



CHAPTER TWO

PARRIS ISLAND

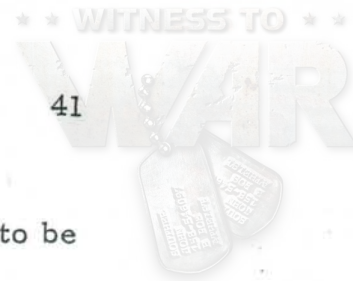
We got a two-day pass and went to Cincinnati. The same doctor examined me that had flunked me for the Navy. I passed the physical. Not a word about the eardrum. There were over 100 applicants that day and they accepted 12 of us.

Pollock's folks wouldn't sign the papers and he went back to St. Paris. The rest of us stayed the night in the finest hotel and had breakfast in the finest restaurant. So far, the Marines seemed super to me.

We boarded a train for Parris Island, South Carolina. Along the way, others came aboard from Tennessee, Georgia, and the Carolinas.

At Yamasee, South Carolina, we boarded a boat that took us out to Parris Island.

On the docks of Parris Island the fun started. Two drill instructors took us over and cussed and kicked us into four ranks.



They never spoke below a bellow. Our new names seemed to be "stupid cunts" and "shitheads." The D.I. in charge walked slowly down the lines, insulting each guy personally.

"Goddamn, I'll bet your folks were glad to get rid of you!"

I had made the mistake of wearing my C.C.C. uniform. When he came to me he said, "What in hell kind of goddamn rags is that?" Now I was proud of that uniform and began to lose my temper. Next he asked, "Do you actually believe you'll ever make a marine?"

"Sir, just as good as some I've seen so far, sir," I shouted. Everything had to be shouted and started and ended with a "sir."

I was chewing gum. He said, "Listen, you shithead, we don't chew that shit in the Marine Corps. Spit it out." He held his hand out for the gum. I garnered all the saliva I could and spit it in his hand.

He glared at me a moment and then stuck that messy wad on my forehead and wrapped it around my head. I cocked my right fist to clout him and he screamed, "Right face!" Everyone fell all over each other and down the dock we went, headed for the barber shop.



We passed an open ditch, with bald-headed guys slaving away in the bottom. On the banks were guards with rifles. It was hot as Hades. The prisoners all yelled at us--

"Fresh fish!"

"Suckers!"

A kid behind me from Georgia said, almost crying, "My god, I've been sent to the wrong place. This is the chain gang, just like in Georgia."

At the barber shop, we stood at attention in the blistering sun, while the D.I. visited with the barbers. He came out and sent me in first. They ran the clippers over my head and let hair, gum and all fall on my face, neck and shoulders.

Back in line at attention. That was the last time I had a chance to raise my arms to get at the hair and gum until eleven o'clock that night. It itched like hell the whole time.

Next, we were marched to the quartermaster and stripped naked. All our possessions were confiscated and put in bundles and tagged. I'll never forget the sensation of being naked in the hostile world with not even a pocketknife. When the guy took my



knife, he said, "Give me that shiv. We don't want you shitheads cutting one another." Then he handed me an eleven-inch bayonet.

From there we went right into close order drill. All we did was march back and forth, with a D.I. at every turn, kicking asses for every mistake.

"You march like you're using a mule's ass for a compass!" They always made a metaphor when dressing us down, and some would parch and shrivel you if you had Bible Belt ears.

"You shitheads are so clumsy you remind me of a monkey fucking a football!"

Right away you learned not to lose control of your facial expressions. When two guys thought the D.I.'s marching chant was amusing and grinned, he screamed, "You fuckin' shitheads, get up in that tree over there!" They climbed up to the lower branches. "Now, you stupid cunts, beat your chests, laugh and scream, like the apes you are!" When they came down from the tree hours later, they couldn't make a sound.

We had been issued a paper on the train which stated, among other things, "The first thing you will receive at Parris Island is



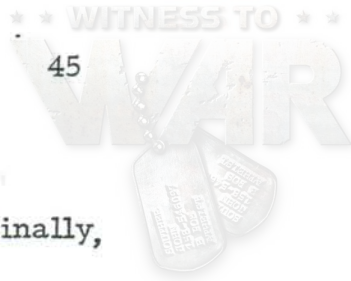
a good meal." We hadn't eaten since breakfast on the train. After dark, the clown ahead of me, when we were between D.I.'s, would mumble, "The first thing you'll receive is a good meal." After we got so tired, this became funny and we all got the giggles. That only further infuriated the D.I.'s.

"I'll knock you as cold as a well-digger's ass in the Klondike!"

