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A Day in the Life of a Beanhead

Patrick Potter

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Bright sunshine gleamed off wet raw granite, the gray cliff rising just ten feet from my window in New South Barracks. Mid-April promised a bright, fresh spring, but snowmelt from recent snowstorms kept the ground soggy, and water rivulets dribbled down the cliff outside.

I wore my PT uniform - white socks, black shorts, and a T-shirt emblazoned with the US Military Academy crest and my name. My class uniform lay on my bed, a lower bunk, still warm from my hustling out of it.

With a growing alarm, I again searched the floor for my black Keds gym shoes.

“Shit.” I blanked for an instant. “Shit, shit, shit.”

I knew what happened. I’d forgotten to grab the Keds with the rest of my gear on my way to the room after my first period math class.

The situation was dire. I had 12 minutes to make it to the gym for my Plebe wrestling class. Neither of my roommates were available to help. If I was late for class, I’d get at least four demerits. To avoid trouble with upperclassmen, I had to change back into my complete class uniform including tie, shoes and hat, to traverse the hall to retrieve the Keds, then change back into gym uniform and try to make it to the gym in time. Long odds.

“Shit,” I said again. *Don’t freeze up or spaz out.* That had been drilled into us in the Class of 1974, constantly and forcefully, since our First of July Reception Day and the start of Beast Barracks. Beast was a distant memory now, as we’d progressed ten months into the academic year.

I had to go for it. The locker room lay six rooms down the corridor, Most upperclassmen had already left for their classes. The few who remained were probably in a rush and wouldn’t

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pay close attention to a beanhead marching down the hall. Beanhead - the most popular nomenclature for a freshman in the West Point Fourth Class or Plebe Cadet System. Supposedly, it wasn't demeaning, only descriptive of dumb creatures learning a new system and way of life. Learning it real hard, I'd say.

I grabbed the doorknob, listening intently. No sound from the hall. I decisively opened the door, passed through, closed it quietly, marched four paces to the opposite wall, made a right-facing movement and proceeded toward the company locker room at the end of the long corridor. After a couple of paces, a voice boomed behind me.

“MISTER Potter!”

I froze. “Yes, SIR!”

I drew myself into an even stricter position of attention, almost a brace. That would come later. Was it the voice of Mister Florer, a Second Classman, or Cow, the biggest ‘flamer’ of all our Company’s upperclassmen? God, I hoped not. Heels clicked down the waxed linoleum floor, mocking the fact that in stockinged feet, my every movement was silent.

“Well, well, well. What do we have here? Have you decided to wander the halls in improper uniform? I suppose you find this more relaxing?”

I did a right-facing movement toward my tormentor, eerily silent without the sound of clicking heels, and replied, “No, Sir!” It wasn't Florer, but a Yearling named Jones. He had a reputation as annoying; always happy to make life unpleasant for Plebes, though he was one himself only a year ago. He was in the squad behind ours in formations, so I'd formed some opinion of him from hearing his frequent berating of his squad's Plebes.

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“I don’t have time, at this moment, to inquire about your puny-minded decisions on what uniform to wear, but you post around to my room after dinner. We’ll discuss proper uniforms, understand?”

“Yes, Sir!” As I responded, with my chin tucked in and my eyes lowered, I noted he carried two textbooks and his slide rule. Likely his next class started the same time as mine. At least he hadn’t ordered me back to my room to re-don my complete class uniform. He probably hadn’t thought of that extra bit of sublime harassment.

I proceeded to the locker room to secure my gym shoes, then got myself to the gym at a prescribed Plebe double-time. On the way, I went through the many items of Plebe Knowledge, or ‘poop,’ I was required to know. I hadn’t had to brace and recite poop for almost a month. My classmates and I, like all Plebes for generations, often had to post around to get inspected and receive updates from upperclassmen on all manner of things. The good thing is that by this time of year, some jokes, humor and personal observations were thrown in, in addition to the inspection, testing of Plebe knowledge, and general beratings. Some sessions turned into a form of socializing, sometimes even getting advice on aspects of cadet life.

Now, for Mister Jones’ benefit, I’d have to review the required knowledge that the 4th Class System deemed appropriate for every beanhead to have memorized, ready for instant regurgitation. As I double-timed to the gym, I reviewed the required knowledge and focused on my shortfalls.

