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The Six Purposes of Drill

Do not call Marine Corps drill instructors “You.” A ewe is a female sheep. Do not refer to yourself as “I” in boot camp. Without a personality, there is no “I.” Yell at the top of your lungs, “Sir, Private Bronkowski requests permission to leave the parade ground, Sir.” When you make the request, don’t look your DIs in the eye or they will say, “Are you queer for our gear? Why are you eyeballing us, Private?” As you formulate your next thought, find a place midway between the back of their campaign hats and the historic buildings of the arcade surrounding the drill field where you march this June morning, 1964. Focused on the in-between place in air, say in a voice that doesn’t quaver, “Sir, Private Bronkowski has shit his pants.”

“Get away from us!” they’ll yell.

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

Jog, M-14 in hand, to the head, the latrine, across the wide, paved parade ground, the Grinder, where in the distance platoons practice close order drill, DIs calling cadence. Where will you go next? you wonder in your misery.

Seeing you run past the reviewing stand, a lieutenant asks, “What’s the matter, Recruit?”

“Sir, the private had an accident.”

“Get cleaned up,” he says. With his tan summer service uniform, he wears a garrison cap, a piss cutter. Near the front of the piss cutter shine the single silver bars of his rank.

The gunnery sergeant you come up to next—when you walk behind him, you slow your pace. “By your leave, Sir.” He waves you on.

See now, Private Bronkowski, through frosted glass windows tilted open, how the sun throws patterns across the clean floor of the latrine. For the first time since leaving Superior, Wisconsin, by Greyhound bus for Minneapolis, then by Western Airlines for San Diego, you have a moment to relax; during your eighteenth year on earth, a moment alone in the first weeks of boot camp. A Marlboro would taste good, you think, while on the Grinder, Platoon 146 drills under the gaze of Corporal George, Sergeant Gribben, and Staff Sergeant Welch, the man who sent you here.

Senior Drill Instructor Welch, bitter-eyed, red-faced, nose filled with broken blood vessels, is especially no friend of yours. To look salty, he wears his campaign hat a little back on his head. If he wanted, he could carry a swagger stick. Despite his cigar smoking and slight paunch, on long runs through the canyons he'll stay with any nineteen-year-old.

"Where are the utility trousers you befouled?" he asks when the platoon returns from the Grinder to the quonset huts, Platoon 146 territory.

"Sir, Private Bronkowski threw them and his skivvies in the dumpster on the way to the shower."

"Diapers are not part of the basic clothing issue. You'll have to buy them. At the next pay call, Corporal George will accompany you to the Recruit Exchange to shop. Get out of my sight, Dippy."

Staff Sergeant Welch has no use for you or other recruits. In Korea he watched men have similar accidents as yours. They had endured combat, extreme heat and cold, sparse rations, water tasting like iodine purification tablets. Who could blame a marine for things that occurred in combat? Then you come along all the way from "Wesconsin"—blond-haired, shiny-faced, soft in the stomach. Disgusted by the sight of you, Staff Sergeant Welch barks something to Sergeant Gribben, the junior drill instructor, about getting the platoon prepared for chow.

Anderson, Clark, Joubert, Jimenez, other privates in your squad bay put away their M-14s.

"Fall in!" Sergeant Gribben yells.

"Sir, Yes, Sir."

Private Dillon grabs the guidon, a staff resting in a holder by the hatch. Its red pennant with yellow numbers identifies the platoon. To win streamers for the guidon, streamers for marksmanship, physical readiness, academics, and drill, Platoon 146 will compete against other platoons in the training series. The drill streamer is yellow, physical readiness streamer white, marksmanship streamer blue.

"Dress right," Sergeant Gribben says, then the rest of the command, "Dress!"

In short sidesteps, you move till Private Muntean's fingertips touch your shoulders and your fingertips touch Private Keiser's when he moves right. At the command "Front!", turning heads and eyes forward, you drop your arms, resuming the position of attention. Page 102, *Guidebook for Marines*, lists six purposes of drill: 1. "To teach discipline by instilling habits of precision and automatic response to orders," 2. "To move a unit from one place to another in a standard, orderly manner. . ."

"Right face," Gribben says. Dissatisfied with the response, he cancels the command.

"Don't worry about bagging your nylons. Let's get it right, Ladies."

This time you turn smartly. Page 103, *Guidebook for Marines*, defines "Snap" in drill as "immediate and smart execution of movement." You will want the smoking lamp lit after chow.

DIs on two sides of you, Dillon raising the guidon, you step out to Sergeant Gribben's cadence call, "Owr, owr, owr, urel, owr, urel, owr." Private Boyd Page runs in front of you. At 1130 hours he is your foghorn. Six feet, five inches tall, soft-spoken, he looks foolish running back and forth ahead of the platoon. By forcing him to imitate a foghorn, the DIs believe Page will sound off louder in ranks.

