

Welcome to Fort Jackson

I wasn't looking forward to basic training and for me the two-hour flight to Columbia was over too soon. After deplaning, we were herded onto olive green army buses and thirty-five minutes later, passed through the gates of Fort Jackson. In another twenty minutes, the buses pulled up in front of the reception center where we were assigned to temporary "fill" barracks. A sergeant told us we'd have to stay there until enough inductees arrived to make up a basic training company. Two NCOs took charge and assigned us to barracks.

The barracks were old two-story wooden buildings. On each floor there were two parallel rows of metal bunk beds running down the building's length and a large open area separating the rows. A bathroom with showers was located at one end of each floor. The NCOs hadn't assigned us to individual bunks, so we grabbed the closest empty one. By the time that was done, it was early evening and getting dark. The NCOs lined us up on the pavement in front of the barracks and marched us to a mess hall, a short distance away. The air smelled of burning coal - - it was still winter and all the buildings at Ft. Jackson were heated with coal-fired furnaces. As we passed through the chow line, I was happy to see that there was plenty of food. I loaded my tray with baked ham, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, string beans, and apple pie.

That evening, we were not allowed to leave our barracks area, so there was not much to do after dinner and we just sat around on our bunks talking. Lights out was at 9:00 PM and not long after that most everyone was in his bunk sleeping or conversing quietly. We were all from New York City and the surrounding area, except for a few guys from Philadelphia. Most of the recruits had their civilian clothes on, but some, who had arrived a day or two earlier, were wearing various items of Army issue. No one there knew anyone else and I felt strange and disoriented. One group of four guys had managed to get a quiet, flashlight-lit poker game going under a blanket.

The barracks was quiet with people drifting off to sleep, when suddenly the overhead lights came on and three NCOs burst in - - a sergeant and two corporals. They were drunk, laughing and talking loudly. One corporal, a baby-faced Southerner, was going on about having just gotten himself a "shot of cock". All the guys from New York were looking at him strangely. What the hell was he talking about? Roaring drunk, he pulled out his penis. "You poor fuckers won't have the chance to get a shot of cock for months. Here you want a sniff", he said pointing his pecker at no one in particular. Then it came to me: when he said "cock" he meant pussy. But how you could call something by its opposite was beyond strange. Most of us New Yorkers had arrived in South Carolina believing that Southerners were uncivilized morons and the corporal's antics went a

long way in confirming our belief. It dawned on me with depressing clarity that we had nothing to look forward to for two years but being bossed around by honest-to-God crackers, beyond ignorant and beyond help. Now some of the ballsier guys began shouting that the NCOs should get the hell out of our barracks and let us get some sleep before they got their asses kicked. After some tough talk back and forth, the baby-faced corporal, who was by far the drunkest of the three, was hauled out the door by the sergeant, with the other corporal trailing behind. The barracks quickly quieted down and soon I was asleep.

Reveille the next morning was at 6:00 AM, but seemed to arrive much earlier. After breakfast, there was a formation and roll call at eight o'clock and then a bus ride to the barbershop where we waited in a long line for a two-minute haircut that left everyone as bald as an egg. The next stop was a large warehouse where we got off the bus, formed a single line, and after first picking up a duffel bag, filed through long rows with shelves and bins on either side, filling our bags with all the Army clothing we would need: several sets of fatigues, two pairs of boots, lots of socks, leather gloves and woolen glove liners, belts and buckles, a jacket, undershorts, undershirts, handkerchiefs, and two baseball caps. Everything was olive green, except the boots, which I was surprised to see were black. I now realized that carrying my brown shoe polish with me from New York, my one gesture of cooperation, had been pointless. After exiting the far end of the warehouse, we were herded back on the buses, lugging our overflowing duffel bags.

Lunch was at a different mess hall where we were allowed only 20 minutes for the meal. Since I didn't have time to finish, I grabbed two oranges on the way out and put them in my jacket pockets. We re-boarded the buses and a half-hour later arrived at our training company.

As we pulled to a stop, we could see drill instructors with their distinctive Smokey the Bear hats waiting for us. Once the first few recruits stepped off the bus, the DIs swung into action, yelling at us, getting right into our faces, shouting "move up, hurry up, you're dragging ass". Soon the buses were fully unloaded and the drill instructors, circling like wolves around a flock of sheep, shouted at us to drop our duffel bags and get on the company street. Then a sergeant ordered us to low crawl. I looked around and saw that, like me, most of the guys didn't know what to do. Some of the recruits got down on their hands and knees; most of us just stood still. A corporal at the front of the crowd shouted, "Watch me", and dropped to the ground so that his belly, forearms, thighs, and knees were on the pavement; then using his forearms and knees to propel himself he crawled forward. As the corporal jumped up, the sergeant repeated the command for us to low crawl. This time everyone got on the ground, pushing and shoving each other for space. Some of the guys still went down on their hands and knees with their backsides sticking up in the air and the drill instructors waded through the mass of writhing recruits and booted the elevated butts back down.

I was in the middle of the pack when a bit of space cleared in front of me and I started crawling forward, the rough concrete of the company street scraping my knees and elbows right through my clothing. Then I felt wetness seeping along my abdomen: the oranges in my pockets had burst and the juice was soaking through. I was afraid that the wetness would attract the DIs' attention or that someone would think I pissed my pants. But after an anxious minute or two of low crawling, the DIs had us up on our feet and running down the company street, up a long hill, down a main road, and eventually back to the street again. I managed to surreptitiously unload the oranges as we ran along the road and by the time we had returned the wet spot was beginning to dry out.

Once we had returned to the company area, the roll was called and we were sorted out into platoons and then formed into platoon formations of four ranks. In front of my new platoon, a black NCO was walking back and forth with his hands behind his back. He was short and wiry and his name tag read Corporal Griffiths. After calling us to attention and then putting us at ease, he told us he knew we were from New York City and that New York had a lot of tough guys. He asked how many of us were tough guys. "Raise your hands" he said. No one stirred. Then some doofus in the second rank put his hand up.

"What's your name?"

"Palluchio."

The corporal came back "Palluchio, what?"

The guy looked around, then after a pause, said "Palluchio, sir."

Griffiths exploded, "Don't ever call me sir. I work for my living. Get up here Palluchio."

Palluchio sauntered to the front of the formation and Griffiths asked again if he was a tough guy. Looking a little sheepish, Palluchio said "Yes, corporal." With that, Griffiths threw a hard left hook into Palluchio's solar plexus, knocking the wind out of him, flooring him. As Palluchio lay doubled up on the ground gasping for breath, Corporal Griffiths asked if there were any other tough guys in the platoon. Everyone stared straight ahead. While Palluchio staggered back into the formation, the corporal ordered us to fall out and enter the barracks directly behind us. "It's gonna be your home sweet home for the next eight weeks" he growled.