
EIGHT**A Hard Man—A Harder Lesson**

An experience that will always remain with me involved one of the D.I.s. All through basic this particular man, Sergeant Sheehan, had been exceptionally hard on the trainees, almost to the point of being cruel.

There was an established rule that whenever a sergeant entered a room where there were trainees present, someone was supposed to stand and call out, “At ease!”, so that the others would know to stand, too.

I never saw a trainee who refused to perform this simple code of respect, yet Sheehan seemed to relish slipping into a room and putting everyone into the push-up position when they failed to call out quickly enough for his liking. The problem was that, though we knew it was a form of harassment, there was nothing we could do about it anyway, so we simply bore up under it.

Then there were the times when we had to go out to the ranges on a forced march. Since we weren't yet accustomed to the stiffness of our new combat boots, the nearly ten-mile hike gave the majority of us painful blisters. Sore feet was the single most prevalent cause of men being out on sick call for our first week-and-a-half of training.

Right at about the time when this affliction was at its peak, and it was difficult enough for most of us to walk that distance, Sheehan made us complete the last mile at a forced run.

As the column ran through the woods, on what resembled a dirt logging road, men who couldn't keep up dropped out all along the way. I'd been one of those who'd fallen by the wayside. Much as I and the others dreaded the reprisals we expected from Sheehan later, it was just impossible to go on with such pain.

After the main column was out of sight, another D.I. came walking back to gather up the strays. To our amazement, he simply asked if our feet were the problem and had us walk along with him, at a leisurely pace, until we met up with the others.

It goes without saying that most of the trainees had no great love for Sergeant Sheehan and, in time, it became obvious to us that the other D.I.s weren't particularly happy with his stiff regiment either. If we were observant, we'd catch a subtle roll of the eyes or a poorly concealed smirk among the cadre whenever he came down on someone with both feet. Don't get me wrong. Discipline was an integral part of the training as we all expected it would be, but it seemed that Sheehan enjoyed carrying it far beyond what was called for.

On our last day of training, out on the ranges, Sheehan had us fall into an unexpected formation. It was late in the afternoon and everyone was looking forward to getting back to the barracks, knowing that we wouldn't have to make the long, cold trek out there again.

When we were in ranks, he walked slowly along in front of us from one end of the formation to the other. I had the feeling that something unusual was coming and could sense that the other trainees felt it too.

All through those weeks of training, whenever Sheehan addressed any of us, it was with an arrogance that sounded full of contempt. It appeared highly unlikely that he could have a warm spot in his entire body. Yet, now he seemed to be feeling, rather than thinking about what he was going to say.

After a long pause, he stopped at center-front of the ranks, put his hands behind his back, and looked us over slowly. Then he spoke in a tone that was uncharacteristically gentle, something none of us had ever expected to hear.

“Men,....I know you feel that I’ve been unduly hard on you these past eight weeks,....and rightly so. I have been. But since this is the last day of training, I wanted you to know that there was a reason for it.”

With his hands still clasped behind his back, and head lowered, he walked slowly along in front of the group while continuing to speak.

“None of you really have any idea just what it is you’re heading into. Now that your basic training is about over, you’ll be moving on to A.I.T....Advanced Individual Training, or in some cases, Advanced Infantry Training,...and then, most probably, to Vietnam.”

Here he paused to let that point drive home. Of course, we realized, deep down inside, that most of us would be headed for the war, but we seldom brought it up or talked about it openly. It was like a disease that nobody wanted to mention for fear of catching it.

“All of your instructors here, including myself, have been over there and come back, so we know exactly what it’s like.”

He stopped walking when he reached the center of the formation again and turned to face us.

“Yes, I *have* been hard on you,...but hard is what you’re going to have to be if you’re going to make it back alive.”

His eyes scanned the large body of men, letting that sink in too.

“You’ve had some good times here in Basic and you’ve had plenty of hard times, but, believe me, when you get to Nam the hard times are going to be like nothing you ever imagined.”

He began walking again with his eyes directed toward the ground. After a long, deep breath, as if what he was about to say was extremely difficult, he continued.

“When I was over there, our company was choppered out to what was reported as an enemy location. The bird that was carrying my squad flew in to drop us off, but it didn’t land. It hovered a few feet off the ground and we had to jump out.

“When we jumped, because of the shift in weight, the pilot temporarily lost control. ...It was only the length of a breath,...but during that time, the bird tipped side-to-side and the blades severed the heads of some of the men who’d jumped.”

There was another pause while he stood looking us over. Then he went on.

“Those men were my friends. Normally, it would have taken me, and the rest of their buddies who’d seen them die like that, a long, long time to get over that kind of shock,...but *nothing* in Vietnam is normal. We didn’t have the luxury of *a long time* to get over it. We had to move on and stay tight if we were going to survive ourselves. As difficult as it was, we had to be hardened against that kind of thing because it happens on a regular basis in a war. One minute, guys you’ve come to feel are your best buddies can be standing right beside you, and the next, they’re being carried away in sealed up body bags.

“If my being hard has toughened you just a little more than you might otherwise have been, then I’ve done my job, and your chances of making it back are that much better. Believe me when I tell you you’re going to need it.

“That’s all I have.”

Sheehan walked over to one side and stood by himself. He appeared to be staring out at the distant tall pines that were the predominant growth on the ranges. It was easy to see that relating such a personal nightmare hadn’t been easy.

An extraordinarily thoughtful quiet fell over everyone, including the other instructors. Finally, one of them came forward to the front of the formation and spoke in a subdued tone.

“All right, men. We’ll take a ten minute break before we start back to the company area. Fall out.”

Then something happened that gave me a good feeling inside. During the break, quite a few of the trainees went over and spoke with Sheehan. His personality was entirely different from what it had been those past eight weeks. He spoke openly and easily without the gruffness he’d constantly displayed.

I noticed something else too. The other D.I.s, who’d been disapproving of his previous temperament, realized that he’d done what he had for the benefit of the men. They spoke with him on a congenial level unlike anything we’d seen for quite some time.

It was extremely important for me, and when I thought about it now, for the rest of the trainees, to see that these people really did care about the well-being of the men. That episode with Sheehan showed me that, despite the image the military had of being a strict, monolithic organization, the

individuals working within its structure were just people,....people with hopes and fears and emotions,....people like myself. And that made a big difference.

There would always be those who had their own particular ideas about such things as rank and authority, the ones who let it go to their heads. But then, there's that kind of personality in any profession.

These were just people trying to do the best job they could under extremely difficult circumstances. It wasn't easy for anyone, military or otherwise, to know that a good number of the young men they'd been training and working with for two months were going to die within the next year. Statistics didn't lie.

Sheehan's actions had gone a long way in dispelling a deep-rooted anxiety I'd felt since the beginning of my training. I hadn't known whether I could feel any real team spirit or loyalty to an organization as cold and regimented as the Army was supposed to be. Having seen the human side of a tough man like Sergeant Sheehan, however, made me feel that I could more readily face the next twenty two months of my military obligation.

I still wasn't thrilled about being in the Army, any more than I had been before, but at least now I had a great deal more respect for it.