



In the Company of Strangers

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This is part 2 of a completed manuscript and is a TRUE STORY.

In part 1 "[Swan Song](#)", I have been accepted to the Aviation Candidate Officer's School (AOCS) in Pensacola, Florida. I have just arrived at NAS Pensacola and I am about to begin my transformation to a Naval Aviator. I pursued my dream of flying for the US Navy for 2 years before I was accepted in my senior year of college at the University of Toledo. Since that time, I have continued to prepare myself physically and mentally for the demands of AOCS. I am following my brother, Mike who graduated from Cleveland State and joined the Navy and is currently flying the A-6E Intruder off the decks of the USS Roosevelt. And the story continues...

As my foot touches the green carpet both doors fly open. I hold my breath and wait. Several sailors stream out of the building and head straight for me. I'm under attack. They're dressed in matching khaki uniforms with black shiny shoes and a square gold belt buckle at their waist that glistens in the sun. My bag falls lifeless to the ground next to my feet as they step closer to the edge of the top step. They're standing just a few feet from me.

The instruction the recruiter told me is just on the tip of my tongue when the sailor directly in front of me barks out, "STAND FAST AND STATE YOUR BUSINESS." I almost jump out of my skin when he speaks. I stand there speechless. His voice is loud and deep and my mind goes completely blank. He's standing with the other instructors at his side and I'm looking straight up at him. I've never seen someone this tall. I don't move a muscle. I try to open my mouth but I make no sound. He speaks again, "CANDIDATE, STAND FAST AND STATE YOUR BUSINESS!" My mind

unfreezes and the thoughts start running at top speed. What? Where? Who? What should I do?

The instruction. Oh, yeah. I start, "Candidate James..."

He interrupts me. "WRONG, WRONG, WRONG." He's screaming so loud it makes it hard to concentrate on what he's saying. "CANDIDATE, YOU WILL RESPOND ONLY WITH YOUR LAST NAME. DO IT AGAIN!" I can feel my heart beating out of control in my chest.

My mind is way ahead of my body. I know I should respond but I can't get the words out. I hesitate and try to collect my thoughts. I take a deep breath and start again, "Candidate Jam..." and then I catch myself. Too late. I see his expression change as soon as I say the first syllable of my name.

He continues to attack, "CANDIDATE, YOU WILL RESPOND WITH ONLY YOUR LAST NAME. I SAY AGAIN, STAND FAST AND STATE YOUR BUSINESS."

Now more sure of myself I try again, "Candidate Haffner reporting."

"WRONG. CANDIDATE, YOU WILL RESPOND WITH AVIATION OFFICER CANDIDATE, STATE YOUR LAST NAME, OF CLASS 2087. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"Yes." My mind is at terminal velocity. I desperately try to follow what he's saying but the tone of his voice and the speed that he is talking scares the hell out of me. This is some serious shit.

"SPEAK UP CANDIDATE. I CAN'T HEAR YOU!"

"Yes, Sir."

"WRONG, WRONG, WRONG. YOU WILL RESPOND WITH AYE, AYE, SIR. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"Aye, aye Sir."

"CANDIDATE, WHAT IS YOUR NAME"

"Aviation Officer Candidate Haffner of Class 2..." I can't remember the number. He said it so fast I've already forgotten what the number is. Something about a class but I'm lost.

He quickly responds, "CANDIDATE, YOUR CLASS NUMBER IS 2..0..8..7!"

"Yes, Sir." My mistakes are mounting. I just need him to slow down and lower his voice.

"CANDIDATE, YOU WILL RESPOND WITH AYE, AYE, SIR. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"Aye, aye, Sir."

"CANDIDATE, WHAT IS YOUR NAME?"

"Aviation Officer Candidate Haffner of Class 2087 reporting as ordered."

There I finished it. Now I can follow him up the stairs into the barracks and get this show on the road. He doesn't move. He continues to stare down at me and I can feel the sweat continue to roll down the sides of my face. The silence is killing me. I'm sure he can see my heart beating in my chest.

He moves and I flinch when he starts, "NOW GET UP HERE!" he yells pointing to the top step.

I hurriedly walked up the last couple of stairs and stand right in front of the other instructors. I'm within their striking distance and they look larger than life. The instructor talking to me looks like he has enough gold bars on his collar that I must be facing a general. The other instructors looked like carbon copies of the first except they have fewer bars. Am I on some weird planet? Before I can finish my thought the instructor to his left shouts, "CANDIDATE, STAND AT ATTENTION WHEN YOU ARE BEING ADDRESSED."

I do my best to stand straight with my shoulders back. The second instructor walks up to me and says, "STAND STRAIGHT AND SQUARE YOUR SHOULDERS."

I'm already on my toes and try to stand straighter. A third instructor walks up to my side and looks at what I'm holding. At least I think he looks at what I'm holding. I try to keep my eyes locked on the instructor in front of me. The instructor at my side starts, "YOU WILL WEAR ALL ISSUED CLOTHING. YOU WILL BUTTON ALL BUTTONS."

It seems like a rhetorical statement so I don't move. I lock my arms at my sides to keep still.

He hesitates and then continues. "CANDIDATE, PUT ON YOUR COAT. QUICKLY! MOVE! MOVE!" The words are flying so fast it's hard to keep up. I have to keep repeating to myself what he says because he speaks so loud that I jump whenever he starts a command.

Maybe he wants me to put my jacket on. I'm not sure. What I do know is that I don't have a lot of time to think. I drop my bag again and start to put on my jacket. Is this what he wants me to do? When I put my first arm in he doesn't move or speak. Silence must be good. He just keeps staring at me so I quickly put the other arm in and then go back to standing straight to see what will happen next. When my hands return back to my sides the instructor repeats, "YOU WILL WEAR ALL ISSUED CLOTHING AND YOU WILL BUTTON ALL BUTTONS, CANDIDATE."

How am I supposed to know that's what he wants? I button the rest of the buttons down the front of my jacket. I do my best to stand straight with my hands at my side, trying to mimic the way he's standing. The problem is I'm an inch shy of six feet and they look to be much taller.

Quickly he speaks again, "CANDIDATE, BUTTON ALL YOUR BUTTONS."

I run my hand down the front of my jacket and I recheck all the buttons. I find an unbuttoned button at the collar of my jacket and shakily button it. The jacket cuts into my neck but that's the least of my worries. I'm facing this very pissed off general and if he wants to see my jacket buttoned then I'm going to do it.

"HURRY UP, CANDIDATE. YOU ARE OUT OF UNIFORM. QUICKLY, QUICKLY."

What? I've already buttoned all my buttons. I look down and check again the buttons down the front of my jacket. All of them are closed so I snap back to attention, putting my hands at my sides.

The instructor looks disgusted. "CANDIDATE, YOU FORGOT THE BUTTONS ON YOUR SLEEVES. BUTTON THEM NOW!"

I try to quickly loop the small metallic buttons through what feels like the microscopic holes on my sleeves. The buttons are slippery from my sweaty hands, which makes things even harder. I'm wearing a long-sleeve dress shirt buttoned to the collar and a jeans jacket in this hot, humid Florida sun. I'm in hell and it's getting hotter with every minute. Why did I bring this jacket? Why didn't I store it in my bag before I got to the base? I'm brought quickly back to reality by the scream of the instructor, "GOOD! NOW STAND AT ATTENTION, CANDIDATE," he reminds me.

I do my best to stand as tall and straight as I can. My hands are hanging at my sides and my balled fists are in front of my pockets. I'm standing with my feet about twelve inches apart. It's my best imitation of a military stance. At least from the movies I've seen this is how I think they look. I'm grasping for anything to help.

"CANDIDATE, ARE YOU WATCHING ME?" Of course I am. He's standing right in front of me. How can I NOT watch him? "IT LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE WATCHING ME, CANDIDATE. STOP LOOKING AT ME. LOOK THROUGH ME. YOU DON'T NEED TO LOOK AT ME. JUST LISTEN TO ME AND LOOK STRAIGHT THROUGH ME."

What does that mean? How can I look at him but NOT look at him? The instructor hesitates for a minute but keeps staring at me. He leans into my face just inches from my eyes. "STOP LOOKING AT ME!"

I'm trying to keep calm but it's very hard. I do my best to act as if he isn't standing there but it's difficult since he's inches away from me yelling at the top of his lungs. I try to look at the front door of the building behind him but I can tell it's not working. I know my eyes keep focusing on his face but it's a habit. The nuns at St. Mary's of the Falls always taught me to look someone in the eyes when they talked to me. I can still hear Sister Kathleen from second grade, "Look me in the eyes when I speak to you." She had a metal ruler that she used to enforce rules. The instructors used their voice but the effect is the same.

"CANDIDATE, YOU'RE LOOKING AT ME AGAIN. LOOK STRAIGHT AHEAD AND JUST LISTEN."

I know I'm failing but I'm doing my best to stand tall. My hands are still hanging at my sides gripping my pant legs.

"WRONG, WRONG, WRONG. PUT YOUR HANDS AT YOUR SIDES."

I think they're at my sides so I shift them a little and then put them back. Where is this going? I'm lost again.

"CUFF YOUR HANDS LIKE THIS," as he speaks he moves his fist up to my face to show me his finger tips pushing into his palm. His thumb is locked on the top of his fist and is bent along the top covering his index finger.

I do my best to duplicate what it looks he's doing.

“WRONG, WRONG, WRONG. PUT YOUR CLENCHED FISTS ON THE SEAMS OF YOUR PANTS. YOUR HANDS ARE TOO FAR FORWARD.” As he talks he never touches me but moves his hands right next to my body.

As he points to my arms, I move my hands back to the seams of my pants and I begin to squeeze the seams with my fingertips. I can feel the fabric of my jeans cutting into my fingers. Everything seems to be happening so quickly but I’m trying to keep my focus. My heart is beating wildly and my arms are beginning to shake from clenching my fists so hard.

“CANDIDATE, YOUR FEET SHOULD BE TOGETHER.” His response is quick and to the point.

I move my right foot slightly to touch my left foot. The sweat is beginning to run down my face and onto my collar. It’s so hot.

One of the other instructors walks to my right side as I stare straight ahead and leans into my ear before he starts screaming, “CANDIDATE, DROP YOUR TRASH!” I jump when he yells and I notice he’s staring at my bag so I bend down to place it on the ground.

“DROP THEM!” he repeats. I release my grip on the handle and the bag hits the ground with a small thud.

As it hits the ground, an instructor on my left side leans up to my ear and shouts, “WHAT ARE YOU DOING? PICK UP THAT TRASH. I DON’T WANT YOUR TRASH IN MY BARRACKS. PICK THEM UP NOW!”