"Let that horn come from the diaphragm, Page. Make it sound low and nasty. Platoon 146 does not want to collide with some pussy platoon," Sergeant Gribben is saying. "*We* are not pussies. *We* are squared away." "Ah-hoo, ah-hoo," calls Page. "That's right. Back and forth. Back and forth, Private Page. Private Keiser, you're slouching. Don't slouch. Private Clark, you're ditty-bopping. Why must you ditty-bop? Huber, Huber, what am I to do with a fuck up like you?"

The boot heels of sixty-one recruits and two DIs hit the deck together. A third purpose of drill is "To improve morale by developing team spirit." "Owr, owr, owr, hedalep, hedalep." You are aligned, squared away. If it could stay this way, if the problem with the ice plant hadn't come up to annoy Staff Sergeant Welch, then boot camp could have been a little easier today, but someone is disturbing the ice plant. Huber? Ramage? Page? Secrist?

Given the destruction of the ice plant and your misfortune on the Grinder, you wonder whether the smoking lamp will ever be lit for Platoon 146. All through the march to chow, you think about a cigarette. After you eat, when you've marched back and stand in formation, will the DIs say, "At ease, Privates. The smoking lamp is lit for everyone but Bronkowski.?"

Your girlfriend taught you to smoke. If she sends gum, cigarettes, or other pogy bait when she writes you from Superior, Wisconsin, the DIs will pummel you in

the duty hut. They'll order you to swallow the gum wrappers. If you can't, they'll make you chew the gum before the platoon. Private Markwood has had to do this. He is the suck-up housemouse who is in and out of the duty hut whenever the DIs want little things done. By having "Housemouse" chew gum before the platoon, by having him roll his eyes to show how happy he is that none of you have gum to chew, the DIs have taught everyone a lesson.

"You'll never crave poge-y bait, will you?" they yelled back on the nineteenth day of boot training. "No, Sir." "*Will* you, Privates?" "No, Sir," you roared, convinced you'd never have a milkshake, cheeseburger, or Milky Way candy bar again. Poge-y bait is for civilians.

Let ass-kissing housemouses and civilians eat poge-y bait. Now on the twenty-ninth day of recruit training, someone could offer you a grilled cheese sandwich and you'd refuse. You don't want any of it. You'll be a lean, mean fighting machine when you leave Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego, in September. You'll have learned hand-to-hand combat, the nomenclature of the M-14 rifle, how to parry and thrust with the fixed bayonet, even the six purposes of drill, though the last three are aimed more toward NCOs than recruits.

At 1200 hours, Corporal George at the lunch tables in the mess hall says, "No playing grab ass. No talking. You have twelve minutes to eat. At the command 'Sit!', I want sixty-one hairy assholes hitting the benches in unison."

On the menu are chicken, potatoes, and corn, but, given the condition of your stomach, you eat light. You want to slip Private Huber a slice of bread. This won't do. He must lose weight.

In twelve minutes, you're outside reforming around the guidon for the march back. On a sunny afternoon, Page is the foghorn.

While the platoon was eating, sleepy-eyed Sergeant Campos has come aboard to relieve Sergeant Gribben. Ordinarily, his eyes stay half shut through the training day. The ice plant problem has troubled Sergeant Campos and gotten under Staff Sergeant Welch's skin. Today, because of the ice plant, Sergeant Campos's eyes are wide open. Below the shaped crown of his felt campaign hat is a black eagle, globe, and anchor insignia. His shirt front buttons align with the left edge of his cartridge belt buckle. The buckle aligns with his trouser fly. Everything freshly starched and pressed runs straight up and down above spit-shined boots.

"Screw with me, I'll screw with you," he says. "In ten minutes, I want 100 dead flies in your grubby hands. Gnats and fleas do not count, Dippies. Private Markwood, bring the DI's chair from the duty hut. There will be no lollygagging. You've disappointed your drill instructors, Girls. Page, sound the foghorn. Quickly.

Get it done. Fly patrol. When I say 'Time,' the rest of you maggots line up, each presenting his captured flies."

The platoon and you, Private Bronkowski, search the pavement, search everywhere inside and outside the squad bays. Private Quinn bumps into Private Hedstrom. Private Barker curses Private Smith. Next to the hatchway, Floyd Settles sees a fly on the hand pump. "Where?" asks LaRoche. "There. No, it's flown," Settles says. Ulom has one, Velarde two. On the bulkhead inside the quonset hut, Elroy Williams zeroes in on a fly. When Lavern Cooper steps into Garcia's and Duncan's cupped hands and they lift him, he reaches halfway up the bulkhead for two flies, maybe three. Velarde, a regular Venus Flytrap claims he has three. Walmsley strikes it rich. "Ahooh ahooh!" Page yells, minutes ticking past.

