

# The Search for Platoon 1005

## I

We were all silent as the bus pulled up to the gate lit only by a few small spotlights. It was almost midnight, June 17, 1966. A dozen or so of us had started out that morning from Philadelphia. We'd picked up a few more when we'd changed planes in Washington, D.C. And a few more when we'd arrived in Charleston, South Carolina, and transferred to the bus. Along the way, there'd been new friends made, strained camaraderie, talk of home and girlfriends and ambitions. But as the last miles of the journey rolled away beneath a shadowy arch of Spanish moss, the bus had carried each man ever deeper into his own thoughts. There was no conversation now, no sound but the mechanical grate and whine of the bus itself. Nervous anticipation — fear of the unknown — turned tongues wooden. I could see gold letters on a red brick wall illuminated by a spotlight: “Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, South Carolina.”

A uniformed guard waved the bus through. Soon it rolled up to the only lighted building on the sleeping base and stopped. A lone figure in a khaki uniform and dark brown Smokey the Bear hat strode through the glare of a spotlight shining down from the side of the building. The bus

driver opened the door, and the lone figure stepped onto the bus, causing the bus to list noticeably to the right. He was eight and a half feet tall. And he was ugly. He blocked the huge windshield of the bus completely. His chest strained at the buttons of his shirt, so that they seemed about to fly off at any moment like buckshot from a scattergun. Standing there with his hands on his hips, he looked like a cross between Paul Bunyan, Babe the Blue Ox, and Godzilla. Then he opened his mouth, and out came the Voice of God.

“There’s four columns of yellow footprints painted on the deck in front of those steps over there,” roared the DI, jerking a thumb the size of a fire hydrant in the general direction of the lighted barracks. “When I give the word, you filthy pigs have three seconds to get outta this bus and plant yourself on one of those sets of yellow footprints. I don’t wanna see nothin’ but assholes and elbows flyin’. You will not talk. You will not eye-fuck the area. You will keep your head and eyes front at all times. You will do everything you’re told instantly, and you will do nothing else. I’ll kill the first cocksucker that fucks it up. You scuzzy shitbirds are *mine*, ladies! And I don’t like you. Now, MOVE! *Do it! Do it!*”

The walls of the bus collapsed inward. One moment I was sitting on the bus getting my eardrums pummeled. The next moment I was standing on a set of yellow footprints. I don’t know how I got from one place to the other, but the footprints were painted so close together that my face and body were smashed up tight against the guy in front of me, the guy behind me was smashed up tight against me, and we were all rubbing shoulders with the columns on either side of us—a formation we would soon come to know as “asshole to belly button.”

I’d volunteered for the Marine Corps, and I knew Marine boot camp was supposed to be tough, but this wasn’t at all what I’d had in mind. Wedged into the midst of that lump of bodies congealing in the hot southern night, with the Voice of God still pounding in my ears and my heart banging away at double quick time, I suddenly wanted to be anywhere but here. An overpowering sense of panic welled up inside of me. I wanted to throw up. I wanted to cry. I remember thinking, “Mommy. Please take me home, Mommy. I won’t be bad anymore.”

It was the last clear thought I would have for days. Again the Voice roared, “Get in the building!” Three or four more identical copies of Godzilla the Blue Bunyan materialized out of nowhere, all of them shouting, “Get in the building! Get in the building! Line up in front of the tables! Double time! Get in the building!” We began to surge forward

frantically in one roiling mass, bodies in back climbing over the ones in front of them like stampeding cattle, stumbling and falling and crawling on hands and knees and getting up and falling again.

Inside, naked lightbulbs glared bright white above two long rows of tables. “Face the tables! Eyes front! Stand at attention! Chin in! Chest out! Thumbs along the trouser seams! Don’t move! Don’t move!” Drill instructors were everywhere, shouting in recruits’ faces at distances ranging from three to six inches: “Keep your head and eyes front, piggy! Don’t even breathe, piggy! What’re you lookin’ at, sweetpea?! You eye-fuckin’ me, sweetpea?! You wanna fuck me, scum?! ’Zat it, shitbag?! You queer, piggy?! Fuck the deck, piggy! Down, piggy, hit the deck! Push-ups! One! Two! Three! Four! Lemme hear you squeal, piggy! *Squeal*, goddamn you!!” They had steel forge bellows for lungs.

“Empty your pockets onto the tables, wormies! Empty your ditty-bags onto the tables, wormies! Empty your wallets onto the tables, piggies! Put your wallets into the green bag in front of you! Put your money, jewelry, legal identification, draft card, driver’s license into the green bag in front of you! No photographs! Nothing else! Is this your sweetheart, piggy? *Answer me*, shithead!”

“Yes.”

“*Yes, sir*, you filthy scumbag!”

“Yes, sir.”

“I can’t hear you!”

“Yessir!”

“Louder!”

“YES, SIR!”

“She looks like a whore, puke.”

Nothing.

“I said she looks like a whore!”

“No, sir.”

“You callin’ me a liar?!”

“No, sir.”

