel, this set got confused looks being on a Marine. The sole reason for that was that the nametapes instead of being green with black lettering were the Navy standard blue with white lettering. They still said U.S. Marines above the left breast pocket, but was considered in most respects to be a Navy uniform for a Navy squadron.

After a nice hot shower, Jack checked up on his Marines and Doc before going to dinner with his two assistants. Halfway through the meal, Doc noticed that something was causing the Squad Leader’s mind to wander.

“What’s running through your mind Jack,” he asked. “You look like you could use some help from your assistants.”

“Nah, not really,” Jack said thoughtfully. “I’ve just got a little issue back at the squadron that came up with a friend of mine. I’m just trying to figure out how to work through this.”

“I thought you were detached from the squadron,” Miller said.

## Forming A Foundation

“Not yet. None of us are detached from our parent units yet. Tomorrow at the activation we really are in all respects but for the final orders. So I’m still a part of the Blue Angels for now. There is a couple people over there seem to think I’m the only one that can really handle this problem because I’m the best friend this guy’s got in the squadron.”

“If I were to guess,” Doc said leaning back, “I’d say there was something going on with our old squad mate Murphy. Is he in some serious trouble?”

“No comment Doc. I don’t want to bring up other people’s problems without their say so about it.”

“Understood.”

“Any which way, I’m going to try to be tracking a couple people down tonight and may be a little detached from the squad. Therefore, I’ll need you two to pretty much keep an eye on everything. I will have my cell phone if something comes up, alright?”

His assistants nodded that that they understood. The trio had then left the chowhall and Jack set off for the E-Club. Murphy wasn’t there at that given point, but a mutual friend had said that Murphy went to the exchange. After once again having no luck at another building, Jack tried the barracks.

The first knocks had proved unsuccessful at drawing Murphy to the door. Jack knew that Murphy’s one and only old roommate had moved out just before their training had begun, so the only one that could or would answer would be Murphy. As Jack was raising his hand for a second try, the door slowly opened.

When Murphy saw his old friend and deck leader, there was a distant look in his eyes that Jack noted. The Deck Leader turned Squad Leader knew the look of someone who was intoxicated. Murphy motioned his friend inside and made his way back to his bed, where he leaned back against the headboard.

Before saying anything Jack did what had come natural to him for quite a while and surveyed the area. Murphy half sat and half laid on the bed holding a half empty bottle of Jack Daniels. His uniform was hung up on the outside of his wall locker, and his wallet sat on the desk with a credit card slip from the exchange. With a closer look, Jack saw that the large bottle that was now half empty had only been purchased an hour before hand at the exchange.

“So, Murphy,” Jack said breaking the uncomfortable silence. “How’s everything been going?”

Silent for a moment, Murph finally replied, “Not too good, man.”

“Yeah, I’d heard through the grapevine you’ve seemed a little out of it at work these past few weeks. Anything you want to talk about?”

No sooner had Jack’s question been asked, than there was a tear rolling down Murphy’s cheek. He looked at his friend and spoke softly.

“You’re the only one I can talk to, Jack. I don’t trust anyone else. I trust you with my life because you’ve been the only one whose treated me with the respect that I’ve wanted all my life. Sure, other people here and at home treat me with respect, but not like you do. You don’t just act like a leader, you treat me like a friend. You show me how you want things done and you make me feel worthwhile. But I failed you when I couldn’t live up to you’re expectations with the platoon. I just can’t deal with that.”

“Listen, this life we live isn’t always simple. There’s a lot more to being a Marine than just a nine to five job and not everyone knows that and we both know not everyone can handle it. We both know some of the famous athletes who couldn’t hack it through Marine Corps Boot Camp, and here you’ve done it. But this life isn’t for everyone.”

“I know,” Murphy said with another tear rolling down his cheek. “I’ve just realized too late that this life wasn’t for me. Now, I’m afraid I can’t get out of it, and I’m scared of what might happen. Ever since that day on the beach I’ve kept thinking how I could never bring harm to anyone, let alone kill them. I’d rather they killed me. That would have screwed someone else in the end if I was out there on a mission. How can I go on with all that?”

