

Experience exceeds the rumors

Student reaps rewards from basic training

Basic training was what I expected in some ways, but a lot more than I had anticipated in others. Everyone had warned me of the horrible tortures I would endure and of all the mental anguish and physical exhaustion. They told me how the army would strip away my individuality and mold me back into a stiff, starched, disciplined soldier.

Yes, for the most part, these things were true, but nobody told me of the great moments I had to look forward to; of the friendships I would form, the people I would meet, and the self-satisfaction and pride I would develop in myself.

When I arrived at Fort Dix, N.J., I was soon in awe of its magnitude; the thousands of acres of training field and the beautiful landscape of green fields and trees. As my bus drove through the grounds, I could see the soldiers' training in the fields. There were soldiers everywhere. I was excited to know that I was a part of it.

The bus stopped in the front of the reception station where I was issued the fatigues that I would wear every day of my training, the black combat boots with their dull leather glow that would soon turn into a fine gloss by hours of spit shining and the field gear that would take me through the complete eight weeks of field training.

I heard the sergeant's voice instructing us to line up against the wall at parade rest, a position that would soon replace the slouched, hand-in-pocket stance, as we were filed through the reception station. Here I received a pregnancy test and vaccinations ranging from chicken pox to tuberculosis.

At last, four days later, we arrived at our training unit, our home for the next eight weeks.

This is where I met my drill sergeant. I was soon to learn that he was not there to harass us or to strip away every fiber of individuality we had, but to help us through eight weeks of rigorous training that can be accomplished only if you earn their respect, and they yours.

They encouraged us to ask questions if we had problems, and to get to know the other women in our platoon and our company. From the first week on, I met people from all parts of the country; people with different personalities and people representing all lifestyles.

I was elected platoon guide, a position directly under the drill sergeant. I was responsible for 42 women varying in age from 17 to 35; from spoiled mama's girls to independent, don't-touch-me types. A lot of the people I met, I wouldn't have wanted to be friends with, let alone help guide through basic training. They didn't want me to tell them what to do, and half of them didn't want to be there at all.

But as the weeks went on, we all started to mesh. Orders were easier to give, and people were more willing to listen.

Appropriately, one of the army's favorite words is "flexible." Each one of us learned how to be flexible, and to bend a little to get the job done. If we weren't, production would stop; or move very slowly, which would add to the stress that was already a strong part of our army lives. But the pressure within the unit, from the other women, was usually enough to straighten it out.

Each one of us wanted to do well, to train hard and to graduate. Each week brought graduation that much closer, and each week we gained more respect for ourselves and each other.

We had all become close to our drill sergeants, amazed that they, too, had individual personalities, and usually good senses of humor. They were not out there to insult and belittle us, but to help us gain pride in ourselves and our work, and to train us to be proud of our accomplishments and of our country.

This pride was established through discipline and the building of stronger bodies and minds. Each morning we rose at 4:30 a.m. and headed to our physical training field. There we would endure an hour of stretching, moaning and groaning in exact sequence, and finish off with a quick double-time run of two miles, along with set after set of the military's favorite muscle builder and discipline instrument, the push-up.

Aside from physical training, or P.T., every morning, we gained endurance from our marching. We marched everywhere — to chow, to our classes, to the field for training, and to the Post Exchange (the military's version of Shop-Rite). We even dreamed of marching. Each session, we steadily increased the weight of our gear until we marched around with 50-pound ruck sacks on our backs, with complete field gear and battle uniform ranging from the steel pots on our heads to our combat boots, which became as smooth as glass and as comfortable as our sneakers.

We went to the field and fired everything from our "babies," the M-16 rifle, to the M-60 machine gun, grenade launcher and the Light Anti-tank Weapon.

One thing I really enjoyed about the military is the equality shown to each soldier regardless of his or her sex. Male or female, each trainee

fired the same exact weapon, was qualified with the same stiff requirements, and was expected to train with the same intensity. Much of the time, the women did just as well as the men. Quite a few qualified with just as high, or higher, scores.

Basic training is a place where each soldier can "go for it" without having to worry what society might think. It's a place where society's sex roles aren't forced on you. I wasn't worried if I should be running around in combat boots with sweat dripping in my eyes and dirt and sand stuck to my back and falling down my shirt. I

didn't have to worry how my hair or make-up looked. I couldn't wear any. I earned the respect of a soldier because I trained like one, and acted like one.

I got a lot more out of basic training than self discipline, a healthy body and a strong mind. I gained respect and appreciation for our nation. I gained pride and respect for its defense and the men and women who give their lives to protect it. Not everyone can or would want to be a soldier, but I, myself, am proud that I made the choice.

By Charla Parker

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