

For all the troops who gave their lives for their country

The Army Chronicles
Book 1

Basics

By
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Basics
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Please note that I use UK English spelling throughout. You will see doubled letters (e.g. focussed), ou's (e.g. colour) and 're' (centre) as well as a few other differences from American spelling.

Foreword

From 1966 to 1994 it was compulsory for white South African males to do military service. As part of their military service it was required to defend the country against any threat from both inside and outside of South African borders. This also led to the South African border war, which spanned from 1966 to 1989. Many young men gave their lives for their country, and many who returned from border duty were so traumatized, they were unable to talk about what they experienced. Even to this day it is impossible for most of those who served in the military and doing border duty, to share with their friends and families as to what they experienced. These books are my attempt to take the reader on a journey to give an insight of what these young men went through. From basics, all through their service and then border duty, or in some cases, the bush war in Angola. Although the characters in this book are fictional, most places and events that follow are not, and are based on what really happened. There were many different military units but our story will focus on 1 South African Infantry Battalion, and our characters

subsequent deployment to 61 Mechanized Battalion. They started their National Service as boys, but finished as men.

Chapter 1

“Are you ready for this?” my mother asked.

I looked at her sun weathered face and the light of the early morning sun that glistened in her soft orange coloured hair.

I sighed. “Not really, but I don’t have a choice.”

That much was true, I didn’t. The government made two years national service compulsory and failure to adhere to your military call up resulted in jail time. I had no desire to go to jail and had no ambitions to make a political statement.

Every year government officials visited every high school, and all boys that turned sixteen that year had to register. There was no place to hide, and no getting away from it, unless something serious was wrong with you.

The previous year was my final year of school and I merrily plotted my future career as a journalist, when I received the big brown envelope in the mail. The moment I saw the “OFFICIAL – CONFIDENTIAL” stamped on it, I knew it contained my call up papers.

On Monday morning the second of February 1987 at 07:00, I had to report at Sturrock Park situated inside Wits University, for the start of my two years National Service.

I haven’t yet fully recovered from my eighteenth birthday party two days earlier, and at that moment I wasn’t sure if the hollow feeling in my stomach was a result of the after affects of the party, or if it was a nervous reaction. I was the only one from my school that was called to 1 South African Infantry Battalion based in Bloemfontein, and to be honest, I did not look forward to it.

From the day I received my call up papers, my father and uncles took great joy in sharing their own army stories with me, which, quite frankly, filled me with horror. None of them were in the infantry, so I hoped desperately that my stories would turn out to be better. They told me the army experience would make me man, but at eighteen, I wasn’t quite ready to be a man yet. Besides, I had a sneaky suspicion that the army and I had different ideas of what it took to be a man.

I opened the backdoor of my mother’s silver Audi and retrieved my kit bag from the back seat. The letter said, only essentials and I hoped my idea of essentials matched theirs. When I closed the door, I caught a glimpse of my tall lanky frame in the reflection of the window. My dusty blond hair blew around in the fresh early morning breeze. I heard how short a haircut in the army was, so in the two months since I finished school, I let mine grow. My father called me a mop head but I failed to see the resemblance.

My mother was a short woman and she had to stretch to place her hands on the sides of my face. There was sadness in her voice.

“Please look after yourself,” she pleaded.

I gave a wry smile and asked, “Don’t I always?”

Before we left the house, she promised she wouldn’t cry, but she couldn’t help it. I saw the tears silently running down her cheeks. She was my mother and through the years had earned the right to have that moment.

I used my thumb to wipe a tear away and said, “Mom, I’ll be alright.”

She smiled at me. “I know.”

She grabbed me and gave me a hug before she kissed me on the cheek. I could see the inner struggle as she said goodbye to her eldest son. I was the first of her four children to leave the nest. I watched as she gave a final wave and drove off. Knowing my mother, the moment she was out of sight, she would bawl her eyes out. I felt sorry for my siblings, because I knew that for the next few days she would smother them with affection, until she got used to the idea of me not being in the house anymore.

I turned my attention to my surroundings. There was a sea of activity, mothers, fathers, wives, girlfriends, grandparents and even children, were saying their last tearful goodbyes. I walked past a young couple who were desperately clinging to each other, both reluctant to let go.

I looked past the crowd of people and saw rows of brown army trucks neatly parked. Their drop sides were raised and the cargo area was covered with a canvas top. The only opening at the back was via the dropped tailgate.

I clutched the brown envelope and approached a large group that gathered. A man in a brown army uniform directed proceedings and I approached him.

“Excuse me sir, is this group for 1 South African Infantry Battalion?”

The man looked me up and down and had a slight smile.

“Welcome to the 1 SAI group, join the rest,” he said and pointed me to a group on my left.

I joined the group and barely put my bag down, when another uniform directed us to one of the waiting trucks. We were herded to the back of the truck, which was fitted with bench seats, two rows back to back along the middle of the truck, and two rows against the side.

An iron hoop attached to the tailgate acted as a step when the gate was down. A guy in uniform with two chevron stripes on each arm ushered us up the step and into the truck. I sat down and from the way we were loaded, I knew it would be a tight squeeze. The young man sitting opposite me had a wild head of flaming red hair, and each hair stood in a different direction. He had a friendly smile on his freckled face, but I could see the fear and uncertainty in his light blue eyes.

“Hi, I am Rex, Rex Dumont,” he said and offered me his freckled hand.

I gripped it and we shook hands in greeting.

“Chris Dempsey,” I said.

He still smiled, and I could see his eyes relax. He made an acquaintance and didn't feel alone anymore. I too felt the knot in my stomach untangle a little.

“So, you also got called to 1 SAI?” he asked.