“Murphy, I’ve got something to ask you both as a leader, but more as a friend. Are you thinking about suicide?”

“No. Hell no, man. I couldn’t kill anyone, let alone myself. It’s just that...there’s one thing I want. The only person I could ask to help me I don’t want to because of how badly I’ve let him down recently.”

“Why don’t you ask him anyways? What’s the worst he could do? Say no?”

“I just don’t think I could ask him. He probably wouldn’t understand.”

“I think he would understand because he probably already knows what you’d ask of him.”

“Alright, I’ll do it. Jack, would you help me get out of the Corps.”

“Sure. I’ll do what I can to help you out, but I want you to understand something. It won’t be quick and it won’t be easy. It’s going to be a long and difficult task that will need to be handled with care. But if I’m going to do this for you I’m going to expect a little something in return.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, I want you to get back to being the Murphy that worked for me before all this started. Quit showing up to work late, quit just going through the motions. Put the regular Murphy charm back into the office and do your best. Your boots shine better than anyone in the squadron. You’ve got a better PFT score than pretty much every Marine on this base. You’ve given me things to be proud of on more than one occasion. Just keep your head up and we’ll get through this. Alright?”

“Yes, Lance Corporal.”

“Now am I going to have to worry about you getting drunk and doing something stupid after I leave here?”

## Forming A Foundation

“No, Lance Corporal. In fact, if you would be so kind, please get this bottle out of my sight.”

“That I can do.” Jack stood to leave and Murphy followed.

“There’s one other thing I wanted to tell you,” Murphy said.

“What’s that?”

“Well, don’t take this the wrong way, but it’s the best way I can say it.”

Before saying anything else, Murphy gave his only true friend a hug.

“Thanks for everything you’ve done for me,” Murphy then said. “You’re the only one that’s ever shown they give a shit about me.”

“You’re welcome, Murph. You take care of yourself now and don’t do anything stupid.”

“I won’t do anything else. I promise.”

2100 EST, G Barracks

It wasn’t that Jack didn’t trust Murphy, there was just something that was making him a little suspicious right now. Jack knew he was hell bent on getting out of the Marine Corps, which was understandable with his mindset. What Jack didn’t quite see was on the level was Murphy’s statement that he wouldn’t do anything else.

Murphy, while a good Marine and above average in the tasks set out for him, he couldn’t seem to stay out of trouble from time to time. Jack remembered one specific incident on a field day not so long ago that had caused a problem significant enough for his assistant to get an ass chewing from the feared Gunner Hayes. Gunner Hayes was the type that was hard core enough to make Hulk Hogan and Arnold Schwarzeneger combined look like a cupcake.

On this given field day, Jack had noticed a long black scuff mark, about five or six feet along the hall as if someone had simply drug their shoe along the tile floor. All of the Marines there knew what would need to be done for field day, the new discrepancy included, so Jack went over to the administration building to take care of paperwork for a couple of his Marines. Murphy assured Jack there wouldn’t be any problems. While at the admin center, Jack naturally did a little bragging about the fine quality work his Marines always did for field day. Granted this was already known throughout the command element due to the previous inspections, but Jack felt like bragging a little more to Gunner Hayes.

Upon return to the barracks, complete with Gunner Hayes to do a surprise inspection, they found the area in question to be in relatively good order except for one small discrepancy. The scuff mark was still on the floor. All of the Marines tasked with cleaning the common areas were found relaxing in one of the laundry rooms, apparently having quite the good time.

Murphy was told to do a quick inspection with the two higher ups while the rest remained where they were. Intentionally taking the long route to get to the scuff mark, there were very few problems noticed, just what might happen with a small amount of traffic going through the halls. When the incriminating evidence was discovered, the Deck Leader and Gunner played it off as if they hadn’t seen it before.

However, instead of blaming someone else, Murphy took the responsibility for not ensuring that the task had been completed. Gunner Hayes promptly tore through him with one of the worst verbal assaults imaginable. Murphy was insulted about everything but his boots. But Murphy had given his squad leader the assurance that there wouldn’t be any problems with the inspection.

Now Murphy was giving the no problems promise again. Somehow the worry about that last incident caused a small sense of worry to creep into the Squad Leader.