I quickly bend down and pick up my bag that I was just asked to drop. Just as I do the instructor on my right repeats, “CANDIDATE, I SAID DROP YOUR TRASH.”

As soon as I do the instructor on my left immediately responds, “I SAID DON’T DROP YOUR TRASH ON MY GROUNDS. CANDIDATE, CAN YOU HEAR ME?”

“Yes. I can,” I say apologetically. I’m being bounced back and forth.

“CANDIDATE, THAT IS NOT HOW YOU WILL RESPOND TO A QUESTION.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“THAT IS NOT A QUESTION, CANDIDATE. TO A COMMAND YOU WILL RESPOND AYE, AYE, SIR.”

"Yes, Sir I mean aye, aye, Sir." I'm not sure what my name is anymore or what I'm doing here. In a few short minutes, my mind is completely mush. I think, "I could sure use that cherry tomato now." Their responses are rapid fire and it's easy to get confused. I keep picking up the bag and as soon as I do, the next instructor tells me to put it down. I pick it up as the other instructor is correcting me for disobeying his order. I can barely breathe. My pulse is racing and the sweat is beginning to sting my eyes but I don't dare take my eyes off the instructors.

I'm powerless and just want to suffer as little damage as possible. I'm not afraid anymore. While they're correcting me I feel an energy begin to build within me. I can feel that, as they continue to push me, the adrenaline is surging through my body and my mind is firing all cylinders at once. It's a state of euphoria I can hardly describe.

Without speaking one of the instructors turns around and holds open the door while I follow him into the building. As I stop behind the instructor in the lobby four or five instructors quickly surround me yelling orders simultaneously. My mind goes blank. I'm being attacked from all sides and it quickly becomes too much to follow. I change tactics. I decide I can only concentrate on the instructor right in front of me. I have to let the others go. Deal with the one in front of me. I can hear the others screaming at me but I try to ignore them.

One of the instructors steps from behind the instructor in front of me and leads a new attack, "DON'T STAND THERE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROOM. STAND WITH YOUR BACK FOUR INCHES FROM THE BULKHEAD."

I don't have no idea what a bulkhead is. I know it has something to do with a ship but as far as I can tell we're nowhere near a ship. Think we're still in a building but I could be wrong. He pauses for a second and then he raises his open hand and slaps the wall behind my head. His show of force startles me and I jump as he continues, "THIS IS THE BULKHEAD." Once again slapping the gray painted wall he keeps repeats, "KEEP YOUR SHOULDERS FOUR INCHES FROM THE BULKHEAD AT ALL TIMES."

I take a step back and my back touches the wall behind me. "FOUR INCHES, CANDIDATE," he corrects me.

One of the other instructors walks over from the other side of the small lobby and joins in, "CANDIDATE, YOU ARE OUT OF UNIFORM. TAKE OFF THAT WATCH."

My hands are shaking and the sweat keeps running into my eyes. Standing still is becoming difficult. It takes me a few seconds before I finally manage to slip off my watch, put it in my front pocket, and move my hands go back to my sides. I brace for the next attack.

"PUT IT IN YOUR POCKET. YOU WILL NOT WEAR A WATCH OR ANY OTHER JEWELRY. CANDIDATE, IS THAT CROSS NECESSARY?" pointing to the gold cross around my neck.

Denise bought me this gold cross for my last birthday and I hadn't taken it off since that day. I forgot that I was even wearing it. I reach to take it off before I answer, "No, sir." I pull it over my head and put it in my pocket with my watch.

When I return to look back at the instructor he has a funny look on his face. I can tell something is wrong. I scan through what I'm supposed to be doing. Buttons buttoned. Check. Standing straight. Check. Hands balled on my sides and four inches from the bulkhead. Check. What am I missing?

The instructor shifts his stare to my neck where the cross was hanging. What do I do now? "CANDIDATE, IF THAT CROSS HAS RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE YOU CAN WEAR IT. I CAN'T MAKE YOU TAKE OFF AN OBJECT WITH RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"Yes, Sir,"

I understand what he's saying. If I feel I need to wear the cross I can say something but I figure it isn't worth the attention from the other pack animals. I remind myself what Mike told me, "Hide. Don't be obvious. Attention is bad and can cause a lot of pain. Do what you have to do to hide." He told me when he went to AOCS his friend who had graduated a few months earlier from AOCS called his Drill Instructor (DI) before he arrived and left a message. When Mike got to AOCS he was standing at attention with his class one morning when he saw several instructors walk slowly through the candidates. His instructor yelled, "Mike Haffner. Where are you?" Mike froze not sure if he should respond. The DI screamed it again, "Mike Haffner."

He said he knew what was coming. "Here," he responded quietly and immediately his DI ran over and the other instructors stood to his side. His instructor started, "So, this is the son of a bitch I heard about." He started taunting him in front of the entire class. He had to do a lot of push-ups and sit-ups before the DI moved to another victim. He laughed telling the story and then he looked at me in his most mocking voice and said "Now, I can do the same thing to you. Be ready for it."

Mike doesn't make idle threats so I knew I didn't need to ask if he was serious. "You can't do that to me," I pleaded but he immediately started laughing.

"Just wait," he said mockingly. I know that look. He tilts his head a little and you see that crooked smile before he starts that comical laugh and you know its game over. I've tried many things to stop that laugh and they never work. He doesn't lose at anything. He has an uncanny ability to turn your disadvantage into his strength. If he sees that you have an advantage he starts the trash talking. Eventually you lose your focus and he snatches the victory.

I adjust myself until the bulkhead is just behind me [hopefully no more or less than four inches behind me]. Without hesitating the instructor continues, "FOLLOW ME." I make a turn to follow him when he barks, "YOU WILL ADDRESS ME WHEN I GIVE AN ORDER."

"Aye, aye Sir," I answer. I take a deep breath and follow him down a short hall to a counter that has another instructor sitting behind a metal gray desk. The desk is inside a wall with pass-through window to a small storage area. It reminds of the scene in Blues Brothers when Elwood gets out of prison. The room has a wall of shelving behind the instructor with bundles of clothes stacked in neat piles. This building is my prison for the next fourteen weeks and I've already met the guards.

The instructor takes a couple of steps to the side of me and yells directly into my ear, "STAND AT ATTENTION."

I move an inch closer to the desk and try not to screw up again. "CANDIDATE, YOU WILL ADDRESS ME WHEN I GIVE AN ORDER."

"Aye, aye Sir."

As I stand at attention I hear the instructor behind the counter reading me a list from a metal clipboard he is holding. As he reads an item, he turns around and

pulls it off the shelves behind him. I can't concentrate on the instructor in the storage closet. I'm more intent on making sure I'm standing straight and my hands are correctly clenched on my seams. The instructor in the storage room keeps moving down his list and building a big pile on the counter but I only hear the last few things. "COTTON T-SHIRT. WHITE SOCKS. A TUBE OF TOOTHPASTE." When he finishes he drops his clipboard on the counter and screams, "CANDIDATE, SIGN HERE." *I know what you're thinking -- just like the movie. Maybe they planned it that way.*

Before I can move he repeats, "QUICKLY, CANDIDATE. SIGN IT. SIGN THE FORM." I heard him the first time, but it takes a few second to process what he said before I can respond. One second is too long.

I take a step forward to grab the pen and I'm immediately scolded, "DON'T CROSS THE LINE. STEP BACK ACROSS MY LINE." I look down and see a small yellow piece of tape cross the floor in front of the counter. I step back behind the line and return to standing at attention.

"CANDIDATE, DON'T STEP ON MY LINE!" he continues to bark.

I check my feet again and my right foot is just touching the edge of the tape. I move my foot back across the tape and wait.

He tries again, "CANDIDATE, SIGN HERE. QUICKLY."

The problem is that I can barely reach the pen or the clipboard while I stand behind the yellow line. I pick up the pen and when I stretch as far as I can I can just reach the middle of the clipboard. I scan the form but I can't read any of the writing. It's just a bunch of scribble on top of straight lines going down the left side page. What is this? What is this scribble?

"SIGN AT THE BOTTOM QUICKLY," he barks.

I have to think for a second before I realize that the illegible scratches are the signatures from other candidates. It suddenly occurs to me that I'm not the only one in this predicament. Where are the others? Am I really in a class? He said something before about class 2087. Where are they? Of course I have to go through all of this within a few milliseconds because I know if I wait too long the instructor will respond. I pick up the pen and stretch to reach the clipboard.

As I write my name he repeats, "CANDIDATE, HURRY UP."

The whole time one of the other instructors is leaning into my right ear and screaming, "CANDIDATE, PICK UP YOUR TRASH."

As soon as he finishes an instructor on my left side counters his order, "I SAID DROP YOUR TRASH."

They're rattling my cage. I continue to ignore the instructors at my sides and just follow the instructor in front of me. It seems to be working. I begin to sign my name but my hand is trembling so bad that I can't form the letters. I just make a couple of looping circles to get it over faster. I assume I'm not being graded on penmanship so I finish with my scribble and drop the pen back on the clipboard. As soon as the pen hits the clipboard I know I've made a mistake. The instructor is waiting for it.

Before I can breathe he responds, "CANDIDATE, HAND ME THE PEN."

I pick up the pen and hand it back to him. The other instructors keep feeding, "STEP BACK. YOU CROSSED THE LINE. PICK UP YOUR TRASH."

I pick up the gear the instructor dropped on the counter and then reach for my bag. It's quite a handful. I'm carrying a towel, white shirt, pair of shorts, two pairs of socks, combination lock, dark gray wool blanket, bar of soap, razor blade, small yellow spiral notebook, black government-issued ball point pen, and a toothbrush. I drop a pair of socks and I'm immediately reminded about, "TRASH ON THE FLOOR." Trash seems to be a big issue.

The instructor to my left says "FOLLOW ME," and starts walking down the hall away from the lobby. The instructors are very quick and efficient as they pass me between them. One feeds for a while and then steps back as another keeps up the attack. I'm switched between instructors but they keep up the pressure.

As I follow the instructor down the hall I get a few seconds of silence to absorb what is happening. I notice that some of the instructors have gold bars on their collar. I assume that the higher instructors have more gold bars on their lapels. My only contact has been with two and three bar instructors.

I'm following the instructor down a long empty hall with rooms on both sides. Although I'm in tennis shoes, I can hear our footsteps echo off the plain walls. The air feels lifeless and I continue to sweat. I have to walk fast to keep up but it hits

me as I follow him down the hall. I realize that I'm no longer Jim Haffner. I'm Candidate Haffner of Class 2087. This is it.

