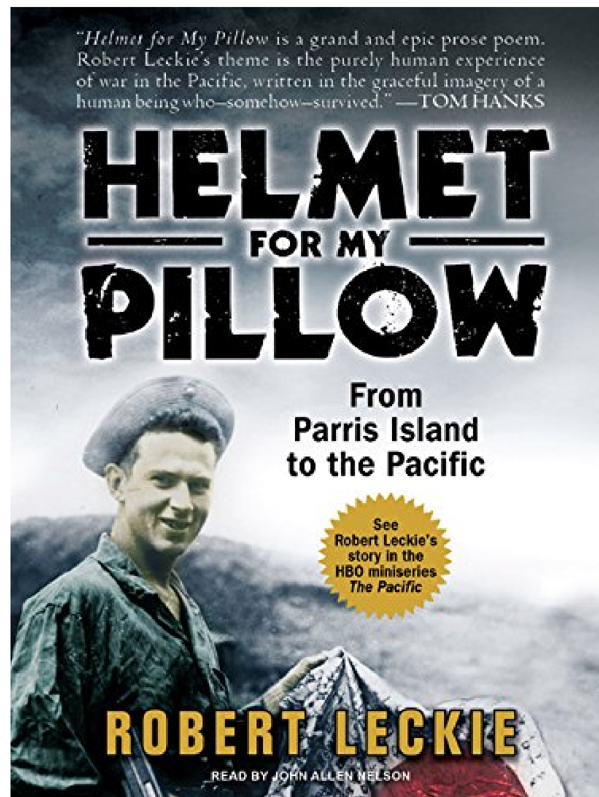
HELMET FOR MY PILLOW: FROM PARRIS ISLAND TO THE PACIFIC BY ROBERT LECKIE



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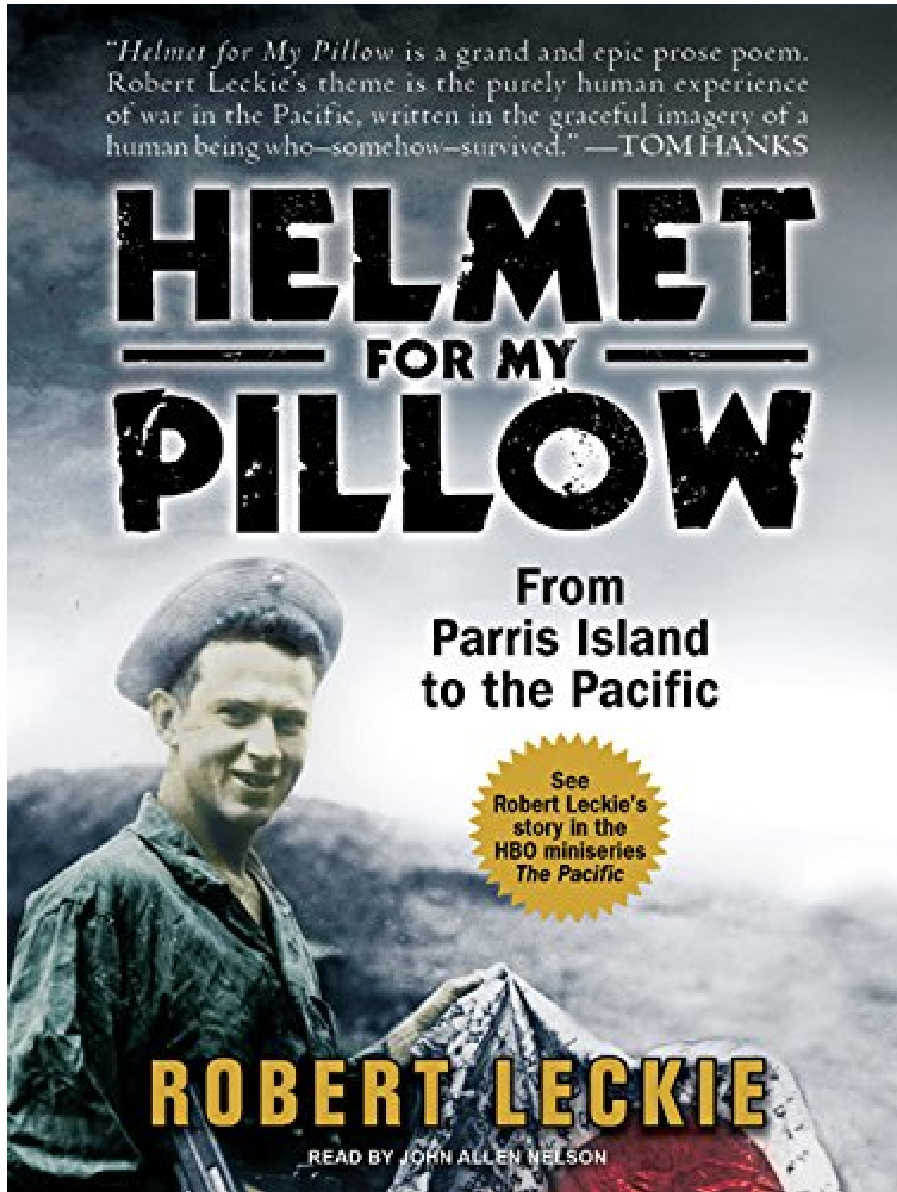