Among fifty-ish items of pure nonsense, such as “How’s the Cow?” There were also useful items such as the chain of command, the names of all government department heads, names of USMA academic deans, as well as all the varsity sports coaches. Included in Plebe

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knowledge: General Orders, the Code of Conduct, the Soldier's Creed, and 'The Days' (number of days, or hours, to the start of key events). Then there was almost a dozen songs, cheers, and chants including the Star Spangled Banner, the Alma Mater, along with many miscellaneous items of plebe lore and tradition, ranging from MacArthur's Messages to the Corps, to the number of names on Battle Monument, to such mundane things as the beverage preferences of the upperclassman who sat at each 10-man mess hall table, usually serviced by three Plebes (designated as Cold Beverage Corporal, Hot Beverage Corporal, and Gunner or Dessert Cutter).

Ironically, the one item that most Plebes liked was General Schofield's Definition of Discipline, which started:

“The discipline which makes the soldiers of a free country reliable in battle is not to be gained by harsh or tyrannical treatment. On the contrary, such treatment is far more likely to destroy than to make an army. It is possible to impart instruction and to give commands in such a manner and such a tone of voice to inspire in the soldier no feeling but an intense desire to obey, while the opposite manner and tone of voice cannot fail to excite strong resentment and desire to disobey.”

To us beanheads, the incompatibility between these lofty words and the 4th Class System seemed ironic! The contrast probably made this bit of Plebe poop easier to memorize.

Before dinner, my two roommates and I had less than ten minutes to change from intramural sports uniforms into Dress Gray, for dinner formation. I'd told them the story of my morning misfortune with Mister Jones.

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Ray, who hailed from Long Island, razzed me in his nasal, raspy accent. “Potter, you take too many fucking chances. You’ve got to toe the line, not be a dumb-ass. You’re going to get a load of shit brought down on all of us if you’re not careful.”

“Damn, I couldn’t help it. I was about to be late for class.” I felt curious as to what he would have done, but didn’t want to hear any preachy BS, even if useful. Ray was a couple years older, had spent time at a local college and a year at the USMA Prep School. He showed a steady hand compared to me and our other roommate, Rob. Like me, Rob was just out of high school, but from a large, high-achieving family in central Ohio.

“I don’t have time for a bunch of crap. I can’t remember the names of some Department Heads like the Air Force, Commerce and Transportation. Also, coaches of Tennis and Cross-Country. Can you help me out?” I asked, or demanded, from a growing sense of desperation.

“Air Force is Robert Seamans, Jr. You can remember that by remembering the Air Force as a junior service. That’s what I do anyway,” Ray responded. He benefited from an excellent memory, as did Rob. Rob provided the other two from a set of notes he had meticulously filed away; Maurice Sans for Commerce and John A. Volpe for Transportation. No one could remember the names of the coaches for Tennis and Cross-Country Teams.

Meanwhile, our brother Plebes who had ‘Minute Caller’ duty were announcing three minutes until formation, so we hustled out into the busy corridor, down the steps and into formation.

After dinner, I posted to Mister Jones’ room. Lucky for me he was in a good mood, or just not willing to waste his time with a beanhead. Most of his hazing revolved around me not

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knowing “The Days” thoroughly, and not being able to quickly name all the Cadet uniforms to his satisfaction; a topic which I hadn’t thought of, but should have. In general, Jones and his roommate were far more interested in the letters they were composing to girls back home. Later they got on the topic of an English composition paper that was due, but with less enthusiasm. Naturally, they didn’t ask a single question about the Plebe poop that I had reviewed. Shortly, and seemingly annoyed with my presence, Jones said “Get the hell out of my sight, Potter. And don’t fuck around with uniforms no more.”

“Yes, Sir!” I responded with a serious mien. I didn’t want to take any chances of more trouble. Rumor control indicated that some classmates were acting ‘BJ’ or ‘bold before June’ and the much-anticipated Plebe Recognition parade. I didn’t need the problem of being considered a BJ Plebe.

I marched toward my room, passing many open doors with upperclassmen studying or completing other activities, in many stages of dress or undress. Most wore bathrobes or class jackets over their class trousers or skivvies, as our ‘Rockbound Highland Home’ still retained an evening chill. Music poured from the door of most upperclassman rooms: lots of Jackson Five, Three Dog Night, and songs like *Make It with You*, *War*, *Ain’t No Mountain High Enough*, *My Sweet Lord*, and others streamed from the doors. Oh, to be an upperclassman and gain those many privileges! That was a thought uppermost in every Plebes’ mind. I’d checked out some sound systems during Christmas break, along with quality Bose speakers.