“I can’t hear you, piggy!”

“NO, SIR!”

“She looks like a whore!”

“YES, SIR!”

“She’s probably fucking your father right now.”

“YES, SIR!”

“Who do you think your mother’s fucking?”

Nothing.

“You better answer me, you ape! I’ll break your black ass a dozen ways to Sunday!”

In the meantime, everything else on the tables got swept into huge trash barrels by several volunteers: “Anybody here drive a truck?”—and the truck drivers were given big push brooms and ordered to clear the tables: spare clothes, soap, toothbrushes, photographs, combs, electric razors, aftershave, shampoo, books, everything disappeared into the trash barrels.

Then a DI with stripes all **up** and down his arms got up on the table and started pacing. “You boys wanna be Marines,” he began in something very like a normal voice. “We didn’t ask you to be Marines; you came to us. It isn’t easy to make a Marine because Marines are the best there is. You’re going to hate it here. You’re probably going to wish you were dead. But most of you won’t die—unless you try to run. This is Parris Island. It’s called an island because it is an island. It’s surrounded by swamps, and the swamps are filled with poisonous snakes. The snakes work for the Marine Corps. The causeway you came in on is guarded day and night, so you can’t get out that way. If you get through the swamps, you have to swim a two-mile channel against some of the strongest currents in the world. And if you don’t drown, the MPs will be waiting to pick you **up** when you get to the mainland. And they’ll bring you back, and you’ll go to the brig for six months, and then you’ll begin training all over again. Don’t try to run. The easiest way to leave this island is to march out the front gate on graduation day. Do as you’re told, do your best, and you might make it.”

The moment he finished talking, the decibel level shot back up to 232: “All right, hoggies, time to shear the sheep! Bleat, bleat, little sheep. *I said bleat!*” We all began to bleat. “Louder!” We bleated louder. The DIs were everywhere, a flurry of motion you could just catch from the corners of your eyes—you didn’t dare look right or left or up or down or anywhere but straight ahead. Anybody who did got nailed instantly, two or three DIs descending upon him like avenging angels, hounding him into jello.

“Double time! Double time! Through the hatchway—not *that* hatchway, you goddamned stupid gorilla! Column of twos! Asshole to belly button! Line up on the yellow footprints!” There were yellow footprints painted all over Parris Island. Several barber chairs and several sleepy barbers waited for **us** at the end of this particular set of yellow foot-

prints. Each haircut took about twelve seconds: zip, zip, and your skull was as smooth as an eggshell. While we stood there packed in line, the DIs assaulted anybody who had hair longer than an inch or two: “Hey, Goldilocks! Hey, sweetheart! You like your hair, pretty girl?! We gonna cut it all off. How do ya like that? You like that, sweetpea? That make ya happy? *Answer me*, you dumb fuck! When I ask you a question, you better have an answer! I’ll spread your pea-brain all over the wall!”

“Yessir!”

“I can’t hear you!”

“YES, SIR!”

“You look like a pussy, sweetpea! Are you a pussy?”

“No, sir!”

“You callin’ me a liar?!”

“NO, SIR!”

“You look like a pussy, puke.”

“YESSIR!”

“Tell me what you are, puke.”

“I’m a pussy, sir!”

“I can’t hear you!”

“I AM A PUSSY, SIR!”

We were herded off to the showers, looking like a bunch of freshly peeled onions. Finally, well into the early hours of the morning, we were herded upstairs into a large open squad bay lined with two rows of double-deck steel bunk beds. “Get in the rack! Lie at attention!” a DI commanded. “Sleep!” The lights went out.

But I didn’t sleep. I don’t know if anyone else slept because I was too frightened to look anywhere but straight up at the ceiling. I was terrified that if I went to sleep, I wouldn’t wake up fast enough, and then I’d be killed instantly. My stomach churned. Someone inside my head was banging away with a sledgehammer, frantically trying to break out. With all my heart and soul, I did not want to be here. I couldn’t understand how any of this had happened. I lay there for what seemed like hours in a kind of trance, staring at the ceiling, my mind in neutral and somebody flooring the accelerator. Jesus, Jesus, sweet Jesus, save me.

The lights went on. A swarm of DIs charged into the squad bay banging the metal lids of garbage cans against the metal bed frames. “Get up! Get up! Get up! Get in front of your racks! Stand at attention! Eyes front! Get up! Get up! Move, move, move! Time to slop the hogs, ladies! Everybody nice and hungry?! I asked you a question, goddamn it!”

“Yessir!” we all shouted in unison.

“Louder!”

“YESSIR!”

Still in civilian clothing, we were herded off, asshole to belly button, to our first breakfast in the Marine Corps.