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Review
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About the Author
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Chapter One

Boot

A cutting wind slanted up Church Street in the cheerless dawn of January 5, 1942. That day I departed for the United States Marines.

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But none of this meant much to me. I was aware of my father beside me, bending into the wind with me. I could feel the wound in my lower regions, still fresh, still sore. The sutures had been removed a few days earlier.

I had sought to enlist the day after Pearl Harbor, but the Marines had insisted that I be circumcised. It cost me a hundred dollars, although I am not sure to this day whether I paid the doctor or not. But I am certain that few young men went off to war in that fateful time so marked.

We had come across the Jersey meadows, riding the Erie commuter line, and then on the ferry over the Hudson River to downtown New York. Breakfast at home had been subdued. My mother was up and about; she did not cry. It was not a heart-rending leave-taking, nor was it brave, resolute—any of those words that fail to describe the thing.

It was like so much else in this war that was to produce unbounded heroism, yet not a single stirring song: it was resigned. She followed me to the door with sad eyes and said, "God keep you."

It had been a silent trip across the meadows and it was a wordless good-by in front of the bronze revolving doors at Ninety, Church Street. My father embraced me quickly, and just as quickly averted his face and left. The Irish doorman measured me and smiled.

I went inside and joined the United States Marines.

The captain who swore us in reduced the ceremony to a jumble. We all held up our hands. We put them down when he lowered his. That way we guessed we were marines.

The master gunnery sergeant who became our momentary shepherd made the fact plainer to us. Those rich mellow blasphemous oaths that were to become so familiar to me flowed from his lips with the consummate ease of one who had spent a lifetime in vituperation. I would meet his masters later. Presently, as he herded us across the river to Hoboken and a waiting train, he seemed to be beyond comparison. But he was gentle and kind enough when he said good-by to the thirty or forty of us who boarded the train.

He stood at the head of our railroad car—a man of middle age, slender, and of a grace that was on the verge of being ruined by a pot belly. He wore the Marine dress blues. Over this was the regulation tight-fitting overcoat of forest green. Green and blue has always seemed to me an odd combination of colors, and it seemed especially so then; the gaudy dark and light blue of the Marine dress sheathed in sedate and soothing green.

"Where you are going it will not be easy," the gunnery sergeant said. "When you get to Parris Island, you'll find things plenty different from civilian life. You won't like it! You'll think they're overdoing things. You'll think they're stupid! You'll think they're the cruelest, rottenest bunch of men you ever ran into! I'm going to tell you one thing. You'll be wrong! If you want to save yourself plenty of heartache you'll listen to me right now: you'll do everything they tell you and you'll keep your big mouths shut!"

He could not help grinning at the end. No group of men ever had a saner counselor, and he knew it; but he could not help grinning. He knew we would ignore his every word.

"Okay, Sarge," somebody yelled. "Thanks, Sarge."

He turned and left us.

We called him "Sarge." Within another twenty-four hours we would not dare address a lowly Pfc. without the cringing "sir." But today the civilian shine was still upon us. We wore civvies; Hoboken howled around us in the throes of trade; we each had the citizen's polite deprecation of the soldier, and who among us was

not certain that he was not long for the ranks?

