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When Angels Cry Tears of Moonshine

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WHEN ANGELS CRY TEARS OF MOONSHINE

A Thesis

by

JUAN FLORES JR

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2018

Major Subject: Creative Writing

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by
JUAN FLORES JR

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May 2018

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ABSTRACT

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When Angels Cry Tears of Moonshine is a collection of non-fiction essays exploring and reflecting on specific experiences as a military police patrolman over the course of the author's enlistment in the United States Marine Corps. Between the years of 2007 and 2009, more specifically, the author was exposed to multiple experiences related to masculinity, trauma, alcoholism, community and leadership that shaped his understanding of the Marine Corps as an institution. Through these personal essays, readers will identify elements of trauma, comradery, faults in leadership and alcoholism from the perspective of a Marine who did not have any combat experience at the time.

DEDICATION

The completion of this project would not have been possible without the love and support of my parents. My mother Rosa Elia Flores, and my father, Juan Flores, still continue to inspire, and motivate me to accomplish this degree.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I will always be grateful to Dr. Jean Braithwaite, chair of my thesis committee, for all her mentoring and advice. She encouraged me to reflect and dig further after each draft than I had done before. My thanks go to my thesis committee members: Dr. Jose A. Rodriguez, Dr. Robert Johnson, and Dr. Robert P. Moreira. Their advice, input and comments on my thesis helped elevate the quality of my work.

I would also like to thank my fellow Marines, some mentioned in this thesis, who gave their input, comments and helped refresh my memory. None of this would have never been accomplished without you.

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CHAPTER I

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Work on *When Angels Cry Tears of Moonshine* started in the Fall of 2016 as a small untitled collection of personal essays. Initially, my plan was to weave together a series of my military police (MP) off duty experiences in the United States Marine Corps. At first, the writing process felt exciting as I prepared myself to share some experiences I had never shared before. At the time, the essays did not have a defined structure or specific timeline constraints as I allowed a stream of consciousness guide me. Even though the totality of *When Angels Cry* quickly grew big inside my head, I was able to produce four essays fairly quickly. However on 1 December 2016, the flow of words came to an abrupt halt when I found out through Facebook that Turner Jay Hopkinson committed suicide. Hopkinson was a K9 handler and both of us served around the same time frame at the Provost Marshall Office (PMO) aboard Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton.

I felt confused. I felt a pain in my soul and I did not know why. I barely knew Hopkinson and got a major case of writers block over the loss. I went through a variety of emotions as I surveyed his Facebook profile. I could not understand how a Marine could have graduated from law school, worked for the California Innocence Project and suddenly commit suicide. Today, I see my loss of focus in late 2016 as recognition to an ongoing pattern of people I know and/or worked with dropping like flies due to suicide. I remembered Jonathon Powell who took his own life on 24 May 2014. From what I thought I knew about Powell, the son of a preacher and

married with two children. He was the last person I expected to take his own life. One of our old squad leaders called to notify me while at work. I had to step out of the building to gather myself. I was at a loss for words back then as well. Apparently, he was struggling and not able to get the help he needed. I felt like a failure drowning in survivor's guilt. Why? Powell was a Marine I trained with, recommended for squad leader and eventually deployed with. We went our separate ways after I left the Marine Corps in mid-to-late 2011 and Powell went on to deploy one more time. I should have reached out more.

I have no issues revealing my first attempt writing *When Angels Cry* in late 2016 a failure. I considered it a failure because I was only able to produce about 40% of what I originally planned for. Plus, I didn't keep any handwritten notes and forgot all the mental notes I had made. Moving forward, this is only one step into understanding my full intent in completing the project. Second, I have no issues admitting I wrote this for therapeutic purposes as I continue transitioning to civilian life. It's been almost eight years since I first began the process of leaving the Marine Corps and I still don't feel like a civilian. Everywhere I walk, I am in a state of hyper vigilance. This paranoia, bleeds over into how I walk and drive. Always paying attention to see if I am being followed. The Marine Corps changed me and today, I have no idea what would have happened to my life if I had not enlisted. I am not even sure if I could have reached this point in graduate school without it.

The second step, I realized that writing and sharing the darkest moments of my past has helped me process those moments and allowed me to move on. I should note that veterans don't like to openly talk about their problems with people they don't trust. Personally, I feel the reason why is because we build mental walls and seal ourselves inside our own heads. I say this, because I am guilty of it. It doesn't help that I am naturally a quiet person and an introvert. I have

been one my whole life and it's easy to censor and/or filter myself out of a conversation. Why? As a veteran, we only feel comfortable around people who have gone through the same experiences we have. In our minds, other veterans are the only ones that can understand.

Personally, that kind of thinking changed once I started writing and sharing my experiences in the classroom. As I began write and share, I slowly felt a weight being lifted off my shoulders. Like the more I shared about my difficult past, the walls inside me got smaller. The first time I felt that sensation, was when I read a poem publicly for the first time. The language within the poem was fueled with anger and my tone of voice raised dramatically as I worked through the stanzas. Afterward, I felt a sense of relief. It felt like, I left those feelings of anger at the podium. Reflecting on my experience, I believe that it was easier for me to freely write my experiences by a stream of consciousness instead of worrying about word choice or structure. Page after page, it felt more important to create something authentic, even though I was only doing it for myself.

There is an emotional angle to *When Angels Cry* because the main focus of this project are the darkest moments of my life between 2007 and 2009. I had to dig deep and mentally place myself back in that time frame, similar to how a poet follows their shadow in the production of poetry. I wanted to properly remember, experience and feel that version of myself again. Early on in writing *When Angels Cry*, I realized documenting what took place was not enough to give the content justice. I was simply retelling the story. I wasn't analyzing what had occurred. When I began acknowledge the alcoholism for example, it felt liberating. As the walls came down, I realized it was OK to move forward and dig much further.

That said, *When Angels Cry* is not a war memoir. Yes, I did deploy to Afghanistan in 2010 and spent a significant amount of time outside the relative safety of military bases and

much smaller forward patrol bases. At this point in time, I feel it's more important to share my non-deployed experiences. Why? One, I believe the market is over saturated with war memoirs. Two, from what I have been exposed to, nothing has been produced that shows what life outside the infantry is actually like. From my point of view, there is a giant blind spot in military-themed literature and mass media available regarding service members that don't go to war.

I share my experiences hoping more people understand veterans and gain a much clearer picture of military culture. Additionally, many of the experiences detailed in *When Angels Cry* are based off police work. I hope my audience will gain some understanding of how isolating policing can be. Keeping Hopkinson and Powell in mind, I feel it would be irresponsible not to share my experiences. That said, the intended audience of *When Angels Cry* is everyone. I keep my audience in mind by avoiding the heavy use of military jargon. If there are military-specific words used, I provide the meaning in a manner reader can understand. Ultimately, *When Angels Cry* is written in a manner to make it as accessible as humanly possible.

My main concern writing for the MFA-Creative Writing Program was figuring my place in literature. I will admit to feeling lost over half the time trying to navigate through the classics and other authors that came before me. Plus, I felt isolated several times being the only veteran in the classroom. Keeping that in mind, one of the biggest obstacles I faced was translating my experiences on paper in a manner my non-military audience could understand. I wasn't always successful. For example, I found *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien interesting and relatable even if it's marked as fiction. I relate to it broadly because of my past in the military, but did not make a personal connection.

However, some of the wisdom inside cannot be denied. O'Brien states, "To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true. At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life." (O'Brien 77). I couldn't help it, but write about my own experiences at PMO. In many ways, writing about the darkest moments in my life, where I personally felt close to death, brought forward its own truth. One truth that many people outside of the military don't know is that not everyone deploys. For the service members that do deploy, not everyone leaves the safety of military bases. It's hard to relate to *The Things They Carried* when wars in the 21st Century can be fought in the background of Pizza Hut, Wi-Fi internet, and skype calls. In contrast, the darkest and most stressful moments in my life were not forward deployed in a war zone. Those moments took place stationed inside the United States. In some ways being deployed in a war zone actually made life easier. How? Taking O'Brien's statement into consideration, in a battlefield, all you really have to worry about is not dying.

Speaking of war and finding my place in literature, I did read certain books from time to time while in the military. In my case, it was a matter of participating in the unofficial Marine practice of passing and sharing books from one Marine to the other. As active duty Marines assigned to a deployable unit, you could be ordered to move to a new location at any given time. Once there, you could wait for hours and even days waiting for word detailing what were are going to do next. During my time in the Marine Corps, smart phones were not as sophisticated as they are today and it was sometimes practical to have a book with you. For example, one popular set of books among Marines, especially during deployments, were those written by Tucker Max. I first learned about Tucker Max between 2008-2009 and his *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell*,

from a Marine that returned from Iraq with a copy. In short words, Tucker Max pieced together a series of short stories documenting his drunken experiences and sexual exploits with women. With titles like, “The Night We Almost Died”, and “Tucker Tries Buttsex; Hilarity Does Not Enslave”, from *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell*, it’s not surprising such a book became popular with Marines. Many Marines on active duty at the time related to the stories this man got published. Considering I heard of this book from a Marine that received it in Iraq, I assumed Marines read Tucker Max to escape from the war going on in the background.

My experience with *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell* was limited to reading a few stories only since a movie based on it was released around the time I borrowed the book. When I got deployed to Afghanistan in 2010, I read the second book by Tucker Max, *Assholes Finish First*, cover to cover. During the deployment, one of the Marines in my platoon got a care package that included a copy of it. At the time, this Marine was the driver of my truck and he just tossed it over when he finished it. Our mission during the deployment was to provide security for a team of Marines that were fixing roads or doing other construction projects in Marjah, Afghanistan. This meant our platoon spent long hours staring at nothing, while mounted on up-armored trucks inside a village in the middle of a desert. Reading books by during the long hours providing security allowed us a short escape from the ridiculous and monotony of a deployment.

For context, one night while posted in the middle of Marjah, my machine gunner began to call out to me saying there was a man standing in the middle of a field that was not there moments before. I looked out with my night vision goggles (NVG) through the window and noticed the faint outline of a man and nothing more. During this, I saw that the gunner flash this humanoid figure thing with a laser (all it does is have a disorienting effect), about 50 yards out. The gunner was freaking out by this point because earlier some farmers had walked on the berm

of a nearby canal. After refocusing the lens on my NVG, I realized that the thing was just a standing scarecrow in an open field.

I read other books during that deployment: *Under the Dome* by Stephen King, and *The Forgotten Soldier*, by Guy Sanjer. It may appear as an odd combination of books to read during a deployment, but they all arrived in care packages. I had no reason to complain considering that the beginning of my deployment was filled with a lot of down time waiting for our official marching orders. *The Forgotten Soldier* gives the reader a side of WWII from the point of view of a young German soldier. Actually, the first book I read on my deployment in Afghanistan was, *Shooter: The Autobiography of the Top-Ranked Marine Sniper*, written by Jack Coughlin, Casey Kuhlman and Donald Davis. Since *Shooter* provides a first person account of the 2003 Iraq invasion and I was on my first deployment ever, I thought it was an appropriate read. These books served only to pass the time, especially when nothing was going on and I read through it fairly quickly.

A few months after I arrived to in late 2009 Okinawa, Japan my company was sent for a cooperative training exercise to South Korea via a civilian chartered transport ship. After sailing through a storm that woke everyone aboard and nearing our destination, we were advised the ship had changed course to Naval Base Sasebo on Mainland, Japan for repairs. In short words, we got stuck on a navy base for a week. Waiting for our departure, I read the Marilyn Manson autobiography, *The Long Hard Road Out of Hell*. After I was done, I traded books with another Marine, *My Custom Van: And 50 Other Mind-Blowing Essays That Will Blow Your Mind All Over Your Face*, by Michael Ian Black.

A quick reflection of the various books I read while I was in the Marine Corps brings several thoughts to mind. At first glance, these books only served as plain entertainment. That

assessment could not be further from the truth. In the military, the Marine Corps in particular, has a strict regimented lifestyle set in place. You are told when and where you are supposed to go. Additionally, when you are instructed to be present at a specific place and time, you had to be there at least 15 minutes early. If you are stationed overseas, Okinawa for example, within the first few days of your arrival you are given a huge cultural sensitivity brief. Which is great since a lot of young Marines have never left the United States. Part of the brief is giving the class a huge list of *do's* and *don'ts* and a list of prohibited places. Additionally, in Okinawa, Japan, Marines with the rank of Sergeant and below are given a *Cinderella-like* curfew. Meaning all Marines must check back in at the barracks (or respective homes) no later than 11:59 on the dot. You are told what you can and cannot wear. The list of restrictions can go on and on.

In my case, I craved an escape from the regimented madness going on in my life. When my personal DVD collection did not satisfy the escape, I gravitated towards books that provided such an escape over the Marine alternative, the Commandant's Professional Reading List (Commandants Reading List). As the list was explained to me around 2004, the Commandant's Reading List, is full of military-themed books chosen by the senior commander of the Marine Corps, the Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC). Each CMC revises the list periodically throughout his tenure with the intent to advance the professional development of Marines. In order to accomplish that goal, The Commandants Reading list may include military-theme books such as: *A Message to Garcia*, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps*, *On Killing*, *Flags of our Fathers*, *The Art of War*, to include others based on historical figures, past wars and legendary battles. Personally, I never went beyond the first few chapters of some of the books on the Commandants Reading List because they were extremely dry. Except for *On Killing*, which I borrowed and read while deployed in Afghanistan. The reason I read *On Killing*,

was because my driver pitched the book as a well-researched study on the act of killing another human being. As for the other books on the list, I did not agree with the notion that reading a book or collection of books could make you a “better” Marine. In my opinion, Marines don’t become good or better at their jobs by reading potentially out of date reading material. If Marines wish to be good at their jobs or better, they need to actually get their hands dirty and train. Yes, I acknowledge that learning about past helps prevent future mistakes, but physically training and going through those mistakes is much more effective.

Returning to the books I gravitated to, as an MP aboard Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, I discovered the music of the band Sixx A.M. and their first album *The Heroin Diaries*. Later on, I discovered that album acted as a soundtrack to the book, *The Heroin Diaries: A Year in the Life of a Shattered Rock Star*, by Nikki Sixx, the bass guitar player for Mötley Crüe. In short the book is an autobiographical sketch with additional side commentary. The core of the book is a year’s worth of personal diary entries provided by Nikki Sixx between December 1986 to December 1987. Not only does Sixx provide additional context for his own personal diary entries, but the people around him do the same for significant events. Sixx is brutally honest with his personal struggles dealing with heroin addiction, alcohol/drug abuse, and other personal issues. For example, in his April 25, 1987 entry he states, “I was hunched trying to find a vein so I could inject into my dick. Then the dope went in my dick and I thought it looked fucking fantastic. I can’t keep doing this, but I can’t stop.” (Sixx 136)

As horrible as it sounds, Sixx also provides his views of the music industry at the time. At the bottom of a July 7, 1987 entry he states, “...We do all the work, write all the music...they loan us money...we have to pay it back, and they own us? What the fuck is wrong with the music business? No wonder they like us fucked up on drugs. If we’re out of our heads, we won’t

see how they're taking advantage...it's slavery." (Sixx 211) Sixx then follows up with, "P.P.S.

See what happens when I don't get fucked up? My brain starts to work again. (Sixx 211)

Through additional commentary it's revealed Mötley Crüe gained full control of their music by making a deal with the record label and signing a non-disclosure agreement.

Overall, what has always stood out to me about the *The Heroin Diaries*, is how it begins. After the introductions, the first diary entry provided is marked December 25, 1986 in Van Nuys, at 7:30 PM:

Merry Christmas,

Well, that's what people say at Christmas, right? Except normally they have somebody to say it to. They have their friends and family all around them, they haven't been crouched naked under a Christmas tree with a needle in their arm like an insane person in a mansion in Van Nuys.

They're not out of their minds and writing in a diary and they're not watching their holiday spirit coagulating in a spoon. I didn't speak to a single person today...I thought of calling Bob Timmons, but why should I ruin his Christmas? I guess I've decided to start another diary this time for a few different reasons...

1. I have no friends left.
2. So I can read back and remember what I did the day before.
3. So if I die, at least I leave a paper trail of my life (nice lil suicide note).

Merry Christmas...it's just you and me, diary. Welcome to my life. (Sixx 14)

The serious tone of loneliness and sadness resonated inside of me when I read this for the first time. Then I quickly realized, Nikki Sixx reads this entry on the first song of the *Soundtrack*. I got mind blown for a second. Even today, when I listen to the album or open the book from time

to time I realize how effective Nikki Sixx uses the spoken word to convey his message. At the end of the book Sixx states, “Someone asked me why I was writing this book and said, ‘maybe one person will read it and it will help them.’ They said, ‘That’s not rock n roll, is it?’ I said, ‘Fuck off’ and smirked...” If I ever get the opportunity to meet Nikki Sixx in real life, I would thank him for saving my life.

From the first track and the first diary entry I saw parallels between Sixx and me. Minus the drugs, I spent the 8 years serving in the Marine Corps without seeing my family during the holidays and mostly spent them alone. Yes, the military has their own respective seasonal formalities every year, but I was always curious to know if they were really sincere. For example, every holiday season someone up the chain of command would open the doors of their homes and invite Marines for a holiday dinner. Personally, if there was one or two Thanksgiving or Christmas dinners, I would walk away thinking something to the effect of, *Well that’s cool*, and that would be the end of it. Mostly because those events were always pre-planned and a form of mandatory fun, because everyone present was told to be there. Once the holiday season came around, Marines are treated to a never ending barrage of turkey dinners mixed in with other holiday-themed events. After 3 or four Thanksgiving dinners, I got sick of eating turkey.

Personally, I preferred the low-key holiday dinners of platoon Sergeant’s (Sgt) and a few of the Staff Noncommissioned Officers (SNCO). The lower the rank of the host, the more honest and sincere the invitation was. All the other holidays parties or dinner invitations were forced as previously mentioned. After attending a few, you would realize they are only trying to have a *check in the box* and demonstrate the command was *taking care* of their Marines. For example, my old platoon sergeant, Sgt. Adams, not only invited his Marines over for the holidays, but consistently opened the doors of his home for super bowl night, Thanksgiving, Black Friday and

Christmas. The main difference between a Sgt. Adams and the corporate feeling of a SNCO event was that Sgt. Adams would always offer everyone to spend the night. This gesture may be small, but to us Marines that lived in the barracks, it does make a difference. Maybe it was the rules in the military that don't allow the ranks to fraternize with each other. Where SNCO's don't mix with the NCO's and NCO's don't mix with the lower ranks. All in all, these walls that segregate the ranks from each other, only feed the cold atmosphere during the holidays.

Overall, as time passed I stopped seeing Marines act like Sgt Adams. While I was in the Marine Corps I preferred to avoid going home. One reason was the expensive price I had to pay to book a flight home at the last minute. The other reason was navigating the block scheduling set up by the chain of command in order to deal with the massive amount of Marines wishing to go home. 99% of the time, all the leave requests submitted would be approved at the last minute. Since I did not want to deal with the stress of locating a flight at a reasonable price during the holidays, potentially deal with flight delays and making transportation arrangements, I volunteered for extra duty. It didn't matter what kind of duty it was, but I always found myself alone in my room watching TV and movies. Reading *The Heroin Diaries* during the 2008-2009 holiday season, I found myself relating to a broken rock star. Here he was confessing to the world that he was spending the holidays alone and getting high. Minus the drugs, I spent the holidays drinking alcohol. It was a short revelation to me that in a weird way, I was looking at myself in a mirror.

Reading books like those mentioned above during my time in the military was much more than just an escape from the monotonous regimented life style of the military. I obviously found reading about rock stars much more interesting than past battlefields. It seems almost coincidental that I discovered *The Heroin Diaries* when I went through my own personal

downward spiral. My downward spiral was rooted in dealing with a heavy workload multiplied with stress and alcohol abuse. Reflecting now, I not only fell into a deep depression where my personal relationships took a toll, I found *The Heroin Diaries* (music included) spoke to me.

I discovered among the lines of the music and more importantly the book, a mirror where I saw a reflection of the man I could become. In some cases, I emulated the man talking to me in the book. To be clear, I never engaged in illicit drug use, I stuck to alcohol and cigarettes. I began to drink Jack Daniels and other hard liquors in amounts that doubled. The significance of *The Heroin Diaries*, at that time and now more importantly is that it demonstrated to me the power of honest storytelling. Through the music and reading from Sixx's personal diary, I saw how low and hard a man can fall from grace. I learned that I needed to make a change and requested orders to leave PMO.

Navigating through the fog, the long nights of reading and writing in graduate school, I feel I didn't find my place in literature until I began reading the Beats. From what I understand of William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac, I truly relate to taking my own personal experiences and using them as inspiration for original work. Throughout my whole time in the MFA-Creative writing program, I have been leaning heavily on my experiences in the military. Moving past some of the shock, which to a desensitized mind like mine there is no shock value to *Junky*, *Queer*, and even *On the Road*, the fictionalized recreations of personal experiences took me back to my time in the military.

I would argue that many of the characters described by writers of the Beat Generation have a lot in common with veterans. Reading through *Junky* for example, I got a sense of spontaneity throughout. Where Burroughs writes about his character's pursuit of his next fix or money making adventure, I could not help it but be taken back to my time in Okinawa, Japan.

Where the Marine Corps places a lot of restrictions on Marines and in some cases actually bans the sale and consumption of alcohol for all service members on the island. Just like the junk-sick man detailed in *Junky*, Marines will go to some extremes to get their fix. For example, the first time I was stationed on Okinawa in 2006. I found out from someone that one Marine actually brewed and sold his own beer from his barracks room. Additionally, there were other forms of entrepreneurs in the Marine Corps on the island. For example, some Marines would invest money into buying more beer and liquor than they are allowed to keep. Only to sell it for a profit the case of emergencies by word of mouth. In other words, they were investing in the case the base would be ordered to go dry.

These kinds of scenarios were not limited to alcohol in the barracks. During long training exercises it was no secret Marines would buy extra tobacco and sell it in the field. In my opinion tobacco addiction is worse than alcohol addiction. Why? You can temporarily calm the alcohol itch with a cigarette or a can of chewing tobacco. In either case, you are still consuming a substance that comes at a price. Events like these came to mind reading *Junky* and I was drawn in by the accessible language Burroughs used. For example, “I kept drinking. Several days later, I passed out in the Ship Ahoy after drinking tequila for eight hours steadily. Some friends carried me home. Next morning I had the worst hangover of my life...” (Burroughs 134) I can personally relate to that. I have plenty of drunken escapades and I am certain any Marine that has gone overseas would say the same.

