Marine Corps Time

By Pat Holt

After graduating from Arlington High School in Poughkeepsie, New York in June, 1958, I didn't find any employment I wanted around home. I couldn't afford college, and I didn't want to get married right away, it seemed logical to me that I should join the service.

I started out with the idea of joining the Navy because they offered the most opportunity for different fields of training, and also my father had been in the Navy during World War I. I went to the Navy recruitment office, at the Post Office building in Poughkeepsie, everything was going just fine until I tried to read the eye chart and failed, my eyesight was not correctable to 20/20, and so I failed the physical. The Marine Corps recruiter had been eavesdropping; he saw my sadness at being rejected. He also saw his opportunity to snag an unsuspecting young girl. He quietly called me aside and told me if I would sign up for the Marine Corps he would help me with the eye chart. He did that by standing behind me and whispering the letters to me. I passed, and I was recruited into the United States Marine Corps I was to leave for basic training March 5, 1959. I was scheduled to leave from the train station in Poughkeepsie, and change trains at Penn Station in New York City and have a sleeping compartment all expenses paid to Florence, South Carolina.

I don't know if I was more excited or nervous. I had never been away from home for any length of time, except Girl Scout camp where I was a counselor one summer. I don't remember much of the trip south; it is all kind of a blur. A Marine Corps bus took us from the train station in Florence to the Marine Corps training center at Parris Island, South Carolina.

I arrived at the barracks surprised and happy to see that the other women were as young and as scared as I was; I guess I thought they would be much older.

The barracks was a one story brick building, as you entered the center of the building to the left was where the sergeants and other non-commissioned officers had their sleeping quarters, to the right, was where our quarters were.

As you walked down the cement floored hallway the door on the right was to the laundry room, with washers, ironing boards, and sinks for hand washings. The dryers weren't the same as modern dryers where hot air comes in and the clothes are twirled around. They had tall drawers with metal rods where clothes would be hung, and then the drawer would be slid back into the heated chamber. As you can imagine our clothes did not come out of there wrinkle free and soft, everything had to be ironed. As we ironed each item we had spray starch and bottles of water to spray on them to help get the wrinkles out. Our uniforms had to be wrinkle free at inspection time; this was extremely important since we had to have daily inspections and if one person failed we all would lose privileges.

A little farther down the hallway on the left was the bathroom and shower area. The toilets were in stalls with doors similar to the ones in the public ladies rooms of today. I'm not sure how many there were, maybe ten, five in each direction as you entered the room. The wall straight ahead as you walked into the room was lined with sinks, which is where we brushed our teeth and where the black girls would heat their curling irons. I remember that the smell of burning hair seemed to overpower everything else.

Farther into the room and to the right there was the shower room area. The floor there was also cement. There were dividers for privacy while showering, but there was also an open area for dressing. This open area doubled as our smoking area.

As you continued down the hall past the laundry room and the bathroom you entered an area called the "squad bay." This is where we lived, at the entrance there was a common area with couches, chairs and coffee tables. This was our living room, or family room. Through this area to the left and right were our cubicles. We slept on bunk beds, two of us to each cubicle, each cubical was separated by tall green lockers and dressers that held our uniforms. Foot lockers for our folded uniforms were under our bunks.

As we began our boot camp experience some of us needed hair cuts to comply with the hair cut rule, in force at that time. The rule was that your hair could touch but not cover your collar. There were beauticians for the white girls, but since we were in South Carolina and it was 1959 the white beauticians would not work on the black girls. Much to my shock and dismay the black girls were given a pair of very large scissors and told to cut each others' hair! They obeyed without question; actually they didn't seem as offended as I did. I can still remember my shock at the big unwieldy scissors that they were given.

Each day during boot camp we would have to get up very early, and be ready for inspection of ourselves and our clothes by 6 a.m., and then we would march to the mess hall for breakfast. After breakfast we would march back to our barracks and if everyone had done all that was expected, and passed all inspections, we all had to have clean pressed clothes. The only makeup we could wear was red lipstick which had to be the same color red as the piping

on our dress uniforms. Inside our squad bay there couldn't be any dust or dirt anywhere, even up under the beds or the spaces up under the dressers behind the legs. The cement floors were mopped and buffed with an electric buffer. Of course our beds had to be made in the standard military way with extra tight sheets and blankets, and specially folded corners. I never remember anyone bouncing a quarter on the beds like in the movies, but they were expected to be stretched tight enough that a quarter could be bounced.

