RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

A Rumor of War

Philip Caputo

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About the Book

In March 1965, Marine Lieutnant Philip J. Caputo landed in Danang with the first ground combat unit committed to fight in Vietnam. Sixteen months later, having served on the line in one of modern history's ugliest wars, he returned home – physically whole, emotionally wasted, his youthful idealism shattered. A decade later, Caputo would write in *A Rumor of War*, 'This is simply a story about war, about the things men do in war and the things war does to them'.

It is far more then that. It is, as Theodore Solotaroff wrote in the New York Times Book Review, 'the troubled conscience of America speaking passionately, truthfully, finally'. It is the book that shattered America's deliberate indifference to the fate of the men it sent to fight in the jungles of Vietnam, and in the years since it was first published it has become a basic text on that war. But in the literature of war that stretches back to Homer, it has also taken its place as an esteemed classic to rank alongside *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Naked and the Dead*.

About the Author

Mustered out of the Marine Corps in 1967, Philip Caputo went on to a prize-winning career as a journalist, covering the war in Beirut and the fall of Saigon before leaving the *Chicago Tribune* to devote himself to writing full-time. His novels are *Horn of Africa, DelCorso's Gallery, Indian Country* and *Equation for Evil.* He is also the author of a collection of novellas, *Exiles*, and a second volume of memoir, *Means of Escape.* A contributing editor for *Esquire*, Philip Caputo has also written for the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe* and the *Los Angeles Times.* He and his wife, Leslie Blanchard Ware, live in Connecticut.

TO

SERGEANT HUGH JOHN SULLIVAN
C Company, First Battalion, Third Marines
KILLED IN ACTION, JUNE 1965

and

FIRST LIEUTENANT WALTER NEVILLE LEVY
C Company, First Battalion, First Marines
KILLED IN ACTION, SEPTEMBER 1965

A RUMOR OF WAR

PHILIP CAPUTO

With a Twentieth-Anniversary
Postscript by the Author

PIMLICO

AND YE SHALL HEAR OF WARS AND RUMORS OF WARS. SEE THAT YE BE NOT TROUBLED, FOR ALL THESE THINGS MUST COME TO PASS, BUT THE END IS NOT YET.... FOR NATION SHALL RISE AGAINST NATION AND KINGDOM AGAINST KINGDOM ... THEN SHALL THEY DELIVER YOU UP TO BE AFFLICTED AND SHALL PUT YOU TO DEATH ... BUT HE THAT SHALL ENDURE UNTO THE END, HE SHALL BE SAVED.

—Matthew 24:6–13

Prologue

> In thy faint slumbers I by thee have watch'd
> And heard thee murmur tales of iron wars....
>
> —Shakespeare
> *Henry IV, Part 1*

This book does not pretend to be history. It has nothing to do with politics, power, strategy, influence, national interests, or foreign policy; nor is it an indictment of the great men who led us into Indochina and whose mistakes were paid for with the blood of some quite ordinary men. In a general sense, it is simply a story about war, about the things men do in war and the things war does to them. More strictly, it is a soldier's account of our longest conflict, the only one we have ever lost, as well as the record of a long and sometimes painful personal experience.

On March 8, 1965, as a young infantry officer, I landed at Danang with a battalion of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, the first U.S. combat unit sent to Indochina. I returned in April 1975 as a newspaper correspondent and covered the Communist offensive that ended with the fall of Saigon. Having been among the first Americans to fight in Vietnam, I was also among the last to be evacuated, only a few hours before the North Vietnamese Army entered the capital.

Although most of this book deals with the experiences of the marines I served with in 1965 and 1966, I have included an epilogue briefly describing the American exodus. Only ten years separated the two events, yet the humiliation of our exit from Vietnam, compared to the high

confidence with which we had entered, made it seem as if a century lay between them.

For Americans who did not come of age in the early sixties, it may be hard to grasp what those years were like—the pride and overpowering self-assurance that prevailed. Most of the thirty-five hundred men in our brigade, born during or immediately after World War II, were shaped by that era, the age of Kennedy's Camelot. We went overseas full of illusions, for which the intoxicating atmosphere of those years was as much to blame as our youth.

