

For all the troops who gave their lives for their country

The Army Chronicles
Book 1

Basics

By
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Basics
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Please note that I use UK English spelling throughout. You will see doubled letters (e.g. focussed), ou's (e.g. colour) and 're' (centre) as well as a few other differences from American spelling.

Foreword

From 1966 to 1994 it was compulsory for white South African males to do military service. As part of their military service it was required to defend the country against any threat from both inside and outside of South African borders. This also led to the South African border war, which spanned from 1966 to 1989. Many young men gave their lives for their country, and many who returned from border duty were so traumatized, they were unable to talk about what they experienced. Even to this day it is impossible for most of those who served in the military and doing border duty, to share with their friends and families as to what they experienced. These books are my attempt to take the reader on a journey to give an insight of what these young men went through. From basics, all through their service and then border duty, or in some cases, the bush war in Angola. Although the characters in this book are fictional, most places and events that follow are not, and are based on what really happened. There were many different military units but our story will focus on 1 South African Infantry Battalion, and our characters

subsequent deployment to 61 Mechanized Battalion. They started their National Service as boys, but finished as men.

Chapter 1

“Are you ready for this?” my mother asked.

I looked at her sun weathered face and the light of the early morning sun that glistened in her soft orange coloured hair.

I sighed. “Not really, but I don’t have a choice.”

That much was true, I didn’t. The government made two years national service compulsory and failure to adhere to your military call up resulted in jail time. I had no desire to go to jail and had no ambitions to make a political statement.

Every year government officials visited every high school, and all boys that turned sixteen that year had to register. There was no place to hide, and no getting away from it, unless something serious was wrong with you.

The previous year was my final year of school and I merrily plotted my future career as a journalist, when I received the big brown envelope in the mail. The moment I saw the “OFFICIAL – CONFIDENTIAL” stamped on it, I knew it contained my call up papers.

On Monday morning the second of February 1987 at 07:00, I had to report at Sturrock Park situated inside Wits University, for the start of my two years National Service.

I haven’t yet fully recovered from my eighteenth birthday party two days earlier, and at that moment I wasn’t sure if the hollow feeling in my stomach was a result of the after affects of the party, or if it was a nervous reaction. I was the only one from my school that was called to 1 South African Infantry Battalion based in Bloemfontein, and to be honest, I did not look forward to it.

From the day I received my call up papers, my father and uncles took great joy in sharing their own army stories with me, which, quite frankly, filled me with horror. None of them were in the infantry, so I hoped desperately that my stories would turn out to be better. They told me the army experience would make me man, but at eighteen, I wasn’t quite ready to be a man yet. Besides, I had a sneaky suspicion that the army and I had different ideas of what it took to be a man.

I opened the backdoor of my mother’s silver Audi and retrieved my kit bag from the back seat. The letter said, only essentials and I hoped my idea of essentials matched theirs. When I closed the door, I caught a glimpse of my tall lanky frame in the reflection of the window. My dusty blond hair blew around in the fresh early morning breeze. I heard how short a haircut in the army was, so in the two months since I finished school, I let mine grow. My father called me a mop head but I failed to see the resemblance.

My mother was a short woman and she had to stretch to place her hands on the sides of my face. There was sadness in her voice.

“Please look after yourself,” she pleaded.

I gave a wry smile and asked, “Don’t I always?”

Before we left the house, she promised she wouldn’t cry, but she couldn’t help it. I saw the tears silently running down her cheeks. She was my mother and through the years had earned the right to have that moment.

I used my thumb to wipe a tear away and said, “Mom, I’ll be alright.”

She smiled at me. “I know.”

She grabbed me and gave me a hug before she kissed me on the cheek. I could see the inner struggle as she said goodbye to her eldest son. I was the first of her four children to leave the nest. I watched as she gave a final wave and drove off. Knowing my mother, the moment she was out of sight, she would bawl her eyes out. I felt sorry for my siblings, because I knew that for the next few days she would smother them with affection, until she got used to the idea of me not being in the house anymore.

I turned my attention to my surroundings. There was a sea of activity, mothers, fathers, wives, girlfriends, grandparents and even children, were saying their last tearful goodbyes. I walked past a young couple who were desperately clinging to each other, both reluctant to let go.

I looked past the crowd of people and saw rows of brown army trucks neatly parked. Their drop sides were raised and the cargo area was covered with a canvas top. The only opening at the back was via the dropped tailgate.

I clutched the brown envelope and approached a large group that gathered. A man in a brown army uniform directed proceedings and I approached him.

“Excuse me sir, is this group for 1 South African Infantry Battalion?”

The man looked me up and down and had a slight smile.

“Welcome to the 1 SAI group, join the rest,” he said and pointed me to a group on my left.

I joined the group and barely put my bag down, when another uniform directed us to one of the waiting trucks. We were herded to the back of the truck, which was fitted with bench seats, two rows back to back along the middle of the truck, and two rows against the side.

An iron hoop attached to the tailgate acted as a step when the gate was down. A guy in uniform with two chevron stripes on each arm ushered us up the step and into the truck. I sat down and from the way we were loaded, I knew it would be a tight squeeze. The young man sitting opposite me had a wild head of flaming red hair, and each hair stood in a different direction. He had a friendly smile on his freckled face, but I could see the fear and uncertainty in his light blue eyes.

“Hi, I am Rex, Rex Dumont,” he said and offered me his freckled hand.

I gripped it and we shook hands in greeting.

“Chris Dempsey,” I said.

He still smiled, and I could see his eyes relax. He made an acquaintance and didn't feel alone anymore. I too felt the knot in my stomach untangle a little.

“So, you also got called to 1 SAI?” he asked.

I just nodded. We watched as the truck filled up, and we were squeezed together with our bags on our laps. We were squeezed like sardines in a can, and the tailgate finally closed.

The uniform with the chevron stripes banged on the side of the truck and yelled, “Driver, this one is ready to go!”

The truck roared to life and jerked forward, throwing us against each other and some awkward glances were exchanged. Every one of us had a feeling of uncertainty, but there were a few that tried to act big and brave. They thought the louder they acted, the braver they looked, but their eyes gave them away. They were just as scared as the rest of us. We made it to the train station in no time. Although it was a Monday, it was early and there was very little traffic through the streets of the city.

Our truck stopped behind another at Johannesburg station. Almost immediately the tailgate was dropped and we were ordered out. I stepped down from the tailgate and looked around at the milling crowd, unsure and uncertain with no purpose. I looked over to the left and there stood a big, black, old fashioned steam engine. A magnificent and shiny monument of an era gone by,

and I realized that I was on the verge of a new era in my life. Whatever happened from that point forward, I knew my life would never be the same.

A man in uniform led us into the building and a few curious early morning commuters watched us file past. An elderly lady said something to her miserable looking husband, and he nodded his head automatically in agreement. From the commuter's point of view, we must have looked like a herd of cattle being led to slaughter. We were taken to the side, down a flight of stairs and onto the train deck.

The train smell hit my nostrils before I stepped onto the platform. I had been on a few trains before, and they always smelled the same. A mixture of iron, old rocks, burnt oil and spent electricity all made up the smell of the train.

More men in brown uniforms directed us onto the waiting train.

"Six per compartment," we were instructed.

I followed the steady stream of people and stepped onto the train. The passageway was narrow on the right side of the carriage and was dimly lit. I tried to follow the guy in front of me into a compartment, but a tall young man with jet black, greasy hair and a sneer on his face blocked the way.

"This one is full, move along," he said.

I ignored him and stepped into the next compartment. There were red cushioned, bench seats on both sides with a luggage rack above and the faint smell of cigarette smoke hung in the air. I was first into the empty compartment, tossed my bag onto the luggage rack and flopped into the seat next to the window. Rex followed me in and dropped his bag on top and sank into the seat opposite me.

Four more filed into the small room, which was only designed for four people, but of course, the army squeezed in six. The last guy was a short, thin young man and I did a double take as he looked too young to be there. He wore glasses, and the luggage case he carried, was almost as tall as him. Not only did he have trouble lifting his case, he was too short to reach the luggage rack. A short thick set guy with spiky blond hair reached out and grabbed the little guy's case.

"Here, let me help you," he said in a deep baritone voice.

Before the little guy could protest, he lifted the case and heaved it onto the luggage rack, the muscles bulging in his powerful arms. The small guy let go of the handle not a moment too soon. If he hung on for a second longer, he would have ended up on the rack with his luggage.

"What you got in there, bricks?" spiky hair inquired, his friendly blue eyes smiling with his face. The scrawny one just pulled up his shoulders and sat down mumbling a thank you.

Once everyone was seated, we all look at each other, wondering what to say.

"So, are you all ready for an adventure?" the spiky guy asked, breaking the uneasy silence.

Everyone stared at him wondering if he had been drinking so early in the morning.

"I'm George by the way, George Cunningham," spiky said.

The little guy looked uncomfortable and mumbled, "Charles Middleton the third."

I smiled. I am a fourth generation Chris Dempsey, but never had the urge to introduce myself as Chris Dempsey the fourth. Nope, I was just plain ordinary Chris that led an ordinary life and was on my way to the army. Charles on the other hand, came from a different circle of society.

"Tommy Bradford," the guy next to me introduced himself.

"Frik Heyns," said the guy on the end.

He was dressed in a khaki shirt, khaki shorts, long light brown socks and brown shoes. He looked like he just stepped off a farm, which he actually did. He later told us he was from a farm near Rustenburg.

Rex and I introduced ourselves and moments later I felt the train come to life. The carriage vibrated when the big diesel units that pulled the passenger compartments fired up. I heard a shrill whistle and, with a slight jerk, the train moved forward. Ahead I heard the roar of the powerful diesel engines as it strained to get the carriages moving. I stared through the window as the train pulled out from the underground station and emerged in bright sunlight. A summer thunderstorm the previous night washed the city pollutants out of the air, leaving the sky a brilliant and clear blue.

The train ride to Bloemfontein took over six hours, and we only had one short stop for fuel. We used the time to get better acquainted. At school, I never had many friends and kept mostly to myself, so needless to say, I was never a member of the popular crowd. Most of the kids in school thought me weird so they left me alone, which was fine by me. I had the occasional girlfriend, but none of my relationships lasted very long. Most of my ex-girlfriends said I was too boring, or mistook my sense of humour for being childish.

That didn't bother me much, although sometimes it did get lonely. When I met Charlotte all that changed, and for once, I thought I met someone that understood me. I was happy, at least until my birthday party. Once again I was alone, until we got on the train together. In the cramped compartment there was no place to hide, and I reluctantly accepted my fate. After all, we were all on the same train and in the same situation.

I found that Rex and I were neighbours. He hailed from Benoni and although I was born in Benoni, I was raised and schooled in the neighbour town, Brakpan. Charles hailed from Sandton, which explained my initial impression. Sandton was on a whole different society level than Brakpan. In fact, I am sure that if you would mention the word Brakpan in Sandton, everyone would think you said a swear word. Tommy and George were both from suburbs around Johannesburg. The ice was broken and everyone started to relax in the company of the others.

At one point George looked at Charles and asked, "Are you sure you should be here?"

Charles looked a little annoyed, and the look on his face was of one who had to deal with remarks like that his whole life, and he was tired of it. We found out later that if it weren't for the fact that he had to do his National Service in the SADF, he would have been at the Jockey Academy. His father was a prominent figure in the South African horse racing community, but not even with all his contacts could he get him out of National Military Service.

Charles pushed his chin out. "I am eighteen and just like you, have no choice but to be here."

George smiled and little devils of mischief were swimming in his blue eyes. He turned and slapped Charles so hard on the shoulder; Charles almost tumbled from the bench.

"No worries sire, I will protect thee," George said.

The rest of the group laughed, but Charles didn't find it funny. I looked carefully at George's face and realized that he wasn't joking. Although his words were said with humour, he would really look out for Charles.

We spent the rest of the trip speculating what lied ahead for the next two years and comparing stories that we heard from relatives. Tommy was the only one in the group that was really excited about the army. He looked forward to having a gun and shooting terrorists. The eagerness and wild look in his eyes concerned me, and when I caught the look that George gave

him, I knew I wasn't the only one. All of us had big plans for the future and none of our plans included being in the army.

Frik from the farm was the biggest surprise. He had no intention of becoming a farmer. His dad wasn't happy with his choice but respected his decision. His older brother already farmed on the family farm, which left him free to follow his heart, to become a world renowned chef. His application was already submitted and accepted. As soon as his two years of military service was done, he would join chef school. We all had hopes and dreams, but for the next two years, everything was put on hold. First we had to serve our country and only then, if we survived, could we live our own lives.

Chapter 2

A low level cloud blanket hovered over Bloemfontein when the train pulled into the station, but I didn't have time to wonder about the weather. Bloemfontein station was much smaller than Johannesburg station, so as we filed out of the train, we swarmed the station. The uniforms were shouting and directing us to the parking lot, where more army trucks waited for us. They were identical to the ones in Johannesburg. Once again, we were piled in, roughly forty per truck.

I heard a know-it-all from the front say, "It's a Samil-50."

When Rex sat down he rubbed his shin. He banged it against the tailgate in his haste to mount the truck. The ride through the city of Bloemfontein was short and I couldn't see much from the back of the truck, but I could see why they call it the city of roses. Lining the streets and in people's yards were roses in full bloom, welcoming us to their glorious city.

We drove through gates with a big sign that announced, "Welcome to Tempe." Once we passed that gate, I knew there was no escape.

There were several forks in the road but the driver kept to the left until we reached two big, solid black gates framed by a small brick guard station. Two guards, dressed neatly in brown uniforms, wearing green berets and shiny brown boots, came to attention as the first truck approached. They shouldered their rifles and opened the gates.

George smiled. "We're expected!"

After the trucks drove through the gates, they reached a T-junction and once again we turned left. The vehicles came to a stop, side by side, on a rugby field, where more uniforms waited for us. Our truck barely came to a halt when one of them yelled at us.

"Get down! Get the hell down from there and line up in a formation!" he yelled.

One guy, in his eagerness to exit the truck, missed the tailgate step and tumbled onto the grass, but he immediately jumped back to his feet. He seemed like someone who fell down a lot.

Most of us had cadet training in school so we knew a little about forming up. We formed in six rows roughly an arm's length apart. Someone with a rank on his shoulders instead of his sleeves, introduced himself as Lieutenant something or the other, and started reading names from a list. We were divided into companies, first Alpha, then Bravo and finally Charlie Company. Frik went to Alpha, Tommy to Bravo and the rest of us ended in Charlie Company. We were not only in the same company, but in the same platoon.

One of the uniforms towered over the others. He was tall and quite thin, at least his length made him appear that way.

He stepped forward and said, "I am Corporal Minnie. Platoon 1, follow me!"

We grabbed our kit and followed the man. We back tracked on the road we came in until we almost reached the gate then turned left. There were six buildings on our right which stood neatly in formation, three rows of two buildings each. All the buildings looked exactly the same, black tin roofs and white walls.

A big sign featuring Heathcliff the cartoon cat, wearing a green beret and holding a rifle announced, "CHARLIE."

The corporal led us past the first building to the one on the far left.

He looked us over then said, "Go inside, choose your bed, then leave your luggage and meet me back here in five minutes!"

We scrambled into the building which had entrances at each end. At the left end where I entered, a small room on my left contained several ironing boards.

Past the ironing room was the showers and the toilets, with a little room to the right that had a closed door. The corporal later informed us that it was the civvy room where we stored all our civilian clothes and personal belongings, or civilian crap, as he put it. I turned right and walked into the main part of the room. The barracks was divided into two sides that mirrored each other and were separated by a two meter high wall down the centre. The know-it-all later informed us it was called a bungalow, not a barracks.

Two rows of beds stood neatly against the walls, and the aisle down the middle shined brightly as the light through the windows reflected of it. I picked the third bed on the left and Rex dropped his kit bag on the one next to me. Charles and George selected the beds opposite us.

"Home sweet home," I muttered and dropped my bag on the bed.

It didn't look very comfortable. Like everything else in the army, it was designed for practical use, not creature comfort.

The bed had a square foam mattress which rested on a foldable iron frame. Next to the bed, a green steel cabinet with sliding doors with space to hang clothes on the one side, and racks for folded clothes and personal items and the other side. The space wasn't much. The cabinet, barely tall enough to accommodate a hanging jacket, was about as wide as the single bed, also the amount of space we had between the beds.

Needless to say, our quarters were a bit cramped, but I would learn to appreciate the space. The floor was covered with light brown linoleum tiles that shone brightly in the light, even with a light layer of dust on the floor. I spent a few moments surveying my surroundings. The room smelled like it stood empty for a while. Apart from the layer of dust, it had that smell of a closed up room, when all the windows were closed and there is no life present. I could feel it coming to life again as beings filled the space once more.

"Come on people we haven't got all day, MOVE IT!" the corporal shouted from outside.

"Why does he always yell?" George asked but moved it, just in case. I ran outside and joined the rest as we formed a formation, this time as a platoon, in only 3 rows.

"You're going to march to the Quartermaster Store where they'll issue you your bedding. Try and keep in formation," the corporal informed us.

We managed to keep the formation quite well, but the marching part was more of a walk than a march, and everyone seemed to walk at their own rhythm.