Chapter Six  
Forming Up

November 10, 1999

0830 EST, NAS Pensacola, Sherman Field

The forty-eight Marines and four Corpsmen that made up the heart of the platoon had gathered and talked amongst themselves. Unlike the majority of the past couple weeks, they mingled amongst each other regardless of squad. They now set that rivalry aside and treated each other with the brotherly respect they all deserved.

The sun shined brighter than they all remembered of recent weeks. There was not a cloud in the sky and their spirits were high. This seemed to effect the brightness of the day. Orion Platoon was about to join the graces of Phoenix Company.

The phoenix, as legend holds it, was a fabulous Arabian bird said to be the size of an eagle. It was said that only one lived at any given time and it was very long lived, up to a thousand years. As its death approached, the bird made a nest of branches and spices and set it on fire. The phoenix was consumed in the flames. While some in mythology said from the ashes, others said the new phoenix arose from the flames. It was thought to be a gentle creature that crushed nothing and ate only dewdrops.

## Forming A Foundation

Orion was the son of Neptune. He was a handsome giant and a mighty hunter. His father gave him the power of wading through the depths of the sea, or as others say, of walking on its surface. In Greek mythology, Orion loved Merope, and sought her in marriage. He cleared the island of wild beasts, and brought the spoils of the chase as presents to his beloved; but as Oenopion, King of Chios and Merope's father, constantly deferred his consent, Orion attempted to gain possession of the maiden by violence. Her father, incensed at this conduct, having made Orion drunk, deprived him of his sight, and cast him out on the sea shore. Through tribulations that followed, Orion regained his sight and continued to find love through many difficulties.

And these were the characters that this platoon felt they would soon live up to in their own lives.

Jack and Dan met each other off to the side of the group. They would be getting into formation in ten minutes, with the ceremony beginning in twenty. The squad leaders had planned to meet up for one last meaning. They clasped hands in a greeting shake.

"Again, good work in the quals," Dan said.

"All in a days work, man," Jack replied. "But as I remember, your squad did pretty damn good too."

"Still, you've got some shit hot Marines."

"We all do. This really is one shit hot platoon. At least it will be when it's official with this ceremony."

"Yeah. And we can say that we were here for it."

"If only to each other. Too bad it's so classified."

"Yeah. And I heard the security on base went really tight today."

"And air ops are shut down," Jack said. "The Blues took off a half hour ago. They're gonna be back about an hour after we're done. I think I heard flight ops talking about one plane coming in about 0850."

Sturgil walked up and shook hands.

"You ready Fish," Cline asked.

"Third's ready as they'll ever be."

McCoy walked up and shook hands with the other squad leaders.

"How's fightin' fourth squad, Mickey," Jack asked.

"They're good," McCoy said. "Just anxious to get this going."

"Well, we've got a couple minutes before we need to be formed up. Let's start heading that way."

Cline yelled for everyone to move over to the reviewing area. The rest began to move to the formation area in front of the two tents. The band had taken their place. They would be at the platoon's right hand side as they faced the tents and behind them slightly. Twenty yards separated the tents and the platoon, with a podium between those spectator areas and slightly in front.

Each member of the platoon took their appointed place in the formation, from the squad leader at the far right to the Corpsman at the far left as they faced the tents. They had just finished getting covered an aligned when the sound of a large jet on final approach began to sound. The distant spec took shape. When it came to land the platoon had their first good look at the jumbo jet by craning their necks and turning slightly. Few recognized the aircraft as a VC-25.

Everyone recognized it as Air Force One.

Epilogue

Fall In

November 10, 1999

0900 EST, Sherman Field

"Platoon, fall in," Gunny Fields bellowed. The well disciplined Marines and Corpsmen snapped to a very rigid position of attention. The Squad Leaders then gave the reports.

"First squad, all present," Lance Corporal Cline stated after saluting.

The Gunny returned the salute and said "Very well" and cut his salute.

Upon Lance Corporal Cline cutting his salute, Lance Corporal Jackson saluted and reported "Second Squad all present."

"Very well."

"Third squad, all present."

"Very well."

"Fourth squad, all present."

"Very well."