We kept this up until eleven p.m. Then we marched into the mess hall and finally did have a damn good meal. Everything was served family-style and was on the tables when we marched in, all in steaming tureens, the cold milk, tea, etc., in aluminum pitchers, with cool moisture beads clinging to the outside.

Then I finally got into a shower and washed the hair and gum from my bald head and neck. I made up my mind right then that someday I would meet that D.I. in a back alley and kill him. I fell asleep relishing this sweet thought.

We slept in two-man tents with wooden decks, as the barracks were all full. At two a.m. the D.I.'s rushed into every tent, upset bunks, kicked asses and screamed, "Everybody out! Fall in!" We all fell in, in our underwear, double-timed around the area and back to the tents. "Fall out and sweet dreams," the D.I.'s said.



We just sat on our bunks and looked at one another. Finally, some poet from another tent said, "Ours is not to reason why. Ours is but to do or die," and we all went back to sleep.

Reveille was at five a.m. Shower, shave, make the bunks, sweep and mop the decks in record time, then morning inspection. "I want that deck to shine like a diamond in a goat's ass! Do it again! If you call that bunk made, you're as thick as shit and twice as nasty! Do it over!" The absence of a single whisker seemed of paramount importance. Few of us shaved, anyway, but the D.I., Sergeant Kemp, caught two hapless fuzz-cheeks trying to put off the straight-razor initiation. No safety-razors allowed. A bucket of water was procured. The culprits stood facing each other over the bucket, simultaneously wetting and shaving each other's face. Needless to say, there were knicks.

Kemp inspected them. "There's some shit running out of your face," he said. "You need some after-shave lotion." He picked up two handfuls of Parris Island sand and rubbed it into their faces. Everyone shaved every day after that.

At breakfast there was a huge bowl of hot corn grits at each table, empty bowls, pitchers of milk, eggs, toast and ham. We



were already saying that the only good thing about this place was the food service. Every table had a "mess cook" to fetch and carry and attend other needs. Trouble was, unappetizing names were given to everything. Mustard was calf shit. Catsup, menstrual sauce or red lead. Sugar, sweet sand. Creamed beef on toast, shit on a shingle. Chipped beef, foreskins on toast. Baloney, horse cock. Cheese, tight ass. And so on down the menu. One learned to ignore the names of good food. We soon learned certain rules of etiquette. If someone asked for a dish to be passed, it was taboo to "shortstop" it on the way to the caller, unless you asked his permission. It was about as bad to refuse permission as it was to actually shortstop it.

I had never seen grits before. I finished the eggs and ham, filled my bowl with grits, put milk and sugar over it and started to eat, when I noticed the whole table was quiet and staring at me. One Alabama boy said, "What in hell are you doing with them grits, Yankee? You're supposed to eat them with your eggs!"

"Hell, I thought they were cream of wheat," I said. "They're good this way, anyhow."

A couple of other guys tried it and pronounced it good. "By god," one guy said, "I've had grits all my life and never thought

of this. I never thought a damn Yank could teach me anything."
In a few days, the whole hall was eating them with milk and sugar.

We all fell out for physical drill under arms, until it seemed the rifle weighed a ton. The physical hazing was just plain punishing. The Three C's had put me in superb condition, but those who came in soft had one hell of a painful time those first few weeks.

"You people are as green as cow shit in June!"

In one drill we put our rifles above our heads, twisting first the muzzles forward, then the butts, all the time shouting, "Butts! Muzzles!" One kid next to me was a slow-talking Georgia boy, and he would get mixed up and scream, "Mutts! Buzzles!" Oh, how I hurt inside from suppressed laughter. I knew better than to laugh. The D.I. had cured that the first day.

Letting a rifle fall was a capital offense. The most minor punishment was standing in front of the platoon and saying, over and over, "I'm a horse's ass from Yamasee, the biggest horse's ass I ever did see, I promise never to drop this rifle again." Then you had to kiss the rifle's butt plate. Usually, you had to cradle the rifle in your arms like a baby for the remainder of the day.



"I'll straighten you people out before you leave or I'll kiss your ass at high noon and give you two hours to draw a crowd!"

Calling a rifle a "gun" was a terrible thing to do. For this you stood at attention and solemnly repeated--

This is my rifle (lift up rifle)
This is my gun (grab penis)
This is for shooting (lift up rifle)
This is for fun (grab penis)

According to Sergeant Kemp, when shouldering a rifle, the trigger guard must rest in the hollow of the shoulder, because God had put that hollow there to fit the trigger guard. He had placed your nose so you could line up your rifle correctly at present arms, and so on down the anatomy. All the pieces of the body's jigsaw puzzle fit exactly to the weapons and gear. Pretty soon it was easy to believe that you had been created solely to be a marine.