When I was in the Marine Corps, I would seek out books to remove me from the situation I was in. Now that I have been out of the Marine Corps for over 7 years, I have been drawn to literature that takes me back to similar moments in my past. One aspect that draws me towards the Beats is the spontaneous atmosphere described in the books. Maybe it's characters like Neal

Cassidy in *On the Road*. Looking past the structure used to put *On the Road* together, I can name several Marines I personally know that remind a lot of Neal Cassidy. Some of my craziest memories in the Marine Corps started because someone called me to show up somewhere out of the blue. For example, one night I can't remember how the conversation got started but a small group of Marines and I thought it was a good idea to go look for a pentagram rumored to be in a church in Presidio Park in San Diego, CA. We showed up at night and didn't find anything. However, we ended up meeting with a group people vandalizing a statue inside the park. The night concluded with both Marines and vandals hanging out drinking, smoking and sharing our respective views of the universe.

It's hard to pin down for me to say what exactly is it that draws me to the Beats. Ultimately, I believe it's a combination of the language used and style, the relatable characters, and spontaneous nature that I see in the books. Focusing on Kerouac specifically, his use of stream of consciousness really stands out to me. I am not a fan of his "first draft, best draft" concept. However, I am drawn to the concept of letting go of all inhibitions or restrictions in the pursuit of writing. Before I knew Kerouac existed, I would describe my writing style as "talking to myself", where I write what I'm processing in my head and edit as I go. Now that I have read about Kerouac, I have someone I can personally identify with. I know I still have a lot to learn. I know I have my faults in grammar and structure. However, I know not to feel ashamed of my own writing technique, because I can always fix and revise afterward. In the end, the Beats make me feel welcomed and confident in what I have to contribute.

My motivation to continue writing is watching the success of Veteran projects like, *The White Donkey: Terminal Lance* by Maximilian Uriate (Max), a Marine that wrote and illustrated his own graphic novel based off a web comic of his own creation. In the 3 panel web comic strip,

terminallance.com, readers can follow the experiences of two main fictional Marine characters (Abe and Garcia) as they deal with the various intricacies of the Marine Corps. Part web comic and part personal blog, Max provides his own interpretation of the Marine experience through the lens of an infantryman. For example on a recent post from March 23, 2018 he states, “Being in the infantry sucks. It sucks so much, in fact, that one has to assume it’s intentional... The problem I have trying to discuss the suck of the infantry in relation to other MOS fields is that one always assumes we’re talking about *combat*.” (*terminallance.com*)

In *The White Donkey*, Max pushed Abe and Garcia off the 3 panel web comic strip into a book length graphic novel. Inside *The White Donkey*, the reader follows Abe as the main character and follow him along through his pre-deployment training, deployment in Iraq, and post-deployment leave. Personally, what makes *The White Donkey*, captivating to me is the honest portrayal of the Marine experience on behalf of Max. Even though *The White Donkey* is clearly marked as fiction within the first few pages, any Marine in my opinion, will connect to it in some way, shape or form. Marines will make a connection through any of the experiences expressed through Max’s art work, dialogue or various themes on the page.

Where Max creates fictional characters and storylines based on the Marine infantry, I wish to continue writing about my own experiences in the garrison side of the Marine Corps. The garrison side of the Marine Corps is the non-infantry element of the branch and one that does not get any coverage from any form of media. When the average person thinks of a war story, their minds will probably travel to battle field documentaries or the typical war memoir. Now I can agree with how Marines are portrayed in *Full Metal Jacket*. There is not much I can agree with beyond the boot camp scenes. I wasn’t alive during the Vietnam War so I can’t speak for the rest of the film. What makes the boot camp scenes relatable and believable to me was R. Lee

Ermev's portrayal of the Marine Drill Instructor. The main reason Ermev's performance was effective was because he was a Drill Instructor on active duty. He had the experience and tools to draw from to give such a captivating performance on screen. Speaking of films, *Jarhead* was not great in my opinion. I know the film is based on book and my criticism is geared towards how it was translated onto the movie screen. In both films, *Full Metal Jacket* and *Jarhead*, their main focus was the war and not much about what happens outside of the battlefield. Nothing about unit formations, uniform and gear inspections, nothing about what happens in the barracks and nothing about the quality of life of the Marines involved.

I want to change that way of thinking, especially when it comes to Marines. I want to broaden the spectrum of knowledge available to the general reader. By using my experiences detailed in *When Angels Cry*, I will be providing a behind the scenes look at the garrison side of the Marine Corps and show people what they are missing. Not everyone in the military jumps out of planes and run towards the front lines as portrayed in the Marine Corps commercials. From my point of view, Marines wake up every day, put on their uniform and patrol the streets. Additionally, many others wake up at the crack of dawn and cook for hours in order for thousands of Marines to be feed. The side of the Marine Corps many are not aware of is the huge amount of drinking that takes place. People don't usually hear about the countless unit formations, tedious gear and uniform inspections and all of the *hurry up and wait*. Where Marines are ordered to go to a place and literally sit and wait for further orders. No one outside of *Terminal Lance* is showing that and/or the kind of bullshit Marines have to deal with every day. Where Max uses fiction and humor to tell his side of the story, I wish to use non-fiction to demonstrate the damage being done outside of the infantry.

CHAPTER II

INTRODUCTION

Full Disclosure: The writer personally feels that in the production of this project, he must change identifying details for the sake of privacy. The following events described here are from his own personal point of view and to the best of his memory.

Inside *When Angels Cry Tears of Moonshine*, I wish to explore a certain time frame of my life between late 2006 and late 2009 through a collection of essays. The reason for the specific time frame is because I felt that I was at a crossroads in my life in late 2006 for the first time since graduating from high school. Narrowing down the time frame further, to early 2007 and late 2009, I experienced what I like to call the darkest moments of my life. In the following essays, I will explore and process those dark experiences as a Marine military police patrolman, assigned to the Provost Marshal Office (PMO), aboard Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton.

Within *When Angels Cry*, readers will be able to find thematic elements (in no particular order) of masculinity, trauma, alcoholism, community and leadership through my experiences in United States Marine Corps. In the process of writing this, I am speaking my truth for therapeutic purposes as I continue my transition back to normal civilian life. That said, I fully understand *When Angels Cry* can be interpreted in a variety of ways and my audience is welcomed to do so. Additionally, I also feel it's important for readers to understand that this is not a war memoir. Yes, I did deploy to Afghanistan in 2010 and those events fall outside of my strict time frame for this project. In my personal opinion, I feel the market is over saturated with war memoirs and the

movies – TV shows based on them. I wish to share my experiences to broaden the spectrum of military themed experiences the world has access to. In that way, more people can read and learn what Marines do when they do not deploy overseas or to war zones.

To begin, I feel it's important to understand that not all Marines are the same. The Marine Corps has multiple layers built into the institution that causes diversity within the military branch. The first divide is in the split between the infantry side and the garrison side. From the infantry (or grunt) point of view, everyone in the Marine Corps who is not infantry are POG's, or Personnel other than Grunt. From the infantry point of view, POG is intended to be a derogatory term, but I personally never saw it that way. Many on the garrison side of the Marine Corps actually embrace it as a term of endearment. Why? From the POG's point of view, all the infantry does is go out into the field to train in the wilderness. If the infantry are not training, they mostly sit around waiting to be told what to do. In contrast, most on the garrison side of the Marine Corps have what can be described as a 9 to 5 job. Furthermore, they have to find the balance doing their 9 to 5 job and maintain the same standards all Marines are expected to keep.

Moving forward, the Marine Corps is an expeditionary fighting force and structured around its multiple infantry elements. In other words, the garrison side of the Marine Corps is the logistical element that supports the infantry. So in the Marine Corps, you will find two distinct separate elements, the Marines that train to fight and the Marines that train to support those who fight.

Within the garrison side of the Marine Corps, the split divides further into multiple smaller and distinct communities of Marines. In the garrison, you have Marine cooks, mechanics, drivers (of many kinds of vehicles), weathermen, administration clerks, combat artists, journalists, musicians (the Marine band), military police, and many others. In contrast,

within the infantry, you have the basic Marine riflemen, motormen, machine gunners, scout snipers, reconnaissance, and others. All these distinct communities exist within their own unique microcosms within the larger Marine institution. As a result, I would like to clarify that it would be impossible to cover the totality of what can be the Marine experience. I can only speak to my own experience as a Marine in the context of the Military Police (MP) MOS.

At 18 years old and fresh out of high school, I was at the beginning stages of a lifelong career in the United States Marine Corps, or so I planned, and it all started after 9/11. That Tuesday of 11 September 2001, of my junior year of high school, I walked into my second period classroom and before the bell rang my classmate Mauricio walked into the classroom speaking loudly and moving his hands.

“The second tower just fell!”

“What?”

“Turn on the TV.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. Mauricio walked over to the television, hanging over the head of the classroom on the right hand side, turned it on and we saw the replay of the towers coming down.

That was my experience on 9/11 and part of the reason I enlisted fresh out of high school. I was wrapped up in the sudden surge of patriotism as everyone else did. I can still remember people wrapping themselves with American flags and making patriotic posters at pep-rallies after 9/11. The other half of my reason for enlisting had several layers stacked on top of it. The first layer is that I did not feel confident or ready for college. Growing up and as far back as I can remember, I was never a fan of school. One of my older sisters always brings up one thing I told her once when she was stressing over an assignment, *No llores...si agarras un zero...como*

quiera es grado. I was a bad student. I hated math, rarely studied, and didn't read a book unless I had to. Overall I did OK in school and got good grades. Looking back now, the only way I can explain my good grades is my good memory. I did pay attention in class and was able to remember the lectures by test time. Back then, I just wanted to graduate from high school and get it over with. The biggest obstacle for college that hovered in my mind was math. I barely made it through high school math, barely passed the TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) exit exam. I did not have any confidence in being successful doing college level math.

The second layer was my introduction to the Marine Corps in the Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) classroom. I believe it was in the first semester of my senior year in 2002 when I first met Staff Sergeant (SSgt) Torres walking in to my ROTC class. SSgt Torres introduced himself and showed everyone in class a tape depicting the intensity of Marine boot camp. The tape showed drill instructors screaming and recruits sounding off at the top of their lungs while exercising. Reflecting on this now, I can say it was a heavily edited and highly produced VHS tape. After the tape ended, SSgt Torres asked the students with a stern voice, *Who here thinks they got what it takes to be a Marine?* Several hands went up, including mine. SSgt Torres went around the classroom handing out business cards, recruiting materials and taking down contact information.

Even though I was in Army ROTC and thought about joining the Army, I was sold by the challenge SSgt Torres presented. I was not impressed by what I had experienced in ROTC. It felt stale and boring. Before I met SSgt Torres, I had never met or talked to a real Marine before and based on his presentation, it felt new and exciting. It felt like, based on the tape, this is what military training should be like. Ultimately, I rationalized to myself that if I was going to enlist in the military, I might as well join the best of the best. At the time, I couldn't wait to graduate from

high school, but I didn't know what to do with my life. I had zero confidence in my abilities to go to college and didn't have a clue as to what I wanted to study.

Later in the semester, I started to attend as many poolee (recruit candidate) functions as I could. Going to these pool functions I realized that I was nowhere near ready to ship out to boot camp. I was overweight and needed a lot of work to meet the physical requirements. These functions focused heavily on physical training (PT) in order to weed out all the weak, the fat bodies, or could perform successfully in boot camp. Throughout the whole experience the recruiters made you step on a scale and tested everyone on pull ups, crunches and a mile and half run. The minimum requirements to ship out to boot camp at the time were for a poolee to do 3 pull ups, 44 crunches (however they made us shoot for 50-plus) and a 14 minute or less mile and half run.

After spending a few months attending these poolee functions, I began to learn that the Marine Corps did not appreciate the poolee's doing just the bare minimum. At poolee functions, recruiters would highlight those who were the most improved. One particular poolee lost over a 100 pounds in a year, improved his run time significantly, but could still not ship out to boot camp because he could not do enough pull ups. This was a wakeup call for me since the recruiters didn't hesitate to point out your deficiencies during the poolee functions. I was always well aware of the huge amount of work I had to do.

I welcomed the challenge to become a Marine and I feel that was the most influential layer made me commit to enlisting in the Marine Corps. Even though I was constantly being called by the Air Force, I made them stop by lying that I failed the ASVAB exam. Once I did my first pull up on my own, I knew I would be worthy to ship out to boot camp. I began to work out even harder 3 times a week. I began to watch what I ate. Slowly, I began to see improvement in

my run time and crunches. I worked out so hard one day that my arms locked themselves at a 90-degree angle for three days. The moment I finally realized that I was worthy of boot camp took place during a poolee function held at Marine Military Academy (MMA). The recruiters held the event as a “fun day” of sorts. They brought in drill instructors and other Marines to help them run the function as a mini-boot camp. The drill instructors yelled at us and made us scream at the top of our lungs, always making us give more. We even had the opportunity to rappel off the MMA rappel tower. What stood out to me the most that day was actually the obstacle course. They paired two people to race each other and cross the entire course. I was paired with a Marine on leave from infantry school and I beat him.

Beyond my motivations to enlist in the Marine Corps and short lived experiences before shipping out to boot camp, nothing I could have done could have prepared me for what I experienced on active duty. Before the military, the only experiences I would consider traumatic were helping my dad slaughter farm animals for food. I have helped him slaughter farm animals for as long as I can remember. At the beginning, the animal was already dead before I helped take the skin off and later cut the animal apart. However, it was around the age of 12 that I can actually remember seeing him kill the animal.

My father kept a personal collection of knives he maintained for the slaughter of farm animals. Using a goat as an example, the first step is to make sure the animal has their legs tied down tight. My father always warned that if one leg slips, one kick can slice your stomach open. I would hold the animal’s legs down with both hands before my father poked through the animals neck with one of his knives. Then I would hold a container to collect the blood with one hand, while still holding the legs with the other. In the middle of this process my father is trying to locate the correct spot on the spine to cut the spinal cord.

However horrific or traumatic this can be interpreted as, I am grateful to my father for teaching me this. I feel my father wanted me to learn a skill that my grandfather taught him. Growing up, it was not out of the ordinary for me to accompany him to help a neighbor or family friend process a goat. The act of slaughtering a goat became something that felt normal to me. An act that a man has to know to potentially feed their family. I not only learned how to process an animal for food, but I also learned that nothing goes to waste. My whole life, I never saw my father allow anything go to waste from any of his farm animals. Inside a small goat you have potential ingredients to process milk to make cheese. Once, he collected the goat/sheep feet over the span of a few months to have enough to make a special menudo.

I must admit that this is a rough transition to experiencing trauma in the military. Over all I had a great childhood. I grew up on a small farm with animals which makes it a rough transition to Marine boot camp. Yes, the drill instructors were always yelling and pushing recruits to give 100%, if not more. However reflecting on boot camp now, the experience was not as traumatic for me as it could have been for others. I do remember one recruit say to me once that he cried himself to sleep almost every night. I did not. The hardest part for me was having to deal with a head ache that lasted for the first two weeks of boot camp. Additionally, I do remember asking myself in boot camp if the drill instructors were putting on a performance. As in, the drill instructor has to flip a switch on to initiate the hyper masculine *Marine Drill Instructor* persona in order to train recruits. Before I went to boot camp, I assumed all drill instructors acted the same. However, I began to see different sides of each of my three drill instructors when they let their guard down for a few seconds. Later on, my assumptions were reinforced when I asked one of my supervisors, who was a drill instructor, how he handled

coming home after leaving the recruit depot. He said he sometimes had to drive around for hours in order to *shut it off* and leave the drill instructor outside of his home.

But boot camp does not prepare you for all the possible trauma a Marine will experience in the fleet. Nothing in boot camp prepared me for witnessing another human being bleeding out on the ground after a car accident. What boot camp did prepare me for was going numb and shutting my brain off for all the times I got yelled over the years. In the Marine Corps, one must learn to not those kind of verbal strikes personally. The best thing anyone can do in those kinds of moments is to just stand there and take it. Don't stare in to the eyes of the person in front of you, but focus on what is behind that person. Respond with an appropriate, *Yes, Gunnery Sergeant...*, for example, and move on.

I always looked up to both my parents. They worked hard every day to provide for us and sometimes the extended family. As poor as we were, growing up there was always an abundance of food. At family events, everyone was fed and provided with as much of the left overs as they wished. My parents taught me everything I know about hard work and the appreciation to have a high school education.

Outside of my parents, I had a variety of mentors such as some of my uncles and school teachers. As much as I disliked going to school, I will always have respect for teachers like Mr. Rosel (History), Mr. Soto (English), and Mr. Garza (Agriculture). They were all well-grounded individuals that never talked down to any of their students. They all challenged me in a variety of ways. Notably, Mr. Soto would make me hand write all my essays more than once because he couldn't read my work. Mr. Rosel challenged every one of his students to learn as much as they could and would not settle for the bare minimum. Plus he was the only teacher, that I know of, that admitted to teaching his class in manner to prepare students for college. Mr. Garza was a

great mentor. As the agriculture science teacher, he was someone I could easily relate to. When I took his class, I felt right at home since part of our classroom activities was to assist him taking care of the animals at the farm on campus for the Future Farmers of America program. Mr. Garza was the only teacher in high school to personally tell me I was smart enough to go to college.

In contrast, what I saw in the Marine Corps was something completely different. While I was privileged to experience a lot of great leaders, they are a rare occurrence. In my experience, it is even more rare to actually work for them for a significant amount of time. Now I must clarify that the following is from my own personal point of view based on my experience. There were a lot of bad Marine leaders that continued to get promoted as they progressed through their careers. More often than not, it is the good leaders that either get passed over or are forced out of the service. In the Marine Corps, they have an *Up-or-you're-Out* kind of promotion policy. Meaning there are time limits to the rank you carry. While I was in the Marine Corps you were only allowed to be a Sergeant (Sgt) for 12 years. If you didn't get promoted to Staff Sergeant within 12 years of service, you would be forced to leave. However, those familiar with the military know that there are plenty of exceptions or cracks in the system. To keep it short, in some cases the individual Marine gets lucky or they seek out awards to make themselves more competitive at meritorious promotion boards. What is more common though, is Marines go on recruiting duty as a Sgt and find themselves getting promoted to SSgt.

My first experience witnessing this was at my first duty station. Our platoon Sgt at the time, who I will call Sgt Blake, reached the 12 year time limit and was passed over for promotion in early Fall of 2006. From my point of view at the time, he was a great Sgt of Marines. He made sure Marines were taken care of and that the job was done at the end of the day. However, the

perception from our chain of command was different. From what he explained to me, he had received one to many bad evaluations as a Sgt. However, everyone in the platoon understood he was overweight. In the eyes of our leadership, Sgt Blake did not *perform* as he should have as a Marine by being overweight. All it took for Sgt Blake to be forced out of the Marine Corps was one bad evaluation from our commander indicating he was not recommended for promotion.

From my point of view, a lot of the bad leaders that I experience in the military, were the one that slipped through the cracks of the Marine promotion system. Whether it was as a result of being They all shared two things in common, they had little to no *boots on the ground*-kind of experience and they did not have enough leadership experience in the jobs they were doing. In other words, they had no Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) credibility and mostly acted as figure heads that *performed* well. I blame this on them gaming the system and doing various other jobs in order to make themselves more competitive in the promotion system. As I understand the promotion system in the Marine Corps after the rank of Sgt, they don't consider how good you are at your present job. All they really do look at is a formal picture taken of you in uniform, the contents of your service record book, and where you stand on the seniority list of Marines of the same rank. That is it.

As Marines we are taught that we are *Americas 911 fighting force, the Tip of the Spear*, we are always *an expeditionary force in readiness*, and that *we do more with less*. Many of these are true to an extent. Yes, we do more with less since the Marine Corps does fall under the Department of the Navy and has a smaller budget. All the other statements are open to interpretation. However, as the smallest branch of the military by both budget and man power, Marines are brought up to be arrogant and cocky. Many of us actually are and it all starts in boot camp. As Marines we were brought up to believe we have to endure the longest and roughest

boot camp of all the branches of the United States Military. Drill instructors emphasize the title of Marine is *Earned Never Given* and no one can take it away. That said, this rhetoric builds up an environment that makes Marines feel that we have to perform as strong and hyper-masculine individuals. We have to train harder, run faster, drink more than our buddy and suck it up if we ever get hurt in the process. In essence we have to do this kind of *Marine* performance in order to be accepted as a proper Marine. Similar to the drill instructor I mentioned earlier. I would like to add that following the *decompression drive* the drill instructor had to do to *shut it off*, he would also warn his wife not to worry when he got home late. It was a sign of a bad day at work.

Through all the bad, the greatest thing about the Marine Corps is the community around the institution. Marines have always taken pride in the strong sense of brotherhood that is built around its members. As the smallest branch of the military, I was one of over 177,000 members when I first entered active duty in late 2003. The numbers rose to around 202,000 Marines around the time I left active duty in 2011. Narrowing it down further, Marines spend a lot of time and go through multiple good and bad experiences together while in garrison or a deployable unit. In garrison or POG-kind of jobs, Marines would be released off duty around 5 PM, and it was not out of the ordinary for them to go off base and party late into the night.

In contrast, leading up to any deployment, Marines have to do a mandatory nine months of pre-deployment training. Those nine months plus, however long the actual deployment is, can add up to around 18 months of a small group of Marines being together. In those 18 months, fights break out over disagreements and life-long bonds are formed as well. Over those long 18 months, boundaries come down, shy Marines break out of their shells. Fights break out over something as simple as one dude not showering or being dirty. However, those fights are insignificant over the simple fact that you know, your buddies in the platoon will always have

your back. At the same time, Marines in deployable units are also allowed to go off base and party just like their garrison counterparts.

Through it all, all Marines share a common bond of earning the title of Marine, and that bond can transcend generations. Every year all Marines celebrate the Marine Corps Birthday on November 10th. It doesn't matter where we are or whether if we are on active duty or not, all Marines will wish each other a Happy Birthday on November 10th. Additionally, if possible, there will be cake and we will hold a ceremonial cake cutting ceremony. Whether official or not, the first slice of cake will be cut and passed by the oldest Marine then present to the youngest.

Little traditions like these that Marines participate in compounded by our shared history together that build and hold an unofficial fraternity together. It can be as simple as shaking the hand of a Marine you know and wishing them a happy birthday on November 10th or making a simple phone call. For example, to this day, I still get random phone calls from Marines, sometimes in the middle of the night. Sometimes, the phone call is just to ask how I am doing because they haven't heard from me in a long time. Other times, the calls are drunk dials, and the conversation lasts for a few hours. However, in the end, whether we are on active duty or not, we still watch out for each other. Additionally, it should also be mentioned the sense of excitement when Marines run into each other out in the civilian world. We may not even know each other, but we instantly want to know where we served, what we did and how long we were in the service. Like a Marine I sometimes run into at the gym I go to in Weslaco, TX. Every time we shake hands, it never fails, we will eventually begin sharing stories of our service in Okinawa, Japan or Camp Pendleton.