I just nodded. We watched as the truck filled up, and we were squeezed together with our bags on our laps. We were squeezed like sardines in a can, and the tailgate finally closed.

The uniform with the chevron stripes banged on the side of the truck and yelled, “Driver, this one is ready to go!”

The truck roared to life and jerked forward, throwing us against each other and some awkward glances were exchanged. Every one of us had a feeling of uncertainty, but there were a few that tried to act big and brave. They thought the louder they acted, the braver they looked, but their eyes gave them away. They were just as scared as the rest of us. We made it to the train station in no time. Although it was a Monday, it was early and there was very little traffic through the streets of the city.

Our truck stopped behind another at Johannesburg station. Almost immediately the tailgate was dropped and we were ordered out. I stepped down from the tailgate and looked around at the milling crowd, unsure and uncertain with no purpose. I looked over to the left and there stood a big, black, old fashioned steam engine. A magnificent and shiny monument of an era gone by,

and I realized that I was on the verge of a new era in my life. Whatever happened from that point forward, I knew my life would never be the same.

A man in uniform led us into the building and a few curious early morning commuters watched us file past. An elderly lady said something to her miserable looking husband, and he nodded his head automatically in agreement. From the commuter's point of view, we must have looked like a herd of cattle being led to slaughter. We were taken to the side, down a flight of stairs and onto the train deck.

The train smell hit my nostrils before I stepped onto the platform. I had been on a few trains before, and they always smelled the same. A mixture of iron, old rocks, burnt oil and spent electricity all made up the smell of the train.

More men in brown uniforms directed us onto the waiting train.

"Six per compartment," we were instructed.

I followed the steady stream of people and stepped onto the train. The passageway was narrow on the right side of the carriage and was dimly lit. I tried to follow the guy in front of me into a compartment, but a tall young man with jet black, greasy hair and a sneer on his face blocked the way.

"This one is full, move along," he said.

I ignored him and stepped into the next compartment. There were red cushioned, bench seats on both sides with a luggage rack above and the faint smell of cigarette smoke hung in the air. I was first into the empty compartment, tossed my bag onto the luggage rack and flopped into the seat next to the window. Rex followed me in and dropped his bag on top and sank into the seat opposite me.

Four more filed into the small room, which was only designed for four people, but of course, the army squeezed in six. The last guy was a short, thin young man and I did a double take as he looked too young to be there. He wore glasses, and the luggage case he carried, was almost as tall as him. Not only did he have trouble lifting his case, he was too short to reach the luggage rack. A short thick set guy with spiky blond hair reached out and grabbed the little guy's case.

"Here, let me help you," he said in a deep baritone voice.

Before the little guy could protest, he lifted the case and heaved it onto the luggage rack, the muscles bulging in his powerful arms. The small guy let go of the handle not a moment too soon. If he hung on for a second longer, he would have ended up on the rack with his luggage.

"What you got in there, bricks?" spiky hair inquired, his friendly blue eyes smiling with his face. The scrawny one just pulled up his shoulders and sat down mumbling a thank you.

Once everyone was seated, we all look at each other, wondering what to say.

"So, are you all ready for an adventure?" the spiky guy asked, breaking the uneasy silence.

Everyone stared at him wondering if he had been drinking so early in the morning.

"I'm George by the way, George Cunningham," spiky said.

The little guy looked uncomfortable and mumbled, "Charles Middleton the third."

I smiled. I am a fourth generation Chris Dempsey, but never had the urge to introduce myself as Chris Dempsey the fourth. Nope, I was just plain ordinary Chris that led an ordinary life and was on my way to the army. Charles on the other hand, came from a different circle of society.

"Tommy Bradford," the guy next to me introduced himself.

"Frik Heyns," said the guy on the end.

He was dressed in a khaki shirt, khaki shorts, long light brown socks and brown shoes. He looked like he just stepped off a farm, which he actually did. He later told us he was from a farm near Rustenburg.

Rex and I introduced ourselves and moments later I felt the train come to life. The carriage vibrated when the big diesel units that pulled the passenger compartments fired up. I heard a shrill whistle and, with a slight jerk, the train moved forward. Ahead I heard the roar of the powerful diesel engines as it strained to get the carriages moving. I stared through the window as the train pulled out from the underground station and emerged in bright sunlight. A summer thunderstorm the previous night washed the city pollutants out of the air, leaving the sky a brilliant and clear blue.

The train ride to Bloemfontein took over six hours, and we only had one short stop for fuel. We used the time to get better acquainted. At school, I never had many friends and kept mostly to myself, so needless to say, I was never a member of the popular crowd. Most of the kids in school thought me weird so they left me alone, which was fine by me. I had the occasional girlfriend, but none of my relationships lasted very long. Most of my ex-girlfriends said I was too boring, or mistook my sense of humour for being childish.

That didn't bother me much, although sometimes it did get lonely. When I met Charlotte all that changed, and for once, I thought I met someone that understood me. I was happy, at least until my birthday party. Once again I was alone, until we got on the train together. In the cramped compartment there was no place to hide, and I reluctantly accepted my fate. After all, we were all on the same train and in the same situation.

I found that Rex and I were neighbours. He hailed from Benoni and although I was born in Benoni, I was raised and schooled in the neighbour town, Brakpan. Charles hailed from Sandton, which explained my initial impression. Sandton was on a whole different society level than Brakpan. In fact, I am sure that if you would mention the word Brakpan in Sandton, everyone would think you said a swear word. Tommy and George were both from suburbs around Johannesburg. The ice was broken and everyone started to relax in the company of the others.

At one point George looked at Charles and asked, "Are you sure you should be here?"

