

# *The Short-Timers*

by Gustav Hasford (1947-1993)

*The Short-Timers* is a 1979 semi-autobiographical novel by American former Marine Gustav Hasford about his experience in the Vietnam War. It was later adapted into the 1987 film *Full Metal Jacket* by Stanley Kubrick.



Dedicated to

*"Penny"*

John C. Pennington, Corporal  
Combat Photographer, First Marine Division  
KIA<sup>1</sup>, June 9, 1968

## Adieu to a Solider

Adieu, O soldier,  
You of the rude campaigning, (which we shared,)  
The rapid march, the life of the camp,  
The hot contention of opposing fronts, the long manoeuvre,  
Red battles with their slaughter, the stimulus, the strong terrific game,  
Spell of all brave and manly hearts, the trains of time through you and like of you all fill'd,  
With war and war's expression.

Adieu, dear comrade,  
Your mission is fulfill'd--but I, more warlike,  
Myself and this contentious soul of mine,  
Still on our campaigning bound,  
Through untried roads with ambushes opponents lined,  
Through many a sharp defeat and many a crisis, often baffled,  
Here marching, ever marching on, a war fight out--aye here,  
To fiercer, weightier battles give expression.

Walt Whitman, *Drum Taps*, 1871



*This is my rifle.  
There are many like it, but this one is mine...*

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<sup>1</sup> KIA = *Killed in Action*

## Chapter I

# The Spirit of the Bayonet

*I think that Vietnam was what we had instead of happy childhoods.*  
--Michael Herr, Dispatches

The Marines are looking for a few good men...

The recruit says that his name is Leonard Pratt.

Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim takes one look at the skinny red-neck and immediately dubs him "Gomer Pyle."

We think maybe he's trying to be funny. Nobody laughs.

Dawn. Green Marines. Three junior drill instructors screaming, "GET IN LINE! GET IN LINE! YOU WILL NOT MOVE! YOU WILL NOT SPEAK!" Red brick buildings. Willow trees hung with Spanish moss. Long, irregular lines of sweating civilians standing tall on yellow footprints painted in a pattern on the concrete deck.

Parris Island, South Carolina, the United States Marine Corps Recruit Depot, an eight-week college for the phony-tough and the crazy-brave, constructed in a swamp on an island, symmetrical but sinister like a suburban death camp.

Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim spits. "Listen up, herd. You maggots had better start looking like United States Marine Corps recruits. Do not think for one second that you are Marines. You just dropped by to pick up a set of dress blues. Am I right, ladies? Sorry 'bout that."

A wiry little Texan in horn-rimmed glasses the guys are already calling "Cowboy" says, "Is that you, John Wayne? Is this me?" Cowboy takes off his pearl-gray Stetson and fans his sweaty face.

I laugh. Years of high school drama classes have made me a mimic. I sound exactly like John Wayne as I say: "I think I'm going to hate this movie."

Cowboy laughs. He beats his Stetson on his thigh.

Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim laughs, too. The senior drill instructor is an obscene little ogre in immaculate khaki. He aims his index finger between my eyes and says, "*You*. Yeah--*you*. Private Joker. I like you. You can come over to my house and fuck my sister." He grins. Then his face goes hard. "You little scumbag. I got your name. I got your ass. You *will not* laugh. You *will not* cry. You will learn by the numbers. I will teach you."

Leonard Pratt grins.

Sergeant Gerheim puts his fists on his hips. "*If* you ladies leave my island, *if* you survive recruit training, you will be a weapon, you will be a minister of death, praying for war. And proud. Until that day you are puked, you are scumbags, you are the lowest form of life on Earth. You are not even human. You people are nothing but a lot of little pieces of amphibian shit."

Leonard chuckles.

"Private Pyle think I am a real funny guy. He thinks Parris Island is more fun than a sucking chest wound."

The hillbilly's face is frozen into a permanent expression of oat-fed innocence.

"You maggots are not going to have any fun here. You are not going to enjoy standing in straight lines and you are not going to enjoy massaging your own wand and you are not going to enjoy saying 'sir' to individuals you do not like. Well, ladies, that's tough titty. I will speak and you will function. Ten percent of you will not survive. Ten percent of you maggots are going to go AWOL or will try to take your own life or will break your backs on the Confidence Course or will just go plain fucking crazy. There it is. My orders are to weed out all nonhackers who do not pack the gear to serve in my beloved Corps. You will be grunts. Grunts get no slack. My recruits learn to survive without slack. Because I am hard, you will not like me. But the more you hate me, the more you will learn. Am I correct, herd?"

Some of us mumble, "Yes. Yeah. Yes, sir."

"I can't *hear* you, ladies."

"Yes, sir."

"I *still* can't hear you, ladies. SOUND OFF LIKE YOU GOT A PAIR."

"YES, SIR!"

"You piss me off. Hit the deck."

We crumple down onto the hot parade deck.

"You got no motivation. Do you hear me, maggots? Listen up. I will *give* you motivation. You have no esprit de corps. I will *give* you esprit de corps. You have no traditions. I will *give* you traditions. And I will show you how to live up to them."

Sergeant Gerheim struts, ramrod straight, hands on hips. "GET UP! GET UP!"

We get up, sweating, knees sore, hands gritty.

Sergeant Gerheim says to his three junior drill instructors: "What a humble herd." Then to us: "You silly scumbags are too *slow*. Hit the deck."

