Chapter 11: The Island

No one leaves Long Island. I was about to graduate from a high school where our most famous alumnus had been a heavyweight-boxing contender. Most Long Islanders live out their life within an hour's drive of where they grew up. I wanted more. I wanted freedom, independence, and excitement. But I didn't have the means, motivation, or maturity to go about it.

Academia was not my forte. There was no scholarship in my future with triple digit SAT scores. A few weeks before graduation I received my final college rejection letter. Denied entrance to a four year university was understandable, but rejection from the local community college stung.

I had no plan. But, that changed ten days before graduation.

Terrorists hijacked a TWA flight en route from Athens to Rome beginning a three-day intercontinental ordeal. A U.S. Navy sailor was executed and his body dumped on the tarmac in Beirut. As I watched this unfold, late one night, I slammed down my fist on the hassock and decided to join the Marines.

The next day was Father's Day. My dad and I were driving to check out a used station wagon for sale – one that could precisely fit an eight-foot by four-foot sheet of plywood in the back for my father's many woodworking projects.

"What are your plans after graduation?" asked my dad.

My father, the great American patriot, served in the Army. His father and brothers also served in the military. It was in our blood to serve.

"I'm joining the Marines," I replied.

"No, really," he chuckled. "What are you going to do? I can help you out with college," he said.

"Seriously, dad, I'm going to join the Marines," I said.

He looked at me for a moment and realized that my mind was made up. He respected my decision. "You're going to have to tell mom."

That night, Dad called an all hands family meeting at the dining room table. These meetings were few and far in between and they usually happened by chance. But, this meeting was called to order with the formality of a corporate board meeting.

"Joe has something to say," my dad announced.

All eyes were on me as my family leaned in.

"I'm going to join the Marines," I said.

My mother just looked at me. I was usually a wiseass, rarely to be taken seriously. After a long silence she said, "Get out of here," with a look of disbelief as she turned her head away from me and leaned back in her chair. It was a common reaction from someone who grew up in Little Italy.

"What if there's a war?" she asked. But, no sooner did she say that than I could tell she realized it wasn't some other mother's son who fought our country's wars.

"When do you leave?" my mother asked.

"Soon," I answered. But, I still had no plan.

It took me six months to finally make it down to the recruiter's office and enlist. Eleven days later I was ready to ship out. The calendar said it was Friday, but it didn't feel like a Friday. It felt like Noday. On my final morning at home, as a

civilian, I noticed many lasts. My last night in my own bed, my last shower in my own home, and my last breakfast with my own family. Although I would still sleep, eat, and shower in the Marines, there was one thing I was doing for the last time: blow-drying my bushy, wiry, hair.

On that cold afternoon, two days after Christmas, about sixty of us from Greater New York City shipped out to join the Marines. In Brooklyn, beneath the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, we were examined at the military processing station. One of the older recruits in our group was tasked to deliver the pile of paperwork containing our orders and medical records to boot camp. We overthought the situation and divided the pile in half since we had to board two separate busses. It was as if we were storming Normandy and some of us weren't going to make it. On the bus I joked around with the other recruits to mask my anxiety. But the joking stopped when we reached the causeway leading onto Parris Island. We were dead silent as we passed through the gates of what we knew would become our hell.

It was midnight. I had been awake since 3:00 A.M. My day was just beginning.

It seemed as if everyone on the island was asleep. There were no lights on in any of the buildings. No cars on the roads. Nobody walking the streets. It was exactly what I expected in the middle of the night. But I knew it was a facade.

My bus made its final turn and rolled slowly in front of the only lit building. The bus's brakes seemed too loud as it stopped – none of us wanted unnecessary attention. The two story, World War II era, H shaped wooden barracks had been converted into offices long ago.

The bus driver knew the routine as his night came to an end. He opened the bus doors and a slim, average height man, wearing the famous Smokey Bear hat, boarded. With his hands clasped together, in a soft, yet firm, conversational tone he said, "On behalf of the commanding general, Major General Olmstead, welcome to Parris Island."

How pleasant. This wasn't too bad. But in a flash that thought vanished from my mind.

He barked at the top of his lungs, "When I give you the command I want you to get off my bus! You will walk, not run, to the other side of the street and stand on my yellow footprints. Do you understand?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" I shouted back, in unison, with my fellow recruits.

"No!" he yelled even louder. "I can't hear you! I said, 'Do you understand?'"

"Sir, yes, sir!" we repeated at what seemed to be the same loud decibel level.

"That's better. Do-It-Now-Move!" he yelled as he stepped off the bus.

In an instant, every single one of us snapped to our feet. From my seat near the back of the bus I saw all of us standing up, perfectly still, not saying a word or looking around.

As I stepped off the bus and my feet touched the ground I distinctly recalled the walk, don't run, instructions. I turned to my left to follow the recruit in front of me but he was nowhere in sight. I sped up in front of the bus and saw my fellow recruits sprinting. I ran too, and stood on the yellow footprints organizing us into four columns. It was my first official military formation.

As the sound of the bus faded away we simply stood on the yellow footprints in the quiet night. The South Carolina air was surprisingly warm. At least fifty-something degree weather seemed warm compared to the thirty degree winter day I left behind in New York City. I had just flown on an airplane for the first time and now I was staring at my first palm tree in the wild. The closest I'd ever been to one was when I received a single green leaf on Palm Sunday. I was amazed; I thought palm trees only grew in Florida and California. I wanted to touch it, but knew better than to try.

