

Becoming a Marine: Re-socialization for a Higher Purpose

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In a film we saw in class recently, one of the speakers, Dr. John Houghton was speaking on socialization. One remark he made, to the effect that what we, as individuals, become is based on what chances we are given and what we learn (Research Methods, 1996), was considered so important that it was repeated again at the end of the film. His statement fits perfectly with the topic of this study: the re-socialization of young men into the warrior society of the United States Marine Corps. Unlike the recruiting efforts of the other services, which seem to focus on what you have to gain by serving with them, the Marine Corps' recruiting philosophy has always been one of challenging; giving young men the chance to prove that they have what it takes to be U.S. Marines. "We Never Promised You a Rose Garden," "Take up the Challenge," and "The Marine are Looking for a Few Good Men" are all recruiting slogans aimed at inviting prospective Marines to prove they have what it takes to be a Marine. This philosophy seems to work because the Marine Corps is the one branch of service that consistently meets its recruiting goals year after year. The question here is whether or not the re-socialization process is necessary and does it serve a useful purpose. If it does, what is that purpose?

To the best of my knowledge there has never been a sociological study of the effects of Marine recruit training, and only one or two non-fiction books have been written about the training of male Marine recruits, most by someone who never served in the Corps. This paper will make reference to those works, but for the most part will rely on the experiences of the author, a Marine for more than 30 years; five of those as a drill instructor whose primary duty

was to turn young men into Marines. I should note that Marine Officer candidates, male and female, go through a different type of training, as do females enlistees. Having no experience with either of these, my focus will be on male recruit training and the socialization that they experience through 12 weeks of recruit training.

Recruit training is broken into four distinct phases: Forming/Processing, about one week; first phase, four weeks; second phase, 4 weeks; and third phase, three weeks. Each of these phases is designed to place different, and progressively more intense, physical and mental stress on the recruit. The psychological pressures are much more intense than the physical ones and serve to impress upon the recruit the importance of adapting to the demands this new society places upon him and the punishment he can expect if he fails. Unlike society in general, a Marine recruit learns that transgressions will result in swift, certain, and severe punishment. Unlike the civilian world; however, punishment is often meted out en masse, to the entire platoon. The principal being that, when you make a mistake as a civilian, the only person you hurt is you, but when a Marine makes a mistake, it may cost other Marines their lives. This mass punishment serves to place extreme peer pressure on the recruit in addition to the stress brought to bear by the rigors of training and the omnipresence of the drill instructor (DI). All this serves to force the recruit to adapt as quickly as possible to his new society.

At the start of training, each platoon of recruits receives a "Welcome Aboard" speech from the Training Battalion Commander. During this speech, it is noted that Marine recruit training is the toughest challenge, outside of combat, that America has to offer its young men. It is a challenge these recruits have voluntarily chosen to undertake, and nothing less than a 100% effort on their part will be acceptable.

Although outside the scope of this study, it should be noted that the phrase *Once a Marine, Always a Marine*, is a testament to the everlasting effect that recruit training, and the subsequent term of enlistment, has on individuals. The Marine Corps is steeped in pride and tradition, and nowhere is the concept of a "Band of Brothers" stronger. The socialization, once achieved, can never be completely undone. Thousands of former Marines (there is no such thing as an ex-Marine) belong to Marine Corps League Chapters, Unit Alumni Associations, spend untold thousands of dollars on Marine paraphernalia, can't wait to slap a Marine Corps bumper sticker on their new car, and gather, year after year, to celebrate the Marine Corps' birthday.

Any look at the Marine socialization process must naturally begin with the primary socialization force, the Drill Instructor. Where do they come from? How are they chosen? How are they trained? The typical Marine Corps Drill Instructor is a Sergeant or Staff Sergeant, between 23 and 35-years old, has 5-12 years of active service under his belt and has proven himself extremely proficient in his military occupational specialty (job) and as a leader. He undergoes a rigorous screening process to ensure he is physically and psychologically fit to undertake the process of re-socializing young men into Marines. He will attend a two-month Drill Instructor School and receive training in physical conditioning, techniques of military instruction, and be thoroughly indoctrinated in all aspects of male recruit training. He will undergo additional psychological evaluation, consisting of taking the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and face-to-face interviews with psychologists, to further determine his fitness for this duty. It is not unusual for one-third or more of each drill instructor class to fail to complete the training, and the greatest single reason for being dropped from the school is being found psychologically unfit. The reward for successfully completing Drill Instructor School is three years of 80-100 hour work weeks, existing in a "fishbowl"

environment, and knowing that the slightest mistake could cost you your career. Despite this, it remains one of the most sought after duties in the Corps and a sure ticket to advanced rank, following a successful tour.