The last thing I wanted to see was food. My stomach was the size of a walnut. But I had this voice inside of me, the guy with the sledgehammer, that kept saying if I didn't take everything that was given to me and eat everything I had taken, I would be killed instantly. So I went through the chow line with my metal tray outstretched, shoulder to shoulder with everyone else, eyes staring straight ahead and stomach screaming, “Please don't do this to me!” as the messmen heaped on eggs, grits, sausage, French toast, butter, syrup, hot cereal, cold cereal, sugar, milk, juice, and a banana. I ate every bit of it, and every mouthful went down like rock salt. I had to swallow two and three times because it kept coming up again. The banana was an unholy nightmare. It was three feet long and weighed thirty-eight pounds. I saved the banana for last, hoping it would go away, but it wouldn't.

After breakfast the pace quickened into a kaleidoscope of shouting, screaming, lifting, toting, sweating, running, waiting asshole to belly button, push-ups, squat thrusts, medical exams, dental checks, shot lines, written tests, forms, obscenities, screaming, and shouting:

- Packing up the clothes we were wearing and addressing the packages to some place called home, casting off the last traces of another life and donning oversized green utilities designed to make you feel puny and lost and awkward and identical to everyone around you.
- Trying to march and failing miserably and being informed vociferously of the failure, watching with envy and humiliation while advanced platoons stepped by in perfect cadence and our own DIs roared, “You'll never march like that, you helpless, worthless shitbags!”
- Receiving our issues of field gear, linens and blankets, seabags and extra clothing, and trying to drag it all across the sweltering parade deck without dropping any of it, and dropping it all over the place as DIs perforated your eardrums with their eyeteeth.
- Drawing our rifles, when a DI announced: “This is your life, ladies. The Marine Corps doesn't give a damn about you, but it loves its

rifles. And if anything ever happens to your rifle, if it so much as gets a tiny little scratch on it, the Marine Corps will hate you forever and ever. And then you'll be in the hurt locker, ladies, and you won't like that at all." I had no idea what the hurt locker was, but I was certain I wouldn't like it.

Another DI told us: "The Marine Corps is your father and your mother. The DI is your priest and your doctor and your lover. The Marine Corps will give you everything you'll ever need. If the Marine Corps doesn't give it to you, you don't need it. The Marine Corps will teach you everything you'll ever need to know. If the Marine Corps wants you to think, you'll be issued a brain. Until you're issued a brain, don't think, ladies. Don't even try to think. Jump when you're told to jump, and don't come down until the Marine Corps tells you to."

The sequence of individual events was without order or logic or foundation. The raging DIs in Smokey the Bear hats never relaxed and never slept and never let up, and they would kill you instantly if you did anything wrong. And you were always, always, doing something wrong. And they never missed a thing.

After a few days—looking back at the records I can tell you now that it was three, though at the time I didn't know if it was two or six or ten—three new DIs appeared in our barracks one morning. They were obviously in a foul mood. All DIs were always in foul moods. They said it was our fault. The three new DIs, we were unceremoniously informed, were our permanent drill instructors and we were about to begin our training cycle.

Jesus, Joseph, and Mary! Begin our training cycle?! I thought we'd begun days ago. What in God's name were they going to do to us now?

## II

One beautiful warm June day twenty-seven years later, I was out walking in my neighborhood in Philadelphia when I noticed a group of eight or ten young black men farther up the block in the direction I was heading. They appeared to be just hanging around, going nowhere, and doing nothing in particular. My heart rate jumped abruptly, and I began immediately and involuntarily to consider my options: Do I keep walking? Do I turn around and go another way? If trouble starts, have I any

chance at all against so many? Is there anything portable I can use as a weapon? What if one or more of them is armed? What if—

In the midst of this machine-gun series of uninvited questions, I suddenly found myself possessed of an overwhelming sense of shame because it suddenly came to me that were this another time and another city, one of these men I immediately perceived as a potential threat might have been John Harris.

Then another thought came quickly on the heels of that one: would Harris, too, find this situation threatening? What would he do, were he here on this sidewalk instead of me? What would he tell me I should do?

John Harris, you see, was the first black friend I ever had. Both of us had been members of Platoon 1005, Company D, 1st Recruit Training Battalion, Recruit Training Regiment, there at Parris Island that summer of 1966. He and I slept next to each other in the long open squad bay that housed the eighty recruits of Platoon 1005 in two long rows of double bunk beds.

There was no privacy for Marine recruits at Parris Island, and precious few opportunities to speak to another human being except your drill instructors, and then only when they spoke to you first, and always at the top of your lungs. But at night, after lights out, Harris and I eventually got bold enough to lean out over the space between us, drawing our heads together and talking quietly. After a while, we started reading each other the letters we received from our girlfriends. By placing the page flat on the linoleum floor, then putting a flashlight down on the page and turning it on, you could get just the faintest glow around the rim of the flashlight, and if you moved the light back and forth across the page, line by line, you could read.

This was risky business because if we got caught there would be god-awful hell to pay with the DIs, who were the meanest, toughest, nastiest men I'd ever encountered in my life and who, as nearly as we could determine, had absolute power and authority over us with no appeal, no recourse, and no mercy. I never would have dared such a thing in the first four or five weeks of boot camp, but in the last few weeks Harris and I began taking our chances because we were very lonely and very young and not quite so frightened as we'd been earlier.