A Marine of unknown status – since I didn't know military ranks – came out of the old wooden building. He pointed to signs on the wall with punitive articles from the Uniform Code of Military Justice regarding AWOL and following the lawful orders of seniors. He made us read them aloud and then asked us if we understood what we just read. Of course we all yelled back, "Sir, yes, sir!" The message on the signs made perfect sense – it seemed obvious – even though I didn't understand why we were reading them.

The Marine went back inside the building and all was calm except for the breeze blowing through my hair and the faint low-tide smell of the swamps surrounding the small island.

A minute later another Marine came out – or maybe it was the same one – and asked for the paperwork from our team leader. Unfortunately, we didn't think to match up the paperwork with the passengers when we split it up between the two busses.

The team leader handed over the paperwork pile to the Marine. As he read off each name he handed the yellow manila envelope to the respective recruit who took it into the old wooden building. There were seven of us left after all the envelopes were handed out. The Marine asked us where our paperwork was. One brave recruit explained that it would be on the next bus. The other six of us were, for the moment, invisible since we remained quiet.

"Fine!" barked the Marine. But it sounded more sarcastic than sincere. He told us to stand on the sidewalk and wait. Waiting was quickly becoming a big part of my military life. Waiting for busses, waiting for food, hurrying up and waiting. Lots of waiting and this was only day one.

I waited on the sidewalk with the six other recruits, our backs to the old wooden building. We didn't know how to stand at attention, yet, but we remained frozen in the seasonably balmy night.

As the wind blew it started to make my right eye water and I was struck with the fear of a tear. I wanted to wipe my eye before anyone saw it. But moving would bring unwanted attention so I just looked up into the night hoping it would quickly dry up. The sky looked exactly the same as it did back home with its twinkling stars and fluffy clouds, yet I was in a strange world. It looked the same but felt very different, like a dream… an unbelievably odd dream. What have I gotten myself into?

It wasn't yet 1 A.M. and I had been awake for more than 20 hours. I was numb, alert, dazed, and tired. My future was about to change, unless I failed. I had no idea what I was facing or where it would take me. My four-year enlistment contract seemed unimaginably long. I only needed to make it through tonight. One day at a

time. I was learning to live in the present. Getting stuck in the past leads to depression. Worrying about the future brings anxiety. Just be in the now. What is happening right now? That was my focus.

I showed up on Parris Island with everything I was ordered to bring: my Social Security card, about $100 in cash, and the clothes on my back. I brought nothing else. No underwear, spare clothes, or razor. Not even a toothbrush. That night, my platoon gaggled – since we didn't know how to march – from place to place where I was issued my uniforms, soap, shirts, flip-flops etc.

At 3 A.M. I sat in a barber's chair for my first military haircut. It was a buzz cut as short as clippers could clip. My hair was so thick and wiry that it jammed the clippers. I watched clumps of it roll down my smock and onto the floor where it was immediately swept up and dumped into the trash.

After a hasty but complete breakfast, where the yelling continued, we had a chance to clean up. My platoon of sixty young men, wearing only flip-flops and carrying a bar of soap, filed into a room with seventy-five showerheads.

"Recruits, listen up! Reach up and pull that chain above your head. Get your entire body wet. OK, stop! You're done!" shouted the drill instructor.

"Now, take that bar of soap in your hand and lather up your body. Lather up your underarms, your crotch, your head and face! Five, four, three, two, one. You're done! I said, 'You're done!' Put the soap away! Now, rinse off. You have ten, nine, eight, three, two, one, zero. You're done!" he bellowed. What happened to seconds seven through four I'll never know. I just learned what it was like to do something "by the numbers."

My bar of soap looked like it had fallen into a pile of topsoil. It was encrusted with my hair clippings. Another consequence of having my full head of hair clipped to the scalp was it was difficult to put on and take off my t-shirt since the stubble grabbed onto my shirt like Velcro.

Throughout the day I rushed and waited. When I waited, I stood perfectly still. And when the line was moving, it was best to not leave a gap or delay it for any reason. The theme of the day was, "Get it and go, recruit!"

"Recruit! What size are you?" asked the supply sergeant.

"Thirty-two," I answered.

"Boxers or briefs?" he followed up.

"Briefs," I replied. For my entire life – all eighteen years – I had worn briefs.

The supply sergeant turned around to grab underwear in my size but there was no box of thirty-two inch briefs at the issue point. Before he could even ask, a junior Marine said, "We just ran out. Martinez is getting a new box that's on location."

Without skipping a beat the supply sergeant grabbed three packages of thirty-two inch boxers and said to me, "Here you go, nine pair of thirty-two inch boxers. Next!"

I hated those boxers. They were awkward since they didn't keep things in place. But I was discovering that this was good training. I was learning how to survive in an uncomfortable environment. I was a model recruit as I fully accepted the situation before me without comment or complaint. To call it brain washing would be a bit extreme, but I certainly wasn't looking for the suggestion box as I left that supply warehouse.

The rest of that first day was a blur as one event bled into the next. We were issued more and more "trash" as the drill instructors affectionally called it. Workbooks and guidebooks. Boots and polish. Socks and towels. Pens, pencils, paper, and envelopes along with stamps. I pulled an all-nighter a couple times in high school, but this was the first time I had stayed awake for thirty-eight hours straight.

At 5 P.M., while putting us to bed, my drill instructor reminded us that today was only administrative. He said it was the tip of the iceberg compared to what we would face a week later on our first official training day. I rubbed my rough scalp as I listened to him while lying in my rack. I was too tired to think about his comments before falling asleep for twelve hours. And then it began again.