

MARINE CORPS RECRUIT DEPOT (MCRD)

Parris Island, South Carolina
February 6 – May 6, 1957

Forty seven years later **November 12, 13, and 14 2004**

I turned 17 on July 2nd 1956, and enlisted in the USMCR on October 15th. A six-month tour was required to satisfy my active reserve commitment. The training would include the standard 13 weeks at Parris Island; and another 13 weeks at ITR, and Advanced ITR at Camp Geiger, near Camp Lejeune, NC. It was during the advanced phase of ITR where I became an 0331 machine gunner. In August of 1957, I returned to my reserve unit to complete my eight-year commitment of evening and weekend monthly drills and two weeks active duty every summer.

I remained another year in the USMCR and on August 1st 1958, I enlisted in the USMC for four years. I left to drive across America that same day. Destination was Pendleton with further assignment to the 3rd Marines on Okinawa. I had never been west of Buffalo, NY. The trip took me from New Jersey to Chicago, and from Chicago to Los Angeles on old Route 66, an experience in itself and potentially another story someday.

Anyway, back to 1957. I signed for my Original Orders to Parris Island at 10:15AM February 4th and the train left Dover, NJ at 12:56 PM. We were supposed to arrive in Washington, DC at 5:55PM, depart at 6:45PM, and arrive at Yemassee the next morning at 8:15. There was some mix up in DC, so several of us deliberately used the situation to miss the next connection so we could look around Washington. My last act of defiance for several months. We finally left sometime after midnight, and 13 and a half-hours later we arrived in Yemassee. The old steam train had clattered through miles of swamps in NC and SC and the first sight of Spanish moss was an early sign I was headed to a different place!

We arrived mid afternoon February 5th 1957, and immediately transferred to the Palmetto Bus Company for the final road trip to Parris Island. I did not even know there was such a thing as a receiving barracks at the train depot and I certainly did not have any time to look around.

This time when I got to Yemassee, I realized how small the place really is, and surely was in 1957. The photo with the town on the right shows just about all there is to see.

Standing on the platform with memories flooding back, I heard a train whistle in the distance. I am not sure why, but for some reason I have always liked the sound of a distant train whistle. Shortly the bell for the road gate started clanging and by then I could see the train coming. What timing. I was not even sure the tracks were still used.

It did not take very long from the faint whistle until the CSX high-speed freight blasted past me. I am no judge of train speed but this thing was moving at something around 100 miles an hour. I snapped one quick shot as it approached and then it was just pounding noise and wind and the long freight was gone as quickly as it had arrived. I bent down and put my hand on the track. The friction had decidedly warmed it. I wished I had thought to put down a penny -- I had not done that since I was a kid.

On my Parris Island page there are photos of the old Main Gate. Now the main PI entrance has been completely redone although the original gate sign is in a nice grassy location just across the street from the Gatehouse.

Parris Island had originally been an island. On base there are photos of WW1 Marines leaving for Port Royal on a barge. For decades there has been a causeway across the marsh and there is a monument about halfway, dedicating it to General E. A. Pollock.

Anyway, on the old Palmetto bus I particularly remember the nice guy in charge. He was very cordial. Even that first night in the Receiving Barracks at Parris Island was very low key -- "gee, this is not so bad". Then at 0530 February 6, 1957 the "shit hit the fan". That's when I first met SDI SSgt V. J. Dipano, who informed us that after McKeon we can't touch you (yeah right) but we are going to work your ass to death!

Almost everything on the base is now different! Nostalgia wanted it to be the same but pride is glad to see what a modern place it has become. The 1st Battalion Road curves around the West Side of the "Grinder" (Parade Deck) and the new Headquarters building is impressive. The brick barracks are new, as are the "Sealy Posturepedic" mattresses I could see through the windows on the unoccupied racks. No "S" turning these "babies!"

The "Grinder" is now decidedly smaller. A good portion in front of the 1st Battalion area is grass; and an even larger portion, at the far end, is a parking lot to accommodate the Graduation Day crowds that fill the expanded reviewing stands. Half of our old PT field is now home to a brand new all weather PT building. No comment!

I had not been back to Parris Island since 1984. Even then the parade deck and the whole area was much as I had remembered. In 1993 the "Grinder" was named the Peatross Parade Deck in memory of Major General Oscar F. Peatross, USMC (March 2, 1916 -- May 20, 1993). The General had served with distinction in WWII, Korea and Vietnam and was a member of the regiment that raised the flag on Iwo Jima. As a former Commanding General of Parris Island, he believed the recruit training program to be the key factor in producing proud, professional United States Marines.

I knew when I saw the name Peatross that it was very familiar. When I got home I looked at my First Battalion, Platoon 43, Graduation book and my memory was refreshed. Then Lt. Colonel O. F. Peatross had been the Commanding Officer of my First Battalion. It immediately all came back. Me responding to him at our Battalion Commander's inspection, him reviewing us on Final Field day and speaking to us at our graduation ceremony.

