
FIVE**Some Reception!**

Fort Dix, New Jersey
November, 1967

Basic Training was an eight-week period of hardening both the mind and the body. It was a very short time during which the Army had to convert a lot of young men, most of whom were really no more than boys, into fit and independent members of a team. The terms “independent” and “team” are usually thought of as contradictory, but both aptly described the caliber of men needed for what lay ahead.

The independence was that of a young man who could rely on himself to muster the inner strength needed to endure one of the most torturous experiences the human condition can encounter,...that of war. And the team would be our best defense against a thoroughly cunning enemy.

I could clearly remember how I felt during my first couple of days back at Fort Dix. The reception center was a small complex of old World War II barracks, exactly like the one I was in right now, with a nearby mess hall and telephone exchange building. Most new arrivals spent four or five days there while their paperwork was being processed, their clothing issued, and their medical needs attended to. In essence, we were being stripped of any connection with the outside world and started on the course of a whole new lifestyle.

Without a doubt, one of the most powerful statements the Army had for beginning the hardening process was when we were marched over to the barber shop and had our hair lopped off, down to the scalp. It was like the final turn of the key in a lock. From that point on, there was no looking back.

Before our individual characters had time to be molded to their way of thinking, however, I could vividly recall how the homesickness felt like a communal disease that infected most of the new guys. We might have had every appearance of military men—from our new olive-drab fatigues and black combat boots to the photo ID card in our wallets—but we were still the same young guys who had eaten one of Mom's home-cooked meals only a couple of days earlier.

On my second night, I decided to call home and let them know I'd made it there all right. Like everyone else, I was feeling miserable over the loss of home and family, so the call was as much for myself as for anyone. I figured the sound of a familiar voice might make me feel better.

As it turned out,...after the call, I did feel much better with the assurance that the world of home and family was still out there,...but the call itself had been traumatic.

My mother answered and we spoke for awhile. Then my father had come on. I don't recall exactly what was said, but the conversation wasn't what hit me really hard anyway.

While my parents were speaking, I could hear the TV playing in the background and that sound seemed to draw me out of that cold, distant phone exchange building and right back into the warmth and coziness of the living room with them.

Tears welled up in my eyes and ran down my cheeks. I hadn't wanted them to feel any more grief than they already were over my situation, so I forced myself to speak almost normally through the onslaught. I fought down an overwhelming urge to tell them, straight out, that I just wanted to come home, but I'd realized that it would only have made things worse. There was absolutely nothing I or they could have done about it anyway.

That surfacing of my pent-up emotions had been what I'd needed. It was my psychological turning point. After it was over, I felt a whole lot better. From then on, I was able to look ahead to the job I might just as well be resigned to doing. Once I'd made contact with the outside world, and reassured myself that it was still out there, it seemed a lot easier to put it on a back burner temporarily and move ahead. Whether I realized it or not back then I'm not really sure, but that was the first step in leaving the boy behind and becoming the man.