I'm doing my best to balance everything I'm carrying and not to drop any "trash" on his floor. The instructor in front of me quickly walks down the hall and I try to stay four inches from the bulkhead. The floors are battleship gray and the hall is dark with no overhead lights. The hallway is long and I can see doorways open on each side of the hall. As we pass each doorway a beam of light sweeps across the hall piercing the darkness. We pass other instructors walking down the hall and I try to stare a hole through the back of the head of the instructor in front of me. I know looking around or falling out of step will be a major mistake so I keep right behind him. From the lobby, I can hear another candidate receiving his gear. I hear someone remind him how to stand at attention and to pick up his trash.

As we approach the end of another hall, the instructor swings to his left and enters an empty room. It's a square room with four small tables pushed together in the center surrounded by four wooden chairs. There are four metal beds in each of the corners and next to each bed is a wooden locker about six feet high with a wooden door on the front. The floor is greenish-colored linoleum and the walls are the same gray as the halls. It's even hotter in the room than the hall. The instructor heads straight for the rectangular metal bed in the far corner of the room. I don't see anyone else in the room. He stops in front of the bed and steps aside. I stop walking behind him and wait. He does a full turn to face me again. "DROP YOUR TRASH ON THE BED."

No longer are there three or four instructors surrounding me. It's a little easier with only one instructor facing me. I drop everything I'm carrying onto the bed. He takes a step to his right and says, "YOUR LOCKER WILL BE LOCKED AT ALL TIMES. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"Aye, aye, Sir."

"NOW, GET YOUR LOCK."

I quickly search through the pile on the bed and I see a pair of white socks roll off the top. I'm powerless as I watch in slow motion as they roll toward the

edge of the bed. I move my hand to try to catch them but it's too late. The socks land on the floor. I know what's coming.

"CANDIDATE, PICK UP THAT TRASH. I DON'T WANT TRASH ON MY FLOOR. CANDIDATE, DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"Aye, aye Sir." I pick up the socks and continue looking for the combination lock. I find the lock at the bottom of the pile under my t-shirt and hold it out for the instructor to inspect.

He looks at it for a second and continues his instructions, "OPEN IT AND MEMORIZE THE COMBINATION." I try to open the packaging slowly but he corrects me, "QUICKLY, CANDIDATE." The instructors are relentless. I have no idea what's going to happen next. I can't get the plastic cover covering the lock open and resort to ripping open the package. I try to find the paper with the combination on it when he repeats, "QUICKLY, CANDIDATE. FIND THE COMBINATION." I tear through the packing and find the small paper with the combination on it. I glance at the typed numbers and quickly memorize them. 22-8-14... 22-8-14... 22-8-14. I'm running on pure adrenaline. My mind is moving a million miles an hour. He follows up with, "CANDIDATE, PUT YOUR TRASH IN THE LOCKER."

Speed is the key so I don't fold anything. I open the door and drop everything on the bottom of the locker ignoring the shelf at the top and the two hooks on the side. Without wasting a second I return to attention and my balled fists move to the seams on my jeans.

"CANDIDATE, YOU STILL HAVE TRASH ON THE FLOOR. PICK IT UP," he says. I scan the floor for something I must have dropped. I don't see anything. I check at the foot of the locker to make sure nothing has fallen when I closed the door. Nothing. I return back to standing at attention.

"QUICKLY, CANDIDATE," he sounds annoyed but I don't know what I'm supposed to do. As far as I can tell there is nothing on the floor.

"CANDIDATE, PICK UP THE TRASH," he repeats. I scan the floor again and still don't see anything. I know I've got a puzzled look on my face and he comes back to feed, "QUICKLY."

I respond quickly, "Sir, this candidate doesn't see anything on the floor."

"WHAT IS YOUR NAME?" he corrects me.

"Sir, Candidate Haffner of Class 2087 sees no trash on the floor," I answer back timidly. I can't find anything I've dropped but he's insistent that I find something. Is this some kind of test? How should I respond? I scan the floor a third time and he solves it for me.

"Candidate, under your bed," he says rolling his eyes. I quickly bend down and see the paper combination for my lock has fallen and landed under my bed. I must have dropped it in my haste to memorize the combination. I pick it up and quickly throw it in my locker before I turn around and face the instructor.

"CANDIDATE, GET OUT YOUR POOPY GOUGE." Lost again. What the heck is a "Poopy Gouge?" I stand there without moving. I've been in the Navy twenty minutes but I know enough to wait for the instructor to clarify.

"CANDIDATE, YOUR POOPY GOUGE," he repeats. I still don't move. I can tell he's going to continue but I have to wait. He hesitates and it starts to get uncomfortable. Finally, he finishes, "THE YELLOW NOTEBOOK, CANDIDATE. GET YOUR PEN AS WELL."

"Aye, aye Sir," I'm still confused. I remember a little yellow notebook when I checked in but where is it now? It must be in my locker. I turn around and tear through the pile of clothes on the floor of the locker for the notebook. I drop a couple of things on the floor and hear about dropping trash again but I quickly pick them up and keep looking. Just as I think he's going to start yelling again I find it. It's a small notebook about 4 inches by 3 inches. I turn around and stand at attention. The instructor makes a sharp turn in front of me and marches a couple of steps towards the middle of the room.

He points to a chair at the corner of the nearest table and says, "CANDIDATE, SIT DOWN." I grab the back of the chair and slowly slide the chair away from the table. For some reason I'm trying to move quickly but quietly. I'm not sure why I think noise will be a problem. I sit down and move my chair closer to the table. There are four brown industrial tables pushed together in the middle of the room and I'm sitting at the table that faces the door. Where the tables meet in the middle there are two books straddling the edge where anyone at one of the

tables can reach them. If the tables were pushed apart they would fall to the floor. The books look worn and the first is a light blue binder and the other is a dark blue worn book but I can't see the name of them. I'm trying to move methodically and not make any mistakes but it isn't working.

"CANDIDATE, SIT AT ATTENTION. PUT YOUR FEET SQUARELY ON THE FLOOR. PUT YOUR HANDS PALMS DOWN ON YOUR KNEES. DO NOT LOOK AROUND. DO NOT LOOK AT ME. YOU WILL LOOK STRAIGHT AHEAD AT ALL TIMES. IN FRONT OF YOU IS A BLUE BINDER."

I quickly reach for the binder but he stops me, "CANDIDATE, WAIT UNTIL I AM FINISHED!" I put my hand back on my lap and wait for him to continue.

"CANDIDATE, WHEN YOU ARE GIVEN AN ORDER YOU WILL RESPOND WITH AYE, AYE, SIR. THAT IS TO LET ME KNOW YOU HEARD AND UNDERSTAND THE ORDER. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"Aye, aye Sir," I scream at the same level he is using at me.

He continues, "OPEN THE BLUE BINDER ON THE TABLE AND TURN TO PAGE 1. TAKE YOUR PEN AND COPY THE ENTIRE CONTENTS OF THIS BINDER INTO YOUR POOPY GOUGE. YOU WILL CARRY YOUR POOPY GOUGE AT ALL TIMES IN YOUR PORT AFT POCKET. THAT'S YOUR BACK LEFT POCKET, CANDIDATE. WHEN YOU HAVE TIME YOU WILL TAKE IT OUT AND BEGIN MEMORIZING WHAT YOU HAVE COPIED. YOU WILL HAVE ONE WEEK TO COPY AND MEMORIZE THE CONTENTS OF THAT BINDER. THE BINDERS WILL BE REMOVED AFTER THE FIRST WEEK AND YOU WILL BE TESTED ON THE MATERIAL. WHEN YOU HAVE A SPARE MINUTE IN THE NEXT WEEK YOU HAD BETTER BE MEMORIZING THAT INFORMATION. BEGIN."

"Aye, aye Sir."

I open the binder and turn to the first page. He marches toward the front of the room but stops in front of the doorway. "CANDIDATE! YOU WILL NOT TOUCH YOUR BACK TO THE CHAIR WHEN YOU SIT. YOU WILL SIT WITH YOUR FEET AT A 90-DEGREE ANGLE AND YOUR FEET SQUARELY ON THE FLOOR. YOU WILL SIT ON THE FRONT HALF OF THE CHAIR WITH YOUR BACK COMPLETELY STRAIGHT."

"Aye, aye Sir."

I straighten my back and adjust my feet to make the 90-degree angle. He spins on his heels and starts to walk out the door. "CANDIDATE, SOMEONE IS LEAVING YOUR ROOM."

I don't move. I don't know what he is expecting me to do. It seems better to just wait than try to anticipate and continue to make more mistakes. I sit there without saying a word. He hesitates to watch my reaction before he continues.

"WHEN SOMEONE LEAVES OR ENTERS THE ROOM ANYONE IN THE ROOM WILL STAND AT ATTENTION AND RESPOND WITH 'ATTENTION ON DECK. STAND BY. GOOD AFTERNOON, SIR. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?'"

"Aye, aye Sir."

"CANDIDATE, STAND AND ADDRESS ME," he says angrily.

"Attention on deck, Stand By. Good Afternoon, Sir."

"GOOD. NOW GET BACK TO THAT BINDER, CANDIDATE."

I take a deep breath and reach for the binder. Before my hand can touch it, "CANDIDATE, I'M BACK IN THE ROOM."

I stand up pushing the chair back from underneath me and stand at attention, "Attention on deck. Stand by. Good Afternoon, Sir." I'm doing my best to mimic the cadence he uses. I'm close but I'm not sure he likes it.

"CANDIDATE, YOU HAD BETTER HAVE EYES ON THE TOP OF YOUR HEAD BECAUSE YOU HAD BETTER GREET ME WHEN I RETURN."

"Aye, aye Sir." I sit down and again reach for the binder. The instructor takes a couple of small steps and is now outside of the room standing in the hall. This time before I touch the binder I can feel his glare and I drop the book on the table. I stand up and shout, "Attention on deck. Stand by. Good afternoon, Sir."

"CANDIDATE, I AM NOT IN THE ROOM. I HAVE NOT CROSSED THE THRESHOLD OF THE DOOR. SIT DOWN AND BEGIN COPYING THAT INFORMATION."

"Aye, aye Sir." I reach for the binder a third time and I can see the instructor still standing in the doorway. I grab the binder and set it down on the table in front of me. I assume I'm going to be doing another greeting in a second and don't want to have to put the book down again. I slowly open the binder and do my best to look like I'm reading the first page but I'm really just waiting for him

to step back across the threshold. I keep my head pointed towards the binder but I'm staring at his feet. If I look any higher he'll know I'm not reading the binder and I'm sure that will be a mistake.

He can tell I'm cheating. "CANDIDATE, KEEP YOUR EYES ON THAT BOOK."