Strangely enough, after the incident on the docks, Sergeant Kemp never bothered me. He appointed me squad leader on the second day, and we began learning the chain of command. Anyone in the squad wanting to see the D.I. or above first saw me. I saw the platoon leader. He saw the D.I. I was responsible for the welfare of my squad.



This fact was brought home to me one day in the mess hall. We were at the table with a more advanced platoon than ours. A kid about my size took one of my boys' piece of cake and took a bite from it. My boy was just a little guy, who had injected a quarter inch of warm wax under the skin of his heels to pass the height test to enlist. I told the kid across the table to give my boy his own piece of cake. He took a bite of it, too. I said, "Why, you low-down son of a bitch, I'll beat your head off." Right then the D.I. had me by the arm and asked what the ruckus was. Also, the other kid's D.I. had him. All we could make them understand was that it was a fight over a piece of cake. They told us to report behind the head at thirteen hundred.

We did. They put sixteen-ounce boxing gloves on the bully and me. These gloves apparently had been wet, for they were rougher than a cob. We went at it with both platoons cheering us on, plus many other spectators. Neither one of us could seem to do much except skin up our faces. We fought until neither could raise his arms. The D.I.'s called it a draw. We were allowed the afternoon off, while the platoons went off to drill. I needed it, too. The other kid had to have his platoon picture taken the next day and he was one hell of a looking thing. It was not to be the last I heard from him.



Never will I forget the sand fleas on Parris Island. Those microscopic creatures had more sharp, painful biting equipment than anything in the world for their size. Sergeant Kemp gave us a long, sentimental lecture on sand fleas, about how they were condemned to live on Parris Island for all eternity and had nothing to eat, except us shithead boots, because the regulars were too tough for their little mouths. We were forbidden to slap them, on the penalty of slow torture. Those little varmits were the cause of many a duck waddle around the parade field, countless fifty push up seiges and mile double-time runs. A scourge of them alighting on the neck, ears and nose while one was at attention could cause the tears to run, and the slightest movement of the shoulders, rifle or arms to brush them off brought the lecture in defense of the poor sand flea and the accompanying penalty.

A new vocabulary had to be established. Woe to the boot who called a port a window, a hatch a door, the deck a floor, an overhead a ceiling, a ladder a stairs, a bulkhead a wall, a head a toilet.

Most every infraction was punished by mass punishment, all of us hazed for individual goofs. Too many goofs and this



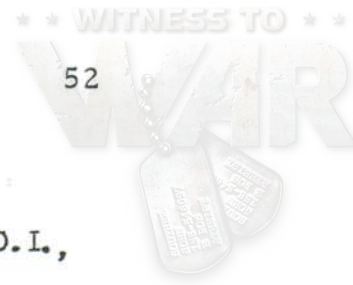
individual was run through the belt line by the platoon. Everyone stood spraddle-legged, belt in hand. The culprit went between the legs on hands and knees, everyone whacking him without mercy. Sometimes some sadist would use the buckle, and more often than not there would be a private settling of this account later.

Anyone receiving more than three letters at mail call went through the belt line. There were times I wished for fewer friends and family back home.

We learned early not to volunteer for anything in boot camp. Sergeant Kemp one day asked if anyone could drive a truck. Several guys eagerly stepped forward. Anything to get out of this soup we were in. They were put to driving a wheelbarrow, hauling stone. Another time it was, "Who likes to swim?" Like a fool, I stepped out. We were put to scrubbing down an empty swimming pool.

"You people are as useless as a nun's pussy."

Sometimes we had lectures on things I took for granted, like brushing the teeth, or how to keep from getting the clap and what



to do if you did. This was usually handled by the assistant D.I., a corporal. His only reason for brushing teeth seemed to be that if he didn't, his mouth tasted like shit the next morning. This he repeated throughout the hygienic lectures. At the end of the lecture one day he asked if there were any questions. Some little tenor-voiced guy piped up and said, "Sir, yes, sir. How did you find out how shit tastes, sir?" He went on a long duck walk but the corporal never mentioned taste again.

He lectured on the care and cleaning of the penis, because he sometimes dreamed of his best girl, but more often of his other one.