CHAPTER III

STARTING IN THE MIDDLE

I arrived at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, California around March of 2007 after I finalized paper work switching jobs from a *POG* warehouseman to *POG* military police patrolman (MP) as an incentive to reenlist for an additional four years in the United States Marine Corps. Before making the deal, I was stationed in Okinawa, Japan and had my mind set on getting out after serving for only four years. Backtracking for context, I arrived at Camp Kinser on Okinawa in August of 2006 and spent about four months playing catch-up on annual training requirements I had been exempted from while stationed in the remote Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center (MWTC) located near Bridgeport, CA. MWTC being so remote did not have the facilities or capability to offer the full suite of Marine annual training on site. As a result, at my three year mark in the Marine Corps, I had swim qualification, gas chamber and rifle range scores that were three years old. By late 2006 I had grown tired of explaining why and/or how I had managed to fulfill orders overseas with out of date annual training. I had grown tired of repeating myself explaining how MWTC was so high up in elevation that our running scores had to be adjusted. Ultimately, I had grown tired of jumping from one training event to the next and being tossed around doing one job to another. With approximately one year left on contract, I felt my superiors were just trying to keep me busy until it was time to pack up my things and check out of the Marine Corps. Additionally, with such limited time left on contract compounded with the fact that I still had a significant amount of

training to complete, I would never be eligible for any *deployments* to various exercises in the region.

Counting down the days to my *freedom*, one of the first steps to completing a full check-out sheet out of the Marine Corps was visiting the unit career planner or the Marine whose main job is to convince Marines to reenlist. At the time, the unit career planner on Camp Kinser was a Marine I will call Staff Sergeant (SSgt) Rogers.

“I am not planning on reenlisting SSgt.”

“Well what about recruiting Marine?”

“Yeah, I’m not interested in that...”

“Let me ask you this, what are your plans after the Marine Corps?”

“I thought about becoming a cop when I was growing up, so that’s a field I would be interested in after I get out.”

“MP’s are always in the need of Marines, would you entertain reenlisting and potentially switching jobs?”

“Actually SSgt, I actually thought about doing that when I was Bridgeport.”

“Really? Tell me about it”

“I was reading through one of those Marine magazines, can’t remember the name, while posted as the Duty NCO. I think it was a special edition or something because it had all the MOS’s and the requirements and what not. The one I really got into was military police because it had K9 and special investigator. I mean I wouldn’t mind doing that job, but I don’t think I qualify.”

“Well Marine, let me check.”

SSgt Rogers smiled as he sat up straight on his office chair. I instantly became nervous since I couldn't believe this was actually happening. I began to feel my heart beating a little bit harder inside my chest. The reason I brought it up being a cop was because I was truly interested in policing after I left the Marine Corps. The career planner checked my military record, encouragingly stated,

“Well Corporal Flores, you will need a waiver from Headquarters Marine Corps because of your GT score...”

A Marine's GT score is based off your Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery test or ASVAB results. The Marine Corps required a 100 GT score and I had a 98.”

“...But don't worry Marine. If you really want to reenlist, I'm confident the waiver request will be approved. I mean you are only 2 points away from the score.”

“Really SSgt?”

“Positive. I can have all the paperwork done and sent off to Headquarters Marine Corps in a few days.”

SSgt Rogers got all the required paperwork done within few weeks. I signed the paperwork and took my second oath of enlistment on 25 January 2007. At the time, the logic behind my decision to reenlist was based on rumors that were going around of possible personnel recalls to fill units for deployments to Iraq. In my mind, I would rather start fresh, switch jobs, switch units and possibly deploy on my terms. What I did not want to happen was get out, put plans on hold, return to active duty on someone else's terms. It made all the sense in the world for me to take control of my situation and dive into policing.

Even though I was jumping into it blind. Interestingly, a few days after my reenlistment, my platoon commander, who administered the oath, asked me if I had done the paperwork for

the \$10,000 reenlistment bonus offered at the time to all MOS's. Surprised, I said no. Soon afterward, I walked to the career planners office and asked about the bonus paperwork. Reflecting on this now, it's interesting that people I interacted with the least, like my platoon commander at the time, were the ones that looked out for my welfare the most. Sure enough later the next day, I read the head line in the *Marine Corps Times* newspaper in bold letters announcing the \$10,000 reenlistment bonus on the news rack at the PX (base store) on Camp Kinser, Okinawa Japan. I left Okinawa, with the reenlistment bonus paperwork in my record book and the knowledge that I was not going straight to MP school. Instead I received orders to Camp Pendleton, CA for on-the-job training (OJT) and be on standby until a school seat opened at the MP school house in Fort Leonard Wood, MO.

Fast forward to March 2007, I am back in the United States. Switching jobs in the military did not come easy for me in the Marine Corps. Even though I got assigned to the Provost Marshals Office (PMO) aboard Camp Pendleton, CA, I was not a full MP. Switching jobs in the military meant that I would lose my previous MOS of 3051 and be assigned the general law enforcement MOS of 5800 on paper. This meant that, until I attended and passed MP school, I would not be eligible for promotion to Sergeant (Sgt). As a Corporal (Cpl) with my promotion certificate dated 01 December 2005, I was not in any rush to be promoted any time soon. As Marines, in order to earn the respect of one's peers and subordinates, one must demonstrate that one at least knows what one is doing. Additionally, if you don't know what you are doing, at least show that you are willing to learn the job first. Nothing frustrates you more than having your superior not have any MOS credibility and then tell you what to do.

As soon as I reported in to PMO and was issued my gear, I was nervous but excited to get started. I had no idea what was going to happen once I got assigned to a platoon. I jumped into

this new job completely blind. All that I knew before was that MP's worked the gates on base. Outside of that, I had never met an actual Marine MP before walking into the headquarters building of Security Battalion on Camp Pendleton. Sure enough, as soon as I was introduced to my new Platoon Sergeant, who I will call Sgt Black, he said I would be working as soon as possible on the night shift. *Great. At least being jetlagged will help me with this*, I said to myself still feeling the effects of a fourteen hour time change.

Sgt. Black said I was lucky to be placed in 2nd Platoon or *Second to None* as he proudly pointed to our office name plate. As we walked into the office he was quick to point out that everyone in the other platoons were complete dirt bags. Plus he added working the night shift meant I would be learning the job at an easier pace. Furthermore, until I attended the MP Orientation classes the following month in April, I would not be issued OC spray (the pepper spray). Plus, I would not be issued a pistol until I attended the next pistol range. Until then, I was just a glorified security guard when placed in charge of the Pulgas Gate, my first post in my new MOS a few days after checking in to Security Battalion, MCB Camp Pendleton.

My first night on the watch as an MP on OJT did not go as smooth as I wished it would have. Everything was going smooth at first, I was placed with an experienced NCO, who I will call Oscar and I picked his brain to gain as much knowledge as I could. I reported my post correctly when the watch commander, who was my boss, showed up. At the end of my shift, I thought I was leaving a good impression my first day on the job. Until I got pulled over for speeding driving the Marines back to PMO on Pulgas Road by SSgt Ross.

“Good Morning Marine, I'm SSgt Ross with Traffic, you got your license and military ID on you?”

“Thank you. I clocked you doing 10-over on Pulgas Road, how long have you been on the watch Marine?”

“This is my night on the watch SSgt.”

“Is that right?”

SSgt Ross looked at my ID’s still on his hand for a seconds and then turned his attention back to me.

“Alright Corporal, you are one of Sgt’s Black’s Marines right?”

“Yes, SSgt. I just checked in from Oki.”

“Ok, I’m going to do you a favor. I’m letting you go with a warning and you will tell Sgt. Black what happened this morning. I will find out if you don’t.”

“Yes, SSgt.”

“Am I clear? Make sure he gets ahold me after you tell him.”

“Yes, SSgt.”

“Alright, here you go.”

After handing me my ID’s Carlos simply said, “Bro, what the hell? SSgt Ross is one of the meanest and strict MP’s at PMO.”

At Camp Pendleton PMO, the traffic units, like SSgt Ross, operate independently with main area of concern being DWI’s, traffic accidents, and speeding tickets. SSgt Ross must have felt pity for me being so new to PMO that he gave me a chance. As soon as I turned in my gear I immediately reported to Sgt. Black and told him I got pulled over by SSgt Ross. His long disappointed stare made me feel more ashamed than embarrassed of what I had done on my first day. I did not make a great first impression, but I was happy to be given the second chance.

The following three working days were a blur compared to my first day on the watch. Saying that I was exhausted would be an understatement. I don't even remember giving my first ticket or what it was for. My first night off, *day* would be more accurate since I was on the night shift. I woke up tired and confused looking at my phone. I checked my wrist watch and then my phone again. I walked outside to the barracks catwalk restarting my phone, like that would have helped me understand what day and time it was. Right? I was hoping to find someone outside to check what day and time it was. Alone on the catwalk, I stared at my Motorola RAZR as it was booting back up and watched the time on the small screen update itself. The small text confirmed I had slept over 24 hours. I was starving since by that time I had not eaten in two days. I drove down the street to the main side PX to get some food.

Even though I went through a rough first week on the watch at Camp Pendleton PMO, I still did learn a few important things about military police and the Marine Corps as a whole. Talking with Oscar my first night on the watch, I learned a different side of PMO. I was standing in the door way of the Pulgas Gate shack while Oscar was stood in the middle of the entrance lane when I asked,

“Wait, you not an MP?”

“I'm actually a Water Dog dude”

“Ha Ha Ha! What?”

“An 1171 Water Support Technician. Basically a water purifier bro”

“Yea man, but you probably not going to believe me but I still haven't actually done my job 3 years in the Marine Corps.”

“Really... Wow! I believe it bro. Back in Bridgeport, we had a couple of bulk fuels Marines attached to us. All they did was operate the fucking gas station.”

“Ha Ha Ha! See! You know how it is!”

“Yeah, they would get really excited when units would come on base to train and request to take them and work refueling the helicopters.”

“All that time I spent at MOS school to learn how to clean water, store it and everything just to be tossed around to working parties and now PMO... This fucking sucks bro.”

As Oscar stared towards the road leaving the gate I could not help but think about PMO what was called the Fleet Assistance Program, or FAP. PMO had this official agreement with all the other units on base to provide Marines to be trained as MP's for six months in order to deal with the low manpower. I quickly learned the FAP Marines, were crucial for the successful operation of PMO. The FAP program allowed each of the four MP platoons at Security Battalion to grow between 30 to 40 percent. During the day, PMO operated all six gates of Camp Pendleton and closed two of them at night. The FAP Marines gave PMO the much needed manpower to allow the augments to handle simple jobs like issuing day passes and manning the gates (some had 3 to 4 incoming lanes) to wave cars through. This allowed PMO to focus the remaining MP's, real 5811's, to patrol the base, fill slots on the SRT team (similar to SWAT), work dispatch and respond to emergency calls.

The FAP program operated like a revolving door. Taking Oscar as an example, he spent about six months at PMO and left as soon as his replacement was ready to man one of the gates. Not all of the Marines in the FAP program were that lucky. If Oscar's parent unit did not provide a replacement, there would have been a fight going on through e-mails and phone calls behind closed doors. The parent units wanted their Marines to come home and PMO did not want to lose manpower. What I found most interesting of the FAP program was that all the other units on Camp Pendleton did was send Marines that were in the middle or end of their enlistment. This

gave them an additional edge in the fight in getting their Marines back because they had to prepare them to get leave.

For the unlucky Marines that got sent at the start of their enlistment or were sometimes forgotten, they spent a long time at PMO. For example, one FAP Marine I will call James, he spent over a year at PMO. He would sometimes be called the *grand-old-man of PMO*, because it seemed he would never leave. This is a Marine reference to the longest serving Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Archibald Henderson, who served for 39 years. After seeing multiple FAP Marines come and go, he called his parent unit trying to figure out where his replacement was. After multiple e-mails and phone calls, he finally reached someone that told him he had been sent permanently. The whole time James was at PMO he was under the impression that he had been sent there to work the gates temporarily like everyone else. As James put it one time, *They just didn't know what to do with me... So they just dumped me here.*

Talking to Marines like Oscar and James, did raise a couple of red flags. The obvious red flag was how PMO was treating their Marines (FAP's and MP's included). The barracks where we lived in and the working hours were horrible. Red flag number two, I noticed quickly almost everyone living at the barracks loved to drink. However, back in 2007, I was still a young and naïve Marine optimistic about a potential future career in the MP field. I was optimistic because I was looking forward to MP school and becoming a full 5811. Once I earned the MOS and got enough experience on the watch, I could potentially transfer to one of the other departments like K9 or an Agent in the Criminal Investigations Division (CID). To my eyes at the time, a CID agent was the equivalent to being a federal law enforcement agent. Even though I was starting at the bottom working the gates of Camp Pendleton, I had a road map to guide me. The way I looked at it at the time, I saw myself working my way up the ladder of responsibility at PMO

from manning the gates to patrol. Eventually, after some significant time working as a patrol unit, I would climb that same ladder again and earn a spot as a patrol or area supervisor on the watch. I understood that all of this would not come easy and would probably take my entire second enlistment to achieve. Compared to the FAP Marines, it appeared that most of them were only looking forward to getting their promised replacement.

CHAPTER IV

THE MONOTONY OF THE GATE SENTRY

By around mid-2009 the men of 2nd Platoon at Camp Pendleton PMO had displayed a pattern of behavior indicative of a downward spiral for at least 2 years. The job of manning all of the gates and patrol duties involved long working hours with little sleep. Sometimes our platoon of about 30 MP's (5811's with the FAP's included) worked a total of 16 to 18 hours a day. That resulted in limited time off to decompress from all of the stress and pressure that came from every direction. Watch commanders would demand to be informed of everything that took place on the watch, but later say something to the effect of, *I trust you guys. Handle it at your level. You don't have to tell me about this.* One example of this would be the handling of what can be described as a "petty call", but what is a petty call? I was never given an official form describing what kind of calls we responded to and what would be determined petty enough to talk our way out of it.

Using a generalized parking dispute as an example that I actually dealt with at one time or another. Consider the case of an unknown Marine taking the Company First Sergeant's parking spot. In the military, senior staff like the Company Commander or the Company First Sergeant really value their designated parking spots. At the local unit level, unknown persons taking designated parking spots is a big deal. This "violation" of a parking spot can escalate to the point they want a tow truck to show up. Furthermore, this kind of "violation" could also

escalate to the point they want the MP's to show up and run the plates or other forms of vehicle registration to get the name of the owner of the vehicle.

In the context of working PMO, I was verbally taught a parking dispute would not warrant MP's showing up unless there is damage to personal property. Additionally, a parking dispute would not warrant calling a tow truck or the running of license plates, that would be illegal. In this case, someone parking within the marked boundaries of a parking spot that "belonged" to someone else could easily be interpreted by me as a petty call. A dispute that should be handled locally at the unit level and not with MP involvement. However, if I had disregarded this kind of phone call without advising my watch commander, I risked getting yelled at about it. Why? In some cases, it could boil down to the watch commander coincidentally driving by the scene of the parking dispute. In other cases, someone in the senior staff coincidentally knows how to get ahold of the Provost Marshal (PM) directly. The PM in return calls the watch commander telling him to handle the situation. In the end, MP's like me would end up getting the angry end of a watch commander being told by the PM how to do his job. At the end of the day, I would be standing at parade rest, being yelled at for ignoring calls thinking to myself, *What the actual fuck?*

In the early Spring of 2008, the Marines of Second Platoon reported to the Camp Pendleton Brig (military prison) classroom early in the morning for what is called in the military a *Safety Stand-down*. The brig on Camp Pendleton is very well hidden in the middle of the southern hills of Camp Pendleton. I drove my Mustang, and parked in near the classroom, which was a separate building adjacent to the brig compound. I arrived around 30 minutes early to the classroom so I could watch the Marines in my squad arrived on time. It was early in the morning and all I could think about standing by my car, Monster energy drink in hand, *Fuck I'm*

tired... *This is going to be a long fucking day.* One by one, the Marines in my platoon began to show up and began to congregate around the parking lot. The next thought that came to my mind was, *This is fucking stupid, everyone here should be sleeping.* James soon arrived and approached me by my car.

“Hey man, get any sleep? What the fuck are we doing here?”

“Safety Stand-down bro.”

“Why? We are on the fucking night shift?”

“Don’t know man. Fucking Training being dicks bro.”

“Don’t they know we supposed to be sleeping right now?”

“Hey man, *needs* of the Marine Corps...”

“Fucken-A man... Hey you get service here?”

Adding to the stress load after 3 long working days, the training section of Security Battalion added mandatory training days to our off days. The training section would make arrangements for annual training seminars about DUI risks, alcoholism, suicide awareness, and even shooting practice. All with the intent of getting as many Marines into one spot to make sure they could check as many boxes as possible off an extensive list of yearly training requirements. Additionally, if any Marine had medical requirements that needed to be met, they were ordered to drop gear in the morning and sent straight to the clinic. Looking back at this now, everything makes sense to me. The *needs* of the Marine Corps called for us to get all these training requirements done. There was no way in hell that such hour-long classes would have been done during our “working hours”. Additionally, it also did not make sense to send Marines on duty to get a medical appointments done. Why? MP’s (FAP’s included) on duty carry loaded weapons.

Weapons of any kind are not allowed in any medical facility. All in all, the results from these methods of the job were simple, madness and multiple paths toward self-destruction.

At the time, I was already on my second four-year enlistment and had some understanding of the methods to the madness. I can say with confidence that the Marines in the training section were only following directions given to them from higher up in the chain of command. In short, they were orders from an operations chief along the lines of *Get as many Marines PME complete as possible*. The term “PME complete” meant getting Marines where they needed to be in order to have that *check in the box* and *most recent date* next to their name on an online database. Additionally, the majority of the training section Marines were either Marines with no experience on the watch or MP’s that spent enough time off the job that they forgot the effect it has on you. In essence, these Marines had no idea what we actually go through on a daily basis or have distanced themselves far enough not to care because they still had a job to do.

These *methods to the madness* and *needs of the Marine Corps* concepts were clear to me and to some of the more experienced NCO’s (Noncommissioned Officers) of Second Platoon. I understood that in the Marine Corps, the *needs of the Marine Corps* took precedence over everything. In this case, the *needs of the Marine Corps* meant getting everyone PME complete. The *needs of the Marine Corps*, meant you had to change your plans to suit said *needs*. Unless an emergency took place that was properly reported to the chain of command via the Red Cross for example, you had to do what and be where you were told. Sometimes, we would get a heads up from someone within the chain of command, and we would pass the word along to the rest of the Marines via text message. Back in 2007-2009, social media use was not as prevalent as it is today, but word spread quickly because everyone had a cell phone.

Going back on the watch after having our *weekend* interrupted by a Safety Stand-down was always a horrible experience. Our already broken sleep cycles were made worse from having to force ourselves to stay awake through a barrage of training seminars. Our sentiments were only compounded at the thought of working on a payday weekend. Us MP's expected Marines with fresh cash to burn at their worst. We didn't expect anything less from the one military branch that takes pride in tracing its origins to Tun Tavern, Philadelphia on 10 November 1775. Marines born in a bar, it wasn't a surprise to us MP's to encounter several possible DWI's at the gates between midnight and 6 AM. For example, an MP in my platoon pulled over a Marine completely blitz drunk with a 30-minute old bar receipt still in his pocket. One time while in dispatch, one of the patrol units on my shift pulled over a Marine E8 (Master Sergeant) late in the morning driving in to work. When he blew into the breathalyzer device, the Marine blew over twice the legal limit. For those Marines that did listen to the safety stand-down, it was hilarious to see Marines with their head hanging from the passenger side window of a Ford Mustang with vomit smeared across the door.

Nothing crazy is expected on non-payday weekends. Marines are either broke or waiting for the direct deposit to hit in the middle of the upcoming week. However, crazy things still happen on these off-weekends like a single drunk driver here or there. Maybe witness the shenanigans of random drunk Marines coming aboard in the passenger seat screaming at the top of the lungs with their annoyed designated driver telling them to shut up. Usually, by the end of the night of a non-payday-weekend a Gate NCO would only have one or two police reports and a short stack of traffic tickets given out by the gate guards.

While manning the gates of Camp Pendleton, MP's don't just encounter Marines or members of other military branches. Every once in a while, we would hear stories of civilians

being lost or asking for directions. One time, an old man with his family in the car, ran the main gate and just kept driving. Actively monitoring the radio traffic at the time, it was announced by Seth that he had pulled the vehicle over and everything was Code 4 or OK on scene. He added there was an obvious language barrier as the cause for the gate run. I believe Seth was instructed by our watch commander to get the man and his family off base as soon as humanly possible. It did not take long for Seth to then reach out to me over the radio and ask if I could translate instructions on how to get off base in Spanish.

What makes this incident memorable is the fact that he asked me to do the translation over the radio since his cell phone was not working properly at the time. Up until then, it was unheard of anyone using any other language but English on our official radio channels. At the time, there were no “official” translators available nearby and I was a 20 minute drive away. Out of options, I believe Seth took a shot in the dark and asked me speak to this man in Spanish over the radio. The job got done and the man was never heard from again.

Besides having to deal with drunks and the possible gate run, working the gates of Camp Pendleton were not all that bad. Granted the hours were long, but those serious enough to be full MP's working for PMO, had to overcome the monotony of the gate sentry. Anyone, FAP's included, could move on from manning one of the gates if he or she proved themselves capable of more than just waving cars through. I personally saw one specific Marine, who was an administrative clerk rise up to the challenge and became a FAP patrolman. This specific Marine, who I will call Jack, came to PMO fresh from his MOS school. As a result, he was one of those unlucky FAP's that spent more than six months waiting for his replacement.

However monotonous it felt to stand in front of the main gate of Camp Pendleton for eight to ten hours on rotation, waving car after car, in never ending waves, everyone at PMO did it at one point.

CHAPTER V

THE BLACK STRIPPER PAD SHUFFLE

In boot camp, recruits live in open squad bays with zero privacy and our drill instructors compared a barracks in the fleet to living in a college dorm. A comment a drill instructor said that I will never forget was, "...you can walk from one end of the barracks, room to room, and have a six pack of beer before you reach the opposite end..." He was right to an extent. I was assigned to room 201 of barracks 1397 in the Fall of 2007 and I lived in that room for over two years. As soon as I dropped my bags, I went straight to the PX and bought cleaning supplies. This three-story rectangular concrete building resembled a small cheap hotel that had about 24 rooms on each floor. This barracks in particular was divided in half with a common area at the center of each floor. Every time I would move into a new barracks room, I would always buy a new broom (plus a dust pan), a roll of large trash bags, a toilet brush, bleach, 409 cleaner, glass cleaner, Scrubbing Bubbles, toilet cleaner, multiple bottles of Lysol and three rolls of paper towels.

My first focus in cleaning that specific barracks room was the bathroom. The bathroom had a toilet and a single shower stall was separated by a wall. The door that opened into the shower was shadowed plexi-glass. Probably after multiple years of multiple people moving in and out of these barracks rooms, the shower and parts of the bathroom began to grow mold. Additionally, the shower door had large hard water stains caked on it and the toilet bowl had

huge stains too. At the time, my first thought was to take as much of the mold and hard water stains off as humanly possible. That's where the Scrubbing Bubbles came in and began to spray generous amounts of it all over the place. Giving the Scrubbing bubbles time to settle, I shifted my attention to the three mattresses available in the room. Originally intended as a three-person room, I was privileged to have my own room as an NCO. After checking both sides of each of the three mattresses, I began spraying intense amounts of Lysol to both sides of the mattress that looked the cleanest.

