

SAMUEL F. LANCKTON

Everyone Breaks

I wanted to become a Man of Death, and so I found myself outside the small airport in Columbus, Georgia, standing amidst a few hundred young bucks who had also signed their lives away. A line of blue civilian vans pulled up. I boarded my assigned transport along with a dozen or so other recruits. The driver, an obese, bearded man wearing a baseball hat that read “Remember Khe-San” welcomed us aboard. No one talked for most of the drive. We passed through the Fort Benning Military Reservation, and soon after, the sign welcoming us to Fort Benning, Home of the Infantry.

“You boys should know this vet is proud of ya,” the driver said with a gentle Georgian lilt. “Not many young men willin’ to make the sacrifice. Now, if ya got smokes on ya, pass ‘em on up. They’ll just take ‘em away from ya at in-processin’. Give ‘em to me, I can hand ‘em out to some hurtin’ vets who sure could use ‘em.”

So we passed them forward, crumpled packs of Camels and Marlboros as well as a couple tins of chewing tobacco. I thought about the “hurtin’ vets” who would smoke these cigarettes (if the driver did not actually intend on simply keeping them for himself). They were the scruffy-bearded mangy souls to whom I would absentmindedly toss a quarter on my way out of a bodega back in Morningside Heights.

I had yet to set foot on a military base, but already I felt a kinship with them – not because we both served our country, but because, as the pinewood trees gave

way to the big, brown barracks and Quonset huts I would soon call home, I could already sense the rest of the world forgetting all about me. It was not an unpleasant feeling.

In-processing was a three day blur of assembly-line physicals, endless shots, issuance of dog tags, t-shirts, jockies, fatigues, socks, boots, and a shoeshine kit, and that most iconic of military indoctrinations, the shaving of the head. I grinned my best Travis Bickle grin as my hair and my identity were shorn away and fell to the floor. We marched in a daze through these station stops, an endless line of young men without affect. Though we were not yet under the thumb of the Drill Sergeants, the NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers) at in-processing were fearsome enough that we rarely dared open our mouths. That night, with actual Basic Training just a few short hours away, I lay awake silently on my rack, staring at the ceiling, and listened to the other recruits murmur about the hellfire that awaited us.

We would go almost everywhere at Benning by leather-bound transport, meaning our jackbooted feet, which were themselves no longer feet, but “dogs.” On the first day of Basic, though, we journeyed to our new home by cattle car, a windowless semi-truck, fifty recruits packed shoulder to shoulder in the dark, standing room only, rucksacks on our backs, duffels in hand, choking on the eerie silence. We all knew that Shark Attack awaited us, the warm welcome from our Drill Sergeants that would begin the process of breaking our spirits and our wills.

The tension in the cattle car broke. The shouting began.

“Say goodbye to the world!” a voice cried out.

“Let’s get some!” yelled another.

“Fit to fight, day and night!” screamed a third.

A chorus commenced of whoops, hollers and boasts. I kept my mouth shut, fear and perspiration pouring down my face. As the truck slowed to a stop in front of our new home, all fell silent again. The back doors flew open, the hot Georgia sun blazed down on our helmets, and the drills laid right into us. A certain expression of Germanic origin was about to become central to our vernacular.

“All right, you pathetic fucks, get your fucking broke dicks off our fucking truck!”

Everything fucking belonged to the drills. We had arrived on their fucking truck. We would live in their fucking barracks, where we would clean their fucking latrines. We would sleep in their fucking racks. We would eat in their fucking mess hall, wolfing down their fucking chow. Our souls might belong to God, but sure as fuck, our candy asses belonged to the drills.

I had imagined them as hulking brutes, staring down at us from beefy heights. As we stumbled and clambered over each other, tripping and cursing to ourselves,

many of us crashing helmet-first to the concrete, I was surprised to notice that three of the four men who would run my life for the next thirteen weeks couldn't be more than five-foot nine.

I lost my footing while charging out of the cattle car and belly-flopped onto the ground. One of the drills hoisted me up to my feet. He was almost a full head shorter than me, wearing mirrored sunglasses and a Hitler moustache beneath his campaign hat. He pulled me toward him and shoved his face close to mine, reeking of chaw and cheap cologne. He shouted in a voice thick with Southern menace.

