



# Boot Camp Blues: Learning That California Wasn't Always Sunny

*By Curtis Jerry Smothers*

## California Dreaming Meets Reality

It was January 1962. I remember thinking during my first days in Navy boot camp in San Diego that I had made a horrible, ghastly mistake. How could I have spent so many of the previous months looking forward to this misery? ("Yippee! I'm going to California!")

How could I have believed the Navy recruiter with his glib assertions that somehow enlisting in the Navy was the answer to the problems of my post-adolescent angst and troubles with a girlfriend who was absolutely smothering me?

Why didn't I just study harder as a freshman, not drop out of college, and dump my girlfriend? (I had the dumping part rehearsed: "It's not you; it's me.")

These and other regrets ran through my mind as I stood at attention with my M-1 "piece" at shoulder arms on that cold and wet January morning long ago as rain trickled down my back.

It was time for our morning routine on the "grinder," a vast asphalt marching area littered with bird droppings and human spit. It was as if I had voluntarily entered some weird, alien world where it somehow made more sense to do this than to lie in a warm bed sleeping until 10 a.m.; where the most important thing in my life now was to remove that dark ring around my skivvy shirt collar so I could avoid the experience of some cheese-breathed chief petty officer yelling in my ear.

## **The Road to Boot Camp**

It all started innocently enough at the Armed Forces Induction Center in downtown St. Louis. It really was just like those World War II films where rows of young men stood in lines while they were checked by medics before being shipped off to fight the Hun.

In my case, it was a day spent standing around in my underwear, going from station to station and doing things like turning my head and coughing while a bored medical officer conducted a visual proctological inspection as we leaned over as a group.

Having passed my cursory physicals, I swore my enlistment oath that same day.

The next day I reported for a bus ride to St. Louis airport, where I embarked on my first cross-country flight to the West Coast. I remember thinking, *"This is first-rate stuff! Look at me on a jetliner! I'm going to California!"*

## **A Sleepless Welcome**

The bubble burst on landing in Los Angeles at about 9:00 p.m., followed by a two-hour wait for the Navy bus to take us to the recruit reception area 80 miles south at the San Diego Naval Training Center (NTC).

We did not arrive until about 0100—that's 1 a.m. in civilian time.

We were just beginning to doze in the reception area when out came this sleepy-eyed petty officer who led us to a barracks room.

Before we could get any sleep, however, he announced that he had made a roster of people who had to stand two-hour "fire watch" duties.

Since I was one of the chosen few, I was awakened for my shift at about 2 a.m. and told all I had to do was stay on my feet and walk around—and presumably awaken everyone if the barracks caught on fire.

It naturally occurred to me that a built-in fire detection system would be far preferable to depriving me of two hours of sleep during my first four hours in the Navy. In any case, within my first 24 hours of Navy service I had already been singled out to lose sleep for no good reason.

## **The Legendary Navy Breakfast**

My next shock came at breakfast the next morning—or, in my case, just two hours later.

We were marched to the Navy chow hall where, for our dining enjoyment, the famous "SOS" (chipped beef in white gravy on toast) headed the menu. ("SOS," of course, stood for *Shit on a Shingle*, the shingle being the toast.)

Also tempting our morning palates were coagulated Navy beans, apparently left over from an era of hardier folk.

*"My God!"* I thought. *"How can anyone eat this? Where are the eggs and sausage? The biscuits? What HAVE I done?"*

In retrospect, I should have realized that this first encounter with Navy chow was merely a preview of many of the ships on which I would later serve. Those ships also served SOS and its pathetic cousin, baked beans on toast. Compared to the coagulated baked beans served in recruit training, the later fare actually seemed pretty good.

## **The Smell of Mothballs**

The next few days became a blur of head shaving, trying on silly-looking and ill-fitting uniform items—denim working uniforms, boots, shoes, underwear, belts, buckles, white hats—all the things that now distinguished our new status as sailors.

Our entire wardrobe somehow had to be folded with military precision into a three-by-four-foot locker.

But first, every washable item had to be scrubbed by hand.

