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## Hog Board

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## **HOG BOARD**

By: Joe Maslanka, MPP

Sunday, free time. Parris Island, South Carolina. The greatest hour of the week. Two hours are reserved for church. The hour you don't attend services with your denomination is time spent in relative peace, sitting on a footlocker, beneath the sharp glare of fluorescent lights. One may choose from any number of activities, spit-shining boots, catching up on mail, just taking a leisurely shit, the possibilities are endless.

The Catholics assemble first and are marched over to the sanctuary. Upon return, the Protestants fall in and lockstep across the blacktop to the large circular structure we call church. I have no clue where the Jewish recruits go? All I do know is the Protestants are off to their service, which means sitting here with the rest of my fellow Catholics. One hour. Like an oasis of freedom in a desert of restrictions. It's our time. It's scarce. It's valuable.

A few weeks back, some of the recruits figured out that if they sat still for church assembly, they could pull off double free time. I didn't partake in that. If ever there was a time to stay close to Jesus, this is the time. This is the place.

Our Senior Drill Instructor caught on pretty quick. We spent the next few weeks going to both services. "You damn Protestants will go to Catholic Church, and you asshole Catholics will go to Protestant Church, you hear me!" "Sir, yes Sir!" Poof, no free time. I have to admit, I dug the Protestant service. It was upbeat, good music, hopeful sermon by the southern-accented Chaplain. I didn't like it enough to do two services every week, but appreciated the experience.

This is Third Battalion, H-Company, Platoon 3311. Third Battalion has a history. Many years ago, a drill instructor marched his platoon through the swamps, in early morning darkness. Rumor has it several recruits drowned. This story is rehashed, especially when we assemble for

an early morning hump into the woods. Intimidating the first few times it's recounted, now it's just part of the routine.

Perfectly aligned bunks, what we call racks, line either side of the squad bay. The smell of bleach is an assault on your nasal cavities. We routinely scrub the decks and clean the heads with it. This long narrow berthing area is home until we graduate. If all goes well, I may be at home to ring in 1985. I clutch to that dream. It propels me through the tough days.

Sitting on my footlocker, a large, olive-drab, wooden box holding all my essentials, I flip through pictures my mom sent from home. Minding my own business, I enjoy a moment of sentimental solace. I catch a pair of shiny black shoes parked in front of me. A shadow cast from the wide brim of a 'smoky-bear' cover. It's Drill Instructor Sergeant Hernandez.

I turned 23 years old upon arriving at Parris Island, first week of September. Not as wide-eyed as some of my platoon. We older privates catch on to the obvious role each DI plays. Gunnery Sergeant Reeves, our Senior, plays the big daddy role. Sergeant Lane, who is preparing to become a Senior DI, is the wise teacher. Staff Sergeant Newby is the no-nonsense practical instructor. Then there is the dick, Sergeant Hernandez. He is a first-time DI. He plays the heavy. He plays it well.

They all screw with us to some degree, but Sergeant Hernandez seems to revel in it. One evening he had us pull our toothbrushes, pass them around, stopped us mid-pass, and told us to brush. Brilliant. There was the time somebody forgot to flush. Hernandez emerged from the head, turd in hand. He flung it down the deck of the squad bay, had us lay on our bellies while scrubbing the deck. I never did find out who retrieved the turd.

Another of his favorites is to bait you into a conversation, get you relaxed, then steer the chit-chat to a subject that will always piss him off. This leads to an excuse to screw with the chosen conversationalist, or just take it out on the entire platoon.

At 23, just joining the Corps, things had gone awry back home. College didn't pan out. I wanted no part of the family bar business. Although, as a kid, my father's weekly inspections of my floor and bathroom scrubbing, along with the occasional verbal abuse, prepared me well for Parris Island. I can't wait to thank him.

I spent the past four years chasing a dream to become a rock star. It ended in a blur of drunken nights, bad decisions, and the eventual break-up of the band.

The Marines are my shot to reset. I am determined not to screw this up. I am coming out of here with something. No heavy is going to mess that up. So, I either take his shit with vigor or keep my head down. Right now, during this most sacred of hours, in a wasteland of miserable weeks, his heaviness is an infringement on my free time.

"What the fuck you lookin' at, boy?" I stand at attention.

"Sir, pictures from home, sir!"

"No shit? Well, let old Sergeant Hernandez have a look." He snatches the stack of pictures from me and begins to rifle through them. "Why are all these people in a bar? You an alcoholic?"

"Sir, no, sir. My father owns a bar, sir!"

"Well, that must have been some kind of deal growing up, huh?"

"Sir?"

"Yeah, drink whenever you want, party all the time. Why the fuck you leave that for this, boy?"

I know he's baiting me. My ass cheeks tighten in hopes I give a satisfactory answer. "Sir, to join the Marine Corps." He holds his hand to my face.

"Who is this blonde?"

"Sir, that is this private's mother, sir!"

"This is your mom? Holy shit, we got to show this to the Senior Drill Instructor." I follow Sergeant Hernandez about twenty paces to the DI quarters. "Senior Drill Instructor, you have to see this." He places the picture on the desk.

"Who's this hot Jodi?"

"You ready for this? This is old Private Mashefski's mom."

"You shitting me?"

"Sir, no, sir, that is this private's mother, sir."

"At ease, Mashefski. Listen up. We're gonna make you proud. I want your mom's picture up on the hog board."

The hog board, aka the motivation board, is a large, rectangular bulletin board that hangs in the upper right corner of our squad bay, just outside the DI quarters. It holds pictures of hot girlfriends and/or female acquaintances from back home.