Harris was especially fascinating to me because, as I said, I'd never before had a black person for a friend. Growing up in a very white small town in rural Bucks County, Pennsylvania, I'd had limited and fleeting and invariably superficial contacts with blacks. Beyond the racial aspect,



however, lay another dimension to my fascination with Harris: he had a pregnant girlfriend. In the community in which I grew up, if you got a girl pregnant, you married her. End of discussion. Period. We called them “shotgun weddings,” and it didn’t matter if the bride was only fourteen years old and the groom just sixteen and the marriage doomed from the start: get pregnant, get married.

Yet here was Harris with a pregnant girlfriend he’d neither married nor abandoned. He wrote to her faithfully, and she wrote to him, and the two of them were trying to sort out what would be the best course for them to take; marriage was a possibility, but by no means a certainty, and as nearly as I could tell, the decision was not up to some father figuratively or literally wielding a shotgun, but rather, it lay entirely in the hands of Harris and his girlfriend.

Adding yet another dimension to my fascination with Harris was the fact that, while he was only a year older than me, he was quite obviously sexually experienced, while the one and only opportunity I’d ever had to get a girl pregnant had passed me by because I was too startled, too scared, and too inept to avail myself of it.

So Harris was a wonder, a revelation, and an education for me on multiple levels, though what I remember most about him to this day is how gently he’d rest his fingers on the back of my wrist as we moved the flashlight together, back and forth across the pages of our girlfriends’ letters, and how sweet was his deep, rich voice whispering against the lonely weight of those hot southern nights far from all that was familiar to either of us.

And as I thought about John Harris that afternoon on Upsal Street in Philadelphia twenty-seven years later, realizing that for all I knew the young men up ahead of me might be just as kind, just as thoughtful, just as fascinating, if only I had the opportunity to get to know them, I decided to keep walking. By this time, you can bet my heart was pounding furiously, as if it would leap out of my chest in the next instant, but nothing at all happened. As I passed in front of them, I nodded and said an offhand hello, and got an equally offhand acknowledgment in return. And then I was by them. It had all been a tempest in a teapot inside my own head, lasting but the space of a few minutes from start to finish.

But as I continued on toward home, I couldn’t stop thinking about John Harris. What *would* he have thought of this situation? Would *he* have felt threatened by a group of young black men half his age? What would he think of me and my instantly defensive reflex?

And that led to a larger set of questions: What had become of John Harris? Where was he now? Who was he now? I hadn't seen or heard from or of him in all these years. Life's like that when you're young and in the military. You spend some time together and you get to be buddies, and then you both move on in different directions and you mean to write but you never do. Instead you meet new people and you make new friendships. And then you move on again, and you meet still newer people. I changed duty stations nine times in three years in the Marines, and the attrition from rotations and casualties during my thirteen months in Vietnam produced additional dislocation. You carry your memories with you along with your seabag, but you fill the time at hand with whoever happens to be at hand.

And then another thought arose: Harris was my best boot camp buddy, my confidant and partner in crime—yet all I could tell you about him was his name, he came from Baltimore, and his girlfriend was pregnant. That was it. The sum total of my knowledge. And with one exception, I knew more about John Harris than I knew about any other member of Platoon 1005.

Eighty of us had gone through certainly the most intense experience I had ever encountered to that point in my life, living cheek to jowl day in and day out for eight grueling weeks (and here “grueling” is not a cliché), eating together, sleeping together, shaving together, showering together, shitting together (no such thing as private stalls in the heads at Parris Island, just a long row of toilet bowls one right after the other), marching together, exercising together, running together, cleaning the squad bay together, sweating together, polishing boots together, rubbing linseed oil into the stocks of our rifles together, memorizing the entire chain of command from our DIs up to the Commander in Chief together—you can hardly name an activity that we did not do together—and yet I knew next to nothing about any of them, in most cases not even their first names.

That's the way the Marine Corps wanted it. The purpose of boot camp was—and I suppose still is—not to bond the members of any particular training platoon to each other in an individual or personal way, but to bond each of us to the Marine Corps itself. You learn to respond to orders without hesitation or question; you learn to work cooperatively with whoever happens to be next to you; you learn to care about the other men in your unit not because they are Joe and Bob and Jack or even because they are likeable guys, which they may or may not be, but because you are a Marine and they are your brother Marines and they are

depending on you to do your job and to do it right and you are depending on them.

I didn't understand this at the time, of course. No one sits you down and explains any of it. They just do things like if you screw up in close-order drill, the DI might haul you out of formation and have you count cadence while the other seventy-nine members of the platoon do fifty push-ups on their knuckles on the macadam parade deck in honor of your blunder. Or if one man fails to finish a three-mile run with full pack and rifle in ninety-degree heat, the whole platoon catches hell, so you do what you have to do to make sure the whole platoon finishes, and finishes together, even if it means that one guy carries two packs and another guy carries two rifles and two other guys get the flagging man's arms over their own shoulders like Jesus on the cross and drag him for the last mile and a half.