Having received the report from all four squads, Gunny Fields executed an about face. Major Ingram stepped from inside the left tent and stood ten feet in front of the podium.

Gunny Fields saluted and said, "Sir, the platoon is formed. All present."

Major Ingram saluted and said, "Very well. Take your post."

## Forming A Foundation

Gunny Fields took his place at the end of first squad. The Lieutenants of each squad took their posts five feet to the right of their squad leader. Major Ingram did an about face after commanding, "Platoon present arms." The platoon saluted.

Major General Oztrike took his place before Major Ingram, who saluted and reported that the platoon was formed. After the salute was formed, Major Ingram took his seat.

"Order arms," General Oztrike commanded, then "Parade rest."

Naturally their movements were extra crisp before a General. He turned around and stood in the same position until a black sedan pulled up behind the tents. A round seal had been placed on the podium when the General turned to face the platoon. He called them to attention and the voice of an unseen face came from the speakers.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Marines, Sailors and distinguished guests. Please rise." The occupants of the tents stood. "Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States."

The band played four ruffles and flourishes and the platoon saluted. Hail to the chief played as the Commander in Chief came in front of the General and returned the salute before standing in front of his seat.

The music stopped and the Gunny ordered the salutes cut. General Oztrike turned around and commanded, "March on the colors."

"Platoon," Gunny Fields called, "Present arms."

They saluted again and the band played "It's a grand old flag." The national ensign, flanked by the Marine Corps and Navy flags were carried out, on either side guarded by two Marine riflemen. When in position before the General, the voice spoke again.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, please remain standing for the playing of To The Colors and our National Anthem."

The platoon held their salutes. At the beginning of To The Colors, the Navy and Marine Corps flags dipped and the rifles were held in a salute. As always, Old Glory flew high and proud. At the end of the National Anthem, the colors were ordered posted and all salutes were cut. General Oztrike strode to the podium as the platoon went to parade rest.

"Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, Commandant Rains, CNO Jones, Admiral Williams," The General said before turning to the formation, "Marines, Sailors and Corpsmen, good morning and thank you for being here. For those of you whom I have not met, I am Major General Oztrike, Commander of Phoenix Company. We are here today to commission a new platoon. The group of Marines and Corpsmen you see before you have been tried, tested and proven as a fine combat able element. More than that they will prove themselves to be a terrorist organization, driving fear into the hearts of our enemies."

Laughter rippled over the grounds. The General looked out and thought that the platoon that looked so sharp, having the backdrop of an M-1 Abrams tank on the left behind the band, and the Blue Angels number 7 plane behind them to the right.

"To the platoon I say this. The demands that lie before you will be great. The courage and candor you have displayed so far have been greater. But rather than have me say much adieu about nothing, I'd like to take this time to thank President Martin for taking time out of his busy schedule to be here today."

Applause once again sounded.

"Before I conclude my short statement, I want to say this to the fine warriors assembled here. Never forget who you are. Never forget how important you are. Squad leaders and Devil Docs, make sure to take care of your Marines. The rest of the platoon, take care of each other. The men on either side of you are your brothers in arms. Take care of them first unconditionally and you'll see that they'll take care of you. With that said, it is my pleasure and honor to introduce our guest speaker. Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States."

Applause sounded and the gathered crowd rose. General Oztrike replaced the wireless microphone in the podiums stand as the president arose. At the podium, the General saluted and the president returned it. They shook hands and the General took his seat.

"My fellow Americans, I thank you for being here at this activation ceremony. First, on this November 10<sup>th</sup>, I would like to say to the Marines here and all over the world, and especially this formation of Marines and their fine Corpsman brothers, happy birthday. Two hundred and twenty four years ago today, the Continental Congress signed a resolution that two battalions of Marines be formed. In the centuries since, those two battalions have formed into four divisions, four air wings and four force service support groups. From the halls of Montezuma, to the shores of Tripoli, the United States Marine Corps has always accomplished the missions they've been tasked.

"The squad leaders of this platoon understand quite well what mission accomplishment is. They are all Lance Corporals, the hardest working rank in the Marine Corps. If every Lance Corporal took the same day off, I firmly believe the Corps would cease to function for that day.

