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My First Four Months In The Army

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At the age of 17, I was a very popular student in high school. At the end of my junior year, I made a decision: I was going to become a Soldier in the U.S. Army. Unfortunately, my family was not overly enthused about my plans. In particular, my father seemed the most bothered by my decision. Although my father is a very compassionate man, he does not readily show affection or get emotional over anything. However, when I signed up for the military on 23 JUL 85, I could see the worry in his eyes. My most vivid memory of that day is my father simply asking me over and over again “Is this was what you really want?”

Even though my father was not fond of sports, I spent much of my time, both playing and competing. Somehow, sports gave me a sense of discipline and teamwork. By the age of 15, I obtained my first job at a restaurant called “Roy Rogers”. At 17 years of age, I began a second job at a wholesale warehouse called Makro. Working these two jobs for over two years, moving up in pay and position, gave me a sense of pride and accomplishment. Through my experiences with sports and work, I learned that hard work and motivation was the key to obtaining success in life. Thus, I was going to obtain my success in the military.

Departing for basic training was both exciting and nerve-racking! I felt as if I was ready for anything. After saying our good-byes, I remember my mother walking into her bedroom. It was months later that I found out she spent at least an hour crying. She needed time, I suppose, to get over the thought that I was leaving home for good. Even as I walked out the door with the recruiter, my father portrayed the proud, stoic man I have known all my life.

Upon arrival to basic training at Ft Jackson, SC on 1 JUL 86, I anxiously awaited the unavoidable barrage of fifty screaming drill sergeants. To my surprise, however, the cadre was relatively calm, and not the infamous monsters I was prepared to confront. I grew up in a family

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with no prior affiliation whatsoever to the military. Naturally, my mind was filled with visions of every military movie seen. Of course, I knew there were individuals with big brown hats waiting for me as I stepped off the bus. What I didn't understand was why I was not doing push-ups, getting yelled at, or wishing I were back home already. Reality did come crashing down three days later, and it crashed hard!

The moment we arrived at our designated training companies, the typical drill sergeants seen on television and in movies "greeted" us. Many privates were shocked and unprepared for the intense atmosphere of basic training, but I was ready. After all, if I entered through the gates of hell, I did it ready, willing and able.

Our drill sergeants were actually very interesting individuals in themselves. Drill Sergeant Jackson was a very large African American who was always mad at the world. Whenever Soldiers got out of hand, he would take them to the place he referred to as "the wood line". It was merely his way of saying that you were going to get smoked on pushups and sit-ups for a long period of time. Then there was Drill Sergeant Peterson, the "newby" E-5 who was nicknamed after the professional wrestler, "Sergeant Slaughter". He was also the "bad guy". Last, but by no means least, was Drill Sergeant Walker. He was considered the "nice guy". Drill Sergeant Walker was a charismatic, levelheaded Vietnam vet who was assigned to the 1/7 CAV. He used to tell us stories about his combat experiences. Specifically, I remember him telling us about how Vietnamese women would place razor blades in their private parts in order to kill Americans during sexual intercourse. Not once do I recall Drill Sergeant Walker yelling at any of us. Although I found all my drill sergeants to be outstanding trainers and individuals, it was Drill Sergeant Walker whom I valued and respected most.

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My eight weeks in basic training flew by. As quickly as the days went by, the nights seemed even quicker. You would barely hit the pillow, only to be awakened for another long, hard day. There were many nights I heard young men crying for home. For the life of me, I couldn't understand why an 18 to 30-year-old man would be crying to go home (perhaps my father's inability to show much emotion helped me in this case). The crying would be short lived, though, because only moments later you would hear those same Soldiers being smoked by the drill sergeants.

Soldiers getting "smoked" were commonplace during basic training, and I was no exception. On one occasion, the drill sergeants awakened the entire platoon because an article of clothing was stolen from a Soldier. As Drill Sergeant Peterson interrogated the platoon one by one, some crazy urge caused me to smile at him. Immediately, he said to me in his southern twang "You must really like me and want to f\*#k me." That was the breaking point that had me bursting into laughter. I was quickly placed in the front lean and rest position and smoked for at least 30 minutes. During this time I tried to hold my composure but was unable to do so. I still remember Drill Sergeant Peterson leaning up against the wall, giving the commands "Down-up, down-up; get up-get down, knock ,em out." That was my only individual smoke session. Many other Soldiers were not as lucky, however. If you stood out in some way, you were easy targets for the drill sergeants. Troublemakers, APFT failures, overweight individuals, slackers or practical jokers were at the forefront of attention. The best way to get through basic training was to blend in with the rest of the platoon and do exactly what you were told.