The stores were across the road behind Charlie Company's bungalows, about three hundred meters away. The corporal ordered us to join the line that already formed. We were to gather our bedding and take it back to our bungalow. When I reached the front of the queue, I received a steel trommel. It was a steel box about 90cm long, 50 cm wide and 30 cm deep, with a lid that can close and handles on the sides.

The trommel contained a feather pillow, two gray blankets, two white linen sheets and two brown towels. I also received a solid stainless steel eating tray with divided sections, which the know-it-all pointed out as, in army slang, a varkpan. We also received a white plastic cup and eating utensils that was referred to as a “pick set”. This consisted of a spoon and fork that fitted together and slid into the hilt of a knife, similar to a butter knife.

I piled everything I received into the trommel, which was now stuffed, and managed to latch it shut while sitting on the lid. Once it was fully loaded I grabbed it by the handles and lifted. It was a hefty weight and with every step towards my bungalow, it got heavier. My arms, legs and back were in serious protest, when I came across someone who stopped to rest. It was Charles, who struggled with the heavy trommel. Next to him it looked like a giant chest.

Charles was red in the face and desperately tried to get oxygen into his lungs. I dropped my trommel behind him and was about to offer to come back and help once I completed my own journey, when I heard the booming voice of George.

“Come on Charlie, you take one side, I’ll grab the other,” he said and slung his own trommel over his shoulder, holding it with only one hand, while he reached for Charles’s trommel with the other.

I could see the bulging muscles in his powerful arms, but he smiled, like it was just an every day excursion for him. George was only half a head taller than Charles, but his stocky frame was packed with power. Charles was too tired to complain and grabbed the other side of his trommel with both hands and staggered along, trying to keep up with George. But he needn’t have worried, George made sure he matched his own pace to that of his little friend.

By the time I made it to my bed, I estimated that my arms stretched by at least five centimetres and that my back was broken in two places, or so it felt. I lay on my bed, trying to fill my lungs with much needed oxygen, when Rex struggled in, his face more red than his hair. He dropped his trommel on the floor and fell on his bed, exhausted.

“My first day and they already attempting to kill me,” he panted.

When I recovered sufficiently, I sat up and looked down the bungalow and saw that everyone was down, well, except for George. He flashed me a smile as he unpacked his trommel. I shook my head and had to wonder if he had his Tarzan oats that morning. Just looking at him tired me out more and I flopped down on the hard bed again.

Everyone tried to catch their breath when the corporal walked in. Nobody noticed him as everyone was occupied with recovery, or with the contents of their trommels.

“What the hell’s going on here!” he shouted.

An eerie silence filled the room and everyone stared at the corporal, who looked like a raving mad lunatic. He could see we were unpacking, so I failed to see the need for his shouting.

“If I or any other rank enters a room where you lower than snail life forms are present, you will jump up and stand to attention. Is that clear?” the corporal shouted at the top of his lungs, his voice echoing through the bungalow.

I had to wonder why he was still shouting as the room was as quiet as an empty church. He could have whispered and everyone would have heard him. We were all frozen in place with whatever we were busy with, but dropped it and jumped to attention.

A few of my fellow newbies nodded their heads, too scared to say a word.

“I said do you understand me?” he shouted again.

The guy nearest to him, totally overcome with fear, shouted at the top of his shrieking voice, “Yes General!”

For a moment the corporal turned several shades of red, and I feared that he might be having a stroke. The tall corporal took one quick step forward, and then he towered over the unfortunate newbie.

“I’m a corporal. I work for my money!” he shouted.

The unfortunate guy being yelled at staggered back until his back was against a wall, and by the look on his face I could see that he wished the wall could swallow him.

“Who are you?” the corporal asked the white faced young man with the slick looking black hair.

The newbie swallowed loudly and said in a squeaky voice, “Herman Meyer, Corporal.”

The corporal stared at him for another few moments, and then swung around and glared at the rest of us.

“Meyer, take the bed by the door. If you see anybody with a rank enter, you make sure everyone knows about it. To make sure you and everyone else will remember it, do a lap around the bungalows!”

Everyone stared at him in stunned silence, disbelief in our eyes, until he bellowed, “NOW!”

Suddenly everyone came to life and we fell over each other, trying to get out the nearest door. My legs were still recovering from carrying my trommel, but I knew there was no protesting, and I better do as I was told. With the crazed corporal glaring at us we found renewed energy and ran. George was the last one back into the bungalow. He was built for strength, not running and everyone stood by their beds at attention when he galloped past to take his place.

The corporal gave a slight sadistic smile then said in a pleasant voice, “As you were.”

When nobody moved he shook his head. “That means you can relax and go back to what you were doing before I walked in.”

Everyone eyed him suspiciously, not relaxing at all.

He sighed and said, “Ok gather around and pay attention, because I’m only going to show you this once.”

He walked over to Rex’s bed, opened his trommel and took out all his bedding. First he threw one sheet over the bed, folding the ends under, and then folded the sides forming a forty five degree fold at the end.

He repeated that on the other side and then spread the second sheet over, ensuring it was to equal lengths on both sides. Then he threw over the grey blanket, which had two stripes down the centre like two train tracks. He made sure the two stripes were centred on the bed and the top end reached to only about a pillow width from the top. He tucked in the bottom end under the mattress, and then folded the top sheet over the end of the blanket.

He used the palms of his hands to smooth out all wrinkles then folded the sides under. To round it off he took the brown towel and laid it across the foot end and tucked the sides neatly under. The bed was made with sure hands which knew where to touch and where not to. He worked with the action and precision that only come from countless hours of practice.

“There, this is what your bed should look like every morning,” he said and looked at the faces around him.

Everyone stared at him in amazement. Nobody had ever seen a bed made that neat before, well, except maybe for Charles. It was neat and smooth, not a wrinkle in sight, the edges square and the folds to a perfect angle. Rex grinned like a prized cat who won the cream, his bed was already made.

“Lights out at twenty two hundred” The corporal said and unceremoniously dumped Rex’s mattress on the floor, and left the barracks.

Rex watched his master piece which lay shattered on the floor, with horror in his eyes.

He waited till the corporal was out of earshot before he said, “Was that really necessary? Now I have to do it over.”

George grinned at him. “Exactly! How else will you learn to do it yourself?”

The rest of the evening we were left alone to get settled in. Ten o’clock exactly I saw the corporal outside the barracks, a smile on his face as he watched the lights go out. I slipped into my bed, which felt strange and out of place. My last thought before I drifted off to restless sleep, was that I survived my first day in the army.

Chapter 3

Five o’clock the following morning, all hell broke loose in the bungalow. We all had a rough night in a strange new environment and we didn’t sleep well. Throughout the night I kept waking up every hour or so, but when it was time to get up, we were all fast asleep. We were oblivious to the lone figure that walked into the bungalow. I could imagine the slight sadistic smile playing on the corporal’s lips before he blew his whistle.

The shrill sound echoed in the confined space as the little ball rattled inside the whistle, yanking us out of our deep sleep. Everyone flew out of bed convinced the world came to an unfortunate end. It took a few seconds of people falling around, tripping over bedding and each other, but eventually everyone stood next to their beds at attention, that is everyone but George. He snored away merrily, caught in the bliss of a dream.

I made eyes at Charles trying to get his attention, dipping my head in George’s direction. Charles’s eventually caught on and his eyes widened as he saw George lying oblivious to the world, under the gray blanket. Charles kicked the bed but there was no reaction from the snoring form on the bed. Unfortunately Charles’s action drew immediate attention and the corporal’s nostrils flared like a race horse who was about to jump the starting gates. He stormed to George’s bed, grabbed the edge of the mattress and tipped the mattress over.

George and the mattress hit the floor at about the same time, but as soon as his body hit the floor, he woke up with a start. George jumped to his feet, his eyes wide with surprise and ready to do battle with the one who dumped him. He saw the corporal glaring at him and instantly flashed a bright smile.

“Good morning Corporal. What a surprise seeing you here,” he said.

The corporal looked at him with astonishment and then shook his head in disbelief. He turned around and said, “Clean up this pigsty. At 06:00 form a squad outside with the rest of the Company then I will escort you to breakfast.”

For about five seconds after the Corporal left the bungalow, everyone stood motionless, and then there was an eruption of frenzied activity. I grabbed my extra towel and shaving kit and made a bee line for the bathroom. I only started shaving the year before and had nothing but a little fluff on my face, but one piece of advice my father gave me before I left home, was to ensure I was clean shaven every morning.

George probably started shaving when he was five. His face was covered with dark stubble that could have scrapped the paint off a tank. Everyone washed, shaved and dressed, and then we proceeded to make our beds as per the corporal’s instruction. Not one single bed in the barracks

looked nearly as neat as the one he made the previous night, but everyone looked at their own beds, quite impressed. It was the neatest bed I ever made and my mother would have been proud.

I grabbed my varkpan, pick set, plastic cup and joined the rest of the Company in front of the bungalows where the corporals were already waiting for us. We were instructed to hold our varkpans and cups in our left hands, leaving our right arms free for marching. We were walked around to the mess building, a large flat roofed structure with double doors at every corner.

We were halted by the front right entrance and a corporal explained the procedure. We were to join the line, get our food and coffee, sit down and eat as fast as humanly possible, then go outside and place our varkpans on the conveyer belt of an industrial dish washer. Two guys doing kitchen duty stood at the other end of the dishwasher, and stacked the clean pans in a pile.

Once your pan is on the conveyer belt, there is a big tub set up with soapy water, to clean your cup and pick set. You'll then grab a clean varkpan from the pile and you were on your way, a nice fluent and efficient operation. It also meant that every day you got a different varkpan and sometimes the one you got was quite banged up, as you were not allowed to search through the pile for a suitable one, you had to grab whichever one was on top.

The food definitely was not my mother's home cooking but it was edible. Every morning was basically the same, with only minor differences. We got porridge, powdered eggs, and on the rare occasion bacon or a pork banger, with bread or toast. I learned later that we received toast once the bread got stale. The portion on my pan that morning seemed generous enough. My father and uncles were in agreement that the food was never enough and it took a few days of running around for me to say the same, but that first few days, it seemed a lot.

By seven o'clock breakfast was done and we were back in the bungalow discussing what we had for breakfast, when the Corporal walked in.

"Stand up!" yelled Herman Meyer in panic.

Everyone dropped whatever they were doing and we all jumped to attention and an immediate silence fell over the entire bungalow. In the distance I heard the clanging of pans from the mess hall and Rex was panting as he came running from somewhere. The corporal glared at us, unappreciative of our prompt response to his presence.

"Form up outside," he growled.

We hurried to store our breakfast equipment and scampered outside to join the other platoons to form in company formation. Ten minutes later we still stood at attention, waiting for the corporals who all stood together to the side, discussing something.

"What are they waiting for," George asked in a whisper.

Nobody answered, too scared the corporals might hear. After what felt like at least half an hour, one of the corporals from another platoon walked over.

"We're going for a little walk," he said.

He made it sound so nice, like we were about to take a walk through a botanical garden. I almost look forward to it.

He walked/marched us through the main gates and down the street.

"Where're we going?" Charles wondered, but only loud enough that those immediately around him could hear.

I shook my head and said, "Maybe they think we're hopeless and are marching us home," but I knew it was wishful thinking.

We continued to walk, past the entrance where we came in the day before, and quite a few of us looked longingly passed the gates to the outside world, but there was no getting out for us. We continued on and walked past the gates of 1 Parachute Battalion on our left.

We carried on with the road until we reached a sport stadium and the corporal brought us to a halt.

“Listen up,” he said with authority and everybody paid attention.

“When you get inside, you’ll strip down to your underwear and join the line. Once the examination is finished, you’ll get dressed and join the squad outside. There will be a lunch pack waiting for you and once there are enough people; one of the corporals will take you back to the base. Dismiss!” he ordered, but no one dismissed.

We all stared at him like he was a creature from outer space. I looked to the left and saw the same question on Rex’s face that was on my mind.

“What examination?”

The corporal didn’t give us time for any further questioning.

“What the hell are you waiting for? Get your butts inside!” he barked.

The Company dissolved and we scampered inside.

The hall was a large building that was used for some assembly functions, but that day, all furniture were cleared out. To the right were a few foldable benches where we could remove our clothes, and the opposite side of the hall was setup as a medical test centre. I stripped down to my red underwear and was very thankful. For once, I listened to my mother and ensured that I wore clean underwear every day. If I had to stand there in dirty underwear I could imagine her standing in front of me, waving a finger in my face saying, *“I told you so!”*

I gathered my shoes and clothes in a bundle and joined the line.

“Next!” a man shouted, dressed in a brown uniform with a red beret that was folded and tucked into the lapel on his shoulder.

My turn arrived and I walked forward.

“Name and number?” he inquired.

“Huh?” I replied.

He glared at me and I could see he had to restrain himself.

“What is your name and army number?” he asked more slowly.

“Oh,” I said and supplied the necessary information.

He made a note on a pad.

“Any illness or allergies?” he asked without looking up.

“No,” I replied nervously.

The man placed the clipboard next to him then slipped his latex covered hand in my underwear and gripped my jewels. I could feel everything shrinking and had to resist the urge to smack him, as face turned red. At school I found myself in many uncomfortable situations in the principal’s office, but none of that came even close to how I felt at that moment, utterly and completely violated.

He squeezed a little and said, “Cough!”

With my future in his hands, I was too scared to say anything, so I gave my best fake cough.

The doctor removed his hand and at that moment, I was grateful that he looked at the writing pad in front of him and not at my face. I’m sure with the look I gave him, he would have classified me as a psychopath, and to be honest, I had more than a few murderous thoughts at that moment.

He completed his writing and handed me a piece of paper and pointed me to the next station and yelled, “Next!”

I moved towards the next doctor who put a cold stethoscope against my skin and listened to my heart, which after the jewel incident, was beating at twice the normal rate. He shone a light in my eyes and ears, looked at my throat, wrote something else on the piece of paper and directed me to the next guy. I followed the line of examinations where they tested my eyes and ears and at the last station the doctor stamped "G1K1" on my paper and yelled for the next victim.

Before the exit I got dressed and joined the others outside. I saw quite a few pale faces. Everyone was quite rattled by the medical examination and I was glad that I wasn't the only one that felt violated by it. It was only George who came out smiling.

"That first doctor looked quite impressed," he said.

We were handed a lunch pack consisting of a ham sandwich, banana and a cool drink and when the group was big enough, we were walked back to the 1 SAI base, and nobody said a word. In the months ahead we would discuss many things concerning our army training but nobody ever referred to that examination again.

Back in the base I learned that if you were classified G1K1, you were ready to go, meaning you were physically and mentally fit for army duty. A few were classified G3K3 and were escorted to join another Company where they would be more involved with administrative duties. There were a few that was classified G5K5 and they were ordered to immediately get all their civvy belongings and get on a waiting truck. They were sent home, medically unfit for military training, thus of no further use for the army and not another minute would be wasted on them.

George, Rex and I were all classified G1K1, which was hardly a surprise, but that little Charles was also G1K1 was a bit of a shock. He was so small I was sure they would send him home. Of course, he was all smiles and even got a gently slap on the back from George, which almost knocked him over.

I shook my head. "George, if you keep slapping him like that he won't stay G1K1 for long."

Both George and Charles grinned at me.

We heard that Tommy was classified as G5K5 because of a heart murmur, and I found that rather ironic. He was the only one of our initial group on the train that wanted to be there in the first place. A corporal collected our medical cards, made a note in a register and directed us to another building across from our bungalow, where a line already formed. When I got closer I saw it was a barber and we were about to get our first military haircuts.

When it was my turn I entered and saw there was three barber's chairs and walked to the vacant one on the left. A young man in brown uniform continuously swept the floor and had a hard time keeping up with all the fallen hair. The barber's wasted no time. The man that approached me was getting slightly bald and not a friendly line anywhere on his face. Without a word he slung the barber's apron around me and tied it behind my neck. The actual haircut was quick and effective. He would take the hair clippers, push it in the front and pull it out the back. With a few practiced and precision strokes, all my hair was laying around me on the floor. Before I could even mourn the loss of my hair, the sweeper guy already swept them into the growing pile in the corner.

I got out of the chair to make way for the next guy when I heard George's voice.

"Just a little off the top and trim the sides please," he asked politely.

His barber grinned and said, "Sure, no problem," and in and out went the clippers.

I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the door as I exit the room and saw a boy of eighteen staring back at me. George swore under his breath as he came out, his spikes were gone and only the roots were left.

George, Charles and I waited for Rex, discussing our incredible short hairstyles, when a boy with freckles came to stand next to us, rubbing his head. We ignored him as we didn't know him and continued our conversation.

"What are we waiting for?" the boy asked and we gaped at him.

It was only when he spoke that we realized it was Rex. His wild red top was gone and the face that was left, looked too young and innocent to be in the army. I doubt even his own mother would have recognized him at that moment.

Once everyone in the platoon had a haircut, we were ordered to form up again and were marched up to the QM stores once more. Now that we were classified army legal, it was time we were issued with our kit. First, we were given a brown sausage like canvas kitbag, where we would put all our kit in. The know-it-all informed us that in army slang, it was called a balsak, which literally translated to a ball bag.

