

Marine lessons changed life, twice

By Bill Shaw

The Facts

Published November 9, 2009

Tomorrow marks the 234th birthday of the U.S. Marine Corps; Wednesday is Veterans Day. It is important on Wednesday, especially in the wake of the Fort Hood tragedy, to recognize all veterans, those who have served, those now serving in the military and those who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country.

On May 5, 1959, with the strains of the “Marine Corps Hymn” echoing across the massive parade field of the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, I became a Marine. My graduation was a turning point in my life.

I had no clue what I wanted to do with my life in 1957, so I followed many of my friends to Louisiana Tech to major in engineering. Chemistry, engineering drawing and advanced math proved I did not have the aptitude or interest in the basics required for a degree in engineering.

Away from home and on my own for the first time, I did not have the discipline to study. I liked to party. I flunked out. In January of 1958, I was an unemployed 18-year-old with no marketable skills or abilities.

On Feb. 5, 1958, I boarded a plane for San Diego and the Ma-

rine Corps Recruit Depot for three months of boot camp followed by three months of individual combat training at Camp Pendleton. I returned home to serve five and a half years in the Marine Reserve.

Boot camp instilled the discipline and mental toughness I lacked fresh out of high school. Some of the recruits in my platoon were overweight and in poor physical condition. They were placed in a Special Training Platoon (STP). They ran everywhere and ran the obstacle course at least once a day.



One recruit who was transitioned back into my platoon lost more than 100 pounds.

Recruits who had no self-discipline or motivation were put into an STP that

specifically stressed discipline and helped the recruits who had reading problems.

The mental and physical discipline instilled in me by the Marine Corps led me to escape a dead-end job as a truck driver and warehouse roustabout at \$1 an hour when I returned to civilian life. I went to college part-time and finished my first degree in English.

Fat in my 40s, afflicted with high blood pressure, a two-pack-a-day smoker, I dug deep into my psyche to resurrect the discipline I learned in the Marine Corps. I be-

came a born-again runner, a marathoner, a triathlete and a running columnist. (Writing is a matter of discipline, too.)

Studies indicate one-third of the youth of America is obese, perhaps two-thirds overweight. In addition, the dropout rates in high school and college are alarmingly high. Both the problems with obesity and poor performance in high school and college indicate a lack of discipline and mental toughness.

I advocate universal military service for all Americans, male and female, 18 to 22. For those opposed to military service, I advocate mandatory community service that includes a three-month training session on weekends. The obese and overweight could be placed in a special “track” to help them develop an exercise regimen and to lose weight. High school dropouts could be placed in a special GED track. Community service graduates could then serve in communities in need, like those devastated by Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Ike, to fulfill an obligation they owe to our country for the freedom we all enjoy as Americans.

Semper Fi! Marines. Thanks to all who have served our country, and God bless all who currently serve in the military. May light perpetual shine upon the souls of those who have sacrificed their lives for their country, and may they rest in peace.

Bill Shaw’s running column appears in *The Facts* every other weekend.

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