Charles looked a little annoyed, and the look on his face was of one who had to deal with remarks like that his whole life, and he was tired of it. We found out later that if it weren't for the fact that he had to do his National Service in the SADF, he would have been at the Jockey Academy. His father was a prominent figure in the South African horse racing community, but not even with all his contacts could he get him out of National Military Service.

Charles pushed his chin out. "I am eighteen and just like you, have no choice but to be here."

George smiled and little devils of mischief were swimming in his blue eyes. He turned and slapped Charles so hard on the shoulder; Charles almost tumbled from the bench.

"No worries sire, I will protect thee," George said.

The rest of the group laughed, but Charles didn't find it funny. I looked carefully at George's face and realized that he wasn't joking. Although his words were said with humour, he would really look out for Charles.

We spent the rest of the trip speculating what lied ahead for the next two years and comparing stories that we heard from relatives. Tommy was the only one in the group that was really excited about the army. He looked forward to having a gun and shooting terrorists. The eagerness and wild look in his eyes concerned me, and when I caught the look that George gave

him, I knew I wasn't the only one. All of us had big plans for the future and none of our plans included being in the army.

Frik from the farm was the biggest surprise. He had no intention of becoming a farmer. His dad wasn't happy with his choice but respected his decision. His older brother already farmed on the family farm, which left him free to follow his heart, to become a world renowned chef. His application was already submitted and accepted. As soon as his two years of military service was done, he would join chef school. We all had hopes and dreams, but for the next two years, everything was put on hold. First we had to serve our country and only then, if we survived, could we live our own lives.

Chapter 2

A low level cloud blanket hovered over Bloemfontein when the train pulled into the station, but I didn't have time to wonder about the weather. Bloemfontein station was much smaller than Johannesburg station, so as we filed out of the train, we swarmed the station. The uniforms were shouting and directing us to the parking lot, where more army trucks waited for us. They were identical to the ones in Johannesburg. Once again, we were piled in, roughly forty per truck.

I heard a know-it-all from the front say, "It's a Samil-50."

When Rex sat down he rubbed his shin. He banged it against the tailgate in his haste to mount the truck. The ride through the city of Bloemfontein was short and I couldn't see much from the back of the truck, but I could see why they call it the city of roses. Lining the streets and in people's yards were roses in full bloom, welcoming us to their glorious city.

We drove through gates with a big sign that announced, "Welcome to Tempe." Once we passed that gate, I knew there was no escape.

There were several forks in the road but the driver kept to the left until we reached two big, solid black gates framed by a small brick guard station. Two guards, dressed neatly in brown uniforms, wearing green berets and shiny brown boots, came to attention as the first truck approached. They shouldered their rifles and opened the gates.

George smiled. "We're expected!"

After the trucks drove through the gates, they reached a T-junction and once again we turned left. The vehicles came to a stop, side by side, on a rugby field, where more uniforms waited for us. Our truck barely came to a halt when one of them yelled at us.

"Get down! Get the hell down from there and line up in a formation!" he yelled.

One guy, in his eagerness to exit the truck, missed the tailgate step and tumbled onto the grass, but he immediately jumped back to his feet. He seemed like someone who fell down a lot.

Most of us had cadet training in school so we knew a little about forming up. We formed in six rows roughly an arm's length apart. Someone with a rank on his shoulders instead of his sleeves, introduced himself as Lieutenant something or the other, and started reading names from a list. We were divided into companies, first Alpha, then Bravo and finally Charlie Company. Frik went to Alpha, Tommy to Bravo and the rest of us ended in Charlie Company. We were not only in the same company, but in the same platoon.

One of the uniforms towered over the others. He was tall and quite thin, at least his length made him appear that way.

He stepped forward and said, "I am Corporal Minnie. Platoon 1, follow me!"

We grabbed our kit and followed the man. We back tracked on the road we came in until we almost reached the gate then turned left. There were six buildings on our right which stood neatly in formation, three rows of two buildings each. All the buildings looked exactly the same, black tin roofs and white walls.

A big sign featuring Heathcliff the cartoon cat, wearing a green beret and holding a rifle announced, "CHARLIE."

The corporal led us past the first building to the one on the far left.

He looked us over then said, "Go inside, choose your bed, then leave your luggage and meet me back here in five minutes!"

We scrambled into the building which had entrances at each end. At the left end where I entered, a small room on my left contained several ironing boards.

Past the ironing room was the showers and the toilets, with a little room to the right that had a closed door. The corporal later informed us that it was the civvy room where we stored all our civilian clothes and personal belongings, or civilian crap, as he put it. I turned right and walked into the main part of the room. The barracks was divided into two sides that mirrored each other and were separated by a two meter high wall down the centre. The know-it-all later informed us it was called a bungalow, not a barracks.

Two rows of beds stood neatly against the walls, and the aisle down the middle shined brightly as the light through the windows reflected of it. I picked the third bed on the left and Rex dropped his kit bag on the one next to me. Charles and George selected the beds opposite us.

"Home sweet home," I muttered and dropped my bag on the bed.

It didn't look very comfortable. Like everything else in the army, it was designed for practical use, not creature comfort.

The bed had a square foam mattress which rested on a foldable iron frame. Next to the bed, a green steel cabinet with sliding doors with space to hang clothes on the one side, and racks for folded clothes and personal items and the other side. The space wasn't much. The cabinet, barely tall enough to accommodate a hanging jacket, was about as wide as the single bed, also the amount of space we had between the beds.

Needless to say, our quarters were a bit cramped, but I would learn to appreciate the space. The floor was covered with light brown linoleum tiles that shone brightly in the light, even with a light layer of dust on the floor. I spent a few moments surveying my surroundings. The room smelled like it stood empty for a while. Apart from the layer of dust, it had that smell of a closed up room, when all the windows were closed and there is no life present. I could feel it coming to life again as beings filled the space once more.