We received two brown overalls, a floppy bush hat, and a canvas utility belt to be worn with said overalls, three pair of light brown army socks, three pair of army underpants, two brown army t-shirts, two brown army vests, two pair of black rugby shorts, a pair of brown army boots, and a pair of gray exercise shoes that could be best described as army sneakers. We also received two one litre water bottles, and a canvas water bottle holder that slipped onto the utility belt.

We were ordered back to our bungalow and were told to change into overalls and boots. All our civvy gear was locked away in the civvy room and from that point forward, we would wear only army gear inside the base. We were warned that if we were caught wearing any civvy clothes, that it would be met with dire consequences and we had no desire to find out what that would be.

"What's taking so long?" the corporal shouted from outside.

Everyone hurried as fast as they could and I felt very uncomfortable. The army underwear fitted, but with wearing only the overall, I felt half naked. The next time I got dressed, I made sure to wear a pair of shorts underneath. The boots were new and hard and it took me a few moments to figure out the laces, which were so long I had to wrap the ends twice around the top of the boot and then tied it in a double knot. My uncle Gabriel gave me that advice. He said that you don't want your laces to come undone while you were marching or running because there would be no stopping to tie them.

When done, I saw Rex had trouble with his laces. I quickly explained and helped him, while Charlie assisted George. Charlie's overall was two sizes too big but that was the smallest they had. When done, the four of us ran outside to join the platoon formation but we were some of the first ones there. By now the corporal got impatient, blowing on his whistle and yelling constantly.

When the last person eventually joined, the Corporal said, "Boys, you got to stop dragging your heels, you see that fence over there, you have thirty seconds to touch it and be back. GO!"

The Corporal referred to the fence around the stores, about two hundred meters away. It took us more than thirty seconds just to get to the fence. The new boots was heavy and very uncomfortable to run in, but we were all in the same boat. This meant that George was even slower than usual. He was only halfway back when we were all formed.

"You didn't make it, try again!" the corporal yelled and sent us back again.

George saw us coming and wasted no time in making a U-turn for the fence. Even with his head start he was still the last one back. My chest burned and my legs felt like jelly and I was one of the more fit rookies who were used to running, but not with that heavy boots. Luckily the corporal decided we made it that time, or he knew that another run could have resulted in a few heart attacks. I heard heavy panting all around me and quite a few sighs of relief when we didn't have to run again.

The corporal gave us a few moments to catch our breaths and then chased us back into our bungalow to fetch our eating utensils for dinner. The same routine followed as for breakfast, we gathered as a Company and walked/marched around to the mess hall. The corporal asked for a volunteer to say grace, but nobody wanted to do it. Charlie put up his hand, and said he didn't mind to do it.

The corporal called him forward and he had to stand in front of everyone. The corporal then ordered everyone to remove their bush hats, fold it and stick it in the left lapels of their overalls. Charlie said grace and when done, he wanted to take his place, but the corporal ordered him to the front of the line. From that day forward there was no shortage of volunteers to say grace because it meant that you would eat first.

After dinner we went to our bungalows and were pretty much left alone for the rest of the evening to pack away our kit and get settled. It was around eight o'clock when the corporal and another man in uniform came in. Herman spotted them approaching.

"STAND UP, STAND UP!" he yelled, almost in a panic.

Everyone jumped up and when the two entered, everyone stood at attention.

The other man looked at the corporal and smiled. Corporal Minnie introduced the man as Lieutenant Raymond, our platoon commander, who formally welcomed us to Platoon 1 Charlie Company. We were informed that after dinner we could change into T-shirts and PT shorts, unless the corporal had other ideas. The Lieutenant proceeded to read a piece from the bible and said a prayer. That also became a regular evening event except for weekends. Sometimes the Lieutenant had news or wise words of encouragement and sometimes, when the corporal had a bad day with us, the words were rather harsh. He also gave us our addresses and instructed us how to inform our loved ones how to write to us. That evening we all wrote letters to be sent home.

After they left we sat around and looked through our brand new kit, most of it came from plastic bags and still had that new smell. Compared to the corporal's faded browns, ours was still bright and shouted out "ROOKIE", but I had no doubt that in a year's time, our browns would be quite faded too.

Before the clock struck 22:00 the lights were switched off. I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. It was not completely dark in the bungalow as there were security lights all over the base that casted an eerie yellow light that filtered into the bungalow. Seeing that there were no curtains to cover the windows, we were never quite in the dark.

I thought of my life before the army and the girlfriend that I left behind. I didn't even know if she was still my girlfriend. The night before I left we had a big argument about something stupid and she left without saying goodbye. I wrote a letter of apology and could only hope that she would read it and not throw it away unopened. I drifted off to sleep and my last thought before I was lost in the land of dreams, I was in the army and there was no turning back. I knew the worst was still to come.

Chapter 4

Five o'clock the next morning I was happily in the arms of my girlfriend when the shrill, annoying sound of the corporal's whistle yanked me from my blissful dream. I struggled to my feet, trying to free myself from the blanket and came to attention next to my bed.

When the chaos quieted the Corporal said, "Breakfast at 06:00 and inspection at 07:00," and he promptly exited the building.

"What inspection?" George demanded to know, as if we were privy to information that he never received.

Maybe he thought the Corporal snuck into the bungalow and whispered special instructions to us while he slept. I pulled up my shoulders and picked my blanket from the floor.

"He probably wants to see if we can make our beds," the know-it-all offered and George just grunted.

George was not a morning person and the army seemed to make his condition worse, but luckily he always cheered up after breakfast. I looked over at Rex and with that sleepy face he had, I could appreciate the army's short haircut policy, because I could only imagine what his wild red top would have looked like.

Breakfast was a very hurried affair that morning as it seemed all the other companies and platoons received the same orders. We simply scooped our food down and Charlie started eating as soon as the food dropped on his pan. He never was a fast eater. His entire life his mother taught him to eat slowly and chew properly. If only she knew what would happen in the army she could have taught him some speed eating instead. Rex didn't have that problem; he could easily win a hotdog eating contest.

"Just swallow, we'll chew later," George offered his advice.

Once we made it back to our bungalows, there was a panic of activity. I stored my eating utensils and got to work on my bed. When done, I took a step back and admired my handiwork, Mother would have been proud. My bed at home never looked that good. At home I would only pull the covers back and made a meek attempt to straighten it. I could only imagine Corporal Minnie's face if he saw my bed at home. It was a good thing my mom wasn't a corporal or I would have done laps around the block every morning.

Someone saw the corporal approached.

"Chips, the corporal is on his way," he shouted.

We all stood at attention next to our beds, all neatly made, our cabinets closed and trommels orderly in front of our beds.

Herman shouted, "STAND UP," when the corporal entered, but that was a waste of breath, we were ready for him.

The corporal walked down the aisle, slowly, his hands together behind his back. He looked at us in disgust, like we were something the cat dragged in.

"First of all, I want you all to stand at the foot end of your beds on the right side," he said in a pleasant voice, but when nobody moved he spoiled it by shouting, "NOW!"

Everyone scurried. Charlie was already at the right side, but the sound of the corporal's voice convinced him that he was on the wrong end and ran around to the other side of his bed. When he realized that he stood next to George, he gave a sheepish grin and moved back to where he was.

The Corporal stopped in the middle of the bungalow, spread his arms wide.

"You call these beds made properly?" he asked.

He threw his arms in the air.

“Didn’t I show you how to make a bed? Do you think I’m your mother who’s going to do it for you every morning?”

I looked down at my bed, convinced mine was the best he had ever seen.

“You all listen like your asses. All of you dump your beds. Come on, dump them on the floor. NOW!” he shouted.

I very reluctantly flipped my perfectly made bed onto the floor. “I’ll be back in ten minutes and when I return, they better look like I showed you,” he instructed and left the bungalow.

Fifteen minutes later he returned and stood at the bottom of the aisle and without even as much as a glance at the beds asked, “Meyer, look down this line. Is everyone in a straight line?”

Herman Meyer looked at him confused and asked, “Huh Corporal?”

The corporal stood at the end of the bungalow and looked down the line of people standing by the end of their beds.

“Are they in a straight line?” he asked again, slowly, as if Herman wouldn’t understand if he talked any faster.

Herman blinked his eyes and looked at him very nervously, then looked down the line and could see the line was everything but straight.

“Eh, no Corporal,” Herman said.

“Dump the beds” he ordered.

There were quite a few that murmured under their breath as they dumped their hard work on the floor.

“What is that?” the corporal asked.

“Some of you don’t look happy. Maybe a lap or two around the bungalows will improve your mood. GO!” he shouted.

We scampered, some fell over the bedding that lay all over the place. The corporal waited by the door when we returned.

“Clean up this mess, I’ll be back in 10 minutes then we’ll have another inspection.”

“I don’t understand what standing in a straight line has to do with the beds,” George muttered as he picked his bedding from the floor and tossed it on the bed in frustration.

Rex sighed and placed his mattress back on the bed.

“Yes, my poor bed was innocent bystander in all this,” he said.

Twenty minutes later when the corporal walked in, we stood at attention, all lined up.

Before the corporal arrived, Herman made sure we lined up in a straight line. The corporal looked at the beds as he walked down the aisle.

He stopped at a bed in the middle.

“Do you have two shoe brushes?” he asked the private.

The rookie swallowed hard and said, “Yes corporal!”

He ducked down in his cabinet and produced two shoe brushes and handed them over.

The corporal called everybody closer.

“This is how you square the edges of your bed,” he said.

He turned the brushes upside down and used the wooden part to straighten out the wrinkles on the blanket and then used the two brushes to pinch the edge from the top and side of the blanket together to form a square edge. With a deft touch from lots of practice and experience he transformed the bed to resemble a square matchbox. Even the towel by the foot end was squared.

“Does anybody have an extra toothbrush?” he asked.

“Yes Corporal,” Rex said and produced a green toothbrush that he removed from its packaging.

With a shoe brush the corporal brushed the fibres of the towel one way, and then followed the two lines of the blanket and extended the lines onto the towel, he used the toothbrush and brushed the fibres in the opposite direction leaving two tracks visible on the towel.

Satisfied with his work he said, "This is what your bed should look like."

We all stared at him in disbelief convinced he was joking, but he wasn't.

He smiled and said, "Twenty minutes and I will be back for another inspection."

He tossed the bed and left us flustered to work on our beds.

Twenty minutes later Herman again shouted, "STAND UP!"

I realized I still had my toothbrush in my hand and it disappeared into the pocket of my overalls, while I made a mental note to buy a new toothbrush from the canteen that evening.

The corporal walked in and we stood in line by our new masterpieces. It didn't look quite as good as the one he made earlier, but it was a major improvement on our earlier attempts. He walked slowly down the aisle, looking at each bed. Once he reached the end, he turned and walked to Rex's cabinet and slid the door open. A whistle escaped his lips, hardly believing his eyes at the mess. Everything in the cabinet was dumped onto the bed.

He proceeded to demonstrate how to fold the T-shirts, socks, underwear and how to stack them neatly in the rack section of the steel cabinet, and how to hang the spare overall on the hanging side without it getting wrinkled. The bottom shelf contained our shaving and bath stuff, but everything was placed nice, neat and in order.

"This is how your cabinets will look every day," he said.

Rex looked at me with raised eyebrows, silently questioning the workability of the instruction. Compared to Rex, I was a neat freak.

The corporal then proceeded to the trommel. He took the empty balsak and folded the edge over to the depth of the trommel. He then manufactured a square box from the balsak inside the trommel, and placed it neatly on the right side. He laid the spare towel at the bottom of the trommel and neatly organized the varkpan, cup and pick set as you would do a place setting.

"This is how your trommels will look. I'll be back in thirty minutes for inspection," he said.

Rex smiled from ear to ear after the corporal left. His stuff wasn't dumped and served as an example for the rest of us.

For the remainder of the morning and afternoon we worked on getting our beds, cabinets and trommels nice and neat. If the corporal was unhappy with even one private's inspection, he would order us to dump all our stuff and start over. A few laps around the bungalows ensured that there was no moaning and we did what we were ordered to do. Inspections carried on till dinner time. After dinner we had time for ourselves until the Lieutenant came around for bible reading and prayer. By 22:00 the lights were already out and everyone fast asleep.

The next morning after breakfast and inspection, the whole Company was told to line up in formation. We were marched around the parade ground, through an open area to a big shiny building made almost entirely out of tin sheeting. Once the corporals brought us to a halt, we filed into the building. In the centre of the building was a boxing ring, with temporary stands all around.

"Ah great, we are going to see a boxing match," George said sounding excited.

I shook my head. "I doubt it. It's probably a welcome speech."

George's face dropped with disappointment.

From the other side I could see young men from Alpha and Bravo Companies also entering. Once all seated, we found my guess was right, it was speech time. Colonel Peter

Hammond formally welcomed all the rookies to 1 South African Infantry battalion. He told us what a pleasure it was to have us there and that we will all benefit from our time spent there. They would make us all into useful soldiers so that we could serve our country with pride. I didn't much like the sound of that but had no choice in the matter, the wheels were in motion and there was no getting off.

After the speeches were done and we were properly motivated, we formed a formation again outside in our respective Companies. From there we were marched to the stores to receive more kit. We received two pair of brown pants, two brown shirts, a green beret, with a badge that was in a packet in the shape of a springbok head. The corporal would show us at a later time how to attach it correctly to the beret. We also received a brown jersey, a bush jacket and a big coat that was lined on the inside with something that resembled brown sheep skin.

We returned to our bungalows, and surprisingly, for the rest of the afternoon and evening were left on our own, not even a visit from the lieutenant. That gave us a chance to get acquainted with our new kit. The corporal did order us to stow it away once we were done looking at it, because we weren't going to use any of it till the end of basics. Our normal daily dress was overalls, brown boots, floppy bush hat and the web belt with a water bottle attached to it.

The following morning after breakfast and inspection we were again ordered to line up in formation and were marched out the main gates, or at least a march was attempted. The corporal tried to keep us in tempo with a, "left, right, left, right," but although the majority could march to tempo, some were just completely out of sync and that made the whole thing look disorganized.

"Now where are we going?" George asked.

I wondered the same thing. "Maybe it's more medical tests?" I ventured a guess.

The corporal put an end to the chattering when he shouted, "I hope it is not yapping I hear back there!" and everyone was quiet.

We marched past the Tempe entrance, past the entrance to 1 Parachute Battalion, back to the sport stadium. This time however, we were made to sit in the stands of the stadium. Soon we were joined by other privates in different sections of the stands, troops from 1 Parachute Battalion and 1 Special Services Battalion. On the rugby field, on a raised wooden platform, was a speech podium made from solid wood, covered in a dark brown varnish. It was another speech, a special welcome by the Tempe Commander, Brigadier James Theron. The message was almost identical to the one we heard the day before, only on a larger scale.

After the welcome we were led to the back of the stadium, where a whole line of friendly elderly women were set up behind tables. They were from the Southern Cross foundation and handing out gift packs to the new troops on behalf of the State President's wife. After we received our gift packs of an imitation brown leather zip pouch that contained a pen, writing pad, envelopes, nail clippers, pocket knife and pocket book, we were marched back to our bungalows.

Apart from attending mandatory church service the Sunday morning, we had the weekend to ourselves. That evening Rex, Charlie, George and I were discussing what might lay ahead for us.

"I heard from a guy in HQ that from tomorrow things are going to change," Charlie said.

We looked at him puzzled.

"Change, how?" George asked.

Charlie pulled up his shoulders. "I don't know. He just said that the holiday is over and that tomorrow our training starts in earnest."

We looked at each other, an uneasy feeling flooded over us. Nobody liked the sound of what we heard. We took comfort in the fact that we were all in it together.

Chapter 5

At 04:40 I was yanked from the arms of my girlfriend by the Corporal's shrill whistle. The previous week I got used to the whistle, but that Monday morning it sounded more sinister and menacing. It had a new purpose. The corporal stood in the doorway and didn't even give us time to fall out of our beds.

"You have five minutes to get dressed and form outside," he shouted.

I jumped into my overalls while Rex still struggled with his blanket.

"I wonder what this is all about," he said before his foot got tangled and he fell over onto his bed.

I grabbed the blanket and pulled it from him before he hurt himself.

"I think this is the start of the nightmare," I said.

George grunted. "I'm sure nothing good can come of this."

Once dressed, we ran outside and lined up in platoon formation. I looked over to our left and saw that the guys from Platoon 2 were going through the same exercise. One by one our guys joined and Clive De Klerk was the last. He was voted Bungalow Bill for the week, which meant he had to close the door once he ensured everyone else was out.

"Didn't I say five minutes?" the Corporal asked.

Before anyone could even think of an answer, he said, "You think you can do things in your own time. You think this is civvy street? The holiday is over. Your ass belongs to me now! You see that tree on the edge of the parade ground? Around it you go!"

We scampered for the tree. It was still a young tree, no taller than two meters, but covered with leaves, looking happy at all the attention it got. I always loved to run, and even with the heavy boots, I was one of the first ones back. One by one the rest formed up again, with George bringing up the rear. The corporal did not look happy.

"I said RUN around the tree. You lot looked like you were out for a Sunday afternoon stroll. Do you think this is a fucking vacation? There you go again!"

He was shouting so loud, I was sure they could hear him all the way to town. As we turned towards the tree, I saw the other Platoons were also running all over the place, with their corporals shouting after them.