If all of these conditions were met to our sergeant's satisfaction, the smokers would be allowed a ten minute smoke break. Our smoking area was in the open area at the front of the shower room. We were allowed to smoke cigarettes up to four times a day, usually ten minutes at a time. We would have a chance to smoke after meals and once in the evening if we were really lucky. Someone would get a dustpan, and we would go to the shower room with it, and all huddle around and inhale as much smoke as we could in as short a time. Cigarettes get very hot when you are taking such quick long drags so I used to light two cigarettes at the same time and smoke alternately, first one then the other. The dustpan would have to be emptied and put away by the end of the ten minutes. The area would then be checked to make sure there were no ashes or butts around or we would lose our smoking privilege for next time.

Smoke time was a privilege, or not smoking was a punishment, however you want to think about it since everyone had to pass inspection of our clothes and our bunk area in order for us to be able to have smoking time. At the time, I smoked, so I had to suffer when others

didn't do their jobs. This type of punishment was supposed to instill teamwork, but I saw it as creating animosity toward those who didn't do they're jobs.

Most of our meals were like that, march to the mess hall, march back, and hope we could get to smoke.

It wasn't until the early 1960's that women were equal to men, and were allowed do do more jobs. Although we didn't learn to handle rifles or have hand-to-hand combat training, for some reason that I'm not sure of, we did get to experience chlorine and tear gas in the gas chamber and learn how to put on a gas mask. After instructions we were taken to a long building, first we walked through the gas filled building with our gas masks on, after that experience we entered again without masks and put on our masks after the gas was dispersed, and continued through the building and out the other end. We saw a movie and were told about nerve gas, and the syringes that male Marines carry to counteract it, but we didn't have to go as far as experiencing that.

There was a story that I believe to be true of a platoon sergeant who had taken his platoon through the swamps and several didn't obey his commands and they were lost in the quick sand, so it was drummed into us that we must obey commands and that as Marines we were the best at everything.

There was also the story of the Soldier who slapped a sand flea that was biting him while he was on a Pacific Island during World War II and the noise of that slap gave away his position to the enemy, causing him and his whole platoon to be killed. Therefore we were never allowed to slap sand fleas. One time we were encouraged to wear makeup for a drill,

we soon realized that was to draw the sand fleas to us so we could practice letting them swarm around and bite us without hitting them.

Marching is physical exercise but it also conditions a person to obey commands without thinking. Even though we were not trained for any combat skills we were still conditioned to obey without thinking. When we weren't marching or doing calisthenics we were in classes on Marine Corps history.

Our mission was to replace the men in offices when they were needed in combat. We marched three to four hours each day, while marching it is important to strike the ground with your heel for the sound and so that you look sharp. That is why there were a lot of foot problems, from pounding our heels on black top as we marched. When we were marching on the drill fields I remember seeing the male Marines, they had it harder than we did. No one ever hit any of us, but there were always some of them with bandages on their heads.

One of the things that we were told was that the women in the Marine Corps were called Women Marines to not take the name Marine away from us. Unlike the women in the Navy, who are called WAVES (*Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service*, a World War II era division of the U.S. Navy that consisted entirely of women) or the women in the Army who are called WACs (Women's Army Corps).

In the beginning of boot camp there were about fifty of us, over the period of training about half were discharged due to physical or problems, which were mostly foot related ormental problems from the stress. The ability to complete the training when so many couldn't added to our pride at completing boot camp and graduating.

********** Part 2 – GOP School **********

Everyone who completed basic training went on to General Office Procedure School which lasted four more weeks and was still at Parris Island. This consisted of class room training, marching, and more Marine Corps history, in case we didn't have enough pride.

During that time we had more freedom, including freedom to spend time out of our barracks and around the base every other night for a couple of hours. We still had to march to and from meals together, and had daily inspections. We didn't have cars so we couldn't go far, but I got to go on liberty off the base two times. The first weekend I went to Beaufort, South Carolina, the town closest to the base with members of my platoon. The other weekend I went with a group of friends to Savannah, Georgia, about 50 miles away, it seems to me we drank quit a bit while we were there. Before I left Parris Island my platoon marched in a Memorial Day Parade in Savannah.

During the time we were together we became a very united group of women, and also very sure that being a Woman Marine meant that we were the best of the best, and we were very proud of that**.** **"**The Few. The Proud. The Marines. Semper Fi; Always Faithful"

When it was time to graduate and go home I was in the group that was going home by bus. We were taken to the bus station in Beaufort, South Carolina. As we entered the bus station on that hot late-spring day, the black girls among us were told that they could not wait for the bus inside the bus station. It didn't matter that we were United States Marines. When our friends weren't allowed in the bus station we went outside and waited with them.