Our ride to Washington was silent and uneventful. But once we had arrived in the capital and had changed trains the atmosphere seemed to lift. Other Marine recruits were arriving from all over the east. Our contingent was the last to arrive, the last to be crammed aboard the ancient wooden train that waited, puffing, dirty-in-the-dark, smelling of coal—waited to take us down the coast to South Carolina. Perhaps it was because of the dilapidated old train that we brightened and became gay. Such a dingy, tired old relic could not help but provoke mirth. Someone pretended to have found a brass plate beneath one of the seats, and our car rocked with laughter as he read, “This car is the property of the Philadelphia Museum of American History.” We had light from kerosene lamps and heat from a potbellied stove. Draughts seemed to stream from every angle and there was a constant creaking and wailing of wood and wheels that sounded like an endless keening. Strange old train that it was, I loved it.

Comfort had been left behind in Washington. Some of us already were beginning to revel in the hardship of the train ride. That intangible mystique of the marine was somehow, even then, at work. We were having it rough, which is exactly what we expected and what we had signed up for. That is the thing: having it rough. The man who has had it roughest is the man to be most admired. Conversely, he who has had it the easiest is the least praiseworthy.

Those who wished to sleep could cat-nap on the floor while the train lurched down through Virginia and North Carolina. But these were few. The singing and the talk were too exciting.

The boy sitting next to me—a handsome blond-haired youth from south Jersey—turned out to have a fine high voice. He sang several songs alone. There being a liberal leavening of New York Irish among us, he was soon singing Irish ballads.

Across the aisle there was another boy, whom I shall call Armadillo because of his lean and pointed face. He was from New York and had attended college there. Being one of the few college men present, he had already established a sort of literary clique.

The Armadillo’s coterie could not equal another circle farther down the car. This had at its center a stocky, smiling redhead. Red had been a catcher for the St. Louis Cardinals and had once hit a home run at the Polo Grounds off the great Carl Hubbell.

There was no measuring the impact of such a celebrity on our group, composed otherwise of mediocrities like myself. Red had been in the big time. He had held daily converse with men who were nothing less than the idols of his newfound comrades. It was quite natural they should ring him round; consult him on everything from pitching form to the Japanese General Staff.

“Whaddya think it’ll be like at Parris Island, Red?”

“Hey, Red—you think the Japs are as tough as the newspapers say they are?”

It is an American weakness. The success becomes the sage. Scientists counsel on civil liberty; comedians and actresses lead political rallies; athletes tell us what brand of cigarette to smoke. But the redhead was equal to it. It was plain in his case what travel and headlines can do. He was easily the most poised of us all.

But I suspect even Red’s savoir-faire got a rude jolt when we arrived in Parris Island. We had been taken from the railroad station by truck. When we had dismounted and had formed a motley rank in front of the red

brick mess hall, we were subjected to the classic greeting.

"Boys," said the sergeant who would be our drill instructor. "Boys—Ah want to tell yawl something. Give youah hearts to Jesus, boys—cause youah ass belongs to me!"

Then he fell us in after our clumsy civilian fashion and marched us into the mess hall.

There were baloney and lima beans. I had never eaten lima beans before, but I did this time; they were cold.

The group that had made the trip from New York did not survive the first day in Parris Island. I never saw the blond singer again, nor most of the others. Somehow sixty of us among the hundreds who had been aboard that ancient train, became a training platoon, were assigned a number and placed under the charge of the drill sergeant who had delivered the welcoming address.

Sergeant Bellow was a southerner with a fine contempt for northerners. It was not that he favored the southerners; he merely treated them less sarcastically. He was big. I would say six feet four inches, two hundred thirty pounds.

But above all he had a voice.

It pulsed with power as he counted the cadence, marching us from the administration building to the quartermaster's. It whipped us, this ragged remnant, and stiffened our slouching civilian backs. Nowhere else but in the Marine Corps do you hear that peculiar lilting cadence of command.

"Thrip-faw-ya-leahft, thrip-faw-ya-leahft."

It sounds like an incantation; but it is merely the traditional "three-four-your-left" elongated by the southern drawl, made sprightly by being sung. I never heard it done better than by our sergeant. Because of this, and because of his inordinate love of drill, I have but one image of him: striding stiff-backed a few feet apart from us, arms thrust out, hands clenched, head canted back, with the whole body following and the great voice ceaselessly bellowing, "Thrip-faw-ya-leahft, thrip-faw-ya-leahft."