The reasons I sprayed my chosen mattress with enough Lysol to leave it moist to the touch: 1) I had spent enough time in the Marine Corps that I knew how Marines live and 2) I stole the idea from my friend Larry from my first duty station. He acquired a couch from a Marine that worked with us that moved to Hawaii and the first thing he did was spray a whole bottle of Lysol onto every crevice of that couch. Why? Well let's just say the previous owner of that couch had every porn channel available through Dish Network. With that in mind, everywhere I moved to while in the Marine Corps I would Lysol where I slept.

My room also had carpet, and I soon realized that I forgot to buy carpet cleaner on my first PX run. With still some Lysol available inside the can on hand, I began to disinfect it as well. My room soon began to have an intense smell of Lysol, and I realized it was time for a break. I opened the curtains and the window and walked outside to the catwalk. I used so much Lysol while I was in the military that when I use it today, it brings me back to the days when I had to disinfect the only personal space I had to live in. Seriously, after a few minutes of airing out my barracks room of the Lysol, I focused on the bathroom again. I gave all the troubling areas a good scrub and followed it with a second coat of Scrubbing Bubbles. I then moved on to the vanity. To my surprise, I found it decently clean, so I moved onto the three aluminum wall

lockers across from it. It was inside of these wall lockers where I found a disgusting surprise. The wall lockers were empty, but inside each of them were a set of three drawers that were bolted on. Well inside the middle wall locker and in one of the drawers were two old and crusty used condoms. I lost it. I grabbed the roll of paper towels, tore a long sheet off to ensure I wouldn't touch it while throwing them in the trash. Afterward, I burned through one of the Lysol cans cleaning every crevice of those wall lockers. I did not want to store anything inside of them until I knew they were disinfected.

It took me one whole day to clean that room to the point I felt comfortable sleeping there. I drove back to the PX and bought more cleaning supplies. The second time I got cleaning rags and moved the furniture around to clean the walls with Lysol. By the end of the day cleaning I was exhausted, but felt comfortable enough to sleep in the room. Barracks 1397 was the third barracks I lived in, and up to that point, the previous two had been renovated. All empty barracks rooms would be generally dirty, but I did not expect the kind of neglect I found at this barracks. The common areas of barracks 1397 served no real purpose, but housing four shitty washers and dryers in a small room in a corner. If these wide-open areas in the barracks had anything at all, they housed old broken TV's, one or two old couches, a random number of broken chairs, or a single pool table. The pool table was useless, other than for playing beer pong. The heavily stained linoleum tile floor, that had random broken pieces of tile, was supposed to be stripped and buffed at least once a month, but it never was. A better description of barracks 1397 is a mold-infested roach-motel that we, as Marines, had to clean ourselves in order to make it livable.

About a year after moving into the barracks, I became well acquainted with the barracks manager who I will call Bobby. He was a short Hispanic man, around 5'10 and in his late 20's-early 30's. When I first met Bobby in his office, when I first checked in to PMO, I noticed he

had a farewell Marine unit plaque on display with his name on it. My first impression was, *Great! He is a Marine, I won't have to deal with a civilian that has no idea what it's like for us to live in a barracks.* At the time, I was familiar with a form of military/civilian disconnect, even with civilians that work government jobs. However, that first impression soon changed. For weeks on Thursday's, while I was in charge of field day for my platoon, Bobby demanded to have my Marines strip and buff the floors of the common area on each floor. Field day in the Marine Corps, is the one day out of the week where every Marine living in the barracks has to thoroughly clean their rooms and the building. The following day, someone from the chain of command of Security Battalion would walk through the building and random rooms inspecting health and cleanliness.

Bobby always met resistance because even though he provided the stripper, wax and pads, he never provided the correct pads to actually strip the floor. By this point in my life in the Marine Corps, I was jaded as a result of how we were being treated by our chain of command. The long working hours, limited time off and shitty living conditions had taken a huge toll on all of us. As the senior man in charge of my Marines at the barracks during field day, I was not going to allow this *civilian* to make our lives more miserable than they already were. I didn't care that he had earned the title years ago. That went out the window. As blood siblings fight every now and then, on the last field day he demanded we strip and buff the floors. I made the decision to take a stand.

“Strip and buff? Are you serious?”, I questioned Bobby who had a concerned look on his face.

“Yea man, can you please get it done tonight. The Sergeant Major has been on my ass for weeks about the floors in the common areas”

“Yea I guess. It’s going to take all night, but ok.”

“Wait, where are the stripping pads?” I said opening both boxes.

“There I got you two boxes of them”

“Yea, but these are buffing pads. To strip the floors we need the black pads we can’t do this tonight unless you get me those.”

“Flores, those are the pads for the buffer, just get it done alright.”

At the time I thought, *Oh fuck no, this dude has no clue as to how you properly strip and buff floors. I’m not playing this fucking game.*

“Yea Ok, I’ll get the Marines to mop and buff the floors, but we can’t strip and buff the floors without the black stripping pads.”

“What did I just say Marine? Strip and buff the floors...”

What Bobby did not know or understand at the time was that what you needed to strip a dirty wax floor was black coarse stripping pads. I stripped and buffed floors in churches and schools in the months leading up to my ship out date. So, when I was tasked to do it as a boot in the Marine Corps, I already knew what to do. I felt confident challenging Bobby, but still felt disappointed in his lack of knowledge on the subject.

“I don’t care what you do, just get it done.”, Bobby continued.

“Well I’m telling you right now, I am not going to make my guys do this and make the floors look worse. I’m sorry, but until you get me the right stripping pads it’s not going to happen.”

“What you just say?”

I told Bobby in detail my working knowledge of stripping and buffing floors and walked out of his office on the first floor. Annoyed that I had to argue my way out of a task that could have been ordered by Sergeant Major, I called my squad leader.

“So, he wants you guys to do something but doesn’t even give you the right stuff to get it done?”, Sergeant Silva asked after giving him the details.

“Yeah, the dude is a fucking tool bag full of rocks, can’t believe he used to be Sergeant.”

“Yeah that guy is a fucken idiot.”

“You know he used to be Motor-T. I saw a 1stFSSG plaque in his office. That’s fucking old school.”

“Fuck you Flo”

“Ha Ha Ha”

“Thanks Flo, I’ll call Staff Sergeant and let him know. He might call you, so make sure you answer the phone.”

“Alright Thanks”

“Hey Flo, one more thing.”

“Whats up, Joseph?”

“We having some beers at my house on Saturday.”

“You know I don’t drink beer.”

“The left-over chocolate Cognac you brought last time is still in my freezer.”

“Oh yea, I forgot about that. Ha Ha Ha! Im down.”

“Awesome, stop by around six.”

I made sure all of the Marines on my floor cleaned their rooms by giving them a specific inspection time. Additionally the floors of the common areas were mopped and one Marine on

each floor ran the buffer. I was confident that would have been enough to make the common areas inspection ready. I took a risk challenging Bobby on the floors, even when he name-dropped the Sergeant Major. At the time, considering the conditions of the task, it was plain stupid to follow through with his order. Time and time again, it seemed that no one cared about the morale of the MP's that lived in barracks. In regards to field day, for us MP's it didn't matter if we were on the night shift sleeping in our rooms, someone could still walk in for the field day inspection. Back then, I did the best I could to make it easier for my Marines during field day. If that meant butting heads with the barracks manager, so be it. I was willing to take the ass chewing.

To conclude, when younger Marines would comment/complain at how bad life at any barracks was, older Marines would always counter with how good *we* had it now. They would give a speech that ultimately became a tired cliché that always started with, *oh back in my day*. These stories would always start with them living in squad-bays or quonset huts with open showers trying to drive a point that *we* now had separate rooms and private showers. I always felt that they knew their words were falling on deaf ears. The revolving opinion after we got that clichéd speech was that they must miss the life at the barracks.

I am not trying to glorify the regimented barracks life, but it was common for some of the married Marines comment at smoke pits, for example, how much they missed the barracks-party-lifestyle. The lifestyle where Marines start drinking as soon as they get released off-duty. Where you can walk down a hallway or catwalk and grab a beer when you are dead broke. I personally saw some young Marines get married just to leave the barracks, but later admit they missed the comradery revolving around being amongst Marines. However, even for the Marines that didn't drink or party at the barracks, it was a great feeling to wake up on a Saturday and just play video

games all day. Once your normal or assigned duties were completed, you were free to do as you wished. At PMO, all you really had to worry about while off duty at PMO was making sure you got food and paid your bills.

CHAPTER VI

THE CATWALK CRAWL – PREQUEL TO THE HOLY-WOOD CRAWL

Around 4 PM I made my routine five-minute drive off base to get some Super Nachos from the drive-thru Mexican restaurant *Eribertos*, lovingly referred to by my peers as ‘*Bertos*. The Super Nachos came in two varieties; chicken or beef. Driving my Mustang Westbound on Vandegrift Blvd, all I could think of was delicious pieces of chicken breast, glazed in a flavorful salsa, held together with cheese and placed over freshly fried tortilla chips. I got curious once and went inside ‘*Bertos* to see how they cooked the food. They had coin vending machines that give you the random sticker or small toy for children. However, I was paying more attention to the gray and dirty generic four man booths. The tables still had the left-over crumbs and condensation rings from previous patrons. The trash cans were overflowing and the floor did need a good sweeping as well. However, all of that didn’t change my mind because the smell of the food being prepared reminded me so much of home. At the time, I just thought they didn’t have someone available to clean the place up.

The lack of cleanliness inside ‘*Bertos*, as I remembered driving up to the drive-thru, must have not affected the “A” grade given by the California Health Department, proudly posted by the pay window. Either way, this was the closest place within a 100-mile radius of Camp Pendleton that sold authentic Mexican food revolving around greasy tacos like barbacoa, lengua, cabeza, and even my personal favorite, the generic potato and egg taco. Leaving the ‘*Bertos* drive-thru, my plans for the night were just to watch a few movies and probably have a few

drinks at the barracks. I didn't feel like doing anything crazy. Driving back to base, windows rolled down, shifting gears, feeling the fresh Southern California breeze on my face, I savored the smell of my food. By the time I made my way to the second-floor catwalk of the barracks, the noise from Victor's room was unavoidable. Some of the married guys in the platoon were outside on the catwalk talking, drinking and smoking. Even Joseph, one of the squad leaders, was there with a red SOLO cup in hand, while others had glass bottles of Bud Light.

“The sun hasn't even started to come down, what are y'all up to?”

“Hey! Join us, here take a beer.”

“Alright, I'll be back once I finish my food.”

I took the glass bottle, shuffling it between my coke and the plate of nachos I carried in a bag. In the process, I got a short glance inside of Victor's room, which was enough to measure the totality of what was coming ahead. Victor had laid down a secretary (a piece of tall barracks furniture) on its side diagonally inside the three-man barracks room. From my point of view, there must have been five people, an extra-large ice chest, and empty beer bottles everywhere. Having the secretary laid on its side and diagonally was the only way people could walk across the room to reach the bathroom.

“Stop being a bitch and join us,” Joseph said as he raised his plastic cup. I kept walking back to my room at the opposite end of the catwalk. Laughing to myself, I had second thoughts joining these drunk fools because I've been getting fucked up every set of off days for months now.

Entering my own barracks room, the contrast was almost overwhelming. I had my own three-man barracks room to myself, with my bed opposite the door, the TV opposite of my bed and a wide-open space in the center of the room. I set up two night stands back to back to create

a small table in front of the TV. I sat in the center of my room, taking it easy while eating and drinking the Bud Light watching a movie I had probably seen 100 times. The beer went down quickly. So, I pulled a bottle of Jack Daniels and my coconut cup I kept stashed inside a small refrigerator that was secured inside a secretary with a padlock. The reasons I kept the small refrigerator secured inside the secretary were 1) the secretary had a power strip bolted on the inside. At the time, I kept my booze ice cold at all times. 2) I also kept another Marine's alcohol stashed in my room as well. 3) there were rules regulating the amount of alcohol allowed in a barracks room. For example, I was allowed to have one bottle of hard alcohol or a six-pack of beer because I was an NCO. At the time, I thought it was a smart move to set up my refrigerator inside a secretary that could be secured with a padlock. If my room got inspected, no one would be able to peep inside my secretaries and wall lockers if they were secured with padlocks.

I set the coconut cup on my makeshift table and poured enough whiskey to fill the cup about $\frac{3}{4}$'s of the way and stirred in coke and ice from my other drink. Often the butt of jokes, my coconut cup was a table decoration I took home after getting drunk at a Hawaiian themed birthday pool party. Since I used the cup there and made it home in one piece, it felt right to keep on using it. Plus, coconut looked like a safer alternative compared to using glass. I took that coconut cup everywhere drinking at the barracks, even during field day and field day inspections. Plus, it was just the right size to set on the catwalk railing while hanging out and smoking a cigarette.

By the time I finished the nachos, I had already refilled the coconut cup again with more Jack and Coke and leaned back on the chair with my left foot on the night stand. At least 45 minutes had passed since I ran into the Marines at the opposite end of the catwalk. I looked at the TV with a long blank glare, not paying attention as the movie progressed on screen. Thoughts

and memories ran across my mind about recent events that took place after being assigned the platoon dispatcher. As soon as I returned from MP school, I was told that I was on top of the list to be trained as a 911 dispatcher. As soon as I finished the dispatcher training, I realized something was wrong. The images of my encounter with the operations commander a few days earlier with his face, big huge eyes popping out of their sockets, glaring into mine had been burned into my memory.

“Gunnery Sergeant, I have a copy here of the California Law that says...”

“Listen Marine, I am your Operations Commander and all the other watch commanders and Staff NCO’s on the watch are part of your chain of command. When we tell you to run something on NCIC, you run it! It’s a lawful order. Am I clear?”, the Gunnery Sergeant yelled in our office building hallway pointing his right hand towards my chest making a typical knife hand.

“Yes, Gunnery Sergeant.”

“Alright, any questions?”

“No, Gunnery Sergeant.”

The Gunnery Sergeant walked away and no progress was made. I tried taking the initiative. I walked down to his office hoping to have a conversation with our Operations Commander. All so I could make an attempt to get across why I felt our Marines misunderstood our access to NCIC. Thinking about it, second Jack & Coke in hand, the mess I got myself into plagued my mind. Bringing up the same questions that really were not answered inside our batcave of dispatch. Should I continue listening to my superiors and run checks on NCIC under ambiguous probable cause? I could potentially be breaking law. Or risk getting yelled at and possibly charged for not following orders? *Damned if you do, damned if you don't. Right?*

The Gunny had power to dictate policy within the company. Disobeying his order, especially now, carried its own unique kind of heavy repercussions. I began to feel the walls of my barracks room closing in around me. The movie on screen now seemed irrelevant. I got up, coconut cup still in hand, turned around to see the posters on my door begin to melt. I really needed to get out... so, I opened the door, walked outside, locked my door and headed to the party at the opposite end of the catwalk.

As I walked down the catwalk, I ran into a small group of Marines outside and bummed a cigarette.

“What took you so long?? Still got that stupid cup I see, Ha Ha Ha! Hey come here and take a shot,” yelled Victor from inside the room.

“Hey! You made it! Time for another round of shots,” Vincent slurred walking out of the barracks room.

He quickly shimmied back inside of the room and opened the extra-large ice chest. This cooler, which was large enough to fit a small human, was full of beer bottles/cans, bottles of Jack Daniels, Makers Mark, Jägermeister, cans of Red Bull, four Monster BFC cans, and bottles of vodka and tequila. The rest of the evening turned into a blur after the first few rounds of tequila shots, beer pong, Marines puking over the catwalk after discussing and sharing the “2 girls one cup” video, discussions of SOP’s (Standard Operating Procedure), more Marines puking in the toilet, more beer pong, Jäger bombs, serious discussions over politics, and more drinking.

The following morning, I woke up in my own bed, face hanging, hovering over my empty trashcan.

Time? 3:35 PM, the usual time I woke up. I looked around and my room was still clean, except for the empty plate of food still in front of the TV. The last thing I clearly remembered

was taking shots a little past midnight. Getting out of bed, I checked my pockets for my keys, phone, wallet and made my way back down the catwalk.

“Victor!” I yelled seeing him walking out the room with a trash bag.

“Hey man, you alright? You got really fucked up last night.”

“Yeah, the last thing I remember is taking shots and the rest is just a blur...Damn! your room got fucked up!”

Even though Victor was carrying a full black jumbo-sized trash bag, the room still had countless beer cans and bottles scattered throughout. Pizza boxes were piled up by the door, bed sheets were crumpled up on the bed mixed in with cammies and the smell of spilled beer, Jäger, Redbull, chewed tobacco spit, piss and vomit.

“Yeah, I got this. Besides Vincent is passed out in the shower. I’ll get him to help me clean this shit up... Hey the ice chest is still full of booze...”

“Oh, really!”

It was rare to see married Marines at the barracks. What should have occurred ten years ago was to have one of the married Marines host the barracks Marines at his own home. Not the other way around where you are making a mess in your subordinates only personal living space. However, there was still a clear party-like-kind of culture linked to living in a Marine barracks. Looking back at this now, there was more to this party atmosphere than just having a large amount of young Marines living together in one building. I can only speak for myself on this, but in this specific case I was drawn to the booze and comradery of my Marine brothers as an escape from the stress I was dealing with. The married Marines could have had the same reason I did that day. On the surface, life can be great living in a Marine barracks when all you have to worry

about is making sure all your personal bills get paid for. However, that life is also a sad existence when you return *home* only to get drunk and play video games all night.

CHAPTER VII

BOREDOM AND THE FART BOX

Every holiday season PMO had to deal with multiple Marines from each platoon wishing to go home for the holidays. As a result, the leadership at PMO established a two week leave block so Marines could spend time at home with their families. The watch commander's solution to the low manpower during the holidays was jumping PMO quickly into *Running Guard*. At PMO going into *Running Guard* meant the leadership merged the Marines not going home into two (a day and night shift) platoons. From day one of *Running Guard*, the remaining Marines worked non-stop until everyone returned on-duty. Additionally, I believe it was around that time the Camp Pendleton air station merged their formally semi-independent MP's into ours. That decision made sense at the time since it brought two "departments" into one unified organization.

At the time, I considered myself a great dispatcher inside the batcave. I learned, became proficient and gained the confidence of my superiors quickly. Within a few months I was taking 911 emergency calls, dispatching those calls within seconds and documenting everything that took place keeping a detailed online record of events. I was so good at my job that the Desk Sgt personally commended me during a random DWI operation three traffic units held. I personally covered 30-plus back-to-back traffic stops in under two hours, including running all license plates, drivers licenses (when requested) and keeping a detailed record of it. In the end, the traffic unit pulled three DWI's and all I got was a *thank you* and a *good job*. Due to my proficiency, I spent most of my time in the batcave during running guard. One additional reason I

was bound to the batcave was because PMO lacked trained and certified MP's to actually do the job. When PMO finally hired civilians to do the job, I jumped at every opportunity available to be allowed to go on patrol.

During running guard, I was allowed to go on patrol several times and that's where I first met John Collette. I was on the day shift and assigned to main side, which included the air station back then. Patrolling the base during the holidays, especially main side, got boring at times. You can only patrol within your zone X-amount of times until you feel like you are going around in a circle. The mostly empty camps, streets, and housing areas were compounded with my short list of specific pet peeves that I cited people for. At the time, that short list included the following traffic violations: running a stop sign, running a red light, driving and using a cell phone and driving with expired registration. I was not getting action on the streets. Figuring out who had expired tags in California is easy, the tags have to be posted on the rear license plate. As a cop, that is an easy way to get probable cause or PC, digging further from there during the traffic stop was fully up to me. However, patrolling the base during the holidays by myself quickly got boring. With nothing interesting going on, on a whim I decided to check out the air station. The drive was quick and acting on another whim, I parked my car and decided to chill at the air station PMO office.

John sat at the front desk of air station PMO and acknowledged my presence with proper military courtesy. Back then, all I knew about John was that he was a short dude from Kentucky that would sometimes break into an his Appalachian English dialect at the flip of a switch. I saw him do this once while posted at our headquarters. I can't remember why he was there and who he was speaking to. However, being present while two Marines from Appalachia speaking to

each other is something I will never forget. They were speaking English, but I could not understand a single word that was exchanged.

What opened the door to both John and I talking that day was the book that I carried with me, *The Heroin Diaries: A year in the Life of a Shattered Rock Star* by Nikki Sixx of Mötley Crüe. We didn't say much to each other that day until I sat in the waiting area of the office reading my book. I remember sitting there and passing the time until John asked what I was reading. I told him what I told everyone, Nikki Sixx provides a year's worth of his personal diary from January to December of 1987. This time frame also covers Mötley Crüe's, *Girls Girls Girls* tour through his point of view. Nikki Sixx doesn't hold anything back in the book. He covers his issues with depression, dealing with an on-and-off-again relationship, the struggle of the band taking ownership of their music, constant partying and struggle with drug addiction with added commentary from the people around him at the time. Additionally, I shared with John the music off the *The Heroin Diaries* soundtrack by Sixx's other band SIXX: A.M, mainly *Life is Beautiful* and *Van Nuys*. I saw that John was intrigued by the book. It was no surprise that he asked to borrow it later on in the day after I finished reading it.

The lyrics to those two songs spoke to me. Part of the connection I made to Nikki Sixx and SIXX: A.M. was how much the book and the music related to our (the MP's) existence at PMO. I discovered SIXX: A.M. first by playing the *Rock Band* game on the PlayStation 3. One of the first songs I bought and downloaded in the game was *Life is Beautiful*. I thought it was awesome. Not long after that, I quickly downloaded the whole album off iTunes on my iPhone. At the time, the music was intoxicating and what made it more interesting for me was reading *The Heroin Diaries Soundtrack* on the album cover. I had to find the source. *What the hell is this?*, I remember thinking to myself. I had to find the meaning or the story behind the lyrics of

Life is Beautiful, *Van Nuys* and the enchanting *Girl with Golden Eyes*. I can't remember when it happened but I found *The Heroin Diaries* at a local shop off base in Oceanside, California.

I had zero issues allowing Collette borrow one of my books. I knew I would eventually see him again. Additionally, I understood the danger of mixing Marines and boredom. It's a horrible comparison, but the best way I can explain it is to compare Marines to toddlers and silence. They just don't mix. If you are familiar of taking care of toddlers, you know that something bad is taking place when you don't hear any noise. Same concept, but switch toddlers with Marines and silence with boredom. The reason Marines will appreciate the comparison to toddlers is because in the Marine Corps many of them feel they are treated as such. Why? Marines must follow all orders given by their commanders and supervisors that end up creating a highly regimented way of life. In many cases, Marines are instructed to *hurry up and wait*. Taking our past safety stand-down as a familiar example, we may have been told to be at the brig classroom at 8 AM, but the training seminar would actually start at 10AM. Why? As the word of the training trails down the chain of command, supervisor after supervisor would make the report time 15 to 30 minutes *earlier* to make sure everyone shows up on time. In the end, Marines end up to their assigned place of duty sometimes 30 to 45 minutes ahead of schedule and a lot of down time just waiting.