I open my Poopy Gouge and turn to the first blank page. I lay the binder on the table to the right of my gouge and begin copying. The first page starts with, "The Regimental Staff at AOCS. The Director of AOCS is Lieutenant Commander...."

"CANDIDATE!"

I jump to my feet. "Aye, aye Sir."

"WHENEVER SOMEONE ENTERS THE ROOM YOU WILL STAND AT ATTENTION AND SAY ATTENTION ON DECK. STAND BY. GOOD AFTERNOON, SIR. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME, CANDIDATE?"

"Attention on deck. STA.."

"CANDIDATE, I ASKED YOU A QUESTION! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?"

"Aye, aye Sir."

"THEN GREET ME, CANDIDATE!"

"Attention on deck. Standy by. Good Afternoon, Sir" I repeat.

"CANDIDATE, I'M WATCHING YOU. KEEP COPYING INTO YOUR POOPY GOUGE. DO NOT LOOK AT ME."

"Aye, aye Sir."

I go back to copying the binder but I can see him still standing at the door. It's intimidating with him staring right at me. I do my best to look like I'm copying another page but I keep staring right at his feet. I can't copy the gouge AND watch him when he walks into my room. He's moving his foot slowly over the threshold of the door without touching the ground. He's testing to see if I'll stand and greet him.

He starts whispering. "Keep writing candidate. Don't watch me. Use your peripheral vision." The tone of his voice scares the hell out of me. I think I like the yelling better. I can't help but think something bad is coming. He repeats the

command with the same voice. I wait until he finishes and then stand and take another chance at a greeting.

"Aye, aye Sir."

"CANDIDATE, DO NOT ADDRESS ANYONE WHO HAS NOT ENTERED YOUR ROOM." He's back to shouting at me.

"Aye, aye Sir."

"CANDIDATE, I HAVE **NOT** ENTERED YOUR ROOM. DO NOT ANSWER ME. KEEP WRITING AND DO NOT WATCH WHAT I AM DOING."

I'm getting confused. I keep acting like I'm writing but I'm staring at the doorway waiting for somebody to walk in. I begin to move my pen to make sure it looks like I'm copying information. I'm making big looping circles without touching the paper. How can I fail to greet him when I just watch for his feet? My only hope is that my ruse works and he can't tell I'm not writing anything.

An instructor walks down the hall and hesitates. I can see his shoes. I keep looping. He stands at my doorway for a few seconds before he leaves and walks down the hall. Up and down the halls I can hear instructors being greeted as they enter other rooms. I don't know what's worse -- someone walking in your room or listening as they enter the room next door and not knowing if they'll walk in my room next.

I hear a candidate in the next room making the same mistakes I made a minute ago. I laugh to myself but maybe that's not fair. He's having the hardest time getting the words right when he stands to greet an instructor. He's forced to keep standing up from his table and try it again and again and again. I can hear his chair scrape the floor when he stands up. Each time he finishes a greeting I can hear his hesitation and then the chair slides again as it starts over. He rushes through the greeting and misses something. First, he keeps saying 'Stand by' and skipping the 'Attention on deck.' When he finally got that right he says, 'Good morning.' Apparently time is a big issue at AOCS because the instructor raises his voice to a new level of excitement when he reminds the candidate it's the AFTERNOON. "MORNING is before noon." He makes the candidate repeat it several times before the hall becomes silent.

I look at the other book sitting at the middle of the tables but I still can't see the title. I wait until an instructor walks by my door knowing I'm probably OK for a second and I slowly move the book so I can read the title – "The Holy Bible." Why is that here? Not that I don't think a little religion could hurt me now -- I surely need the help but it seems strange to see it there.

I have never imagined that it would feel this intimidating to have someone yell at me. I have plenty of brothers and sisters so I know what it's like to take verbal taunting but this is far worse than anything I could ever imagine. I'm literally shaking from the fear of what is going to happen next.

Without warning a four-bar instructor enters my room. Since I entered the building I've seen mostly two-bars so this must be their boss. I push my chair away from the table with my calves and it moves just enough to allow me to stand. I greet him at the top of my lungs, "Attention on deck stand by. Good Afternoon, Sir."

The instructor stares at me for a few seconds. He scans the room and glances down at my notebook. I'm sure he can't possibly see what I'm writing from that distance. He moves his gaze back to my eyes and stares for a few more seconds before he finally responds, "CARRY ON, CANDIDATE."

"Aye, aye Sir." He turns and walks out of my room. What was that? What was he looking for? I must have passed since he left. I continue to copy out of the binder and wait for the other instructors to enter the room but I spend more time watching the door than copying. It's getting hot in the room. I wonder when someone else will be brought into the room? So far it's just me.

BAM! Oh my God. What was that?

BAM! I jump when it sounds.

BAM! It's rhythmic in its timing and it sounds like a wooden pole slamming into the hard linoleum floor. The worst part is that it sounds like it's moving slowly down the hall toward my room. I try to keep both eyes on the hall but it's hard. I stop copying. I can feel the pressure building in my eyes from straining to look ahead while I keep my head down waiting for someone to cross my threshold. I can feel sweat start to roll down my back and my arms glisten. With my jean jacket on it's getting hotter every minute.

BAM! The pain in my eyes mounts with each strike on the floor. My head aches from the strain. Sweat is rolling down my face and stinging my eyes. It's so hot I can't stand it. I don't dare wipe the sweat from my face. Having my jacket buttoned up to my chin in this heat is unbearable. I keep moving my pen as the sweat continues to run down my face. It's getting hard to see.

BAM! My heart is racing and I can feel it pounding in my chest. What is that noise? I can no longer hear anything else in the hall except that sound echoing off the walls. I have to struggle to stop myself from screaming. Every strike becomes louder and the sound pushes me to a new level of fear. My hands are trembling. I can feel that my legs are bouncing up and down under the table. Adrenaline is rushing through my body and I can't control my hands from shaking. I've never felt fear like this before. I can barely force air into my lungs. The fear is overwhelming and is growing.

BAM! Now it's getting very close. Whatever it is, it's just out of sight of my door. My eyes are straining to see what is making that sound. I can hear it swing down and strike the floor right in front of my door. What is it? Are they going to hit me? Can they do that? Can they actually beat me? If I ever get shot down the enemy would beat me. Is this some type of prisoner training? My first day and this is what happens? Mike never said anything about them actually beating me.

BAM! When it hits the hard floor it bounces and the sound echoes through the hall. I can see now that it is a stick. It hangs in mid-air and then falls but I can't see who's holding it. My heart is about to rip out of my chest. The sweat is continuing to run down the sides of my face. My eyes are riveted to the stick. I can't see its owner but I can't take my eyes off it. It's hanging about three feet off the floor and I wait for it to fall.

BAM! It's thicker than a broom handle and about four feet long. I can see the feet of the instructor as he holds the stick just off the floor as he moves slowly past my door. He's holding the stick right in front of my door. I can see it slowly raise and hang there. He's waiting for something.

BAM! I jump and the sound bounces inside my room. I can feel the sound move through me. There is no place for me to go. Should I get up? Should I defend myself? I have to do something. I'm having trouble sitting still. My whole

body is shaking. Just when it becomes unbearable, the instructor starts to whisper, "Keep writing, Candidate. Don't watch me."

How could I NOT watch him? The sweat is falling off my face and raining onto the table. In the emptiness of the room I can hear it hit the table. Splat. Splat. Splat.

BAM! I can no longer write in my notebook because the ink doesn't write through my sweat dropping on the page. The page I'm writing on has become a watery mess. I keep the pen moving at a good clip; I just want the stick to stop. Slowly he moves the stick across the entrance of the door. While he moves it he keeps staring right at me. He's good at this.

"Keep writing Candidate."

Stop it! My eyes feel like they might pop out of my head and roll across the table. I can feel my head pound from the strain of watching the stick. I'll do anything to get him to stop. Just tell me what you want! My heart continues to beat wildly. I'm being held on the starting line and I can't move. The pressure is building and building. The gun has gone off but I can't move. It has to stop. My legs are twitching for movement and my hands are shaking. The arms of my jacket are dark blue from the sweat pouring out of every pore in my body. The jeans jacket is completely stuck to my body. The rain continues on the table and my head hurts and I can see the stick is moving up again. It's coming again.

"Don't look at me, Candidate." His voice builds as he continues to speak and when he's now at full strength. "I SAID KEEP WRITING. USE YOUR PERIPHERAL VISION, CANDIDATE!"

BAM! The instructor slowly swirls the stick across the threshold of my door. Should I stand? I can see him but should I see him if I'm writing in my Poopy Gouge? I can't write through the wet pages so I continue my fake writing.

"You will address anyone who enters your room," he says teasingly. I like it better when he yells. He's back to whispering and it's completely breaking me down.

Now! I jump to my feet as my chair slides behind me, "Attention on deck. Stand by. Good afternoon, Sir." My eyes scan his gold bars and I counted three.

I'm breathing like I've just finished a sprint to the finish line. I'm staring right at the stick. It looks huge.

The instructor is holding the stick off the floor as he speaks, "Very good, Candidate. Now continue copying your gouge." He swings the stick towards the floor but stops right before it hits.

I still jump and it takes a second to respond, "Aye, aye, Sir." I push my chair back quickly and sit down. The instructor walks out of the room and continues his cadence with the stick. I'm so glad that's over. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. My heart begins to slow down and my eyes began to focus on the text. I'm physically drained but I passed. Whatever that was testing I passed since he left my room.

It's getting hotter and hotter in the room. I'm starting to close my eyes to keep the sweat from running in them. My eyes sting but I can't wipe my face for fear of an instructor seeing me. I make a quick turn around and see windows along the far wall but they're closed. It's an oven in this room.

Minutes pass and I haven't seen or heard an instructor. The stick is too far down the hall to be a threat anymore. Someone else has to deal with that. Things are starting to go wrong. I'm getting dizzy. I can't get a good breath of air. I stop moving my pen. I just have to relax. My vision is getting blurry and I began to think about limits. How long can I continue with this heat? What is my limit? Is this it? Something has to change. My eyes close and I begin to slow down. I'm straining to stay alert. I know I can't last through the day at this pace but can I go another ten minutes? Five minutes?

I'm going downhill fast. A new pain develops in the small of my back from holding myself upright without touching the back of my chair. I'm starting to struggle. What can I do? I have to keep going. I won't quit. My hand is making small circles near the table without touching my gouge. The sweat is dropping off my face. I can't continue to write in my Poopy Gouge. It feels like someone has poured a cup full of water over my head. I keep my eyes closed but the sweat continues to sting my eyes as it runs down my face. I've got to wipe this sweat. I open my eyes and look towards the door. I quickly drop my pen so I can use the sleeve of my jacket to wipe some of the sweat off my face; the coarse denim fabric

is scratchy. I pick up the pen; it feels so heavy. I realize I'm leaning to the right on my chair and I try to sit straighter.