We were introduced to the bayonet. The bayonet is part of a good marine's soul. It's not so much the eleven inches of cold steel as it is the "Spirit of the Bayonet." I was to hear this phrase countless times in the next few years and came to believe in it. The Spirit of the Bayonet is that "will to close with the enemy and kill him."

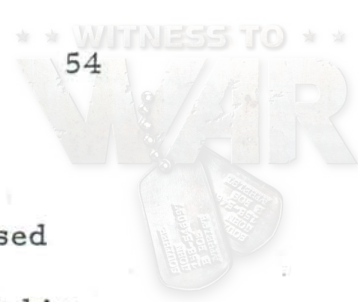
The bayonet course on Parris Island was always there, patiently waiting for us. The dummies were dressed in foreign uniforms and they had mock rifles sticking out, fastened to them by hinges and



springs. The dummies were stuffed with sticks and brush. You were taught to "parry" this mock rifle aside and stab the dummy. Those dummies never knew when they were licked. You could stab one through the heart, skin hell out of your hand on the twigs inside, and his damn rifle would flop back and clout you in the head. We had an hour of this every day and every stab had to be accompanied by a loud yell of "hah!" Before long there wasn't a good tenor voice left in the platoon.

We had a tall, lean mountaineer from North Carolina in the platoon. He seldom talked and chewed tobacco when he got a chance. One day we were at attention at port arms. His rifle's position didn't suit the assistant D.I., who gave it a hard shove into the mountaineer's nose. The mountain boy pulled his bayonet and drawled, "Suh, y'all better run, suh, or I'm gonna kill ya, suh!" He ran. Right straight to Sergeant Kemp's office. We convulsed with laughter at his short, choppy steps and the big old mountain kid plopping along after him. The kid was set back to a newer platoon for more training.

We were introduced to the grenade. The corporal was demonstrating how to pull the pin. He held the grenade down by



his crotch with both arms straight and said, "You're supposed to pull it down here." Then he moved it up by his belt, with his elbows bent, and continued, "But I pull it up here. Hell, down there you don't know if you've got the grenade or your meat."

We were given courses in the care and handling of all the hand weapons. We were taught to field-strip them and reassemble them blindfolded.

One character in the platoon named Gibbs was abnormally interested in weapons. He was always taking his rifle apart farther than he was supposed to and asking the instructor questions to the point of frustration. Every minute he was off duty, he had the cold stub of a cigar stuck in his mouth.

Also, we were taught the fine points of walking a lonely post on sentry duty. To break us in for this, the D.I.'s took us to an old airplane hangar, far from anything else. Gibbs was on the post when Kemp took me out there to relieve him. As we rounded a corner, there sat Gibbs on the ground, his pancho spread in front of him, with his pistol laid out in as many pieces as there were to come apart. I thought that D.I. would have a stroke. Never have I heard a man use so many epithets and rave like that.



Years later, I picked up a Leatherneck magazine and there was Top Sergeant Gibbs, with a cigar stub clamped in his teeth, looking innocent as ever and holding a certificate of merit in the field of weapons armory.

We slowly shed the veneer of soft civilization and became fifty hard young marines. I guess you get a little cocky about that kind of thing. Sometimes Sergeant Kemp would stand in one spot and march and drill us all around him. One day as we were headed in the direction of the bay, he let us get far away. One guy in the ranks said, loud enough for us but not for Kemp's ears, "We don't hear him!" Everyone thought this a great idea, to make the D.I. run to stop us.

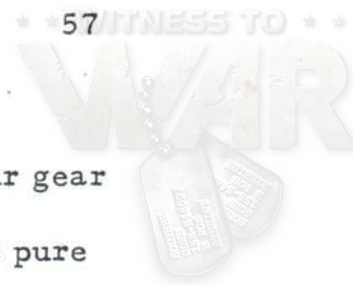
Kemp shouted, "To the rear, march!" and we continued right on. No further commands were given and we marched right into the bay. Everyone was at least armpit deep. We floundered around and got out. Kemp fell us in, double-timed and kicked our asses to the showers, turned them all on and marched us in, rifles, bayonets, and all.

"I need you people like I need two assholes!"



Then we had all that mess to clean up before falling out for inspection. We had two hours extra drill after supper in the bay vicinity. We heard every whisper the D.I. made.