Today thanks to social media, a quick internet search for military themed Facebook pages like *Terminal Lance* for example, you can see the wide variety of stupid things Marines do on their down time. Some recent examples are Marines jumping into puddles, kicking each other in the groin or walking around dressed as Batman for no good reason. All these immature actions, a result of simple boredom, are immortalized because of cell phones and the internet. However, from my experience, bored Marines have been videotaping themselves doing dumb stunts since I

arrived at my first duty station in 2004. Before the internet and YouTube, all of those tapes dumb stunts done on active duty were probably stored in old dusty boxes or in long forgotten external hard drives. Before YouTube, dumb stunts like me jumping off a tall ladder onto a huge pile of snow, were only shared with people you trusted. Even then, if it was shared, it only went as far as sharing the story in conversation.

A less dangerous example took place around the time of the 2008-2009 holiday running guard time frame. At the time, an online forum, *pendletonunderground.com*, used by military wives to talk to each other aboard Camp Pendleton came up on our radar at PMO. I first heard about it working in the batcave over an incident on base housing involving military wives communicating their opinions and gossip over the internet. The conversations taking place over various topics on this forum sometimes got heated to the point some of the wives started bashing each other online. One case in particular, someone posted a picture of a drunk woman that urinated on herself while sitting on the ground on a forum thread. Back in 2008-2009, situations of online harassment or what is considered online bullying today were rarely reported to PMO. Myspace and Facebook were a thing, but not everyone had smartphones like they do today.

Browsing through *pendletonunderground.com* on my personal MacBook while working in the batcave, I could sometimes track incidents taking place on base from the wives point of view. For example, one common issue that PMO encountered on base frequently were neighborhood disputes or noise complaints. In other words, shouting matches between neighbors, or family housing residents complaining that their neighbors have the music on too loud at night. From our point of view as PMO, the issue is simple, we show up and help settle the problem. Depending on the severity of the complaint, we would have to write down the names of the parties involved, take statements and write a police report. Again from our point of view,

situations like these were simple and easy to handle. The public perception of the MP's online was a completely different story at *pendletonunderground.com*.

As soon as I heard about *pendletonunderground.com*, our chain of command also heard about it because military wives began to use it to post their complaints about MP's. One day during our briefing our platoon sergeant walked up to the podium holding multiple printed e-mails. He read through each one passing important information the Marines in the room should know about. Information such as, who was selected to attend the next rifle or pistol range, the next scheduled physical fitness test and important policing information such as a suspect BOLO (be on the lookout). He then concluded his brief by taking a deep breath and said along the lines of, *One more thing gentlemen, please don't ask women driving on base if you can break their fart box*. Instantly, everyone in the briefing room erupted into laughter. I remember asking myself, *What the fuck?* After the atmosphere in the room settled down, the sergeant followed that he was serious because someone had complained about it.

What I didn't know back then, but I do now is that John Collette was the one responsible for the fart box complaint. Bored Marines is the simple explanation to what took place. The reason I believe I got the full fart box story was because I brought up the incident in conversation hanging out with other MP's in Okinawa Japan. I feel lucky that John was there to clear it up because the fart box story would have lost all its meaning. As John explained during a recent conversation, he was bored while being assigned to air station PMO, signed up for *pendletonunderground.com*, and posted a fake complaint under the screen name *lilcountrygirl*.

"I had a MP hit on me when i came through the gate a hour ago. whats up with that."
After several inquiries from the other members on the forum *lilcountrygirl* followed up.

“One of them asked me if he could bust my fart box...i mean that is so gross..i didnt know what to think or say..can you believe that someone would do something like that?”

To be crystal clear, no one at PMO asked a woman if he could break her fart box at the gate. I believe this incident became an issue because someone high in the chain of command read the thread as it exploded online. All resulting from one bored Marine stuck inside a box with nothing productive to engage his mind on. This is just one example at one end of the spectrum of the consequences of mixing boredom and Marines. At the other end of the spectrum, Marines and boredom can get dangerous. One quick example is when a Marine at one of the gates popped the tires of a vehicle with fixed in-ground, mechanical spike strips. From what I understood at the time, he was playing a game. He would engage the spike strips and then quickly disengage them before the vehicle drove over them. In this case, the spike strips either got locked in the engaged position or he was not quick enough to disengage them in time.

At the more dangerous end of the spectrum, Marines actually lose their lives. One old and obscure example I learned about in 2004 involved a Marine shooting his buddy in the head playing a stupid game with their service pistols in the back of a Humvee. I rediscovered this incident researching an older, but more obscure story possibly from the late 1990's. The 2004 incident revolved around two Marines who were best friends in the Marine Corps who were being transported in the back of a Humvee to guard duty on Okinawa, Japan. En-route, they started playing a game by taking out their pistols, putting them off safe, and pointing them at each other. Possibly during a bump in the road, one of the pistols fired accidentally, and as a consequence Private Markert shot his best friend in the head.

I couldn't find any trace of the older incident, but from what I can recall it happened under similar circumstances. Two Marines on duty mixed up in boredom and loaded pistols.

However, the difference between these two incidents was that in the older incident both Marines were inside a building, but were still pointing the pistols at each other. This time around, they were actually cycling through all the rounds in the magazine by continuously pulling on the slide assembly backwards. This kind of action on a pistol causes the round in the chamber to exit through the ejection port. The following forward motion on the pistol slide inserts another round into the chamber. Boredom and the repeating action of cycling through all the rounds in a pistol magazine caused one of them to fire. One Marine was shot and killed in the process.

One of the causes of the amount of boredom Marines experience in the Marine Corps, especially while they are on duty (barracks duty or guard duty) is the environment they are into. In the Marine Corps, there is a common saying used to describe your existence on duty, *A Marine on Duty Has No Friends*. If a Marine is assigned barracks duty, he is given a log book, a duty belt and ordered to tour the barracks around the clock for 24 hours. As the duty, you are responsible for enforcing all Marine barracks regulations and expected to keep order in the middle of the assumed chaos. However, the reality of being the barracks duty is actually a long day of sitting inside a small office, potentially furnished with 20 year old office furniture, a couple of chairs and a spare room with a bed if you are lucky. You are expected to walk each floor and perimeter of the barracks every hour (on the hour) and document all your findings in the log book. The sad reality of barracks duty is that one spends the majority of the day walking around an empty building and writing logbook entries that say, "Duty NCO tours barracks, nothing unusual to report."

In the case of guard duty, Marines are placed in a similar situation as the MP's at the gates. Marines are armed, sent off to rural and/or isolated areas of military bases to guard an entrance, building or room with little to no human interaction. Keeping the, *A Marine on Duty*

Has No Friends saying in mind, what seems like a simple task at first quickly becomes the anchor of a mundane existence. The quick answer to solve the issue of boredom and Marines is for units to provide better supervision of their subordinates. Leaders should do a better job at getting to know the Marines under their charge. A good Marine leader knows how their Marines will act with or without supervision. However, I have to admit that this answer is not that simple. In the Marine Corps, when people talk about “better supervision” the conversation leads to micro-management, a common knee-jerk reaction to Marines caught being stupid. In my opinion, micro-managers, are the worst-kind of leaders. Micro-managers are suffocating and alienating towards mid-level leaders. A more well-rounded solution is to find the balance between knowing your Marines and supervision, just enough, to encourage a sense of mutual respect in both parties.

Reflecting on my experiences at PMO and the incidents I just mentioned, I am grateful no one got shot by a negligent discharge. All the elements were in place for someone to do something stupid. Marines with loaded weapons, spending long hours sitting or standing with nothing meaningful to engage on. There is only so much a person can take physically standing on a gate in the middle of nowhere with only one or two other individuals (if you are lucky) exposed to the elements. You can only stand there for so long until your mind wanders to contemplate your existence. A pale existence where you have to spend over 12 hours of your life standing for no reason but to possibly wave hundreds of cars through a gate. I will conclude with one final anecdote. Someone did almost did commit suicide while I was on the watch. It didn't take place during my shift or in my platoon. I believe it was our sister platoon, the ones we relieved for the day. One Marine, I can't speak for since I don't remember his name or situation,

was discovered just in time before he pulled the trigger inside a port-a-john by the main gate. I have no idea what was going through his mind, but I do relate to the possible agony he faced.

As for John Collette, we met up again in late 2009 after I got orders to Okinawa, Japan. Once there, checked in to what eventually became, Military Police Company, Combat Logistics Regiment 37. I don't know about Collette, but I had to jump the chain of command to get those orders. All I did was tell my squad leader, *Sgt, because I respect you I am giving you a heads up that I'm jumping the chain of command to go see the Marine Monitor and get orders. I need to get the fuck out of here. I think I'm losing my mind.* My squad leader acknowledged my courtesy and I walked away. In all honesty, there was nothing he *could* do. At this point in my career, I knew no one could stop me from seeing the Marine Monitor while he visited PMO.

Marine Monitors act in a similar manner to a career planner. However, they have the power to give a Marine orders the day he meets with them. The Marine Monitor's job is, to my understanding, to monitor the amount of Marines (organized by MOS) in each unit on each base. In the few minutes I saw him and expressed my desire to be anywhere but Camp Pendleton PMO. All he did was express, Excellent! Tapped on his laptop computer, and said,

“Okinawa needs MP's right now...How much time you got left on contract?”

“About a year and half Master Sergeant.”

“You may need to extend your contract to do a full two year tour of Oki.”

“That's OK with me Master Sergeant.”

Just like magic, a few days later I signed an extension on my enlistment, got a hand shake, and the piece of paper that allowed me to leave PMO forever. It felt as if I had sold my soul to the devil, because others got presented with orders and not given the choice to ride out their

contracts at PMO. On the other hand, I played *a game* I saw some of my superiors play in order to get what they wanted. In a way, I learned from the best.

Once in Okinawa, I arrived and checked in to a unit that didn't even exist. Walking into my new company office I met up with Collette again. At this point in my career, this was the third time I had moved in the Marine Corps and the first time I arrived to a unit that on paper, belonged to no one. The explanation was simple, I got orders to a brand new MP company in the process of being organized. At the time, the Marine Corps was rethinking the mission of military police companies attached to logistical units. Thus, I found myself jumping blind learning a different side of my job.

The move to Okinawa, Japan felt like I base jumped off a giant bridge, but it got me deployment to Afghanistan. However, Collette was not allowed to deploy. He was not selected for the deployment because he had returned from Iraq in 2009. Before deploying, I was under the impression Collette's role in the company was to train the next generation of Marines. During the deployment, I found myself in the similar boring situation I have previously mentioned. Our mission was to provide protection to an engineer battalion that was tasked to do re-supply convoys, fix/improve roads and build a small patrol base. In other words, the majority of our 7 month deployment, our platoon spent countless hours staring at an empty desert at night.

Leaping forward to December 2011, I returned as a freshly promoted Sgt. I had barely taken about five steps in our company office to learn Collette had been caught smoking synthetic marijuana, lost rank/pay and been placed on administrative restriction (restriction). Being placed on Restriction in the Marine Corps means: 1) during off duty hours, the Marine has to check in with the Officer of the Day (OOD) every hour, on the hour, on a pre-determined schedule. The average time frame a Marine can be placed on restriction is for 30 days. 2) The Marine has all his

or her liberty secured, meaning the Marine cannot leave the base. If the Marine needs to go anywhere, outside of the perimeter of the barracks, he or she will need an approved escort. 3)

The Marine is restricted to wear only his or her uniforms.

I was shocked and could not believe what I was hearing in the company office. At the time, I was under the impression Collette was a good Marine. Before leaving to Afghanistan, Collette was one of the few Lance Corporals (LCpl) in the company that would accompany the NCO's going out off base to Naha, Okinawa to drink and hang out in the bars. In the Marine Corps, NCO's are not allowed to fraternize with LCpl's. At the time, us NCO's made an exception since Collette was considered a *Senior* LCpl because of his experience and time in the Marine Corps. Back then I considered Collette a good Marine and never would have imagined him doing something illegal in the Marine Corps.

Soon after my return I was assigned to do administrative work in the company office. I had expressed my desire not to reenlist and was promptly assigned to work as the Company's Training NCO. One of the first tasks given by our Company First Sergeant, outside of getting Marines to rifle ranges and other annual training exercises, was to speed up the process of kicking Collette out of the Marine Corps.

The process was brutal, and to make things worse I was ordered to organize an anti-substance abuse class for the Marines of the company. I organized for a substance abuse officer as guest speaker to give the class. I stood at the back of the classroom as the guest speaker began talking. Collette, was seated on the last row and away from the rest of the company, looked towards me and stated along the lines of, *Do I have to keep being punished?* I had to swallow my devastation and keep a stern face as I ordered him to turn around and pay attention. Part of me

felt guilty, but I had to set my personal emotions aside because of the job I had to do. I could not ignore what he had done.

Collette continued to misbehave. He was busted for having synthetic marijuana again. Around the middle of December, Collette's brig paperwork was signed by our company commander and I was assigned his escort. The 45 minute trip to the Camp Hansen brig was full of an awkward silence. I turned him over to the prison guards, got paperwork signed and didn't see Collette again for over 30 days.

After his return to the company, I was pressured once again to speed up the processes to kick him out of the Marine Corps. I arranged for all the administrative, medical and legal appointments. I got stranded on Camp Foster, Okinawa with Collette when the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster on 11 March 2011 due to the tsunami warning that followed. For context, the island of Okinawa, Japan is South in the East China Sea, nowhere near mainland, Japan. That specific day on Camp Foster, Collette had an appointment with the Legal Services Office that dragged late into the day. By the time I figured out what was going on, every single base on Okinawa was on lockdown. The whole island stood still. Sitting outside at the bus stop of the main PX, I called my supervisor to let him know both Collette and I were OK but stuck on Camp Foster. My next phone call went to the OOD on Camp Kinser, since Collette had been placed on restriction again.

"Sir, this is Sgt. Flores with MP Company, this is to let you know that I have Collette at Camp Foster and we are stuck because of the tsunami warning and the lock down."

"Good to go Sgt., come see me with Collette once they lift the lockdown."

Both Collette and I sat at the bus stop waiting for the lockdown to be lifted. I decided to shuffle through all my Marine contacts on Okinawa on my phone. At that point in my Marine Corps

career, I had an extensive list of contacts (both inside and outside of PMO) that I could have asked for help. One by one, I reached out stating, “Hey bro, where you at...” and following up with, “I need help getting back to Kinser.” One by one they responded with a version of, “Hey man, we still on lock down over here...” 11 March 2011 turned out to be a long day, not only due to the nuclear disaster, but because I had to figure out a way out of Camp Foster during the lock down. One by one, all my PMO contact told me there was nothing they could do. My initial plan of finding someone that could have sneaked Collette and me out of Camp Foster failed. In the middle of going through my contacts, trying to figure out a place to possibly sleep during the lockdown, I got a call from the OOD.

“Hey Marine...the lockdown is over. Head on over with Collette.”

“Thank you Sir. I’ll take a cab.”

After a long and exhaustive process, Collette was finally kicked out of the Marine Corps. However, that was not the last time I heard from him. Somehow, some of his paperwork was lost in the process of transferring him from Okinawa and Camp Pendleton, CA. Out of nowhere I got an e-mail from Collette with a phone number to call.

“Hey Collette it’s Sgt. Flores.”

“Sgt., I can’t check out of the Marine Corps because the Sgt over here at Separations Company says they don’t have my release paper work from the brig.”

“What the fuck!”

Apparently, on some online database the Marine Corps operates showed Collette was still an inmate. After speaking to the Sgt at Separations Company, I was made aware that the process could not move forward until it was proved that Collette was released from the brig. I spoke to our Company First Sergeant about the situation, he was not happy about it. The reason I talked to

him first was that I did not want him blindsided over the situation. I assured the Company First Sergeant the Collette issue was an easy fix because I had made copies of Collette's paperwork before he left. I got the release paper scanned and emailed it to Separations Company in Camp Pendleton. Soon after that, Collette was discharged from the Marine Corps. Even though I played a major role in getting Collette kicked out of the Marine Corps, I can say we are still friends.

CHAPTER VIII

ZOMBIE

It always started the same, me driving the patrol car West on Vandegrift Blvd and conducting a traffic stop at the intersection of Vandegrift Blvd and Santa Margarita Road not far from the main gate.

“Control, 152, 10-38 on a red Chevy Cavalier, California-28’s Six Bravo Zulu Fox Two Seven One, reason for stop, defective brake lights, my 20 is at the intersection of Santa Margarita and Vandegrift.”

“Copy 152, 10-38 at 0155, 28’s return valid to a 2000 red Cavalier”

I set the directional lights on the patrol car and stepped out to approach the vehicle from the driver’s side. The night was always dark with a cold breeze cutting through my uniform sending a chill down my neck, spine and through my limbs. With the headlights still on, I could see the silhouette of a man inside the Cavalier just sitting there. As I got to the driver’s window I was met with a single gunshot to the gut. Without skipping a heartbeat, I drew my 9mm Beretta from my holster and shot from the hip while falling backwards. I never saw the face of the man in the Cavalier. Once on the ground I continued shooting until my arm was fully extended. With my free hand I grabbed and activated the radio microphone hanging from my uniform collar,

“Control 152..., 11-99! Shots fired..., the bastard shot me, don’t worry I got him!”

I woke up in my barracks room shaking and in cold sweats.

Around eight months before I left the Provost Marshal Office (PMO) at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton on 2 July 2009, I began having a recurring dream that scared me enough to think I was losing my mind. One afternoon after waking up I found the light shining through the window on my closed curtains illuminated my room enough to see. I look at my alarm clock and it was almost 2 PM. I began to change into my green on green PT gear, or my green running shorts and skivvy shirt. I couldn't stop thinking about the dream. Still shaking and trying to put on my green skivvy shirt, I asked myself why I didn't wake up right after getting shot? Wouldn't normal people wake up after that? Once I was ready, I drove out to Engineer Hill, the spot where my Marines were meeting for PT. Engineer Hill on main side, was an unimproved road that also doubled as a running trail for Marines that wanted to go on runs into the Camp Pendleton wilderness. As a trail, Engineer Hill slopes gently upwards as rises up in elevation for about a mile and a half to a well-known turn around point. My plan for the day was to have my Marines stretch for a few minutes, run up and down the hill for a total of 3 miles, pass word to be ready in time for our pre-watch brief.

I arrived at a dirt patch at the base of Engineer Hill to find some of my Marines already there. I still did not feel ok. Once everyone arrived and stretched, I gave the signal to take off up the hill. I began running as well. As usual some Marines kept quiet the whole time, others gave their sarcastic objections to my decision to keep running up and down hills. I liked running up and down hills. Sometimes I did it on my own since it allowed me the time and space to think amongst the wild brush of Camp Pendleton. This run up and down Engineer Hill was no different. Still shaken from waking up to the dream it made me forget that sometimes coyotes or mountain lions have been spotted in this area of main side. I had forgotten about the mountain lion paw prints I had seen recently at the Engineer Hill turn around point.

Running up the hill, ignoring who or what was around me I kept asking myself, *Why did my dream keep going? What does all this mean?* Why did I have to feel the pain radiate from the entry wound? I was about a quarter of the way and I looked up for just a second. I heard Jeremy jogging up the hill singing to the lyrics of the Three Days Grace song *Riot*. This reminded me of the song Adam Gontier, the singer of Three Days Grace, sang for Apocalyptica, *I Don't Care*. The lyrics ran across my already troubled mind and the sound of cellos allowed me to shake off the dream. The eerie lyrics played as a soundtrack of to my pale existence at PMO. There was no reason to dwell on the dream. I had to deal and get over the scary gut feeling that the dream was foreshadowing some kind future event. But just like the lyrics said, I had to *leave it all behind* me because I had a job to do. I had to snap out of it and focus my remaining energy on potentially going on patrol and responding to calls.

It didn't matter if I put up a fight. This specific dream continued to haunt me. At first, I blamed it on the anxiety of pulling people over. As a cop, even in the military, you can never know who or what you are getting yourself into when approaching a vehicle during a traffic stop. Contrary to popular belief, there is no such thing as a *routine* traffic stop. You can't read the driver's mind. You never know how a driver or his/her passengers will react. You don't know if a person inside the car has a weapon and holding a grudge against cops. For example, the person you pulled over may be someone you testified against at their court martial. MP's are not popular on military bases just like any civilian police agency. We are referred to as Blue Falcons, which sounds better than it actually is. In the military, *Blue Falcon* is a term reserved for snitches or *that guy* who gets people in trouble for saying or doing things they are not supposed to. The military may brag about instilling discipline in its members, but everyone is still human. The tough lessons learned in boot camp do erode over time as service members further distance

themselves from boot camp and basic training. From my personal experience, everyone in the military, especially Marines, will eventually do something stupid that may get MP's involved. Why? From the policing point of view, no one is above the law, even in the military. I once gave an Marine Major a traffic ticket with two violations in clear view of his Marines. I did not do it to be an asshole, the Major stopped in front of where his Marines were waiting for him. At the time, I had no idea the person I stopped was a Major. I saw a man running a stopped sign and driving and talking on a cell phone. Reflecting on this now, I know I could have handled the situation differently. Back then I could have simply given him a warning or called my supervisor for some advice on how to handle the situation.

Even though a speeding ticket on base will not make it to the violator's civilian driving record, the military still has a similar database system in place to keep track of traffic violations and police involvement. As Marine MP's, the Consolidated Law Enforcement Operations Center, or CLEOC is the system we used to input all data regarding our involvement on base. Incidents that merited a police report, like a simple assault for example, where we had to document everything that took place and who was involved. That kind of report makes its way into CLEOC and eventually up the chain of command of the Marine involved when requested. It was only then, that someone can be charged under the Uniform Code of Military Justice or the UCMJ. As PMO, we were a reporting agency only. PMO did not file charges. However, we were forever marked and blamed for getting Marines demoted, losing pay, or even kicked out of the Marine Corps.

I wasn't the only one having death dreams as I found out late one night when Joe called me. He asked if he could hang out in the barracks because he and his wife were not getting along. Of course, I said yes and decided to wait for him, sitting on my chair outside the door on

the catwalk. The dim lights overhead provided enough light to illuminate the immediate area , but offered a dimmed view of my surroundings. Facing my door was a large Eucalyptus tree that grew taller than the three-story building. Beyond the sandy dirt that surrounded the barracks was a small wooden bridge that went over a dry but grassy ditch. Above this feature was a dirt patch where Joe usually parked among others from PMO. Beyond the dirt patch was pitch darkness, but I could make out the outlines of distant hills and security lights that marked streets and buildings. Sure enough, Joe showed up and parked his black Corvette on the dirt patch. From the catwalk I could still make out Joes six foot two figure make his way to the barracks with a six pack of beer in hand.