And it doesn't matter if that flagging man is the same guy who crapped out yesterday and the day before and the day before that. You can hate his guts and wish him dead a thousand times over again, but if he starts falling behind, you are going to move to his side and tell him, "Come on, man, you can do it. Keep moving. You can do it." And you're going to take his rifle out of his hands, easing his burden by eleven pounds—back then when we trained with M-14s—and carry it for him because he is a Marine and you are a Marine and he needs help.

That's what the Marine Corps wants you to learn in boot camp. The Marine Corps doesn't care if you know that Joe Blow has a '58 Chevy Impala or Ralph Doe's mother has muscular dystrophy or George Shmoe was the fastest high school sprinter in Tennessee. The Marine Corps doesn't want you to know. Not while you're at Parris Island, at least. And the Marine Corps doesn't give you the slightest chance to find out. You do what you are told to do. You speak when you are spoken to. And your latitude for activity or speech beyond those boundaries is almost entirely limited to late night tête-à-têtes with the guy sleeping next to you.

Even the one guy I actually knew before I got to Parris Island I virtually never talked to the entire time we were there. Harry Nelson and I both graduated from Pennridge High School in June of 1966, just nine days before we left for Parris Island. I didn't know Harry all that well because he'd been in parochial school until ninth grade, and we mostly traveled in different social circles, but we'd been in the senior class play together. So later in the year, when we discovered we were both joining the Marines, we figured we might as well join on what the Marine Corps

called the Buddy Plan, which guaranteed that we'd be assigned to the same training platoon at Parris Island. What our recruiter didn't tell us is that we wouldn't ever get to talk to each other anyway, so we might as well be on different planets for all the comfort we got out of having a familiar face in the platoon. Ah, those recruiters, they're a helmet full of laughs.

In any case, what I knew about Harry Nelson I didn't learn in boot camp, and as little as I knew about John Harris, I knew even less about anyone else. We came together out of the night—really and truly out of the night—and we spent those eight weeks together, and after we graduated on August 12, 1966, we all went up to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, for three more weeks of basic infantry training. But at Lejeune we were broken up and mixed in with the 240 Marines from the other three platoons in our boot camp training series who had graduated the same day we had. We were no longer Platoon 1005. And when we left the Infantry Training Regiment, we scattered out into the Corps to receive whatever specialized training each of us had been assigned and to meet whatever our individual futures held.

I saw Harry Nelson at home in Perkasio in the spring of 1968, and again in 1983, and at our twentieth and twenty-fifth high school reunions in 1986 and 1991. Terry J. Bowles ended up in my battalion in Vietnam in 1967, and I shared a beer with him and his twin brother Jerry once or twice that summer at our battalion's command post near Hoi An. But with these few and fleeting exceptions, I never saw any of the other members of Platoon 1005 again.

Who were these men who'd joined the Marines in the summer of 1966 just as the Vietnam War was rising toward a terrible and sustained crescendo of savagery? Where had they come from? Why had they joined? Where had they gone after we finished basic training? How many of them had gone to Vietnam? How many had come back? What had they done with their lives in the years since? What did they think now? By the time I got home from my walk that afternoon in June 1993, I had decided to find out.

### III

But how to go about tracking them down? From a platoon book that was sort of like a lean, mean version of a high school yearbook, I had each man's name. I also knew that each of us had come from somewhere

east of the Mississippi River because anyone living west of the Mississippi was sent to the other Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, California. That's all the information I had with which to start my search, and the trail twenty-seven years old.

The first thing I did that evening was to write a letter to George C. Wilson, the former Pentagon reporter for the *Washington Post* and the author of a number of books on the military, including *Mud Soldiers* and *Supercarrier*. Wilson and I had traveled together in postwar Vietnam in 1990 with a group of writers sponsored by the William Joiner Center of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, and he was the best print journalist I've ever met. He seemed to have no agenda of his own, no axes to grind, no point to make. He wanted to know what *you* had to say. He wanted to hear *your* story. And when he picked up his pen, that's what he wrote. When I began to interview and write about the members of Platoon 1005, it was George Wilson's example I tried to emulate.

But I was far from interviewing anyone in June 1993. Except for Harry Nelson, whom I could locate through high school alumni records, I had no one to interview. I figured if anyone knew how to track people who'd been in the military, it would be Wilson, and indeed he had several good suggestions, one of which was to check the platoon roster against the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial Directory of Names*. "I found the directory invaluable when I was writing *Mud Soldiers*," he replied. Then he added, because I'd told him how the idea to track these men down had come to me, "I hate to tell you this in such a cold way, but in my copy of the directory, a Marine lance corporal John Lee Harris, Jr., of Baltimore, was killed on 21 September 1967. He was born on 12 September 1947, so I fear he is your friend."

For a long time I stared at Wilson's letter. All these years, I thought, and that goddamned war is still taking friends away from me. I hadn't seen Harris in over a quarter of a century, but he had always been a touchstone for me, as he was that day on Upsal Street, a way to help me keep the world in perspective. I had always assumed a world with John Harris in it, but he was not and had not been for a long time. It was eerie, and it made me very sad.