*Down.*

*Up.*

*Down.*

*Up.*

"HIT IT!"

*Down.*

Sergeant Gerheim steps over our struggling bodies, stomps fingers, kicks ribs with the toe of his boot. "Jesus H. Christ. You maggots are huffing and puffing the way your momma did the first time your old man put the meat to her."

*Pain.*

"GET UP! GET UP!"

*Up.* Muscles aching.

Leonard Pratt is still sprawled on the hot concrete.

Sergeant Gerheim dances over to him, stands over him, shoves his Smokey the Bear campaign cover to the back of his bald head. "Okay, scumbag, do it."

Leonard gets up on one knee, hesitates, then stands up, inhaling and exhaling. He grins.

Sergeant Gerheim punches Leonard in the Adam's apples--*hard*. The sergeant's big fist pounds Leonard's chest. Then his stomach. Leonard doubles over with pain. "LOCK THEM HEELS! YOU'RE AT ATTENTION!" Sergeant Gerheim backhands Leonard across the face.

*Blood.*

Leonard grins, locks his heels. Leonard's lips are busted, pink and purple, and his mouth is bloody, but Leonard only shrugs and grins as though Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim has just given him a birthday present.

For the first four weeks of recruit training Leonard continues to grin, even though he receives more than his share of the beatings. Beatings, we learn, are a routine element of life on Parris Island. And not that I'm-only-rough-on-'um-because-I-love-'um crap civilians have seen in Jack Webb's Hollywood movie *The D.I.* and in Mr. John Wayne's *The Sands of Iwo Jima*. Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim and his three junior drill instructors administer brutal beatings to faces, chests, stomachs, and backs. With fists. Or boots--they kick us in the ass, the kidneys, the ribs, any part of our bodies upon which a black and purple bruise won't show.

But even having the shit beat out of him with calculated regularity fails to educate Leonard the way it educates the other recruits in Platoon 30-92. In high school psychology they said that fish, cockroaches, and even one-celled protozoa can be brainwashed. But not Leonard.

Leonard tries harder than any of us.

He can't do anything right.

During the day Leonard stumbles and falls, but never complains.

At night, as the platoon sleeps in double-tiered metal bunks, Leonard cries. I whisper to him to be quiet. He stops crying.

No recruit is ever allowed to be alone.

On the first day of our fifth week, Sergeant Gerheim beats the hell out of me.

I'm standing tall in Gerheim's palace, a small room at the far end of the squad bay.

"Do you believe in the Virgin Mary?"

"NO, SIR!" I say. It's a trick question. Any answer will be wrong, and Sergeant Gerheim will beat me harder if I reverse myself.

Sergeant Gerheim punches me in the solar plexus with his elbow. "You little maggot," he says, and his fist punctuates the sentence. I stand to attention, heels locked, eyes front, swallowing groans, trying not to flinch. "You make me want to vomit, scumbag. You goddamn heathen. You better sound off that you love the Virgin Mary or I'm going to stomp your guts out." Sergeant Gerheim's face is about one inch from my left ear. "EYES FRONT!" Spit sprinkles my cheek. "You *do* love the Virgin Mary, don't you, Private Joker? *Speak!*"

"SIR, NEGATIVE, SIR!"

I wait. I know that he is going to order me into the head. The shower stall is where he takes the recruits he wants to hurt. Almost every day recruits march into the head with Sergeant Gerheim and, because the deck in the shower stall is wet, they accidentally fall down. They accidentally fall down so many times that when they come out they look like they've been run over by a cat tractor.

He's behind me. I can hear him breathing.

"What did you say, prive?"

"SIR, THE PRIVATE SAID, 'NO, SIR!' SIR!"

Sergeant Gerheim's beefy red face floats by like a cobra being charmed by music. His eyes drill into mine; they invite me to look at him; they dare me to move my eyes one fraction of an inch.

"Have you seen the light? The white light? The great light? The guiding light--do you have the vision?"

"SIR, AYE-AYE, SIR!"

"Who's your squad leader, scumbag?"

"SIR, THE PRIVATE'S SQUAD LEADER IS PRIVATE HAMER, SIR!"

"Hamer, front and center."

Hamer runs down the center of the squad bay, snaps to attention in front of Sergeant Gerheim.

"AYE-AYE, SIR!"

"Hamer, you're fired. Private Joker is promoted to squad leader."

Hamer hesitates. "AYE-AYE, SIR!"

"Go."

Hamer does an about-face, runs back down the squad bay, falls back into line in front of his rack, snaps to attention.

I say, "SIR, THE PRIVATE REQUESTS PERMISSION TO SPEAK TO THE DRILL INSTRUCTOR!"

"Speak."

"SIR, THE PRIVATE DOES NOT WANT TO BE A SQUAD LEADERS, SIR!"

Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim puts his fists on his hips. He pushes his Smokey the Bear campaign cover to the back of his bald head. He sighs. "Nobody *wants* to lead, maggot, but somebody *has* to. You got the brain, you got the balls, so you get the job. The Marine Corps is not a mob like the Army. Marines die--that's what we're here for--but the Marine Corps will live forever, because every Marine is a leader when he has to be--even a prive."

Sergeant Gerheim turns to Leonard. "Private Pyle, Private Joker is your new bunkmate. Private Joker is a very bright boy. He will teach you everything. He will teach you how to pee."