For the first few minutes, Joe and I had a few drinks, hung out and talked. I didn't say anything to him about my dreams until after we played some video games and had much more to drink. All I remember him saying was, *you not the only one...* and that's when the conversation shifted to the level of stress we dealt with almost on a daily basis. After that conversation, I came to the conclusion it was a combination of stress and lack of sleep. My stress was rooted in working 13 to 16 hour shifts on four hours of sleep, depending on the work load.

I will never forget one day working during the Christmas leave block. In the military it's a common with units that are very busy to designate specific time blocks (two weeks for example) for service members to spend the holidays at home. I volunteered not going home. I had arrived early before my shift to help build the watch roster. I was walking towards our platoon office, the watch commander leaving the watch was coming out of his. The Staff Sergeant, about six feet tall and probably in his mid to late thirties, had his eyes sunken into his skull marked with a 2-inch wide pitch-black line across his face. He must have been exhausted.

He didn't even acknowledge my presence when I gave him the proper greeting of the day, "Good Afternoon, Staff Sergeant...", as I walked by him.

I acknowledge the job of watch commander at PMO is much more stressful than the average patrolman on base. I can imagine the weight of responsibility being the one Marine that answers directly to the Provost Marshal in regards to any incident taking place on base must keep him up at night. Additionally, the higher the position we held on the watch the more responsibility we had to carry building our police reports. The quality of those reports and supporting paperwork was the watch commander's main concern 99% of the time. At the time, I played a big part in building those reports when MP's responded to calls or uncovered anything significant. Like a Marine driving with an expired driver's license would have escalated the significance of a traffic stop and initiate a report because the vehicle could be towed. Back then, if any MP (FAP's included) initiated a report for whatever reason, you could not leave PMO until the work was done, and your report was cleared by your immediate supervisor. However, if the watch commander did not approve of the report or found any discrepancy, the report was kicked back to get fixed. Depending who was involved and the size of the discrepancy, you could stay up to around 9 AM, like I did one time.

That specific incident was a result of picking up the slack for someone else that had to leave early. However, since I was that person's immediate supervisor, it fell on to me to finish the work. Furthermore, I had to wait until I was cleared to leave. Joe asked to stay in my barracks room that morning since he didn't feel like driving all the way home. I remember standing outside my room on the catwalk and seeing Joe doing doughnuts on the dirt patch above the wooden bridge.

The other part of the stress that was layered on top of working long hours came from getting yelled at all the time. Sometimes, it seemed we were getting yelled at for no reason. The yelling became redundant to the point it was ineffective. It was so common that I personally became numb to it. For example, I remember working dispatch one day and then being yelled at the next day by the watch commander over *who* actually *authorizes* dispatching MP's to calls. I believe this ass chewing got its roots over the vague interpretation of a petty call. It's hard to say with certainty, like I mentioned earlier, I became numb to having another grown man yelling at my face. In this specific case, I remember standing at parade rest outside our headquarters on a beautiful Southern California day. My watch commander standing in front of me with his short skinny frame, pointing and yelling at me up and towards my face, with his mouth fully open. I can still see the sun light reflecting off his sweaty brow, I couldn't do anything else, but take the ass chewing standing facing forward with my feet shoulder width apart and hands behind my back at the waist.

Then there were the dependents, or family members of active duty personnel. Many of them believed they were entitled to the same military courtesy as their spouse. The biggest culprits were the wives of high ranking active duty personnel. One time, I pulled over the wife of a Navy officer for completely ignoring a stop sign. To top it off, she didn't stop until a few yards before leaving the main gate. If it wasn't for the guards paying attention and moving towards the exit lanes, she probably would have fled. She began to yell at me before I even arrived to the driver's side window. She kept repeating, "Don't you know who my husband is?" and "Are you really giving me a ticket?" Of course, I gave her the ticket and advised my watch commander of the encounter. Later in the day, she brought her husband into our headquarters, demanding to speak to my watch commander over the incident.

One of the 10 General Orders of Marines is, *To salute all officer and all colors and standards not cased*. Meaning, we saluted the flag and/or any officer we came in contact with. In context of being PMO and as a result of manning the gates of entry to the base, we came in contact with a lot of officers in their cars. Back then military officers were easy to identify because they were given a blue sticker to place on their vehicle. Military officers would receive this blue sticker when they registered their cars on base, similar to any state DMV. They were given a base vehicle registration decal and a blue sticker that had to be placed together on a visible spot on the windshield. Outside of morning rush hour, it was an easy task to wave a car through with a blue sticker on base and render a proper military salute. Well for a while it became a huge deal when military wives began calling in complaints that the guards were not saluting them at the gate during the morning rush hour. The guards during rush hour just waved cars through that had up-to-date base registration decals, completely disregarding the blue stickers. The guards did this, not to disrespect anyone on purpose, but to keep morning rush hour traffic flowing as fast as possible. The situation escalated one day when a military wife stopped all the entry traffic of one lane demanding a salute from the guard. The guard, who I assume was very frustrated at this point, sarcastically responded with giving a proper military salute stating, "Good morning blue sticker!" The wife didn't appreciate that gesture at all and of course everyone heard about it later.

Bad dreams were not the only thing to come around and remind me of how messed up my mental and emotional situation was. Sometimes depending on what I was doing, like driving around in my Mustang to clear my head, odd day dreams ran across my mind. On one of these drives, I was driving on Vandegrift Blvd going nowhere in particular. Aboard Camp Pendleton, Vandegrift is one of two major arteries on base. Basilone Road goes North and South connecting

all camps North of main side. In contrast, Vandegrift encircles all the Southern camps and main side forming a backwards “C” intersecting with Basilone at the Camp Pendleton air station in the 22 Area. Driving East and away from my barracks, I decided not to take the shortcut down Rattle Snake Canyon Road after passing the T-intersection of 16th Street and Vandegrift. Instead, I decided to follow the curvy “C” end of Vandegrift since I was in no rush of getting anywhere.

I continue East, see a giant motor pool of vehicles to my left and follow the uphill curves of Vandegrift to the apex of the “C” until I end up heading West and downhill. To my left and right are hillsides, but I know that on the other side of the hill to my right is Lake O’Niell. Eventually, I see the Marine Corps Mechanized Museum to my right and I stop at the Y-intersection of Rattle Snake Canyon Road and Vandegrift Blvd again. Facing Westbound, I see cars driving towards me but turned left onto Vandegrift in my direction of travel. In front and facing me, I see a giant red semi-truck with a trailer. I drift away as my thoughts take me to look to my left again waiting for the last car to pass in front me. I shift my car into first gear and quickly get my foot off the clutch. In a heartbeat my car engages into a peal out but quickly pulls forward at full speed once I shift into 2nd gear. I pull my car into the direction of the red semi, causing a head-on collision.

My mind pans outward and I can see the car and truck engulfed in flames. I can see the jagged metal. I can see the liquids spill on the ground and ignite. In that moment, I see my own self-inflicted demise. Entranced in the moment, the only thing that snaps me out of my thoughts is the driver behind me honking the horn.

Driving forward as I saw the truck pass by me still intact, I couldn’t help but think to myself, *What the fuck is wrong with me?* I had sunk myself into a dark hole where I was emotionally dead. It affected my personal relationships with people outside the military. I

stopped talking to some people I cared about. Some, I still don't. I called my family at least once every two weeks or so just to say I was doing fine. I wasn't fine. I began to take risks, like drinking more than usual and driving when I wasn't supposed to. Like the one time I drove a friend's Mustang to an acquaintance's apartment literally down the street from a bar on the other side of the 78 freeway in San Marcos, CA. I felt confident enough in my drunken-coherence, that I volunteered to drive to the apartment. I was the least drunk person that night. Along the way, I dangerously turned into a Carl's Jr drive thru and ordered *Jumbo Jacks*. I drove everyone home, making it to the apartment complex safely, but not after doing a peel out at some random intersection I can't remember. However, I did not receive the Jumbo Jack I ordered.

I turned myself into a functioning alcoholic. I partied with a wide variety of people. I would put on a facade that I was fine but, deep inside I didn't know how to deal with the stress. As a result, I was slowly turning myself into a really dark person that eventually lacked emotion and empathy. I did not care, even though it was my job to care for everyone on base. I was emotionally dead. I had to restrain the kind of laughter and twisted joy that came from looking on other people's misery. Like a black hole, I was hungry for the experiences to let me know I was still alive.

Once, I responded to a suicide attempt in which a Marine had mixed anti-depressants with an apple-flavored-peach-schnapps-like alcohol mixer. Upon arrival I was met with a paramedic only who let me know the Marine was already being transported to the hospital. I secured the scene (the barracks room) and told the paramedic to leave. Walking out, the paramedic handed me the suicide note and pointed to the anti-depressant pills he believed the Marine took. I laughed reading the suicide note where he apologized to his daughter for not making it work with her mother and taking his own life. Everyone would be better if he was

gone, he said. Still on scene, doing paper work and preparing to make the required unit notifications, one of the Marine's unit representatives (unit rep.) arrived asking what was going on. I advised the unit rep. of what the Marine did and showed him the suicide note.

Instantly, he began on a long and loud tirade berating the Marine for trying to take his own life. More specifically, he repeatedly began calling the Marine a bitch because he believed it was all an act. According to unit rep. they were leaving in a few weeks and the Marine had already expressed he did not want to go. He specifically asked rhetorically along the lines of, "Seriously, if you are trying to kill yourself, you drink a whole bottle of Jack Daniels and some other kind of pills...Not some peach schnapps like a bitch!" I laughed and agreed.

My experiences at PMO still affect me to this day now about 10 years later. I now believe that because of the policework and training I experienced, I developed a sense of hypervigilance, or a form of paranoia. I'm always trying to be aware of my surroundings and/or looking over my shoulder. This state of paranoia was reinforced when I was "spotted" and called out for being PMO by someone I didn't recognize while on deployment in Afghanistan. I was walking back to our company office alongside one of my buddies in Camp Leatherneck when out of nowhere someone I did not recognize began to yell, "Hey! You PMO!" repeatedly. I denied I was PMO repeatedly pointing out I was deployed at the time and did not carry a police badge. The second time I was "spotted" wasn't as scary as the first. It was at a gym on Camp Kinser in Okinawa, Japan. There was a guy that would not stop staring at me and mean-mugging me while I was working out. At the time, I assumed it must have been something I was involved with during my time at PMO in California.

More recently, I noticed that I still keep looking in my rear-view mirrors while driving. This is an old habit of mine from being on patrol while at PMO to see if I am being followed.

The simplest way to explain how to tell if you are being followed is to pay attention to the vehicles behind you as you drive. Make mental notes of the make, model, and color of car or truck. More importantly, as you check your mirrors switching lanes, see if the same vehicle keeps a specific pace behind you. This habit paid off one time in 2012, driving my Mustang home around 9:30 PM from my first job as a civilian at Pep-Boys in Weslaco, TX.

While on Expressway 83 driving towards Progreso, I noticed a late-90's red F150 switched lanes suddenly and followed me on the off ramp. On Frontage Road I switched lanes again as if I was going towards Mercedes. The red truck kept doing the same thing I was. At the last moment before reaching the intersection of Frontage and FM 1015, I switch lanes again to turn South towards Progreso. The red truck did the exact same thing I was doing again. Waiting at the intersection, looking both ways to make a right turn, my paranoia began to kick in. I talked to myself saying out loud, *Who the fuck is this guy? What the fuck does he want? The ONE TIME I don't have a weapon on me, this fucker starts following me.* I turned South on 1015 and decided to take the red truck on a tour of Progreso and see how long it took for the idiot to figure out that I knew what he was doing.

The drive South on 1015 is straight and gets dark once you leave the Weslaco city limits. I passed two intersections but decided not to make any significant lane changes. I rationalized that if this guy was trying to follow me home, I wanted to keep him in the dark as much as possible. I reached the S-curve on 1015, next to the golf course, that leads to the canal and a Y-intersection. Left takes you straight to Mexico, right takes you into the city of Progreso, I stayed on the right lane. The red truck did the same and followed me past all the schools on 1015. We reached the intersection of 1015 and Malone Drive, I turned right heading West on Malone and the red truck did the same. A block down I quickly turned left onto Hidalgo Street which splits

the old Progreso Elementary school that I attended in the early 1990's. The red truck kept doing the same. We passed Palm Street, where Progreso PD was located at the intersection of Palm and 1015. I didn't turn there, driving past the PD because, if anything was to go down, I wanted it to be on my terms. I didn't trust Progreso PD then, and I still don't. Progreso PD has a horrible record of cycling through police officers. Instead I turned East on Johnny Vela Street, meeting back at the 1015 again with my turn signal pointing North. I noticed the red truck set his turn signal heading South and we parted ways. I took the long way back home making sure I didn't see that red Ford again.

CHAPTER IX

THE DRUM BEAT

I must have been working the dayshift for some time one a Tuesday or Wednesday early in 2009 when I began to feel an annoying pain in the center of my forehead. At the first half of my shift, I thought the headache was a symptom of a poor diet or dehydration. I didn't think much of it at first since I was on the main side patrol zone of Camp Pendleton. Since I had easy access to the PX and a variety of restaurants, I wasn't too worried about it. As the day progressed, I ate a decent meal at one of the fast food restaurants and made sure I was drinking more water than my usual Rockstar or Monster energy drink. By midafternoon the pain began to grow into a sharp and shifting pain that traveled to the right side of my skull. There it began to pound slowly like the beat of a bass drum.

When I realized that I wasn't going to be a productive member on the watch, I drove to dispatch, which we called the batcave, to talk with the desk sergeant. Once inside the cold, dark and sealed room, I realized it was more soothing than driving out to some secluded spot to hide for the rest of the day, which I could have done. I knew where all the good hiding spots were. However, hiding in my patrol car brought the risk of getting caught sleeping on duty and at the time, I thought it was a much better idea to crawl into one of the dark corners of the batcave. Inside the batcave, much like the comic book version, access is restricted and I would have gotten an advance warning of any VIP's walking in. The room is sealed inside a building that is guarded by a camera at the front door.

Once inside the dispatch, I walked and stayed behind the octagon shaped cubicle and slouched over the partition.

“Sargeant, my head is killing me, please don’t send me on any calls. I’m going to hide in here until changeover.”

“What’s going on, Flo?”

“I don’t know, it started here on my forehead but now the right side of my head is fucking pounding. I’m letting you know because I’m feeling fucking useless.”

“I got you...”

“Alright, thanks Sgt.”

Once I heard those words I slouched against the wall and onto the floor in the hallway leading to the door. I felt secure hiding in the batcave. At the moment, the last thing I needed was to deal with the multiple stressors of the job. For example, making the situation worse by pulling someone over for a minor traffic violation and dealing with a civilian with a false sense of entitlement because of *whoever* their spouse was.

Up to that point I had never felt such a painful headache like that. The last time I felt such pain was my own fault for drinking multiple energy drinks back to back. This time the pain felt different. A pain that started off annoying, like a mosquito bite, but then got infected and spread. An infection that mutated into a sadistic Jigsaw-like villain that took pleasure in slowly destroying my consciousness. Each passing hour of the day felt like torture getting worse.

I fell asleep in that dark hallway but was startled awake when I heard the desk Sergeant calling out for me. *Hey Flo!* I was still in dispatch, and lost track of time. I stood up slowly thinking I was getting relieved and cleared to drop gear.

“Hey Flo, I know you feel like shit but I need you to go to this one call.”

I have no memory of what happened at the school I responded to. I still can't remember why I was sent out there. I don't even remember what I did wrong. What I can remember is standing outside in the PMO parking lot speaking to my squad leader. All I heard from my usually soft spoken squad leader Rick was *DUDE you FUCKED UP...* Nothing else registered. Still standing there in the parking lot I remember feeling strong body and joint pain. The only words I remember putting together were, *I told – I was sick – I've had this headache all day.* Somehow, we came to an agreement that I should go see medical. At this hour, my only option was the emergency room (ER) at the Naval Hospital on base. Rick said to give him my gear belt with issued pistol, rounds, radio, OC spray and began walking to his car. With every step, I felt my joints smashing against each other. A few feet away from the car, my knees suddenly gave out. I collapsed, and if Rick had not been walking beside me, holding onto me, I would have landed head first in the parking lot.

Rick drove and tried to make conversation. In part, I think he was trying to distract me from continuously berating myself over a mistake I don't remember doing. It must have been a horrible drive because Rick told me the reason he moved to the watch from the Criminal Investigations Division or CID. In short, he told me he got in trouble for leaving his service pistol in a baby carrier while working on a case. Back then, I thought he did it just to make me feel better over my mistake. Losing track of your issued weapon in the Marine Corps is a big deal. The issue is serious enough, a Marine unit will place everyone on lockdown until the weapon is found. More recently, I found out, Rick was lying to me, which is ok. Before this incident in 2009, Rick and I bonded over the fact that we had been in boot at the same time. We were probably on the same plane flying into San Diego since Rick was born and raised in Texas.

Plus, at the time we also shared a mutual hatred for a certain individual, last name of Mejia, from San Benito, Texas.

There were a lot of people in the ER so I had to wait in line to check in at the front desk. There was a buzz at the checking-in area about something called the swine flu. At the time, I thought all the dependents ahead of me in line were freaking out over nothing. I just wanted to know what was wrong with me and get meds to make it go away. That way I would have the energy to deal with the consequences of my earlier mistake. I checked-in with the nurse and went to the waiting area, Rick was still there and so was his girlfriend. I told them I would be fine and they didn't have to wait for me. Rick refused to leave.

I fell asleep and was jolted awake by Rick giving me an elbow. A nurse was calling my name. In a small examination room I got my vitals checked by another nurse and told her about my long day full of symptoms. She asked if I had gotten the flu shot, which I did, and what kind of work I did. Our conversation led to her suggestion that since I worked in a highly stressful environment that was compounded by my drinking. In essence, I had weakened my own immune system. I got a wicked case of the flu that hit me and left me like road kill. The nurse gave me a prescription, a four-day light duty sheet (four days off work) and sent me home with strict orders to stay in my barracks room. Walking back to the waiting area I was surprised to see Rick was still there. I told him I got the flu and I didn't want to get him or his girlfriend sick. He didn't care and drove me home. Once inside my room, I heated some canned soup, took my meds and went straight to sleep.

I woke up, not knowing what time it was, though I could see sunlight through the curtains. I heated up another can of soup, took my meds and went back to sleep. This cycle repeated itself for three days until on the fourth day I woke up starving. My body felt like it was

recovering from a hangover, but I did feel better. I figured out my platoon was off work, so I called Rick to let him know I was still alive and apologized again for fucking up really bad. He laughed and said everything was taken care of. I let him know I appreciated him risking his life taking me to the hospital and hung up. I was starving and out of soup. I called in a favor from Joe and about 30 minutes later he arrived with a giant Subway sandwich. I ate it, took more meds and went back to sleep.

A day or two later, I was back on the watch. I was expecting to get yelled at, but it didn't happen. Why? I still have no clue. I only remember going back to work after my four days off and having to explain that I felt better. But I wasn't the only Marine that got sick. Everyone in my platoon got sick at one point and just sucked it up and kept working. As Marines, we dealt with it in the only way that we knew how, by jokingly saying, *oh so you got the death plague now...* once someone starting coughing and spiting yellow and green phlegm. I was just the unlucky one that ended up in the ER.

A common Marine phrase used in Marine Corps propaganda is *Pain is Weakness Leaving the Body*. It was used heavily when I first enlisted and throughout my time on active duty. It was on posters, t-shirts, and other forms advertisements. However, *Pain is Weakness Leaving the Body*, became synonymous with another phrase when compressed states, *Take Motrin, drink plenty of water, and change your socks*. The main difference between the two is that, *Take Motrin...* was taken from our Corpsmen, or Navy medics. The Marine Corps doesn't have any medics, they are supplied by the Navy instead.

The *Take Motrin* is a reference to the common answer a sick or injured Marine would receive after seeing the Corpsmen for a variety of complaints. To be clear, this is not the absolute answer a seriously sick or injured Marine would receive every time they see Navy medical

personnel. From my personal experience, the *Take Motrin* statement can trace some of its roots from the common practice of Marines receiving it during and after long hikes. Taking a ten mile hike as an example, one or two Corpsman will walk up and down the column of Marines during a break in the hike asking if they are OK. It was not uncommon for a Corpsman to say, *Hey! Change your socks...* after seeing Marines taking their boots off. Additionally, if a Marine complained of leg pain, the Corpsman would reply with, *Here, take some Motrin and drink plenty of water.*

During one hike particular at my first duty station, the MWTC base commander ordered all personnel on base to hike from the main base camp to the Levitt training area. I can't recall the total distance the company traveled, but we had to travel up a mountain slope for about a mile. After the company reached the base commander's desired elevation we had a long hike through the woods ahead of us to reach the Levitt training area, where Marines do mountain-climbing-kind of training. At elevation, the commander ordered a long break in the hike and the Corpsman went up and down the row of Marines asking if we were OK.

"How you feeling Marine?"

"I'm OK Doc"

"Any pain? You need some Motrin? How about some Sodium tablets?"

"Sodium tablets?"

"For the cramps."

"Oh. No I'm OK Doc."

"Don't forget to change your socks."

I had never heard of Sodium tablets before and was amused watching the Hispanic and middle aged Corpsman walking up and down the column of Marines on the hike. I should point

out that all Navy Corpsman assigned to Marine units have their full respect. During training events they do and experience everything Marines do. Taking this hike as an example, that middle aged Corpsman hiked alongside us carrying a heavy medical bag.

Taking into consideration both phrases, *Pain is Weakness Leaving the Body* and *Take Motrin, drink plenty of water, and change your socks*, one from the Marine Corps and the other from medical personnel. The latter taken by Marines and used to reinforce the suck-it-up-kind of culture I lived in. I eventually used it myself. However, it wasn't only me, but every other Marines I served with since 2003. *Take Motrin* later was used so much to the point it became a joke. Why complain of the pain or sickness if we are only being offered Motrin, water and told to change our socks? Personally, both phrases came to mind on every run, hike, training exercise, and even during the course of my duties. *Pain is Weakness* and *Take Motrin*, kept reminding me to push forward through the pain.

CHAPTER X

MISSING TIME

I will never forget the pale, blank and scared look on his face when he told me he drove from the main gate and had zero memory of how he got to the parking lot. He lost fifteen minutes of his life and couldn't figure out why. I can only remember telling him it must have been because of the lack of sleep. I had identical experiences. My body would shift into auto pilot driving the patrol car after having eight hours of sleep spread across two days. The other side of me wonders if other events of that Marine's life could have contributed to the *auto pilot* symptom. Missing time is the portions of my mind that I just can't recall. I have a great memory, and it bugs me to no end that some moments I just can't remember. These moments are like deleted bits of memory on a computer that has crashed, and fried your hard drive. All I have to offer is a blank look on my face, like this particular Marine did when he approached me at our headquarters saying he couldn't remember how he got there.