By the time George caught up and formed with the rest of the Platoon, most of us were still trying to catch our breaths. The corporal still wasn't happy and we had to run again. After the fourth time my legs felt heavy and my lungs were in serious protest. George looked like he was about to pass out, his eyeballs bulging in their sockets as he desperately tried to fill his lungs with much needed oxygen. The corporal stood there and looked at us with a slight smile and a sadistic twinkle in his eye.

"Breakfast at six, inspection at seven," he said and then we were dismissed.

"What was the point of that?" Rex asked as we staggered back into the bungalow.

"Probably to get us fit," Charlie offered.

"More like stuffing us around," George said.

I looked down out my dusty boots that shined so brightly earlier.

"Or to dirty our boots," I said and everyone groaned.

We had to re-polish and shine our footwear before breakfast.

“I think we better get used to this because I’m sure this is not the last time this is going to happen,” I said.

The others agreed and we were not looking forward to it.

Breakfast was an even hastier affair than normal that morning. By the time I got to the table, my pan was already half empty. We wolfed our food down and if you asked anyone what they had for breakfast that morning, I’m sure you would’ve gotten several different answers.

We hurried back to the bungalow and when Herman shouted, “Stand up!” everyone still scampered around like ants. The corporal started his inspection with Herman.

“This bed looked like a whore slept in it,” he said and tossed it on the floor.

As far as he went, beds were tossed. No one escaped the carnage.

“You have five minutes to clean up this pigsty and form up outside,” he ordered.

We didn’t even wait for him to leave before the bungalow erupted in activity. I’ve never made a bed so quickly in all my life. It was only a few days, but I already got better at making my bed. No wonder the corporal made it look so easy when he showed us how to do it, because I would’ve bet my girlfriend on the fact that he did it many times when he did basic training.

When my living space was in order, I ran outside to join the rest of the platoon.

When Clive joined, the corporal shouted, “I said five minutes not fifteen, around the tree!”

About halfway back from our second trip around the tree, I heard Rex, who was a few lengths behind me.

“Tonight I am chopping that fucking tree down!”

I looked around at him and said, “That won’t help because he would just find something else to chase us around, probably something further.”

By the time George joined, I got my breath back and got ready for another run.

“Now that you have cleared the cobwebs and have some fresh air in your lungs, it is time for your first drill lesson,” he said to our surprise.

I could hear George at the other end of the platoon sigh with relief. The corporal tried to hide his smile but I caught a glimpse of it.

“When I say, stand at ease, this is what you do,” he said and demonstrated.

Instead of standing at attention he moved his left leg so there was about a shoulder length gap between his feet. He put his hands behind his back and relaxed his shoulders.

“This is how you stand at ease. Platoon, stand at ease!” he ordered and half the squad followed the command while the other half were about a second behind.

The Corporal shook his head and I could see the look on his face said *Pathetic*.

He sighed then said, “When I say, PLATOON, you come to a state of readiness by standing up straight and straighten your arms behind your back. Ok, let’s try it. PLATOON!”

If it weren’t for the fact that the corporal stood in front of us with a very serious disapproving look on his face, I would have busted out laughing. Some of the guys looked like they received an electric shock, and stiffened from head to toe.

“Stand at ease.”

We practiced that until we could do it in unison, then the corporal moved to the next drill, coming to attention. He demonstrated how you lift your left leg so your thigh formed a ninety degree angle before you slammed your foot down next to the other in a sharp, crisp motion.

He would shout, “Attention!” and as the last letter fell, we had to slam our feet down. On the first try, it sounded like someone tossed a hand full of ball bearings on a tin roof, clattering around for about a second. After a few laps around the tree, and some practice, the forty feet that came down on the hard compressed dirt, almost sounded like one.

Next was the left turn, right turn and about face commands. We had to do it on the count of, “1 ... 2 ... 3 ... 1. Where on the first one you would turn, and on the second one you would slam your foot into place. I suspected there were a few dyslexic people in the squad who didn’t know their left from their right. When the corporal ordered left turn, they would turn right and every time that happened we would run. After a few laps around the tree, George threatened the dyslexic individuals with grievous bodily harm, which I found was an instant cure for dyslexia.

The last drill of the morning, and the one that we used most over the next few months, was the double time march. We had to run in sync to the corporal’s orders and pace of, “left ... right ... left ... right,” and then had to learn to stop as a unit on the, “HALT!” command. I was convinced the corporal didn’t like us and tried to get rid of us. Just when we were ready to drop, he called tea time.

We had to run back to the bungalow to fetch our plastic cups, and two rookies were sent to the kitchen to fetch the stainless steel urn that contained cool drink. It tasted like orange flavoured water but nobody complained. Everyone was thankful for the cold liquid and the welcome break.

Taking a sip from his plastic cup, George said, “I think the corporal is out to kill us.”

He threw a suspicious glance at the corporal, who sat to the side, sipping from his own cup staring at something in the distance.

“Maybe if he thinks he can kill us off, they would give him a better platoon,” Rex ventured a guess.

I sighed. “Yes, that would make sense. We sure look and sound like a sorry bunch. I don’t see the other platoons running half as much as we do.”

Charlie walked over, cup in hand, smiling from ear to ear.

“This is fun,” he said.

We stared at him wondering what was in his cup. George grabbed his arm and pulled Charlie’s cup to his nose and sniffed the contents.

“Maybe he suffers from heat stroke,” Rex guessed.

“You have two minutes to put your cups away,” the corporal shouted, cutting our analysis of Charlie’s mental health short.

We all scattered back to the bungalow, dropped our cups in our trowsers and formed again, standing at attention.

“Didn’t I say that when you line up in formation you stand at ease?” The corporal asked.

“No Corporal, I think we missed that part,” said a tall skinny guy named Frankie, the know-it-all.

“Around the tree!” shouted the corporal and off we went.

“Idiot!” I heard George snarl at Frankie as I round the tree.

We formed again, standing at ease. The corporal brought us to attention.

“What the hell are you looking at private? Do I look like a hamburger? Look straight ahead, not at me!” he shouted and several pairs of eyes swung straight ahead.

We did a right turn and then he took us on a run, double time march, all the way around the parade ground till we approached the big shiny tin building.

When the Corporal brought us to a halt, I glanced to the left and saw rows of tents that were setup as outdoor classrooms, complete with a table and an instruction board. The corporal led us to one of the tents and told us to make ourselves comfortable on the ground. He called two newbies forward and asked them to hand everyone a notebook and a pen. We got our first lesson,

which was about the history of the South African Military. By the end of the lesson, every one of us felt a little more pride in being there and being part of history in the making.

After the lesson, we broke for lunch. The corporal marched us double time back to the bungalow to get our eating utensils. Lunch consisted of sandwiches, tee and a banana. After we scoffed down the food, we had fifteen minutes to ourselves before we had to form again for afternoon lessons. That day I learned the painful truth of afternoon lessons. It was a form of torture devised by a very sick individual. The corporal would stand in front talking in his most boring voice, while we would fight to stay awake. Of course, we lost. If the corporal saw too many nodding heads, we had to run to the fence, about hundred and fifty meters away.

That evening I looked at my notebook and laughed at my notes. It started out fine, but as I was overcome by tiredness, my notes turned into unreadable scribbles that didn't even stay in a straight line. It started out straight but then did a right turn until it disappeared off the bottom of the page. I showed it to the others and was relieved that I wasn't the only one. Rex and George's notebooks looked the same. It was just eager eyed Charlie who managed to stay awake. No matter how boring the lesson, he found it interesting. That led to a whole new discussion about his mental health. By 22:00 the lights were off and every one of us was already long gone to dreamland.

Chapter 6

04:30 the following morning, when the corporal arrived to wake the platoon, we were already up. Due to the dust the previous morning on my boots, I decided to leave them for last. I polished but did not shine them. The corporal ordered us to a formation, and we ended doing four laps around the tree. Once he was satisfied that we were dusty and tired enough, he left us to go to breakfast and get ready for morning inspection.

George walked over to me and asked, "What is up with that lot?"

He was pointing at three people from platoon 3 that stood separate from the rest of their platoon, one on crutches. I had no idea.

The know-it-all walked past.

"Hey Frankie, what's up with them?" I asked.

Frankie looked in the direction where I pointed.

"If you're sick or injured, the medics put you on light duty for a few days. You are not allowed to run or do strenuous exercise while on LD. I heard the guy with the crutches stepped in a hole when their Corporal made them run the first day. He ran around for two days before he finally went to see the medics. They found that he broke his ankle," Frankie said.

I smiled at Frankie and said, "Thanks."

He nodded and darted into the bungalow.

George shook his head. "That guy is a walking encyclopaedia."

Rex snorted and said, "More like a poking his nose in everyone's business clopaedia."

"Knowing a guy like that might come in handy," I said.

I took one last look at the light duty squad and before they disappeared behind their bungalow, I swear I heard one of the guys said, "Blue ... blue ... blue"

Herman stood sentry by the door of the bungalow and made sure everyone removed their dusty boots before entering. The floor had already been shined for inspection and the dirty boots would have ruined it.

“All this running is going to be the death of me,” said George as he pulled his boots from his aching feet.

“Either that or it will turn you into a star athlete,” I replied and had to duck in a hurry. A flying boot whizzed past my head, and hit the wall behind me with a dull thud.

I turned my attention to the task of shining my boots, and the trick of not shining it earlier worked rather well. George and Rex had to re-polish their boots while Charlie and I only buffed ours. Rex looked rather miserable because George had him convinced our trick would not work and that made double work for him.

“That was the last time I listen to you,” he mumbled.

After breakfast the Corporal arrived for inspection and found fault with everything. We were in for a lot more running that day, because the corporal’s mood seemed more foul than usual.

We did four laps around the tree before we even started drill practice. The other platoons were marching merrily up and down the parade ground while we were doing laps around our favourite tree. One guy from platoon 3 made a snide remark as we ran past them. George turned around.

“I know where you sleep,” he shouted at the guy.

Even from a distance I noticed the guy turned pale and swallowed hard. George’s reputation spread quickly and I was rather glad he was our friend. Some of the guys gave him the nickname, “Gorilla,” but would never say it to his face.

Once the corporal got our running out of his system, we were going to attempt the marching thing too. It looked so easy watching the others do it while we were running, but I found they didn’t have Frankie with them. Frankie, the know-it-all knew a lot about a lot of things, but he didn’t know shit about marching.

Corporal Minnie ordered, “Platoon, forward march!”

I took two steps then collided with Frankie, who was not moving. This caused a pile up as everybody crashed into each other, and half the platoon ended up in the red sand of the parade ground, in a heap of swearing bodies.

The corporal, already not in a good mood, was furious. His face turned red and his mouth moved, but no words came out. The veins in his forehead pulsed, and looked like they were about to pop. George took off running for the tree.

“Where the hell are you going?” Corporal Minnie shouted.

George answered over his shoulder, “Just getting a head start Corporal.”

The corporal looked at him in disbelief and shook his head. I was about to set off after George when the Corporal said, “Ok, let’s try this again.”

He let George run all by himself. It was only when the lone figure rounded the tree that he realized nobody else was running.

The Corporal ordered, “Platoon, forward march!”

Everyone started to march, including Frankie. The problem was that he swung the same arm and leg forward. When his left leg went forward so did his left arm and the result was so funny I lost all concentration. Luckily before I could cause another wreck, the Corporal shouted “Platoon, HALT!”

We came to an abrupt stop. Corporal Minnie walked to Frankie with murder in his eyes.

Only George’s thundering feet that sounded like a herd of elephant, saved Frankie from certain death. George aimed to take his place in the squad but the corporal had other ideas for him.

“You see that tree by the gate,” and he indicate to the gate leading up to the tin building about three hundred meters away.

“Go pick me a leaf,” he ordered.

For a second it looked like George was about to argue, but then he changed his mind and set off for the tree.

The corporal turned his attention back to Frankie, his stare ice cold.

“Who are you?” he asked.

Frankie swallowed hard and said, “Frankie, Corporal.”

At that point I admired the corporal’s self control. He took a deep breath, and when he spoke, he sounded like a hungry bear.

“What’s your surname?”

Nobody in the army was interested in first names. Only friends called you on your first name, that is, if you didn’t have some cool nick name.

Frankie swallowed again, his voice feint, almost just a squeak.

“Thompson, Corporal.”

Corporal Minnie stared at him for a few moments, then his voice was as calm as an ocean without a breath of wind.

“Well Thompson, would you be so kind and explain to me what the hell you’re doing?”

Frankie looked uncomfortable and avoided eye contact.

“Marching, Corporal.”

The corporal turned red in the face again, the vein in his forehead pulsing once more.

“I’ve seen troops marched before, and even done it myself on occasion, and believe me, what you’re doing is not fucking marching!” he shouted. By the end of his tirade his face was only millimetres away from Frankie’s face.

Frankie sighed with relief as the heavy sounds of boots announced George’s return. The corporal turned his attention to George, who was holding a little green leaf.

“Your leaf corporal,” George said.

The corporal stared at him for a moment, hands on his hips.

He looked at the leaf and said, “I didn’t want that one, I want the one next to it. Please be so kind and go fetch it.”

Despite the soothing voice, fury twisted the corporal’s face. George decided it wise not to argue, and set off for the tree once more.

“Platoon, forward march!” the corporal ordered, and once again we were marching. However, there was still no improvement in Frankie’s marching technique.

“Halt!” the corporal shouted.

Again his mouth moved but no sound emerged, his extended hand pointed towards Frankie. I later found that in the military, you were not allowed to point a finger at someone, so they pointed the whole hand instead. It was suppose to be less offensive, but the way the corporal did it, it looked like he was about to spear Frankie with his hand.

“Come here!” he shouted, the pitch of his voice a tad too high.

Frankie stepped out and stood next to the corporal.

“You!” he shouted and pointed at me. “Show him how to march.”

I stepped forward and when the corporal gave the order, “Rookie, forward march!” I marched until the corporal shouted halt, and called me back into the squad.

“See how it’s done?” he asked Frankie, who nodded, his face an ash white and his bottom lip trembling.

I could hear George before I saw him, blowing like a whale. He didn't even try to speak, he just held the leaf for the corporal, who stared at him a moment.

"It's not that one either, go and get another one," he shouted.

George stood with his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath when the corporal shouted, "NOW!"

George glared at the corporal for a moment, and then set off for the tree again. His feet followed each other, his pace barely faster than a walk.

Corporal Minnie gave the order and we marched again. Frankie got it right for about five steps, before he got confused, and reverted back to his old trusted method. The corporal halted us and pulled Frankie out by the arm, and made him stand alone.

"Thompson, forward march!" he ordered. He marched Frankie to the edge of the bungalows and back. On the way there Frankie stepped out of pace a few times, and got a smack in the back of his head. By the time they returned, remarkably, Frankie was still in step. The corporal ordered Frankie back to his position.

The heavy fall of George's boots sounded out as he approached, but I also heard a strange rustling sound. I whipped my head around and saw a lollipop tree running towards us. George had ripped the whole tree from the ground, roots and all. Through the leaves, I could see George's face. Although tired, he was furious.

The corporal saw it too, but demanded, "What the fuck are you doing?"

George came to a halt, holding the tree out to the Corporal, his chest heaving up and down. "Which one do you want?" he panted.

For a moment the corporal was dumbstruck. He stood with his mouth open gaping at George.

"Are you out of your fucking mind? The RSM will kill us both! Go put that tree back immediately." He pointed to Rex and said, "You go help him, and make sure it is planted properly."

As George and Rex set off with the tree, the corporal looked at the rest of us, and threw his arms in the air.

"What have I done to deserve this? Why did they give me the most useless bunch of wanna be soldiers?" He turned and stood with his hands on his hips, taking a hard, longing look at the other platoons, who marched along merrily up and down the parade ground.

It took the rest of the morning and a lot of shouting and swearing, but by the time we broke for tea, Frankie was able to march properly. Or at least got to swing his arms and legs the right way, keeping in sync with the rest of us presented a whole new challenge. When George and Rex returned from their tree planting adventure, the corporal didn't say a word. He pointed towards the squad, indicating to join the platoon. But from that day forward, we only had to run around the trees, no rookie was ever asked again to bring a leaf, at least not in our platoon.

"I've never run so much in my life," George complained at tea break.

I took a sip from my cup containing mango flavoured water, and said, "I thought the corporal was going to have a heart attack when you came back with the tree."

George gave a wry smile and said, "I wasn't going to make another run, it would've killed me."

Rex and Charlie smiled and shook their heads.

"Well, you better watch your step or you'll be in for a lot more running. You're on the corporal's radar now. He'll keep his eye on you," Charlie said.

Charlie's words were only half true. George did do a lot more running that afternoon, and the next morning, but he didn't do it alone. The entire platoon ran with him. With every little thing the corporal was unhappy with, we had to run. By lunchtime my legs were like jelly and had a mind of their own. Our bodies trembled with exhaustion and a few of the rookies had to stop and throw up.

Nobody said anything as they valued their lives, but a few of the looks that were aimed George's way, could have raised the dead.

"I'm Mr. Popularity today," George grumbled. He felt bad that his friends, and the rest of the platoon, had to suffer for his arrogance.

Rex slapped him on the back and said, "Don't worry, we got your back."

After lunch we were ordered to change into PT clothes and into formation. We marched double time to the rugby field, where sign boards were setup across the field with different sports.