War is always attractive to young men who know nothing about it, but we had also been seduced into uniform by Kennedy's challenge to "ask what you can do for your country" and by the missionary idealism he had awakened in us. America seemed omnipotent then: the country could still claim it had never lost a war, and we believed we were ordained to play cop to the Communists' robber and spread our own political faith around the world. Like the French soldiers of the late eighteenth century, we saw ourselves as the champions of "a cause that was destined to triumph." So, when we marched into the rice paddies on that damp March afternoon, we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit convictions that the Viet Cong would be quickly beaten and that we were doing something altogether noble and good. We kept the packs and rifles; the convictions, we lost.

The discovery that the men we had scorned as peasant guerrillas were, in fact, a lethal, determined enemy and the casualty lists that lengthened each week with nothing to show for the blood being spilled broke our early confidence. By autumn, what had begun as an adventurous expedition had turned into an exhausting, indecisive war of attrition in which we fought for no cause other than our own survival.

Writing about this kind of warfare is not a simple task. Repeatedly, I have found myself wishing that I had been the

veteran of a conventional war, with dramatic campaigns and historic battles for subject matter instead of a monotonous succession of ambushes and fire-fights. But there were no Normandies or Gettysburgs for us, no epic clashes that decided the fates of armies or nations. The war was mostly a matter of enduring weeks of expectant waiting and, at random intervals, of conducting vicious manhunts through jungles and swamps where snipers harassed us constantly and booby traps cut us down one by one.

The tedium was occasionally relieved by a large-scale search-and-destroy operation, but the exhilaration of riding the lead helicopter into a landing zone was usually followed by more of the same hot walking, with the mud sucking at our boots and the sun thudding against our helmets while an invisible enemy shot at us from distant tree lines. The rare instances when the VC chose to fight a set-piece battle provided the only excitement; not ordinary excitement, but the manic ecstasy of contact. Weeks of bottled-up tensions would be released in a few minutes of orgiastic violence, men screaming and shouting obscenities above the explosions of grenades and the rapid, rippling bursts of automatic rifles.

Beyond adding a few more corpses to the weekly body count, none of these encounters achieved anything; none will ever appear in military histories or be studied by cadets at West Point. Still, they changed us and taught us, the men who fought in them; in those obscure skirmishes we learned the old lessons about fear, cowardice, courage, suffering, cruelty, and comradeship. Most of all, we learned about death at an age when it is common to think of oneself as immortal. Everyone loses that illusion eventually, but in civilian life it is lost in installments over the years. We lost it all at once and, in the span of months, passed from boyhood through manhood to a premature middle age. The knowledge of death, of the implacable limits placed on a

man’s existence, severed us from our youth as irrevocably as a surgeon’s scissors had once severed us from the womb. And yet, few of us were past twenty-five. We left Vietnam peculiar creatures, with young shoulders that bore rather old heads.

My own departure took place in early July 1966. Ten months later, following a tour as the CO of an infantry training company in North Carolina, an honorable discharge released me from the Marines and the chance of dying an early death in Asia. I felt as happy as a condemned man whose sentence has been commuted, but within a year I began growing nostalgic for the war.

Other veterans I knew confessed to the same emotion. In spite of everything, we felt a strange attachment to Vietnam and, even stranger, a longing to return. The war was still being fought, but this desire to go back did not spring from any patriotic ideas about duty, honor, and sacrifice, the myths with which old men send young men off to get killed or maimed. It arose, rather, from a recognition of how deeply we had been changed, how different we were from everyone who had not shared with us the miseries of the monsoon, the exhausting patrols, the fear of a combat assault on a hot landing zone. We had very little in common with them. Though we were civilians again, the civilian world seemed alien. We did not belong to it as much as we did to that other world, where we had fought and our friends had died.

I was involved in the antiwar movement at the time and struggled, unsuccessfully, to reconcile my opposition to the war with this nostalgia. Later, I realized a reconciliation was impossible; I would never be able to hate the war with anything like the undiluted passion of my friends in the movement. Because I had fought in it, it was not an abstract issue, but a deeply emotional experience, the most significant thing that had happened to me. It held my

thoughts, senses, and feelings in an unbreakable embrace. I would hear in thunder the roar of artillery. I could not listen to rain without recalling those drenched nights on the line, nor walk through woods without instinctively searching for a trip wire or an ambush. I could protest as loudly as the most convinced activist, but I could not deny the grip the war had on me, nor the fact that it had been an experience as fascinating as it was repulsive, as exhilarating as it was sad, as tender as it was cruel.