"Come on people we haven't got all day, MOVE IT!" the corporal shouted from outside.

"Why does he always yell?" George asked but moved it, just in case. I ran outside and joined the rest as we formed a formation, this time as a platoon, in only 3 rows.

"You're going to march to the Quartermaster Store where they'll issue you your bedding. Try and keep in formation," the corporal informed us.

We managed to keep the formation quite well, but the marching part was more of a walk than a march, and everyone seemed to walk at their own rhythm.

The stores were across the road behind Charlie Company's bungalows, about three hundred meters away. The corporal ordered us to join the line that already formed. We were to gather our bedding and take it back to our bungalow. When I reached the front of the queue, I received a steel trommel. It was a steel box about 90cm long, 50 cm wide and 30 cm deep, with a lid that can close and handles on the sides.

The trommel contained a feather pillow, two gray blankets, two white linen sheets and two brown towels. I also received a solid stainless steel eating tray with divided sections, which the know-it-all pointed out as, in army slang, a varkpan. We also received a white plastic cup and eating utensils that was referred to as a “pick set”. This consisted of a spoon and fork that fitted together and slid into the hilt of a knife, similar to a butter knife.

I piled everything I received into the trommel, which was now stuffed, and managed to latch it shut while sitting on the lid. Once it was fully loaded I grabbed it by the handles and lifted. It was a hefty weight and with every step towards my bungalow, it got heavier. My arms, legs and back were in serious protest, when I came across someone who stopped to rest. It was Charles, who struggled with the heavy trommel. Next to him it looked like a giant chest.

Charles was red in the face and desperately tried to get oxygen into his lungs. I dropped my trommel behind him and was about to offer to come back and help once I completed my own journey, when I heard the booming voice of George.

“Come on Charlie, you take one side, I’ll grab the other,” he said and slung his own trommel over his shoulder, holding it with only one hand, while he reached for Charles’s trommel with the other.

I could see the bulging muscles in his powerful arms, but he smiled, like it was just an every day excursion for him. George was only half a head taller than Charles, but his stocky frame was packed with power. Charles was too tired to complain and grabbed the other side of his trommel with both hands and staggered along, trying to keep up with George. But he needn’t have worried, George made sure he matched his own pace to that of his little friend.

By the time I made it to my bed, I estimated that my arms stretched by at least five centimetres and that my back was broken in two places, or so it felt. I lay on my bed, trying to fill my lungs with much needed oxygen, when Rex struggled in, his face more red than his hair. He dropped his trommel on the floor and fell on his bed, exhausted.

“My first day and they already attempting to kill me,” he panted.

When I recovered sufficiently, I sat up and looked down the bungalow and saw that everyone was down, well, except for George. He flashed me a smile as he unpacked his trommel. I shook my head and had to wonder if he had his Tarzan oats that morning. Just looking at him tired me out more and I flopped down on the hard bed again.

Everyone tried to catch their breath when the corporal walked in. Nobody noticed him as everyone was occupied with recovery, or with the contents of their trommels.

“What the hell’s going on here!” he shouted.

An eerie silence filled the room and everyone stared at the corporal, who looked like a raving mad lunatic. He could see we were unpacking, so I failed to see the need for his shouting.

“If I or any other rank enters a room where you lower than snail life forms are present, you will jump up and stand to attention. Is that clear?” the corporal shouted at the top of his lungs, his voice echoing through the bungalow.

I had to wonder why he was still shouting as the room was as quiet as an empty church. He could have whispered and everyone would have heard him. We were all frozen in place with whatever we were busy with, but dropped it and jumped to attention.

A few of my fellow newbies nodded their heads, too scared to say a word.

“I said do you understand me?” he shouted again.

The guy nearest to him, totally overcome with fear, shouted at the top of his shrieking voice, “Yes General!”

For a moment the corporal turned several shades of red, and I feared that he might be having a stroke. The tall corporal took one quick step forward, and then he towered over the unfortunate newbie.

“I’m a corporal. I work for my money!” he shouted.

The unfortunate guy being yelled at staggered back until his back was against a wall, and by the look on his face I could see that he wished the wall could swallow him.

“Who are you?” the corporal asked the white faced young man with the slick looking black hair.

The newbie swallowed loudly and said in a squeaky voice, “Herman Meyer, Corporal.”

The corporal stared at him for another few moments, and then swung around and glared at the rest of us.

“Meyer, take the bed by the door. If you see anybody with a rank enter, you make sure everyone knows about it. To make sure you and everyone else will remember it, do a lap around the bungalows!”

Everyone stared at him in stunned silence, disbelief in our eyes, until he bellowed, “NOW!”

Suddenly everyone came to life and we fell over each other, trying to get out the nearest door. My legs were still recovering from carrying my trommel, but I knew there was no protesting, and I better do as I was told. With the crazed corporal glaring at us we found renewed energy and ran. George was the last one back into the bungalow. He was built for strength, not running and everyone stood by their beds at attention when he galloped past to take his place.

The corporal gave a slight sadistic smile then said in a pleasant voice, “As you were.”

When nobody moved he shook his head. “That means you can relax and go back to what you were doing before I walked in.”

Everyone eyed him suspiciously, not relaxing at all.

He sighed and said, “Ok gather around and pay attention, because I’m only going to show you this once.”

He walked over to Rex’s bed, opened his trommel and took out all his bedding. First he threw one sheet over the bed, folding the ends under, and then folded the sides forming a forty five degree fold at the end.