Just out of the corner of my eye I see movement. I push my chair back but I know I'm moving half speed. I begin to respond. "Attention on deck..."

The instructor interrupts me, "Candidate, why is your coat on?" He looks nervous. Have I done something wrong?

"Aviation Officer Candidate Haffner of Class..."

"CANDIDATE, TAKE OFF THAT COAT! PUT IT IN YOUR LOCKER. DO IT NOW!"

He immediately walks out of the room without waiting for a response. He knows if he stayed I would make mistakes in the way I address him. I slowly walk over to my locker. I haven't stood up for over an hour and my legs ache. I'm moving like an old man going uphill. It takes a few tries but I finally manage to open the lock on my locker and take off my coat. My coat is dripping on the floor when I sling it off my shoulders and hang it on one of the hooks in the locker. I look at the floor and it looks like a sprinkler has been turned on. The floor is pocked with beads of sweat. I lock the door of my locker and I can immediately feel the cool air hit my arms and back. That feels good. I walk back to the desk and see sweat drops on the floor leading from the table to my locker. I sit down, turn to a dry page in my gouge, pick up my pen and go back to my gouge. I'm saved.

I spend most of the afternoon writing in my gouge. Every few minutes someone enters my room and makes sure I know how to greet them. Every other time they correct my stance or tell me to talk louder. One instructor tells me to move my balled hands back to the seams of my pants. I correct my position and he moves out. I'm still nervous but at least I don't feel like the center of attention. It's getting a little easier. The room feels cooler now that I'm not wearing my jacket. I can hear other candidates down the halls being berated just like me. At least they're making the same mistakes and getting the same treatment. All in all, I'm making it. I'm about halfway through copying my gouge from the binder.

I'm beginning to relax. I wait until I can't see any instructors in the hall and I look around the room. As I scan the room I can see the shadows growing longer across the floor. The windows on the back wall of the room show the sun is

beginning to move lower in the sky. The walls of the room are empty and I don't have on my watch so I've lost track of time. Without warning an instructor walks in my room. I stand and greet him but he doesn't respond or even look at me. Another candidate follows the Two Bar to the other side of the room. He's getting the same treatment that I did when I arrived. He's corrected for his stance and dropping trash on the ground. I stand there at attention and watch. I feel like a voyeur as he makes the same mistakes over and over. I know what he's going through but I can't do anything to help. From my perspective it looks like he's having trouble. He gets worked over pretty good. I am standing at attention and using my side vision to watch the other candidate. He can't get the greeting right and gets asked to repeat it. Was I that bad? It's a different experience watching it happen to someone else. I did better than he's doing. He keeps saying the wrong words or switching aye, aye with yes, sir. The instructor feeds off his mistakes and keeps after him. When it seems the candidate can't take any more abuse the instructor suddenly turns and walks out of the room. The candidate is sitting diagonally across the table from me and in the seat closest to the door. His face is red and puffy. He looks like hell. I pass him the blue binder without talking. I know I've copied enough and can begin memorizing the first section. He takes it and I can tell he's losing the fight. He looks like he just woke up. Do I look that bad?

Later in the afternoon, I'm working on my Poopy Gouge and Puffy Face is still sitting across from me at the tables. The instructor leads a candidate into the room and he takes the seat next to me. He seemed to have no trouble entering the room. He misses a few greetings but gets the hang of it after a few minutes and they leave him alone. He came in with the same kind of blue button shirt I'm wearing. He looks trim and his hair is cut military short. He already looks like a pilot. Mike warned me about getting my hair cut too short.

Whatever you do, "Don't stand out. Blend in and hide."

Blue Guy seems to be more in control than Puffy Face.

Puffy Face across from me is 25 pounds overweight and looks like he couldn't do a push-up if his life depended on it. He talks with a strong Southern accent that sounds strange to an Ohio-born candidate. When he does speak he is constantly

making mistakes. He has on a yellow t-shirt and tennis shoes. His hair is receding which adds to his lumbering personality. He won't last long here. You can see in his face that he's a short-timer. Just passing through.

The last candidate in the room comes in with only a few mistakes. He's trim but doesn't have the bulging shoulders of Blue Guy. He gets his lock out with dropping the paper and memorizes the combination the first time he's asked by the instructor. He has trouble with his aye, ayes and yes, sirs but so did I. He finishes arranging his locker and sits down next to Puffy Face while he copies his gouge. He's the Normal Guy. The instructors don't use our names when they speak to us. We're all candidates and they use the third person when referring to themselves.

It had been an hour since Normal Guy joined the room. Blue Guy keeps looking around the room and it makes me nervous. He finally settles down and starts copying his gouge. I'm scanning through the sweaty pages of my gouge when we hear a loud whistle pierce the relative quiet.

Immediately someone begins screaming, "FORM A SINGLE FILE LINE. EVERYONE OUT OF HIS ROOM. NOW! EVERYONE OUT OF HIS ROOM."

All at once we stand and slide our chairs back. I can feel a twinge in my legs from sitting. I move behind Blue Guy and follow him towards the door. I follow him right out of the room and start jogging down the hall. I turn around and see Normal Guy right behind us. Puffy isn't out of the door yet. Candidates are coming out of their rooms on both sides of the hall and inserting themselves into the line moving down the hall. We have to make a sharp turn at the end of the hall and continue to the left. As we make the turn we see the instructors at the end of the hall waiting.

"QUICKLY, CANDIDATES." There are four or five instructors standing at the top of the stairs when we reach the end of the hall. "LINE UP IN ONE ROW WITH YOUR BACKS TO THE BULKHEAD. QUICKLY. YOU'RE MOVING TOO SLOWLY CANDIDATES." We form a continuous line down the hall four inches from the bulkhead facing the other side of the empty hall. "LOOK STRAIGHT AHEAD. DON'T LOOK AT ME. LOOK STRAIGHT AHEAD," the instructors repeat as the line forms. I'm near the front of the line next to Blue Guy and we have to wait for the rest of the candidates to line up.

The highest-ranking instructor walks away from the other instructors and slowly walks along our line. He slowly inspects each candidate but doesn't say a word. He has five gleaming bars of gold on his lapel and he looks like he just walked right off the Top Gun movie set. He's very thin and he has his military length haircut shaved on the sides. The other instructors stop talking among themselves when he walks in front of the line of students. The only sound is our heavy breathing and the thud of his black leather shoes when he clicks his heels to the floor. He hesitates before beginning, "Candidates, I expect to see a straight line. Look at your feet and make sure you are in a straight line. Do it now!" His voice is calm and not yelling like the other instructors.

I turn and look at my feet. I shift to make sure the line is as straight as I can make it. "That's not a line. Look at this line on the floor." He motions to the floor but no one moves an inch. We can't follow his hand because we're supposed to keep looking straight ahead. The first thing we learned was not to look around. You always keep your eyes straight ahead.

"Candidates, when I want you to look at something I will point and you will respond with 'SNAP'. When you say 'SNAP' you will rotate your heads in unison and look at what I am pointing at. Do you understand?"

"AYE, AYE, SIR," rings out from the line. The sound of all of us responding in unison is deafening. I can hear the echo ringing down the hall when he begins.

"Candidates, Look here."

Loudly we respond with "SNAP," and turn our heads to look at the line on the floor. He is pointing to a yellow striped line running the length of the hall. The line is about 20 inches from the bulkhead.

"Candidates, when I say form a line you had better have your toes right behind that line. No one touches my line. Do you understand candidates?"

"AYE, AYE, SIR," we repeat.

He slowly continues his walk up and down the line. He stops about every fourth or fifth student and stares into a candidate's eyes. "GET YOUR FEET OFF OF MY LINE," he roars to a candidate next to me. He resorts to using same ear splitting levels as the other instructors and my blood pressure spikes. Slowly he continues to walk down the line and stops at another candidate farther down the

line, "YOU, TOO." I can see a candidate to my left jump and I check my feet again to make sure my feet form a single straight line down the hall.

He stops at one candidate towards the middle of the line and begins, "DON'T YOU LOOK AT ME. KEEP YOUR EYES FORWARD AT ALL TIMES. IF I STAND DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF YOU, YOU WILL LOOK RIGHT THROUGH ME. DON'T FOCUS ON MY EYES. LOOK RIGHT THROUGH ME. YOU WILL USE YOUR PERIPHERAL VISION TO KNOW IF I AM TALKING TO YOU. OTHERWISE, JUST STARE RIGHT AHEAD."

He pauses for effect and then continues, "CANDIDATES, IN TWO DAYS YOU WILL MEET YOUR DRILL INSTRUCTOR. HE IS NOT AS UNDERSTANDING AS YOUR CURRENT INSTRUCTORS. WHEN YOU MEET YOUR DRILL INSTRUCTOR, IT IS ASSUMED YOU ALREADY KNOW HOW TO MARCH AND HOW TO ADDRESS HIM. WE HAVE TWO MORE DAYS TO GET YOU READY. YOUR JOB IS TO LEARN AS MUCH AS YOU CAN IN THAT TIME. YOUR DRILL INSTRUCTOR IS GUNNERY SERGEANT JONES. GUNNERY SERGEANT JONES WILL NOT TOLERATE SOMEONE DOING SOMETHING WRONG." As he finishes he starts his inspection where he left off.

Using my peripheral vision I can see the Five Bar stop at a candidate. He stares for several seconds before he speaks, "STOP LOOKING AT ME. LOOK THROUGH ME." He starts to raise his voice as he starts in again, "YOU'RE STILL LOOKING AT ME. STOP IT! DON'T YOU KNOW HOW TO LOOK THROUGH ME? STOP LOOKING AT ME. IGNORE ME. JUST LISTEN AND STARE STRAIGHT AHEAD."

The Five Bar is near the end of the line and stops and spins on his heels and returns to the front of the class, stopping next to a Three Bar. He nods to him and immediately the three bar walks to the first candidate on my left and stops. He holds a stopwatch and makes a point of shaking his head when he speaks. "ONE MINUTE AND SEVENTEEN SECONDS. CANDIDATES, I AM DISAPPOINTED IN HOW LONG IT TOOK CLASS 2087 TO MAKE IT DOWN THE HALL AND FORM INTO A LINE. YOU NEED TO DO IT IN FORTY FIVE SECONDS. NOW WE WILL KEEP DOING THIS UNTIL YOU DO IT FORTY FIVE SECONDS. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"AYE, AYE, SIR," we shout in unison.