This book is partly an attempt to capture something of its ambivalent realities. Anyone who fought in Vietnam, if he is honest about himself, will have to admit he enjoyed the compelling attractiveness of combat. It was a peculiar enjoyment because it was mixed with a commensurate pain. Under fire, a man's powers of life heightened in proportion to the proximity of death, so that he felt an elation as extreme as his dread. His senses quickened, he attained an acuity of consciousness at once pleasurable and excruciating. It was something like the elevated state of awareness induced by drugs. And it could be just as addictive, for it made whatever else life offered in the way of delights or torments seem pedestrian.

I have also attempted to describe the intimacy of life in infantry battalions, where the communion between men is as profound as any between lovers. Actually, it is more so. It does not demand for its sustenance the reciprocity, the pledges of affection, the endless reassurances required by the love of men and women. It is, unlike marriage, a bond that cannot be broken by a word, by boredom or divorce, or by anything other than death. Sometimes even that is not strong enough. Two friends of mine died trying to save the corpses of their men from the battlefield. Such devotion, simple and selfless, the sentiment of belonging to each other, was the one decent thing we found in a conflict otherwise notable for its monstrosities.

And yet, it was a tenderness that would have been impossible if the war had been significantly less brutal. The battlefields of Vietnam were a crucible in which a generation of American soldiers were fused together by a common confrontation with death and a sharing of hardships, dangers, and fears. The very ugliness of the war, the sordidness of our daily lives, the degradation of having to take part in body counts made us draw still closer to one another. It was as if in comradeship we found an affirmation of life and the means to preserve at least a vestige of our humanity.

There is also the aspect of the Vietnam War that distinguished it from other American conflicts—its absolute savagery. I mean the savagery that prompted so many American fighting men—the good, solid kids from Iowa farms—to kill civilians and prisoners. The final chapter of this book concentrates on this subject. My purpose has not been to confess complicity in what, for me, amounted to murder, but, using myself and a few other men as examples, to show that war, by its nature, can arouse a psychopathic violence in men of seemingly normal impulses.

There has been a good deal of exaggeration about U.S. atrocities in Vietnam, exaggeration not about their extent but about their causes. The two most popularly held explanations for outrages like My Lai have been the racist theory, which proposes that the American soldier found it easy to slaughter Asians because he did not regard them as human beings, and the frontier-heritage theory, which claims he was inherently violent and needed only the excuse of war to vent his homicidal instincts.

Like all generalizations, each contains an element of truth; yet both ignore the barbarous treatment the Viet Cong and ARVN often inflicted on their own people, and neither confront the crimes committed by the Korean

division, probably the most bloody-minded in Vietnam, and by the French during the first Indochina war.

The evil was inherent not in the men—except in the sense that a devil dwells in us all—but in the circumstances under which they had to live and fight. The conflict in Vietnam combined the two most bitter forms of warfare, civil war and revolution, to which was added the ferocity of jungle war. Twenty years of terrorism and fratricide had obliterated most reference points from the country's moral map long before we arrived. Communists and government forces alike considered ruthlessness a necessity if not a virtue. Whether committed in the name of principles or out of vengeance, atrocities were as common to the Vietnamese battlefields as shell craters and barbed wire. The marines in our brigade were not innately cruel, but on landing at Danang they learned rather quickly that Vietnam was not a place where a man could expect much mercy if, say, he was taken prisoner. And men who do not expect to receive mercy eventually lose their inclination to grant it.

At times, the comradeship that was the war's only redeeming quality caused some of its worst crimes—acts of retribution for friends who had been killed. Some men could not withstand the stress of guerrilla-fighting: the hair-trigger alertness constantly demanded of them, the feeling that the enemy was everywhere, the inability to distinguish civilians from combatants created emotional pressures which built to such a point that a trivial provocation could make these men explode with the blind destructiveness of a mortar shell.

Others were made pitiless by an overpowering greed for survival. Self-preservation, that most basic and tyrannical of all instincts, can turn a man into a coward or, as was more often the case in Vietnam, into a creature who destroys without hesitation or remorse whatever poses even a potential threat to his life. A sergeant in my platoon, ordinarily a pleasant young man, told me once,

“Lieutenant, I’ve got a wife and two kids at home and I’m going to see ’em again and don’t care who I’ve got to kill or how many of ’em to do it.”

General Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition also had an important effect on our behavior. Our mission was not to win terrain or seize positions, but simply to kill: to kill Communists and to kill as many of them as possible. Stack ’em like cordwood. Victory was a high body-count, defeat a low kill-ratio, war a matter of arithmetic. The pressure on unit commanders to produce enemy corpses was intense, and they in turn communicated it to their troops. This led to such practices as counting civilians as Viet Cong. “If it’s dead and Vietnamese, it’s VC,” was a rule of thumb in the bush. It is not surprising, therefore, that some men acquired a contempt for human life and a predilection for taking it.