When my own copy of the *Directory* arrived from the Friends of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, it looked and felt like a telephone book. But instead of telephone numbers and addresses, it contained the names of the American dead in Vietnam—fifty-eight thousand of them—their rank, branch of service, hometown, dates of birth and death, and the panel and

line numbers for locating each name on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

In it, in addition to John Harris, I found three other members of Platoon 1005: William C. Blades III, Billy Blades of Massachusetts, who'd been a road guard with me on our platoon's endurance hike to Elliott's Beach, the two of us in bright orange vests far enough out in front of the rest of the platoon to be able to hold a rare conversation; Roosevelt Tharrington, Jr., of North Carolina, who was terrified of shots (the medical kind); and Francis L. Langley of Alabama, about whom I could recall nothing at all.

One lost life is one too many, and I would soon come to know just how devastating each loss was to the people who knew and loved these men. But these four were, in truth, far fewer than I had expected to find on that cold, black stone slab. We'd finished boot camp at a time when General William C. Westmoreland was calling for ever larger numbers of troops, and Lyndon Baines Johnson was still giving him what he asked for, and Marine casualties were mounting. I had been fully prepared to find ten, twelve, fifteen platoon members among the dead.

So I'd accounted for four members of the platoon, but what about the others? I began by placing notices in military and veterans' publications. Over the course of the summer, these turned up only one more man, Gary S. Davis, a *Leatherneck* reader. But a retired Army enlisted man from Florida named Ben Myers saw my notice in the CAP Unit Veterans Association newsletter and offered to share his computerized national directory of listed telephone numbers and addresses.

Talk about the kindness of strangers. He said, "Send me the names and home states of the men you're looking for." I said, "I don't know their home states." He said, "Okay, then just send me their names." I said, "We're talking seventy-five guys here." There was only a moment's hesitation in his voice before he said, "That's okay, send them anyway."

A couple of weeks later Myers sent me a stack of computer printouts. Some names, such as Harold E. Feighley and Gaetan L. Pelletier and Richard Quashne, Jr., weren't listed at all. Others, such as Thomas M. Brown and John E. Green and Kenneth E. Smith turned up by the hundreds—far too many to be usable. But there was only one Michael C. Albon, and he was the guy I was looking for. Other names turned up by the half-dozen or the dozen or the score, and I wrote letters to all of them.

I wrote to thirty-nine Joseph B. Taylors and got no reply, but I wrote to twenty-one Jeffery S. Browns and received a phone call from the one

who'd been in Platoon 1005. Stephen T. Summerscales wasn't on the list, but a Ruth Summerscales was listed in a town not far from Philadelphia, so I picked up the telephone and called; she turned out to be his mother. George D. Osada wasn't on the list, but a George H. Osada was listed in Philadelphia, so I called. I got a woman who had just bought the house from the son of the previous owner, who had recently died. She said the son lived in Philly too, and the son turned out to be our Platoon Guide (the guy who marches at the front of the platoon with a little pennant on a pole that says "1005"). All told, I eventually located twenty-nine platoon members through Myers's list, and another half-dozen from my own computerized directory once I acquired a CD-ROM drive for my own computer in December 1994.

Meanwhile, in December 1993 at a conference on the Vietnam War at Notre Dame University, I met Constance Menefee of Ohio, who put me in touch with retired Army lieutenant colonel Richard S. Johnson of Military Information Enterprises, Inc., San Antonio, Texas. From Johnson's book *How to Locate Anyone Who Is or Has Been in the Military*, I learned additional methods for finding platoon members.

Under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), for instance, anyone can request the military records of anyone else who's ever been in the service. You need only to provide enough information for the civil servants at the National Personnel Records Center in Saint Louis to identify the files of the person you want. The federal Privacy Act forbids release of such information as current address, medical records, or social security number, but NPRC is supposed to make available a service person's record of promotions, military occupational specialty (MOS), education level, duty assignments, awards and decorations, records of court-martials if applicable, and other basic information pertaining to that person's military service.

From the Commandant of the Marine Corps, I had already obtained the company reports from Company D, 1st Recruit Training Battalion, for June and July 1966, and from these I was able to get the men's service numbers (most of them, at least; a few were not legible, since what I received were poor photocopies of fourth or fifth carbon copies done on a manual typewriter, which is how copies got made before there were photocopy machines). I could therefore give NPRC a name, service number, beginning month and year of active service, and branch of service. I began sending one request each week, and continued this process for more than a year and a half, until I had requested the records of every member of the platoon.

The turnaround time on a request varied from a few months to a year, and what I got back was equally inconsistent. Sometimes I received six or seven or eight pages of material photocopied directly from a man's service record book (SRB). Other times I got as little as a hastily handwritten and incompletely filled out FOIA cover sheet. As nearly as I can tell, it depended on which clerk handled your request, how diligently that clerk wanted to do his or her job, and what sort of a mood he or she was in on the day the request was filled. Eventually, I received at least something from NPRC on all but three men, whose files, NPRC told me, could not be located on the basis of the limited information I could provide.

