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**Florence Essay Prize**

None of my life's accomplishments have given me more satisfaction than becoming a United States Marine. My dad was a Marine in Vietnam, and I've always thought that his courage and decisiveness could be attributed to his service. He has always been a hero of mine, and I wanted his best qualities to show in me, too.

So, in my youth, I thought the world of the Marine Corps. I don't remember ever being told that Marine was the most professional, most efficient and most successful warrior class in history; I simply always knew it. My dad kept his uniforms in my parents' closet, 30 years after being discharged. I felt that they still meant as much to him after I was born as they did when he left the ranks. "Semper Fidelis", a Marines' saying which means "Always Faithful" in Latin, adorned my toy box, and a similar bumper sticker has been on every car my dad has owned. I even went as a Marine for Halloween when I was eight. My shirt was only a child's camouflage top, but I wore a real five-point cover, his uniform hat, on my head, one he had worn on his while on duty. It had a real Eagle, Globe and Anchor on it, which is the Marine emblem. I have pictures from that trick-or-treat outing, and the pride behind my smile on that night ranks the costume a little higher than other years' vampires or Jason Voorhies from *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*.

I signed the Marine Corps' various dotted lines at 19 years old, after deciding to postpone college. I thought that I needed direction, and I felt I hadn't done anything truly important in my life. I saw the Marine Corps as a temporary occupation, and a vehicle to being able to confidently say, "I have contributed to the world." My family and friends weren't thrilled, but they respected my decision, and already I felt I'd done the right thing. All that was left was to prove it to everyone else.

I got in a van with other recruits in July of 2002. We rode in silence from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, to Beaufort, South Carolina. With only a few miles to go until our destination, the driver spoke up, and it was to be all anyone said the entire trip: "On up here, they'll be yelling, and y'all won't know what to do. But none of that'll be too bad, and you believe me, because I've done this a hundred times."

That's just how it happened minutes later. Shouting directed me out of the van and onto the notorious yellow footprints of Marine Recruit Depot Parris Island. Nearby, big letters on the Receiving Company Building read: "Through These Portals Pass Prospects For America's Finest Fighting Force: The United States Marines". We stood as straight and perfectly still as we could, and listened to Drill Instructors tell us in fierce language how we would walk, talk, eat and breathe for the next three months, if we made it that far.

We filed into the Receiving building, and first thing, we got our heads shaved. I touched my hair nervously while watching the recruits ahead of me roughly shorn, so I was called over to a barber, and he cut a weaving swath of my hair off, leaving the rest untouched. I then went to the back of the line, and was immediately joined by other recruits with mangled 'dos who'd absentmindedly touched their heads as they watched my (semi-) haircut.

We went single-file everywhere: through periods of data entry, where Marines put our ability to speak in the third person to the test ("This recruit's birth date is August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1982, sir"); through issue point after issue point for our equipment, where eye-contact was a surefire way to get "individual attention", i.e. screamed at; and finally, blessedly, into a long empty room, where we sat in rows, cross-legged, in silence, lest the raving lunatics charged with our care hear our murmuring and come back.

Eventually we were separated into platoons, and we were assigned a company and battalion to belong to, as well as our own team of Drill Instructors. These men hounded us throughout basic training. They demanded perfect execution in marching movements, martial arts techniques, rifle care and firing, as well as eating and sleeping, and they insisted that our memorization of Marine Corps history, customs, rank structure and governing personnel be second nature. Anything short of their lofty designs was, to them, and eventually to us, abject failure. I began to expect a great deal of excellence out of myself, and my fellow recruits.

Soon, we became excellent at our various tasks, too. I believe around that time I got exactly what I wanted from recruit training. I was forced to attempt difficult exercises, and after one only came another. I divined finally that the way through it all was to accomplish, succeed, and move on. This was not my life's mantra prior to boot camp. I came to take pride in accurately firing an M-16, which was no priority whatsoever before joining. I cared that my shirts and pants had sharp creases, a concern so alien to me before that the thought of it probably still makes my mom dizzy. Things I didn't like or wasn't necessarily inclined to do *could* be important. That was an enormous revelation. Once I figured that out, boot camp sped right along.

Also, once we streamlined and performed better each day, the Drill Instructors revealed more and more what the Marine life was like. They told us "sea stories", tales from their years of experience, which validated all the strenuous training. They acted like regular people for brief spells, and that was encouraging also.

We did an intense exercise to conclude recruit training called "the Crucible". We trekked 50 miles in two days on three hours of sleep. There were mechanical reasoning challenges to solve as small teams, and we ate only two meager meals while "in the field". The experience was strenuous, but it proved we could do what was asked of us. After completing the Crucible, our spirits were indomitable, and we graduated from Recruit training.

I had never been as proud as I was the moment they finally called us “Marines” at our graduation ceremony. With his platoon in a group formation, our Senior Drill instructor dropped an emblem into each of our hands, and I got my own Eagle, Globe and Anchor, to be fastened to my own Marine Corps cover, ceremoniously, and with my father and family looking on. That was my life’s proudest moment, because I had finally done something lasting, something quite hard, and truly something real.

That was almost five years ago, and the Marine Corps was my life for most of that time. It widened my comfort zone to include the Pentagon and Japan, with several stops in between. The confidence—social, professional, and private— that came with it all has made that terrific moment in front of the cheering stands at Parris Island ever more stellar. Becoming a U.S. Marine is so far my greatest accomplishment, and, having done that, I believe I can look forward to many more.