As time went by, the D.I.'s became a little more human and we learned a few things about them. Otto Kemp was a beautifully salty sixteen-year veteran who had fought in Nicaragua. He had a big machetti cut on his leg. I began to realize that he was one hell of a marine. Of medium height and very slim, he always looked neat and cool, even after a hot, sweaty day in the field. Every boot wanted to look like Sergeant Kemp. His uniforms were always bleached to just the right color, and I think he could have tossed his hat in the air and it would have landed on his head at just the right angle. He had the hands of an artist or pianist, but once he grabbed my arm and I thought his fingers were going clear through. He never washed his feet with soap because it softened them. He was a distinguished rifleman, so he wouldn't attend movies because it was detrimental to his shooting eye. He was married to the Corps. Many of the old marines I met later were just as dedicated. Slowly, I lost my resolve to kill him.



It came time for firing the rifle range. We packed our gear and rode trucks out to the rifle range barracks. They were pure luxury compared to those tents. Food was catered to us from the mess hall. "Wash your mess gear, or you'll get diarrhea and shit like a pet coon."

Things changed in that our platoon score counted towards our D.I.'s prestige and record. Wagers were always made among the D.I.'s as to whose platoon was superior. Kemp and the corporal actually kind of babied us during the firing line instruction.

In the barracks, however, they were still given to bursting in and running us around the area without any explanation. One night after taps, another guy and I tied a rope across the doorway, just knee high, to two steel bunks. Later we started hollering, as if there were a fight. Kemp and the corporal came charging in, hit the rope and sprawled all over the place. Things were deathly quiet. Finally Kemp said, "Which one of you shitheads set that bear trap?" We roared with laughter. The two-mile run seemed a small price to pay.

The big day arrived and all the platoons and spectators gathered at the rifle range. It was a festive atmosphere, like a championship game. One platoon would assume positions on the firing line, while another platoon, down in a cement trench behind

the target embankment, down in the "butts," manned the targets.

When the targets were ready, the sergeant in charge of the firing line would holler through a megaphone, "Ready on the right!"

A sergeant down the line would reply, "Ready on the right!"

"Ready on the left!"

A sergeant on the left would answer, "Ready on the left!"

"Commence firing!"

And the platoon would fire their rounds. When they finished a set, the sergeant in charge got on the field telephone, called the sergeant of the platoon in the butts and ordered them to mark the targets. The D.I. would shout to his boys, "Mark targets!" and each team would bring their target down by pulleys. Bullet holes in the center black circle were marked by placing white discs over them, and holes in the outside white circle were marked with black discs. Then you ran the target back up the pulley. The men on the firing line read the marks through binoculars. If a guy had missed the target altogether with a shot, the men in the butts manning his target took a red flag on a long pole and waved it across the top of the target and then dropped it below the embankment. The red flag was known as "Maggie's Drawers." Get a few Maggie's Drawers



and you blew your reputation as a rifleman.

When one platoon was down in the butts that day, a couple of boots had a target that some colonel was shooting at for his annual qualification. Every year a marine has to qualify on the firing range to maintain his rating or get a new one. The ratings are, top to bottom, distinguished rifleman, which you can't earn in boot camp, expert, sharpshooter and marksman.

That colonel couldn't hit a bull in the ass with a bass fiddle. Of course, in the butts you don't know who's shooting at the target you're manning. The guy on the colonel's target waved five Maggie's Drawers. The colonel, peering through his binoculars, couldn't believe it. He went to the field telephone and called the D.I. in charge of the butts. The D.I. summoned one of the boots on the colonel's target.

"Hello," said the boot.

"Mark that goddamned number forty-two target, will ya?" barked the colonel.

"Hey, I read that target," replied the boot, "and you gotta hit the goddamned thing first, you dumb son of a bitch!"



"Do you know who you're talking to?" asked the colonel.

"No."

"Well, this is Colonel (so and so)."

"Well, do you know who you're talking to?" asked the boot.

"No."

"Thank god for that!" he said and hung up.

Our platoon made a great showing on the firing range. I got an expert rating. Later Sergeant Kemp said we were the best platoon he ever had, as he counted his winnings.

"The Marine Corps is a good home. You shitheads are as lucky as a whore with two gidgets."

Now came an endless round of aptitude tests. As a result, another kid and I found ourselves qualified for Annapolis. He went, and the next time I saw him he was a captain in the Marine Air Force. Kemp gave me a lecture. "Son," he said, "there's nothing lower in the Marine Corps than a second lieutenant, unless it's a field music. You have all the makings of a good marine. You have a chance to go to Sea School, where only the best go. Do it!"



I did. Jim Ward, from Lima, Ohio, and I packed for Charleston, Virginia. As we pulled out of camp on a truck, Kemp had already acquired a new platoon of scared boots. As we passed the parade ground, we saw two of them up in the tree, beating their chests and laughing. Kemp saluted our truck and we saluted back.