It was another of the many instances of segregation and bigotry I encountered in the south. Back home in Pleasant Valley there weren't many black people that I knew of, and the ones that I did know were just like me, and were treated that way. My mother, father, were very good friends with a black lady named Georgie; she was a wonderful lady and the first black person I knew. Actually she was the only one I did know until I went to school. When we went to the neighboring city and saw black people I thought they must be her relatives. Therefore the idea of segregation was strange to me

The bus ride home was uneventful. While I was home my boyfriend asked me to marry him, I told him no, that I couldn't marry anyone but a Marine. I believed that only someone who had survived Marine Corps boot camp was good enough for me.

**********Chapter 3 – Ride back to camp **********

After a two week leave, I was to be stationed at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. While I was away in Boot Camp my Uncle Fred had died, and left his wife, my Aunt Toddy some money. She needed a car so she bought a canary yellow Ford Fairlane convertible with a black top; it was a very snazzy car. Since she had a new car and I needed a ride to North Carolina, my parents decided that we would all make the trip together. My Mother, Father, Aunt Toddy, Nephew Gary and Cousin Brent, and I, drove the 663 miles from Pleasant Valley, New York to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. Gary and Brent were 12 years old at the time. We drove down through New Jersey and took the Delaware Bay Ferry, which was quite an experience. I once again saw discrimination, this time in the form of "colored" drinking

fountains. I still didn't understand it, and was appalled by it. The trip on the ferry was long, and rough. It seems like it was at least an hour. I know there were times when we were in the middle and couldn't see land in any direction. The bridge-tunnel system that has replaced it is 19 miles long, so I guess that is how far our ride was.

On the way we stopped at some cabins to spend the night, and we stopped to eat at picnic areas along the highway. There were just places to pull off with picnic tables and garbage cans, unlike the rest areas of today. They were also not as crowded; they didn't have public rest rooms

********** Camp Lejeune **********

The barracks at Camp Lejeune were very similar to the ones at Parris Island, with one exception. At the front end of our squad bay near a door there was an area set aside for four Corps WAVES. Those were the nurses' aids that were in the Navy. The Marine Corps did not have medical personnel; we were supported by Navy doctors and nurses.

I was stationed at Camp Lejeune for the remainder of my three year enlistment, mostly I worked in a men's company office except the times when I had to have "mess duty." This was something that we did at least once a year or sometimes as a punishment for minor infractions of rules. It consisted of getting up very early and going to the mess hall to help prepare meals, and cleaning up after. Each day we had to move all of the tables and benches out of the mess hall and pour buckets of soapy water onto the cement floor then scrub with brushes, then rinse and use squeegees to push the water into the drain hole, and replace the tables and benches for the next day.

There were many similar brick barracks through out the base, and each contained a company of men, and they were grouped in battalions. There were bars called "Slop Shoots" through out the camp, but the only one that allowed enlisted women who were not officers or non-commissioned officers with or without escorts was the one next to our barracks, because of that fact there was always a line of men on the sidewalk outside the door waiting to be escorted in, since they could only enter when escorted by one of us. During most of my first year I don't think I ever got past my local "Slop Shoot," and I don't think I ever bought a drink for myself.

After a while it became the place to go during the week, but on weekends when we had more time we would go into Jacksonville, North Carolina and my challenge to myself was to drink in every bar in Jacksonville on one night. My problem was that I kept forgetting what happened when I drank so I don't know if I ever met my challenge.

I had another problem with alcohol, now I think of it as an allergy. As I drank, I would get hives. They would start out as red blotches on my hands, neck, and face, then blend together to cause me to look pretty strange for a while, then the redness would fade away along with my memory.

Sometimes when we went to J-Ville, which is what we called Jacksonville, we would get a hotel room, and then go to an ABC store, which is where you could buy liquor. We'd buy some vodka and get some orange juice from the grocery store. We would put them in our hotel room. We'd leave our stash there. Since my friends and I didn't know about marijuana or coke our stash consisted of booze. We would then head out into J-Ville and hit the bars.

One of our favorite night spot was "The Band Box." They had a band, and we would all get drunk and request the band to play our favorite song, "Boney Maroney" over and over. We especially liked that song because the name of our commanding officer was Captain Maroney. After the bar closed, we would go to our hotel room and continue drinking.

One of the other fun things I remember doing was going to the beach, we used to go to Onslow Beach, North Carolina because it was only about 14 miles away. I would join some friends who had a car, since I didn't have a driver's license, and we would stop at an ABC store to get some cases of Carlings Black Label beer. The reason I remember the brand of beer is that I have a picture of myself with a couple of friends on the beach with a pile of Carlings Black Label beer cans. I didn't do much swimming except one time I remember walking out into the ocean and then the next thing I remember is sitting by the fire drying out. My drinking adventures weren't very exciting to me, but they were to the people I hung out with.

