

Adventures in Bootcamp

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In 1992, I joined the Navy. The reasons were many, but foremost were the need for funds to finish my undergraduate degree and a powerful desire to get out of West Texas. I was twenty-three at the time and may not have been thinking clearly.

To say the least, bootcamp was an interesting experience. Remember, this was 1992, so the experience was nothing like you see in movies like *Full Metal Jacket* or other Hollywood presentations, but it was summed up nicely by a statement made in a letter I received while in boot. The letter was from a friend of mine from high school. He'd joined the Navy five years before, right out of school. In the letter he said, "Right about now, your life is hell." He wasn't wrong, but there were some interesting happenings, too. It wasn't all hell and fire.

For instance, right off the arrival bus at Orlando Recruit Training Center, I nearly got myself in serious trouble. You see, I overheard two drill instructors discussing that incoming recruits weren't allowed to have shaving gel. Without thinking, I opened my mouth to speak, which would have gotten me into trouble right there. What I was going to say would have landed me in the brig though; as I almost explained that, yes, you could make a nice explosive with shave gel, and you only needed some household chemicals to do it. In my defense, it was around 3:00 AM and I had been up for almost 24 hours, so my thinking wasn't all that clear.

Due to various health issues, I was a member of four training companies. The third was the one where the most interesting things happened, and where I was a member the longest. It was also an integrated company, which means its makeup included men and women. This is an important detail later.

The first interesting story about bootcamp I'm going to relate isn't much of a story. Still, it's stuck with me, and I find it amusing. Again, I will point out that this was 1992. This wasn't the 1960s with a draft going on, so you could always opt out, refuse training, and go home. It wasn't even a dishonorable discharge to do so. I will also remind you that I was 23 and among a group of 18-year-olds fresh out of high school. It doesn't sound like much of an age difference, but it was significant.

For the event in question, we were in the first week of actual training, and it was our first time being "cycled." This entailed a rapid-fire alternation between sit-ups, push-ups, running in place, and doing "body builders." When doing this sort of thing, you are tired and in pain after just a few minutes.

We were about fifteen minutes into this routine when a young man near me just stopped. He comes to full attention and just stands there. One of the two company commanders (drill instructors) rushes over and gets in his face, screaming at him and demanding he get busy doing what the rest of us are doing. The whole time this young man is standing there, at attention mind you, proclaiming, "I'm refusing training, ma'am!" This may not seem like a big deal. Send him home, right? Except he's standing AT ATTENTION. He's still playing the game by the rules. I wanted to go over and yell at him. If you're refusing training, you refuse training. You sit down, stretch out on the floor, and let it be known without a doubt that you're not playing the game anymore. You certainly don't stand there at attention. That young man disappeared for the night but was back with us the next day in full training mode.

The next incident came a few days later. We were directed to the training pool and told to sit in the bleachers next to it. One of the company commanders steps up and announces, "I can't believe I have to ask this, but I'm required to. Is there anyone in this company who can't swim?" A full third of the 84 people raised their hands. The next words out of the company commander's mouth mirrored my thoughts: "What were you thinking? Navy. Ships. Water." Later I felt sorry for those people. The penalty for joining the Navy and not knowing how to swim is

that they teach you. This means getting up even earlier in the morning during bootcamp to go to the pool for your lessons. You also stay in boot until you learn or quit.

I must note that I almost joined them. Not because I couldn't swim; I'm from the Gulf Coastal region and swim like a fish. No, I was on my last leg by this point. I'd contracted pneumonia. It's called "recruit crud," and most recruits come down with some level of it. For me, though, it led to my being hospitalized with IV antibiotics being pumped into my arm. Thus, I was there at the pool—coughing my head off, feverish, and barely able to breathe—but there was no way I was failing that swim test. I had a rescuer in scuba around me the whole time, but I passed the test. The pneumonia did lead to the medics learning just how bad my lungs were, though, and that got me put out of the Navy in bootcamp.

But the weekend before I went into the hospital, there was one more interesting incident that happened. It was Sunday—on Sunday you got to relax a little as the company commanders weren't allowed to come in until afternoon. You still had to get up and follow routine, but at least you didn't have to stress about being dropped for more push-ups. This was also while I was in my third company, the integrated company, so there were men and women present. We didn't mix until well after wake-up, mind you, so relax. There's no bunking together or anything like that.

I'd been made yeoman for this company, which means I was the company's clerk. It also meant I was third in rank among us recruits. I'd also earned the reputation of being a good guy to come to for advice. In my defense, I mostly just listened and asked questions until the person talking with me worked out the problem on their own.

