

BAPTIZING A RIFLE

The scent of the oil was stronger and more pleasant than any flower's exotic perfume. Greased and lubricated pieces make for a well-tuned assembly. Pull back. Click. Release. Snap! A perfect assembly with zero catches or malfunctions. An evil grin spreads across my grungy face as I sneak a glance at the other recruits of Platoon 3006 that struggle like lost children. Together, everyone trains with the same chore of rifle maintenance, but for me, cleaning my weapon is a religion that never leaves me. I finish the reassembly with ease, careful to keep the breach open during my last inspection of every piece. Once inspected, I scrub the area surrounding me before I signal the piercing, soulless eyes of the Drill Instructors who haunt our every move. This type of methodical maintenance is the only solace that I feel within my sandy Hell.



In the United States Marine Corps, every Marine trains to be a rifleman in the infantry. From the beginning of enlistment, Marine recruits carry a rifle that is issued to them upon arriving with their platoon. Throughout the three-month training period, the rifle does not leave a recruit's side for more than a few minutes. This rifle is a symbol of the Marine Corps, even if the military occupation of a recruit does not have the need for a weapon. Every Marine, regardless of occupation, has a fundamental purpose, and this purpose is that every Marine is a rifleman. The rifle becomes a part of your soul.



The South Carolina heat allows the sand to clump and mass together on every surface of my gear. The four mile run to the obstacle course has made my uniform become soaked in perspiration, helping the sand to cling to the fabric with greedy fingers. The day's first obstacle is a battle crawl through thick sand and underneath sharp barbed wire. Without warning, a boot finds my gear with enough force to send me face first onto the deck, or ground to the uninitiated. Surprised, I push my freshly purified rifle in front of me to brace my plunge downward. After the sudden impact, I do not wait to consider injury or who pushed me, but I begin my torturous crawl forward. My rifle is now unrecognizable under inches of Parris Island's luxurious beach.



After the first few weeks of recruit training, recruits are given the ability to clean their own rifles during allotted free time without supervision. The rifle maintenance is an essential part of the training and is instilled into every Marine's memory. Once the disassembly is memorized, a Marine can clean a rifle with minimal thought; however, improper maintenance from mindless recruits can cause stoppages in the weapon, reducing combat readiness and effectiveness, so the cleaning procedures become a task of religious importance. As recruits, surviving the transition from civilian life to military life is the main purpose of the training, but for any future infantryman, rifle maintenance is like giving a bath to your first child.



The barracks are spotless after hours of rigorous scrubbing, but the rifle that lies before me is still caked in sand and Spanish moss. As I put out the cleaning supplies in their designated areas and begin the disassembly, I think back on the

quiet hills of my Tennessee home. In the depths of wooded hills and valleys, my father taught me how to clean my hunting rifle, and now, I clean a different kind of rifle. This rifle is designed to protect my life and the life of my brothers surrounding me, instead of providing food for the unreliable winter season.

After the upper receiver is separated from its lower half, I begin to remove the bolt assembly, careful not to misplace important pieces. I take each of these pieces from the rifle delicately and clean it to a point of obsession. Every grain of sand and smudge of grime must be removed from a rifle for it to pass the Drill Instructor's inspection. The bolt assembly is clean and perfect within seconds, and my surgical fingers already move to begin with the barrel. The cleaning rod forces the sand out of the barrel just as the Senior Drill Instructor walks into the barracks instructing us to recite the Creed of a United States Marine. Every recruit knows the creed by heart, and it is ingrained within our soul as we repeat the words as one would repeat the Lord's Prayer.

*This is my rifle! There are many like it, but this one is mine!
My rifle is my best friend! It is my life! I must master it
as I must master my life!*

The sound of the hard bristle brushes and closing bolts mark the rhythm of our holy sanctuary. There is no solemn Amen.



The rifleman's creed enforces the idea that every Marine should know that his or her rifle is the separating factor between life and death. There was once a Marine Major that said to his own platoon after reciting their rifle prayers that the creed should be a faith so lasting that no one should have to be preached to about it, and after more than sixty years of its recitation, every Marine knows the faith.

Along with the rifleman's creed, Marines in the infantry found consolation from their rifle, often making a spiritual connection with the object of destruction and protection.