Finally, there were the conditions imposed by the climate and country. For weeks we had to live like primitive men on remote outposts rimmed by alien seas of rice paddies and rain forests. Malaria, blackwater fever, and dysentery, though not the killers they had been in past wars, took their toll. The sun scorched us in the dry season, and in the monsoon season we were pounded numb by ceaseless rain. Our days were spent hacking through mountainous jungles whose immensity reduced us to an antlike pettiness. At night we squatted in muddy holes, picked off the leeches that sucked on our veins, and waited for an attack to come rushing at us from the blackness beyond the perimeter wire.

The air-conditioned headquarters of Saigon and Danang seemed thousands of miles away. As for the United States, we did not call it “the World” for nothing; it might as well have been on another planet. There was nothing familiar out where we were, no churches, no police, no laws, no newspapers, or any of the restraining influences without which the earth’s population of virtuous people would be

reduced by ninety-five percent. It was the dawn of creation in the Indochina bush, an ethical as well as a geographical wilderness. Out there, lacking restraints, sanctioned to kill, confronted by a hostile country and a relentless enemy, we sank into a brutish state. The descent could be checked only by the net of a man's inner moral values, the attribute that is called character. There were a few—and I suspect Lieutenant Calley was one—who had no net and plunged all the way down, discovering in their bottommost depths a capacity for malice they probably never suspected was there.

Most American soldiers in Vietnam—at least the ones I knew—could not be divided into good men and bad. Each possessed roughly equal measures of both qualities. I saw men who behaved with great compassion toward the Vietnamese one day and then burned down a village the next. They were, as Kipling wrote of his Tommy Atkins, neither saints "nor blackguards too/But single men in barricks most remarkable like you." That may be why Americans reacted with such horror to the disclosures of U.S. atrocities while ignoring those of the other side: the American soldier was a reflection of themselves.

This book is not a work of the imagination. The events related are true, the characters real, though I have used fictitious names in some places. I have tried to describe accurately what the dominant event in the life of my generation, the Vietnam War, was like for the men who fought in it. Toward that end, I have made a great effort to resist the veteran's inclination to remember things the way he would like them to have been rather than the way they were.

Finally, this book ought not to be regarded as a protest. Protest arises from a belief that one can change things or influence events. I am not egotistical enough to believe I can. Besides, it no longer seems necessary to register an

objection to the war, because the war is over. We lost it, and no amount of objecting will resurrect the men who died, without redeeming anything, on calvaries like Hamburger Hill and the Rockpile.

It might, perhaps, prevent the next generation from being crucified in the next war.

But I don’t think so.

Part One

The Splendid Little War

No great dependence is to be placed on the eagerness of young soldiers for action, for the prospect of fighting is agreeable to those who are strangers to it.

—*Vegetius*
Roman military writer
4th century A.D.

One

> Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
> How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood….
>
> —Wilfred Owen
> “Arms and the Boy”

At the age of twenty-four, I was more prepared for death than I was for life. My first experience of the world outside the classroom had been war. I went straight from school into the Marine Corps, from Shakespeare to the *Manual of Small-Unit Tactics*, from the campus to the drill field and finally Vietnam. I learned the murderous trade at Quantico, Virginia, practiced it in the rice paddies and jungles around Danang, and then taught it to others at Camp Geiger, a training base in North Carolina.

When my three-year enlistment expired in 1967, I was almost completely ignorant about the stuff of ordinary life, about marriage, mortgages, and building a career. I had a degree, but no skills. I had never run an office, taught a class, built a bridge, welded, programmed a computer, laid bricks, sold anything, or operated a lathe.

But I had acquired some expertise in the art of killing. I knew how to face death and how to cause it, with everything on the evolutionary scale of weapons from the knife to the 3.5-inch rocket launcher. The simplest repairs on an automobile engine were beyond me, but I was able to field-strip and assemble an M-14 rifle blindfolded. I could call in artillery, set up an ambush, rig a booby trap, lead a night raid.

Simply by speaking a few words into a two-way radio, I had performed magical feats of destruction. Summoned by my voice, jet fighters appeared in the sky to loose their

lethal droppings on villages and men. High-explosive bombs blasted houses to fragments, napalm sucked air from lungs and turned human flesh to ashes. All this just by saying a few words into a radio transmitter. Like magic.

