



Chapter Five

The first week of Basic Training rapidly cemented the transformation begun at the Reception Center, methodically eliminating every vestige of the lives we'd left behind. We were marched to the barbershop on Post and formed up—the entire Third Platoon lined up before three barber chairs manned by Army barbers, the lines extending out the door of the shop.

This is going to take a while, I thought.

“How would you like it, son?” asked the barber solicitously as he tucked the customary white cloth around the first kid's neck.

“Uh, you know . . . trim the sides,” said the kid, surprised at being consulted, “maybe a little off the top.”

Out flashed the electric clippers, and with the other two barbers grinning widely, he buzzed the kid's head clean in thirty seconds.

Later we were marched to the enormous Supply Warehouse, a dark cavernous place with mountains of fatigue shirts and trousers, everything in OD (olive drab) Green, where pairs of clerks seized and measured us, shouting sizes to each other,

such that, by the time you had moved through the line, being pushed and manhandled throughout, you found yourself carrying four sets of fatigues, two pairs of combat boots, a dress uniform, and myriad other items comprising your entire military wardrobe.

We double-timed to the barracks—everything jammed into an Army duffle bag—where we were assigned to squad rooms.

There were seven guys in my squad, whom I remember as vividly as the members of my own family: Ed Cook, from Syracuse, who at twenty-six was the oldest among us, the draft having interrupted his career at American Airlines; Eric Desjardin, from Massachusetts, a college guy who had signed up for Army Intelligence and was on his way to Ft. Devens after Basic; a diminutive guy named Donald Wolf (whom we nicknamed “Weasel”) from northern New York, whose sunny good nature was essentially unquenchable; Tom “Somebody,” a cheerful Irish kid from South Philly (whose last name lies just beyond the borders of my memory); Tony, a skinny Italian kid from New Jersey, passionately dedicated to subverting the rules, whatever they might be; and Vern, a large, dumpy guy whose questionable hygiene and personal sloppiness rendered him incapable of making his bunk in a military manner.

We were instructed in bed-making—“with hospital corners,” explained our Assistant D.I., demonstrating the technique and pulling the dust-cover taut, “*so a fucking quarter bounces off it, and I want to see the motherfucker BOUNCE!*”—along with every other imaginable element of domestic house-keeping: uniforms pressed, brass polished, boots shined, dress shoes *spit*-shined, linoleum floors waxed and buffed to a



Basic Training, Barracks Inspection/Ft. Dix, New Jersey—1969

mirror gloss, latrine spotless, chrome gleaming (to a degree that would have astonished our mothers), all of it in the effort to pass our first inspection.

Our Drill Instructor, Sgt. Theron Russell, was a lean-jawed Missourian who resembled Gary Cooper in *Sergeant York*, and we were lucky to have him. Unlike the red-haired sadist who commanded the Fourth Platoon, Sgt. Russell didn't waste time



Basic Training, Drill Sergeant Russell/Ft. Dix, New Jersey—1969

trying to terrify us; he simply wanted us to *get it*.

When we didn't *get it*—as when Charlie Company's senior NCO, a black SFC (Sergeant First-Class) with a baritone voice of astonishing resonance and volume, strode into our squad room for the first inspection, took one glance at Vern's slovenly made bunk and dismantled it with his swagger stick, then marched out of the room—Sgt. Russell's jaw visibly clenched and his face whitened under his tan. He cast a frozen glare at us, before turning on his heel and following the senior NCO into the next squad-room bay.

All eyes turned toward Vern, whose bedding lay on the floor.

"I'll tell you what," said Ed Cook, addressing Vern and

speaking for all of us, “you’d better learn how to make that fucking bunk.”

Vern had trouble with his bunk, however—as he seemed to have trouble with the material world in general—and his bedding decorated the floor of our squad-room bay for the next two days.

Other trainees in the Third Platoon were found wanting, but none as egregiously as Vern—the Platoon’s disapproval reflected in Sgt. Russell’s wintry tone of voice as our squad was verbally pilloried, dropped for innumerable push-ups, placed on nighttime Fire Guard, and consigned to the end of the chow line.

From that moment on, one of us—usually myself or Desjardin, the best bed-makers in the group—would re-make Vern’s bunk each morning, accompanied by his mumbled excuses, while the rest of the squad stood around, cursing him vigorously.

And this was merely the first hour of the day.

Throughout the eight weeks of Basic, we were awakened at 3:45 a.m., with fifteen minutes to shave and dress, followed by an hour of frantic preparation for Inspection—“Falling Out” at 5:00 a.m. . . . running in formation through the pre-dawn darkness, every pair of boots landing in perfect cadence, the percussive sound echoing along the company street . . . watching the flag flutter as it reached the top of the flagpole while Reveille blared and the rim of the sun edged above the horizon . . . standing at a rigid “Parade Rest” in the chow line while a drill instructor, the edge of his Smoky Bear hat just grazing my cheek, shrieked at me for some minor infraction . . . gulping down the doughy pancakes and diuretic coffee that

the Mess Hall provided . . . inhaling a Winston or Marlboro in the fleeting moments that were allotted us outside the Mess Hall (“*Smoke ‘em if you got ‘em!*”), in what now seems to me one of the moments of perfect and unadulterated happiness in a variegated life . . . marching four miles through coastal sand to the rifle ranges to zero our M14s and perfect our marksmanship . . . returning at dusk . . . standing in formation on Charlie Company’s frozen parade ground at “Present Arms,” while the bugle notes of Retreat lingered in the frigid air . . . handing in our weapons at the Ordnance Room . . . retiring to the barracks to polish our boots before “Lights Out” . . . and doing it all over again the next day.

This was not a hard life; in many ways it was a profound relief from the undergraduate economics major for which I was so ill suited and the corrosive sense that I had let my family down.

For those of us who’d spent time in college, the Army was immediately recognizable as a vast bureaucracy, and navigating a bureaucracy was something we’d already learned how to do. We enjoyed a marked advantage over the eighteen-year-old recruits fresh from East Coast high schools, still gawking and uncertain at the hilarious blend of Kafkaesque discipline and military ritual that comprised Basic Training.

At nineteen, I was in the best shape of my life—I could run all day with a cigarette in my mouth—and scored a nearly perfect 492 on the Army PT (Physical Training) test: Sergeant Russell running alongside me in the final event, urging me on, having bet heavily against the drill instructors who commanded our rival platoons.

Among the indelible images housed in my memory



Basic Training, Close Order Drill/Ft. Dix, New Jersey—1969

from Basic Training is the vision of Weasel’s good-natured face, twisted in an expression of anxious concern, gazing at the chrome fixtures in the latrine to determine if they were inspection-ready.

And *KELLY*—*Tom KELLY*, whom I accompanied home to his South Philly neighborhood on a balmy spring weekend toward the end of Basic, his last name just marching over the border of my shrinking memory, before “Lights Out.”