"Find a sport you like and line up. If there isn't one to your taste, report to the far side," the corporal instructed. Rex and I chose cricket while George chose rugby.

Charlie was never the sporting type and there was no board for chess, so he reported to the far end. They did group sports, which included everything from softball, to doing a mini obstacle course. It depended on what the corporals thought up on the day. We found that Wednesday afternoon's was sports days, one of the few things in the army that we actually enjoyed. Friday after lunch, once again, we were ordered into our PT clothes and marched double time to the area next to the rugby field. Unlike Wednesdays, Fridays was for fitness tests, and we were not looking forward to those. First, surprise, surprise, we had to run, two comma four kilometres to be exact. That meant we had to do two laps on the road that led around the base.

We were timed and had to complete the track in less than twelve minutes. From our company, quite a few didn't make the required time, but none from our platoon. Even George made the required time, only just, but he made it. That caused him to grin from ear to ear. He actually earned a back slap from Corporal Minnie. All that running around served a purpose after all.

Next, pull ups. Those were the ones I had most trouble with. I never had strong arms, was always more concerned with running. A bar mounted on two poles was a little taller than head high. When the whistle blew, I jumped, grabbed the bar and pulled myself up until my chin touched the bar. The first ten pull ups went easy enough, but then the struggle began. After fifteen I had to let go and shook my arms, which felt like jelly.

I knew time was running out, so I jumped again and grabbed the bar. I managed to finish the twentieth pull up, when the whistle blew, indicating our sixty seconds were up. George grinned. He easily made forty in his allotted time. When it came to strength, he was in his element. Like me, Charlie also struggled with the pull ups and didn't make it, barely managing ten pull ups. We all made the requirement of thirty push ups in sixty seconds followed by thirty sit ups.

The following morning after breakfast, we lined up in formation. The corporal asked for a few volunteers who had driver's licenses. George and a few others eagerly put their hands up, and the corporal ordered them to follow him. The rest of us took a smoke break while we waited for their return. A short while later I heard a low rumble. George and the others approached, pushing wheel borroughs filled with spades and rakes. That day we learned another important lesson, never volunteer for anything in the army.

It turned out Saturday mornings were spent doing yard maintenance in and around the base. It wasn't too bad, especially once we learned the art of looking busy. If the corporal deemed that we didn't look busy enough, we had to run, and take whatever implement we worked with, along for the ride. So we quickly learnt the fine art of looking extremely busy, while doing absolutely nothing.

"What are we suppose to learn from this?" Charlie wondered, ever the optimist.

"Nothing, this is just slave labour," George said, looking more sour than normal.

Rex thought it through for a moment then said, "When you get captured by terrorists, you can garden your way out of there."

I looked at him, shook my head, and said, "Yes, it's official. You are crazy."

Chapter 7

Monday morning, the start of our second week, and surprisingly, we were all still alive. Sunday morning we attended church, but afterwards, had the rest of the day to ourselves. I washed my overalls, which dried quickly in the warm Bloemfontein heat. In the evening I did ironing, and although not perfect, did a much better job than Frankie. He had to walk around with a burn mark on his bum from that night onwards. He ironed his pants, when someone called him away and he left the warm iron face down. Upon his return, smoke filled the ironing room, and his overalls were left with a nice burn mark on the bum.

Breakfast and inspection was followed by drill instruction and the customary few laps around the tree. I noticed that the other platoons ran a lot more than the previous week. Nobody said anything, but their disappointing time in the 2,4 had something to do with it. A lot of them laughed at George while he did all the running around the tree, but with the fitness test, he had the last laugh and finished well ahead of them.

After lunch, we didn't return to the tents for afternoon lessons, instead we went to the rugged field area at the other side of the tin building.

"This doesn't bode well," George ventured an opinion. I had to agree with him.

"Gentleman, today we're learning the fine art of leopard crawling," the corporal informed us, and proceeded to demonstrate how it was done. You lay flat on your stomach, and crawl forward using your elbows and knees, while keeping your stomach flat to the ground.

While the corporal demonstrated, it looked easy enough. We were instructed to form a line and drop to our bellies. We had to crawl forward for twenty meters, make a u-turn, and crawled back. Immediately I found it was not as easy as it looked. The ground was hard and rocky, and it hurt my elbows and knees. It was summer and hot so I always kept the sleeves of my overalls rolled up, but that was one time I rolled them down in a hurry to give my elbows extra protection. It helped a little but still not easy, and the hurt was still there. After the second try, some guys complained, which only resulted in a run to the fence. It was not up for discussion, you would do it, even if you had to crawl over a bed of broken glass.

The corporal increased the length of the crawl to forty meters, which meant the last five meters we had to crawl over a rocky, dirt road, which was even harder than the field grass. He kept shouting for us to move faster and faster. I crawled forward, moving like a newt. When you brought your left leg up, your right elbow goes forward and vice versa. My forearms were flat on the ground and I used my arms as much as my elbows. Charlie moved like a lizard, crawling with the speed of a leopard. With every crawl he was the first one back. George saw the smug look on his face and growled at him.

Once we understood the technique of leopard crawling, the corporal changed tactics. We had to line up on one side of the field, then we would run forward, and when the whistle blew, we had to dive down on to our bellies and leopard crawl, until he blew the whistle again that brought us back to our feet running. On the second dive down I heard George grunt. He went down too hard and winded himself, but there was no time to catch his breath, he had to do that while crawling. By the time we broke for afternoon drinks, my knees and elbows felt raw. I lifted the sleeves of my overalls and saw that my arms were red with several scrapes visible.

"I don't understand the object of this exercise," George said miserably, after he made sure he was well out of earshot of any corporal.

"It's fun," beamed Charlie.

George looked at him, shook his head and said, "That's because you are like a little newt. You have no trouble scampering over the ground."

Charlie smiled and said, "Yes, and you look like an epileptic elephant trying to crawl." He jumped away quickly, before George could grab him and crush his ribs.

The corporal blew on his whistle and we started a new bout of leopard crawling. He found a stick somewhere, and if he deemed you crawled with your ass too high off the ground, you got whacked. Frankie got whacked several times because of the way he crawled. It looked like a dog that was sniffing for something, with his nose on the ground and his butt sticking straight up in the air.

By the time we formed up for dinner my body was in serious protest. It felt like I fell off a horse and got stampeded by a herd of cows. By the way most of the platoon moved, or didn't move, I could see I wasn't the only one. The guys from Platoon 2 laughed at us. They had camouflage training. I told them that I heard that they were due for leopard crawling the following day, and that their corporal was determined to outdo ours. Their faces dropped and looked very worried, which brought a smile to quite a few faces in our platoon.

The next morning I was shaving when Rex walked in.

"Did you see that train?" he asked.

I looked at him curiously and asked, "What train?"

I couldn't remember seeing a train anywhere near the camp.

He smiled and said, "The one that ran me over."

I sympathized because my body ached all over and I had trouble moving. "What did Platoon 3 do yesterday?" I asked.

Rex shrugged his shoulders and said, "I'm not sure, but they weren't crawling or running much."

I tried to work out what waited for us that day. Not many of us could go through another day like the one we had before, our bodies were already broken.

Maybe the corporal felt sorry for us, or maybe just in a good mood, but during our drill session we didn't run once. Not even when Frankie turned the wrong way. While marching, we did a left turn and he did a right, going off on his own. The corporal yelled at him a little before Frankie rejoined the platoon, and we continued. In return, we rewarded him with an impressive drill display. Coming to attention, our feet came down as one. We turned as one, and marched as one. I don't think the other platoons were quite so lucky, they ran for the fence or the tree a number of times.

After tea break we reported for morning lessons, which, for us that day, consisted of learning the intricacies of compass reading. Clive's compass kept showing a different direction than anybody else, even after the corporal gave him a different one. He had his pocket knife in

his pocket and the metal screwed with the compass. After a laugh and a run to the fence, he got it right. When we broke for lunch everyone was very nervous about the afternoon ahead.

Platoon 3 was the lucky winners of the leopard crawl. Our Platoon did sign and spoor reading, while Platoon 4 did camouflage. There was no sign of Platoon 2, so we had no idea what they were up to. We were so relieved to do something less strenuous, that we actually paid attention to what the corporal said, and participated in the exercises with vigour and enthusiasm. Over in the field Platoon 3 did battle with the hard ground that refused to budge.

“These guys look even worse than we did yesterday,” Charlie said. We stood outside our bungalow and watched Platoon 3 as they filed past our bungalow on their return with their encounter with, THE FIELD.

“I’m glad I’m not in Platoon 2, they know their turn is coming and it’s getting worse,” Rex said. “At least we were caught unaware. They have to suffer through the anticipation.”

The young men that walked past our bungalow were battered and bruised, their spirits broken. The guys from our Platoon knew what it felt like, and watched in silent sympathy, giving an encouraging nod every now and again.

That evening a new event featured. It was one that became very important to each of us, mail call. The corporal would read the name on the envelope and we cheered. If the envelope was pink or scented, we cheered even louder. The corporal called my name and held a plain yellow non-scented envelope, so I only got a small cheer. I took the letter and recognized my girlfriend’s handwriting. It was addressed to *Rifleman C Dempsey* and for a moment, I savoured the rifleman bit, before the reality of the letter struck me.

I retreated to my bed and opened the letter, my hands trembling. It started, *Dear Chris*, and at once I knew it wasn’t good news. No letter with a start like that bared anything good. I took a deep breath and read the rest.

I trust that you are doing well and that you enjoy your time in the army. I’m Sorry for the way we parted ways and that I wasn’t there to say goodbye before you left. I tried to catch you that morning but you and your mother already left when I got to your house. Two years is a long time and I don’t know what will happen while you are in the army. I’m not going to make any promises. You are a nice guy and I do want us to stay friends.

I stared at the letter unsure by what she meant. It sounded a lot like she broke up with me, but I didn’t want to jump to conclusions. With a thumping heart, I read the rest of the letter. She talked about her mother’s hospital visit and about an upcoming camping trip with her brothers.

I reread the letter three times to try and understand what she said, but I either didn’t want to, or it didn’t make any sense. Turning the letter around, I even looked on the back if there wasn’t a piece missing, but it was blank. I decided to write her a long letter in return. The writing pad was in front of me for over half an hour, and the only thing I wrote was, *Dear Charlotte*.

I stared at the blank white paper with the faint writing lines for a long time, and then simply wrote: *Does this mean that you’re not my girlfriend anymore? Chris*. I placed it in an envelope, addressed it to her and dropped the letter in the outgoing box. In the morning someone would take the box to the admin office and all the letters would then be mailed to their destinations. After the lights went out, I stared at the ceiling for a long time, feeling empty and unsure of my own emotions. That night I had a restless sleep.

The following day we had our normal drill practice, and at the tea break I sat to the side with my cup of orange flavoured water, feeling very sorry for myself.

Rex came over and asked, “What’s eating you? You’ve been miserable since last night.”

I sighed. I couldn't hide it from my friends and explained about the letter I received. Rex sat down next to me.

"Shit," he said.

George and Charlie heard what I said and also sat down next to us, not saying a word, mourning with me in silence. Not a word was said again after that, and I knew that was the only time they would allow me to sulk. If I tried it again, there would have been action taken.

Because it was Wednesday, after lunch was sport parade, so no classes or leopard crawling. Which meant Platoon 2's agony would be dragged out another day. I once heard a saying that said, the anticipation of death was worse than death itself. By the look the guys from Platoon 2's faces, I would say that was true.

There would be no cricket practice that day, so Rex and I joined the group sports with Charlie. The corporals divided us into teams, constructed an obstacle course, which consisted of a big metal ball, a gum pole, a bucket of water, a soccer ball and two old truck tires.

The afternoon turned out to be quite a lot of fun. Without even realizing it, we actually got a lot of exercise, which probably was the whole point all along. That was the first time our group was together without George present, and it felt quite strange, almost like we were missing a limb. I realized how close the army experience brought us as friends. That evening it would be even more evident.

We sat in our bungalow discussing the day's events, when Frankie ran in, shouting that there were guys from Bravo Company causing trouble within our Company lines. Without putting much thought into it, every single body in the bungalow ran outside to join the ruckus, even little Charlie. We didn't asked what caused it, or what they were doing there. We just saw them as trespassing on our turf, and they had to be sorted.

There were about twenty guys from Bravo Company that were after three Charlie Company guys, who allegedly offended them. But when they were met by nearly a hundred guys fighting for their Company's honour, they executed a hasty retreat. Unfortunately for them, not before a few punches, kicks, slaps and a few other things landed. George slapped one guy as he run past him, which caused the fellow to spin like a top and fell in a heap, before he had to struggle back to his feet to keep from getting trampled.

Word quickly spread to Bravo Company that their mates were in trouble, and they formed a defensive line on their side, with us on the edge of our line. Nobody was brave or stupid enough to cross company lines. It would have taken only one to string the whole lot together. Before it got out of hand and resulted in serious bloodshed, the Regiment Sergeant Major walked out of the canteen, his huge moustache like motorbike handle bars, hopping in the wind. He didn't even have to say a word; just the sight of him was enough to ensure that everyone would scamper back to their own bungalows. I expected the corporals to have some serious words with us, but to everyone's surprise, not a word was said about it. After that incident, nobody dared to cross into another Company's lines. If you had a friend in another company, you met on neutral ground.

The next day, after lunch, Platoon 2 finally had their day of leopard crawling in the field, while we did camouflage training. First, we were told the reason to camouflage was to make it more difficult for the enemy to spot you in hiding, or that you could sneak up on them unnoticed. Before we started, we went to a different part of the field, and were asked to point out the corporals that were hiding in the field. At first glance, it just looked like a field.

Rex pointed out a grassy knoll that was just too grassy and a corporal stood up. He had grass stuck in his battle helmet, his webbing and everywhere he could find, in order to blend in

with the grass and his surroundings. If there weren't forty pairs of eyes looking for him, we probably wouldn't have spotted him. Three more were pointed out, but we were told there was a fifth. Looking as we might, the only thing we saw, was grass, a few bushes, and platoon 2 leopard crawling in the area to our right. When we finally gave up, a bush, not ten meters from, us stood up and shouted, "BANG! You're all dead."

Corporal Minnie handed us a few tins of black, non-reflective camouflage paint, and were instructed to apply it to our faces in diagonal stripes. Two or three stripes were enough, and we would assist each other. Once done, we lined up and I saw the corporal's facial expression turned to utter disbelief.

"Thompson, what the fuck are you doing?" he asked. I looked over and could not help myself.

Frankie painted his whole face black, the only thing that stood out, was the whites that surrounded his two blue eyes, and it sparkled against the backdrop of black. The corporal allowed us our laugh at Frankie's expense, and then we had to camouflage our bodies. We didn't have battle helmets yet, and the bush hats didn't hold the grass that well, but we managed. By the end of the exercise, I itched from head to toe from the dry grass. When we assembled for dinner, a sore, bloody, quiet Platoon 2 was slow in joining the rest of the company.

Chapter 8

Friday morning, after a drill and run session, we marched to the stores again. We were issued with a big hiker's back pack, chest webbing, battle webbing and a Kevlar battle helmet. We also received a Dixie set, which consisted of two square pans, the one slightly smaller than the other, so that they slid into each other and fit together.

"Wonder what these are for?" George asked.

We didn't have an answer, but Frankie our resident know-it-all-can't-do-any-of-it said, "This is what you use in the field instead of your varkpan."

Back in the bungalow we tried on our new battle helmets. My lightweight Kevlar helmet was covered with brown cloth and sat secure on my head, but the chin strap took a little getting used to. Charlie took the smallest size they had to offer at the store, but was still at least two sizes too big for him, and kept falling over his eyes. When Rex had his helmet on, George smacked him on the helmet with a fire bucket, still attached to his water bottle. There was only a dull thud, but he was smacked so hard, I saw his eyes cross over for a moment, and feared his neck might be broken, but Rex smiled.

"Hey, this thing can take a knock," he said.

I removed my helmet quickly, I had no desire to have it shock tested by George.

After lunch we changed into PT gear for our weekly fitness evaluation. I felt the difference a week's running around made, and improved my personal time in the 2,4. George was once again last in our platoon, but he managed to finish ahead of a few others, and comfortably made the twelve minute qualifying time. Charlie managed to do exactly his required twenty pull ups and was happy to pass his evaluation on the day. Corporals with clipboards walked around and recorded the scores achieved, which would then be handed to the admin staff for record keeping.

We spent a quiet but busy weekend. We got better acquainted with our newly acquired battle gear, and also did all our laundry. Sunday afternoon Frik joined us for a game of poker and our game had attracted quite a number of curious onlookers. The banter in the group while playing a hand, often had the onlookers rolling in the aisle with laughter. I welcomed the

distractions as it kept my mind occupied most of the time, but at night, when the lights went out, I couldn't help it. My thoughts drifted towards Charlotte. I wondered if she received my letter and what she did while I served my country.

Monday morning after drill session and tea break, we expected to march up to the classroom tents for a lesson. But the corporal ran us with the usual double time march up the side of the parade ground, past the gym, to a building which windows was covered with white paint and burglar bars. He instructed us to line up alphabetically. Roy Abbott was first in line, and when he emerged with a rifle in his hands, Rex, who stood behind me, in his excitement slapped me so hard between the shoulders, I almost choked. George also turned around and flashed us his pearly whites.