As stated earlier, recruit training is divided into four distinct phases, encompassing myriad subjects. I will attempt to concentrate only upon those that contribute most directly to the socialization process. Recruits, regardless of their varied backgrounds, are all generally familiar with what to expect while in recruit training. There have been numerous movies that depict "Marine Boot Camp" in all its profane, frenetic glory. *Full Metal Jacket* and *The DI* are two of the better-known Hollywood presentations. Additionally, recruiters are required to forewarn the recruit, prior to his shipping out, as to what he can expect. They've also heard stories from former Marines, friends and family, each more than happy to share their own boot camp experiences. Despite all that, nothing quite prepares them for their initial welcome to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot.

Retired Marine Major Gene Duncan (1980), a veteran of 29 years service and two wars, describes Marine recruit training as "Boot Camp for new Marines where the DI has a few short weeks to correct eighteen years of bad habits, no values, meism, and momism" (p. xxx). The corrections begin immediately. By design, recruits arrive late in the evening. They arrive tired, hungry, disoriented, many away from home for the first time. They are scared, apprehensive, and unsure of exactly what the next few hours, not to mention the next three months, will bring. Their re-socialization starts before they are even off the bus. A DI enters the bus and in a loud and booming voice that insures he will not be misunderstood or ignored, instructs the recruits to gather their belonging, exit the bus, and take their places on the yellow footprints on the sidewalk next to the bus. Thomas Ricks (1997) describes what happens next.

They charge off the bus onto rows of yellow footprints painted on the asphalt: in their first moment on the ground at Parris Island, they also have stepped into the Marine Corps' powerful and distinctive culture. The footprints, four to a row, eighteen rows, are so closely packed that the newcomers can't be seen as individuals. Standing nearly heel to toe in the dark night their faces hardly visible, and their bodies become one mass. The effect is intentional: Marine Corps culture is the culture of the group, made up of members who are anonymous (p. 29).

The re-socialization process has begun! Already they are being taught how to stand in their new environment. The DI will explain the position of attention, the "basic military position from which most other drill movements are executed" (COD Manual, 1980 p.2-2), from head to toe; the recruits will spend hours on end standing at attention here in their new society. Additionally, the DI will explain several articles from the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ).

This new society comes complete with its own set of laws, completely alien to the recruit's former lifestyle. Things like disobedience of a lawful order, unauthorized absence, desertion, disrespect toward a noncommissioned officer, and even silent contempt (a dirty look) are concepts unheard of in their previous society. All are against the rules now, and violations are dealt with severely. Ricks quotes from a speech by Marine Corps Commandant General Charles Krulak, "We're getting [recruits] from a society that is in many ways disintegrating...unless there is a change in this nation, this problem is going to manifest itself in larger proportion as we go along" (pp.38-9). There will be no manifestation of disintegration in their new society.

Next, the recruits are taken inside and deprived, in turn, of their personal effects, their civilian clothing, and their hair. Heads are completely shorn. They are issued basic uniforms consisting of camouflaged trousers and cover (hat), a gray sweatshirt, and a pair of running

shoes. They are completely stripped of their individuality, so cherished by their former civilian society, and are assigned a role call number. Their platoon number will be spray painted onto their sweatshirts. They have now been assigned a new identity and relegated to the very bottom of their new society, where they will remain for the next three months.

By now, many of these recruits have been awake for more than 20 hours and the stress is beginning to take its toll. This new society; however, demands that its members learn to thrive on stress and there will be no time wasted in teaching this to the newest members. The next week is spent accomplishing administrative tasks required before training can begin in earnest: medical and dental exams, uniform issue, and lessons in things like the basic terminology of this new society and rudimentary close-order drill. They are kept tired and under stress, and many begin to believe that they have made a mistake; that this new society is not for them. Soon, they will look back on these processing days with fond memories.

The recruits will be denied all the basic diversions of the typical American youth-
-television, cigarettes, cars, candy, soft drinks, video games, music, alcohol,
drugs, and sex. Unlike in the other military services, they won't train alongside
women. (Ricks, 1997, p. 43).

Upon the completion of the processing, the new recruits are "dropped" to the training company DI's who will be with them for the next eleven weeks, 24-hours a day, 7-days a week, watching, training, criticizing, punishing, controlling every aspect of their lives. By now they have been issued nametags, which are worn to identify them by last name. They will soon realize, however, that at this point in their new society anonymity is the key to a less painful existence. To be noticed means you screwed up, and that equals punishment and extra attention from the DI's, always guaranteed to be painful.

The emphasis of these four weeks of first phase will be on physical training, close-order drill, and intensive indoctrination into this new society; all accomplished in an environment of ever-increasing stress. Such things as how to walk, talk, eat, sleep, sit, and properly wear this new society's clothing all need to be learned--quickly. Physical fitness will be a basic requirement now and for their entire term of service. Additionally, physical toughness will help them develop the self-discipline and mental toughness required to function and thrive in a high-stress environment. They will find that the mistakes of one are paid for by all - a necessary step in both establishing the concept of teamwork and learning how to accept responsibility. Hours are spent on close-order drill as a means of instilling "a high state of discipline which assures respect for authority, instant and willing obedience to orders, teamwork and unit spirit" (COD Manual, 1980, p.1-9) that this new society demands of all its members.