"NOW WHEN I GIVE THE ORDER YOU WILL ALL FALL OUT TO YOUR ROOMS AND AWAIT THE SIGNAL TO FORM A LINE. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"AYE, AYE, SIR."

"WHEN YOU RETURN YOU WILL ALL..." He stops his sentence and points at the yellow line, "CANDIDATES, LOOK HERE."

"SNAP!" we shout. I don't mind when the instructors yell while we're in a line. It seems easy to blend in and not get noticed. It's a change from having a one-on-one like when I got to my room.

"STOP AND PUT YOUR TOES DIRECTLY BEHIND THIS LINE. NOT ON TOP OF THE LINE. BEHIND THE LINE. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"AYE, AYE, SIR."

"YOU HAD BETTER ALL BE CARRYING YOUR POOPY GOUGES. YOU WILL NEVER LET IT OUT OF YOUR SIGHT." I move my left hand every so slightly and feel my back left pocket. I can feel the spine of the notebook so I know I'm OK even though I didn't remember putting it there. "CANDIDATES, RETURN TO YOUR ROOMS," he barks. We break the line and start moving towards our rooms.

The entire class starts walking down the hall and we're reminded, "CANDIDATES, THIS IS NOT A PARTY. RUN TO YOUR ROOMS!"

Before he finishes the sentence the line is on the run. There's a bottleneck as I round the turn and I have to walk a couple of steps before I can run the rest of the way. I turn around in the room and wait inside the doorway for the signal to go back down the hall.

For the next two minutes you could have heard a pin drop. Complete silence. We don't speak in the room. We're standing in a line just inside the door waiting for the signal. We know talking will only bring attention from the instructors and that is the last thing we want. I learned from my mother how to blend into a room and not be seen. It's a skill. I stand behind Blue Guy and in front of Puffy Face. I can feel his breath on my neck as I stand poised for the whistle. Normal Guy was back to the room first and he's going to lead us down the hall.

"WWWWWWWHHHHHHHHEEEEEEEE." The whistle pierces the silence and we move. "MOVE IT, MOVE IT. FORM A SINGLE LINE."

Before he can repeat the command Normal Guy is on the move. I follow Blue Guy and when we turn the corner out of our room I can see other candidates from

our class pouring out into the hall. It's complete chaos. I see two candidates crash into each other and both go down. It's every man for himself. I feel like a fullback avoiding tacklers as I dodge candidates and try to squeeze in front of them while we move down the narrow hall. The instructors continue to scream from around the corner. I sprint down the hall to where the instructors are standing. Running at full speed is difficult since the floor is slippery from a heavy wax coating. I join the line forming in front of the instructors. Not bad. I'm near the front next to Blue Guy again. I don't see Normal Buy so I assume he got stuck with Puffy Face near the end.

The Five Bar stands in front of the line with his stopwatch watching the seconds tick by. "QUICKLY, QUICKLY. FORM A SINGLE FILE LINE WITH YOUR BACKS TO THE BULKHEAD. TOO SLOW. MOVE FASTER."

I look at my feet to make sure I'm not touching the line. I can sense a few candidates farther down the line step back an inch or two to make sure they're behind the line. I move my hands to seams and stand at attention. I can see other candidates run past to join the growing line. The Five Bar walks to the front of the line. "SIXTY TWO SECONDS. TOO SLOW AGAIN. WE WILL KEEP DOING THIS UNTIL YOU MOVE FASTER. CANDIDATES, WHEN GUNNERY SERGEANT JONES GREETES YOU, YOU WILL BE SORRY IF YOU MOVE THIS SLOW FOR HIM. YOU WILL THINK THAT THIS WAS THE EASY PART. RETURN TO YOUR ROOMS. NOW!"

"AYE, AYE, SIR." The line starts moving .

When I get in the room and stand back in our line I hear someone and turn around. Puffy Face is leaning on his knees getting air. The air is heavy but it isn't that bad. He's out of shape and it shows. I'm lined up behind Blue Guy. Normal Guy lines up behind me while Puffy Face gets his nerves back together. I feel pretty good. I can do this for a while. A little sprint. Rest while they talk and then return to begin again. It's nothing like intervals in track. Of course, I never had a track coach scream at me to hurry up and form a line. I can still hear Puffy Face breathing.

WWWHHEEEEE! We move out of our rooms with the same chaos and assemble at the end of the hall. As I wait for the instructor to begin speaking, I find a small blemish in the paint on the other side of the hall and start staring at it.

It's the only way I can keep from looking at the instructor once he starts talking. If he starts correcting someone near me it's even harder not to look at him. I stare at the spot until I go cross-eyed. I blink and I'm right back to watching the spot. It's my visual cherry tomato and it seems to be working.

A Four Bar slowly examines the line and finds his first victim, "CANDIDATE, GET BACK OFF MY LINE."

"Aye, Aye, Sir," someone to my right yells. I notice that the small spot on the wall looks like a small rhino. I can see its little horn sticking out the front of its small irregular shaped body. It looks like he's walking slowly across a long grassy meadow toward his water hole. He looks so peaceful. For just a second I almost forget where....

The Four Bar stops at another student and barks, "KEEP THOSE EYES LOOKING STRAIGHT AHEAD, CANDIDATE. USE YOUR PERIPHERAL VISION. DO NOT LOOK AT ME. CANDIDATES, I MUST INFORM YOU THAT TIME YOU LINED UP IN A RECORD OF FIFTY EIGHT SECONDS. STILL TOO SLOW. WE WILL KEEP DOING THIS UNTIL." He stops himself, "STOP LOOKING AT ME, CANDIDATE."

It sounds easy but when an instructor is talking and walking right in front of me my reaction is to follow him with my eyes. Of course they're waiting for it and immediately react. Some of my classmates seem to have a big problem with wandering eyes. As long as I can find a spot on the wall on the other side of the hall I'll be OK.

Mike told me to adapt. Find a way. "The instructors and drill instructors will make your life miserable. You have to make your way past anything they ask you to do."

As his words finish, the 5-bar yells, "EVERYONE BACK TO THEIR ROOMS. WE WILL TRY IT AGAIN. MOVE IT."

We make our way back down the hall. This time some candidates are starting to move slower. I'm pacing myself. Through my races I've learned how to conserve energy for when it's needed most. Running back to the room is rest. The real race is when we have to move towards the line. As we round the corner into the room the whistle sounds again. We're not even in our line when the whistle starts. Here we go.

“MOVE IT! MOVE IT! THIS IS THE SLOWEST CLASS I HAVE EVER SEEN. CANDIDATES, YOU MUST MOVE FASTER. QUICKLY.”

This time with renewed energy I go full out to contribute to the class beating the time. I don't see the same amount of traffic that I encounter the last time down the hall. I pass a few candidates when I make the turn and continue at full speed and stopping when I reach the yellow line. I'm fourth in line. As each candidate joins the growing line they look at their feet to make sure they aren't touching the precious line. “NOT BAD. FIFTY FIVE SECONDS. JUST TEN SECONDS TO GO,” the instructor comments when the last candidate stops moving. I still have something left. I can easily drop a couple more seconds when I return to the line for the next rotation. I move my eyes to the wall scanning for a new shape to study. I have to wait for the return to our rooms.

A Three Bar stands in the background behind the Four Bar right in front of me. When I strain my vision I can just make out that he is looking at his watch. “Look at the time. We had better get them to chow.” I can hear him talking but I keep my eyes on a new spot I found on the wall. It looks like a small amoeba fighting its way off a petri dish. It's fighting with all the other amoeba to get to the edge of the small plastic dish but they're blocking his path. Before he can finish his fight my concentration is broken.

The Four Bar answers the Three Bar by looking at his watch and switching gears, “CANDIDATES, WE WILL NOW MAKE OUR WAY TO GET SOME CHOW. THERE WILL BE NO TALKING IN THE LINE. YOU WILL ALL WALK IN TWO COLUMNS BEHIND ME. YOU WILL WALK QUICKLY SO WE CAN MAKE IT TO CHOW BEFORE IT CLOSES. CANDIDATES, ON THE STEPS YOU WILL TOUCH EACH STEP AND YOU WILL KEEP ONE HAND ON THE HANDRAIL THE ENTIRE TIME YOU ARE ON THE STEPS. FOLLOW ME.”

As he moves towards the set of stairs he stops, turns around and faces the class before we begin a response. The class freezes and waits for him to speak, “CANDIDATES, WHEN WE WALK WE WILL ALL CLICK OUR HEELS ON THE FLOOR AT THE SAME TIME. THE LEADER IN THE LINE WILL SET THE CADENCE. ALL THOSE IN THE GROUP WILL START WITH THEIR RIGHT FOOT AND FOLLOW THE PERSON IN FRONT OF YOU. WHEN THE LEADER'S HEEL HITS THE FLOOR YOU HAD BETTER

MAKE SURE YOUR HEEL IS HITTING THE FLOOR. I WANT TO ONLY HEAR ONE SET OF HEELS HIT THE FLOOR. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"AYE, AYE, SIR."

We follow the instructors down the steps and exit out the back of the building. We click our heels as we descend the final set of stairs to the sidewalk. We walk in two columns down the sidewalk towards the chow hall. With the movement down the stairs I'm now second position in the left column and it makes me nervous. I'm marching six feet from the Four Bar leading this expedition. His arms and legs move with precision and discipline. Watching him march makes me realize that I have a long way to go before I graduate from AOCS. There is no way I look like that. He's a machine. The next fourteen weeks are going to mean some big changes for me.

The Three Bar and the rest of the Two Bars march around the class while we march and are constantly correcting a candidate's hand swing or his heel snap. We move at a turtle's pace towards the chow hall. "RIGHT. LEFT. RIGHT. LEFT." The Four Bar walks in front and to the left of the first column calling the cadence. "RIGHT. LEFT." When he announces RIGHT the class lifts their right foot and clicks our heel to the ground. It's rhythmic but for the first few steps it's hard to keep the Four Bar's exact cadence. I find myself wanting to walk faster. Before long I slow down and I'm now walking as part of the team. We sound like a wild herd of elephants crossing the plains onto the next watering hole. Every second a big boom sounds as our heels hit the ground. I quickly learn that if I just keep a clear mind I have no trouble marching. If I think about it too much I make mistakes and raise the wrong foot or I swing my arm instead of my foot. I take a second to get back in rhythm and keep going. The first few seconds the instructors don't notice so I try to blend in and keep moving. I force myself to erase any thoughts from mind and go back to marching without thinking. Before we get a block I'm moving with the column and enjoying the break in the normal routine. The instructors correct candidate's stance or posture in a whisper and don't use their inside voices once we start marching outside.