As a contracted infantryman, I found the connection during the gruesome months on the Island, but as I transitioned past the beginning stages of training, I realized how much the connection would grow. Riflemen have a specific mindset that is borderline animalistic. All of the training is for war and violence, and violence was an essential component of the cultural contract signed in blood. The spiritual connection was increasing between my rifle and I, and the connections with anything other than the training was decreasing. The war mindset was taking full control of who I was, but a Marine must have the ability to eliminate hesitancy, fear, as well as uncertainty of action and focus on the actions required to fire well-aimed shots at oncoming demons. I had to be one with my rifle, and I had to give in to the ultimate connection of the actions that were required of me.



The constant drizzle of the rain limited my vision to only fifty yards, which for this particular assignment was too close for comfort. At a close range, my rifle would be near useless if the target snuck up on the squad of three men. I scanned my sector, ensuring that the path was all clear before stepping off. I looked to my left to signal the two other Marines to move forward. The reconnaissance training was designed for the worst to happen, and my squad was already too tense. The rain picked up as the checkpoint was reached in good time considering the decline in the conditions. Visibility was now at fifteen yards, and the forest ground

had become a swamp in seconds. My rifle resembled the dead fingers of the barren trees, dark and dripping water.

After wading through shin-deep mud, I could not see my squad at my flanks. The sound of a quick snap alerted me to something coming towards me, and a splash to my left indicated one member of the squad found the hidden pond that signaled our boundary. As I returned my sights towards the previous snap, my rifle was jerked out of my hand and into the deep muck below. I looked into the eyes of the Sergeant in charge of my squad's training. "Fail" was written in his eyes. All he said to us was "clean and reflect," which was his way of telling us to clean our gear and reflect on our failure of the mission and a silent predators. I picked up the unrecognizable mass that used to be my rifle and mentally prepared myself for church. Church was my time to bathe in gun oil, and my confessions were my reflections.



Members of the Marine Corps infantry were trained like the Spartans and the Athenians. Honor and glory were in the battle of war, and the bond between warriors was closer to a family shared by the spilt maroon blood of battle. Every training exercise and mission was preceded by a motivational speech; the best of those were from Greek poets. The commanding officer bellowed at blood-thirsty Marines, "Here is a man who proves himself to be valiant in war. With a sudden rush he turns to fight the rugged battalions of the enemy, and sustains the beating waves of assault." Shouts and battle cries answer while our preacher delivers the sermon of war. These speeches were prayers from gods of ancient times. Tyrtaeus would be proud.



After continuous training, normal feelings become lost in a haze of movements. Exhaustion, compassion, and fear are replaced by blind courage, integrity, and commitment. Vicious sermons lack compassion and increase the adrenaline, causing the need for sleep to fade. Fear, however, is only present when giving in to pain. As a Marine, there is no large meaning to life except the Corps and the brotherhood that is formed in the ranks, but when a Marine finds out that he will be discharged, fear is the only emotion present. With the inevitable decision, the return to civilian life is an ugly demotion. Unhappiness is present as I clean the rifle in front of me for the last time and think upon the words of Dante: "I am formed in such a fashion, by God's grace, that your unhappiness does not affect me." Giving in to the emotions would be losing a personal battle, and I was trained to never give up or give in to emotions. Pull back. Click. Release. Snap!



I follow the same trail that my father had taken me down during countless hunts as a child. In these quiet woods, I am not hunting anything in particular, but I walk absent-mindedly with my rifle. The memories of speeches and exercises flash through my head as I continue towards a clear field where a young buck stands alone. Even then, a year after being honorably and medically discharged from the Marine Corps, I still remember the marksmanship training. The spiritual connection comes back in that moment as I look down the scope, and somehow know that I will not shoot.

Once home and unpacked, I take my rifle to the bench and begin to place the cleaning supplies in their designated places. Before I realize what I am doing, I disassemble my rifle and clean every single piece, preparing it for inspec-

tion. While I scrub the already shiny bolt, I can hear a platoon somewhere recite the rifleman's creed to a choir of metal brushes and cleaning rods. Some see the cleaning as a chore, but I find it to be a peaceful habit that never leaves me.



In the United States Marine Corps, the bonds and habits you make are for life. After leaving the Corps, people move on to accomplish achievements or pursue dreams they once had. Anyone that has earned the title of a United States Marine holds it forever; the title is eternal, and there is no ex-Marine. People may leave the Marine Corps, but it does not leave them. I have been out four years now, but I still have the same mindset I was trained to have. While I only clean my rifle now after a seasonal hunting trip, I can sometimes feel the South Carolina heat on my neck and the sand underneath my boots while I say my prayer in two words: *Semper Fidelis*.