

### **The Reluctant Warrior By Patrick Hughes**

"What did I ever do to deserve this?" I asked myself. Leaning against the curved aluminum side of a Quonset hut I took my helmet off and stared up at the stars in the clear California sky. The cool desert breeze blew gently against my face as if to provide me with some minor respite from my situation. Looking away from the stars at I pondered my question, my gaze fell to the ground at my feet.

The problem was that I knew exactly how I got here. In fact, so many of us got here the same way, we've made it into some kind of joke. 'How did we get here? It's all in our initials... USMC. They say it stands for 'U Signed the Motherfuckin' Contract.' And yeah, two years ago, in a youthful rush to please my parents, I did.

That was a different time. I'd just finished four years of high school in exactly the way my parents expected me to: near the top of my class. I wanted to take a break, but my father would hear none of it. He said that it was either college, trade school, or the military.

I didn't like any of those choices. I just wanted to relax for maybe a year, then find what I wanted to do with my life; but how do you tell that to a self made Vietnamese businessman who came to the United States with nothing? It's simple, you don't. And after far too little consideration, I told my father that I was going to join the army.

"Army? That for people who can't be Marines. You should be Marine." he said. I had my doubts, but my feelings didn't seem to matter much in this equation. I understand that he just wanted me to be the best at whatever I did, but at seventeen I just wanted to take some time off. Nevertheless, I went to the recruiter the next week and signed on as a motor transport specialist - a fancy name for a mechanic.

It was a safe job, far from the front lines, with plenty of civilian applications once I got out. At least that's what I thought before the Iraq War. A year after the invasion the civilian transport contractors realized that war was dangerous and they wanted no part of it. That's when the call went out throughout the Corps for truck drivers. My unit, 5/14, with its large number of underutilized troops was near the top of the list.

By May, 2004 we were given the Warning Order and sent to the desert for a quick week long truck driving class, after which we'd be sent to other units for deployment. We were separated into three platoons at the end of the first day. The first two were the combat platoons who were to deploy in three months. The third was a reserve for the injured, untrained, additional, and otherwise non-deployable Marines were sent. Third Platoon was currently my home. It was a place of terrible anxiety, as we each wondered if we were going to be chosen to fill out one of the other platoons or be allowed to return safely home. I was--

"Hey Chu?" a voice called out in the dark, shaking me out of my thoughts "Is that you Chu?"

"Huh? Halt, who goes there?" I challenged the figure walking towards me in the darkness.

"Its just me, Espino." a familiar voice replied, "I'm here to relieve you. Head on back to the rack. You've still got three hours until reveille."

"Ok, see you in formation." I said to the Lance Corporal handing him my radio handset and reflector vest. My boots crunched on the mix of rock and sand as I walked back to the Quonset hut that had been my world for these past two weeks. Entering the windowless dark, I counted the edges of the cots until I got to seven. My rack, the place I called home.

As I lay there, I envied Espino. He was going home. Four days earlier his seven ton truck was

rear ended by another during driver's training. I saw the whole thing, being two trucks back from the accident in the convoy. Thankfully, no one appeared to be seriously hurt, but the Corpsmen said that there was a risk that Espino's spine had been injured and that for the next six weeks he was non-deployable.

There were other lucky ones like Espino, like Lance Corporal Digert sleeping soundly in the rack to my left. Somehow, in its indefinite wisdom, the Marine Corps forgot to assign him a military specialty after boot camp, and until they did, he wasn't going anywhere. I wrapped myself in thoughts of envy and fear and somehow drifted off to sleep.

When the brilliant desert sun crept out to banish the night a few hours later, it found me standing unmoving alongside the other members of Third Platoon as we stood for morning formation. I wondered if we all dreaded this. Every day it was the same. The First Sergeant would come out with a new list of names to bolster the two combat platoons. Whenever they were short - and they always were - he would call out names from the Third platoon, my platoon, to make up the difference.

So there we stood in perfect formation awaiting his word on our fate. Some, like Digert and Espino stood with a relaxed confidence that came from knowing they were non-deployable. Others, like me, stood trembling with the fear that our name would be called.

"Third Platoon, Report!" the First Sergeant barked.

"Third Platoon all present and or accounted for sir!" the Corporal yelled back.

Then the anxiety would build as he shouted names like a roll call of the damned.

"Lee, Harper, Holt, Salinez report to first platoon following formation." the First Sergeant

ordered, "Ableson, Baker, Bradford, Chu -"

I never heard anything after my name. A cold chill swept through my body as I tried to comprehend what had just happened. I don't know how long we stood there before Private First Class Baker brought me back to reality with a pat on the back, "I guess we're going out to the Sandbox together, huh?"

I nodded and said something warlike that I didn't really feel. My boots felt heavy as I walked into the Third Platoon hut for the last time. Anxiety rose within me as I slowly packed my gear one piece at a time into my oversized green canvas sea bag.

I tried to keep up a brave front, and act like a Marine was supposed to act, but it was no use, I had to talk to someone or I was going to lose it, but who? All my other friends had already been assigned to one or the other of the combat platoons. At a loss, I decided to talk to the Corporal. He was an unusual individual, about a decade older than he should have been for his rank. That wasn't his fault; he just found the Corps later in life than I did. He was into all kinds of military history and stuff, if some army used something somewhere, he knew about it. Now I had to see if he knew as much about people and their fears as he did about history. He seemed friendly enough, but now burdened with a command above his ability - the constant shuffling of personnel brought on by the deployment orders now made him hold the billet of Platoon Sergeant - I wondered if he'd have time for me.