Initially I wanted these records so that, in the event I could not locate a man, I could still learn what his military job had been, whether or not he had served in Vietnam, and whatever else the records might tell me. But I realized as soon as I began receiving records that sometimes I would get an unexpected bonus.

The hometown of Terry J. Bowles at the time of his enlistment, for instance, was Glasgow, Kentucky. There was no Terry J. Bowles listed in Glasgow, Kentucky, in my telephone directory, but there were thirty-two other people named Bowles. I wrote to all of them, and got a phone call back from his niece by marriage, who gave me his parents' address and telephone number. By the same method, I found Gaetan Pelletier, who no longer lives in his hometown of Madawaska, Maine, but who has a sister who does, and she got one of my letters.

Sometimes the bonus didn't cost so many postage stamps. I haven't been able to figure out why, but some SRBs had a man's social security number at the bottom of each page, while others did not. For those that did, the clerks at NPRC were supposed to black it out before sending the records along, and usually they did, but every once in a while I'd receive four pages of material and the social security number would be blacked out on the first three pages, but when you turned to page four, there it was. Once you have a social security number, you can take it to any number of tracing services, and for a fee they'll run a check and usually come up with a fairly current address. Military Information Enterprises ran a number of traces for me.

Another way to track veterans is through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). If a veteran has ever placed a claim with the VA, there will be a file on him or her. What you do is send a list of names and service numbers to the VA, and they'll send you back a list of VA claim numbers. Then you can write letters to the people you're trying to locate and send the letters to the VA, and the VA will forward them to the last known



addresses they have. I found four more members of Platoon 1005 using that route.

And that route, too, sometimes yields bonuses. Since the early to mid-1970s, depending on the branch of service, a service person's social security number is also his or her service number and VA claim number. It wasn't that way when I was in the Marines. Your service number meant something only within the Marine Corps. Likewise, your VA claim number pertained only to the VA system.

Most of the men in Platoon 1005 would probably have the older VA claim numbers, but if a platoon member didn't apply for VA benefits until as late as 1974, his VA claim number would be his social security number. In December 1993, I requested VA claim numbers for forty-five members of Platoon 1005. I got back a list of thirty-six men who had made claims with the VA. Twenty-nine of them were the old eight-digit numbers, but seven were nine-digit social security numbers I could then have traced. By this route, I was able to get in touch with four more members of the platoon.

A few more men I located through leads given to me by other platoon members. Rey Waters remembered that Stephen Sofian came from Atlantic City, New Jersey. George Osada recalled that Tom Tucci was from South Philly. Gaetan Pelletier was able to get a telephone number for Gerard Sirois's sister. Over the course of three years between the summer of 1993 and the spring of 1996, I eventually located or at least accounted for nearly three-quarters of the eighty members of Platoon 1005.

#### IV

For a dozen years after I left Vietnam, I had nightmares about the war. At first realistic and factual in nature, as the years passed the dreams became ever more surreal and fantastic. In the last dream I had, in the early spring of 1980, Viet Cong rats were jumping into the bedroom of my third-floor apartment in Chicago through a broken window, and I kept trying to get my girlfriend to realize that we were in danger, but she wouldn't listen.

When I started courting the woman I would marry, the nightmares about the war stopped. Perhaps they'd been occasioned as much by loneliness as by the trauma of war. Perhaps Anne's presence beside me gave me back something of what the war had taken away. Perhaps her love redeemed me. I don't know. I only know that for years I dreamed about the war, but when Anne began to sleep beside me, the dreams stopped.

What didn't stop were and are the anxiety dreams I have always had about being back in boot camp. To this day, three or four times a year, I'll dream that I'm back at Parris Island. The details vary from dream to dream, but the basic dream is always the same: everyone else is exactly who and what they were in the summer of 1966, but I'm who I am now; I've got my usual longish hair and I'm wearing maybe blue jeans and sneakers and a La Salle sweatshirt or whatever. We're all standing at attention in front of our racks in the squad bay, and I'm screaming with terror inside my head because I know any moment Drill Instructor Evans is going to notice me standing there completely out of uniform, shaggy-haired and soft around the middle, and then I'm going to be in the hurt locker. And I always wake **up** sweating like a stuck pig, my heart running riot until the fog of half-awake gives way to wakefulness and fear gives way to amused wonder.

It's amazing to me that even the most unpleasant memories of war can be held at bay by the love of my wife, yet nothing can save me from Parris Island and my drill instructors, even after thirty-two years. And even though a part of me knows, even as the dream unfolds behind my closed eyes, that this isn't real and the DIS won't really kill me and never really intended to, still the dreams come, and the heart races, and it is always a relief to wake up. Parris Island was a tough place for a 17-year-old kid who'd never before encountered an adult more threatening than a teacher wielding a detention slip. Still, that dreams about boot camp should persist years after dreams about the ultimately much more terrible war have ceased is something to contemplate.