I am conflicted about this *missing time* reflecting on my past. How can I remember certain events in the middle of being black-out drunk? My mind can bring back short flashes of memory bits of past drunken escapades. However, I can't remember the mistakes I made responding to a call at a school with the flu. I don't have a definitive answer. I'm not a medical or mental expert, but I believe my body grew a tolerance to all the yelling and trauma. A similar kind of tolerance to the huge amount of alcohol I consumed. Instead of my mind helping me process the trauma, like alcohol, through all the sleep deprivation it wiped bits of it away.

CHAPTER XI

THE *HOLY-WOOD CRAWL* – IN THE PLAYGROUND OF BROKEN ROCK STARS

Working for PMO, the Provost Marshall's Office, it was hard for all of us to keep track of the days. Why? For context, here is a quick example of our working schedule:

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					Work	Work
Work	Off	Off	Off	Work	Work	Off
Off	Work	Work	Work	Off	Off	Off

Looking at it from the outside, when I first showed up at PMO, that kind of working schedule did not sound bad all. The pitch I received was getting a 72 (a three-day pass or three-day weekend) every two weeks. Then I started working and it soon became clear how shitty the working hours actually were. I started working on the night shift under the impression it was the best hours to work. After working the first three days, I slept for over 24 hours on my first day off. I woke up starving and confused not knowing what time or day it was. I checked my phone and computer three times, not believing what I was seeing.

To illustrate, as Military Police (MP), our official working hours were from around 4:30 AM or PM, depending on whether we worked the day shift or night shift. However, those time slots are misleading because it doesn't count all of our other responsibilities as Marines.

Let's take a typical working day on the night shift, which as time passed became my personal favorite shift to work as an MP. I usually woke up around 2 PM to take off and lead my Marines into an hour session of PT that started at 2:30. After PT was over, I would allow my Marines an hour to shit, shower and shave, change over into our cammies, or the camouflage uniform, maybe get some food, check out our issued pistols, radios and OC spray from the armory, and show up for our pre-briefing before shift. The brief would last around 15 to 30 minutes, which was mainly used to pass important information to the platoon. Funny thing is, around 75% of this short time slot was used to tell the MP's of all the dumb stunts Marines got caught doing on post, and tell us not to follow their bad example. The other 25% of the brief, it was used as intended. The platoon Sgt. passed important BOLO's, or *Be on The Look Out*, of suspects or suspicious individuals/vehicles, VIP's coming on base, the time slots for our "random" mandatory ID checks/random vehicle inspections at the gates, or inform us that shit had hit the fan on base and we needed to hurry up and post. After the word was passed to the platoon, this gave the Marines 30 minutes to get into formation and do a quick uniform/gear inspection for serviceability. Every working day, I would usually do the platoon inspection and release the Marines around 4:30 PM to ensure the day shift would be released on time. By that time, most Marines, would have already been awake and active for over three or four hours before our 12-hour shift.

Depending on the work load, if there were no police reports to complete, the Marines started getting relieved by around 4:45AM to 5AM. If they had reports and they were not completed within shift time, it didn't matter if your shift was over. Any Marine with reports had to stay at PMO until it was completed and approved by the appropriate supervisor.

At the time, everyone helped each other before shift, giving rides, passing word to *someone* vouching for a Marine running late before they checked out gear. On the flip side, after dropping gear, performing any required cleaning duties and turning in paperwork, everyone disappeared as soon as they were dismissed. Unless any plans were made secretly via text message, Marines popped smoke and were not seen until the next working day. It was an odd and warped working/comradery dynamic at Camp Pendleton PMO. In other words, Marines didn't hang around our PMO headquarters unless they had to.

To be clear, I'm only giving the perspective from one of the four working Military Police platoons. It must be pointed out that all the platoons shared the same warped comradery dynamics in some way, shape, or form. This was a symptom of the general low morale within the platoons that we all shared. We all felt the pressure from being deep inside a dark hole that we dug ourselves into working at PMO. It was no secret, every swinging dick up the chain of command knew about it. At least I thought they did at the time. The common phrase used by Marines to describe it all, was *the method to madness*. This was compounded by the words our own watch commander said one time, *the beatings will continue until morale improves*.

What was *the method to the madness* that resulted with *the beatings will continue until morale improves*? An isolation grew out of working PMO that was sometimes suffocating. The schedule I was working twisted my sense of reality in the sense I began to see the world differently. My sense of what the *Friday* before a long weekend came on a Wednesday. I lost track of current events, and other thing of significance. For example, I had no idea of what the Tea Party Movement was until I saw one of their demonstrations off base while getting a haircut. I became a slave to the institution I was working for. It felt like I was only alive to serve PMO. Even though we worked long hours and did our best doing the difficult job, no one got any

recognition for it. The only time anyone got any recognition, it was for doing the wrong thing. Like the one time during the night shift, a Marine working the gates decided to steal money from a wallet he found. As a result, the entire platoon had to go through hell getting yelled at in the morning after the shift. At the time, the only outlet Marines had to deal with the stress was to attempt living like rock stars.

I was returning to the barracks the Friday after field day inspection, getting myself a plate of Super Nachos from *'Bertos*. Walking up onto the second-floor catwalk to find Marines drinking outside of Victor's room again.

"Hey Flo! You going to help us with this cooler again", Victor said standing in the doorway of his barracks room.

"Damn! Sure. I guess man, let me finish my food first and I'll come back."

"There is still a ton of shit in here...", Victor said pointing to the giant cooler.

"No shit... I didn't know there was still that much."

I walked to my room second guessing myself if I should join these guys drinking again. The same people were making noise and playing beer pong on the secretary, same music was playing, but this time less people were participating. Whether it was the wives that didn't allow their Marine husband join in the party, or they flat out didn't want to hang out at the barracks again, I don't know.

I returned not long after to find James and Chris playing beer pong against each other. If there was anyone that could outdrink me back then, it would have been either James or Chris. I knew I could hold my own against these guys, but I still had a hard time stomaching beer ever since I gave myself a concussion in November of 2004. Outside of the shenanigans of James and Chris playing beer pong, the mood in the barracks was different this time. Maybe it was the

crazy thought of a small group of guys drinking, trying to make a dent on the monster that was the booze filled cooler. As the night went on, random people walking by the catwalk got beer and left. I mostly hung out sitting on the giant cooler. James and Chris left early in the AM, off to some other random adventure, but were soon replaced by Buck and Nasty.

“We come bearing gifts!” Nasty stated walking in holding his guitar and motioning towards Bronco carrying two six packs of glass bottles of Bud light. I had never seen or met these two guys before. They both dressed in a similar manner, except for Bronco never took off his cap and Nasty carrying a guitar. Nasty instantly stood out most because he never shut up. I soon learned from Victor that they were two Marines he deployed with to Iraq when he was in 3rd Amphibious Assault Battalion in 2006. The mood inside the barracks room turned calm once Buck and Nasty showed up, in sharp contrast to what it was before. The music kept playing but it switched from the hard rock/hip-hop of before to a more mellow 311/Red Hot Chili Peppers Southern California sound.

I didn't mind hanging out with these guys, listening to music and drinking. We began talking to each other, sharing some of our own “war stories”. Marines always seem to size each other up when they first meet. Seriously, if we're in full uniform we can't help it and compare each other's ribbon stacks or lack thereof. It must be part of the unofficial rule of knowing your buddy's life story if you spend any significant amount of time together. You size each other up to figure out who is the most experienced in the room. At the time, I had not deployed anywhere special outside of Okinawa, Japan. Oki, as Marines call it, really didn't count as a *real* deployment. The most dangerous thing you faced out there was getting a heat injury. Back in the mid-2000's with Iraq burning up in flames and Afghanistan at the beginning stages to become the forgotten war, those were *real* deployments in the eyes of Marines. Oki, on the other hand,

was seen as a normal duty station. Yes, Marines get sent there for several months and call it a “deployment”. Yes, Marines will get the Navy Overseas Deployment Ribbon after spending more than six months on the island, but it was never regarded it as a true deployment. Why? Because, you can go off base in civilian attire and sun bathe at the beach. You can’t do that in Iraq.

The mood changed when Nasty started playing his guitar. He began playing a song he wrote one deployment, *The Chariots of Death*. I don’t remember the words but I will never forget how it changed the mood in the room. As Nasty closed his eyes and sang the ballad that honored their unit, the tumultuous deployment in Iraq and the brothers that lost their lives. I got chills as I witnessed both Victor and Bronco’s faces turned red and tears began to fall down their faces. Bronco pulled down his cap low. Nasty raised his voice and it echoed inside the room. The song ended and we all sat in silence. Victor, Bronco, and Nasty bowed their heads. I had never seen a gram of raw emotion emitted from Victor before.

An awkward silence permeated through the room that must have led Bronco to suggest, *Let’s go to Hollywood and have Nasty sing at the bars...*

Of course, I said yes when I was asked and off we went in Bronco’s extended cab Silverado at around 3AM with the giant cooler in tow. Victor and I placed the cooler in the truck bed and secured it with bungee cords by the rear window that conveniently had a sliding glass door. Bronco topped off his truck at the on base gas station. Even though gas on base was significantly cheaper than off base, he still paid over \$200 to fill up.

Speeding up the I-5 (the 5), leaving Northern San Diego County, someone got the bright idea to switch gears and head to Las Vegas instead. However, we got distracted in the excitement of Bronco racing a V12 Mercedes Benz and later a crotch rocket. We missed the exit somewhere

on the 5. Bronco was showing off and talking about how fast the Corvette motor installed in his truck was.

We continued drinking the entire ride towards Hollywood. Victor kept handing out beers to everyone inside the truck as soon as we left the base. Conveniently, he reached for them through the sliding rear glass window. Well, everyone got beer except Bronco and he didn't mind. By this point I was so buzzed, I didn't realize I was drinking that much. As soon as we finished one, we tossed the can out the window.

We arrived and drove onto Hollywood Blvd to a hotel room off a side street off the strip. Victor and Bronco called some old girlfriends over. In-between waiting for the girls to show up, Victor and I got the cooler off the truck and continued drinking. The next thing I remember is waking up on the floor by the foot of the bed with one of my boots as a pillow. Seriously, Marines can sleep anywhere. We are definitely the ultimate bums. Bronco and Victor were sharing the bed with two girls and Nasty kept singing on his guitar. Still semi-buzzed, I had no idea how I ended up on the floor. I rolled on my side and went back to sleep.

I was startled back awake around 3PM. Bronco was taking a dump with the door open and Nasty was brushing his teeth. They were laughing over something I didn't understand so I sat up from the floor to find Victor still passed out on the bed. The girls were gone.

Back in the Silverado, how Bronco managed to drive this beast of an extended cab in Hollywood traffic? I still have no clue, but he did enjoy revving the engine in the middle of Hollywood and doing short peel outs. The last time I was on Hollywood Blvd was in late 2005 for Dick Clark's, *New Year's Rocking Eve* and I walked the *Walk of Fame* at night. This time around, I got to experience it the way it should be. The sun was out, people were everywhere and I was still drunk. The sidewalks were packed with tourists and a variety of street

performers/characters that would take pictures with you for tips. We were on our way to Saddle Ranch, a western themed bar on Sunset Blvd in West Hollywood. I had never heard of this place, but Nasty brought his guitar as he promised he would.

I was impressed the Saddle Ranch could exist in the middle of the glamour of Hollywood. It looked out of place with its wood construction, mechanical bull and western theme inside and out. In my hunger and still-drunk-near-hangover-state of mind, all I cared about was getting some food and another drink. We brought the cooler with us in the back of the truck, but didn't dare take a beer out through the sliding door in daylight. I followed the guys through the restaurant and we got seated in the outdoor section that semi-circled the place. I ordered a Double Jack and Coke, the "Original Burger" from the menu and was surprised that they had cotton candy as a dessert in the menu.

"Victor, what's the deal with the cotton candy?"

"Oh yea man that's a thing here and trust me... this place is quiet now, but it's fun as hell to hang out here at night..."

"Hey guys I'm gonna start playing some songs", Nasty interrupted.

Nasty set a chair aside and sat on top of the table in front of us and began to playing his guitar. After a few songs, the other patrons actually began to clap and made song requests. Everything was going good until one of the servers with the manager showed up and asked us to leave. None of us had finished our drinks, gotten any of our food, and the manager's explanation was their local *regular* musician had complained. Victor, Bronco and I looked around asking where this musician was. Apparently, this mysterious musician was not happy about getting zero attention from the three other occupied tables in the entire restaurant. Nasty suggested he would be more than willing to have a joint-jam session and the regular can keep the tips. The manager argued

that his regular musician had been booked ahead of time and was not happy. We paid for our drinks and left the restaurant hungry so we located our nearest In & Out burger and finally ate some food.

Back on the truck, we decided to drive around Hollywood Blvd again. Inside the truck, the conversation between us revolved around whether we should go and try to get inside the Playboy mansion or try and find the Hollywood sign. Nasty said something along the lines of, *Yea, there is a speaker on a rock we can talk to and we should just give them some random white girls name.* I was thinking of using Britney. Of course, we didn't find the Playboy mansion, but we did get lost somewhere in the hills near Hollywood looking for the Hollywood sign. This took place in early 2008, I had just gotten my hands on the first-generation iPhone and I didn't take advantage of the limited utility it carried. Plus, the Hollywood sign was harder to find than we first thought it would be. We ended up driving up, down the hills and through several residential areas going nowhere in particular. We laughed at all the sports cars we saw and how out of place we looked driving around in a Silverado. Eventually we came upon a vista area and Bronco decided to stop, and check out the panoramic view of Los Angeles. I took advantage of the situation and decided to get into the cooler and in the mix of all the beer and liquor bottles I found a Monster. I needed it. The sun was coming down and we decided to head back down to Hollywood Blvd and get some food.

The following day, somehow, we ended up walking the Walk of Fame, it was a Sunday and the strip was still packed with tourists. We started on the Southern side of the sidewalk (where our hotel was located) and headed west. We paused here and there, got some food, and continued walking. Heading nowhere with nothing to do but kill time. We reached the edge of the Southern edge of the Walk of Fame crossed onto the other side. There was a large crowd of

people, I think it was a protest of some kind. We came upon a couple that were street vendors cooking hotdogs on a hot plate selling them for \$2 and Victor and I got some. In our still semi-drunken state, they were some of the most delicious hot dogs I ever had. We must have walked a block or two ahead of where the street vendors were, somewhere near the Chinese Theater when we heard a commotion behind us. We looked back to see the hot dog vendor running with his cart. The lady that was with him was screaming for everyone to make a hole in the crowd so they could get through.

“Dude why are they running?”

“Bro, they need a license to sell food on the street.”

“Oh shit...”

“Yea man hope y’all don’t get sick eating those hot dogs”, Nasty interrupted.

No sooner did the lady make a hole in the crowd, a pair of cops were close on their tail.

We continued along the Walk of Fame and soon forgot about the hot dogs and street vendors. Eventually we made it back to the Southern side of Hollywood Blvd to *Ripley’s Believe it or Not!* museum on the corner of Hollywood Blvd and Highland Ave. We paid the entrance fee and took the tour. After giggling like drunken idiots for over an hour at the various “artifacts” inside like, “Vampire Hunting” kits and two headed baby skeletons; we continued down the Walk of Fame. Less than a block down the strip, we found a Hooters where we decided to eat dinner. In the midst of eating chicken wings, we continued to drink. I skipped on the beer and began ordering Jack and Cokes. Nasty played some music and actually danced with some old man’s daughter. The family was in the area looking at the sights, just as we were. I had no clue why or how Nasty managed to get the old man’s permission. Maybe it was his Southern charm

or one of his pick-up lines that I kept hearing him say that weekend. Something along the lines of, *I wrote some song for George Strait back when I was in Nashville...*

The night at Hooters ended and so did ours, we continued walking down to the hotel. We gathered our things, put the cooler back in the truck bed and headed home. It was late and Victor and I had to work Monday afternoon. All of us were still hammered in the truck, at least I don't think Bronco was since he continued to drive. Real soon the beer began to be handed out again by Victor through the rear sliding glass door. I don't know if it was the booze or the fact that we never did empty the cooler full of booze.

Out of nowhere someone threw a half full can of Bud light out the window.

“Oh shit!”

Soon after that, almost full beer cans flew out the window. Laughing ensued inside the truck. One beer can did make contact with a car that made the alarm go off. That sent Nasty into a driving frenzy and we were running stop signs and stop lights through the passing lane of six-lane intersections. Someone said they saw a cop car with the lights on. Just then, Bronco made quick rights, lefts, another right and another left that we got lost. None of us ever saw the cops after that, nor am I certain that there ever was any to begin with.

“Hey Flo, bust out the maps on your phone”

“Oh shit! Yeah, hold up!”

I flipped the Location Services on my iPhone and got a triangulated general location on google maps, that allowed me to tell Nasty which direction to go in order to get back onto Highway 101 and eventually back onto the 5. Back in 2008, an iPhone came off as an expensive novelty, but this moment was the first time I experienced its usefulness. The app store still didn't

exist, and the only “apps” were web apps that ran off websites. The most useful and entertaining one I ever found was *canidriveyet.com* which helped you determine if you can drive after a night of drinking. It calculated your BAC (Blood alcohol content) after you entered your gender, weight, what you drank and how much.

Heading south on the 5, we were almost home when Bronco said we were running out of gas. His truck stopped about a mile outside of Camp Del Mar of Camp Pendleton. It was a good thing that we got as far as we did because we were technically within the boundaries of MCB Camp Pendleton. It just so happens that the 5 cuts through the Western edge of the base, separating the beach from the rest of the base.

With the lights of Camp Del Mar in the distance, I suggested we walk there and see if we could get someone to help us. We all got out of the truck, Bronco locked it and we walked to Camp Del Mar. Along the way, Nasty discussed his idea to “borrow” a friend’s Chevy Blazer. He added the owner would not mind because he was on leave and told Nasty where the key was. Plus, to solve the fuel situation, we would also “borrow” a fuel jug that was kept in the back of another friend’s jeep. These friends were all people they served and deployed with in Iraq.

We jumped the perimeter fence and continued walking to the barracks. I ripped my favorite pearl stone shirt navigating the top of the fence, but I was more worried about running into the Del Mar Area guard doing a random patrol. We found the silver Blazer with a spare key hidden under one of the fenders. The fuel jug was also in the back of the jeep as described.

“Dude, I hope the they don’t call the cops on us”, Nasty said.

“Bro, you are with the cops”, Victor responded and everyone busted out laughing.

We drove down to the gas station on Camp Del Mar again, filled up, drove North bound on the 5 and took the exit on Las Pulgas Rd and turned around heading back South on the 5. We arrived

to the Silverado, and Bronco offered to drop Victor and me off back to our barracks on base.

Arriving late on an early Monday morning I still got plenty of sleep to lead PT for our guys

Monday afternoon to work the night shift.

CHAPTER XII

CHAOS

“Control: All Northern units. Stand by to copy vehicle roll over on the I-5, South from power plant –BREAK- Multiple ejected from the vehicle.”

I responded quickly to the accident on the I-5, as quickly as I could. At the time I was posted at our northernmost gate, named Device Fox, when I heard the call over the radio. As fast as I could drive, since our speed is tracked by GPS in the patrol cars, I got there fairly quickly. Getting to the accident felt like an eternity because I kept trying to prepare myself mentally to what I might encounter. Once I got there I found a black Chevy S10 rolled over and upside down on the northbound lane. In one fluid motion I parked my patrol car near the center-divide on the southbound lane of the 5, set my directional lights and ran towards the accident. The truck was originally traveling South. There was one young man under the truck bed. He wasn't crushed but still conscious and had a large laceration on the back of one of his legs. Another man, had been ejected and was laid out on the ground with his head facing traffic. There was a woman holding on to his head and as she saw me screamed she was an off duty nurse, the man was unconscious and had a possible head and neck injury. Before I had even arrived, two good samaritans had actually provided some first aid.

The details of the other two accident victims are hazy. Everything happened really fast. My main focus at the time was to make sure the scene was safe and get as much information as possible in order to get the paramedics there quickly. From the beginning, I was collecting ID's

and discovered from the one conscious victim that all of them were Marines with a unit that had just returned from a deployment from Iraq. With the little information I gathered, the ambulance got there fairly quickly.

As soon as the paramedics evaluated the victims, one of them approached me saying they would evacuate three in ambulances and one would have to be airlifted, adding the bird was on its way, and that I needed to stop traffic on the northbound lane because it was going to land on the freeway. What? Throughout this whole process, traffic was slowing passing by around the accident. Without giving it much thought, I relayed the information back to dispatch. I added the details of each Marine going to each specific hospital. After I had both of my hands available, proceeded to wave my hands up and down trying to stop traffic as safely as possible. I alone stopped all traffic on the northbound I-5 freeway so a medical helicopter could land and evacuate one of the accident victims. In the end, the last time I checked, everyone survived the accident.

“Control: 162, 182. Stand by to copy domestic assault, possible child stabbing –Break-suspect has fled the scene...”

This case began near the end of my shift as a northern Camp Pendleton patrol unit. I was at Device Fox waiting to be relieved off duty. Initially, I responded to the vague call as described above. I floored the patrol car’s accelerator not paying attention to my speed and turned on my lights and sirens as I crossed through Camp San Mateo. The address for the scene was a housing area on the opposite side of mountain. To get to the house, I had to cross the camp near the gate I was posted on, a large hill and busy business district all inside the my patrol zone. To top it all off, I was alone. En-route, I was instructed to get one Marine off the gate to serve as my back-up. A task easier said than done. After crossing Camp San Mateo, I was barreling through up my first obstacle, the hill. I just happened to glance at my speedometer, I was speeding up the hill at

85 miles an hour, on base. I looked up at my rearview mirror and the lights on the dash cam pointed at me were blinking. *FUCK! Well fuck it, I have to get there anyway.* I thought letting off the accelerator cruising over the hill.

By the time I reached Basilone Road, I had already instructed Device Echo, the gate nearest to my destination, *to have my back-up ready for me on the side of the road... this is going to happen quickly...* Near Device Echo, traffic was already stopped at the gate for me and one skinny Lance Corporal was ready for me. I took a wide turn and proceeded to attempt a move than can only be described as something off a Hollywood action movie. Mid-turn, I took my left hand off the steering wheel, leaned over opened the passenger door, hoping the momentum would cause it to open and slammed on the breaks. No room for introductions, once I noticed the Marine had half of his body inside the car I instantly floored the accelerator again.

I U-turned away from the gate heading North to the housing area receiving directions over the radio and confirming the description of the suspect. I gave my back-up a quick crash course refresher on how to respond to such an incident. Getting close to the cul-de-sac where the house was located, I found a white male that met the description of our suspect standing outside of the house. I parked the car and stood behind my car door, pistol drawn, yelling commands to my suspect. He quickly complied, was searched, and placed in the back of my patrol car. I instructed my backup to run to the back of the house, just in case, and to meet back up inside the house.