In the spring of 1961 I made what was considered an outstanding comment in the "If You Ask Me" column of the Camp Lejeune Globe, the base newspaper. Whatever it was it impressed the commanding officer of Company "L" Tigers, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marines so much that I was invited to receive an award of being named the "Tigress of the month" and I was given a certificate, and formal review of their formal guard mount. What this meant was that I went to their company area and watched as they marched past and they stopped so that I could walk between the rows and inspect as they saluted with their rifles. It was a really great honor. I also had these pictures taken.

There were some things I didn't like about the Marine Corps, like every month even after boot camp we had to have inspections where everything was checked for cleanliness, and all of our gear was checked. We needed to maintain at least two complete sets of uniforms in perfect condition. To prove that we maintained them properly, we had an inspection referred to as "junk-on-the-bunk." For this inspection all required items of clothing had to be folded and displayed on our bunks in the prescribed manner. That was one of my least favorite things that I had to do; it seemed like such a waste of time.

Other unpleasant memories were the times when there was a purge of lesbians. Every once in a while since homosexuals were not allowed to serve in the Marine Corps, there would be list of women who the officers in charge determined were lesbians. This list was provided to the Commanding Officer by informers within our company. We would be called into formation and the lesbians would be called out and given discharges. There was never any other proof needed or trial, just the word of these informers, and action was taken.

I used to go home on weekends sometimes, mostly long weekends, but sometimes regular ones. I would get a ride up to New York City and get the train from Grand Central Station to Poughkeepsie, New York and take a taxi to my home in Pleasant Valley or sometimes my father would pick me up at the train station. Most of the time I knew the guys that I got rides with but not always. The Base rule was that you could go anywhere on weekend liberty within 600 miles of the base. Most of us didn't follow that rule.

On one nice spring weekend, when my aunt was getting married, and I wanted to go, I talked my friends Sam and Sonja into driving the 663 miles up to Pleasant Valley, New York to the wedding. We brought our dress blue uniforms because we were very proud of who we were, and wanted my friends and family to see. Sam drove his Pontiac Catalina straight through. I think he did take a little nap after we arrived, but it couldn't have been very long. We got dressed in our uniforms and looked really sharp for the wedding. After the wedding we had a few beers, and a few more drinks of whatever was offered. It was mid-afternoon and we decided that we should go back to my house, which was only about 3 or 4 miles from the wedding and rest so we could go out partying some more in the evening. Sam was

speeding down the road as "Blue Moon" was blasting on the radio and as we hit a bump in the road the car couldn't make the turn I heard the weeds and dirt hit the car as we left the road. The next I knew we were upside down with the windshield broken, as I crawled out through the windshield I was telling Sam to get out; Sonja had been thrown out of the car. We had all been sitting in the front seat and had not been wearing seatbelts. I don't even think cars had seat belts back then. There was a house across the street so I went over to ask them to call an ambulance for my friends, I thought I was very calm until I started to knock on the door, and my hand became like it belonged to someone else and banged uncontrollably on the front door. When the lady came to the door she said her husband was calling the ambulance, and the ambulance came soon after and we were taken to the local hospital. I had cuts on both my knees, Sam and Sonja both had some head injuries, and other bumps and bruised. We were supposed to stay overnight in the hospital but decided that we had to get back to the Base on time so we wouldn't get into trouble. My cousin Babs and her husband Nick drove us back to Camp Lejeune. We arrived on time, but we did get caught for being outside the 600 mile limit on weekend liberty because of our stay in the hospital. We were given disciplinary actions called "office hours" that consisted of going in front of the Battalion Commander and getting some kind of sentence. We all got some restriction to base and suspended sentence of reduction in rank. The "everyone does it" defense didn't work, from that I learned that a rule is a rule and if you get caught it doesn't matter if everybody else does it, you got caught.

As I settled into a routine of the "Slop Shoot" during the week, and J-Ville or Pleasant Valley on the weekend time went by. I one night in the line for the "Slop Shoot" there was a

very handsome man with dark brown eyes, and black hair, his name was Frank, I let him escort me inside. I think it was love at first sight. We started going steady right away, and soon after he asked me to marry him. Of course I said "Yes." He was a Marine and had been in the Marine Corps for almost 9 years so he was as gung-ho as I was. I brought him home to meet my family and they hit it of right away. He was certainly a charmer and had quite a gift of gab.

I got out of the Marine Corps in March 1962 and went back to Pleasant Valley, when Frank was discharged he also came to Pleasant Valley and stayed with my cousin Babs and her husband Nick until July 1963 when we got married. We moved into a nice little cottage and expected to live happily ever after.