

Ashley L. Hamm

Professor Bauknight

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Semper Fi

Semper Fi. The Few. The Proud. I grew up on these words, passing through the gates of Parris Island and the Marine Corps Air Station at Beaufort, South Carolina. My family didn't do our grocery shopping at Winn Dixie like all of the other kids' families; we went to the Commissary on Parris Island. I was the only kid I knew who had to show an identification card to buy a bag of Doritos. I was, in that respect, very different from lots of other kids and I loved it. I felt, to be perfectly honest, a bit above everyone else, a member of the exclusive Marine Corps family. My friends' memberships to the Yacht and Sailing Club just couldn't measure up.

There is a certain indescribable pride I have always felt when the sentry salutes me onto base, when I am stopped on the main drag on Parris Island so the recruits can march across the road. The sounds of Marines in training answering the booming commands of Drill Instructors is unparalleled, like hearing the ocean waves lap at the sandy shore for the first time after living in a different region; it always makes me feel at home. My car crawls along the main drag at exactly twenty-five miles per hour, and I turn off the radio and roll down my window, regardless of the weather, to hear

the resounding cadences of recruits; I feel the unwavering red, white and blue.

I did not grow up frequenting the Marine Corps Air Station, as I did Parris Island. There was never much there that concerned dependents except the DEERS office, where I go once a year to renew my identification card. The entrance to the Station is incredible and intimidating, with fierce fighter jets positioned at the left side of the gate. The Station is a significant part of the Marine Corps, as it holds all the aircraft, and so the security there is a bit stricter than at Parris Island. Despite the intimidation, I still felt like part of a very exclusive family, the Marine Corps family. I just never had any idea how much of a boundary would be placed between us and civilians until the Fall of 2001.

I launched into my freshman year of college, after withdrawing from the College of Charleston, enrolling in the second eight-week semester at the Beaufort campus of the University of South Carolina. Two of the three classes were held on the Station, the other on Parris Island. I was excited to start classes. It did not bother me in the least bit that the classes were being held on base. What did I have to worry about? I had every right to be there.

The semester started a few weeks after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. I was terrified to go anywhere near either base because of the possibility, and the downright fear, that we would be targeted.

"Dad, I can't go on base right now. What if something happens? What if someone hits the Air Station?"

I remember my dad reassuring me, "It's the Marines. They won't let anything happen to you. You'll be fine. Just cooperate with them, do whatever you are told. If they want to search your car, the only thing you say is, 'Yes, Sir, where would you like me to park my car?'"

"How can they even hold classes there after 9/11? What the hell is wrong with USCB? Don't they know we're a prime military target? Are we a target?"

"It's always a possibility. I don't think there will be anymore attacks, especially here. If there are anymore, they will probably happen in D.C. The only reason we would be a target is the Air Station; that would destroy all the aircraft and air traffic personnel for the East Coast. Parris Island would most likely be safe from any attacks, since it is just the training depot. Either way, though, all of Beaufort would feel it. As far as USCB goes, there is no reason to cancel classes on base. The folks out there know what they're doing; they are trained to protect the bases, especially in times like these. They won't let anything happen to you."

The early October evening came and I started on the bumpy highway out to the Station for the first meeting of classes. I made sure that afternoon that the interior of my car was immaculate, so that if the military police did want to search my car, they would not find anything suspicious and I could

be on my way. Military police have always been three times as intimidating to me as civilian police, and I wanted to make sure I was doing everything right; I wanted to be one less person they would have to worry about.

I veered off the highway onto a back road, yielded to oncoming traffic and approached the gate, turning my parking lights on. I had left my house with plenty of time to allow for random vehicle searches and civilians who did not know anything about being on a military base; the military police would surely be a bit hastier with visitors than normal, given the circumstances. I slowly guided my car to the line of cars already formed at the gate, The gate, swarming with military police cars, traffic cones, police tape, signs posted for civilians and bomb-sniffing dogs. My heartbeat started to increase a bit as I got one more car-length closer to the sentry. My shaky hands reached for my identification card in my wallet, and I set it in the center console. I did not want to make any sudden movements approaching the gate that would trigger suspicion. I knew the security was going to be tightened, but I had no idea exactly how tight it would be. I had not seen anything yet.