I say, "SIR, THE PRIVATE WOULD PREFER TO STAY WITH HIS BUNKMATE, PRIVATE COWBOY, SIR!"

Cowboy and I have become friends because when you're far from home and scared shitless you need all the friends you can get and you need them right away. Cowboy is the only recruit who laughs at all my jokes. He's got a sense of humor, which is priceless in a place like this, but he's serious when he has to be--he's dependable.

Sergeant Gerheim sighs. "You queer for Private Cowboy's gear? You smoke his pole?"

"SIR, NEGATIVE, SIR!"

"Outstanding. Then Private Joker *will* bunk with Private Pyle. Private Joker is silly and he's ignorant, but he's got guts, and guts is enough."

Sergeant Gerheim struts back to his "palace," a tiny room at the far end of the squad bay. "Okay, ladies, ready...MOUNT!"

We all jump into our racks and freeze.

"Sing."

We sing:

*From the halls of Montezuma,  
To the shores of Tripoli,  
We will fight our country's battles,  
On land, and air, and sea.*

*If the Army and the Navy  
Ever gaze on heaven's scenes,  
They will find the streets are guarded by  
United States Marines...*

"Okay, herd, readdddy...SLEEP!"

Training continues.

I teach Leonard everything I know, from how to lace his black combat boots to the assembly and disassembly of the M-14 semi-automatic shoulder weapon.

I teach Leonard that Marines do not ditty-bop, they do not just walk. Marines run; they double-time. Or, if the distance to be covered is great, Marines hump, one foot after the other, one step at a time, for as long as necessary. Marines work hard. Only shitbirds try to avoid work, only shitbirds try to skate. Marines are clean, not skuzzy. I teach Leonard to value his rifle as he values his life. I teach him that blood makes the grass grow.

"This here gun is one mean-looking piece of iron, sure enough." Leonard's clumsy fingers snap his weapon together.

I'm repulsed by the look and feel of my own weapon. The rifle is cold and heavy in my hands.

"Think of your rifle as a tool, Leonard. Like an ax on the farm."

Leonard grins. "Okay. You right, Joker." He looks at me. "I'm sure glad you're helping me, Joker. You're my friend. I know I'm slow. I always been slow. Nobody ever helped me..."

I turn away. "That sounds like a personal problem," I say. I keep my eyes on my weapon.

Sergeant Gerheim continues the siege of Leonard Pratt, Private. He gives Leonard extra push-ups every night, yells at him louder than he yells at the rest of us, calls his mother more colorful names.

Meanwhile, the rest of us are not forgotten. We suffer, too. We suffer for Leonard's mistakes. We march, we run, we duck walk, and we crawl.

We play war in the swamp. Near the site of the Ribbon Creek Massacre, where six recruits drowned during a disciplinary night march in 1956, Sergeant Gerheim orders me to climb a willow tree. I'm a sniper. I'm supposed to shoot the platoon. I hang on a limb. If I can see a recruit well enough to name him, he's dead.

The platoon attacks. I yell, "HAMER!" and Hamer falls dead.

The platoon scatters. I scan the underbrush.

A green phantom blinks through a shadow. I see its face. I open my mouth. The limb cracks. I'm falling...

I collide with the sandy deck. I look up.

Cowboy is standing over me. "Bang, bang, you're dead," he says. And then he laughs.

Sergeant Gerheim looms over me. I try to explain that the limb broke.

"You can't talk, sniper. You are dead. Private Cowboy just took your life."

Sergeant Gerheim promotes Cowboy to squad leader.

During our sixth week, Sergeant Gerheim orders us to double-time around the squad bay with our penises in our left hands and our weapons in our right hands, singing: *This is my rifle, this is gun; one is for fighting and one is for fun.* And: *I don't want no teen-aged queen; all I want is my M-14.*

Sergeant Gerheim orders us to name our rifles. "This is the only pussy you people are going to get. Your days of finger-banging ol' Mary Jane Rottencrotch through her pretty pink panties are over. You're married to *this* piece, this weapon of iron and wood, and you *will* be faithful."

We run. And we sing:

*Well, I don't know  
But I been told  
Eskimo pussy  
Is mighty cold...*

Before chow, Sergeant Gerheim tells us that during World War I Blackjack Pershing said, "The deadliest weapon in the world is a Marine and his rifle." At Belleau Wood the Marines were so vicious that the German infantrymen called them *Teufel-Hunden*--"devil dogs."

Sergeant Gerheim explains that it is important for us to understand that it is our killer instinct which must be harnessed if we expect to survive in combat. Our rifle is only a tool; it is a hard heart that kills.

Our will to kill must be focused the way our rifle focuses a firing pressure of fifty thousand pounds per square inch to propel a piece of lead. If our rifles are not properly cleaned the explosion will be improperly focused and our rifles will shatter. If our killer instincts are not clean and strong, we will hesitate at the moment of truth. We will not kill. We will become dead Marines. And then we will be in a world of shit because Marines are not allowed to die without permission; we are government property.

The Confidence Course: We go hand over hand down a rope strung at a forty-five degree angle across a pond--the slide-for-life. We hang upside down like monkeys and crawl headfirst down the rope.

Leonard falls off the slide-for-life eighteen times. He almost drowns. He cries. He climbs the tower. He tries again. He falls off again. This time he sinks.

