

Induction

Feeling the hangover, my stomach empty and churning, mouth and throat dry, I rolled out of my basement bed. I quickly showered in the bathtub in the furnace room, shaved in the half-bath beneath the porch, and dressed. My mother was already up, kettle on the boil. As I came up the stairs from the basement, she poured the boiling water over the teabag in a large white cup. "Thanks." I fished out the tea bag and added milk and sugar. No, I didn't want anything to eat. She mentioned the clear, cold March weather: good for flying. I nodded.

The doorbell rang. Donald. I got up from the table and went down to my room. Grabbed my bag: socks, underwear, toilet kit, brown shoe polish, rag, and brush. When I came back upstairs, Donald was sitting in the kitchen talking to my mother. He gave me a big smile, "Hey, Johnny." We left immediately. I got in the front of the car Donald had borrowed from his parents; my mother slipped in the back seat. We drove from 39th Place to Skillman Avenue, to 39th Street, to Queens Boulevard, to 43rd Street, then onto the Brooklyn Queens Expressway. No one spoke. The sun was coming up low and glaring as we drove down the Belt Parkway on our way to Fort Hamilton. Less than two weeks before, Donald and my mother had made the same trip with my brother Mike, who had enlisted in the Navy. I didn't go with them that morning. I had said my good-byes the night before and remained under the covers in the basement bedroom Mike and I shared, pretending to sleep, knowing I would soon be making the same journey.

I really felt hung-over now, but I managed to mumble, "I'll write as soon as I get to basic training." Donald said "Yeah, good luck." My mother, who had been silent and seemed tense, then spoke up in her clear, no-nonsense voice, "I'll be praying for you". Soon we passed under the shadow of the Verrazano Bridge. Donald showed my induction papers to the guard at the Ft. Hamilton gatehouse and was directed to a low building where a few young guys in civilian clothes were entering. I shook Donald's hand, kissed my mother, got out of the car, and walked into the Army.

A uniformed clerk manned a desk just inside the entryway of the one-story building. The clerk stopped me, checked my induction papers, and then waved me through to a large room where I sat around for most of the morning with a bunch of other inductees. Small talk was minimal. Finally, forms were handed out, which we completed and waited in line to hand in. The clerk checked to see that each of us had completed all the items on the forms and after the last man in line handed his paperwork in, we waited some more. About mid-day, we were herded into a large windowless room where a captain stood on a podium. As two corporals formed us into ranks, he informed us we

were about to take a soldier's oath of allegiance to the United States. The captain said that we were all to step forward to take the oath, but that anyone who was unable or unwilling to do so should remain standing where they were. Everyone stepped forward. Then he flicked a switch and a slide projector flashed the words of the oath of allegiance on the wall behind the podium. As dust motes drifted through the white light of the projector, I read the beginning line:

"I do solemnly swear I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies..."

I recited the words quietly, wondering what practical purpose the oath served and feeling relieved when we concluded with, "so help me God." The captain switched off the slide projector, welcomed us to the United States Army, told us we were about to be flown to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for basic training, and wished us good luck. We filed out of the large room, picked up our travel bags, and exited the building into the bright March sunlight. Three buses were waiting with their engines running. We boarded the buses and, after a short drive down the Belt Parkway, arrived at Kennedy Airport. We didn't go through any of the terminals, but drove directly onto the tarmac and up to a chartered commercial airliner. We climbed the metal steps of the movable ramps positioned at the front and rear of the airplane and soon every seat was filled. After takeoff, the stewardesses distributed lunch consisting of a ham and cheese sandwich and an apple, packed in a white cardboard box tied with white twine, like a cake box you'd get from a bakery.