I came home from the war with the curious feeling that I had grown older than my father, who was then fifty-one. It was as if a lifetime of experience had been compressed into a year and a half. A man saw the heights and depths of human behavior in Vietnam, all manner of violence and horrors so grotesque that they evoked more fascination than disgust. Once I had seen pigs eating napalm-charred corpses—a memorable sight, pigs eating roast people.

I was left with none of the optimism and ambition a young American is supposed to have, only a desire to catch up on sixteen months of missed sleep and an old man's conviction that the future would hold no further surprises, good or bad.

I *hoped* there would be no more surprises. I had survived enough ambushes and doubted my capacity to endure many more physical or emotional shocks. I had all the symptoms of *combat veteranitis*: an inability to concentrate, a childlike fear of darkness, a tendency to tire easily, chronic nightmares, an intolerance of loud noises—especially doors slamming and cars backfiring—and alternating moods of depression and rage that came over me for no apparent reason. Recovery has been less than total.

I joined the Marines in 1960, partly because I got swept up in the patriotic tide of the Kennedy era but mostly because I was sick of the safe, suburban existence I had known most of my life.

I was raised in Westchester, Illinois, one of the towns that rose from the prairies around Chicago as a result of postwar affluence, VA mortgage loans, and the migratory urge and housing shortage that sent millions of people out

of the cities in the years following World War II. It had everything a suburb is supposed to have: sleek, new schools smelling of fresh plaster and floor wax; supermarkets full of Wonder Bread and Bird's Eye frozen peas; rows of centrally heated split-levels that lined dirtless streets on which nothing ever happened.

It was pleasant enough at first, but by the time I entered my late teens I could not stand the place, the dullness of it, the summer barbecues eaten to the lulling drone of power mowers. During the years I grew up there, Westchester stood on or near the edge of the built-up area. Beyond stretched the Illinois farm and pasture lands, where I used to hunt on weekends. I remember the fields as they were in the late fall: the corn stubble brown against the snow, dead husks rasping dryly in the wind; abandoned farm houses waiting for the bulldozers that would tear them down to clear space for a new subdivision; and off on the horizon, a few stripped sycamores silhouetted against a bleak November sky. I can still see myself roaming around out there, scaring rabbits from the brambles, the tract houses a few miles behind me, the vast, vacant prairies in front, a restless boy caught between suburban boredom and rural desolation.

The only thing I really liked about my boyhood surroundings were the Cook and DuPage County forest preserves, a belt of virgin woodland through which flowed a muddy stream called Salt Creek. It was not too polluted then, and its sluggish waters yielded bullhead, catfish, carp, and a rare bass. There was small game in the woods, sometimes a deer or two, but most of all a hint of the wild past, when moccasined feet trod the forest paths and fur trappers cruised the rivers in bark canoes. Once in a while, I found flint arrowheads in the muddy creek bank. Looking at them, I would dream of that savage, heroic time and wish I had lived then, before America became a land of salesmen and shopping centers.

That is what I wanted, to find in a commonplace world a chance to live heroically. Having known nothing but security, comfort, and peace, I hungered for danger, challenges, and violence.

I had no clear idea of how to fulfill this peculiar ambition until the day a Marine recruiting team set up a stand in the student union at Loyola University. They were on a talent hunt for officer material and displayed a poster of a trim lieutenant who had one of those athletic, slightly cruel-looking faces considered handsome in the military. He looked like a cross between an All-American halfback and a Nazi tank commander. Clear and resolute, his blue eyes seemed to stare at me in challenge. JOIN THE MARINES, read the slogan above his white cap. BE A LEADER OF MEN.

I rummaged through the propaganda material, picking out one pamphlet whose cover listed every battle the Marines had fought, from Trenton to Inchon. Reading down that list, I had one of those rare flashes of insight: the heroic experience I sought was war; war, the ultimate adventure; war, the ordinary man's most convenient means of escaping from the ordinary. The country was at peace then, but the early sixties were years of almost constant tension and crisis; if a conflict did break out, the Marines would be certain to fight in it and I could be there with them. Actually *there.* Not watching it on a movie or TV screen, not reading about it in a book, but *there*, living out a fantasy. Already I saw myself charging up some distant beachhead, like John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and then coming home a suntanned warrior with medals on my chest. The recruiters started giving me the usual sales pitch, but I hardly needed to be persuaded. I decided to enlist.