He repeated that on the other side and then spread the second sheet over, ensuring it was to equal lengths on both sides. Then he threw over the grey blanket, which had two stripes down the centre like two train tracks. He made sure the two stripes were centred on the bed and the top end reached to only about a pillow width from the top. He tucked in the bottom end under the mattress, and then folded the top sheet over the end of the blanket.

He used the palms of his hands to smooth out all wrinkles then folded the sides under. To round it off he took the brown towel and laid it across the foot end and tucked the sides neatly under. The bed was made with sure hands which knew where to touch and where not to. He worked with the action and precision that only come from countless hours of practice.

“There, this is what your bed should look like every morning,” he said and looked at the faces around him.

Everyone stared at him in amazement. Nobody had ever seen a bed made that neat before, well, except maybe for Charles. It was neat and smooth, not a wrinkle in sight, the edges square and the folds to a perfect angle. Rex grinned like a prized cat who won the cream, his bed was already made.

“Lights out at twenty two hundred” The corporal said and unceremoniously dumped Rex’s mattress on the floor, and left the barracks.

Rex watched his master piece which lay shattered on the floor, with horror in his eyes.

He waited till the corporal was out of earshot before he said, “Was that really necessary? Now I have to do it over.”

George grinned at him. “Exactly! How else will you learn to do it yourself?”

The rest of the evening we were left alone to get settled in. Ten o’clock exactly I saw the corporal outside the barracks, a smile on his face as he watched the lights go out. I slipped into my bed, which felt strange and out of place. My last thought before I drifted off to restless sleep, was that I survived my first day in the army.

Chapter 3

Five o’clock the following morning, all hell broke loose in the bungalow. We all had a rough night in a strange new environment and we didn’t sleep well. Throughout the night I kept waking up every hour or so, but when it was time to get up, we were all fast asleep. We were oblivious to the lone figure that walked into the bungalow. I could imagine the slight sadistic smile playing on the corporal’s lips before he blew his whistle.

The shrill sound echoed in the confined space as the little ball rattled inside the whistle, yanking us out of our deep sleep. Everyone flew out of bed convinced the world came to an unfortunate end. It took a few seconds of people falling around, tripping over bedding and each other, but eventually everyone stood next to their beds at attention, that is everyone but George. He snored away merrily, caught in the bliss of a dream.

I made eyes at Charles trying to get his attention, dipping my head in George’s direction. Charles’s eventually caught on and his eyes widened as he saw George lying oblivious to the world, under the gray blanket. Charles kicked the bed but there was no reaction from the snoring form on the bed. Unfortunately Charles’s action drew immediate attention and the corporal’s nostrils flared like a race horse who was about to jump the starting gates. He stormed to George’s bed, grabbed the edge of the mattress and tipped the mattress over.

George and the mattress hit the floor at about the same time, but as soon as his body hit the floor, he woke up with a start. George jumped to his feet, his eyes wide with surprise and ready to do battle with the one who dumped him. He saw the corporal glaring at him and instantly flashed a bright smile.

“Good morning Corporal. What a surprise seeing you here,” he said.

The corporal looked at him with astonishment and then shook his head in disbelief. He turned around and said, “Clean up this pigsty. At 06:00 form a squad outside with the rest of the Company then I will escort you to breakfast.”

For about five seconds after the Corporal left the bungalow, everyone stood motionless, and then there was an eruption of frenzied activity. I grabbed my extra towel and shaving kit and made a bee line for the bathroom. I only started shaving the year before and had nothing but a little fluff on my face, but one piece of advice my father gave me before I left home, was to ensure I was clean shaven every morning.

George probably started shaving when he was five. His face was covered with dark stubble that could have scrapped the paint off a tank. Everyone washed, shaved and dressed, and then we proceeded to make our beds as per the corporal’s instruction. Not one single bed in the barracks

looked nearly as neat as the one he made the previous night, but everyone looked at their own beds, quite impressed. It was the neatest bed I ever made and my mother would have been proud.

I grabbed my varkpan, pick set, plastic cup and joined the rest of the Company in front of the bungalows where the corporals were already waiting for us. We were instructed to hold our varkpans and cups in our left hands, leaving our right arms free for marching. We were walked around to the mess building, a large flat roofed structure with double doors at every corner.

We were halted by the front right entrance and a corporal explained the procedure. We were to join the line, get our food and coffee, sit down and eat as fast as humanly possible, then go outside and place our varkpans on the conveyer belt of an industrial dish washer. Two guys doing kitchen duty stood at the other end of the dishwasher, and stacked the clean pans in a pile.

Once your pan is on the conveyer belt, there is a big tub set up with soapy water, to clean your cup and pick set. You'll then grab a clean varkpan from the pile and you were on your way, a nice fluent and efficient operation. It also meant that every day you got a different varkpan and sometimes the one you got was quite banged up, as you were not allowed to search through the pile for a suitable one, you had to grab whichever one was on top.

The food definitely was not my mother's home cooking but it was edible. Every morning was basically the same, with only minor differences. We got porridge, powdered eggs, and on the rare occasion bacon or a pork banger, with bread or toast. I learned later that we received toast once the bread got stale. The portion on my pan that morning seemed generous enough. My father and uncles were in agreement that the food was never enough and it took a few days of running around for me to say the same, but that first few days, it seemed a lot.

By seven o'clock breakfast was done and we were back in the bungalow discussing what we had for breakfast, when the Corporal walked in.

"Stand up!" yelled Herman Meyer in panic.

Everyone dropped whatever they were doing and we all jumped to attention and an immediate silence fell over the entire bungalow. In the distance I heard the clanging of pans from the mess hall and Rex was panting as he came running from somewhere. The corporal glared at us, unappreciative of our prompt response to his presence.