There will be times when lives will be at stake, or need to be risked, in the accomplishment of a mission, and there will be no time for orders to be questioned. This will be one of the most important concepts recruits learn. In addition, the recruits will receive instruction on such subjects as first aid, Marine Corps history, military customs and courtesies, and a hundred other things their new society will require of them. AT ALL TIMES, they will be under the watchful eyes of their DIs, always there to catch every mistake, punish every transgression, correct every misstep, and maintain the stress at a nearly intolerable level. Many recruits will be found mentally unsuitable for this new society and more will be physically unable to make the transition. They will be dropped from training, discharged and sent home. Most, however, will begin to make the adaptation and be ready to move on into second phase.

In first phase, the main emphasis is on physically and psychologically re-socializing the recruit into his new life; breaking down the civilian socialization so as to replace it with

something better. Second phase emphasis is shifted more toward Marine field craft: weapons training, rifle marksmanship, ever-increasing physical conditioning, hand-to-hand combat, and water survival training. Despite this change in focus, the DI's remain ever vigilant to catch and correct unacceptable behavior. Having moved on to second phase, the recruits are held to an even higher standard of adherence to societal norms, and the consequences for lapses grow more and more severe.

Many recruits arrive at boot camp having no experience of any kind with weapons. Some may have been raised in homes where weapons and violence were an anathema. In a society that considers "Every Marine A Rifleman," these recruits, will find this step in their evolution extremely difficult. To successfully complete their re-socialization they will be required to become proficient with their rifle and familiar with several other weapons. Second phase ends with a week of living "in the field," learning offensive and defense combat tactics and getting a small taste of what they can expect once they are fully accepted into this warrior society. The stress is high, with much training and little sleep, but the recruits know that the end of this week heralds third phase and the final three weeks of training.

For those recruit who still remain after second phase, the emphasis in third phase shifts again, this time to preparation for final event testing and graduation. The recruits are walking, talking, and looking like Marines. Rather than slacking off; however, the DI's become nearly maniacal in their efforts to remove any remaining vestiges of the pre-Marine society from which the recruits came. The DI's themselves will be evaluated on the performance of their charges and nothing less than exemplary performance is acceptable. Making it into third phase is still no guarantee that they will graduate. Up until graduation day, even mere hours before the recruits are addressed as Marines for the first time and take their place as welcome additions to their new

society, their DI's are still searching for mistakes to correct or behavior to adjust. The moment finally arrives, the Company Commander gives the order, and the platoon is dismissed, its former recruits, now and forever, United States Marines.

Is boot camp too tough? Most who have never been Marines will say yes. Those; however, who have earned the title "Marine" will tell you that it accomplishes its purpose. For a service that proudly claims to be "First to Fight", mental and physical toughness are paramount to survival, and completing boot camp is the best available indication of the likelihood of combat survivability. Marines, as a society, are expected to do things civilian society could not hope to accomplish. Writing of World War II Marines, Korean War veteran Dr. Eugene Alvarez (1984), history professor and former Marine DI, explains the necessity for the harsh treatment; the unrelenting drive to instill instant, willing obedience to orders, and self-discipline:

[b]y the time that a recruit departed Parris Island, he was instilled with a brand of training and discipline that would push him forward on a hostile beach, when every instinct in him screams for him to dig in. Tens of thousands of Parris Island's, and San Diego's, boots demonstrated the value of rigorous boot camp training and went on to win victories in World War II that are among the most famous in the history of the United States Marine Corps. (p. 103).

Throughout the history of the Corps, Marines have, time after time, been called upon to place themselves in harm's way and no doubt will be again. A look at the battlefield accomplishments of Marines at Belleau Woods, France in World War I; islands like Tarawa, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa in World War II; Inchon and the Chosin Reservoir in Korea; Hue City and Khe Sanh, Vietnam prove beyond a shadow of a doubt, the necessity for the intensity of Marine boot camp. At each of these places, and at an unnamed multitude of others, Marines have

attacked, defended, held their ground and, in many cases, died because that was what was expected of them. The self-discipline and unquestioning obedience they learned in recruit training ensured that they would follow orders and place themselves in danger when any sane person would have fled.

A recruit who completes basic training does so "with the knowledge that he has completed what has been called the toughest recruit training in the world" (Moore, 1983, p. 16). American society expects much from its warrior society and, in turn, the warrior society expects much from those Americans who would join it. Every recruit is given the chance to prove he can learn what it takes to make the transformation to this different and demanding society. If they measure up to the warrior society's standards, they earn something that can never be taken away, the right to call themselves United States Marines, forever a member of the warrior society. Still a part of American society, yet forever changed: re-socialized for a higher purpose.

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Dr. Djamba's Comments: *The writing style was very good. The topic was interesting, not something that many people know about. It was easy to read. It was, overall, a great paper.*