I had another motive for volunteering, one that has pushed young men into armies ever since armies were invented: I needed to prove something—my courage, my toughness, my manhood, call it whatever you like. I had

spent my freshman year at Purdue, freed from the confinements of suburban home and family. But a slump in the economy prevented me from finding a job that summer. Unable to afford the expense of living on campus (and almost flunking out anyway, having spent half my first year drinking and the other half in fraternity antics), I had to transfer to Loyola, a commuter college in Chicago. As a result, at the age of nineteen I found myself again living with my parents.

It was a depressing situation. In my adolescent mind, I felt that my parents regarded me as an irresponsible boy who still needed their guidance. I wanted to prove them wrong. I had to get away. It was not just a question of physical separation, although that was important; it was more a matter of doing something that would demonstrate to them, and to myself as well, that I was a man after all, like the steely-eyed figure in the recruiting poster. THE MARINE CORPS BUILDS MEN was another slogan current at the time, and on November 28 I became one of its construction projects.

I joined the Platoon Leaders' Class, the Marines' version of ROTC. I was to attend six weeks of basic training the following summer and then an advanced course during the summer before I graduated from college. Completion of Officer Candidate School and a bachelor's degree would entitle me to a commission, after which I would be required to serve three years on active duty.

I was not really ambitious to become an officer. I would have dropped out of school and gone in immediately as an enlisted man had it not been for my parents' unflinching determination to have a college graduate for a son. As it was, they were unhappy. Their vision of my future did not include uniforms and drums, but consisted of my finding a respectable job after school, marrying a respectable girl, and then settling down in a respectable suburb.

For my part, I was elated the moment I signed up and swore to defend the United States “against all enemies foreign and domestic.” I had done something important on my own; that it was something which opposed my parents’ wishes made it all the more savory. And I was excited by the idea that I would be sailing off to dangerous and exotic places after college instead of riding the 7:45 to some office. It is odd when I look back on it. Most of my friends at school thought of joining the army as the most conformist thing anyone could do, and of the service itself as a form of slavery. But for me, enlisting was an act of rebellion, and the Marine Corps symbolized an opportunity for personal freedom and independence.

Officer Candidate School was at Quantico, a vast reservation in the piny Virginia woods near Fredericksburg, where the Army of the Potomac had been futilely slaughtered a century before. There, in the summer of 1961, along with several hundred other aspiring lieutenants, I was introduced to military life and began training for war. We ranged in age from nineteen to twenty-one, and those of us who survived OCS would lead the first American troops sent to Vietnam four years later. Of course, we did not know that at the time: we hardly knew where Vietnam was.

The first six weeks, roughly the equivalent of enlisted boot camp, were spent at Camp Upshur, a cluster of quonset huts and tin-walled buildings set deep in the woods. The monastic isolation was appropriate because the Marine Corps, as we quickly learned, was more than a branch of the armed services. It was a society unto itself, demanding total commitment to its doctrines and values, rather like one of those quasi-religious military orders of ancient times, the Teutonic Knights or the Theban Band. We were novitiates, and the rigorous training, administered by high priests called drill instructors, was to be our ordeal of initiation.

And ordeal it was, physically and psychologically. From four in the morning until nine at night we were marched and drilled, sent sprawling over obstacle courses and put through punishing conditioning hikes in ninety-degree heat. We were shouted at, kicked, humiliated and harassed constantly. We were no longer known by our names, but called “shitbird,” “scumbag,” or “numbnuts” by the DIs. In my platoon, they were a corporal, a small man who was cruel in the way only small men can be, and a sergeant, a nervously energetic black named McClellan, whose muscles looked as hard and wiry as underground telephone cables.

What I recall most vividly is close-order drill: the hours we spent marching in a sun so hot it turned the asphalt field into a viscous mass that stuck to our boots; the endless hours of being driven and scourged by McClellan’s voice—relentless, compelling obedience, a voice that embedded itself in our minds until we could not walk anywhere without hearing it, counting a rhythmic cadence.