"Form up outside," he growled.

We hurried to store our breakfast equipment and scampered outside to join the other platoons to form in company formation. Ten minutes later we still stood at attention, waiting for the corporals who all stood together to the side, discussing something.

"What are they waiting for," George asked in a whisper.

Nobody answered, too scared the corporals might hear. After what felt like at least half an hour, one of the corporals from another platoon walked over.

"We're going for a little walk," he said.

He made it sound so nice, like we were about to take a walk through a botanical garden. I almost look forward to it.

He walked/marched us through the main gates and down the street.

"Where're we going?" Charles wondered, but only loud enough that those immediately around him could hear.

I shook my head and said, "Maybe they think we're hopeless and are marching us home," but I knew it was wishful thinking.

We continued to walk, past the entrance where we came in the day before, and quite a few of us looked longingly passed the gates to the outside world, but there was no getting out for us. We continued on and walked past the gates of 1 Parachute Battalion on our left.

We carried on with the road until we reached a sport stadium and the corporal brought us to a halt.

“Listen up,” he said with authority and everybody paid attention.

“When you get inside, you’ll strip down to your underwear and join the line. Once the examination is finished, you’ll get dressed and join the squad outside. There will be a lunch pack waiting for you and once there are enough people; one of the corporals will take you back to the base. Dismiss!” he ordered, but no one dismissed.

We all stared at him like he was a creature from outer space. I looked to the left and saw the same question on Rex’s face that was on my mind.

“What examination?”

The corporal didn’t give us time for any further questioning.

“What the hell are you waiting for? Get your butts inside!” he barked.

The Company dissolved and we scampered inside.

The hall was a large building that was used for some assembly functions, but that day, all furniture were cleared out. To the right were a few foldable benches where we could remove our clothes, and the opposite side of the hall was setup as a medical test centre. I stripped down to my red underwear and was very thankful. For once, I listened to my mother and ensured that I wore clean underwear every day. If I had to stand there in dirty underwear I could imagine her standing in front of me, waving a finger in my face saying, *“I told you so!”*

I gathered my shoes and clothes in a bundle and joined the line.

“Next!” a man shouted, dressed in a brown uniform with a red beret that was folded and tucked into the lapel on his shoulder.

My turn arrived and I walked forward.

“Name and number?” he inquired.

“Huh?” I replied.

He glared at me and I could see he had to restrain himself.

“What is your name and army number?” he asked more slowly.

“Oh,” I said and supplied the necessary information.

He made a note on a pad.

“Any illness or allergies?” he asked without looking up.

“No,” I replied nervously.

The man placed the clipboard next to him then slipped his latex covered hand in my underwear and gripped my jewels. I could feel everything shrinking and had to resist the urge to smack him, as face turned red. At school I found myself in many uncomfortable situations in the principal’s office, but none of that came even close to how I felt at that moment, utterly and completely violated.

He squeezed a little and said, “Cough!”

With my future in his hands, I was too scared to say anything, so I gave my best fake cough.

The doctor removed his hand and at that moment, I was grateful that he looked at the writing pad in front of him and not at my face. I’m sure with the look I gave him, he would have classified me as a psychopath, and to be honest, I had more than a few murderous thoughts at that moment.

He completed his writing and handed me a piece of paper and pointed me to the next station and yelled, “Next!”

I moved towards the next doctor who put a cold stethoscope against my skin and listened to my heart, which after the jewel incident, was beating at twice the normal rate. He shone a light in my eyes and ears, looked at my throat, wrote something else on the piece of paper and directed me to the next guy. I followed the line of examinations where they tested my eyes and ears and at the last station the doctor stamped "G1K1" on my paper and yelled for the next victim.

Before the exit I got dressed and joined the others outside. I saw quite a few pale faces. Everyone was quite rattled by the medical examination and I was glad that I wasn't the only one that felt violated by it. It was only George who came out smiling.

"That first doctor looked quite impressed," he said.

We were handed a lunch pack consisting of a ham sandwich, banana and a cool drink and when the group was big enough, we were walked back to the 1 SAI base, and nobody said a word. In the months ahead we would discuss many things concerning our army training but nobody ever referred to that examination again.

Back in the base I learned that if you were classified G1K1, you were ready to go, meaning you were physically and mentally fit for army duty. A few were classified G3K3 and were escorted to join another Company where they would be more involved with administrative duties. There were a few that was classified G5K5 and they were ordered to immediately get all their civvy belongings and get on a waiting truck. They were sent home, medically unfit for military training, thus of no further use for the army and not another minute would be wasted on them.

George, Rex and I were all classified G1K1, which was hardly a surprise, but that little Charles was also G1K1 was a bit of a shock. He was so small I was sure they would send him home. Of course, he was all smiles and even got a gently slap on the back from George, which almost knocked him over.

I shook my head. "George, if you keep slapping him like that he won't stay G1K1 for long."

Both George and Charles grinned at me.

We heard that Tommy was classified as G5K5 because of a heart murmur, and I found that rather ironic. He was the only one of our initial group on the train that wanted to be there in the first place. A corporal collected our medical cards, made a note in a register and directed us to another building across from our bungalow, where a line already formed. When I got closer I saw it was a barber and we were about to get our first military haircuts.

When it was my turn I entered and saw there was three barber's chairs and walked to the vacant one on the left. A young man in brown uniform continuously swept the floor and had a hard time keeping up with all the fallen hair. The barber's wasted no time. The man that approached me was getting slightly bald and not a friendly line anywhere on his face. Without a word he slung the barber's apron around me and tied it behind my neck. The actual haircut was quick and effective. He would take the hair clippers, push it in the front and pull it out the back. With a few practiced and precision strokes, all my hair was laying around me on the floor. Before I could even mourn the loss of my hair, the sweeper guy already swept them into the growing pile in the corner.