I made it back to the relative sanctuary of my room. Both roommates were deep into their studies, but appeared glad for the interruption.

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“Yer back soon, what’d ya have to do, give Jonesie-boy a blow job?” quipped Ray as Rob looked on, smirking.

“No, but the dumb fuck wanted me to name all the uniforms this place has issued us. According to him, there’s nine, but I didn’t remember that we’re supposed to be issued dress whites for the summer. I also left out ‘as for swimming’ which isn’t a uniform in my opinion.”

Rob, analytical by nature, stopped smiling. “That’s not right,” he said, mentally calculating. “It should be ten if you count Long and short overcoats.”

Meanwhile, Ray threw in, with a barely concealed chortle, “*Your* opinion don’t mean shit! You ought to know that by now.”

“I don’t care how many it is!” I retorted. “The dumb mother-fucker just wanted to waste my time. I’ve got six or eight hours of studying, and only three hours till Lights Out,” I vented.

“He’s an asshole,” interjected Ray. “I heard him talking to his beanheads, saying they’re starting to act BJ. I don’t even know if I want to shake his hand and be recognized by a jerk like him.”

Rob spoke up, “No, man, you’ll be happy as hell when that day rolls around. It’s only 55 and a butt days now. We can forget about hazing, square meals and memorizing the crap in the regulations and our Bugle Notes bible. Plus, most upperclassmen are pretty cool. Did you hear that Mister Lind is being considered for the Olympic Biathlon team, and Mister Palguta may apply for an Olmstead Scholarship?” Both were Firsties in our company, and highly respected by all.

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“The only thing I need to know is which ones have hot-looking sisters that want to put out,” said Ray abruptly. He always sought to get the last word in.

At that moment, two loud raps reverberated from the door and it slammed open. Our squad leader, Mister Legere, strode in, wearing gym shorts and a Navy bathrobe he must have won at an Army-Navy game. We jumped to attention, facing him.

“You men studying?”

“Yes, Sir,” we said as in a chorus.

“Good. . . Potter, I see your math grades are still headed south. Are you two helping your classmate out, or just letting him go under?”

“Yes, Sir,” they both replied. Unfortunately, their tutoring wasn’t that useful, as I understood few of the increasingly complicated aspects of differential equations. I’d have to focus more on that in my limited ‘free’ time.

“Well, pick up the pace. I want to see his grades turning around ASAP. Got it?”

“Yes, Sir,” we replied, again in unnatural unison. He gave us a look and shook his head.

“But that’s not why I’m here,” he continued. “I’m here because the CO noticed that some of you beanheads stink to high heaven, so there’s a shower formation in ten minutes. Be ready and in the corridor at 2030.” He strode out, slamming the door.

The shower call provided a brief period to relax sore, stiff muscles that almost continuously held us in poses of attention, or over-exerted during Plebe athletics, intramural sports or periodic obstacle courses. Back in our room, I hit math hard, to the detriment of my other courses. With Ray’s knowledgeable but impatient assistance, I worked out a couple of

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concepts and recognized a few equations needed to solve the problems in our current chapter. At lights out, I took my French textbook into my bunk to read by flashlight, to be at least minimally ready for the next day's class. We all had duties the next morning, so we planned to get up just before six a.m. reveille. Rob and I were Minute Callers, and Ray had newspaper distribution duty.

Before sleep overcame me, I gave a moment's thought to my many challenges, and the chances that I might not make the grade. Every day had risks, and both roommates had made good points about our situation. At least we were united as Classmates, squad-mates and roommates. We had already lost over 15% of our Class, either for deficiency in academics, physical or athletic problems, or insufficient motivation. In a small, tired part of my being, I resolved to hang in and avoid unnecessary risks. Verses from the Alma Mater gave me extra resolve, just as I sank into deep sleep.

*“Hail Alma Mater dear,
To us be ever near.
Help us thy motto bear
Through all the years.
Let Duty be well performed.
Honor be e'er untarned.
Country be ever armed.
West Point, by thee.”*