"Candidates, do you know how to march? Keep swinging your arms. The opposite arm from the lead foot is swinging at your side. When walking you will

scrape your inseam with your clenched fist. The heel strikes first when you march. I expect to hear one step when the class marches. Keep in time.”

We cover the short distance to the chow hall. I’m hoping we can relax and talk to each other while we eat. Up to this point the closest I’ve come to talking is a quick glance when I walk by a roommate or catch someone’s glance when they’re running down the hall next to me.

“CANDIDATES, HALT!” We stop just outside the chow hall and wait for the next instruction. The Four Bar lowers his voice and continues, “Candidates until you meet your Drill Instructor you will not eat in the Candidate’s chow hall. The Candidate’s Chow hall is for candidates who have been qualified for AOCS. You will not be qualified for AOCS until the initial physical testing is complete and you visit NAMI for your flight physicals.” He speaks quickly and with precision. “You will eat in the Enlisted Chow hall and obey all posted rules as they are explained to you. You will not talk to anyone. You will not look at anyone. You will step up to the counter, present your tray and your tray will be filled with your meal. You will not say anything. You will not answer any questions. You will not make comments. You will eat all the food you are given. After receiving your food you will slide to the right. You will not cross your feet. You will keep your elbows at your side and hold your tray at a 90-degree angle. After you receive your food, you will move to the drink station. You will each get two glasses of water, not juice or milk, and you will then proceed to a table. You will remain completely silent in the chow hall. Now move.” Before anyone can respond he turns and opens the door. The Four Bar addresses the first candidate in front of me, “You will hold the door for your classmates and be the last candidate to receive your meal. Take the handle.” The candidate grabs the handle of the door and steps behind the door without responding.

I’m NOW FIRST in line. Bad. Bad. Bad. I’m not blending in. I follow the instructor to the far end of the chow hall. All the people eating in the chow hall turn and face the class. There are 15 to 20 people sitting around the long rectangular tables. Several of them start laughing but most of the room goes back to talking to the others at their table. They don’t seem impressed to see us. As I get near the line an enlisted seaman sitting at a table with other enlisted seamen

stand and jump in front of me to get in line. I have to stop to let him walk in front of me.

The instructor looks at me as I pass him and says, "You're first, grab a tray and join the line." As I walk by and grab a tray he quietly starts repeating the instructions, "No talking. No looking around. Move quickly without making a sound. Get your food and proceed to a table..." His voice trails off as I keep moving down the line away from him.

The chow line reminds me of the cafeteria line at Berea High School with its single line filing past the stainless steel display cases filled with hot food that send swirling clouds of steam into the air. I'm standing directly behind an enlisted seaman moving through the line. He's dressed in his blue work shirt and is wearing hideous blue bell-bottoms with black work boots. He turns around as I step behind him and he looks right at me. As he scans me up and down he starts to laugh.

What's this guy's problem? I put my tray on the top counter and the food worker drops the ravioli in the center slot and drops a single piece of dry, white bread on the side. I slide my feet and my arms are locked at a right angle. As I move, the seaman looks back at me and again shakes his head.

I turn around to see if the instructors are watching the seaman in front of me. As soon as I scan the far end of the hall I immediately meet the glare of one of the instructors across the room.

I can read his mind and he's telling me to turn around and keep shuffling. I say a silent prayer he doesn't come over here as I continue to follow the seaman with my tray held at 90-degrees. The seaman keeps turning around and making that same stupid laugh. I want to punch him in the face. I'm sure any second an instructor will come up here and tell this guy to stop it. He's driving me crazy. I keep staring at him knowing something is going to happen.

He turns around a third time and says, "Hey, asshole. That looks like fun? Are you having fun?"

I wanted to take him out. Something to make him stop. Just wait until I get my wings and pass you in the hall. Who will salute whom?' Instead of talking to him, I just look at him and try to act like I don't hear him. Maybe this is a test?

I receive a fruit cup at the next station and continue down the line as the seaman turns around again, "Still back there jackass?" he says with that sarcastic grin. I can feel my blood begin to boil. Where are the instructors? Surely they can see a fight is about to break out.

With all the pressure of being here this is taking me to the brink. I'm so mad my arms are shaking but I desperately tell myself to just calm down. My hands are clutching the tray so tight my knuckles are turning pale white. I can feel the sweat start to slide down my face. Just when it gets unbearable I hear this little voice in my left ear.

"Don't turn around. Don't address that person in front of you. Keep moving, Candidate. You will not talk to anyone. You will not look at anyone." I can see just out of the corner of my eye that it's a Two Bar. He's whispering to me as the seaman is turning around and laughing. Surely, he can see the seaman. It must be a test. I know the instructor can hear this guy. He's mocking the whole class. He's mocking AOCS. Let me do something, I'll make him stop.

When the instructor walks away, the seaman continues his assault, "Kissing ass already. That is all you officers do is kiss ass. You look like a complete jackass." As I turn and head towards the drink station he stays right in front of me. I'm about to break my tray over his head. I can't stand it. The seaman picks up a small glass and adds some ice before filling it with Coke. I pull out a glass from the green restaurant-style plastic rack and pour water from the metal pitcher sweating on the counter. I fill both of my glasses and turn away from the seaman.

I'm finally away from that idiot. I take a deep breath as I walk away. I guess I passed that test. The instructors are standing around some empty tables in the corner and motion for me to head over there. As I walk by the seaman I can hear him laughing with the other people at his table. It takes all of my patience not to say something. At least I'm going to be an officer. Maybe I'll make him push a mop for a few hours when I graduate. I make a mental note to look for him later. Maybe he can wash my plane? Can I make him do that?

I reach the empty table in the corner and stand behind the first empty chair. A Two Bar walks over and whispers to me, "Stand at attention, Candidate."

After a few seconds the table starts to fill up with other candidates that were behind me in the line. The instructor whispers his instructions to the entire table. "Put your water glass on the top right of the tray. Any other glasses go the right next to the water glasses. The salad bowl goes to the bottom left of the tray. The plate is centered on the tray with the front touching the front of the tray. A coffee cup with saucer goes on the right of the tray touching the front of the tray. The fork goes on the left and is touching the plate."

As he speaks he begins to circle the table without stopping, "The knife goes on the right with the spoon immediately to the right of the knife. All silverware is touching the plate. Everything is grounded. Nothing is hanging."

As he speaks all the candidates at my table are moving the items on the plate in accordance with his instructions. I can hear the clanging as we keep up with his instructions. He continues, "When you've finished your meal, you will place your knife at the top of your plate crossing the plate. Your fork will lie just below the knife on your plate. This is the only time it will be explained. The next time you had better do it right Candidates."

The instructor stops at the candidate next to me, "Candidate, secure your silverware." The candidate moves his silverware to make sure it's touching his plate.

As he arrives back at the head of the table he starts again, "When you arrive at the table you will adjust the chair to your right for the next candidate. You will slide his chair a foot from the table. You will secure your tray and return to attention. When the last candidate at the table takes his chair he will respond, 'Seat.' You will take your seats together and sit at attention with your chest touching the table. Your feet will be at a 90-degree angle with both feet touching the floor. The last candidate will then say, 'Adjust.' You will make sure your tray, plates, and utensils are properly grounded and await the next command. He will then say, 'Pray.' If desired, you will bow your head and make an appropriate prayer. He will then respond with, 'Eat.' The instructor is speaking quietly and I have to strain to make sure I hear everything he's saying. "Then and only then will you begin eating. You will not speak. You will not look around. You will eat everything on your plate. You will not throw food away. Your plate will be checked

when you get ready to leave so your plate had better be clean. Eat Candidates.” He speaks without notes. Did he memorize all that on the way here? He steps back from the table and moves to the next one.

The class eats quietly. Only the occasional sound of a glass hitting the sound of a plate breaks the silence. Everyone turns to face the candidate who makes the sound but no one speaks. A candidate at the far end of the table starts looking around. I assume he’s looking around but I can’t see him well since I’m looking straight down into my plate. An instructor walks to the far end of the table and whispers for the table to hear, “Keep all eyes forward. No one is to look around and you are to remain totally silent.” I just keep eating without looking up.

While I eat my food my mind is rushing through what’s in store next. Will we work on how long it takes us to from a line at the end of the hall? Will we spend another few hours copying gouge? I keep trying to work through the scenarios in my head.

As Two Bar returns to our table and begins his commands, “When you finish your meal take out your Poopy Gouge and start memorizing. You only have a week to memorize it all so get started.” He then moves to the next table to give the same instruction.

Once I finish eating I reach for my Poopy Gouge. I’m trying to study Navy uniform insignias when the Two Bar returns to my table. “Candidates all stand.” I return my Poopy Gouge to my pocket and stand behind my chair. I move my chair back to its position touching the table and stand at attention. “Candidates pick up your trays and follow me.” I quickly pick up my tray and join the line that’s forming to return the trays.

As I move to the exit I pass an instructor standing next to a trash can. Watching the candidate in front of me I mimic what he does. I overturn my tray in front of the instructor and he nods as I walk over and set my tray on the dishwasher conveyor belt. When we walk outside the Three Bar is back to screaming at ear splitting levels, “CANDIDATES, LINE UP. QUICKLY! QUICKLY! LINE UP.” I rush to join the double column forming in front of the instructors.

“NOW CANDIDATES WE WILL MARCH BACK TO THE BARRACKS. THERE WILL BE NO TALKING ON THE WAY. READY... MOVE.”

We march back to the barracks and it feels good to be outside. My back is still stiff from sitting so straight up in my chair. I feel lucky that I'm in the middle of the column so I know my mistakes won't attract any attention. As we keep moving I feel a new pain start in my heels. My heels are beginning to ache from pounding them with each step. I grimace from the sting but keep moving.

When we arrive back at the barracks we're told to keep copying our Poopy Gouge and then we're quickly returned to our rooms. Every few minutes a Two or Three Bar walks into the room. After being greeted the instructor walks around the room and makes sure we're still working on our gouge. They inevitably find a reason to harass Puffy Face while the rest of the room stands at attention. Puffy continues to make mistake after mistake. It's no problem for me if he makes mistakes. His mistakes means less attention directed towards me from the instructors. The weeding out has started.

We go back to copying gouge and an hour later a Two Bar announces that we're making a "head call" (Military talk for a bathroom break). "CANDIDATES, YOU WILL RETURN TO YOUR ROOMS AND RETRIEVE YOUR SHOWER ITEMS. YOU WILL THEN HAVE SEVEN MINUTES IN THE HEAD TO SHOWER, BRUSH YOUR TEETH AND RETURN TO YOUR ROOMS. YOU HAD BETTER NOT BE LATE. READY MOVE."