I got out of the chair to make way for the next guy when I heard George's voice.

"Just a little off the top and trim the sides please," he asked politely.

His barber grinned and said, "Sure, no problem," and in and out went the clippers.

I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the door as I exit the room and saw a boy of eighteen staring back at me. George swore under his breath as he came out, his spikes were gone and only the roots were left.

George, Charles and I waited for Rex, discussing our incredible short hairstyles, when a boy with freckles came to stand next to us, rubbing his head. We ignored him as we didn't know him and continued our conversation.

"What are we waiting for?" the boy asked and we gaped at him.

It was only when he spoke that we realized it was Rex. His wild red top was gone and the face that was left, looked too young and innocent to be in the army. I doubt even his own mother would have recognized him at that moment.

Once everyone in the platoon had a haircut, we were ordered to form up again and were marched up to the QM stores once more. Now that we were classified army legal, it was time we were issued with our kit. First, we were given a brown sausage like canvas kitbag, where we would put all our kit in. The know-it-all informed us that in army slang, it was called a balsak, which literally translated to a ball bag.

We received two brown overalls, a floppy bush hat, and a canvas utility belt to be worn with said overalls, three pair of light brown army socks, three pair of army underpants, two brown army t-shirts, two brown army vests, two pair of black rugby shorts, a pair of brown army boots, and a pair of gray exercise shoes that could be best described as army sneakers. We also received two one litre water bottles, and a canvas water bottle holder that slipped onto the utility belt.

We were ordered back to our bungalow and were told to change into overalls and boots. All our civvy gear was locked away in the civvy room and from that point forward, we would wear only army gear inside the base. We were warned that if we were caught wearing any civvy clothes, that it would be met with dire consequences and we had no desire to find out what that would be.

"What's taking so long?" the corporal shouted from outside.

Everyone hurried as fast as they could and I felt very uncomfortable. The army underwear fitted, but with wearing only the overall, I felt half naked. The next time I got dressed, I made sure to wear a pair of shorts underneath. The boots were new and hard and it took me a few moments to figure out the laces, which were so long I had to wrap the ends twice around the top of the boot and then tied it in a double knot. My uncle Gabriel gave me that advice. He said that you don't want your laces to come undone while you were marching or running because there would be no stopping to tie them.

When done, I saw Rex had trouble with his laces. I quickly explained and helped him, while Charlie assisted George. Charlie's overall was two sizes too big but that was the smallest they had. When done, the four of us ran outside to join the platoon formation but we were some of the first ones there. By now the corporal got impatient, blowing on his whistle and yelling constantly.

When the last person eventually joined, the Corporal said, "Boys, you got to stop dragging your heels, you see that fence over there, you have thirty seconds to touch it and be back. GO!"

The Corporal referred to the fence around the stores, about two hundred meters away. It took us more than thirty seconds just to get to the fence. The new boots was heavy and very uncomfortable to run in, but we were all in the same boat. This meant that George was even slower than usual. He was only halfway back when we were all formed.

"You didn't make it, try again!" the corporal yelled and sent us back again.

George saw us coming and wasted no time in making a U-turn for the fence. Even with his head start he was still the last one back. My chest burned and my legs felt like jelly and I was one of the more fit rookies who were used to running, but not with that heavy boots. Luckily the corporal decided we made it that time, or he knew that another run could have resulted in a few heart attacks. I heard heavy panting all around me and quite a few sighs of relief when we didn't have to run again.

The corporal gave us a few moments to catch our breaths and then chased us back into our bungalow to fetch our eating utensils for dinner. The same routine followed as for breakfast, we gathered as a Company and walked/marched around to the mess hall. The corporal asked for a volunteer to say grace, but nobody wanted to do it. Charlie put up his hand, and said he didn't mind to do it.

The corporal called him forward and he had to stand in front of everyone. The corporal then ordered everyone to remove their bush hats, fold it and stick it in the left lapels of their overalls. Charlie said grace and when done, he wanted to take his place, but the corporal ordered him to the front of the line. From that day forward there was no shortage of volunteers to say grace because it meant that you would eat first.

After dinner we went to our bungalows and were pretty much left alone for the rest of the evening to pack away our kit and get settled. It was around eight o'clock when the corporal and another man in uniform came in. Herman spotted them approaching.

"STAND UP, STAND UP!" he yelled, almost in a panic.

Everyone jumped up and when the two entered, everyone stood at attention.

The other man looked at the corporal and smiled. Corporal Minnie introduced the man as Lieutenant Raymond, our platoon commander, who formally welcomed us to Platoon 1 Charlie Company. We were informed that after dinner we could change into T-shirts and PT shorts, unless the corporal had other ideas. The Lieutenant proceeded to read a piece from the bible and said a prayer. That also became a regular evening event except for weekends. Sometimes the Lieutenant had news or wise words of encouragement and sometimes, when the corporal had a bad day with us, the words were rather harsh. He also gave us our addresses and instructed us how to inform our loved ones how to write to us. That evening we all wrote letters to be sent home.

After they left we sat around and looked through our brand new kit, most of it came from plastic bags and still had that new smell. Compared to the corporal's faded browns, ours was still bright and shouted out "ROOKIE", but I had no doubt that in a year's time, our browns would be quite faded too.

Before the clock struck 22:00 the lights were switched off. I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. It was not completely dark in the bungalow as there were security lights all over the base that casted an eerie yellow light that filtered into the bungalow. Seeing that there were no curtains to cover the windows, we were never quite in the dark.