Wan-tup-threep-fo, threep-fo-your-lef, lef-rye-lef, hadalef-rye-lef, your-lef … your-lef … your-lef.
Dress it up dress it up keep your interval.
Thirty-inches-back-to-breast-forty-inches-shoulder-to-shoulder.
Lef-rye-lef.
TothereAH HARCH … reAH HARCH … bydalefflank HARCH!
Dress it up keep your dress DRESS IT UP SCUMBAGS.
Lef-rye-lef. Dig those heels in dig ’em in.
Pick-’em-up-and-put-’em-down DIG ’EM IN threep-fo-your-lef.
DIG’EM IN LET’S HEAR IT DIG’EM IN.
Threep-fo-your-lef, lef-rye-lef.
Square those pieces away SQUARE ’EM AWAY GIRLS. YOU, SHITHEAD FOURTH MAN IN THE FRONT RANK

I SAID SQUARE THAT FUCKIN’ PIECE, SQUARE IT AWAY Wan-tup-threep-fo.

YOU DON’T SQUARE THAT PIECE I GONNA MALTREAT YOU BOY KNOCK UP UP THE SIDE O’ THE HEAD threep-fo-your-lef SQUARE THAT PIECE! YOU FUCKIN DEAF? EYES FRONT! DON’T LOOK AT ME NUMBNUTS! EYES FRONT! SQUARE YOUR PIECE! Now you got the idea, nummie Wan-tup-threep-fo.

Threep-fo-your-lef, lef-rye-lef, hadalef-rye-lef, lef-rye-lef. Lef-rye-lef, lef-rye-lef, your-lef, your-lef YOUR OTHER LEF SHITHEAD. Lef-rye-lef, lef… lef…

Lef-rye-lef.

The purpose of drill was to instill discipline and teamwork, two of the Corps’ cardinal virtues. And by the third week, we had learned to obey orders instantly and in unison, without thinking. Each platoon had been transformed from a group of individuals into one thing: a machine of which we were merely parts.

The mental and physical abuse had several objectives. They were calculated first to eliminate the weak, who were collectively known as “unsats,” for unsatisfactory. The reasoning was that anyone who could not take being shouted at and kicked in the ass once in a while could never withstand the rigors of combat. But such abuse was also designed to destroy each man’s sense of self-worth, to make him feel worthless until he proved himself equal to the Corps’ exacting standards.

And we worked hard to prove that, submitted to all sorts of indignities just to demonstrate that we could take it. We said, “Thank you, sir” when the drill sergeant rapped us in the back of the head for having a dirty rifle. Night after night, without complaint, we did Chinese push-ups for our sins (Chinese push-ups are performed in a bent position in which only the head and toes touch the floor). After ten or fifteen seconds, it felt as if your skull was being crushed in

a vise. We had to do them for as long as several minutes, until we were at the point of blacking out.

I don't know about the others, but I endured these tortures because I was driven by an overwhelming desire to succeed, no matter what. That awful word—*unsat*—haunted me. I was more afraid of it than I was of Sergeant McClellan. Nothing he could do could be as bad as having to return home and admit to my family that I had failed. It was not their criticism I dreaded, but the emasculating affection and understanding they would be sure to show me. I could hear my mother saying, "That's all right, son. You didn't belong in the Marines but here with us. It's good to have you back. Your father needs help with the lawn." I was so terrified of being found wanting that I even avoided getting near the candidates who were borderline cases—the "marginals," as they were known in the lexicon of that strange world. They carried the virus of weakness.

Most of the marginals eventually fell into the unsat category and were sent home. Others dropped out. Two or three had nervous breakdowns; a few more nearly died of heatstroke on forced marches and were given medical discharges.

The rest of us, about seventy percent of the original class, came through. At the end of the course, the DIs honored our survival by informing us that we had earned the right to be called Marines. We were proud of ourselves, but were not likely to forget the things we endured to claim that title. To this day, the smell of woods in the early morning reminds me of those long-ago dawns at Camp Upshur, with their shrill reveilles and screaming sergeants and dazed recruits stumbling out of bed.

Those who passed the initial trial went back to Quantico two years later for the advanced course, which was even more grueling. Much of it was familiar stuff: more close-order drill, bayonet practice, and hand-to-hand combat. But there were additional refinements. One of these was a

fiendish device of physical torture called the Hill Trail, so named, with typical military unimaginativeness, because it was a trail that ran over a range of hills, seven of them. And what hills—steep as roller coasters and ten times as high. We had to run over them at least twice a week wearing full pack and equipment. Softened by the intervening two years of campus life, dozens of men collapsed on these excursions. The victims were shown no mercy by the DIs. I remember one overweight boy lying unconscious against a tree stump while a sergeant shook him by the collar and shouted into his blanched face: “On your feet, you sackashit. Off your fat ass and on your feet.”