Cowboy and I dive into the pond. We pull Leonard out of the muddy water. He's unconscious. When he comes to, he cries.

Back at the squad bay Sergeant Gerheim fits a Trojan rubber over the mouth of a canteen and throws the canteen at Leonard. The canteen hits Leonard on the side of the head. Sergeant Gerheim bellows, "Marines *do not cry!*"

Leonard is ordered to nurse on the canteen every day after chow.

During bayonet training Sergeant Gerheim dances an aggressive ballet. He knocks us down with a pugil stick, a five-foot pole with heavy padding on both ends. We play war with the pugil sticks. We beat each other without mercy. Then Sergeant Gerheim orders us to fix bayonets.

Sergeant Gerheim demonstrates effective attack techniques to a recruit named Barnard, a soft-spoken farm boy from Maine. The beefy drill instructor knocks out two of Private Barnard's teeth with a rifle butt.

The purpose of the bayonet training, Sergeant Gerheim explains, is to awaken our killer instincts. The killer instinct will make us fearless and aggressive, like animals. If the meek ever inherit the earth the strong will take it away from them. The weak exist to be devoured by the strong. Every Marine must pack his own gear. Every Marine must be the instrument of his own salvation. It's hard, but there it is.

Private Barnard, his jaw bleeding, his mouth a bloody hole, demonstrates that he has been paying attention. Private Barnard grabs his rifle and, sitting up, bayonets Sergeant Gerheim through the right thigh.

Sergeant Gerheim grunts. Then he responds with a vertical butt stroke, but misses. So he backhands Private Barnard across the face with his fist.

Whipping off his web belt, Sergeant Gerheim ties a crude tourniquet around his bloody thigh. Then he makes the unconscious Private Barnard a squad leader. "Goddamn it, there's one little maggot who knows that the spirit of the bayonet is to *kill!* He'll make a damn fine field Marine. He ought to be a fucking general."

On the last day of our sixth week I wake up and find my rifle in my rack. My rifle is under my blanket, beside me. I don't know how it got there.

My mind isn't on my responsibilities and I forget to remind Leonard to shave.

Inspection. Junk on the bunk. Sergeant Gerheim points out that Private Pyle did not stand close enough to his razor.

Sergeant Gerheim orders Leonard and the recruit squad leaders into the head.

In the head, Sergeant Gerheim orders us to piss into a toilet bowl. "LOCK THEM HEELS! YOU ARE AT ATTENTION! READDDDDY...WHIZZZZ..."

We whiz.

Sergeant Gerheim grabs the back of Leonard's neck and forces Leonard to his knees, pushes his head down into the yellow pool. Leonard struggles. Bubbles. Panic gives Leonard strength; Sergeant Gerheim holds him down.

After we're sure that Leonard has drowned, Sergeant Gerheim flushes the toilet. When the water stops flowing, Sergeant Gerheim releases his hold on Leonard's neck.

Sergeant Gerheim's imagination is both cruel and comprehensive, but nothing works. Leonard continues to fuck up. Now, whenever Leonard makes a mistake, Sergeant Gerheim does not punish Leonard. He punishes the whole platoon. He excludes Leonard from the punishment. While Leonard rests, we do squat-thrusts and side-straddle hops, many, many of them.

Leonard touches my arm as we move through the chow line with our metal trays. "I just can't do nothing right. I need some help. I don't want you boys to be in trouble. I--"

I move away.

The first night of our seventh week of training the platoon gives Leonard a blanket party.

Midnight.

The fire watch stands by. Private Philips, the House Mouse, Sergeant Gerheim's "go-fer," pads barefoot down the squad bay to watch for Sergeant Gerheim.

In the dark, one hundred recruits walk to Leonard's rack.

Leonard is grinning, even in his sleep.

The squad leaders hold towels and bars of soap.

Four recruits throw a blanket over Leonard. They grip the corners of the blanket so that Leonard can't sit up and so that his screams will be muffled.

I hear the hard breathing of a hundred sweating bodies and I hear the fump and thud as Cowboy and Private Barnard beat Leonard with bars of soap slung in towels.

Leonard's screams are like the braying of a sick mule, heard far away. He struggles.

The eyes of the platoon are on me. Eyes are aimed at me in the dark, eyes like rubies.

Leonard stops screaming.

I hesitate. The eyes are on me. I step back.

Cowboy punches me in the chest with his towel and a bar of soap.

I sling the towel, drop in the soap, and then I beat Leonard, who has stopped moving. He lies in silence, stunned, gagging for air. I beat him harder and harder and when I feel tears being flung from my eyes, I beat him harder for it.

The next day, on the parade deck, Leonard does not grin.

When Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim asks, "What do we do for a living, ladies?" and we reply, "KILL! KILL! KILL!," Leonard remains silent. When our junior drill instructor asks, "Do we love the Crotch, ladies? Do we love our beloved Corps?" and the platoon responds with one voice, "GUNG HO! GUNG HO! GUNG HO!" Leonard is silent.

On the third day of our seventh week we move to the rifle range and shoot holes in paper targets. Sergeant Gerheim brags about the marksmanship of ex-Marines Charles Whitman and Lee Harvey Oswald.