I checked to make sure the last of my gear was secured, and then walked down the sandy aisle separating the perfectly even rows of cots. Several of the others whose names were chosen were also busy packing their gear, oblivious to everything else, lost in their own private thoughts. Others, lucky enough not to have been chosen by that terrible lottery laughed and chatted amongst themselves. I approached the Corporal, who was chatting with Espino while pouring over a disorganized clipboard of

paper.

"Hey, uh, Corporal, can I talk with you for a minute?"

He looked up from the chaos in his hands.

"What is it Chu?" he said quietly, knowing that my name had been called earlier.

"I'd need to talk with you for a moment, if you can." I glanced around at the several faces whose attention I had garnered, "In private, outside."

"Yeah, of course." he said handing off his clipboard to Espino.

I followed him into the barren world washed by the unrelenting desert sun. A pair of helicopters flew by on their way towards the mountains in the distance. The thumping of their heavy rotors matched that of my heart as we slowly walked through the dry sand.

"They're sending you to second platoon from what I heard, is that right?" he began.

"Yes Corporal."

"From what I heard, they're supposed to be heading out to Al Qaim out on the border with Syria. There's not a lot of action out there."

"I didn't know that Corporal."

He turned to me and stopped. I guess he could see the fear in my eyes. The Corporal pointed towards a pallet of crates behind one of the Quonset huts, "Have a seat Chu. Talk to me."

I halfheartedly dusted off one of the crates before doing as he asked, my cover pulled low over my head as I faced the ground.

"I, I, I'm afraid Corporal. I know I'm a Marine, and I'm proud to be one, but I don't want to go war. I don't know if I'm ready."

He sat down beside me, "We're all afraid Chu. Marine or not, we're all afraid. Anyone who says they aren't is lying out their ass, even Sergeant Morris. You know, all those Marine heroes – Chesty Puller, Dan Daley and the rest that they told us about in Boot Camp were just as scared as you are now; they just overcame their fear when the time came. Fear is just part of being a person. There's no shame in that."

"But, Corporal, I'm only nineteen. I haven't even had a girlfriend."

"You want to know something; I didn't have one either at your age. There will be plenty of time for that when you get back."

"If I get back."

"Well, I'm not going to lie to you. Its war and in war people die, but they also die here at home, in car accidents, robberies, fires. Life has no guarantees. You could get hit by a bus tomorrow even before you deploy. It's not when you die that matters, it's what you do with your life while you're here, and besides, it's not written anywhere that you're going to get killed just because you deploy."

"Can I speak freely Corporal?" I asked.

"Sure, tell me what's on your mind."

"That sounds all well and good from someone who's not going overseas."

He nodded, "I was wondering when you'd bring that up, but yeah, you're right. I can say whatever I want, for now, I'm not going. Tomorrow, next week, next month that can change. When they get to my

name I'll go. I'll leave my life behind for a time and I'll go do what I signed up to do."

"And you'll probably be scared."

"Hell yeah I'll be scared. Who in their right mind wants to leave their family and go get shot at? I'll be scared now, I'll be scared when I got there, and I'll be scared when the rounds start flying down range. I'll just put my faith in the fact that my fellow Marines will do their job and keep my ass alive, while I do the same for them. Remember, you're not alone Chu. You're not alone out there."

I thought about what he said for a moment. He was right. No matter why I joined the Marine Corps, I was one of them now. I wasn't going to war alone; I was going with a platoon of my friends. Highly trained, well armed, very dangerous friends who were counting on me to stand by their side as an equal when things went south.

"I think I understand Corporal." I said, even though it would probably take much longer for me to truly grasp the significance of our conversation.

"We're all here for each other. That's who you fight for when the rounds start flying. Not mom, dad, apple pie, or even some shiny medal. You're fighting for the guy to your left and the guy to your right, and they're doing the same for you."

I felt a fierce pride welling up within me, a pride that helped ease, but not eliminate my fears. I hoped it would last. Jumping off the crate I looked over at the Corporal, "Thank you for your time Corporal. You'll make a good platoon sergeant one day."

He shook his head and smiled, "One can hope."

"If you don't mind, I have to finish packing my gear and report to Second Platoon."

"I understand. Remember Chu, you're a United States Marine. That means you'll never be alone, no matter how far they send you. Just let me know where you end up so I can write, OK?"

I nodded and began the sandy trek to my gear. Walking past the other members of my former platoon, I took one long last look back across the racks at what used to be my home. With a full seabag in one hand, I hefted my pack onto one shoulder and made my way to the second platoon barracks.

I paused at the threshold, recounting the Corporal's words. He was right. This was my time to show what kind of person I really was, to show that I could be counted on when the chips were down. Stepping into the barracks I made my way through the crowd of busy Marines towards their leader.

"Lance Corporal Chu reporting Staff Sergeant Radke." I said in an steady voice.

He reached out for my hand. Letting my seabag fall to the ground I shook it. "Proud to be here Staff Sergeant."

"Well, go find a rack, secure your gear, and get comfortable. It's going to get busy real quick like."

The next day was my last day at the 'stumps. That morning we were to board buses to integrate with our parent platoons. For me it was just a short drive across the base to meet the members of 1/7 'Suicide Charlie'. For the others it would be a trip to the airport, then either Camp Pendleton for members of First Platoon, or home for those lucky bastards in Third. As I boarded the bus, I looked out its dirty window at the members of Third Platoon. There was Espino, Digert, and of course, the Corporal barking out orders to all those who were lucky enough to miss this call. I no longer envied them; they had a different course to take and were a part of a different story. As for mine, I hoped it would have a happy ending.