On that rare occasion that we perform well, we are allowed to line up and, one-by-one, get a few seconds in front of the hog board. It can be motivating. I have held the vision of a few bikini-wearing babes, sent to our Florida contingent, in the dark crevices of my mind. There is no way my mom is going to provide those thoughts to anyone in Platoon 3311.

"Sir, no, sir. This private's mother's picture will not hang on the hog board, sir." Sergeant Hernandez storms into my face like a pit bull on a t-bone. The man is a human pit bull, squat body with a huge head. If he weighs 160, his skull has to be at least 50 pounds of that.

“Who the fuck you think you are, boy? I will rip out your fucking throat. You don’t say no to my Senior Drill instructor, now take this picture and hang it on that hog board before I stomp you to dust!”

“Sir, no, sir!”

“That’s it. Sergeant Hernandez, take his ass to the quarter deck. Make him dig.”

“With pleasure, Senior Drill Instructor.” He pushes the brim of his cover into the bridge of my nose. All I see is the top of his cover. He brings his voice to a sadistic whisper. “You’re all mine, Mashefski. When I’m done with you, we’ll be mopping up what’s left of you into a bucket.” He pulls his head back, rises on his toes, shoves a finger into my face, and raises his voice to a sonic pitch. “Now get your ass on the quarter deck!”

There are two places you never want to be in Parris Island. One is the pit, a large sandbox that can accommodate an entire platoon. They are found everywhere throughout the battalion grounds. A ‘pit stop’ is made to get your mind right. We are mobbed there for high cardiovascular exercise, humiliation, and flea bites we never dare slap at or scratch.

The other is the quarter deck. A lonely stretch of cold, cement floor between our bunks and the DI quarters. It is reserved for those who piss off a DI. Sergeant Hernandez specializes in the quarter deck, as he seems to be perpetually pissed off.

He keeps me waiting there, standing at attention, taking his time to come from the quarters. No one dares to stare unless they want to join me. They just go about their free time routines.

With the goal to wear my ass out, Sergeant Hernandez storms out of the quarters. He sports a serious look of determination. I, too, am determined. This is one battle of wills which

will not be conceded. He's not going to break me. My mind is made up. Screw this big-headed fuck.

“Dig.”

“Sir, aye, aye, sir!”

I drop to the floor, hands on the deck, ass semi-protruding toward the ceiling, and I begin pulling alternating knees to my chest.

“Faster. Faster. Push ups. Jumping jacks. On your back, leg raises, hold it, hold it.” He continues an onslaught of commands like some fitness instructor from hell. My heart is pounding. Sweat begins to pour from my face. “You are fucking up my beloved quarter deck with your nastiness. You will swab your disgusting sweat if you don't die first. You hear me!”

“Sir, this private will not die, sir!”

“Oh, now you're gonna tell me what you're gonna do? I'll tell you if you'll die or not, you hear me, boy?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” I say between gasping breaths. The routine goes on for the remainder of free time. Driven by love and family pride, I keep pace. My heart pounds as though it will explode from my chest. The Protestants are returning.

Just when he thinks I am broken, he stops me to ask if I am ready to pin my mother's picture to the hog board, but my will to refuse does not die. Will not die. He digs me even harder.

“Push-ups. Up. Down, slow. Hold it, hold it. Do I see your arms quaking?”

“Sir, no, sir.”

“You keep holding it, boy. Senior Drill Instructor, I think old Mashefski might be ready to reconsider.”

I hear the tapping of the Senior's highly polished shoes approaching. He stands above me as I hold my half push up. Pain tears through my arms. Gunnery Sergeant Reeves bends to place my mother's picture under my face, sweat dripping onto her smiling image. "You ready to hang this picture and share motivation with your platoon, boy?"

"Sir, no, sir, this private's mother's picture will not hang on the hog board, sir!"

"You disrespecting me, boy?" His voice barrels through the berthing area like a freight train. I can hear the rustling of my platoon come to a quick silence.

"Sir, no, sir!"

"Cause you're pissing me off. You know that, don't you? Do you need more quarter deck, asshole?"

"Sir, bring it on, sir!" He stands there in a brief moment of silence. My arms shake, my chest heaves, perspiration flows from my face, my t-shirt sopping wet.

"Pick up your picture, Mashefski, stand the fuck up." He holds two fingers to my face. "You have two fucking weeks to get me a hog-board-worthy picture or I will kill you next time. You hear me, boy?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

He leans to my right ear and whispers. "You have ten minutes to get your ass to the pay phones and call home. Get. Me. A. Picture. If you don't, I will dig your ass to hell. Understood?"

"Sir, aye, aye sir!"

"Double-time, scum bag!"

I run through the squad bay. Down the steps. Hitting the walkway, I burst upon the bank of pay phones like Walter Payton to the end zone. My hand is shaking as I jam my finger into the dial to get a collect call home.



“Mom, mom, I don’t have much time.”

“Oh my God, JoJo. I don’t believe it. Joe, our son is on the phone!”

“Mom, listen, you gotta do me a favor.” I rapidly explain the situation.

Without hesitation. Without question. “We’ll take care of it.” I dart back to the barracks arriving without fanfare.

Next Sunday, free time. I rip into an envelope to find a picture from home. A topless woman sits on the washing machine in the utility room of my dad’s bar. She’s a regular. I am sure she drank free that night. I present it to my Senior Drill Instructor.

Smiling, “You did good, Mashefski.”

He tells me the picture isn’t right for the hog board. He is placing it in the ‘motivation manual.’ I had no idea this even existed. It’s a special photo album residing in the bottom left drawer of his desk.

He allows me to quickly thumb through it. It’s like an amateur Penthouse Magazine. He snatches it from my hands, throws it into the drawer and locks the desk. “Get the fuck out of here, Mashefski.” A few days later I am promoted to platoon guide.