By the end of our seventh week Leonard has become a model recruit. We decide that Leonard's silence is a result of his new intense concentration. Day by day, Leonard is more motivated, more squared away. His manual of arms is flawless now, but his eyes are milk glass. Leonard cleans his weapon more than any recruit in the platoon. Every night after chow Leonard caresses the scarred oak stock with

linseed oil the way hundreds of earlier recruits have caressed the same piece of wood. Leonard improves at everything, but remains silent. He does what he is told, but he is no longer part of the platoon.

We can see that Sergeant Gerheim resents Leonard's attitude. He reminds Leonard that the motto of the Marine Corps is *Semper Fidelis*--"Always Faithful." Sergeant Gerheim reminds Leonard that "Gung ho" is Chinese for "working together."

It is a Marine Corps tradition, Sergeant Gerheim says, that Marines never abandon their dead or wounded. Sergeant Gerheim is careful not to come down too hard on Leonard as long as Leonard remains squared away. We have already lost seven recruits on Section Eight discharges. A Kentucky boy named Perkins stepped to the center of the squad bay and slashed his wrists with his bayonet. Sergeant Gerheim was not happy to see a recruit bleeding upon his nice clean squad bay. The recruit was ordered to police the area, mop up the blood, and replace the bayonet in its sheath. While Perkins mopped up the blood, Sergeant Gerheim called a school circle and poo-pooed the recruit's shallow slash across his wrists with a bayonet. The U.S.M.C.--approved method of recruit suicide is to get *alone* and take a razor blade and slash deep and vertical, from wrist to elbow, Sergeant Gerheim said. Then he allowed Perkins to double-time to sick bay.

Sergeant Gerheim leaves Leonard alone and concentrates on the rest of us.

Sunday.

*Magic show.* Religious services in the faith of your choice--and you will have a choice--because religious services are specified in the beautiful full-color brochures the Crotch distributes to Mom and Dad back in hometown America, even though Sergeant Gerheim assures us that the Marine Corps was here before God. "You can give your heart to Jesus but your ass belongs to the Corps."

After the "magic show" we eat chow. The squad leaders read grace from cards set in holders on the tables. Then: "SEATS!"

We spread butter on slices of bread and then sprinkle sugar on the butter. We smuggle sandwiches out of the mess hall, risking a beating for the novelty of unscheduled chow. We don't give a shit; we're salty. Now, when Sergeant Gerheim and his junior drill instructors stomp us we tell them that we love it and to do it some more. When Sergeant Gerheim commands: "Okay, ladies, give me fifty squat-thrusts. And some side-straddle hops. Many, many of them," we laugh and then do them.

The drill instructors are proud to see that we are growing beyond their control. The Marine Corps does not want robots. The Marine Corps wants killers. The Marine Corps wants to build indestructible men, men without fear. Civilians may choose to submit or to fight back. The drill instructors leave recruits no choice. Marines fight back or they do not survive. There it is. No slack.

Graduation is only a few days away and the salty recruits of Platoon 30-92 are ready to eat their own guts and then ask for seconds. The moment the Commandant of the Marine Corps gives us the word, we will grab the Viet Cong guerrillas and the battle-hardened North Vietnamese regulars by their scrawny throats and we'll punch their fucking heads off.

Sunday afternoon in the sun. We scrub our little green garments on a long concrete table.

For the hundredth time, I tell Cowboy that I want to slip my tube steak into his sister so what will he take in trade?

For the hundredth time, Cowboy replies, "What do you have?"

Sergeant Gerheim struts around the table. He is trying not to limp. He criticizes our utilization of the Marine Corps scrub brush.

We don't care; we're too salty.

Sergeant Gerheim won the Navy Cross on Iwo Jima, he says. He got it for teaching young Marines how to bleed, he says. Marines are supposed to bleed in tidy little pools because Marines are disciplined. Civilians and members of the lesser services bleed all over the place like bed wetters.

We don't listen. We swap scuttlebutt. Laundry day is the only time we are allowed to talk to each other.

Philips--Sergeant Gerheim's black, silver-tongued House Mouse--is telling everybody about the one thousand cherries he has busted.

I say, "Leonard talks to his rifle."

A dozen recruits look up. They hesitate. Some look sick. Others look scared. And some look shocked and angry, as though I'd just slapped a cripple.

I force myself to speak: "Leonard talks to his rifle." Nobody moves. Nobody says anything. "I don't think Leonard can hack it anymore. I think Leonard is a Section Eight."

Now guys all along the table are listening. They look confused. Their eyes seem fixed on some distant object as though they are trying to remember a bad dream.

Private Barnard nods. "I've been having this nightmare. My...rifle talks to me." He hesitates. "And I've been talking back to it..."

"There it is," says Philips. "Yeah. It's cold. It's a cold voice. I thought I was going plain fucking crazy. My rifle said--"

Sergeant Gerheim's big fist drives Philip's next word down his throat and out of his asshole. Philips is nailed to the deck. He's on his back. His lips are crushed. He groans.

The platoon freezes.

Sergeant Gerheim puts his fists on his hips. His eyes glare out from under the brim of his Smokey the Bear campaign cover like the barrels of a shotgun. "Private Pyle is a Section Eight. You hear me? If Private Pyle talks to his piece it is because he's plain fucking crazy. You maggots *will* belay all this scuttlebutt. Don't let Private Joker play with your imaginations. I don't want to hear another word. Do you hear me? Not one word."

Night at Parris Island. We stand by until Sergeant Gerheim snaps out his last order of the day: "Prepare to mount....Readdy...MOUNT!" Then we're lying on our backs in our skivvies, at attention, our weapons held at port arms.