In some strange way I feel it an honor to now know that my old Battalion Commander had survived three wars, became a Commanding General of Parris Island, retired a Major General, and that now the “Grinder”, that changed my life, is named for him.

The Graduation Day ceremony was fantastic. The Marines passing in review for the Commanding General, Depot Sergeant Major, military personnel and guests, were an inspiration and a memory of what we must have looked like so many years ago.

The Iwo Jima Monument is still where it was on my tour, directly across the “Grinder” from my old barracks. Inscribed on two sides of the base are “In honor and in memory of the men of the United States Marine Corps who have given their lives to their country since 10 November 1775”; and “Uncommon Valor was A Common Virtue.” At the near end of the Parade Deck, there is a new statue dedicated to male and female Marine Drill Instructors.

Stretching across Boulevard de France is a sign “Marines -- Semper Fidelis.” This leads to areas I never knew were there. I discovered the burial ground for the Parris Island Bulldog Mascots. The main monument plaque says “Our Mascot MIKE 1905 – 1916 Service Honest and Faithful.” This little area is just behind the Commanding Generals Home. The photo of this impressive home is the front entrance.

Nearby is the statue of Iron Mike with the inscription “In memory of the men of Parris Island who gave their lives in the World War – Erected by their comrades.” Around the corner is the Parris Island hotel. After graduation on Friday the only car left in the lot was the desk clerk’s. Nothing fancy but the place is clean and quiet, until a little after 0530 that is. A lot of early morning running and yelling!

Speaking of yelling there is none after lights out. It is now mandatory that recruits receive 8 hours of uninterrupted sleep. As I wandered around on Saturday night I expected to be challenged: “HALT! Who is there?” Well, Marines in boot camp no longer walk guard duty. I am not sure how they learn General Orders or how to walk a post. A DI told me the sleep requirement was the first reason it’s no longer done. Second, that would be *outside*. He assured me they still walk Fire Watch *inside*. I guess the inside, outside thing is weather related like the new indoor PT building. Again, no comment!

Another surprise was my waiting on the Grinder for taps at 2200. I did not hear taps. I asked a passing DI and he thought I missed it at 2130. Something about sleep 2130 – 0530. We used to lie in the rack at attention at 2200 as it was played and then the DI would say something cute like “Goodnight Girls.” I also learned there was no longer a bugle player. When played it is just a recording over a PA system. The DJ must have been off that Saturday night. So much for this tradition.

In my day there was no Crucible – we just called it Final Field. There was a grueling force march at double time on a “round about” route to Elliotts Beach where the Final Field exercise continued. Then I thought the name Elliotts was some torture location. Turns out it is just a picnic area. Actually, it’s not far from The *Legends* at Parris Island Golf Course where I was to play on Saturday. I don’t know if there was a golf course there in 1957, so I may have double-timed across a future fairway on the way to Elliotts.

I remember thinking the rifle range was far away; however, it is just a little over a mile from mainside out Wake Boulevard. It is just past the turn for Elliotts Beach and the *Legends* golf course. The Range is now called Weapons and Field Training Battalion. The old wooden training buildings are now brick, as are the barracks there too. The Quonset huts we lived in are long gone. However, I could still see my target number 30 on the first range. How do we remember these things, like service numbers and my rifle number 4281758. I wonder whatever happened to that M-1? The one I have now is 4676030 – don't have that one memorized!

Oh, one more thing. I don't think the sand flea is still the number one insect of dread at Parris Island! Without question the new insect of repute must be the Fire ant!

I first encountered them in Texas weeding a flowerbed. My reaction to hearing about them was: Oh yeah, I know about ant bites -- I remember red ants when I was a kid. They bite but hardly something to fear!

Well, after pulling up a weed and having 50 of them instantaneously swarm over my hand and forearm, and receiving about 25 bites, I had new respect. It was only days later as each bite became infected that I really vowed to steer clear.

Back to PI. They are everywhere! Little sandy mounds no matter where you look. I would love to watch snapping in – I can't even relate to how they can do it.

On Saturday I played golf at *Legends* with Lt. Colonel Paul Augustine, and one of his Captains and a Gunnery Sergeant. As a 17-year-old kid, I could never have imagined this event. I must thank Colonel Wayne Morris USMC (Ret) for the introduction, and Lt. Colonel Augustine for the arrangements.

On Friday Lt. Colonel Augustine had given me a tour of MSAS Beaufort where he is Commanding Officer of the Marine Air Logistics Squadron (MALS) in support of the F-18's stationed there. That night we went to the Officers Club for dinner and the "hit" there was hearing and seeing the Fighter Bar. It is a fighter pilot thing -- you have to see it to understand.

The Sunday morning brunch at the Parris Island *Traditions* Officer and NCO Club was equally impressive. As I sat there looking out over the water it amazed me how much there was to see compared to a recruits perspective, which never goes more than a few yards past your physical presence.

The Iwo Jima Monument looks impressive at night. There was, however, something strange standing in the middle of the Grinder waiting for taps. Other than the wind, there was not a sound. No echoes of my youth, just the wind that will still be there long after I am gone as well.

Semper Fidelis

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