"This platoon is the only group to have done something of this magnitude. These squad leaders are the lowest ranking squad leaders to ever step up to the challenge of Special Forces in their positions. The same can be said with the rest of the platoon. These are brave men.

"To the platoon formed here, I simply say this. You have done a fine job so far in forming in such a way as this. Now continue to march. You have proven you can do what we need you to do. It has been proven that the directives I put in place were more than followed. They have been by far exceeded. I came here for two things. First, to say job well done, keep it up. Second, I came to activate a platoon personally. General, let's do this."

## Forming A Foundation

General Oztrike took his place ten feet in front of the podium.

“Platoon,” he bellowed, “A-ten..hut.”

The platoon, both officers and enlisted snapped smartly to the position of attention.

“Officers in charge, center, march.”

The Lieutenants in charge of each squad marched single file and centered themselves in front of the President. After turning to face him, they saluted. With the salute returned, all parties cut. As the General took the proper position behind and to the left of the President., four PFCs marched forward with folded American flags. General Oztrike saluted and took the flag from the first PFC, who then saluted the flag and returned behind the tents. The flag was similarly passed to the President who then handed it to Fourth Squad’s OIC and addressed him.

“Lieutenant, you are hereby posted as fourth squad’s officer in charge.”

“Aye, aye sir,” Lieutenant Williams said.

The process was repeated with the other three squad leaders. When told to take their post, they went to the side of the tent, handed the flags to the appropriate Marine and resumed their places to the right of their squad.

“Squad leaders,” the General called, “Center...March.”

The squad leaders took their place in the same manner as their Lieutenants had been done before. There was one difference in the enlisted men. These four Lance Corporals walked straighter and projected a great pride both in their squads and in themselves.

When the salutes were exchanged, the PFCs appeared again, holding the guidons for each squad. They were handed out in turn before the President spoke.

“Lance Corporals, take charge as squad leaders. Take charge of your squads and accomplish the mission.”

The guidons were dropped parallel to the ground in salute as they replied, “Aye Aye, sir.” When their salute was returned from the President, the guidons snapped up. They marched back around the platoon and resumed their posts as squad leaders. Their guidons flew high when their General spoke again.

“Major Ingram, front and center.”

The Platoon Commander, the last to be posted, took his assigned place in front of the President.

“Present the Organizational Colors,” the General called. The Marine Corps flag, bearing the name Phoenix Company, Orion Platoon across the bottom scroll, was brought forward from the Color Guard.

“Platoon,” Gunny Fields Called, “Present Arms.”

The color bearer stopped beside the General and relinquished the flag. General Oztrike passed the flag to the President. The most proper salutes were rendered by the platoon. The guidons were held stiffly horizontal to the ground.

“Major Ingram,” the President said proudly, “Take charge of your platoon and carry out the mission. Orion Platoon is activated.”

The flag was extended.

“Aye aye, sir,” The Major replied. He took the flag and assumed his command. The flag was then handed back to the flag bearer and returned to the color guard.

“Platoon,” Gunny Fields called. “Order arms. Parade rest.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the voice came over the loudspeakers. “Major James Ingram, platoon commander of Orion Platoon.”

The wireless microphone was presented to the platoon commander for his remarks.

“Marines and Corpsmen of Orion Platoon, happy birthday. Today is our two hundred twenty fourth birthday as Marines. And I’ll tell you, I don’t feel a day over 150.” The crowd laughed. “It is also the birthday of our platoon. In the matter of both cases, it’s reason to celebrate. Tonight, the fine folks at the Blue Angels were kind enough to loan us their hangar for a little party. Unlike the Marine Corps Ball for most units, there won’t be a charge to you for ours. You’ve earned it. Last Friday you got to go to a concert, now you get to celebrate your accomplishment once more. Before I conclude there is one more group who would like to congratulate you on your accomplishment, and I believe I hear them on their way now.”

From the platoon’s left to right, the Blue Angels flew past in a diamond formation. It was a picture perfect fly-by.

“And one pilot,” Major Ingram continued, “Couldn’t let the opportunity pass to thank his lead tech, who is standing in our platoon.”

The number two plane, ‘The Mighty Duce’ passed overhead inverted. A split second later, every ear was crushed with the sonic boom.