Sergeant Bellow marched us to the quartermaster's. It was there we were stripped of all vestiges of personality. It is the quartermasters who make soldiers, sailors and marines. In their presence, one strips down. With each divestment, a trait is lost; the discard of a garment marks the quiet death of an idiosyncrasy. I take off my socks; gone is a propensity for stripes, or clocks, or checks, or even solids; ended is a tendency to combine purple socks with brown tie. My socks henceforth will be tan. They will neither be soiled, nor rolled, nor gaudy, nor restrained, nor holey. They will be tan. The only other thing they may be is clean.

So it is with it all, until one stands naked, struggling with an embarrassment that is entirely lost on the laconic shades who work in quartermaster sheds.

Within—in the depths the psychiatrists call subliminal—a human spark still sputters. It will never go quite out. Its vigor or its desuetude is in exact proportion to the number of miles a man may put between himself and his camp.

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Here is one of the most riveting first-person accounts ever to come out of World War II. Robert Leckie enlisted in the United States Marine Corps in January 1942, shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In Helmet for My Pillow, we follow his odyssey, from basic training on Parris Island, South Carolina, all the way to the raging battles in the Pacific, where some of the war's fiercest fighting took place. Recounting his service with the 1st Marine Division and the brutal action on Guadalcanal, New Britain, and Peleliu, Leckie spares no detail of the horrors and sacrifices of war, painting an unvarnished portrait of how real warriors are made, fight, and often die in the defense of their country. From the live-for-today rowdiness of marines on leave to the terrors of jungle warfare against an enemy determined to fight to the last man, Leckie describes what war is really like when victory can only be measured inch by bloody inch. Woven throughout are Leckie's hard-won, eloquent, and thoroughly unsentimental meditations on the meaning of war and why we fight. Unparalleled in its immediacy and accuracy, Helmet for My Pillow will leave no one untouched. This is a book that brings you as close to the mud, the blood, and the experience of war as it is safe to come. Now producers Tom Hanks, Steven Spielberg, and Gary Goetzman, the men behind Band of Brothers, have adapted material from Helmet for My Pillow for HBO's epic miniseries The Pacific, which will thrill and edify a whole new generation.

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Most helpful customer reviews

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.
These were real men!
By woodduck_88
I just like reading bits of history from someone's perspective that actually lived it. I thoroughly enjoyed this book because there were details about the actual fighting and boot camp and training but there was also "side stories", for lack of a better term, to help remember that these were real people. They weren't just some made up characters. These were incredible men that made this country great! I thought this book did a great job or portraying just that. And it didn't have all the profanity that some do. All that's not necessary to me. I know how vulgar Marines can be. I don't have to actually read it. I definitely recommend this book.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.
On the shelf with the best WWII books
By James Christ
I was given this book by a veteran named Robert Brutinel who had served in the Marine paratroops. He joined in 1942 and arrived on Guadalcanal after the climactic fighting. However, he served on Vella La Vella and Choiseul and then fought in the 5th Division and was wounded on Iwo. When he handed me the book he said, "If you want to know what it was like, this is it." He thought the humor of the book and the camaraderie of the Marines was exactly like what he experienced. So I read the book. To this day, it is my all-time favorite Pacific theater book. And it's right up there, in my opinion, with the Forgotten Soldier on the "all-time best WWII book" shelf (with a handful of others.)

I couldn't help but read some of the critical reviews. I completely disagreed with them. Often they accused the author, Robert Leckie, of having a great resentment toward leadership and authority. I did not find that the case at all. In fact, Leckie often praised officers and had great respect for the good ones. What he couldn't stand, and it shows in his book, is unfair use of power in leadership positions -- also called theft. In almost every instance, be it the cigars LT Ivy-League stole, or the Japanese footlocker stolen by LT Big Picture, Leckie had every right to be angry and I wonder if any of the people who criticized him would have acted any differently.

Another criticized Leckie for drinking and womanizing when he was not in combat. Apparently that reader did not realize that Leckie (just like the thousands of other Marines who took liberty Down Under) had been on Guadalcanal for 5 months, with nothing but death staring him in the face and not a single woman to lay eyes on, and was now on liberty in the very country he had helped save from invasion, knowing he would be going back into combat soon. Leckie was no different than many of the other Marines, just more honest about it. I laughed at the part when a Marine was coming back from a rendezvous with a young Australian girl and commented to Leckie that the Australian girls had no morals. Leckie's comment to that hypocrisy made me laugh.