We make a mad dash to our rooms. I fumble with my locker combination before I retrieve my white towels, soap, and shaving kit. I run down the hall towards the head. As soon as I turn the corner, the instructors starts, "HURRY. YOU HAVE USED ONE MINUTE AND YOU ARE NOT IN THE HEAD YET. HURRY. YOU ONLY HAVE SIX MINUTES LEFT. THIS IS THE SLOWEST CLASS I HAD EVER SEEN. DRILL INSTRUCTOR JONES IS NOT GOING TO BE PATIENT. YOU ARE MUCH TOO SLOW."

I push open the door to the head and there are candidates right inside the door. As soon as I enter I find a clear spot on the floor I strip off my clothes and they fall to a heap at my feet. I scan the shower lines and make a quick decision what I will have the best chance of accomplishing; a shower or just a shave and a quick brush of my teeth.

I look again at the shower room and a line is already forming behind each spigot. My best shot is to try for an open sink so I turn and go back to the sinks. I get the last free sink and set my toothbrush down on the edge. I quickly brush my teeth. I know I don't have time to shave with shaving cream so I begin to shave only using water. The cold water feels good on my face but it hurts as the razor blade scrapes across my cheek. I don't have time to slow down and keep going. The instructors have repeated to us to make sure we're clean-shaven at all times. They tell us if we have a five o'clock shadow to shave twice a day. I decide when they said that that I'll get in the habit of shaving at night and save the two minutes I'd have to spend in the morning. I can feel the blade scrape across my skin and I see the blood starting to run down my neck. I rub some water on my face to try to stop the sting but it makes it hurt even more.

Through the muffled door I can hear the taunts from the instructors whenever a student goes by. Some of my classmates are finishing and going back into the hall but getting assaulted.

HURRY!! HURRY!!

I jump every time the door opens because their voices echo off the white porcelain walls and sound louder. I take a deep breath and once more splash water on my face. A shower would be great but I don't have the time. I grab my shaving kit off the sink and another student takes my spot. I go back to the spot on the floor where my clothes lay and look back at the shower line. Too long. I give up and head for the door. As I open the door, I'm greeted with, "GET TO YOUR ROOM, CANDIDATES. TIME IS RUNNING OUT. YOU HAVE USED FIVE AND A HALF MINUTES. MOVE IT!"

Without thinking I touch my neck to see if the blood is still there. Before I can look at my hand I get an immediate response. "CANDIDATE, DID YOU TOUCH YOUR FACE?"

I stop and throw myself against the bulkhead. My hands find their own way to the seam on my jeans and I grab the fabric. The instructor leans toward me to make his point.

"NEVER TOUCH YOUR FACE IN FRONT OF ME, CANDIDATE. YOU WILL KEEP YOUR HANDS AT YOUR SIDES WHILE YOU ARE BEING ADDRESSED. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"Aye, aye, Sir." I'm standing at attention and the instructor just watches me. The silence is awkward and I'm not sure if I should start moving or just wait for him to say something. I hesitate. He keeps staring.

"CARRY ON, CANDIDATE." Before he finishes the command he turns and walks back towards the head door.

"Aye, aye, Sir." I turn and start to sprint back towards my room.

I'm the first into the room. I go to my locker and return my shaving kit and dry towel to the shelf. I wipe my towel on my neck and I see flecks of blood on it. It stings and I'm sure I look like a mess but I didn't want to be late out of the head. Better to come out somewhere in the middle of the class where I can blend in. I really wanted to take a shower. I spent most of the day copying out of the binders and I was looking forward to a shower. I figured it's better to try again in the morning than to risk missing the time cutoff. I go back to my chair and open the binder and keep copying my gouge. At least now I don't have to worry about someone else needing the binder. Before time ends Blue Guy, Puffy Face and Normal Guy run back into the room almost at the same time and return to their seats. Down the hall I can hear the last candidates leaving the head with the instructors in pursuit.

"YOU'RE LATE, CANDIDATE. TOO MUCH TIME! DO YOU KNOW HOW LONG SEVEN MINUTES IS? MOVE IT TO YOUR ROOM, NOW."

I'm back at my familiar seat facing the door. I start to copy the next section when I hear footsteps down the hall. Big, loud footsteps of someone walking down the hall. Someone wants to be heard.

I hear an instructor walk into a room barking orders. "STAND UP STRAIGHT. DON'T LOOK AT ME, CANDIDATE. PUT YOUR HANDS DOWN AT YOUR SIDES." Someone is getting some attention down the hall. The sweat running down my neck burns; the scrapes on my neck hurt even more but I don't dare touch them. That mistake I'll make only once.

I'm still copying gouge and keeping one eye on the doorway. I write a few words and then check the door. I find my place in the binder and write another few words. It's painstakingly slow but I have to be prepared for the instructors to walk into the room at any second. I keep switching between copying gouge and watching the door.

An instructor makes the turn into our room. He walks hurriedly and didn't pound his heels in the halls so I didn't hear him coming. I push my chair back and start, "Attention on deck... Stand by..." .

The other candidates join in with, "Good evening, Sir."

The Two Bar walks up to Blue Guy's bunk and points at the bed covers.

"Snap." We simultaneously move our gaze to the rack.

"Candidates, gather around. We're going to go over the proper way to make a rack."

He sounds normal, meaning that he isn't yelling every sentence. We've seen plenty of two bars today but only one four and one five bar. They are the class leaders. Most of our time we've spent with the Two and Three Bars when we line up at the end of the hall or for the walk to chow.

The Two Bar in our room spends the next fifteen minutes going over how to make the rack. I finally find out the purpose of the Bible in the middle of the table. The Bible is used to measure the distance to fold down the sheet over the blanket at the front of the bed. It has to be an exactly five-inch fold which is conveniently the width of the Bible.

The instructor picks up the Bible on the table and demonstrates how to check the fold to make sure it's square. When he finishes making the rack he has the corners squared and has an exact five-inch fold at the top. We ask a few questions about the fold and how to square the blankets. He explains the process in detail and then finishes by telling us that if we had any other questions we can check our binders because it's covered in there. He seems in a hurry when he spins on his heels and left the room.

After the instructor leaves we go back to copying our gouge. Within a few minutes we've let our guards down a bit and we're starting to relax. It's peaceful in the halls. We can't hear any instructors.

“WWWWWWWHHHHHHHHEEEEEEE.” What is that? We’re not sure what to do. After a few seconds we can hear the other candidates and realize we should be leaving our room.

Since we’re all the same distance from the door we have a traffic jam getting through the doorway. At least three of us do. Blue Guy is usually first since he always has a jump on Normal Guy and then being a step behind him I usually run into Normal Guy trying to get out. Puffy Face is always last out of the door.

When we reach the end of the hall there’s a Three Bar waiting for us. “CANDIDATES, YOU HAVE PASSED YOUR FIRST DAY. YOU WILL RETURN TO YOUR ROOMS. YOU WILL CHANGE INTO THE SHORTS YOU WERE ISSUED WHEN YOU ARRIVED. YOU WILL CLOSE THE DOORS UNTIL JUST YOUR FIST WILL FIT THROUGH THE OPENING. YOU WILL THEN GO TO BED. WAKE UP CALL IS AT 05:30 SO I SUGGEST YOU GET SOME SLEEP. YOU ARE NOT TO LEAVE YOUR ROOMS AT NIGHT. IF YOU NEED TO USE THE HEAD YOU WILL MOVE DOWN THE HALL AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE WITHOUT RUNNING. YOU WILL THEN RETURN TO YOUR ROOM. THERE WILL BE NO TALKING AND NO LIGHTS. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?”

“Aye, Aye, Sir,” we shout.

“TOMORROW WILL BE A BUSY DAY. THE REMAINDER OF THE CANDIDATES WILL BE ARRIVING IN THE MORNING AND WE WILL BE TAKING YOU THROUGH THE INITIAL PHYSICAL TESTS IN THE AFTERNOON. YOU HAD BETTER GET YOUR REST. YOU WILL NEED IT. GOOD NIGHT, CANDIDATES.”

He hesitates before scanning the line and then finishing his thought. “NOW MOVE!”

“AYE, AYE, SIR,” we respond and start the rush for our rooms.

I retrace my steps back down the hall. Puffy Face is the last one in the door and puts his fist in the door to make sure he has it closed the right distance. I change into my shorts. When I take off my shirt I see that the collar has dried blood from my neck. I’m constantly sweating so my neck feels sore from my buttoned collar constantly rubbing against the cuts. I hang up the shirt and fall down on top of my rack. I figure it makes more sense to sleep on the blanket and make it easier for me to make my rack in the morning. During the demonstration it

was explained that the instructors will be making a room inspection the next morning so I want to make sure I make my bed correctly.

Blue Guy turns off the lights. The sun is just starting to set on the horizon and the air is still sticky and hot. I lay down on the bed and my mind is still racing. I'm rethinking the day's events. It's a lifetime ago that I walked up the steps leading into the barracks. I comfort myself with the thought that I have been through some of the worst. I'm becoming more comfortable with everything now. I've learned how to properly greet instructors entering or exiting the room. I've learned how to march. I've been through a meal and knew what to expect in the chow hall. Hopefully that one seaman doesn't eat there very day. I'll have to make sure I'm not near the front of the line for dinner tomorrow.

My mind keeps racing and I can't slow it down. Everything is flying by at a mile a second. How to march and not trip on the curbs. How to make my bed with tight corners. What's left in my gouge that I have to copy? What is the Bible for again? What is the combination for my locker? Did I save it or throw away the little piece of paper with the combination? What are the names of the other candidates in my room? Was that someone coming down the hall? How will I do on the obstacle course? How many push-ups is the minimum I have to do? Did someone just walk by the door? Do I have to swim for the initial test? What is the minimum time for the obstacle course? Was that a hand in the doorway? How am I supposed to greet instructors? Am I screwing this all up? Did someone just walk down the hall again? It goes like that most of the night. I sleep for a few minutes at a time but I keep waking up thinking the door is being opened.

I awake sometime in the middle of the night. I feel like I'm being watched. I scan the door and I see someone standing in the shadow. Am I supposed to address him? Is that just another candidate making a head call? Is that an instructor checking on us? My heart is pounding and I can hardly breathe. I stare at that door for the next few minutes and wait for something to happen. Maybe the instructors will get us up to march around the parade grounds (they usually do that in the movies). It's a while before I drift off to sleep. A short time later, the same thing happens. A few minutes of sleep punctuated with fifteen minutes of complete terror.