We say our prayers:

*I am a United States Marine Corps recruit. I serve in the forces which guard my country and my way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense, so help me God...GUNG HO! GUNG HO! GUNG HO!*

Then the Rifleman's Creed, by Marine Corps Major General W.H. Rupertus:

*This is my rifle. There are many like it but this one is mine. My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I master my life.*

*My rifle, without me, is useless. I must fire my rifle true. I must shoot straighter than my enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he shoots me.*

*I will.*

Leonard is speaking for the first time in weeks. His voice booms louder and louder. Heads turn. Bodies shift. The platoon voice fades. Leonard is about to explode. His words are being coughed up from some deep, ugly place.

Sergeant Gerheim has the night duty. He struts to Leonard's rack and stands by, fists on hips.

Leonard doesn't see Sergeant Gerheim. The veins in Leonard's neck are bulging as he bellows:

MY RIFLE IS HUMAN, EVEN AS I, BECAUSE IT IS MY LIFE. THUS I WILL LEARN IT AS A BROTHER. I WILL LEARN ITS ACCESSORIES, ITS SIGHTS, ITS BARREL.

I WILL KEEP MY RIFLE CLEAN AND READY, EVEN AS I AM CLEAN AND READY. WE WILL BECOME PART OF EACH OTHER.

WE WILL...

BEFORE GOD I SWEAR THIS CREED. MY RIFLE AND MYSELF ARE THE MASTER OF OUR ENEMY. WE ARE THE SAVIORS OF MY LIFE.

SO BE IT, UNTIL VICTORY IS AMERICA'S AND THERE IS NO ENEMY BUT PEACE!

AMEN.

Sergeant Gerheim kicks Leonard's rack. "Hey--*you*--Private Pyle..."

"What? Yes? YES, SIR!" Leonard snaps to attention in his rack. "AYE-AYE, SIR!"

"What's that weapon's name, maggot?"

"SIR, THE PRIVATE'S WEAPON'S NAME IS CHARLENE, SIR!"

"At ease, maggot." Sergeant Gerheim grins. "You are becoming one sharp recruit, Private Pyle. Most motivated prive in my herd. Why, I may even allow you to serve as a rifleman in my beloved Corps. I had you figured as a shitbird, but you'll make a good grunt."

"AYE-AYE, SIR!"

I look at the rifle on my rack. It's a beautiful instrument, gracefully designed, solid and symmetrical. My rifle is clean, oiled, and works perfectly. It's a fine tool. I touch it.

Sergeant Gerheim marches down the length of the squad bay. "THE REST OF YOU ANIMALS COULD TAKE LESSONS FROM PRIVATE PYLE. He's squared away. You are all squared away. Tomorrow you will be Marines. READDDY...SLEEP!"

Graduation day. A thousand new Marines stand tall on the parade deck, lean and tan in immaculate khaki, their clean weapons held at port arms.

Leonard is selected as the outstanding recruit from Platoon 30-92. He is awarded a free set of dress blues and is allowed to wear the colorful uniform when the graduating platoons pass in review. The Commandant General of Parris Island shakes Leonard's hand and gives him a "Well done." Our series commander pins a RIFLE EXPERT badge on Leonard's chest and our company commander awards Leonard a citation for shooting the highest score in the training battalion.

Because of a special commendation submitted by Sergeant Gerheim, I'm promoted to Private First Class. After our series commander pins on my EXPERT'S badge, Sergeant Gerheim presents me with two red and green chevrons and explains that they're his old PFC stripes.

When we pass in review, I walk right guide, tall and proud.

Cowboy receives an EXPERT'S badge and is selected to carry the platoon guidon.

The Commanding General of Parris Island speaks into a microphone: "Have you seen the light? The white light? The great light? The guiding light? Do you have the vision?"

And we cheer, happy beyond belief.

The Commanding General sings. We sing too:

*Hey, Marine, have you heard?*

*Hey, Marine...*

*L.B.J. has passed the word.*

*Hey, Marine...*

*Say good-bye to Dad and Mom.*

*Hey, Marine...*

*You're gonna die in Viet Nam.*

*Hey, Marine, yeah!*

After the graduation ceremony our orders are distributed. Cowboy, Leonard, Private Barnard, Philips, and most of the other Marines in Platoon 30-92 are ordered to ITR--the Infantry Training Regiment--to be trained as grunts, infantrymen.

My orders instruct me to report to the Basic Military Journalism School at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, after I graduate from ITR. Sergeant Gerheim is disgusted by the fact that I am to be a combat correspondent and not a grunt. He calls me a poge, an office pinky. He says that shitbirds get all the slack.

Standing at ease on the parade deck, beneath the monument to the Iwo Jima flag raising, Sergeant Gerheim says, "The smoking lamp is lit. You people are no longer maggots. Today you are Marines. Once a Marine, always a Marine..."

Leonard laughs out loud.

Our last night on the island.

I draw fire watch.

I stand by in utility trousers, skivvy shirt, spit-shined combat boots, and a helmet liner which has been painted silver.

Sergeant Gerheim gives me his wristwatch and a flashlight. "Good night, Marine."

I march up and down the squad bay between two perfectly aligned rows of racks.

One hundred young Marines breathe peacefully as they sleep--one hundred survivors from our original hundred and twenty.