Helmet for my pillow is the type of book you simply can't put down. And you will be reading it and people in the other room will ask you "What's so funny?" because you often laugh out-loud at the wonderfully entertaining style Leckie uses. But at other times you will be riveted and saddened by the loss of great heroes like LT Racehorse and many others. (May they rest in peace.)

Robert Leckie was truly a gifted writer and it's no wonder he made his career writing for newspapers and then writing best sellers. Fantastic book.

278 of 289 people found the following review helpful.
Profound and unique insight into the WWII Pacific experience
By Lori D. Smith
First, I must admit a particular regard for this book as the granddaughter of Bill Smith (whom Leckie refers to as 'Hoosier'), who served with Leckie in How Company. Leckie offers nuanced insight into the ways in which he and his friends understood national military service, the `enemy', and the war more generally, and how these perspectives or ideas evolved among the men from North Carolina to Guadalcanal, Australia, and New Britain. Leckie steers clear from prototypes or cliches; there is no enblematic enlisted man or officer. Rather, these men are treated as real people coping (or not) with the profound uncertainty of their situation.

Perhaps this appreciation says more about my own lack of experience with combat/warfare. Thinking of Guadalcanal from a macro or military history perspective, it is easy to take for granted that marines' objectives - and the most efficacious means to pursue them - were always apparent to those involved. In this context, Leckie's account of warfare as a learning process was deep, reflexive, and fascinating. For example, he describes: 1) the marines' first reactions to air battle and subsequent adjustment to air battle as a simple process of attrition; and 2) the uncertainty confronted by officers at various stages, against the backdrop of the US' limited military experience in the Pacific or in jungles more generally. In this way, Leckie also makes apparent the need - and efficacy - of severe hierarchy. For this reason, I think that reviewers' arguments positing a lack of regard for officers deserve qualification.

UPDATE/REFLECTIONS
Hoosier was wounded and evacuated early in the Battle of Peleliu; I believe that Chuckler and Runner were wounded later and evacuated with Leckie. Leckie and his friends stayed in touch - in the summer of 1985, my grandfather and his wife, as well as Runner (Juergens) and his wife, went to visit Leckie in New Jersey. There Leckie decidated a park in their honor, in honor of all marines who fought in the Pacific Theater (I uploaded a photo of the dedication plaque in the 'customer image gallery').

Although Hoosier never liked to share his experiences from the war, my father considers the book to be true to his character. And, while the HBO miniseries diverges considerably from the book, Hoosier's sense of humor appears true to form (the book provides far greater nuance and depth, different dialogue, and events unfolded differently). This edition of the book also includes a few photographs of Leckie, Runner, Hoosier, and others - some taken in their dress blues, and others on Guadalcanal.

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HELMET FOR MY PILLOW: FROM PARRIS ISLAND TO THE PACIFIC BY ROBERT LECKIE PDF

Yeah, reading a book **Helmet For My Pillow: From Parris Island To The Pacific By Robert Leckie** could include your close friends lists. This is just one of the formulas for you to be effective. As known, success does not indicate that you have wonderful things. Recognizing as well as recognizing greater than various other will certainly offer each success. Beside, the message and impression of this Helmet For My Pillow: From Parris Island To The Pacific By Robert Leckie can be taken and picked to act.

Review
"Helmet for My Pillow is a grand and epic prose poem. Robert Leckie's theme is the purely human experience of war in the Pacific, written in the graceful imagery of a human being who---somehow---survived." ---Tom Hanks

About the Author
Robert Leckie (1920–2001) served in the 1st Marine Division during World War II and authored more than forty books on American war history, including The Wars of America: From 1600 to 1900.

John Allen Nelson's critically acclaimed roles on television's 24 and Vanished are among the highlights of his twenty-five-plus years as an actor, screenwriter, and film producer. As a narrator, he won an AudioFile Earphones Award for his reading of Zoo Story by Thomas French.

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Chapter One

Boot

A cutting wind slanted up Church Street in the cheerless dawn of January 5, 1942. That day I departed for the United States Marines.