“Dammit, Hobs,” Jack muttered.

“Marines and Corpsmen, once more, congratulations. With that said, it’s time for me to shut up so you can have some time to your squads today.”

He walked to the side of the platoon that would be the front when they marched. Once there, Gunny Fields came out and stood in front of the Major, who then went in front of the platoon as they faced now.

“Orion Platoon,” Major Ingram called. “Fall in.”

The platoon snapped to attention as the President and General Oztrike stood in front of the podium.

“Conduct the pass and review,” the General called. The platoon commander saluted and acknowledged the order. He turned and commanded the platoon.

## Forming A Foundation

“Pass and review. Right, face. Forward, march.”

As they stepped off, the Major made his strides longer and faster to retake his position at the front of the platoon, five feet ahead of the Lieutenants and ten feet ahead of the squad leaders. The platoon was preceded by the color guard and followed by the Marine Corps band, which were playing Semper Fidelis, the march of the Marine Corps.

As the colors passed the reviewing officials, the platoon colors dipped along with the Navy Colors in salute of the honored guests. As they passed, Gunny Fields called the platoon following him.

“Eye, right.”

The squad leaders let the guidons drop horizontal in a salute again. The OICs and platoon leadership looked right and saluted. The rest of the platoon, except fourth squad, turned their eyes forty-five degrees to the right. When the corpsmen in, in the last rank of the platoon, passed the President, the platoon was given the command ready, front. They marched proud as ever.

The band, instead of continuing past the reviewing officials, stopped and made a final formation. They finished the song as the platoon faced center. Without a second of silence, they continued to Anchors Away, the Navy anthem, as was tradition. The Marines Hymn followed this.

In a testament of honor to the platoon gathered, the Blue Angels flew past once more, in a single file trail, with quarter turn rotations seemingly in time with the music.

The music ended and the band marched away to a very upbeat drum cadence. Clear of the reviewing area, it turned to the solo tap of a snare drum. Major Ingram, now in front of his platoon, saluted and reported to the General.

“Sir, the ceremony is complete.”

“Very well,” the General replied. After the salutes were cut he and the President went to personally meet and greet the entire platoon. As they approached the band still played in the distance and the platoon went to parade rest. They were told to go to attention when the President came to the person before them and that they could return to rest after the General and Major passed by. The President intended to shake every individual's hand.

“Lance Corporal Cline,” the President said to the first squad leader. “Good work taking charge of your squad. The General briefed me last night about the platoon.” In the last sentence his voice had grown loud enough for the whole platoon to hear well enough. “I understand this is a shit hot group. It definitely exceeds my expectations.”

The President continued through the squad, speaking with each Marine for a moment about their hometown and their job before continuing to the next person. He spoke longer to each of the Corpsmen to reiterate their importance to their squad and platoon. Then he walked behind first squad to the beginning of second.

“Lance Corporal Jackson, nephew of Colonel Jackson as I understand.”

“Yes sir,” Jack replied.

“And from what I've been hearing about your squad, you must have learned a few things from him.”

“He taught me a few tricks growing up. I just tried to pass them on as much as I could.”

“You've done well as the General tells me. I knew your uncle when I was a Governor. Give him my best for life in Arizona.”

“Yes sir.”

President Martin took a moment to speak to each and every Marine and Corpsman, as did General Oztrike and Major Ingram who followed him. They were seemingly simple and basic until he came to a Marine towards the end of fourth squad.

“Private First Class Martin. I had a feeling I might run into someone familiar today.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Congratulations on all of your hard work, Marine.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“What?”

“Thanks Dad.”

A sense of mild shock washed over the platoon as the connection in names had finally been placed. No one in the platoon had even suspected this out of the quiet PFC of fourth squad.

The final brief conversations continued and eventually the President and General departed from the platoon. Once they were clear of the area, Major Ingram stood three paces in front of the center of the platoon, which he called to attention.

“Each of you has exceeded the expectations set for you. Congratulations and a job well done. Squad Leaders, take charge of your squads and carry out the plan of the day. Up from the ashes rise the warriors of the night. Phoenix Company, Orion Platoon, Dismissed.”