Our blue dungarees—three long-sleeved shirts with bell-bottom trousers—six sets of skivvy shirts and boxer shorts, five pairs of black socks, and three white sailor "Dixie cup" hats all had to be scrubbed free of that unmistakable mothball smell.

In boot camp parlance, a brand-new recruit was referred to rather pejoratively as a "mothball." Newly formed recruit companies that had just been issued uniforms could be identified from a distance by the powerful aroma drifting from their clothing. Veteran recruits generally gave them a wide berth in the mess hall and on the streets.

## **Laundry by Military Precision**

Those were the days before recruits had access to automatic washers and dryers.

Our generation scrubbed uniforms on large concrete wash tables using buckets of soapy water and stiff scrub brushes.

We hung the wet clothing on clotheslines behind the barracks. Instead of clothespins, we used six-inch lengths of string called "clothing stops."

Each item of clothing had to hang exactly two fingers' width apart, or the entire company could expect to be rousted out of bed in the middle of the night by some prowling, grouchy company commander who apparently had nothing better to do than make our lives miserable.

## **Growing Up the Hard Way**

Although my "incarceration" in boot camp lasted just a few days longer than nine weeks, it marked a significant milestone in my journey from adolescence to young adulthood.

Boot camp taught me that there are times when it is necessary to postpone comfort and instant gratification in order to develop resilience and coping skills, even when the lessons make little sense at the time.

I learned to laugh at petty tyrants and frustrate their attempts to provoke mistakes simply so they could exercise their authority and humiliate someone.

The biggest lesson I learned during my 65 days at the Recruit Training Center in San Diego was that it was entirely possible for a Midwestern-born and bred young man to be cold, miserable, tired, and hungry—even in California.

Home wasn't so bad after all.

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many of the previous months looking forward to this misery? ("Yipee! I'm going to California!")

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My next shock occurred at breakfast the next morning (in my case just two hours later). We were marched down to the Navy chow hall, where, for our dining enjoyment the famous "SOS" (chipped beef in white gravy on toast) headed the fare. ("SOS" stands for Shit on a shingle, the shingle being the toast.) Also to tempt our morning palates was coagulated Navy beans, presumably left over from an era of hardier folk.

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The next days were a blur of head shaving, trying on silly-looking and ill-fitting uniform items, like denim working uniforms, boots, shoes, underwear, belts, buckles, white hats - all the things that now distinguished our new status as custodians of a repertoire of strange clothing that somehow had to be folded and organized into a three-by-four foot shelved locker.

But first we had to scrub all the washables by hand. Our blue dungarees (three long-sleeved shirts with bell-bottomed trousers), six sets of skivvy shirts and boxer shorts, five pairs of black socks, three white sailor's "dixie cup" hats, all had to be scrubbed and rid of that telltale mothball smell. (In fact, in boot camp parlance, a new and inexperienced recruit was referred pejoratively as a "mothball.") Newly formed recruit companies who had just been issued their uniforms could be spotted by that same strong, wafting smell of mothballs. They were typically given wide berth in the mess hall and on the street.

Those were the days before recruits were allowed access to automatic washers and driers. Our generation scrubbed our uniform clothing on large concrete and troughed tables using a bucket of soapy water and a scrub brush.

We hung our wet clothing on clotheslines in back of our barracks. Instead of clothespins we used six-inch "clothing stops" that were essentially pieces of string. Each item of clothing had to be hung exactly "two-fingers" width apart, or the company could expect to be roused out of bed in the middle of the night by some prowling, grouchy company commander on duty having nothing better to do than make our lives miserable.

Although my "incarceration" in boot camp was a just a few days longer than nine weeks, it marked a significant milestone in my growth from adolescence to a young adult. Boot camp taught me that there are times when it is best to forego instant gratification of comfort and security and learn coping skills, even though the lessons do not make sense at the time.

I learned to laugh at petty tyrants and foil their attempts to get me to screw up so they could exercise their power and humiliate me. The biggest lesson I learned from my 65-day experience at the Recruit Training Center in San Diego was that it was possible for a Midwestern born and bred lad like me to be cold, miserable, tired and hungry - - even in California. Home wasn't so bad after all.