"You are one fat fuck, Private! How did you get so fucking fat?"

I froze.

"Do you not understand what I'm saying, Private? Are you fucking retarded?"

"No, drill sergeant!"

"You fucking never say no to your drill sergeant! The proper response is, 'Negative, drill sergeant!' Are you fucking tracking?"

I looked at him in blank terror, so trapped in his mirrored gaze I barely noticed the nightmare exploding all around me. Drills shouted streams of epithets at the recruits already receiving their first smoking, already busting out push-ups and jumping jacks, rucks still on their backs. I would learn the proper terms for these exercises soon. For the moment, I just wondered what the fuck "tracking" meant.

"Are you tracking, Private Fatman?"

I responded with a tentative half-question

"Affirmative, drill sergeant?"

"You are ate up like a fucking soup sandwich, Fatman! You do not fucking say 'affirmative, drill sergeant.' When the answer is in the fucking affirmative, you will say, 'Hoo-uh, drill sergeant.' Tracking?"

"Hoo-uh, drill sergeant."

"Sound off like you fucking have a pair, Fatman!"

"Hoo-uh, drill sergeant!" I shouted as loud as I could.

"You are fucking pathetic! You are fucking weak! You are a fucking embarrassment to my uniform!"

"Hoo-uh, drill sergeant!"

"Hoo-uh what, Private Fatman? Did I ask you a fucking question?"

"No, drill sergeant! I mean, negative, drill sergeant!"

I stole a glance at the name emblazoned on his perfectly starched uniform. Pants. The man scaring me shitless was named Drill Sergeant Pants.

"You mean?" Drill Sergeant Pants screamed. "You mean? You do not fucking mean anything, Private Fatman! You do not fucking mean anything to me! You do

not fucking mean anything to Uncle Sam! Your fucking recruiter lied to you, boy! You are just another fat, useless hunk of shit! You will fucking square yourself away or I will fucking square you away! Tracking?”

“Hoo-uh, drill sergeant!”

“Outstanding, you fat fuck! No time like the fucking present to start burning that gut. Front leaning rest!”

“I don’t know what that means, drill sergeant!”

“First things fucking first, you are not ‘I’ or ‘me’! You are ‘this recruit’! Are you fucking tracking, Private Fatman?”

“Hoo-uh, drill sergeant!”

“Front leaning rest means you get down on your dick-skinners and your dogs, start fucking pushing, and count off like you got a fucking pair!”

I dropped to the ground.

“One!” I yelled, and pushed.

“Two!” I yelled, and pushed.

“Three!” I yelled, and pushed.

“Four!” I yelled, and pushed.

Drill Sergeant Pants once again yanked me to my feet.

“Who the fuck taught you to count, Private?”

What the fuck did he mean by that?

“Well, who the fuck taught you? You look way too fucking stupid to have taught yourself! How the fuck did you learn to count?”

“This recruit learned in school, drill sergeant!”

“And I bet you rode there every day on that little yellow bus, Private Fatman! In my army you will count off as follows. One-two-three-one! One-two-three-two! That is the one and only fucking way you will shit numbers out your fucking cakehole! Now get back in the front leaning rest and bang me out fifty fucking push-ups.”

He crouched down beside me, his face inches from mine, as I pushed as hard as I could – but at “one-two-three-fifteen” I could do no more. My arms wobbled as I struggled just to hold myself up.

“Jesus Fucking Christ! My daughter can do more fucking push-ups than that, and she’s only three years old! Are you a fucking child, Private Fatman?”

“Negative, drill sergeant!”

“Bullshit! Look at your fucking dick-skinners. They’re like a little fucking girl’s. From now on, you are Private Bitch Hands. Understood?”

“Hoo-uh, drill sergeant!”

I understood the nickname, as I've delicate fingers, but I had hoped for something more along the lines of "Maverick" or "Iceman".

"Now on your fucking feet!"

I heaved myself up again.