When I graduated from basic training, I was sent to Ft Lee, VA, for training as a Material Storage and Handling Specialist. Our drill sergeant was a Vietnam Vet by the name of Drill

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Sergeant Petrosic. He was a very calm drill sergeant whose strategy was to take away your personal time if you failed to uphold the standards. This method of “corrective training” is one that has stayed with me even to this day. Drill Sergeant Petrosic used to always state “There is always that two percent of individuals who will do exactly the opposite of what you tell them.” Throughout my years in the military, I have found that to be true. In all sincerity, I feel that my training during AIT is when I truly obtained my mindset as a Soldier.

Drill Sergeant Petrosic not only reinforced basic training standards, but also taught us basic housekeeping skills (laundering, folding clothes, ironing, etc) and how to be proud of our unit. He taught us how to employ teamwork by signing the platoon up for fun runs on post. He stated, “Whatever we have to do to win the race, do it.” Drill Sergeant Petrosic was a very caring and dedicated drill sergeant. He was there when you woke in the morning, and there when you fell asleep at night. Not only was he intelligent, but also physically fit. Our platoon had the highest PT average, with some of the highest scores in the battalion. I left AIT with a score of 299 on my APFT.

Some of the things that I was taught in AIT seemed very petty at the time, but I now understand why I was taught in such a manner. Some of Drill Sergeant Petrosic’s strategies came in handy for me during my duty as a drill sergeant from 1999-2001. Several years after my drill sergeant duty, I received messages from some of my former Soldiers, thanking me for showing them the little things, such as ironing their uniforms. They informed me that during their time growing up at home, they were never taught or were never required to perform these basic tasks.

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After graduation from AIT, I proceeded to Ft Benning, GA, for Airborne School. When I originally signed my military contract, I requested anything with an airborne option. I wanted to “be all I could be”. So, in NOV 86, I found myself in airborne school. Up until that point, I hadn’t failed anything in the military, and wasn’t about to fail out of this school. The first week, known as “ground week”, went by fairly fast. We mainly learned parachute landing falls (PLF’s) and prepared our bodies for parachute landing procedures, known as riser slips. Although failure was not an option for me, everyone has his or her weakness. Ironically, my weakness seemed to be a fear of heights.

I quickly came to the realization that climbing a 30-foot wood tower, which shifted and produced a lot of creaking noises, wasn’t the place for an 18-year-old kid from Philadelphia. Unfortunately, you couldn’t just walk up to the top of the tower and jump out. There was about a 50-minute process of climbing, then waiting for the Soldiers in front of you to jump. It took me until the last couple of jumps before finally qualifying on the tower, but I made it. It filled me with pride to know that I had conquered my biggest fear. I knew I could do almost anything now.

As you know, when you conquer one thing there is always something else. Within the next week, we tackled Ungowa, the 200-foot tower. As you were being hoisted 200 feet into the air in pre-opened parachutes, you were to prepare yourself to land, utilizing everything that you were taught over the past 2 weeks. When my turn came, without hesitation but still fearful, I stepped into the harness and was taken up to the top of the tower. Suddenly feeling a jolt, I felt the chute release from the frame and I was freefalling. My last two weeks of training came into

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effect, as it was solely up to me to ensure that I landed properly, without breaking anything. My landing was successful; thus, I moved on to Jump Week.

Week 3 was the most exhausting and brutal week of airborne training, both physically and mentally. During a formation, a young man was brought in front of the company as an example of what not to do when you are jumping out of the “bird”. The man had his right bicep torn from its bone during a jump. He jumped out of the bird with the static line wrapped around his arm. His upper arm was nothing but bone and skin. That was an extremely graphic example I knew I would never forget.

We had a total of two days to perform five jumps. The first couple of jumps were okay, but on my third jump, I landed directly in a briar patch. Needless to say, I was pulling stickers from everywhere, including several very sensitive areas. During my fifth and final jump, I had a “door position”. I remember thinking that “You never have a door position during training.” Noticing my nervousness, the jumpmaster asked me, “Are you ready, you okay?” My answer was a loud “Airborne!” When the light turned green, I leaped out of the door, but in my excitement forgot to count. Instead, I yelled “Airborne!” Hitting the ground on that last jump was the greatest feeling in the world. At that point I was officially an airborne Soldier! Having my wings pinned on was such a feeling of accomplishment and pride. I felt that I had done something not many Soldiers were willing or capable of doing.

Four months after my farewell to my family, I returned home for a week of leave. My family, especially my father, was so proud that I moved on and accomplished something within that small amount of time away from home. That was when I realized that I not only had

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a great career ahead of me, but also the possibility of a very fruitful retirement. All my hard work was worth every minute.

My first four months in the military were some of the best months of my life. If not for the training I received, I may not be where I am today. My motivation not to fall into a dead-end job made me work harder to achieve my goals. Additionally, my upbringing and experiences with work and sports helped me to excel physically and mentally. Therefore, I try to teach my children to stay involved in sports, be independent, and not to make excuses to back down. My experience in the military has taught me to take every opportunity available, because your life will be what you make it.