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Hurricane Training

Jerry Howard

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Hurricane Training Jerry Howard

Justin stood at attention in front of the cadet barracks, focused on the top of Gunny's polished head. The rest of his platoon counted in unison. Anyone, civilian or cadet, was welcomed to accompany the Raiders for PT. Gunny used PT sessions as a means for daring students to join his beloved Marine Corps. Those sleeping in civilian dorms near the drill field sometimes complained of the noise. Platoon members frequently shouted, "RAIDERS!!" as they ran past in unison at 5:25 a.m. Annoying the campus throughout the morning was held in high regard.

"Hey, Hulio, bein' late ain't a personal problem, it's a unit problem. Apparently, no one has told Midshipman Harris here how to properly organize and execute a sufficiently effective plan with the alarm clock! So while you get strong, he's going to BAMCIS his way to punctuality! Midshipman Harris, we patiently await your verbal OSMEAC. Enjoy the view."

Gunnery Sergeant Ramirez's thick, Brooklyn accent deepened his bark. Under his shaved pate, his features resembled Mr. Clean minus the earring. Thick-set, Hispanic, at five feet, nine inches, he personified the bulldog Marine, with attitude to match. His stout Napoleonic demeanor dwarfed anyone who stood near him.

Gunny's wrath began with two hundred four-count flutter kicks, followed by fifty eight-count body builders. Ninety-five percent humidity and the stifling heat of the Appalachian summer intensified the platoon's misery. Gunny circled them, hands behind his back.

Forced to stand and watch while his teammates got strong, Justin lowered his head. All this just to tell him to keep the alarm clock across the room.

"Midshipman Harris! Midshipman Harris! Have we thought of plan yet?! Hello, Hulio! Hello! What are we gonna do?! What is the plan?! Speak up mutha-fucka!"

"To put the alarm clock across the room, sir!"

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“Sir?! Sir?! Oh, so you’ve lost your freakin mind now?! I know I didn’t just get promoted! My pay sure as hell didn’t change! You think I’d be out here if I was a freakin’ sir?”

“No, Gunny! To put the alarm clock across the room, GUNNY!”

“Okay crazies, get your asses up! Platoon commander, carry out the plan of the day.”

“Aye, Gunny.” Justin joined the platoon, to a cadre of angry glares as they completed the rest of the PT session.

The alarm clock beeped. Justin leaped from the top rack, crossed the room, and smacked the off button. He put on his olive drab PT shirt and camouflage trousers. Lightning flashed. His black combat boots shimmered with a spit shine. Thunder cracked while rain battered the roof.

“Why am I even doing this?” He closed the door quietly.

“Midshipman Harris reporting,” Justin told the platoon guide in the basement room of the Marine Corps and Naval ROTC offices. Wiping his face, he leaned towards another freshman.

“Is it not crazy out there? Did word come down yet? Are we still doing the Boots and Utes run?”

“Word is a hundred people had to be rescued last night. Three hundred homes were wrecked. Mountains and hurricanes don’t mix, apparently.”

The platoon commander entered. “Gunny’s five minutes out. Form up outside.”

The platoon scrambled through the exit and arranged formation in the wet grass.

Gunny paced in front of the platoon. “Okay, Hulios, you stupid mutha-fuckas will be pleased to know ...”

Justin exhaled a sigh of relief; the weather was cancelling the exercise.

“Hurricane Fran has been downgraded to a tropical storm, and if ain’t rainin’, we ain’t trainin’!”

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Justin's jaw dropped. Rain peppered his face. Drips from the brim of his cover fell in slow motion.

"Platoon commander, carry out the mutha fuckin' plan of the day."

"Aye Gunny." The platoon commander saluted and faced the platoon.

"Riiiiight, Face! Forwaaaaaad march! Dou-ble time, march!"

Jogging away from the exterior lights of the offices, the buildings disappeared from view. Behind walls of blackness, a crescendo of wind, rain, and thundercracks masked their cadence.

The swollen mountain creeks overran the roads, treacherous in the low light of zero dark thirty, still an hour before sunrise. Thick clouds and rain held back daybreak. Streetlamps along the edge of the drill field provided the only light.

They ran on, blinded by rain and wind. Justin strained to focus on the back of the next rat's head. Gusts pushed platoon members out of formation. Strokes of lightning lit the drill field, changing the terrain with each flash. Trees, bushes, and roads appeared as images then vanished in the blackness. The platoon left the grass and pavement for a dirt road.

A thunder crash Justin jump. He resisted the urge to plug his ears by tightening his fists. The streetlamps disappeared; campus power failed.

"Hey! Hey, Hulio! Platoon Commander, I know we're not using that bridge! Marines, bein' amphibious in nature, move through the water, not around it!"

"Aye, Gunny! Guide, you heard him."

"Aye, sir!" The guide led the column of officer candidates toward the rising, rushing water. Justin swallowed hard as they approached the embankment.

Gunny insisted the column of students move upstream instead of crossing perpendicular, extending the length of the exercise.

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“We gotta get properly warmed up!”