Standing beside Sergeant Campos, the hateful Housemouse reads from a pocket dictionary kept in the duty hut. "Ice plant is 'An Old World annual herb of the carpetweed family with fleshy foliage covered with glistening papillate dots or vesicles.'" No one understands him. All you know is that ice plant is four inches tall, dark green, and grows around quonset huts and duty huts.

As the platoon rushes about, Private Custard gives you the finger.

"It wasn't me that did anything to the ice plant, Custard."

"Yes it was. You came back here once you crapped your pants."

"So what?" you say. "Somebody would've seen me if I was sitting out here."

Tonight they'll treat you to a blanket party. The darkness and blanket hiding them from sight, the recipient doesn't know who's hitting him.

"Page, cease with the alarm," Sergeant Campos says. He relaxes in his chair. "Platoon 146, present your findings."

"Aye, aye, Sir," the platoon says, scrambling into line.

It's all silly. When Sergeant Gribben makes Private Lee, whose rifle is found with rust on it, bury the M-14 outside the quonset hut, placing an R.I.P. sign over it, it's silly. When Private Draper, assigned submarine patrol, scans the quonset huts for enemy subs, it's silly. Looking like a fool, he stands for thirty minutes on a dumpster peering through empty Coca Cola bottles before reporting, "Sir, no submarine activity sighted here on land, Sir." When the DIs say things like "Up your giggy with a wawa brush," it's silly. The words make no sense. Fly patrol is silly.

"How many captured?" Sergeant Campos asks.

"Sir, two, Sir," Wangler says.

"How many from you, Brickman?"

"Four, Sir."

“Do not give your flies to other recruits, Privates. We will extend the flies a proper burial. How many, Chief?” he asks Sammaripa, an Indian the DIs call “Blanket Ass.” They call blacks “Splivs,” Catholics “Mackerel Snappers.”

When he has examined thirty-six flies, Sergeant Campos stands up. Eyes focused on Private Ramage’s palm, he says, “Ramage, I’ve seen this one. What are you pulling? This fly was the second one through the line.”

“No, Sir, it’s newly killed, Sir.”

“It’s not. I saw it five minutes ago. I recognize its eyes. Flies, like civilians, are unsanitary. You must discourage them from your presence. Get down. All of you, get down. Hit the deck. I want one hundred squat thrusts. Ready, exercise. One, two—” Sergeant Campos loses count at fifty six. “Start over, Girls,” he says as Staff Sergeant Welch returns to the duty deck while Corporal George hovers about.

A Catholic like you, Sergeant Campos has received Communion at Mass. When you could not climb the straight rope on the obstacle course, he’s looked the other way. “Try the knotted rope, Broo-owski,” he’s said at other times. Gribben and George, not being Catholic, are neutral toward you.

Coming from the Land of Sky Blue Waters, you’re pretty good at swimming and running forest paths. You hate squat thrusts. You begin them standing up. Elbows touching the insides of the knees, you place your palms on the burning asphalt. Arms stiff, you thrust legs and trunk backward, keeping toes straight, heels up. Returning to the squat position, elbows touching knees again, you go back to the stand position, repeating the process for as long as the DI wants you to.

When you look over, Private Huber is picking up flies. No one sees this. He looks pleased that he’s pulled one on the DIs. He looks around for more flies to put in his mouth. The starving Huber isn’t one of the platoon’s better recruits; Private Ramage isn’t; you, Alphonse Bronkowski, aren’t. Custard and the guidon carrier are. Even with a boot camp haircut, Keith Custard has striking features. The DIs call him “Hollywood.” He went to high school with The Beachboys. Given his good looks, you’d think he’d be happy anticipating his opportunities for beautiful women and good jobs, but it’s like he wants boot camp to go on forever.

If Private Huber doesn’t lose weight, he’ll be sent back to start recruit training over. Motivation Platoon is for the lazy, the out of shape. When Huber takes a slice of bread in the chow line, the DIs remove it from his tray. When Huber takes a pat of butter, they shitcan it. “None of it’s for you. None, Huber.” Though he’s not as heavy as before, he messes things up.

The Fatboy, the Fly Thief, you with your “problem” are upsetting the DIs. As far as Keith Custard is concerned, you should be discharged, leaving Platoon 146 better off. If Huber eats flies, Sergeant Campos has a fly up his ass.

“Someone’s breaking the ice plant. Who’s the moonlight squatter? No diddledicking, Privates. Who did it? Who’s the leaf lover?” he asks.

You, Private Bronkowski, know the guilty man. After “Taps,” the private above you hasn’t been able to sleep with Settles snoring, Bertilson and Ramage whispering to themselves, and Huber crying. Maybe a lot of things motivate Private Secrist to descend from his bunk, returning later smelling of earth and ice plant.