It didn't take long before George emerged from the building with a rifle in his hands, an R4 assault rifle. He was so busy admiring his new weapon, he completely ignored us. He walked past us while he stared at the weapon in his hands, mesmerized by its beauty. I watched as my fellow platoon mates appeared one by one with their new weapons. The anticipation was building, and when it was my turn, I stepped into the building with a heart that beat twice its normal speed. They divided the inside of the building in to three areas, a small entrance area, a room to the right with a heavy lockable steel door, and the main room where they kept the weapons, built like a big, walk in safe.

A Staff Sergeant in charge handled proceedings, and he had three guys from HQ Company assisting him in issuing us our weapons. Once you got your weapon, underneath the grip, on the belly of the barrel, was a serial number that one recorded against your name. The Staff warned everyone to memorize the number so you don't lose, or misplace your weapon. Doing that would have serious consequences. He didn't elaborate, but the threat was clear and enough to ensure we looked after our weapons.

They also issued me a cleaning kit, which consisted of a canvas holder that was rolled like a Swiss roll, containing brushes, scrapers, and everything else to maintain your rifle. I also received four empty detachable box magazines which could hold thirty five rounds each. I carried my stuff outside and spotted George waiting for us under a tree, sitting on a brick ledge. I joined him and proceeded to inspect my new weapon.

The weight of the rifle surprised me, not nearly as heavy as I thought it might be. Unloaded, it weighed only 4.3 kilograms. A black plastic stock that could fold back made it more compact, and a black plastic grip protected your hand from the heat of the barrel. The rest of the weapon was painted army brown, with the exception of the flash suppressor at the end of the barrel, and the bipod, which they painted black. A sticky type of oil covered the entire weapon, used to protect it from rust while the weapon was in storage.

"Isn't she a beauty?" George asked.

I had to agree, it was a sleek looking weapon. Apart from shooting the odd pellet gun or playing with my father's BB gun, I never fired a gun before. Rex joined us, a look of astonishment on his face.

"Can you believe it, they gave me a weapon," he said in wonder.

George and I eyed him suspiciously and George asked, "Why? Are you a psychopath from Benoni who's planning to massacre us all in our beds?"

Rex smiled and I said to George, "We better keep an eye on him. With these types from Benoni you never know."

But Rex didn't hear a word. He only had eyes for his R4 as he lovingly stroked the barrel. When Charlie walked out, the rifle looked oversized in his small hands.

“Geez Charlie, that rifle looks a bit big for you. Are you sure you’ll be able to fire it?” George asked.

Charlie grinned and with a glint of pleasure in his eye said, “Yeah, just watch me.”

The rest of the morning we had to learn how to march and run with our new weapons. After a few laps around the tree, the weapon didn’t feel that light anymore. It didn’t take long for Frankie to drop his rifle, and we found that dropping your rifle was a major sin. If you dropped her, you fell next to her, and when you got up, you ran.

Frankie was the first in our platoon to find what it felt like when running while holding the rifle above your head with outstretched arms. When he returned from his run, I thought he was about to cry, barely able to lift the weapon higher than his shoulders. That was the last time he dropped his rifle, and by lunchtime the loving glances that the weapons received earlier, turned to hatred filled glares.

Our afternoon lesson, not surprisingly, concentrated around our new weapons. We learned that it fired a 5,56 mm projectile and was effective up to five hundred meters. The corporal showed us how to take the weapon apart, how to clean and maintain it, and how to put it back together. We learned how to load bullets into the magazine, but were not allowed to clip a loaded magazine to our rifles yet. We had to practice that part with empty magazines. I couldn’t wait to shoot it for the first time, but I found we had to get acquainted with our new girlfriends first, before we could take them out on a date.

The next few days we did a lot of exercises with our rifles, which I suspected, was aimed at getting us used to the weight and feel of our weapons. But I thought the corporals had way too much pleasure in getting us used to them. Anything we did wrong, instead of our normal run around the tree, we had to do it with the rifles held above our heads with outstretched arms. Even George, with his powerful arms, complained about the form of exercise.

“What are they doing? Teaching us how to be prisoners of war?” George asked.

“Nah, it’s just a new tool for physical training,” Rex answered.

George made a grunting sound through his nose and said, “It’s more like physical torture”

I could see Charlie had a hard time with the rifle PT, but he did not utter one complaint. One had to admire his strong character, endurance and pure determination. The next day the corporal came up with a new one, we had to hold the rifles at arm’s length in front of us, and turn the rifles slowly with our hands like a propeller. Quite a few rifles dropped as our arms got tired, but I would rather have my arms fall off than drop that rifle. Surprising enough, with all the rifles that fell, not one of them was Frankie’s.

Wednesday morning we had to learn how to leopard crawl with our rifles. I crawled like before, only this time, I had the grip in my right hand in such a way that the stock was resting on my right forearm, while the barrel was resting on my left forearm, with my left hand holding it near the magazine area. You had to be careful not to dig the flash suppressor into the ground, and it took a while before we could crawl comfortable with the weapon, but the corporal made sure we had plenty of practice.

Thursday morning we did not gather for breakfast as usual. We did not even have inspection. The corporal instructed us to get our battle webbing, and we had to ensure our dixies and pick sets were packed in to the back pocket of the webbing. I filled a water bottle and attached the pouch that held the bottle to my web belt, and took two empty magazines. They slotted into the magazine pouch at the front of the battle webbing. We had to wear our battle helmets, were loaded on to waiting Samils, and promptly driven out of the base.

“Where do you think we’re going?” Charlie asked.

George sighed heavily and said, "I'm sure it is nowhere good."

It was the first time we left the base since the start of our training, and although it was good to be out, a few nervous glances were exchanged. Hardly any cars were out so early. The early morning chill reminded us that winter was on the way. We drove about forty kilometres and turned onto a dirt road.

"I bet you we're at De Brug for shooting practice," Frankie said, excitement lighting up his face.

For someone so inept and clumsy, he was a wealth of information, and once again, Frankie was right. When the truck came to a stop, we were told to get out and line up in formation. I have never been to a shooting range before, but was confident that we found ourselves at one.

In front, a high sand wall covered with grass meant to catch the bullets after it passed through the targets. In front of the wall was a small rise with a concrete top, about a hundred meters wide. Below the concrete top, a dugout where they loaded the cardboard targets on a mechanism that move up and down. When the mechanism were down, the people below safely attach a new target to the frame on the mechanism, and raised it for the people out on the range to shoot at, but we were not going to use those yet. On top of the concrete area were heavy iron squares standing upright, which we were going to use to sight our weapons.

First, we had to prepare our rifles. In our cleaning kits was a small black container filled with gun oil. We were required to oil the breach, the silver piston, and all moving parts, which ensured the weapon won't jam when you fired it. Our platoon was first up and lined up at the hundred meter mark. Humps, similar to the humps seen at a drive in theatre, were spaced every hundred meters as far back as one thousand meters. I looked around and saw Rex and George to my right, smiling like cats that got the cream. Charlie, to my left, was pale. He was nervous and I gave him an encouraging smile.

I spread my bivvy, a square plastic sail that doubled as a rain coat or a one man tent, out on the ground as instructed, and lied down on my stomach. Corporals walked down the line and handed each of us five rounds while the sergeant major ran through the safety instructions. My hands shook uncontrollably when I loaded the cartridges into the magazine. It took a few tries before I managed to clip the magazine to my rifle. I wiped my sweaty hands on the side of my overalls.

When the Sergeant Major gave the instruction, I pulled on the knob, which pulled the breach block back. When released, the mechanism, in its forward action, fed a bullet from the magazine into the firing chamber. My weapon was ready, but I was not. My heart pounded at a ferocious pace, and I had to wipe my hands again, while I tried to focus my eyes.

"READY," the Sergeant Major ordered.

I moved the selector from the SAFE to the FIRE position. There were two fire positions on the selector toggle, "A" for automatic fire and "R" for rapid fire, which meant that the rifle would fire as fast as I could squeeze the trigger.

"AIM," the Sergeant Major shouted.

I lined the little aim hole of the back sight, the top of the front post that is enclosed in a durable shroud, and the target, which one of the metal plates on the concrete slab. We each had three plates, and I took aim at the middle one. For a moment, everything was quiet, anticipation hanged in the air. Somewhere close by a dove serenaded a loved one. The sky was a brilliant blue and serene, and everything was peaceful.

"In your own time, at your own target, FIRE!" came the command.

The first shots cracked, shattering the serenity. I jerked. The sharp exploding sounds scared me. I took a deep breath and tried to calm my shaking hands. Pressing the stock firmly into my shoulder, I let my breath go and squeezed the trigger. There was only a slight kick to my shoulder from the recoil, and the bang was not as loud as I thought it would be, but still loud enough to make my ears ring. The smell of burnt gunpowder filled my nostrils and out of the corner of my eye, I saw an empty shell casing flew to my right as it got ejected. I had no idea where my bullet struck, but all three my plates were still standing.

I took another deep breath, and squeezed the trigger again. After the first shot, I knew what to expect and saw a puff of dust near the top of the sand wall at the back. The shot was way off target. I took careful aim again and gently squeezed the trigger, and another puff of dust flew up from the sand wall, in almost the exact spot as before, up and to the right of my target. I fired the remaining two rounds and felt the heat from the barrel radiating towards my face, while my chin rested against the stock that was pressed into my shoulder. I squeezed the trigger one more time, to make sure there were no more live rounds left, and heard the metallic click as the firing pin hit the empty chamber.

I placed my rifle on its bipod as instructed and stood up. I look towards the targets and saw that most of them were untouched. Once we were all standing, a corporal took one of the other platoons forward to erect the few fallen target plates.

When they were safely behind us again, the Sergeant Major said, "Now that you're used to the weapon, we'll adjust the sights for you."

Once again the corporals walked down the line and handed out another five rounds each. My hands stopped shaking. It was easier to load the cartridges into the empty magazine and clipped it to my rifle.

We assumed the firing position again, but had to wait till one of the corporals or the Sergeant Major stood behind you, and gave the command to fire. I had to wait a while but then a corporal stood behind me, and kicked my boot.

"Ok, fire!" he said.

I took careful aim at the middle plate and squeezed the trigger. I felt the kick against my shoulder and saw the puff of dust from the sand wall. The corporal leaned over me, took my rifle, and with his adjusting tool made an adjustment to the sights.

He returned my weapon and said, "Again."

Once more I aimed and squeezed the trigger. Another puff of dust flew up, in line with my target but still high. The corporal made another adjustment to my front sight, changing the elevation. Again I took aim at the middle plate and when I squeezed the trigger, I heard the "CLANG" as my bullet struck the plate. It hit the plate low on the left side, the result was that the plate swivelled sideways, but did not fall over.

"Again," the Corporal ordered.

I took aim at the left plate. When I fired, the bullet struck the plate low and to the left which caused the plate to spin once and then fall over. The Corporal made another adjustment, and then I took aim at the right plate. My last shot struck the plate near the centre and it fell backwards without spinning. I looked up at the corporal and grinned, very satisfied with myself, but he was already busy with Charlie.

When we got ordered back to our feet, most of the targets were down. I folded my bivvy and attached it to the strap on my webbing. I looked over to my left and saw a grin from under a helmet. Charlie's battle helmet covered his eyes, and if he wanted to see something he had to tilt his head back, but he grinned from ear to ear,

“That was awesome,” Rex said as the corporal took us forward to erect the fallen plates.

“Yes it was,” Charlie agreed from under his helmet.

George was all smiles while I tried to calm my heartbeat, which was racing, with adrenalin still pumping through my veins.

Half an hour later our euphoria came to an abrupt end, when the corporal found that one of the guys in the platoon fired only four of his five rounds, and still had a live round in his weapon. First the corporal reiterated how we should do a safety check after we were shooting. There should never be a live round in the chamber, unless we were in the firing line. To ensure we never forget that, we had to run to the very back hump, which was eight hundred meters away. When we returned, the corporal seemed even angrier. We had to run again, only that time, when he blew his whistle, we had to fall down. When he blew his whistle again, we had to get up and run. The offending rookie ran alone and carried a full ammo crate for inspiration.

After half an hour of running, falling, swallowing dust and running some more, my lungs and most other parts of my body were in serious protest to the torture. Everyone felt the same way, but nobody dared to say anything, part in fear of the corporal, and part in fear that George might flatten them with a swipe of his powerful arm.

There was a man in our platoon, Tony Marino, who was twenty five. He was originally from Zimbabwe, but had permanent residency, and recently acquired South African citizenship. By law, he was required to complete three months basic training in the SADF. Tony was married, had a two year old son, and his wife was pregnant with their second child. He kept mostly to himself and did what he was told to do. Maybe it was the longing for his wife and kid, or maybe it was something else, but that day Tony was in a foul mood.

Not impressed with all the running nonsense and the more we ran, the worse Tony’s mood got. When we returned after several runs, the corporal ordered us to go again, but Tony walked up to the corporal and told him to fuck off, with a menacing look in his eyes. The corporal was five years his junior, and although taller, Tony was bulkier and much stronger, and the corporal knew trouble was brewing. He changed his mind and made us line up in formation instead. He called Tony to the side and had a quiet word with him. I couldn’t hear what the corporal said to him, or what Tony’s reply was, but the corporal’s sun tanned skin paled as the blood drained from his face.

We returned to the rest of the company and were told to line up behind Platoon 3, who was busy shooting. It was our turn to erect their fallen plates. Tony was our hero. If it weren’t for his intervention, we would still be running. Unfortunately Tony was in for a formal reprimand once we got back to the base.

That day we had our first meal out in the field, and we learned that if you were in the field, you did not have breakfast and lunch, only brunch. Unlike the varkpan, the dixies had no separate sections, and you had to decide what goes in which Dixie. An art we would perfect with time, because if you mixed the wrong foods, it turned into quite a mess and tasted terrible.

We arrived back at the base late in the afternoon. The corporal showed us how to clean each part of the rifle. I was quite shocked with the state of my rifle when I took it apart. The silver gas piston was covered with black carbon, and so was the inside of the normal shiny gas tube. Every corner inside the weapon was filled with oil and carbon. The corporal showed us which tool to use to clean each part, and it took most of us almost two hours to get it clean and ready for inspection again the next morning. We knew it would be a thorough inspection, so we took extra care in getting the weapons squeaky clean.

Chapter 9

Friday morning we were all sore and grumpy from the previous day's torture at the shooting range. Not even Charlie was his normal cheerful self and walked with great difficulty. Every muscle in my body ached.

"Ow ow ow," Rex said as he got out of bed and attempted to walk to the bathroom. He had to grab every bed along the way for support.

"Call the medics, I can't move," George said from his bed.

I sympathized and wanted to lie in bed all day, and nurse my sore body, but that was impossible. There was no time to feel sorry for myself. I almost yelled when I swung my legs down and stood up. The pain shot through my stiff legs, and it took great effort to move them. Slowly I made my way to the bathroom. Most people in our platoon looked like they walked on eggs and was scared to break them.

That morning we didn't hurry breakfast as much, but only because we couldn't move any faster. Inspection did not go well. The corporal focused on our weapons and found fault with every weapon he inspected. Charlie's silver piston was not clean enough, Rex's gas tube still had carbon in it, George's rifle looked like a pig shat in it, and my rifle barrel looked like the Sahara desert, rocks and all. Although when I looked, it was perfectly clean and I knew we were in for another tough day. The lieutenant called Tony away before the trouble started. He probably knew what the Corporal had in mind for us. We spent more time running around the tree than doing any drill practice.

At one point the corporal decided simple running was not enough anymore, and we had to team up with someone. I ended up with Rex, which was lucky. We were of similar build. Charlie however, was not so fortunate. He ended with George, which was more than twice his weight. First, we lined up our rifles next to the bungalows. We lifted our partners on to our shoulders, draped like a sack of corn, and run with them to the road, which was a hundred meters away. At the road we had to switch for the return journey.

I lifted Rex onto my shoulders and set off, my sore legs complaining about the extra weight, but I had to struggle through it. By the time I reached the road, my lungs were burning, and I couldn't get air in them quick enough. My legs were like two pieces of rubber jutting from my lower body. Every single muscle in my back tightened to the point of breaking. Once we reached the road we switched, and although I had a breather, the trip back wasn't comfortable. His bony shoulder stuck just below my ribs and with the bounce of each step, his shoulder bone pressed deeper in to my mid section. About halfway back, Rex breathed like a horse. I was afraid he wasn't going to make it, but somehow, he managed to stay upright and kept going through the stumbles.

George and Charlie finished ahead of us, breathing heavily. George saw me looking at them curiously and he put his index finger to his lips. He never swapped with Charlie and carried him all the way. They only pretended to swap at the road. Charlie kept his pose, completely out of breath, ready to pass out, like the rest of us. But the corporal was not done with us yet.

He instructed us to get our rifles, and then we had to do a few laps around the tree with the rifles held above our heads. My arms were ready to come off and I could hardly lift the weapon above my head. While running, I rested the weapon on top of my head. I tried not to think, because even that hurt. One foot in front of the next was all I concentrated on, and tried to stay upright, because if I went down, there was no getting up again. I heard someone behind me fall, but did not dare to look back, that would have used valuable energy.

