

## LINES

In boot camp, you'll spend most of your day standing 'on line'. Standing on a long, unbroken yellow line. There will be two of them, running parallel down the cement floor, between two similar lines of metal bunk beds. And you'll stand on your line, heels touching, over top of your spot on that line, with your feet pointing at 45-degree angles, arms straight at your sides, fingers curled with your thumbs running alongside the seam of your camouflage trousers. You'll stand on line to practice rifle drill and to fail inspections and get ass chewings. You'll do pushups on line, you'll scream 'Yes Sir' in unison with 80 other recruits while standing on line, and you'll wonder if you made a mistake.

You'll stand in lines too. There will be sweaty lines behind pull-up bars, nervous lines on the rappelling wall, and ravenous lines at the mess hall. You'll stand in lines in the rain and the sun, resisting the urge to swat at sand fleas and fire ants. But not in the bathroom, there will be no lines there, only five or six bald-headed recruits crammed into port-o-johns, or surging crowds around long urinals, like pigs fighting to get to a trough.

You'll march in long lines. Actually, you'll spend so much of your day marching that you'll feel misled by your recruiter for having failed to mention this. In four columns and about twenty rows, you'll march with your platoon, run with your platoon, do pushups and sit-ups and up downs with your platoon. And you had better keep those lines straight; otherwise, you'll suffer with your platoon. When your platoon breaks its lines, you'll make sugar cookies. The recipe will be running until you're sweaty, and then rolling around in a pit of white sand. Then you'll spend the rest of your day with sand in your pants and in your ears and in your mouth. But one-day, your marching and wheeling and about-facing rows and columns will hold in straight lines. And instead of rolling in the sand, rest and rewards will be in store for the platoon. Then the line between individual and group will begin to blur.

There will be indoctrination in the ways of the Marine Corps and its past glories. You'll study the actions of a long line of warriors that stretches back, from Fallujah to Khe-San, the Chosin Reservoir to Guadalcanal, Belleau Wood to the battle of Tripoli, where Marines fought pirates for Thomas Jefferson. But the lineage stretches back further, from armored knights on horseback to Roman centurions to the front lines of Alexander's phalanxes. The warrior line. You'll have to uphold those men's legacies and their histories and their traditions. So you'll march and drill and run and yell and shoot and suffer and succeed and you'll become someone who can carry that weight.

Eventually, you'll finish your training and go home. You'll have sharp lines in your new haircut and straight posture, and the embarrassing habit of yelling 'Yes Sir!' in your sleep. But you'll be in great shape, and have all the confidence of the young and invincible. You'll go to parties in college towns, and hold court with impressionable young men whose bravest decision will have been to follow their parent's carefully planned path for them. You'll walk up to pretty girls and drop your new line, 'yeah baby, I'm a Marine.' Which won't work anywhere near as well as you'll hope it will. But when you put on your uniform for your family, showing off your single ribbon and rifle-shooting badge, your mom will smile and you'll feel proud and you'll hope that it might make up for some of the tears.

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Then you'll have to leave. *Leave*-leave, for an exciting adventure in an exotic land where people will be trying to hurt you, but you'll be young and probably invincible, even after seeing so many familiar faces in the obits. There won't be any lines when you leave. Early flights in small town airports aren't very busy, and the TSA agent will have a son in the Guard, so she'll know how it is. She'll give you extra time with your family. So you'll stand there, your dad in jeans, your mom in her pajamas and glasses. No one will really talk, though everyone will be speaking. No one will say the word that will be ringing in everyone's ears. No one will say *Afghanistan*. Instead, you'll all say *take care* and *I'll see you soon* and *I love you*. Your dad won't cry, and your mom will try not to at first, but she'll give up when they call for boarding to begin.

It'll take a while to get in country. You'll have to fly from your base to Germany and then to Kyrgyzstan on commercial planes. In flight movies and dinners with everyone's rifles and machine guns lying in piles on the floor at your feet. From there you'll fly to Kandahar in a huge Air Force cargo plane. Leaving Kandahar you'll take a helicopter, and you'll watch the door gunner sweep the moonlit fields with his machine gun.

The guys you'll replace won't talk much. They'll be gaunt and dirty and chain smoke cigarettes. Inside a guard tower, they'll have a row of empty shell casing pounded into the wood. One for each confirmed kill. You'll be shy and jealous and unnerved by the newest card-carrying members of the warrior line.

On your first night, a drone will spot someone digging in the road down from your patrol base. You'll lead an impromptu patrol into the darkness, and the air will be thick with humidity and mosquitoes. You'll creep through the night with your heart pounding, straining for clues in the humming silence. The person emplacing an IED will turn out to be a stray dog, and you'll feel relieved, and a little bit let down.

You'll plan patrols, drawing blue lines on maps of green fields and red roads and numbered buildings. Thinking of all the things that could go wrong, what if there's an ambush or someone steps on an IED? You'll plan for those contingencies, and redraw the lines accordingly. You'll lead patrols, converting the lines on the map into missions and ambushes, fire-team echelons and ranger files. Sweaty patrols through overgrown cotton fields, boring patrols gathering census data, and terrifying patrols to contact. But your patrols won't use the dirt paths; you won't be keeping your feet dry on the road, or taking shortcuts down a ratline. The roads will be full of bombs.