Hollywood Custard is pinning the destruction on Huber. For all the things Huber’s messed up, he’s not disturbed the landscaping at three a.m. Because Hollywood dislikes him, they’re out to get him. Maybe Hollywood’s trumped-up suspicions about the ice plant have been relayed to the DIs by the Housemouse. Huber has been off all through training. He couldn’t execute the vertical climb on the obstacle course. He couldn’t execute the “By the right flank, March” command on the drill field.

Corporal George asks, “Are you in love with plant life, Huber? Are you a horticulturist?”

Sergeant Campos asks, “Is this your secret garden? What other secrets do you keep from your drill instructors?”

Staff Sergeant Welch, brim of his brown felt campaign hat touching the front of Huber’s utility cover, asks, “Are you rebelling against us, Huber? Are you the deranged fuck up we think you are?”

Unsure whom to answer, the still-fat private whose utility uniform hangs from his frame begins to shake. We knew the end was near when he couldn’t recall the sixth General Order, the muzzle velocity of the M-14, or the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

“The private doesn’t know what a hordacultist is, Sir.”

“Your DI doesn’t speak English? Is that what’s wrong that you can’t understand him? We’ve had trouble with you all along, Private?”

“Sir, the private understands the drill instructor.”

“Then you are a horticulturist?”

“Sir, Yes, Sir. I guess the private is a hordacultist.”

“No shit. Bring me roses,” Staff Sergeant Welch says, as though one way or another he’s getting to the truth about Private Joey Paul Huber. “You like gardening. I want roses. You don’t grow roses? You said you’re a horticulturist.”

“Sir, it wasn’t Huber,” Secrist says. “It wasn’t him. I sat in the ice plant. It calms me at night.”

“Stand still, Huber,” Welch is saying. “Do you have the St. Vitus’ Dance that you’re shaking and moving about? You’ll shake all right when you get to Motivation Platoon. I can do nothing for you. Your drill instructor, who froze hands, feet, and dick at Inchon, Korea, leaving the latter permanently erect, does not fail, but he has done so this day. You’ll be sent back in training.”

“It wasn’t him,” Secrist says. “Look at him. He’s helpless, Sir.”

“Out of my way,” Corporal George yells when he’s heard enough. Pushing aside recruits, he’s on Secrist. Face an inch away, he hollers, “You better stand at attention, Maggot.”

“Yes, Sir. I’ll be sent back,” Huber says to Staff Sergeant Welch on the other side of the platoon. Crying, he wiggles around in some kind of dance. Hoping Sergeant Welch will change his mind and not shitcan him, Huber looks like he’s performing the Twist as he burps up his snack. Done with squat thrusts, Platoon 146 starts more push-ups as punishment for all of this.

“One for the Corps, two for the Corps—” the platoon says.

“Sound off! Louder!”

“I did it. *I* did, Sir,” Private Secrist says.

“Louder!” Corporal George says. “Louder, Louder!” drowning him out. “One for the Corps, two for the Corps.”

A flight is leaving San Diego. A platoon is heading on a long run. A girl is preparing to write you. You’ve told her no pogeys, but she’s angry about what you said the night before you left when you told her you loved the Corps more than her. Who knows what she’ll put in the envelope for the DIs to find. The smoking lamp is out, probably forever. The ocean breeze has stopped. They’ve paired Private Norman with Private Page. Page...Norman. Now double foghorns run about at 1400 hours on a clear day yelling “Ah-hoo, ah-hoo.” Ramage is doing extra push-ups for lying when he didn’t lie. Housemouse is reading from the dictionary. Secrist is doing squat thrusts for telling the truth. Starved, Huber looks for flies, gnats, ants even, as you, Bronkowski, are saying to Staff Sergeant Welch, “Sir, the private requests permission to make a head call.”

“You went four hours ago.”

“Yes, sir, the private knows this, Sir.”

“Up your giggy with a wawa brush. Get back in line. Finish your squat thrusts, Bronkowski.”

“Twenty-nine for the Corps, thirty for the Corps,” the recruits are saying.

Don't look Sergeant Welch in the eye. To him you're not human. When you formulate a thought as Page and Norman warn of fog and Huber dances the fly dance, find a place midway between the back of Staff Sergeant Welch's campaign hat and the quonset huts this June afternoon, 1964. Focused on the in-between place, say in a voice that doesn't quaver, "Sir, Private Bronkowski's had an accident again, Sir."

When he yells, "Get away from me. Get away from here," do not move, Bronkowski. Say, "Sir, the private from Wisconsin has shit himself. Do you hear the private? The private's going to have another accident and another, Sir," until finally one of them listens about Huber the fly eater, about Page the moving foghorn, about Ramage the liar, about all of you, and how, after the first four weeks of Marine Corps boot camp, the fog is descending on an otherwise clear afternoon.



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