By the time we all returned from the last run, four of our mates laid on the ground somewhere en route to the tree. The corporal looked at us in disgust.

“Go get your buddies, we never leave anyone behind. Move, go get them!” he yelled. We all set off again on a slow jog, helping the fallen back to their feet, dragging them back. Another went down in front of me, and I grabbed the guy by the arms trying to help him back to his feet. George joined me, and we helped the guy back to join the rest of the platoon. The corporal stared at us for a long moment, with a blank look on his face.

“Break for tea,” he finally said.

We moved to the side of the street and dropped to the ground. Nobody had the strength left to fetch our tea time drink, so we drank from our water bottles.

“Shit,” was all George could muster, but no-one answered him.

I realized why Tony was called away that morning. They knew he would not take what we did. If he was included in the morning’s festivities, the corporal would have been on his way to the hospital. I tried to think what we did to deserve treatment like that, but it was the army, they didn’t need a reason.

After tea, we did a double time march up to the tents for a lesson. Nobody paid much attention to the lesson. We only concentrated on keeping awake and staying alive. None of us had the desire, or the gumption, to do a trip to the fence. I sat there, my mind blank, letting my body function on auto pilot. If you see someone who nodded, a gentle jab reminded them to stay awake. I received a few jabs myself, but we managed to make it to lunch time without further incident or torture.

After lunch we were ordered to change into PT clothes for our weekly evaluation.

“He can’t be serious,” George said with a look of disbelief on his face.

We sat there and looked at one another, trying to draw strength from each other. When we lined up for the 2,4 km run, we had a look of resignation on our faces. It was against our will, but unless we wanted more of what happened that morning, we had no other option but to cooperate. Not one person from our platoon made it in the required time, but we stuck together. We ran as a group, and failed as a group. We had a common enemy and we banded together. We failed every single exercise. It was not on purpose; we just didn’t have the strength and energy left to do it.

Saturday morning we didn’t do any of the usual gardening or maintenance work. I was not sure if the corporal felt guilty for the torture of the previous two days, or that he saw we could hardly move, let alone pick up a shovel. The corporal lined us up in a straight line, and walked us through our boundary lines. It was called a “Chicken Parade,” and like chickens that pick at everything they see, we would pick up any small little thing that didn’t belong there, anything from little pieces of paper to cigarette stubs.

We finished earlier than normal and spent the rest of the weekend recovering, sure in the knowledge that Monday would bring a new week, new challenges and more torture. Even our Sunday afternoon poker game was subdued and didn’t attract the usual crowd of onlookers. We cracked no jokes and there was no banter. We played in resigned silence, captured by our own thoughts that were a long way from the army base in which we were held captive.

The only topic for discussion was how the corporal dished out punishment and seemed to enjoy it.

“He reminds me of Hitler,” George said, his voice sounding bitter.

Charlie frowned and said, “I’ve seen pictures of Hitler, and he looks nothing like him.”

George nodded. “True, but he’s just as sadistic. I’m sure he is the devil.”

Monday morning at 04:00, the evil whistle spewed its annoying shrill through our bungalow. I struggled out of my bed and stood at attention at the foot end, while trying to figure what the ruckus was all about. Rex also laboured out of his bed, but as he stepped forward, his foot got tangled in his blanket. I heard the dull thud when his half naked body hit the floor. In his haste to get back to his feet, the blanket tripped him again, and back to the floor he went. By the time he got control of his limbs, the corporal stood in front of him, hand on his hips, glaring look on his face.

“What the hell are you doing, Du Mont?” he asked.

Rex threw an accusing glance at his blanket and said, “I tried to get up Corporal, but apparently my blanket had other ideas and kept tripping me.”

Corporal Minnie glowered at him for a moment, before turning.

“Everybody outside in five minutes, dressed in PT clothes and running shoes. You better not let me wait,” he said.

We didn’t even wait for him to exit the bungalow before we scurried around to get into our PT clothes. For five minutes it looked like an ants nest in the bungalow, with people hurrying all over the place, but at the end of it, we were all formed outside, dressed and ready to go.

“Seeing that you failed your fitness test so miserably, I decided, out of the goodness of my heart, that I would help you pass the next one. Starting today, every morning we’ll go for a platoon run until all of you pass the fitness test,” he said.

Out of the corner of my eye I looked at him and tried to determine if he was on drugs, or just naturally stupid. If it weren’t for the fact that he fucked us up for two days, we would have had no trouble in passing the test. Apparently that fact failed to occur to him.

We did a left turn, and on command we set off on a double time march, running in formation. We followed the road around the base, the 2,4 km route. Only that day, we did more than 2,4. I think the only thing that stopped a mutiny that morning, was the fact that the corporal ran with us, making sure we stayed in pace. We ran in quiet, the sounds of our rhythmic footfalls in the early morning echoing through the base.

On our second lap, lights started to go on all over the base, as it slowly started to wake. By our third lap, there were a few curious onlookers, and on our forth lap, when we passed the Alpha Company bungalows, quite a few people were clapping hands and making snide remarks at us.

“Ignore the idiots, they’re not used to anything,” the corporal said.

We looked straight ahead. Everybody was breathing hard, and had no intention to start another company war. Having one company as enemies was bad enough. Running in formation was much more energy sapping, than running alone. We did a fifth lap before the corporal decided it was enough. He brought us to a halt by our bungalows, before we were dismissed.

“I thought Hitler was going to run us all morning,” George said.

It didn’t take long for the nickname to stick.

“The only fucking reason we failed the fitness test in the first place, was because he ran us to death for two days,” Rex added.

I looked at my friends and saw the anger on their faces.

“I don’t think this has anything to do with fitness,” I said.

Charlie stared at me and demanded, “Then what?”

I thought for a moment then said, “Well, maybe a little, but it has more to do with getting us to work together as a unit.”

George looked at me, and shook his head stubbornly.

“I think the corporals have a bet going to see who can heap the cruellest punishment on their troops,” George said.

Charlie nodded in agreement and said, “Hitler is winning by a clear margin.”

Everybody who listened agreed on that point.

“I think Chris has a point though, if we work together it might make it easier,” Frankie added and everyone nodded in agreement.

That afternoon after lunch, we found out how true those words were. We started our afternoon lessons as normal, and soon, our heads nodded. Our platoon wasn't the only one having that problem. Instead of chasing us all the way to the fence, the corporals got together and took the whole company to the field at the other side of the tin building. Our platoon lined up on the far right, where the field was at its most rugged. When the whistle blew, we had to sprint forward, and on the second whistle, we had to dive down and leopard crawl until the next whistle, when we had to get up and run again.

As we lined up, everyone in our platoon looked at each other and knew we were in for a tough afternoon, but nodded and encouraged each other.

“We can do this!” was heard all down our platoon line, but only loud enough that it was out of earshot of the corporals. After a few times of running and leopard crawling, they switched the leopard crawl, with running with rifles above our heads around the tin building. We kept encouraging each other, and if one fell, three others helped him up and dragged him along.

Our change in attitude clearly made a difference. The physical exercises were tough and our bodies were bloodied and bruised, but we kept our spirits up, keep encouraging each other, working together as a unit. With the other platoons to our left, it was every man for himself, and it started to tell on them. If one fell, they left him, and he didn't get up again. A corporal will scream and shout at the fallen one, but he was so exhausted that he didn't care.

This carried on for more than an hour, and towards the end, the field was littered with bodies of exhausted young men who collapsed and could not take it anymore. Our platoon didn't leave anybody behind. One guy twisted his ankle and could hardly step on his foot, so George and I had him between us, carrying him forward. If we get too tired, someone else took over, but he did not stay behind.

When the corporals finally stopped the torture, our corporal walked forward and ordered, “Platoon 1, line up over here.”

We were there, in formation, standing at ease, with our rifles dirty, but by our sides.

Thanks to a thunderstorm the previous night that soaked the field, we were covered in dirt and muck, from head to toes. Our faces covered with brown masks of mud, with stripes made by sweat running down our faces.

The other corporals had a hard time getting their platoons together. Corporal Minnie looked at us and smiled. I wasn't sure if he was proud or just sadistically happy. He looked at the guy with the twisted ankle, who stood gingerly on his leg, with a grimace on his face.

“You two take him to the medics,” he said to Frankie and Clive. “The rest, ten minute smoke break, then report to your tent so that we can continue the lesson.”

I didn't bother walking anywhere, and dropped right where I stood, and lay on my back, breathing heavily. I stared at the sky above, where a few lazy clouds moved slowly against the brilliant blue background.

“That almost killed me,” said George, lying next to me. He pulled his bush hat over his eyes to shield them from the sun.

“Thanks guys for picking me up when I fell,” another said.

We laid there until the corporal blew his whistle, and made our way over to the tents, all of us moving together. For the rest of the afternoon's lesson, we made sure we stayed awake. A couple of times I had to pinch myself to make sure I didn't fall asleep. For once, I saw a human side to Hitler. If it looked like we couldn't stay awake anymore, he called a smoke break. We had a lot more of those that afternoon than any of the other platoon's, who made multiple trips to the fence.

The guy who twisted his ankle, had indeed sprained it. He would be on light duty for a while. He joined Jippo, the guy from platoon 3 with the broken ankle, who was still on crutches, and a few others in the light duty squad. That evening in the bungalow, although we had a tough day, the mood was upbeat and the guys joked with each other. At mail call, my name was called out twice. I got a letter from my mother saying that they miss me and she hoped everything was going well, and trusted that I got enough to eat. I would write her later and asked to send supplements, because the food was not enough.

I turned my attention to the other letter. It was from Charlotte. I smelled the plain pale yellow envelope, and although not scented, I detected a hint of her perfume. My hands trembled slightly when I opened the letter. *Dear Chris* it started and my heart beat increased. I quickly read through the letter, then stared at it, before I crumbled it into a ball and threw it against the wall.

"Bad news?" Rex inquired.

I looked at him and said, "She met someone else."

George walked over and slapped me on the shoulder.

"Don't worry, as soon as we get a pass, we'll get him sorted."

I nodded. I didn't want to share all the murderous thoughts that ran through my head at that moment.

"You should inform her we're learning to shoot," Rex said with menace in his voice.

I looked at him, shook my head and said, "Sometimes you worry me."

Chapter 10

Thursday morning, the sky was grey with a hint of rain in the air. It was cold and the wind blustered against the sails, as we mounted the Samils on our way to the shooting range. A mad scramble ensued for who got to sit at the back. That gave us a view of the civvies driving by and a glimpse of life outside our closed in world. We were given a peep of what it could be like in prison, and I made a promise to myself to make sure I don't ever end up there. Although I doubt prisoners run as much as we did.

When we arrived at the shooting range, we were informed that we would use the targets for the first time. Platoon 4 was taken into the target pits to load the targets, while we lined up at the hundred meter hump, and prepared our rifles for battle. Once our weapons were oiled and ready, the corporals instructed us to the correct shooting stance for shooting while standing upright. I stood my body so the targets were on my left and brought the rifle into position, the stock pressing firmly into my right shoulder, while my left hand held the front grip, but only tight enough to steady my aim. I was more confident with the rifle and weren't so nervous about shooting, because I knew what to expect.

We were given ten rounds each, loaded it into the magazine, and clipped it to my rifle. When the order came, I cocked my rifle and stood ready. The wind was gusting, pushing and shoving, and I had trouble staying in one spot, and keeping my aim on the target. When the

sergeant ordered, "FIRE," the sound of rifle fire exploded in the crisp air. My first three shots missed the target completely, once on the left and twice to the right. I felt like screaming to the wind to stop pulling and shoving me, I couldn't aim. I planted my feet wider and braced myself against the wind. The rest of my shots managed to find the target although spread out all over the place.

I fired my last shot when Sergeant White yelled, "Thompson, what the hell are you doing?"

I looked to my right. Frankie had his feet too close together, which resulted in the wind blowing him everywhere. He swayed from one side to the other in the wind, trying to aim his rifle and shoot. The barrel of his rifle pointed all over the place, and the last shot went into the ground fifty meters in front of him. When the Sergeant called out to him, he turned around without thinking, the rifle still held to his shoulder, pointed in the direction of the Sergeant.

"It's the wind Sarge" he answered innocently.

Everyone dove for cover, trying to get out of the line of fire, except the Sergeant. He took three quick steps forward, and the next moment his huge hand connected with the side of Frankie's head. Frankie dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes, his rifle clattered next to him in the compact hard red soil. Frankie sat up and shook his head while blinking his eyes. The helmet took the majority of the force, and Frankie's brows were pulled in puzzlement. He looked shocked at the Sergeant as if to say, "What did I do wrong?"

The Sergeant was red in the face, with a look of shock and anger still edged into his features.

"Don't you ever point a rifle at someone, unless you plan to shoot him!" he shouted.

Frankie swallowed hard, grabbed his rifle and stumbled back to his feet.

"Geez, sorry Sarge, I wasn't thinking," he said. Regret was all over his boyish face. I expected the Sergeant to give Frankie an ammo crate, and chase him up and down the shooting range. Instead, he grabbed him, shoved him into a shooting position.

"There, plant your feet wider apart, and make sure you stand firm. Brace yourself against the wind with your legs. Once you feel secure, put the rifle to your shoulder and fire," he instructed.

Frankie did as instructed, and fired his last three bullets. All the shots hit near the centre of the target. Frankie flashed the Sergeant a smile.

"Thanks Sarge, that worked much better," he said.

The sergeant smacked him against the back of the helmet and said, "Don't ever do that again."

Everybody else got the message too. With everyone done, we ensured our weapons were safe, and then placed them on their bipods. The Corporals took us forward to inspect our targets. I had six out of ten hits, with only one near the centre. The other shots sprayed all over the target.

When we were done admiring our handiwork, the guys in the pits pulled down the targets, and used little round, coloured stickers to cover the holes made by our bullets. We made our way back to our positions, and were instructed how to fire from a kneeling position. Again we received ten rounds. I hit the target all ten times, my grouping a little better. The wind had less effect on me while kneeling.

Next we shot lying down on our bellies, like the first time when we sighted our weapons. Again I had ten hits, with the grouping even closer together. We found that while lying down, you definitely had a steadier aim. I was amazed when I looked at Frankie's target. All ten shots were grouped together in the centre, closer than anyone else. A huge smile lit up his face.

Just as we were done shooting for the day, the food truck arrived. We grabbed our dixies and joined the line for food.

“That was fun,” Frankie said in front of me.

“You can be glad the Sarge didn’t take your head off,” Rex remarked.

Frankie cringed at the thought of the smack he got, and rubbed the back of his head.

“Hey Chris,” a guy said from behind the food pots.

I looked up, and it was Frik. I flashed him a pleasant smile, and extended my hand in greeting.

“Frik, what are you doing out here,” I asked.

He smiled at me, shook my hand and said, “I brought you your food. They heard I can cook, so they moved me to the kitchen.”

I laughed and answered, “Ah, so that’s why our food got so much better lately.”

He gave me a huge smile for the compliment. I was grateful that we kept friends with Frik. Having a friend in the kitchen was always a good idea. After we ate, we washed our dixies in a big oval zinc tub filled with soapy water. We sat around for twenty minutes before the corporal called us to line up. It was our turn in the target pit.

The corporal showed us how to operate the target mechanism, and how to cover the bullet holes with the stickers. On command, we lifted the targets and waited for them to fire. It was quite strange standing in the pits. You heard the bullets ripped through the target overhead, followed by a sharp whistling, whipping sound a moment later. After the guys inspected their targets we pulled them down, covered the holes and raised them for the next round. I enjoyed the break in the pits. It beats running up and down the rifle range. It was late in the afternoon when we returned to base, just in time for supper.

Friday, evaluation day, and after the fiasco of the previous week, we all wanted to redeem ourselves. My body, still a little sore from all the activities during the week, was in much better shape than the previous test. We started off on our 2,4k run. It was every man for himself as everyone tried to post their own personal best. I finished second overall, beating my best time by five seconds, and almost four minutes faster than the previous week. George brought up Platoon 1’s rear, but finished comfortably within the cut-off time.

As for the other exercises, we cheered each other on, and drew strength from the support. We all passed the fitness test comfortably. Life in the camp became routine and we got used to life in the army. My ironing skills improved, my sewing skills improved and my discipline improved. I learned that when a rank shouted jump, I didn’t ask how high, I jumped. If it wasn’t high enough, they would yell, and you would do it again. The army kept us busy. I didn’t have much time for my own thoughts, which was a good thing, because every time I thought about Charlotte, I got angry. I cared more for her than I admitted, and half expected our relationship not to work, but resented the way it ended.

Monday morning, instead of lining up in our PT clothes, we were ordered to report in overalls, boots and rifles. At first I thought our morning running days were over, but no, it was merely the strategy that changed. The five laps that morning was pure torture, and when we returned to our bungalow, everyone complained, although well out of earshot of the corporal. We got used to the five laps a day in PT clothes, so the five laps in work gear took a bit of doing. By the end of the run the rifle weighed at least twenty kilograms.

Monday evening the lieutenant brought a box of letters. He explained the letters were written by school children from all over the country, who were encouraged to write the soldiers

that served their country. He asked us to each pick one or two and write them back. I took three. Other than my mom, I didn't have anybody else to write, and it was a welcome distraction.