The war with Japan was not yet four weeks old, Wake Island had fallen. Pearl Harbor was a real tragedy, a burning bitter humiliation. Hastily composed war songs were on the lips of everyone, their heavy patriotism failing to compensate for what they lacked in tune and spirit. Hysteria seemed to crouch behind all eyes.

But none of this meant much to me. I was aware of my father beside me, bending into the wind with me. I could feel the wound in my lower regions, still fresh, still sore. The sutures had been removed a few days earlier.

I had sought to enlist the day after Pearl Harbor, but the Marines had insisted that I be circumcised. It cost me a hundred dollars, although I am not sure to this day whether I paid the doctor or not. But I am certain that few young men went off to war in that fateful time so marked.

We had come across the Jersey meadows, riding the Erie commuter line, and then on the ferry over the Hudson River to downtown New York. Breakfast at home had been subdued. My mother was up and about;

she did not cry. It was not a heart-rending leave-taking, nor was it brave, resolute—any of those words that fail to describe the thing.

It was like so much else in this war that was to produce unbounded heroism, yet not a single stirring song: it was resigned. She followed me to the door with sad eyes and said, “God keep you.”

It had been a silent trip across the meadows and it was a wordless good-by in front of the bronze revolving doors at Ninety, Church Street. My father embraced me quickly, and just as quickly averted his face and left. The Irish doorman measured me and smiled.

I went inside and joined the United States Marines.

The captain who swore us in reduced the ceremony to a jumble. We all held up our hands. We put them down when he lowered his. That way we guessed we were marines.

The master gunnery sergeant who became our momentary shepherd made the fact plainer to us. Those rich mellow blasphemous oaths that were to become so familiar to me flowed from his lips with the consummate ease of one who had spent a lifetime in vituperation. I would meet his masters later. Presently, as he herded us across the river to Hoboken and a waiting train, he seemed to be beyond comparison. But he was gentle and kind enough when he said good-by to the thirty or forty of us who boarded the train.

He stood at the head of our railroad car—a man of middle age, slender, and of a grace that was on the verge of being ruined by a pot belly. He wore the Marine dress blues. Over this was the regulation tight-fitting overcoat of forest green. Green and blue has always seemed to me an odd combination of colors, and it seemed especially so then; the gaudy dark and light blue of the Marine dress sheathed in sedate and soothing green.

“Where you are going it will not be easy,” the gunnery sergeant said. “When you get to Parris Island, you’ll find things plenty different from civilian life. You won’t like it! You’ll think they’re overdoing things. You’ll think they’re stupid! You’ll think they’re the cruelest, rottenest bunch of men you ever ran into! I’m going to tell you one thing. You’ll be wrong! If you want to save yourself plenty of heartache you’ll listen to me right now: you’ll do everything they tell you and you’ll keep your big mouths shut!”

He could not help grinning at the end. No group of men ever had a saner counselor, and he knew it; but he could not help grinning. He knew we would ignore his every word.

“Okay, Sarge,” somebody yelled. “Thanks, Sarge.”

He turned and left us.

We called him “Sarge.” Within another twenty-four hours we would not dare address a lowly Pfc. without the cringing “sir.” But today the civilian shine was still upon us. We wore civvies; Hoboken howled around us in the throes of trade; we each had the citizen’s polite deprecation of the soldier, and who among us was not certain that he was not long for the ranks?

Our ride to Washington was silent and uneventful. But once we had arrived in the capital and had changed trains the atmosphere seemed to lift. Other Marine recruits were arriving from all over the east. Our contingent was the last to arrive, the last to be crammed aboard the ancient wooden train that waited, puffing, dirty-in-the-dark, smelling of coal—waited to take us down the coast to South Carolina. Perhaps it was

because of the dilapidated old train that we brightened and became gay. Such a dingy, tired old relic could not help but provoke mirth. Someone pretended to have found a brass plate beneath one of the seats, and our car rocked with laughter as he read, “This car is the property of the Philadelphia Museum of American History.” We had light from kerosene lamps and heat from a potbellied stove. Draughts seemed to stream from every angle and there was a constant creaking and wailing of wood and wheels that sounded like an endless keening. Strange old train that it was, I loved it.

Comfort had been left behind in Washington. Some of us already were beginning to revel in the hardship of the train ride. That intangible mystique of the marine was somehow, even then, at work. We were having it rough, which is exactly what we expected and what we had signed up for. That is the thing: having it rough. The man who has had it roughest is the man to be most admired. Conversely, he who has had it the easiest is the least praiseworthy.

