
SEVEN**Lessons In The Freezer**

If I had to describe Basic Training in one word, that word would be “*cold*”.

Fort Dix was spread out on a flat, wide-open landscape with very few features to block the winter wind. During the time I was there, from the middle of November to the middle of January, 1967, we had several heavy snow storms. With the wind chill factor, the mercury had hovered at around twenty degrees below zero.

Most of the classes, which were held daily, took place out on one of the many weapons ranges, and only occasionally were we fortunate enough to be inside if the range had a shed on it. We usually sat on bleachers, exactly like the ones at a high school football game, completely out in the open, unguarded from the wind.

The topics covered everything from first aid to hand-to-hand combat, but I can vividly recall how difficult it was to concentrate on the instruction when strong gusts whipped the powdery snow into little spinning funnels that skated along the ground. Even now, it’s almost painful to remember shivering as I hunched down into my winter field jacket, fatigues, and long woolen underwear. If it hadn’t been for the fact that those classes were geared toward our survival, and that the instructor was an Army sergeant, the whole scene would have been ludicrous at best.

Trainees falling asleep during a class, because of the cold, had been a major problem. Most instructors stated, as soon as we were seated, that any man caught sleeping would have to stand for the

remainder of the class,..and even that really wasn't a deterrent. I was guilty of dozing off myself on a couple of occasions, though I was never caught at it.

It was pretty clear that the instructors weren't so much concerned about someone falling asleep due to a boring class as they were about his freezing to death. Sleep was one of the first warning signs of that.

There were only one or two occasions when training was actually called off due to the severe cold. One of them was when we'd gone out to the exercise field. There was a piece of equipment out there that looked like a ladder suspended horizontally above our heads. Each man would jump up and swing from rung to rung until he reached the far end. Then he would turn around and swing back. On this particular day, it had been so cold that the skin of our palms literally froze to the iron rungs. When we let go, our hands became a bloody mess.

The Army wasn't very forgiving about missing training, but under such conditions as these, they had little choice but to call it off.