I thought of my life before the army and the girlfriend that I left behind. I didn't even know if she was still my girlfriend. The night before I left we had a big argument about something stupid and she left without saying goodbye. I wrote a letter of apology and could only hope that she would read it and not throw it away unopened. I drifted off to sleep and my last thought before I was lost in the land of dreams, I was in the army and there was no turning back. I knew the worst was still to come.

Chapter 4

Five o'clock the next morning I was happily in the arms of my girlfriend when the shrill, annoying sound of the corporal's whistle yanked me from my blissful dream. I struggled to my feet, trying to free myself from the blanket and came to attention next to my bed.

When the chaos quieted the Corporal said, "Breakfast at 06:00 and inspection at 07:00," and he promptly exited the building.

"What inspection?" George demanded to know, as if we were privy to information that he never received.

Maybe he thought the Corporal snuck into the bungalow and whispered special instructions to us while he slept. I pulled up my shoulders and picked my blanket from the floor.

"He probably wants to see if we can make our beds," the know-it-all offered and George just grunted.

George was not a morning person and the army seemed to make his condition worse, but luckily he always cheered up after breakfast. I looked over at Rex and with that sleepy face he had, I could appreciate the army's short haircut policy, because I could only imagine what his wild red top would have looked like.

Breakfast was a very hurried affair that morning as it seemed all the other companies and platoons received the same orders. We simply scooped our food down and Charlie started eating as soon as the food dropped on his pan. He never was a fast eater. His entire life his mother taught him to eat slowly and chew properly. If only she knew what would happen in the army she could have taught him some speed eating instead. Rex didn't have that problem; he could easily win a hotdog eating contest.

"Just swallow, we'll chew later," George offered his advice.

Once we made it back to our bungalows, there was a panic of activity. I stored my eating utensils and got to work on my bed. When done, I took a step back and admired my handiwork, Mother would have been proud. My bed at home never looked that good. At home I would only pull the covers back and made a meek attempt to straighten it. I could only imagine Corporal Minnie's face if he saw my bed at home. It was a good thing my mom wasn't a corporal or I would have done laps around the block every morning.

Someone saw the corporal approached.

"Chips, the corporal is on his way," he shouted.

We all stood at attention next to our beds, all neatly made, our cabinets closed and trommels orderly in front of our beds.

Herman shouted, "STAND UP," when the corporal entered, but that was a waste of breath, we were ready for him.

The corporal walked down the aisle, slowly, his hands together behind his back. He looked at us in disgust, like we were something the cat dragged in.

"First of all, I want you all to stand at the foot end of your beds on the right side," he said in a pleasant voice, but when nobody moved he spoiled it by shouting, "NOW!"

Everyone scurried. Charlie was already at the right side, but the sound of the corporal's voice convinced him that he was on the wrong end and ran around to the other side of his bed. When he realized that he stood next to George, he gave a sheepish grin and moved back to where he was.

The Corporal stopped in the middle of the bungalow, spread his arms wide.

"You call these beds made properly?" he asked.

He threw his arms in the air.

“Didn’t I show you how to make a bed? Do you think I’m your mother who’s going to do it for you every morning?”

I looked down at my bed, convinced mine was the best he had ever seen.

“You all listen like your asses. All of you dump your beds. Come on, dump them on the floor. NOW!” he shouted.

I very reluctantly flipped my perfectly made bed onto the floor. “I’ll be back in ten minutes and when I return, they better look like I showed you,” he instructed and left the bungalow.

Fifteen minutes later he returned and stood at the bottom of the aisle and without even as much as a glance at the beds asked, “Meyer, look down this line. Is everyone in a straight line?”

Herman Meyer looked at him confused and asked, “Huh Corporal?”

The corporal stood at the end of the bungalow and looked down the line of people standing by the end of their beds.

“Are they in a straight line?” he asked again, slowly, as if Herman wouldn’t understand if he talked any faster.

Herman blinked his eyes and looked at him very nervously, then looked down the line and could see the line was everything but straight.

“Eh, no Corporal,” Herman said.

“Dump the beds” he ordered.

There were quite a few that murmured under their breath as they dumped their hard work on the floor.

“What is that?” the corporal asked.

“Some of you don’t look happy. Maybe a lap or two around the bungalows will improve your mood. GO!” he shouted.

We scampered, some fell over the bedding that lay all over the place. The corporal waited by the door when we returned.

“Clean up this mess, I’ll be back in 10 minutes then we’ll have another inspection.”

“I don’t understand what standing in a straight line has to do with the beds,” George muttered as he picked his bedding from the floor and tossed it on the bed in frustration.

Rex sighed and placed his mattress back on the bed.

“Yes, my poor bed was innocent bystander in all this,” he said.

Twenty minutes later when the corporal walked in, we stood at attention, all lined up.

Before the corporal arrived, Herman made sure we lined up in a straight line. The corporal looked at the beds as he walked down the aisle.

He stopped at a bed in the middle.

“Do you have two shoe brushes?” he asked the private.

The rookie swallowed hard and said, “Yes corporal!”

He ducked down in his cabinet and produced two shoe brushes and handed them over.

The corporal called everybody closer.

“This is how you square the edges of your bed,” he said.

He turned the brushes upside down and used the wooden part to straighten out the wrinkles on the blanket and then used the two brushes to pinch the edge from the top and side of the blanket together to form a square edge. With a deft touch from lots of practice and experience he transformed the bed to resemble a square matchbox. Even the towel by the foot end was squared.

“Does anybody have an extra toothbrush?” he asked.

“Yes Corporal,” Rex said and produced a green toothbrush that he removed from its packaging.

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