Those who wished to sleep could cat-nap on the floor while the train lurched down through Virginia and North Carolina. But these were few. The singing and the talk were too exciting.

The boy sitting next to me—a handsome blond-haired youth from south Jersey—turned out to have a fine high voice. He sang several songs alone. There being a liberal leavening of New York Irish among us, he was soon singing Irish ballads.

Across the aisle there was another boy, whom I shall call Armadillo because of his lean and pointed face. He was from New York and had attended college there. Being one of the few college men present, he had already established a sort of literary clique.

The Armadillo’s coterie could not equal another circle farther down the car. This had at its center a stocky, smiling redhead. Red had been a catcher for the St. Louis Cardinals and had once hit a home run at the Polo Grounds off the great Carl Hubbell.

There was no measuring the impact of such a celebrity on our group, composed otherwise of mediocrities like myself. Red had been in the big time. He had held daily converse with men who were nothing less than the idols of his newfound comrades. It was quite natural they should ring him round; consult him on everything from pitching form to the Japanese General Staff.

“Whaddya think it’ll be like at Parris Island, Red?”

“Hey, Red—you think the Japs are as tough as the newspapers say they are?”

It is an American weakness. The success becomes the sage. Scientists counsel on civil liberty; comedians and actresses lead political rallies; athletes tell us what brand of cigarette to smoke. But the redhead was equal to it. It was plain in his case what travel and headlines can do. He was easily the most poised of us all.

But I suspect even Red’s savoir-faire got a rude jolt when we arrived in Parris Island. We had been taken from the railroad station by truck. When we had dismounted and had formed a motley rank in front of the red brick mess hall, we were subjected to the classic greeting.

“Boys,” said the sergeant who would be our drill instructor. “Boys—Ah want to tell yawl something. Give youah hearts to Jesus, boys—cause youah ass belongs to me!”

Then he fell us in after our clumsy civilian fashion and marched us into the mess hall.

There were baloney and lima beans. I had never eaten lima beans before, but I did this time; they were cold.

The group that had made the trip from New York did not survive the first day in Parris Island. I never saw the blond singer again, nor most of the others. Somehow sixty of us among the hundreds who had been aboard that ancient train, became a training platoon, were assigned a number and placed under the charge of the drill sergeant who had delivered the welcoming address.

Sergeant Bellow was a southerner with a fine contempt for northerners. It was not that he favored the southerners; he merely treated them less sarcastically. He was big. I would say six feet four inches, two hundred thirty pounds.

But above all he had a voice.

It pulsed with power as he counted the cadence, marching us from the administration building to the quartermaster's. It whipped us, this ragged remnant, and stiffened our slouching civilian backs. Nowhere else but in the Marine Corps do you hear that peculiar lilting cadence of command.

"Thrip-faw-ya-leahft, thrip-faw-ya-leahft."

It sounds like an incantation; but it is merely the traditional "three-four-your-left" elongated by the southern drawl, made sprightly by being sung. I never heard it done better than by our sergeant. Because of this, and because of his inordinate love of drill, I have but one image of him: striding stiff-backed a few feet apart from us, arms thrust out, hands clenched, head canted back, with the whole body following and the great voice ceaselessly bellowing, "Thrip-faw-ya-leahft, thrip-faw-ya-leahft."

Sergeant Bellow marched us to the quartermaster's. It was there we were stripped of all vestiges of personality. It is the quartermasters who make soldiers, sailors and marines. In their presence, one strips down. With each divestment, a trait is lost; the discard of a garment marks the quiet death of an idiosyncrasy. I take off my socks; gone is a propensity for stripes, or clocks, or checks, or even solids; ended is a tendency to combine purple socks with brown tie. My socks henceforth will be tan. They will neither be soiled, nor rolled, nor gaudy, nor restrained, nor holey. They will be tan. The only other thing they may be is clean.

So it is with it all, until one stands naked, struggling with an embarrassment that is entirely lost on the laconic shades who work in quartermaster sheds.

Within—in the depths the psychiatrists call subliminal—a human spark still sputters. It will never go quite out. Its vigor or its desuetude is in exact proportion to the number of miles a man may put between himself and his camp.

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