Justin hadn't learned to doggie paddle until age eleven. He struggled with swimming. His heart rate spiked as he fought the current. Each step in the flashing water brought it closer to his head, until the stream covered his chin and mouth.

“Listen, crazies, I don't care if you have to grab your nuts or your ovaries or whatever you got to get up shit creek, but we will overcome this terrain!”

The rain fell hard. Splashing into his nose, the torrent seemed to deepen. Justin attempted a weak breaststroke but fell out of the column into a current that shoved against each movement. Trying to regain his footing caused him to submerge. Bouncing off the creek bed, he surfaced, gasping. He ducked under and pushed up again, then inhaled. Under, up again, inhale. Justin didn't drown but lost his sense of direction. Disoriented, he could only move against the current's thrust.

The water over his ears muffled his hearing. Gunny's instructions became barely audible: “When Marines emerge, we low crawl to keep our fuckin' heads from gettin' shot off, so there betta' not be any clean faces comin' up the other side.”

“Low crawling, aye, Gunny!”

Crawling out of the water, exhaustion kept Justin from raising his head. He ground his face deep into the sludge and wriggled on his belly up the hill.

Their run continued. Soaked, Justin's groin chafed. The lightning gave only brief looks at his drenched surroundings. At the campus amphitheater, the lowest two rows of seating were underwater. Tree limbs littered the flooding earth.

Looping near the drill field, the platoon halted on submerged gravel. The boys formed one row, and began field drills in three inches of water.

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“Count off!”

They alternated between one and two. Justin paired up with Dahlquist, whom Gunny called ‘Dogbreath.’

“Attrition is our mission,” Gunny howled. “If you quit, it’s over, misery included. But you stupid fucks want to get my salute one day, you betta earn it! You can’t be half in and expect to lead marines. If you think a hurricane is risky, how about a second lieutenant who still doesn’t know what he wants to be when he grows up? That’s fuckin’ dangerous!”

They did wheelbarrow sprints. With little upper body strength and a large midsection, Dogbreath crept ahead on his hands. Next, they crab walked. Dogbreath hindered their pace, drawing Gunny’s ire.

“Hey, Crazies! I know we’re not draggin’ ass! And we’re not standing around either. We do continuous push-ups while we wait. And if your chest doesn’t hit water, your push-up isn’t low enough!”

“Aye, Gunny!”

Bear crawls and eight-count body builders followed. Mountain climbers, one-legged plank pushups, three-second squats, and single clap pushups mounted into anguish. Every exercise had a debilitating twist in a never-ending series of drills. More low crawling, this time carrying your partner. With Dogbreath on his back and his head on the ground, Justin’s torture continued. His cheek and temple scraped the stones and his chafed groin was afire. His bruised knees and shredded forearms stung in the grit of the mud.

After the order to stand, Justin rubbed specks of gravel from his palms. Even through the rain, he tasted the salt of sweat on his lips. Panting, an odd and unexpected warmth and calm flowed into his cheeks and jaws.

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“I’m actually still alive.”

Barely audible over the downpour, Gunny issued their final directive: “In combat, you’re never gonna know who will need to be carried to safety. Dogbreath, you’re dead.”

Dogbreath fell to the ground. Gunny killed half the other platoon members while sheet lightning flashed on the bodies littering the wet earth. Those remaining were ordered to fireman carry the dead to an unknown rally point.

Gunny headed opposite the drill field. Stocky, but nimble, the lightning made him materialize in other locations when he moved. In seconds, he appeared over fifty yards away, returning to the raging creek.

Mustering all his strength, Justin hoisted Dogbreath across his shoulders. Dogbreath was the same height as Justin but weighed fifty pounds more. Justin gained his feet slowly. Out of Gunny’s view, Dogbreath pushed against the small of Justin’s back to assist.

Dogbreath spoke into Justin’s ear. “I’ll do my best to help. But you got this.”

Justin’s legs shook, his back ached. Dark rain fell through his eyelashes. Again, he followed the man in front.

The creek cheered Justin’s every step. His mind raced with his heartbeat. Was he going to drown Dogbreath, and himself? Did Gunny not see him barely survive the water the first time across?

Near the stream’s bank, Justin sank ankle-deep in mud. Entering the creek, Dogbreath’s weight steadied him against the current. In the approaching dawn, the landscape was becoming at last visible, finite, and conquerable.

Gunny led them in circles to a different creek where the water was only waist deep. The rain weakened as Justin thrashed through the water. This time, he didn’t just struggle through,

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Justin attacked the embankment and dug each step hard into the hillside. Every muscle burned with Dogbreath secured across his shoulders. Justin growled and clawed to the top of the bank. Cresting the hill, the platoon commander appeared in the growing light. He motioned Justin to join the rest of the platoon and form up.

Justin stamped past Gunny who stared nowhere but at him, slowly nodding. Justin roared, “RAIDERRRRRRS!!”

He set Dogbreath down and joined the platoon. All the boys echoed his yell.

Straightening up, Justin stood tall, chin up and out. He fixed his gaze on nothing and everything. Dogbreath leaned over to whisper, “Man, you were born for this shit.”