Tomorrow at dawn we'll all board cattle-car buses for the ride to Camp Geiger in North Carolina. There, ITR--the infantry training regiment. All Marines are grunts, even though some of us will learn additional military skills. After advanced infantry training we'll be allowed pogeey bait at the slop chute and we'll be given weekend liberty off the base and then we'll receive assignments to our permanent duty stations.

The squad bay is as quiet as a funeral parlor at midnight. The silence is disturbed only by the soft creak-creak of bedsprings and an occasional cough.

It's almost time for me to wake my relief when I hear a voice. Some recruit is talking in his sleep.

I stop. I listen. A second voice. Two guys must be swapping scuttlebutt. If Sergeant Gerheim hears them it'll be my ass. I hurry toward the sound.

It's Leonard. Leonard is talking to his rifle. But there is also another voice. A whisper. A cold, seductive moan. It's the voice of a woman.

Leonard's rifle is not slung on his rack. He's holding his rifle, hugging it. "Okay, okay. I love you!" Very softly: "I've given you the best months of my life. And now you--" I snap on my flashlight. Leonard ignores me. "I LOVE YOU! DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND? I CAN DO IT. I'LL DO ANYTHING!"

Leonard's words reverberate down the squad bay. Racks squeak. Someone rolls over. One recruit sits up, rubs his eyes.

I watch the far end of the squad bay. I wait for the light to go on inside Sergeant Gerheim's palace.

I touch Leonard's shoulder. "Hey, shut your mouth, Leonard. Sergeant Gerheim will break my back."

Leonard sits up. He looks at me. He strips off his skivvy shirt and ties it around his face to blindfold himself. He begins to field-strip his weapon. "This is the first time I've ever seen her naked." He pulls off the blindfold. His fingers continue to break down the rifle into components. Then, gently, he fondles each piece. "Just look at that pretty trigger guard. Have you ever seen a more beautiful piece of metal?" He starts snapping the steel components back together. "Her connector assembly is so beautiful..."

Leonard continues to babble as his trained fingers reassemble the black metal hardware.

I think about Vanessa, my girl back home. We're on a river bank, wrapped in an old sleeping bag, and I'm fucking her eyes out. But my favorite fantasy has gone stale. Thinking about Vanessa's thighs, her dark nipples, her fully lips doesn't give me a hard-on anymore. I guess it must be the saltpeter in our food, like they say.

Leonard reaches under his pillow and comes out with a loaded magazine. Gently, he inserts the metal magazine into his weapon, into Charlene.

"Leonard...where did you get those live rounds?"

Now a lot of guys are sitting up, whispering, "What's happening?" to each other.

Sergeant Gerheim's light floods the far end of the squad bay.

"OKAY, LEONARD, LET'S GO." I'm determined to save my own ass if I can, certain that Leonard's is forfeit in any case. The last time Sergeant Gerheim caught a recruit with a live round--just one round--he ordered the recruit to dig a grave ten feet long and ten feet deep. The whole platoon had to fall out for the "funeral." I say, "You're in a world of shit now, Leonard."

The overhead lights explode. The squad bay is washed with light. "WHAT'S THIS MICKEY MOUSE SHIT? JUST WHAT IN THE NAME OF JESUS H. CHRIST ARE YOU ANIMALS DOING IN MY SQUAD BAY?"

Sergeant Gerheim comes at me like a mad dog. His voice cuts the squad bay in half: "MY BEAUTY SLEEP HAS BEEN INTERRUPTED, LADIES. YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS. YOU HEAR ME, HERD? IT MEANS THAT ONE RECRUIT HAS VOLUNTEERED HIS YOUNG HEART FOR A GODDAMN HUMAN SACRIFICE!"

Leonard pounces from his rack, confronts Sergeant Gerheim.

Now the whole platoon is awake. We all wait to see what Sergeant Gerheim will do, confident that it

will be worth watching.

"Private Joker. You shitbird. Front and center."

I move my ass. "AYE-AYE, SIR!"

"Okay, you little maggot, *speak*. Why is Private Pyle out of his rack after lights out? Why is Private Pyle holding that weapon? Why ain't you stomping Private Pyle's guts out?"

"SIR, it is the Private's duty to report to the drill instructor that Private...Pyle...has a full magazine and has locked and loaded, SIR."

Sergeant Gerheim looks at Leonard and nods. He sighs. Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim looks more than a little ridiculous in his pure white skivvies and red rubber flip-flop shower shoes and hairy legs and tattooed forearms and a beer gut and a face the color of raw beef, and, on his bald head, the green and brown Smokey the Bear campaign cover.

Our senior drill instructor focuses all of his considerable powers of intimidation into his best John-Wayne-on-Suribachi voice: "Listen to me, Private Pyle. You *will* place your weapon on your rack and--"

"NO! YOU CAN'T HAVE HER! SHE'S MINE! YOU HEAR ME? SHE'S MINE! I LOVE HER!"

Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim can't control himself any longer. "NOW YOU LISTEN TO ME, YOU FUCKING WORTHLESS LITTLE PIECE OF SHIT. YOU *WILL* GIVE ME THAT WEAPON OR I'M GOING TO TEAR YOUR BALLS OFF AND STUFF THEM DOWN YOUR SCRAWNY LITTLE THROAT! YOU HEAR ME, MARINE? I'M GOING TO PUNCH YOUR FUCKING HEART OUT!"