In his documentary film, *War: A Commentary*, when Canadian journalist Gwynne Dyer wanted to explain how ordinary young men are transformed into soldiers—that is to say, people whose job it is, finally, to kill other people—he chose Marine boot camp to make his point, and he filmed that segment at Parris Island, because Marine boot camp is among the toughest and most effective military basic training programs in the world. A lot of people have a lot of misconceptions about what goes on in Marine boot camp, however (or at least what went on when I was there; you might want to look at Ron Schirmer's story for a more contemporary look at Parris Island). Yes, you are stripped of your individuality and trained to respond without hesitation or question. Yes, you are dehumanized and desensitized and taught to fight with your bayonet and even your bare hands. Yes, they swear at you a lot and shout at you a lot and make you do a lot of things that seem to be utterly pointless and gratuitously stupid.

But you need to understand that the popular image of the sadistic

DI force-marching frightened recruits through deadly swamps in the middle of the night is derived from one single such incident that happened in the 1950s. You need to understand that the U.S. Government was going to send large numbers of young men to fight in Vietnam whether they had been trained well or poorly, whether the war was a good idea or not, whether you approved of the war or didn't. You need to understand that within five to twelve months three-quarters of the men of Platoon 1005 would find ourselves fighting in Vietnam, and when you have to think clearly and act bravely even when you are taking incoming mortar and small-arms fire and two of your buddies are down and screaming for their mothers and all you want to do is crawl up into your own mother's womb and never come out again, you begin to realize that the things we were made to do in boot camp no longer seem either pointless or stupid. You need to understand that we were not traicing for a garden party.

If you are going to send young men to war (and women, too, these days), you had damned well better train them, and though I came to hate the American War in Vietnam, I have never hated the Marine Corps, and I will always be grateful to Staff Sergeant J. J. Oliver, Sergeant T. W. Evans, and Sergeant D. S. Bosch, and to the training program for which they served as point men, for preparing me as well as anyone could have prepared me to bear up under the awful obscenity of war. The Marine Corps had not come looking for me; I had gone looking for trouble. I was young and headstrong and naive, and I believed President Johnson when he said that if we did not fight the Communists in Vietnam, we would one day have to fight them on the sands of Waikiki, and when I got to Vietnam and it all began to come unraveled, the only thing that kept me functioning from day to day was the knowledge that I was a Marine, that other Marines were depending on me for their lives, that if I gave in to despair and exhaustion and fear, they would die. The Marine Corps called it esprit de corps. I've heard others call it brainwashing. Call it what you like, I'm convinced I would never have left Vietnam alive had it not been for the training I received at Parris Island.

## V

In 1961 I'd scrawled onto the cover of my school notebook, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." In 1963 I'd stood for eight hours, all through a cold late November

night, just to get a glimpse of John F. Kennedy's casket lying in state beneath the Capitol rotunda. In the winter of 1966, only months before I'd enlisted, I'd written in a journalism class, "What more noble a cause can a man die for than to die in defense of freedom?" I turned down four colleges to join the Marines.

And when I didn't initially receive orders to Vietnam, I badgered my boss at Marine Corps Air Facility, New River, North Carolina, Master Gunnery Sergeant Bergman, day after day, week after week, for two months, until one morning he finally said, "You wanna go to Vietnam, Ehrhart?" I said, "Have you been listening, Top?" Which was a pretty smart-ass answer for a young private first class, but Top Bergman let it pass. "I got a message here says they're looking for Oh-Twos in the infantry in Vietnam," he said. I'd been assigned to the field of combat intelligence, which is designated in the Marine Corps as 02. "Sign me up," I said.

I arrived in Vietnam in early February 1967. I left in late February 1968. I have spent much of my adult life dealing with the personal consequences of my decision to join the Marines and fight in Vietnam. Anyone familiar with the body of my writing — and even more so those who know me personally — already knows this. What those people may be shocked and amazed to hear is that I have finally tired of writing about myself. What more can I say that I haven't already said?

If you want to know what happened to me in Vietnam and how it has affected my life, you need only consider the titles of some of my books: *Vietnam-Perkasie: A Combat Marine Memoir*; *Passing Time: Memoir of a Vietnam Veteran Against the War*; *Busted: A Vietnam Veteran in Nixon's America*; *Going Back: An Ex-Marine Returns to Vietnam*; *In the Shadow of Vietnam: Essays 1977–1991*; *Carrying the Darkness: The Poetry of the Vietnam War*. If you want to know more than that about me, read one or two of those books. My personal favorite is *Passing Time*, but *Vietnam-Perkasie* seems to be more appealing to most people.

*Ordinary Lives* is not a book about me. It's a book about the other seventy-nine men of Platoon 1005. And it's a book I could not have written even ten years ago, let alone fifteen or twenty. None of these men, at least among those I've had the opportunity to sit down and visit with, shares my perspective on the war or the depth and breadth of my knowledge about its origins and causes and history. And for a very long time I was so angry about the war, and so impatient with anyone who didn't see things my way, that it would not have been possible for me to sit for three or four or five hours in the same room with someone who thinks we could