

# The First 24

## Personal Narrative by Justin Cooley, English 101

Goodbyes are never easy, and this one was definitely the hardest one I had ever faced in my eighteen years. I was still young and this was a gigantic decision I had made. It was not going to be easy. I was going to Parris Island—home of angry, yelling drill instructors and mindless recruits striving to become United States Marines. In my mind I thought, *Do I have what it takes to make it?* I had never been away from home for this long, and saying goodbye to my family and girlfriend tore me in half. Could I do this?

“God, ya’ll already fuckin’ smell! Put your maggot heads between your knees and don’t bring ‘em up!”

This is Parris Island. But all I can see is the floor of the bus. Where are they taking us that I can’t look up and see? The urge to just catch a single peek was thwarted by the fear of getting caught and I kept my head bent down out of sight. I nudged the guy sitting next to me.

“What’s taking so long?”

“Man, I don’t know. I think they’re just trying to scare us.”

“Well it’s working.”

The bus drove for what seemed like hours and hours, stopping and going, almost taunting us with the chance to look up. But when we did stop, I was far from ready to get off. I was ready to go home.

“Get off my bus and get on my yellow footprints! Move! Move! Move!”

Every one of us jumped to our feet and hurried off the bus. As I fell in formation and put my feet at the 45-degree angle to match the yellow footprints, I could feel the fear in the air. I may have been away from my family and anyone I knew, but I wasn’t alone. We were all scared. The fear was evident in the looks of the guys beside me. Our hearts all raced loudly and I felt the recruit’s breath behind me—as I am sure the one in front of me felt mine. I had no idea what was about to happen and what to do about it.

“Through these portals pass the world’s finest fighting men: United States Marines. It’s up to you if you make it.”

We lined up and marched through the large, threatening silver doors. We were back to chest, tighter than sardines could even imagine. They split us up and led us down rows of desks. As we sat down they handed out the contracts. In my head, all I was thinking was *What am I agreeing to? What does this allow them to do?* But I put my signature down—blank after blank of signatures.

“Now, let’s go call Mommy and Daddy you bunch of babies. Tell them you’re O.K.” The instructor just laughed at us all.

We were again crammed into a tight room with at least fifteen phones along the front wall. There was a script right beside the phone for what we were supposed to say. And that’s all we could say. I dialed my mom’s number and waited for her to answer. She knew I’d be calling.

“Hello?” That’s all I heard. I started barking off the script word for word.

“I love you.” I caught it just as I finished the last sentence.

Those were the last words I would hear from anyone back home for three months. I hung up the phone and rushed to the next room. We had our pictures taken, fingerprints scanned, and signed even more paperwork. I felt like I was signing my life away. I had been on the island for about six hours now.

After the most painful haircut of my life, where it felt as though they were just pulling the hairs out instead of cutting them, they moved us into a room with a long catwalk and cubbies with huge green sea bags laying in them. We grabbed the bags and were marched through an assembly line of gear. Skivvy shirt and shorts, socks, underwear, utilities—everything was stuffed into our bags.

“Strip down. Now!”

“Now grab a skivvy short and shirt.”

“Put them on.”

We were all dressed in desert camouflage, with tennis shoes, or “go-fasters,” on our feet instead of boots. We were 1<sup>st</sup> Phase recruits. Lost, confused, “garbage” recruits. They put us in a holding room for hours. We were instructed to stand in formation at the position of attention. Several recruits passed out from locking their knees. We just continued standing there. I had been on the island for about fifteen hours.

“Time to see your new home. Grab all your gear.”

We wrapped ourselves in huge sea bags so heavy that we could hardly walk. Then we marched. It seemed like forever. We passed the parade deck, where three months in the future I would become a United States Marine. That seemed so far ahead that it wasn’t even imaginable. I had a long, hot summer to face before I would get to see that day.

We finally arrived at the barracks and dropped all our gear onto a rack. The instructor taught us how to make a perfect rack and then told us to practice. We made our rack and then ripped the blankets off. We repeated it over and over, until the pattern was embedded in our minds. My rack mate, Pvt. Farmer, whispered to me as we kept tightening the racks:

“Cooley.”

“Yeah.”

“Man, this ain’t that bad yet. Wait until we pick up and meet our real drill instructors. That’s when it’s gonna suck.”

Farmer was right. I had only been on the island for twenty-four hours. This wasn’t the worst yet. I knew it. I just didn’t want to think about it. I missed home, my family, and my girlfriend.

Almost eight months later I can still remember every minute of that first day and the ones that followed. As it turned out, Week One was really the hardest. It’s the beginning of a five-week breakdown phase. I was treated like dirt and brought down to a level where they could make a Marine out of a boy. I hated it while I was there, but I would gladly do it again. There is no place like Parris Island: no place better for making Marines. I have changed a lot since June 14<sup>th</sup>, the day I stood on those footprints, and it has all been for the better. I made it off the island to see my family and girlfriend on September 10<sup>th</sup> and although there’s no place like the island, it is much better to be home.