Leonard aims the weapon at Sergeant Gerheim's heart, caresses the trigger guard, then caresses the trigger...

Sergeant Gerheim is suddenly calm. His eyes, his manner are those of a wanderer who has found his home. He is a man in complete control of himself and of the world he lives in. His face is cold and beautiful as the dark side surfaces. He smiles. It is not a friendly smile, but an evil smile, as though Sergeant Gerheim were a werewolf baring its fangs. "Private Pyle, I'm proud--"

*Bang.*

The steel buttplate slams into Leonard's shoulder.

One 7.62-millimeter high-velocity copper-jacketed bullet punches Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim back. He falls.

We all stare at Sergeant Gerheim. Nobody moves.

Sergeant Gerheim sits up as though nothing has happened. For one second, we relax. Leonard has missed. Then dark blood squirts from a little hole in Sergeant Gerheim's chest. The red blood blossoms into his white skivvy shirt like a beautiful flower. Sergeant Gerheim's bug eyes are focused upon the blood rose on his chest, fascinated. He looks up at Leonard. He squints. Then he relaxes. The werewolf smile is frozen on his lips.

My menial position of authority as the fire watch on duty forces me to act. "Now, uh, Leonard, we're all your bros, man, your brothers. I'm your bunkmate, right? I--"

"Sure," says Cowboy. "Go easy, Leonard. We don't want to hurt you."

"Affirmative," says Private Barnard.

Leonard doesn't hear. "Did you see the way he looked at her? Did you? I knew what he was thinking. I knew. That fag pig and his dirty--"

"Leonard..."

"We can kill you. You know that." Leonard caresses his rifle. "Don't you know that Charlene and I can kill you all?"

Leonard aims his rifle at my face.

I don't look at the rifle. I look into Leonard's eyes.

I know that Leonard is too weak to control his instrument of death. It is a hard heart that kills, not the weapon. Leonard is a defective instrument for the power that is flowing through him. Sergeant Gerheim's mistake was in not seeing that Leonard was like a glass rifle which would shatter when fired. Leonard is not hard enough to harness the power of an interior explosion to propel the cold black bullet of his will.

Leonard is grinning at us, the final grin that is on the face of death, the terrible grin of the skull.

The grin changes to a look of surprise and then to confusion and then to terror as Leonard's weapon moves up and back and then Leonard takes the black metal barrel into his mouth. "NO! Not--"

*Bang.*

Leonard is dead on the deck. His head is now an awful lump of blood and facial bones and sinus fluids and uprooted teeth and jagged, torn flesh. The skin looks plastic and unreal.

The civilians will demand yet another investigation, of course. But during the investigation the recruits of Platoon 30-92 will testify that Private Pratt, while highly motivated, was a ten percenter who did not pack the gear to be a Marine in our beloved Corps.

Sergeant Gerheim is still smiling. He was a fine drill instructor. Dying, that's what we're here for, he would have said--blood makes the grass grow. If he could speak, Gunnery Sergeant Gerheim would explain to Leonard why the guns that we love don't love back. And he would say, "Well done."

I turn off the overhead lights.

I say, "Prepare to mount." Then: "MOUNT!"

The platoon falls into a hundred racks.

I feel cold and alone. I am not alone. All over Parris Island there are thousands and thousands of us. And, all around the world, hundreds of thousands.

I try to sleep...

In my rack, I pull my rifle into my arms. She talks to me. Words come out of the wood and metal and flow into my hands. She tells me what to do.

My rifle is a solid instrument of death. My rifle is black steel. Our human bodies are bags of blood, easy to puncture and quick to drain, but our hard tools of death cannot be broken.

I hold by weapon at port arms, gently, as though she were a holy relic, a magic wand wrought with interlocking pieces of silver and iron, with a teakwood stock, golden bullets, a crystal bolt, jewels to sight with. My weapon obeys me. I'll hold Vanessa, my rifle. I'll hold her. I'll just hold her for a little while. I will hide in this dark dream for as long as I can.

Blood pours out of the barrel of my rifle and flows up on to my hands. The blood moves. The blood breaks up into living fragments. Each fragment is a spider. Millions and millions of tiny red spiders of blood are crawling up my arms, across my face, into my mouth...

Silence. In the dark, a hundred men are breaking in unison.

I look at Cowboy, then at Private Barnard. They understand. Cold grins of death are frozen on their faces. They nod.

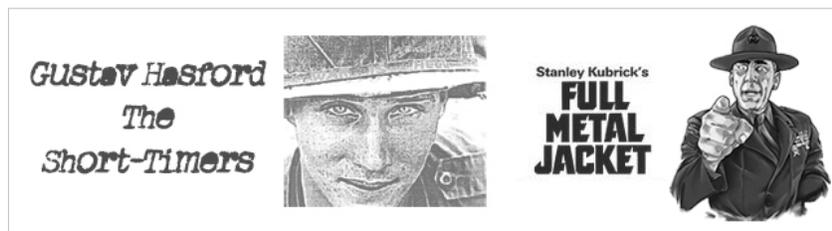
The newly minted Marines in my platoon stand to attention, horizontal in their racks, their weapons at port arms.

The Marines wait, a hundred young werewolves with guns in their hands.

I lead:

*This is my rifle.*

*There are many like it, but this one is mine...*



*Wer nichts weiß,  
muss alles glauben!*  
Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach



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