

What's It Like

REPORTER MARCHES OFF TO BOOT CAMP

Parris Island lives up to its reputation for tough Marine training

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, April 16, 2006

This is the fourth in a year-long series we call "What's It Like?" giving readers a first-hand look at some interesting activities in the region.

By RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

PARRIS ISLAND, S.C. — I wouldn't make a very good U.S. Marine.

That's what I was thinking as I took another shot to the head.

I was wearing a helmet and some other pads as I fought a man with a pugil stick — sort of like a giant Q-tip; think American Gladiators — but I was taking a beating.

Every time I'd go in for a body blow, he'd bonk me right in the face. Whack! This happened over and over and over again until the Marine overseeing the exercise mercifully called things to a halt.

Now I'm not going to mention that I had to fight without my eyeglasses. Or that my opponent was taller than me. Or that, unbeknownst to me, he was a sergeant in the Marines who'd taught martial arts for four years.

"You need to move more," a victorious Sgt. Kendrick Scott told me afterward. "You were just kind of standing straight up. Get more aggressive."

Maybe I should have known that. I did receive five whole minutes of training in bayonet fighting techniques before my big bout.

But there are no excuses on Parris Island, where a sign near the front gate proudly declares, "We Make Marines."

More than 20,000 men and women each year come through this surprisingly lush recruit depot, one of two in the United States for this branch of the military. Recruits undergo 12 weeks of grueling training that breaks them down mentally and physically before they emerge as Marines. It's a process that's been going on here since 1915.

MULTIMEDIA

[Watch and listen as Ryan Smith goes through boot camp.](#)

READ SIDEBAR:

[Local recruits deal with rigors of boot camp](#)



Reporter Ryan Smith battles it out with Sgt. Kendrick Scott as part of martial arts training for Marines on Parris Island, S.C. (THE BLADE)

I came to basic training with a group of high school educators from Ohio and Michigan, many of them guidance counselors. It was part of a program the Marines have to show them what boot camp is really like so they can better advise students.

Our first full day began much the same way any future Marine's visit to the island would: with lots of yelling.

Sitting on a school bus, we traveled onto the island via a causeway, past the salty marshes and the alligators that might be slopping around there, and pulled to a stop.

I heard what came next before I saw it. Thud, thud, thud! A drill instructor's shoes pounded up the steps of the bus, quickly revealing a large hat (the kind Dudley Do-Right might wear), then the imposing female who was wearing it. She stormed to the back of the bus in her camouflage uniform, barking out directions at the top of her lungs.

Sit up straight!

Get off my bus!

Another Marine stood at the door yelling at us.

Faster! Faster!

We shuffled out and arranged ourselves on the nearby sets of yellow footprints painted on the pavement.

I knew this wasn't for real. I knew I only had to make it through a few minutes of this, not 12 weeks. (Imagine what it must be like for recruits, who arrive groggy and scared in the dead of night and whose first day usually lasts 36 hours.)

Still, when I came to a stop — feet positioned precisely at a 45-degree angle, hands crisply at my side, fingers curled naturally, eyes pointed straight ahead — I couldn't help but feel my heart racing.

The drill sergeant proceeded to keep yelling — a quick blur of noise I feared would be directed at me — as she explained the rules. The Reader's Digest version amounts to this: You will do everything we say and you will do it now, now, NOW!

This is not to say the Marines can't be good-humored and have a good time. At one point, I was pleased to see a gas station marquee on the island announcing a bus trip to see "Finding Nemo On Ice" (presumably not for recruits, who have almost no free time).

Generally, though, I found Parris Island to be one tough place. There were the morning wake-up calls well before dawn and the dreaded sand fleas, little gnat-like creatures that hover around you in clouds before closing in for a painful bite.

On the confidence course — a kind of obstacle course each recruit must master — one woman in our group broke her leg and ankle when she fell awkwardly from the toughest set of monkey bars you've ever seen.

I tackled a couple of the simpler obstacles, including the wall climb and the arm walk (a set of parallel bars on steroids). And I was pretty good at walking around going "Ooh-rah!" like the rest of the Marines.

Perhaps my biggest challenge, though, was lunch.

Those MREs (Meals Ready To Eat) are really hard to open.

It took me several minutes to get into mine, and that was only after employing my reporter's pen to stab the plastic packaging repeatedly.

Once opened, however, I had access to a smorgasbord of calories. Aside from the main course of meat loaf with gravy, there were mashed potatoes, crackers with apple jelly, vanilla cream wafers, and some Tootsie Rolls. To my delight, it all tasted great.

The best thing about it was the magical way the food was heated. A recruit from Massachusetts gave me some water from his canteen to put in a special pouch, into which I had placed my meat loaf. Within seconds, it was smoking hot.

There were a lot of things I couldn't do while I was on Parris Island. They took it easy on me, I know. I didn't sleep in the barracks. I didn't run through a chamber where recruits are exposed to tear gas.

I wasn't forced to speak in the third person, as recruits are to emphasize how they are part of a team, not an individual.

I didn't have to take part in the Crucible, a 54-hour test all Marines go through that involves more than 30 miles of marching, only eight hours of sleep, little food, and a mess of physical and mental challenges.

But.

I did fire an M-16.

I did it after much study and contemplation (and countless games of make-believe in my backyard growing up with two brothers).

First, I observed recruits at the rifle range, where the constant pop-pop-pop filled the air with the scent of gun powder. Later, my group got a quick lesson in marksmanship from Sgt. Robert Keith Kesterson. It lasted 19 minutes.

He told us about the weapon — lightweight at eight pounds, capable of firing one round or in three-round bursts — and reviewed safety guidelines.

Out on the range, I settled into my bunker, where I could rest the edge of the gun on a ledge and take aim at enemies arrayed at varying distances. All I had to worry about was holding the gun and getting the enemy (black target, 200 yards) in my sights. There wasn't much of a kickback, so I didn't have to worry about that.

I pulled the trigger (my first time ever, for any kind of gun).

Most of the time I missed.

I don't remember hearing much — the result of ear plugs and intense focus — until a second or two after. That's when I noticed the voice of the Marine supervising me — one glorious time in particular.

“Hit.”

Another pause.

“Head shot.”

Oh yeah!

I mean, um, Ooh-rah!

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

[< previous](#)

[next >](#)