After all was said and done, there was no child stabbing. What I gathered from the mother after I cleared the house was that the suspect got into an argument with his step son and the teenager punched his bedroom window, cutting his hand in the process. I reported my findings to the MP's taking over the case and drove the suspect to our headquarters to finalize

the process. After I turned him over, dropped my gear and had to advise my watch commander of speeding over our authorized speed (5 MPH over the posted speed limit only) in the patrol car responding to the call. My watch commander was not happy about what I did, but appreciated the heads up and my reasoning. From my point of view, I responded to a possible child stabbing with the suspect fleeing the scene. I admitted not paying attention to my own speed and taking full responsibility.

“Control: Mainside Units standby to copy possible suicide attempt... be advised there is an 11-44 on building 2565 room 165 –Break- point of contact is...”

The Marine was hanging from a heater pipe with duct tape wrapped over his eyes, mouth hands and feet. The hot water from the shower was left on. He must have been dead at least 5 days and the only reason he was found was because the smell spread to the adjoining room. I arrived to drop off my partner because the main side units and area guard (who were assisting) needed more people to secure the scene. After dropping off my partner, I left because I was covering for the main side patrol zone as an axillary patrol unit.

I eventually made my way to the batcave later in the day after it was clear CID would take over the investigation and the body moved off scene. My first thoughts about going there was to see if anyone of the dispatchers or Desk Sergeant needed anything. Locked inside of the cold and dark room for 12-plus hours with only a collection of 7-9 computer screens to illuminate your activities was its own level of hell. It must have not been long after I showed up that K-9 showed up and told those inside the room what happened. Interesting details like, once my partner got to the door of the barracks room, he puked his guts out. The worst part of it all was the smell of the body lingering over the area, rigor mortis with body fluids that pooled and made his lower limbs swell. What haunted me the most? The mental image I was creating of the

Marine hanging with his hands duct taped behind his back compounded with my own experience arriving to a vehicle rollover on the freeway seeing the bodies of the four Marines spread across the 5-freeway.

In true Marine fashion and with a fucked-up sense of humor, our way of coping with stress began to come out. Paige, one of the dispatchers, told us she was the one that took the call from the area guard. What bothered me at the time, Paige also said she took a call from someone who asked for a welfare check on the resident of the barracks room where the body was found. I don't think Paige connected the dots as quickly as I did. I started laughing to myself and told Paige that she must have talked to the killer. After the initial shock and Paige telling me to shut up and stop being jerk, I asked her to write down the phone number and save the call recordings. I definitely knew CID would want to talk to that person that mysteriously called around the same time the body was found. What happened to the investigation? No clue. Beyond us MP's responding, we are only a reporting agency and CID agents keep tight lips about their work.

At the time, I gave Paige a lot of shit over taking the call where I believed she talked to the killer. I was not considerate of her own emotional well-being. Paige was and I still consider her a friend of mine. She is now married and expecting a child. I believe I still haven't apologized for being such an asshole. I know this is will never be enough, but I am truly sorry Paige for being a dick. I cannot rationalize how a fellow Marine could have murdered one of our own. The image my mind constructed that day is still burned inside in my memory and will be forever. Interacting with the scum of society within our own Marine community has left its mark inside my soul. Why? It contradicts everything I was taught in boot camp and throughout my career in the United States Marine Corps.

I cannot deny that incidents such as these were traumatic. I will never forget Marines laid scattered and unconscious on the ground. The possible child stabbing incident lays burned in my memory because of the amount of trouble I could have potentially gotten myself into. Doing 85 on a 45 MPH on base is a career ending move where I could have potentially lost significant rank and pay. It didn't matter that I was responding to an emergency call. Some of my peers got in trouble over GPS tracking devices that reported MP's were doing 80 MPH over the Pacific Ocean. Obviously that specific device was marked as defective. Somehow I navigated my way out of it by admitting my actions straight to the watch commander. I still remember his face full of disappointment. At the time, I imagined he would also get his ass chewed behind closed doors. I don't remember the fallout from that incident. Maybe they rationalized to leave me alone since by that time I had already received ordered to Okinawa, Japan. In the end, incidents such as these are a constant reminder of how much of a thankless job policing can be.

CHAPTER XIII

TRUE ALCOHOLICS GO TO MEETINGS

Not many people I know have woken up in a random person's living room floor passed out after a wild night of drinking and not have any memory of how they got there. I did, but wouldn't call myself an alcoholic. Why? Well as the good old cliché goes, only alcoholics go to meetings. I don't and never did. I drank hard alcohol. As a matter of fact, I drank so much that I would drink just about anyone under the table. Not trying to show off and digress, I once beat my friend Alex, who everyone called the Russian, at a drinking game using Incredible Hulk shots.

Everyone called Alex the Russian because no one could properly pronounce his last name and he was born in Russia so the name stuck. To start this off, the Russian and I were hanging out drinking in my barracks room after field day watching a movie from my DVD collection. He was drinking bud light and I was drinking Jack and cokes from my coconut cup. Fun fact about the Russian, he couldn't stomach Vodka after getting really drunk off it one time. For some reason, I remember we ended up in the common area where our sister platoon that worked the night shift were playing beer pong on the pool table. It was field day and it was not uncommon for the barracks to party during or after field day was completed. The unwritten rule at the barracks was for everyone to clean up their mess before field day inspection. After the barracks beer pong queen was crowned, Tracy from the operations office, for some reason I got the bright idea to challenge the Russian to a game of beer pong.

The Russian wanted to use beer but it was I that raised the stakes to liquor. I was the idiot that returned to my room, grabbed my left-over Hennessy cognac and Hpnotic liqueur, mixed them both together to make 20 mixed drinks in plastic SOLO cups. By the time the drinks were distributed into each cup it was a considerably low amount in each cup. We divided them evenly so we both would have 10 drinks each and proceeded to play the game.

Long story short, the Russian puked around midway, making me win the game, and I had to clean up the mess. The Russian's vomit did leave a heavy stain on the pool table that enshrined my victory over the Russian. That said, I would categorize myself as a "functioning alcoholic" meaning I am a coherent drunk. As crazy as that sounds, I have the ability to remember almost everything that takes place while I am drinking. Except when I blacked out. Still, I could be blitz-drunk-shmamed, which is a word I created myself back then to describe the levels of drunkenness I could achieve by combining the words shit-faced and hammered. To continue, I could be shmamed and still remind people of all the socially damaging details days after a crazy night of drinking. How one individual (that shall not be named) took one for the team and jumped on a grenade, for example. Not in the way Bruno Mars describes in his song *Grenade*, where it could be interpreted as a metaphor for dealing with pain for love. No, by *jumping on a grenade*, I'm talking about taking the ugly girl so your buddy can take the pretty one home. For me at the time, such "coherent-drunk-recall" can be both a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing in the sense that I can realize I am a being a drunk asshole while I'm being the asshole. However, it's a curse because that's not how it's supposed to work when you drink to make your demons go away.

As a Marine on active duty in general, there are several things that we had to deal with on a daily basis that makes military service more of a way of life, not a job. Why? For starters, I

believe that in any civilian job, you can go home and do as you wish. You can relax, actually ignore your boss, and get away with it too. You can't do that in the military, especially in the Marine Corps. The regimented military lifestyle is something you have to accept and conform to if you want to be successful on active duty. For those reading this and considering the military as a potential career, they should consider my point of view, the military is more than just your average job. If you ignore your boss and don't do as you are told in the military, you risk getting yelled at or worse. You risk getting charged under the UCMJ.

That said, imagine life in a college dorm, but operated by strict cult leaders. Almost every single aspect of our lives like clothing, haircuts, and places to visit are controlled by orders given by either Headquarters Marine Corps or local orders given by local commanders. For example, the Marine Corps Uniform Regulations, or Marine Corps Order 1020.34G, governs not only what, when, how, and which uniforms Marines can wear. Furthermore, that same order also regulates what kind of haircuts and civilian clothing the individual Marine can wear as well. This order is constantly being updated at least once every year with countless amendments to regulate any new fad that may be considered eccentric. Famously in late 2007, Headquarters Marine Corps updated the tattoo policy for Marines banning sleeve tattoos. The general idea of the ban meant that Marines were not allowed to have a tattoo sleeve or a collection of tattoos that could be interpreted as a sleeve. This tattoo ban further reinforced previous tattoo restrictions that revolved around not having tattoos on your wrists and above the shirt collar.

I worked at the main gate on the last day when sleeve tattoos were allowed and witnessed multiple Marines drive on base with fresh ink on their arms. As a result of the sleeve tattoo ban, every Marine with visible tattoos had to get them documented and the paperwork along with photos placed on their service record books. The Marine ban on sleeve tattoos was not well

received. I personally interpreted the ban as an attack on the Marine identity. As I young Marine I wanted to have my own tattoo sleeves beyond the three tattoos I do have. All the Marines I viewed as good mentors and the epitome of how a Marine should act and look, all had tattoos. Not all of these Marines had tattoo sleeves, but had single tattoos on their arms. At the time, the general idea I had for my own arms was to get an American patriotic theme on one arm and a Mexican theme on the other. The logic behind it was for my tattoos to reflect the duality of my identity. I never even got started on building my tattoo sleeves because I spent a large portion of my money on alcohol.

Moving forward, the places we live, the bases and barracks are not always the *home* we wish it could be. One time, while I was in Okinawa I was assigned to the rifle range and as a result I had to spend a week in a barracks with rooms that resembled a prison. The individual rooms were literally 10x9 with barely enough room for two Marines to live in. There were no bathrooms inside the room and if a Marine needed a shower, those facilities were in a separate area in the center of the building. In other places, such as Camp Pendleton's Camp Talega, quonset huts were still being used to house Marines being recalled back to service for deployments to Iraq. So *home*, to the average person could be interpreted a place where one can sit and relax from the pressures of the outside world. That's not how I viewed the barracks or the base. Yes, Camp Pendleton had multiple facilities or recreational areas I could have used to relax and have a good time. However, after working long 13 to 16 hour days for 2 to 3 days straight, the last thing I wanted to do was go to a place and be around other Marines.

It should be pointed out that when I left the military, the Marine Corps was spending large amounts of money on building new and more modern barracks across the service. Additionally, they were also investing money to improve the quality of life for Marines by

providing WIFI in certain places for example. Let's not forget about our superiors, whose actions can be interpreted as taking advantage of certain situations to make people's lives difficult.

Why? Sometimes individual Marines brought it upon themselves as a result of their own actions. However, some Marines in leadership positions act in a manner that can only be explained in one way. The rank and/or position they earn gets to their heads and they forget where they came from. From my point of view at the time, I felt these kind of leaders felt compelled to improve the Marine Corps based on some twisted way of thinking. They could take advantage of the fact that any order given by Headquarters Marine Corps can be interpreted differently. For example, Marine Corps Order 6110.3 the Marine Corps Body Composition and Military Appearance Program was revised in 2008. In short, part of the new revision was interpreted by some of our local leadership to say that if any Marine looked fat, they could be pulled aside and immediately get their height and weight checked to see if they met the requirements. Depending on the height of an individual Marine, determines their respective minimum and maximum weight. If that Marine failed and formally declared overweight, they would be placed in a formal Body Composition Program (BCP) that is run locally by our unit. Being placed in BCP meant having to report at a designated time and date (sometimes twice a week) to run an extra hour of PT.

At various moments during my time on active duty, I had multiple reasons to drink. Some previously discussed like self-serving superiors, stupid rules, dumb orders/regulations, or just wishing to forget; there is not enough paper in the world to list them all. However, I was lucky that as a single Marine, invitations to go out and have drinks at the local dive bars, clubs, or a homie's house, were never in short supply. Early in the Spring of 2009 for example, Jeff, one of the few Marines in my platoon who had issues with his wife I wasn't aware of at time, texted me out of the blue saying to join him at *Stampede*, a western style bar located in the Old Town

district of Temecula, California. I was surprised when I read the text at first; I wasn't expecting to get an invite to one of the bar slums that surround military bases across the USA. *Stampede* is a place where desperate and lonely local women congregate in hopes of snatching up young and naïve Marines for the military benefits.

I should point out that the *Stampede's* reputation is based from older and more experienced Marines passing on their experiences onto the next generation. This oral history built an image of a small population of women that hang out at the bar scene surrounding military bases. As young Marines we were told, more like warned, that these kind of women prey on these young and naïve service members hoping to get a golden ticket. It all begins the moment young Marines, fresh from the school house, check in to their first duty stations for example:

“At ease Marine. How old are you?”

“19, Gunnery Sergeant”

“Ok, I don't know if you have heard of the *Stampede*, but I advise you not going there.

OK. Nothing good comes out of that place. Just a bunch of lonely women that want leach off you for the benefits. Understood. Because everyone around this base knows that Marines get a steady pay check the 1st and the 15th. They know about the extra pay they get after they get married, you know the BAH, and the free medical and dental.”

“Yes, Gunnery Sergeant.”

“Alright, I don't want to hear that one of my Marines is getting married to someone they met and had a one-night-stand from the *Stampede*. Alright?”

“Yes, Gunnery Sergeant.”

“I hope so Marine. Let me tell you something, if you ever decide to get married, you tell your chain of command about your plans first. We better know about it before your future ex-wife does alright. I will tell you why, because the first thing you will do is see Base Legal and get a prenuptial agreement done. You paying attention Marine?”

“Yes, Gunnery Sergeant.”

“Alright, I tell you what, because all this chicks want is that BAH and they all know that after ten years of marriage, with no pre-nup, they rate half of your retirement.”

“Yes, Gunnery Sergeant.”

“Excellent, hand me the check-in sheet, and we will have you on your way.”

In meetings like these, all you can do is stand there and agree with a man that has a heavy rank on his collar. At the same time, the same young Marines that are the targets do end up going to places like the *Stampede*, because of the oral tradition.

I called Jeff, a big tough and rough around the edges Marine, asking if his text was serious, and it was obvious he was drunk. To top it all off, he was drunk off one Apple Martini. Nonetheless, it was clear he could not be there alone. Marines never leave their brothers alone, especially in situations like these. As Marine we are taught never to leave their buddies behind. *Alright Marines, school circle around me!* As Marines, that’s how we knew our weekend would start because those were the first words our Platoon Sergeant, Company Gunnery Sergeant, or Company First Sergeant would say for our liberty brief before being released on weekend liberty:

“Alright Marines, school circle around me!”

In an instant 30 Marines encircle the Platoon Sergeant. The shortest of the Marines and those of lower rank sat on the ground, the taller ones take a knee as those higher in rank stood at the back of the circle.

“Squad leaders, anyone missing?”

“Negative!”

“Alright Marines, here is your liberty brief. When you go out this weekend make sure you take a buddy with you.”

“Yut!”

“Excellent, when you are out of town with your buddy, take care of each other alright.”

“Yut!”

“I’m not going to tell you not to drink because I know everyone over the age of 21 is going to do it. So if you are 21 and over, drink responsibly. I drink and I do it in the privacy of my own home on my back porch with a cigar. If you are not 21, don’t do it.

“Oorah!”

“Now if any one of you gets arrested off base, you and buddy better be in the same cell when I get called to pick you up. Seriously! If I show up and you are there by yourself, your buddy better be in the cell next you!”

“Yut!”

With every *Yut!* given, or *Oorah!*, as a platoon were acknowledging our platoon sergeants orders before the weekend liberty. The liberty brief were more of a “cover your ass” kind of thing done by our superiors in case someone gets in trouble over the weekend. However, being told over and over, does cement it in our minds that we have to be there for each other, no matter what.

Jeff needed someone to talk to. More importantly, he needed the company of his brothers to help him cope with whatever was going on with him personally. As soon as I got off the phone assuring him I would meet him there as soon as possible. I started a mass-text with as many individuals I trusted and hoped were not busy or already drunk. It may have been around 7 PM, but I have been known to be blitz drunk by 9 AM. Nevertheless, I was able to muster up Joe, Jorge, Gary, Vincent and a few other people. Joe was the first to respond and agreed to pick me up and roll as soon as he hung up the phone. Within minutes he was outside my building in his black Corvette. Speeding up the I-15 freeway, Joe and I were laughing our butts off that we were actually going to the *Stampede*. The locally infamous Boot hangout where even experienced Marines could be found trying to get laid before deploying. Joe and I did end up getting focused enough because the situation with Jeff was serious. As we walked into the bar, we found Jeff slumped over a table with high chairs with a Martini still by his side.

Jeff was a self-professed lightweight when it came to drinking. Upon seeing that reflected at the bar, Joe and I started laughing, while at the same time asking what the hell was going on. Joe and I ordered dry Martinis as a show of solidarity with our brother in pain. Additionally, we also noticed how out-of-place we were in a Western bar. The majority of the crowd in cowboy boots, big belt buckles and hats. Us with our surfer shirts and skater shoes; we stood out, a lot. Eventually, a whole crew came together and started to have some fun at Jeff's expense.

“Jeff! Why you being bitch bro?”

“Fuck you Ling Ling!” Jeff responded still slumped over the table near the bar.

George looked Asian, it was an inside joke. Soon after everyone finished their martinis, George declared:

“Hey fuck these Martini bullshit, let's have some beers.”

Everyone else started ordering their own drinks and Jeff's mood started to get better. One of the odd things I discovered about *Stampede*, they had small moments when they also played hip hop music as a break from the country music. This was the first time I had ever been to the *Stampede* and the switch in music really caught me off guard. *Stampede's* reputation was infamous and well known around Camp Pendleton that you didn't have to go there to know what took place inside. So, when the hip-hop music began blasting over the speakers, a bachelorette party came out of nowhere making a ton of noise.

When Jeff decided to participate in the festivities of a bachelorette party at the *Stampede*, at the time I thought he was going to be ok. Reflecting on this now, how could I have known for sure? I already had a sweet buzz when the bachelorette party (the bride to be and four other women) approached us and asked us to take some "bachelorette party lottery scratchers" well I was all about it. The maid of honor passed the scratchers around to the few of us that agreed to play the game. The idea of the game was that whoever scratches the ticket had to give the "prize" to the bride to be. Some of the prizes were to kiss the bride, give her a last dance, take a shot, or other random actions intended to spice up the party. I remember scratching off my ticket and had to give the bride a sexy lap dance. The crowd erupted in cheers and gave the bride to be a chair to sit in. In my buzzed plateau, I sat on her lap and proceeded to dry hump her while placing my arms over her shoulders.

Now I feel I was only going through the motions and I wonder if Jeff was going through the same. At the time he lived considerably far away off base with his wife. He never did discuss the issue he was having with his wife. I assume it serious enough for Jeff to do the 45 minute drive from Southern San Diego County to Temecula. Additionally, his problems must have been serious enough that he left his wife and moved into the barracks. The significance of this event is

not to mark this as a celebration but more of a comparison between two very different Marines. I did not have a reason to drink at that moment. Yet, I chose to accompany Jeff at one of the lowest moments of his life. Yes I was going through the motions, but considering where I was at the time, I don't think I would have done anything differently. Looking at this event ten years later, the hyper masculine culture of the Marine Corps, compounded with the atmosphere I was living through led me believe that I was doing the right thing.

Ten years ago, I would not consider myself an alcoholic. Even though I woke up one morning in a stranger's living room looking around asking myself, *What the fuck have I done?* As I looked around in the living room floor seeing pictures of white people and their children I did not recognize.

“Hey man, you OK?”

Still laying on the ground, I looked over towards the banister where I saw a white man I did not recognize. I must have given him a concerned look.

“You don't remember me do you? I'm Thomas dude”

“Oh shit, I'm sorry.”

“It's ok, Joseph and his wife are in the spare bedroom...”

The most embarrassing thing to me that morning was I had met Thomas about twice before that night and I didn't even remember his face. Thomas was my buddy Joseph's white friend and the first time I shook his hand was when Joseph and I drove out to his work place on Camp Pendleton. The night leading up to me waking up in his living room floor started as it usually did, I would get a text saying that I should drive to a specific address to hang out and drink. From what I was told, I got shmamed at his neighbor's house, who happened to be Thomas's supervisor, blacked out, started screaming at the top of my lungs, told Joseph's wife to shut the

fuck up, puked on someone's truck tire and passed out. Joseph and Thomas actually dragged me to the living room I later woke up in.

Looking back now, I believe I was at my worst during my homeboy Jorge's 80's themed birthday party. I decided to go as Nikki Sixx, the bass player for Mötley Crüe, but I didn't just play dress up, I embodied who he was at the time. An 80's broken rock star that loved to drink whiskey and revealed in *The Heroin Diaries* to doing a near six-foot line of cocaine. I bought a flared mullet wig, tight pants, knee high leather boots and I wore make up for the occasion. Jorge's party was in his garage in on-base housing and everyone was having a great time when I noticed he had been gone for a while. I went inside and found him in the kitchen taking tequila shots. Keeping in mind I was already buzzed (not at my plateau yet) from taking ceremonial shots and drinking a double Jack and Coke. In the spirit of an 80's metal head, I find my homie sneaking shots in the kitchen.

"Dude what the fuck are you doing!"

Jorge stared at me through the curls of his wig and just simply replied, *Here* handing me a shot of tequila. We took the shot, slamming it down with ease, but it was only the beginning. He instantly poured another round and declared, "Salud!" Afterward, the kitchen countertop rang like church bells with a, *Clank... Clank... Clank...* as we went toe-to-toe, shot after shot, to finish off 3 bottles of tequila in one sitting. We walked back out to the garage strutting as if we tied for gold at the tequila Olympics and the party continued. There is a video in some deep corner of the internet of me dressed as Nikki Sixx head banging and dancing to Thriller. Plus there must be another of me being carried while homies and I attempting to sing *Glycerin*. I can't fully remember everything since I blacked out and only remember parts of the night. In-between the

missing time I remember more drinking, head bagging, taking more shots, and taking tons of pictures with my friends with my mouth wide open.

The difference between me ten years ago and now is that back then you could hear me saying thing like, *Yes, I drink and I love drinking the types of alcohol that can kill my liver faster...* Today I'll admit, I was an alcoholic. I have a fatty liver and my doctor has told me to stop drinking and I am proud to say that I was able to do it cold turkey. By the time I got the diagnosis I had already spent months without a single drop of alcohol. I understand this sounds disingenuous, but I asked one of my friends that had to go through mandatory AA meetings about the experience. In short words, he said it was horrible. He described the withdrawal symptoms as having an itch you can't scratch and a thirst that can't be satisfied. I never experienced those kind of things, and I felt a sense of survivors guilt. Through it all, I have nothing else to say but ask, *Why? Why me?* How am I able to do this, but others can't? Today as I reflect on my life I can provide one possible explanation. Attending college later in life allowed me to thrive in an environment where I didn't feel the sense to prove anything to my peers. I didn't feel the need or urge to fit in with any crowd, but still a sense of structure in life that I missed from the military.

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