Recreation consisted of obstacle-course races or pugil-stick fights. The pugil-stick, a thick, wooden staff, padded at each end, was supposed to instill “the spirit of bayonet”; that is, the savage fury necessary to ram cold steel into another man’s guts. Two men would square off and bash each other with these clubs, urged on by some bloodthirsty instructor. “Parry that one, now slash, SLASH! Vertical butt stroke. C’mon, kill the sonuvabitch, kill ’im. Thrust. Jab. That’s it, jab. JAB! KILL ’IM.”

Throughout, we were subjected to intense indoctrination, which seemed to borrow from Communist brainwashing techniques. We had to chant slogans while running: “Hut-two-three-four, I love the Marine Corps.” And before meals: “Sir, the United States Marines; since 1775, the most invincible fighting force in the history of man. Gung ho! Gung ho! Gung ho! Pray for war!” Like the slogans of revolutionaries, these look ludicrous in print, but when recited in unison by a hundred voices, they have a weird, hypnotic effect on a man. The psychology of the mob, of the *Bund* rally, takes command of his will and he finds himself shouting that nonsense even though he knows it is nonsense. In time, he begins to believe that he really does love the Marine Corps, that it is invincible, and that there is nothing improper in praying for war, the event in which the

Corps periodically has justified its existence and achieved its apotheosis.

We were lectured on the codes marines are expected to live by: they never leave their casualties on the battlefield, never retreat, and never surrender so long as they have the means to resist. “And the only time a marine doesn’t have the means to resist,” one instructor told us, “is when he’s dead.” There were classes on Marine Corps history, or, I should say, mythology. We learned of Lieutenant Presley O’Bannon storming the fort of the Barbary corsairs at Tripoli, of Captain Travis seizing the fortress of Chapultepec—“the halls of Montezuma”—during the Mexican War, of the 5th and 6th Regiments’ bayonet charge at Belleau Wood, of Chesty Puller whipping the rebels in Nicaragua and the Japanese on Guadalcanal.

Around seven hundred and fifty men began the advanced course; only five hundred finished. The graduation ceremony took place on a scalding August afternoon in 1963. We stood at attention on the liquefying asphalt of the parade field on which we had spent countless hours drilling.

A squad of field grade officers began taking their places in the reviewing stand, campaign ribbons adding a splash of color to their khaki shirts. The sun glinted off their brass rank insignia and the polished instruments of the band. There was a small crowd of civilians, mostly parents who had come to watch their sons take part in this martial rite of passage. Awards were presented, the usual messages of congratulation read, and someone made a brief duty-honor-country valedictory speech. We stood patiently, sweat trickling from our noses and onto our ties, the heat wilting the creases in our shirts.

Finally, the order to pass in review rippled down the line. We marched past the stand, snapping our heads at the command “Eyes right” while the gold and scarlet guidons fluttered in the breeze and drums rolled and the band

played the Marine Corps Hymn. It was glorious and grand, like an old-fashioned Fourth of July. Bugles, drums, and flags. Marching across the field in battalion mass, with that stirring, soaring hymn blaring in our ears, we felt invincible, boys of twenty-one and twenty-two, all cheerfully unaware that some of us would not grow much older.

I was commissioned on February 2, 1964, and returned to Quantico in May for Officers' Basic School, where new second lieutenants served a six-month apprenticeship before being sent to their first commands. I was assigned to Company H, Basic Class 2-64.

Basic School was fairly pleasant compared to OCS. No more harassment from profane, sadistic drill sergeants. Now they had to call us "sir," although, with the previous summer's experience fresh in our minds, the sight of some old salt with three stripes and a rocker on his sleeves still caused a Pavlovian reaction of terror.

Living conditions were regal. We were housed in two-man rooms in a BOQ that was indistinguishable from a modern dormitory. Large, airy lecture rooms and a gymnasium (named in honor of an alumnus who had been killed in Korea) completed the collegelike atmosphere.

Basic School was a school in fact as well as in name, a halfway house between the campus and the real Marine Corps. Its purpose was to turn us into professional officers. Because of the Corps doctrine that every marine is a rifleman, the course emphasized infantry fundamentals—weapons-training and small-unit tactics. It was dry, technical stuff, taught in the how-to-do-it fashion of a trade school: how to take a hill by frontal assault or envelopment; how to defend it once you have taken it; how to deliver searching and traversing fire with an M-60 machine gun.

For me, the classroom work was mind-numbing. I wanted the romance of war, bayonet charges, and desperate battles