I glanced in my rearview mirror and was blinded by the lights of the cars behind me. *I'm glad I left when I did. I hope they realize they won't be getting through this gate with just a simple nod.* It was finally my turn. One of the sentries approached my car as I held out my identification card. As I looked up at him, I saw the M-16 strapped to the front of his camouflage

fatigues. An *M-16*! I had never been that close to such a weapon – I had only handled a .38 – and this one was mere inches away. He stood erect, proud, determined, eyeing my car and me. He could not have been more than twenty-years-old; I was eighteen, and could not imagine any of my friends with an *M-16*. He approached my car with bold intention. I could feel the color drain from my face, the reality of a post-September 11 world slamming into me. He checked my windshield for the appropriate sticker for base privileges. Another sentry walked around my car, shining a flashlight under and inside the car, while the sentry that checked my identification also shined a flashlight in my car. I looked up ahead and to the side and saw several cars pulled over, drivers standing around in confusion and irritation as military police searched their cars, an occasional bomb-sniffing dog checking the perimeter. Keeping my hands on the steering wheel and sitting up straight, I wondered if and when I would be asked to pull over for a vehicle search. The sentry approached my window.

“Where are you heading this evening, Ma’am?” he asked, sternly.

“I-I’m taking classes at Building 206. USCB, Sir,” I managed to stutter.

I felt my heart rate return to an acceptable pulse when the sentry finally said, “Have a good evening, Ma’am,” saluted and waved me through the gate. I had made it onto base unscathed, unlike the majority of my classmates, as well as my professor, all of but one of them civilians; the other was an active duty Marine. I continued down the main drag to my

assigned building, obsessively checking the speedometer to ensure I was driving the mandated speed. I parked my car across the street from the gray two-story building, under the soft light of a streetlamp. I regained my composure and glanced at the clock: twelve minutes until class started. I grabbed my bookbag and headed across the street and across the manicured lawn into the building.

As the students poured in, late due to vehicle searches, complaints and remarks of irritation and resentment echoed around the room.

"Damn MPs searching my car. It took me two hours just to get here! They treated me like I was a criminal, interrogating me about what I was doing on base. I showed them my pass from USCB. Yet, they still had to search my car," one civilian student complained. *I would love to see you enlist, see how long you would survive as a Marine. Damn civilians.*

Another student, who was of obvious Arabic descent, would continue his complaints against the military police for the rest of the semester, without fail. "They treat me like I'm a terrorist," he said, "just because of how I look. I hate those damn Marines."

My blood ran cold when I heard this. *He hates the Marines? How do you hate the Marines? How can you hate the military? Damn civilians. No respect.*

There was only one active duty Marine in the class, and he defended the Marines and the military in general when I was too enraged and inarticulate to speak.

"Y'all can't take it personal," he said. "This is our job, to take every security measure possible to protect the base."

"Screw 'em," retorted the Arabic student. "They have no right to search my car. I wasn't doing anything suspicious."

"You're not in town anymore, man, you're on base. It's different procedure here. And, with 9/11, they have every right to search any vehicle that comes on base, *especially* civilians," said the Marine. *Thank you!!! Somebody get it through this guy's thick skull!*

"Not to be rude," one girl said, "but you better get used to being singled out. They don't know if there are terrorists here. There very well could be. So, your best bet is to drop the attitude and just do as you're told." She had friends who were Marines. She knew what she was talking about. That's just the way things were.

The only people not complaining in that building were people with a military identification card, those of us with base privileges. Everyone else could not understand why their vehicles were being searched; they could not understand why the military police was so hostile. They had no idea what was going on. They had no idea of the changes the military was going through, that the effects of September 11 were not just felt in New York,

Pennsylvania or Washington, D.C. I sat at my desk, four rows back, thinking about what was happening. This was not the military that I had grown up with; this was not the world that I had grown up in. Debates about civilians being on military bases took up the majority of class time, but I could not speak. I could not tell these people how wrong they were. I was in shock. I had never heard anyone speak poorly of the military, especially of the Marines. Sure, there were the arrogant young recruits out on liberty causing trouble in the downtown bars, but that was as far as anyone's resentment of the Marines went.

It was easy for people to look at their television screens, listen to the grotesque reports of Dan Rather and Tom Brokaw and feel empathy for those effected by the attacks of September 11. It was easy for people to turn off their televisions and go about their daily lives, just as they had done September 10 and before. It was easy for people to do this because they did not see any of the effects of the terrorist attacks. They were safe in their civilian cities, their suburbs, and their friendly rural towns. Civilians in Beaufort were not exempt from this. It was impossible for them to comprehend the dramatic changes in our military; they had not been on military bases before the attacks, thus they had nothing to compare the aftermath to, if they even made it on base. Watching the reports on television was a numbing experience; nothing clicked. Ghastly images flashed on the screen, images of people bleeding, sobbing, screaming people

wearing masks to prevent smoke inhalation, people being pulled out of piles of bodies and loaded onto stretchers, people wandering aimlessly looking for help or loved ones they believed to be victims of the attack; but it all seemed so far away. There are three images that were burned into my mind that fall: the image of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center, the Towers collapsing into dense smoke and flames, and the M-16s strapped to the chests of twenty-something-year-old sentries. The first two, like everyone else, I saw on television. But the last one, I saw for myself.