One day, you'll be in a field of marijuana. Not an American sized field, rolling hectare-acres of green, but a respectable tennis court sized field of marijuana. You'll lie in the powdery brown dirt. The tall green stalks will stand in rough rows around you and lie crushed under your body armor. And the fire will come from in front of you and

beside you, cutting pot branches and stems off, piling up on your back like a strange version of pick up sticks.

You'll call in casualty evacuation 9-lines for your friends.

One of your guys will write his wife and kids every day. But after a few weeks, he'll stop hearing from them. He'll sulk and pout and talk back. And you'll have to take a firm line with him, even if breaks your heart a little.

There will be an ambush on a bright fall day, while you're wiping sand off rows of sandbags. You'll sprint down a dusty road to safety, with bullets snapping and whining at you. Later that night, you'll take your boots off and get ready for bed, and notice bullet holes in your pant legs. And you won't feel so invincible.

You'll hear explosions. Some near, some far. Some followed by gunfire, others followed by silence. Some followed by urgent casualty reports, others followed by casualty reports that aren't urgent anymore.

And when you get a phone, for the first time in months, you'll make sure your guys use it before you do. You'll get a turn right before the phone moves down the line to the next patrol base. You'll climb onto the roof of the mud hut you'll live in, to get some privacy and a better signal from the satellites. And you'll be so excited to call home that you'll screw up dialing three times. But once you get it right, and you hear the line connect, you'll hear your mother's voice, on the answering machine, because no one is home.

One day, in between cigarettes, one of your buddies will casually observe, "I don't think we're gunna make it outta here." And you'll laugh at him, not because you think he's wrong, but because it'll surprise you that it took him so long to figure that out.

But you'll make it back, and the first thing you'll have to do is wait in line to turn in your rifle. You'll feel naked with out it. And you'll smoke American cigarettes, lighting the next with the smoldering ember of the previous. You and your buddies will hear the excited murmurs of the families waiting to welcome back the newest members of the warrior line. Some guys will be going nuts, but you won't be expecting anyone. Your unit will march in formation with straight columns and straight rows. But your posture won't be so straight, stooped from body armor and responsibility and loss. When you look across at the crowd, you'll see a green poster board with your name written in capitalized glue on letters. And you'll cringe because you won't want to see your family. Not yet. All you'll want that night is a hundred beers and a thousand cigarettes and a night without dreams. You won't want to see your family until you get your shit back in line.

A few days after getting back, you'll stand in line at a nightclub in a college town, shivering in the February night. A drunken little blond girl, in a tight, shiny black dress, will demand that she cut you in line, "Because her boyfriend is a Marine, and he's in Afghanistan." And you'll laugh, loud and long and uncontrollably until your eyes squeeze out tears and your gut aches because she won't recognize a bunch of Marines who will still smell like Afghanistan.

You'll watch the straight lines of the red headed Lieutenant's new cane, tentatively tapping down the sidewalk. Sometimes the red tip will catch in the sand or on tufts of grass. You'll stand in formation for long hours, watching hundreds of men receive purple hearts and medals for valor. Some awards presented in absentia, others presented posthumously.

Your unit will go to a ceremony in an old basketball gym. The kind with strips of hardwood laid for the court and dry, dusty smell. The kind with large lights in wire cages hanging from a high ceiling. In the center of the court, facing the bleachers and perched on a black easel, will be a blown up photograph of a young man. His photo will be from the chest up, his chin square, his eyes narrowed, and his lips unsmiling. The navy blue dress uniform will say more than his stoic face will. To his right, in a gentle curve facing

the bleachers, will be seven other photographs. The uniform will be the same, but the faces will be different. There will be seven more photographs curving to the left. Your unit will listen in respectful silence to short citations of brief lives, and you'll keep it together during the ceremony. Afterward, you'll go to speak to a new widow and you'll stop by the bleachers. Tears will burn your eyelids and your throat will cinch shut. So you'll watch from a safe distance, hiding under the bleachers, because you won't be able to cry in front of the guys. Some lines will still be too hard to cross.

Later, impressionable young men in college bars will ask you about it. They'll start with softball questions and easy lines of admiration. One will whisper confidential disclosures that he wanted to join, but his Mom wouldn't let him. They'll beat around the bush until they establish what they'll think is enough rapport to ask what they want to know. "Did you kill anyone?" You'll settle on a standard line, one that'll get as hard and smooth as a river pebble.

You'll have to draw lines with family and friends and lovers. What will you tell them, and when? What will you tell your girlfriend in the beginning, and what will you tell her when she wakes you up because you'll scream in your sleep? So you'll plan it out, like a patrol, drawing lines and planning for contingencies. Contingencies for things like the time you'll drunkenly tell your mom about a little blown up boy. You'll plan for those contingencies, and redraw the lines accordingly.