Getting back to the story, I was in the company office on this Sunday, performing my secretarial duties before the company commanders arrived. In the middle of this, three of my shipmates come barging into the office. This wasn't something they were supposed to do. There's a procedure you're supposed to follow when you're in boot, and just rushing in wasn't it.

"Come quick, Yo-Yo." The nickname for yeomen was "yo-yo," but this was another breach of protocol. I was the company commanders' "yo-yo," not the rest of the company's. The company was supposed to call me "recruit petty officer." Anyway, they went on to say, "We've got a situation out here."

I didn't know what the situation was, but I knew if they were bargaining in like that, it had to be something serious. I darted out of the office after them. I was ready to marshal troops, move people, and get the situation under control. What I was not prepared for was coming through a group of people circled around a young man and woman huddled together, hugging each other. I don't think I need to explain that this wasn't allowed.

My lips pursed, and I was ready to lay down the law, but noticed they were sobbing on each other's shoulders. A different approach was in order.

"Alright, everybody back up. What's going on here? You two know there's not supposed to be fraternization." I crouched down with them and listened to their tale of woe. A tale quite different from what I was expecting.

It turned out that these two hadn't met in bootcamp. They were, in fact, high school sweethearts. They'd enlisted together and gotten married a few days before they shipped out for bootcamp.

Now, they should have been separated and put into different training companies. That's not what happened, though, and here they were in the same company. This was bad. They were terrified that they'd be blamed for the mistake and punished for it. It took some work, but I finally calmed them so we could talk, or more to the point so they would listen.

"Look," I told them. "Right now, this isn't your fault. It shouldn't have happened, and while you should have spoken up before now, right now, it isn't your fault."

I didn't have to say it. They heard the word: "But?"

"But if the company commanders find out on their own, and they will, then it's your fault and there'll be hell to pay."

This made them panic again. "They'll kick us out." They were convinced of this.

"No, but they might if you let them figure it out. Now they'll probably just reassign one of you to a new company, which is better than the alternative, right?"

"So, what do we do, Yo-Yo?"

"First, the company commanders don't get here until 1300. When they get here, the two of you are going to be posted by the office door waiting for them. Second, you're going to explain the situation to them

calmly and clearly. Finally, you're going to listen to them and be prepared to be separated for the rest of boot."

It was the best I could do for them. They followed my directions, though, and at 1300 they were posted outside the office door, standing at attention. The company commanders came in, saw them, stopped, and stared for a minute. "So, you're our married couple." My advice to them couldn't have been better timed.

I was kicked out of the office at that point, so I didn't hear what happened firsthand. I was told the story later. The gist is that the commanders had come into the barracks building that morning and were jokingly asked how their married couple was doing by one of the other company commanders (how they'd found out is still a mystery to me.) They were blind-sided by this, so they were rather upset when they marched into our barracks. It was made clear to the young couple that had they been anywhere else when our company commanders arrived, there would have been hell to pay. Had they not been willing to face the consequences, it would have gone hard for them. As it was, they were allowed to stay in the same company together. There could still be no fraternization. They were told that they could get their hand-holding in, and no more, on Sundays before the company commanders arrived.

All of this was relayed to me by the couple weeks later, when I got out of the hospital and was shadowing the company to catch up with them. The aim was that I would be able to rejoin them in training instead of needing to go to a fourth company. It was one of the few times in my life where I had been hugged by someone who wasn't a family member or long-time friend.

Unfortunately, I was unable to shadow the third company for a 24-hour period. I was released for active duty a few hours after the hug. Since I didn't get to shadow them for at least a day, I was re-assigned to the fourth company.

It turned out they needn't have bothered. They finally figured out how bad my lungs were. I was born with a form of COPD, not that it was called such then. As little as this condition seemed to slow me down, though, it made it so they couldn't put me on a submarine. Since I was in training to be a nuclear technician, that's where they wanted me, and so I was discharged as unfit for duty.

To this day, I think about these stories, especially about the young couple. Did they make it to graduation? If they did, were they togeth-

er in the same company, or were they eventually split up? Honestly, I just wonder what happened to them. I'd like to think that they made it through and did so together. Not only that, but I hope it was the start of many adventures that they shared.

I must admit that I also think about what would have happened if I'd been able to stay in the Navy. How would my life be different? Would I have made officer like I'd planned? I also wonder how things would have turned out if I hadn't joined the Navy at all. I certainly wouldn't have these stories to tell.

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