DS Pants eyed my uniform. He grabbed the collar of my BDUs between his thumb and forefinger, looking at my rank. "Well, I see I'm fucking mistaken, P-F-C! You are not Private Bitch Hands, you are Private First Class Bitch Hands! How'd you get the bump?"

Most recruits enter Basic as E-1 Privates. After completing basic, they typically become PV2s. They usually make E-3 PFC about six months after their first posting. There are, however, exceptions.

"This recruit went to college, Drill Sergeant!"

"You went to college? You went to fucking college? I never went to fucking college, and I still know how to fucking count. What fucking college did you go to?"

"Columbia, Drill Sergeant!"

"You went to fucking college in Central America? You went to Cocaine College? Is that what you're fucking telling me, Bitch Hands?"

"Negative, Drill Sergeant!"

"Well, where the fuck is this Columbia?"

"New York City, Drill Sergeant!"

"Jew York Fucking City! So you went to college with a bunch of fucking commies, queers, and dope fiends, is that right?"

Pretty much.

"Hoo-uh, drill sergeant!"

"And you couldn't even fucking manage to graduate!"

DS Pants knew this because recruits who had completed college were bumped up one rank above my own, to E-4 Specialist.

"Did you fucking drop out or did they fucking kick your fat ass out?"

"This recruit dropped out, drill sergeant!"

"Of course you dropped out, you First Class Fuck! You are a fucking quitter! You are not going to make it! Isn't that fucking right?"

"Negative, drill sergeant!"

"Bullshit! What the fuck did you study at Cocaine College?"

"This recruit was an English major, drill sergeant!"

"What the fuck does that mean? Did you study fucking poems?"

My senior thesis, before I abandoned it, had been entitled "Personism Revisited: On The Poetry of Frank O'Hara."

“Negative, drill sergeant! Novels! War novels!”

“So you think you fucking know about war, Bitch Hands?” DS Pants spat in my face. “Why don’t you fucking teach me something they learned you from your war novels at Cocaine fucking College in Jew York fucking City! I think I might be in need of a little fucking enlightenment!”

I paused.

“This recruit doesn’t know if the drill sergeant is serious!”

Behind his shades I could sense his eyes widening with rage.

“I am always fucking serious, Bitch Hands! I am fucking serious in the barracks! I am fucking serious on the Field of Pain! I am fucking serious twenty-four fucking seven! My own wife calls me drill sergeant! So when I say teach me something you learned at Cocaine College, I mean fucking teach me something you fucking learned at Cocaine fucking College!”

I took a deep breath down my dry throat. My BDUs were soaked with sweat. I couldn’t make this miniature tyrant any angrier with me than he already was. What the fuck? I did my best to sound off like I had a pair.

“The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong in the broken places, drill sergeant!” I howled. “But those that will not break it kills, drill sergeant! It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially, drill sergeant! If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too, but there will be no special hurry, drill sergeant!”

DS Pants roared back at me.

“Is that what they fucking learned you about war, Bitch Hands? I’ve been through two fucking combat actions! I have twelve fucking kills, and those are just the confirmed! But I don’t have the slightest fucking idea what that faggot-ass bullshit meant! Your whole life you have been fucking weak! I will make you strong! Your whole life you have been fucking soft! I will make you hard! I will turn your fat fucking ass into a lean, mean, green killing machine! Understood, Bitch Hands?”

“Hoo-uh, Drill Sergeant!”

“Are you a fucking killer?”

“Hoo-uh, Drill Sergeant!”

“Bullshit! Front leaning rest!”

I dropped back down on my dick-skinners and my dogs and started busting out more push-ups. I was scared and tired and my arms and legs nearly buckled beneath me, but I hid from DS Pants the trace of a grin on my face. At long last, I was where I belonged.

SAMUEL F. LANCKTON served in the United States Army Infantry before graduating from Columbia University with a B.A. in 2000. “Everyone Breaks” is a chapter from his memoir *Other Than Honorable: A Memoir of Military Madness*. He suffered for many years from bipolar disorder. He died in April 2015, age 40, while a patient at McLean Hospital in Belmont, MA. He was a brilliant writer, lover of poetry, collector of friends, inspiring wit and open soul.