The first letter was from a ten year old boy named Darren. He wrote that he liked the military and loved seeing the men in their uniforms. He couldn't wait till it was time for him to do his service. I smiled and shook my head. If he knew what I did the previous few weeks, he would stay far away. It was a lot more pain and a lot less glamorous than it sounded.

The second letter was from ten year old Joyce. She thanked us for protecting the country and making her life safe. I smiled. The only thing I protected at that moment was my own ass. I wrote her a thank you note and told her that it was an honour. The third letter was from a twelve year old girl named Karen. She wrote about her interests, sports, dancing and gardening.

I found it a little odd that a twelve year old would list gardening as an interest. She said she wanted to become a pen pal, and I saw no harm in that. I wrote her back thanking her for her interesting letter, and as a matter of interest, asked her about her interest in gardening. I always loved working in our garden, as long as it was on my own terms. If my dad told me to do something, then it was work and not an interest anymore.

Tuesday morning after inspection, we were ordered to fill our water bottles and report outside in full battle gear. Instead of our battle webbing, we had to take our back packs. We had to load our extra blanket and pillow, an extra full two litre water bottle, and all our magazines, dixies and pick sets. The corporal made us jump up and down to make sure we didn't rattle. If something rattled, we had to rearrange our packs in such a way that nothing made a noise when we were moving. I jumped up and down and sounded like a walking kitchen. It took several attempts, and the use of all my extra socks, and a T-shirt, to make my pack noise free.

Once we got rid of the noise, we joined the other platoons and lined up in company formation.

"We're going for a little walk," the corporal from platoon 2 informed us. Whenever a corporal said, you were going for "a little walk," you could bet a month's wages on the fact that the walk was going to be anything but little.

Dressed in browns, with a bush hat, and carrying only a water bottle and their whistles, the corporals grinned at us.

"Walk where Corporal?" Charlie asked from under his helmet.

The corporal smiled, or rather grinned, and said, "Just a nice little stroll through nature."

George groaned, and we all knew that the walk was not going to be pleasant.

We marched out of the base, through the main gates, out of the Tempe base, past the church, and onto a dirt road that stretched out into the distance, with no visible end. When we reached the dirt road, we were told that we could walk at our own pace from there. It was a thirty kilometres walk, and we had six hours to complete it. We had to report to the halfway point within three hours, or we would miss lunch that was waiting for us there. The corporals would show the way.

"30 Kilometres! Are they crazy?" Rex wondered.

The look on George's face showed he echoed the thought.

"Well, at least they got the walk in nature part right," Charlie said, ever the optimist.

I hated walking, and a thirty kilometre walk was never on my to-do list. My legs started protesting just at the thought of walking. The first kilometre or so, the company stayed quite compact, but then slowly strung out. There were quite a few eager beavers that walked a lot faster than everyone else, so they moved quickly ahead.

Apparently the other platoons haven't learned the lesson of working together yet, and were strung out all over the place. Our platoon stuck together, and made sure nobody fell behind. We encouraged each other and when we reached the five kilometre sign, we did it in fifty minutes and were making good time. We reached the ten kilometre sign twenty minutes ahead of schedule, but some of the guys started to take strain. Our boots were more comfortable than when we got them initially, but walking long distances in them still took its toll.

When we reached the halfway mark, Frik and his fellow kitchen staff had food parcels ready for us. We each received a packet containing a sandwich, an apple, banana, and a fruit juice drink in a little, rectangle cardboard box. It was planned as a grab and go, not to waste any time. There was also a water truck so that we could refill our water bottles, which was a good thing, because both my bottles were almost empty. While I waited my turn for the food, I quickly filled my bottles and reminded the others to do the same.

I grabbed my food packet and joined the rest of my platoon to start our return journey. "I'm finished and we're only half way," Rex said.

George eyed him and said, "You better make sure you walk all the way because I'm not carrying your sorry ass."

Most of the platoon heard that threat, and although I knew it was said in jest, the others didn't, and it served as added inspiration. George built himself quite a reputation around the base as someone not to cross.

It was hot, with not a cloud in the sky and the windless day was of no assistance. It was like the corporals made an arrangement with Mother Nature, to make the march as tough as possible. Sweat poured down my face, and the weight of my backpack had doubled since we left the base. When we reached the twenty kilometre mark, I had to stop to get the two litre water bottle from my pack. The one on my hip was empty, again. Most of the others followed my lead and we quickly filled the one litre on our hips from the bigger one in our bags. I only had two litres of water left and there was still a long walk ahead.

My throat was constantly dry, and I had to really fight the urge to keep sipping from the bottle, and I wasn't the only one. When we reached the twenty five kilometre mark, we lost some time and only had ten minutes to spare.

"Come on guys, we're almost there," I said. Legs were faltering and we needed all the encouragement we could get.

"Yeah, we can do it. We're Platoon 1," Rex shouted.

Everybody shouted encouragements, more for themselves than for the others, but it had the desired effect. We kept pushing forward, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other.

When we reached the end of the dirt road, Hitler was waiting for us. I looked at my watch and saw that we made it with five minutes to spare.

"Is this the whole platoon?" he asked.

"Yes Corporal," Frankie answered, red in the face.

Corporal Minnie had a slight smile and looked amused. We were all in a state, and a few of us probably suffered from dehydration, maybe even sunstroke. I took my last sip of water about a kilometre back, and my throat and body craved more.

He took a moment to look us over then said, "Let's get you back to the base so that you can get yourselves cleaned before supper time."

With great relief we walked through the main gates of our base.

Chapter 11

“Ow ... shit,” Rex groaned as he sat up in his bed.

I didn't want to move, because it was going to hurt, but lying in bed the whole day was not an option. With difficulty I shifted in to a sitting position, my legs protesting. A burning pain that started on the outside of my left small toe shot up my leg. I peered down and the side of the toe was one big blister.

“Shit,” Rex said again.

He had a big blister on his right heel, and popped it with the sharp point of a needle. Clear liquid flowed from it and dripped on to the shiny floor.

I took a needle from my sewing kit, and popped the blister on my toe, which relieved the pressure, but not the burning. If anything, the burning got worse.

“Damn, looks like I have warts on my feet,” George said.

He had multiple blisters on both feet.

“Here put some of this stuff on,” Charlie said and handed George a pot of salve. George unscrewed the top and pulled his head away. Even from where I sat on my bed, the foul stench of the green salve punched me in the nose.

“What is this stuff? It smells awful,” George said, and he screwed the lid back, but the stink lingered in the room.

“It's my grandmother's special salve that heals anything from a scratch, to a deep cut. She makes it herself,” Charlie said, looking proud.

I stared at him curiously. From what he told us, his family didn't sound like the type who would make their own salve. He noticed our confusion.

“Grandma's the odd one in the family. She and grandpa stay on a farm, and believe in a lot of home remedies. This is one that actually works,” he said. His half smile almost seemed embarrassed, but I thought it was cool.

“Here, let me try it,” I said to George, and he tossed me the pot.

Opening the container, I tried to ignore the smell. I remembered something my own grandmother told me once about medicine, “If medicine smelled or tasted bad, it's probably good for you.” I took some of the green stuff on my index finger. The texture was smooth, like petroleum jelly, maybe not as oily, and a bit stickier. I applied some to the wound, gently rubbing it in.

George and Rex stared at me with wide eyes, waiting for my toe to fall off. I noticed a strange tingling sensation in my toe, and almost immediately, the burning sensation disappeared.

“It actually feels better,” I said surprised.

Rex grabbed the pot from me and applied some salve to his blisters.

“You're right, it does feel better,” Rex said.

George eyed us suspiciously, trying to determine if we were serious or just messing with him.

He motioned to Rex to give him the stinky stuff, and applied some to his blistered feet. He looked at Charlie and handed the pot back to him.

“Well paint me pink and call me Teddy, but it works,” George said with wonder in his voice. I wrapped a plaster over the sore, and got dressed. When I walked to the bathroom, I hardly noticed it. Most of the guys hobbled around the bungalow. There wasn't anyone who didn't have a blister somewhere after the previous day's stroll. I realized that the corporal never came to wake us for our usual morning run. He must have known that we would be in no shape for running.

After breakfast and inspection we formed for our morning drill session. We had the basics down pat, and the corporal showed us some more complicated drill moves. He instructed us to do a slow march, an open order march, presenting arms, and what to do for inspection. In the bungalow, they inspected our environments and our kit. Outside, we got inspected. The corporal or lieutenant held the morning inspections, once we formed, to check if our boots were shining, if we all had a smooth shave, that our clothes were ironed, and that we looked neat. We were told to take pride in our appearance and our uniform, even if it was only overalls.

After we broke for tea, the lieutenant asked if there were any of us interested in the Junior Leaders program.

Rex looked at me and asked, "What about you?"

I heard about JL's and the 10 months of torture. Although interested in obtaining rank, I thought I'll rather try out for the Section Leaders, which was only a ten week program. Ten weeks of torture sounded better than ten months of it. I looked at Rex, shook my head.

"No, I'm going to try for Section Leaders."

George and Charlie weren't interested either. The lieutenant led the few interested parties away to be interviewed, with all the other possible candidates from the other companies.

The rest of us went for lessons. We learned about the patrol mortar, called Patmor for short. It was a 60 mm mortar carried by infantry, and consisted of a tube mounted on a base plate. You would drop a mortar down the tube. When it hit the firing pin at the base, it would trigger the cap, which ignited the propellant attached to the bomb's fins. That hurled the projectile to a maximum range of almost five hundred meters, depending on the elevation.

Learning about the different weapons we would encounter while doing our Service, was quite an experience. The corporal told us that we would get to fire most of them. Rex's eyes sparkled with anticipation.

The rest of the week went by without any major incidents. Early morning run, drill after breakfast and inspection, followed by lessons before and after tea, with the customary runs to the fence or around the tree. Thursday we went to the shooting range for more practice. We settled into a routine and our bodies reached peak fitness. Our usual runs weren't much of a punishment anymore, even when running with our rifles held above our heads. It became more of an inconvenience than anything else. But just when we got used to everything, things changed.

Monday morning we were informed to load our backpacks and sleeping bags. We were going on a field trip.

"We're going camping," Charlie said excited.

I looked at him sceptically and said, "Being in the army, that can't be a good thing."

George nodded and added, "Mark my words, nothing good can come of this."

Charlie made a face at George and said. "Don't always be mister doom and gloom. This is going to be fun."

Rex looked at me.

"Fun in the military? Somehow those two words just don't go together," he said.

George winked at me and said, "Yeah, but you must remember, this is from the little newt who thinks leopard crawling is fun." Charlie grinned from ear to ear.

We joined the rest of the company, and were herded on to the Samils. They drove us to De Brug, but we didn't go to the shooting range. Instead, we went to an area at the foot of a giant hill that looked like a miniature mountain. The first thing we did when we arrived was to pitch the tents. A pole went up the middle and once you lifted it, the four corner support poles went in, forming a five-by-five meter square tent.

Nobody gave us instructions, and the first tent took a little figuring out, giving the corporals a laugh at our expense. But once we got the first one standing, the others followed in a hurry. Each platoon had two tents, and we finished just in time for brunch. When we were out in the field, although the food was brought in big silver hot boxes, it tasted better than when we ate in the base.

I greeted Frik with a friendly smile, and inquired about his welfare. He was happy with his new duties, and gave me an extra helping of scrambled eggs. In the army, nobody gave the cook a hard time, not if you want to eat properly.

Once again we had to wash our dixies in zinc tubs, and were warned to clean them properly, or pretty soon we would suffer from a running stomach, or jippo guts, as it was commonly known in the army.

After brunch, our field training started. A corporal instructed us how to setup booby traps, and how to detect them. It was quite interesting, but we thought it was a waste of time. We were a mechanized infantry unit, which meant that we ride rather than walk everywhere we wanted to go. Unfortunately our esteemed instructors seemed to have forgotten that fact.

We spent the afternoon in the blazing hot sun, learning how to walk in single file formation, without bumping into each other. It seemed easy enough.

After tea time, most of the Corporals disappeared into the hill to prepare a course for us for that evening. We were divided into smaller groups and had to wait till nightfall. Waiting in the military rarely consisted of sitting around idly, but included a few runs. We were not allowed to simply sit around and do nothing for a while. That would be a waste of precious time.

I watched the sun set, the horizon painted in a bright orange and purple glow, the colours reflected in the scattered clouds. As darkness descended, bright stars appeared and multiplied by the second, until the sky was covered with stars. A sight you were not able to see in the city.

“Ok, it’s time,” a corporal announced. He led the first group to a path at the foot of the hill.

While the group made their way up the hill, the rest of us were given a lesson in navigating by the stars. We were shown the Southern Cross, and how to find your way at night following the stars. A red flare shot from the hill, climbing high into the night sky, followed by the loud bang of a thunder flash that echoed in the valley beyond. The boom that rolled down the hill was closely followed by a loud yell. Another loud, hollow boom followed a bright, white flash.

We looked at each other, wondering what the hell they were doing to the guys on the hill. It sounded like they were blown to bits. The corporal didn’t pay any attention to the commotion and continued with his lesson, but nobody paid attention.

“Ok, group two, you’re up,” another corporal called.

I was part of group two, together with Rex, Charlie, George, Frankie and a few others. We made our way up the steep hill to the start of the trail, and formed a line, single file. Frankie was placed in the lead.

“Frankie, you better keep your eyes open,” George pleaded with visions of Frankie leading us down a cliff in the dark.

“No problem,” Frankie replied.

Frankie stepped forward and we followed. Anticipation in the air, everything was dark and quiet. The only sound was the crunching of boots against a rock, the snap of a twig and the rustle of leaves as we brushed past. There were no crickets, or anything else alive. They probably fled, or hid after the ruckus earlier. I walked in formation behind Frankie with George directly behind me. Frankie never even saw the tripwire.

The bright red flare shot up high into the night sky with a loud, “ssshhhh” sound, a split second before the booming sound of the thunder flash overwhelmed my senses, and echoed through the night. Frankie fell backwards, and his weapon clattered to the ground. His head came to rest on my left boot, and I bent down and placed my hand on his chest to check if he was still alive. He grabbed my arm, clutching it like a man who was drowning, and my arm was the only thing he could hang on to for support.

We all stood frozen in place for a moment.

“Frankie, are you ok?” I asked in a whisper.

He let go of my arm and struggled to his knees, while frantically searching in the dark for his fallen rifle. He found it and wrestled back to his feet. Even in the dim star light filtering through the trees, I noticed his sparkling wide eyes, while the ringing in my ears subsided and my hearing slowly returned.

“Damn it,” George muttered under his breath.

“I think I shat my pants,” Rex whispered behind him.

“Shhh,” Charlie said, but I could hear that he was shaken.

“Ok, let’s move, but watch your step,” I whispered to Frankie. There was a green-yellow glow in front of us in the path from the glow sticks they have placed at regular intervals, to ensure we stayed on the right path. It was a good thing, because after that first blast all our senses were scrambled, and it would have been easy to get lost.

We continued forward, and as we passed through a dense tree canopy, blocking out even the little light that filtered through, a rat-tat-tat sound sounded directly from our left. A corporal squeezed off a few rounds with his rifle on automatic. I wasn’t sure if it was blanks or live rounds, but didn’t take any chances and dove down. Everyone behind followed my example, except Frankie, who stood frozen in place. When he turned around he didn’t see anyone.

“Guys?” he said. His voice sounded like a mouse peep, and for a second he reminded me of Shaggy when he got nervous and looked for Scooby.

I stood up and the others followed. Frankie looked at me in the dark and for a moment I thought he was going to hug me. He turned around and stared ahead.

“Eh, Chris, maybe you should take the lead,” he said, his confidence shaken and his nerves shattered. I slapped him on the shoulder and without a word, stepped forward and followed the glow sticks. There were a few more bangs and flashes, but we were better prepared and continued onwards. Walking that path reminded me of walking through a haunted house display, with things jumping out at you around every corner, trying to scare you to death.

We all breathed a little easier when we walked into the clearing at the end.

As our group gathered, I frowned and asked, “I thought there were more people in our group?”

The rest looked around and Charlie said, “There was, we’re missing a few.”

A corporal directed us back to the group, smiled and said, “At least you bunch noticed. The first group didn’t even know some of their members were missing.”

He showed us where to go and said our missing friends were captured, and that they would join us afterwards.

It was close to midnight when all the groups finished the course, and our captured friends were allowed to join us again. The corporals looked very satisfied with themselves. They were able to kidnap people from our groups without anybody noticing them. Lucky for the corporals nobody tried to grab George or Tony in the dark.

I was exhausted when we finally were allowed to go to our tents to get a few hours sleep. I removed my boots, laid my rifle next to me, and crawled into my sleeping bag. I listened to the night sounds around us. Slowly the human sounds got quiet, and I only heard the sounds of nature.

Then George started snoring.

Chapter 12

I woke and was surprised to see light outside. The sun had not yet made a showing but was fast approaching. I was so tired when we went to bed, not even George's imitation of a chainsaw could keep me awake. I sat up, shook my boots to ensure there were no unwelcome visitors in them, and pulled them on. The next moment I almost choked on my own tongue. A corporal stood right outside our tent blowing his whistle like a madman, the shrill sound piercing the early morning quiet. It was time for another day of run and fun in the sun.

Because of the lack of sleep, most people were sluggish that morning, but after a few runs to the dirt road and back, our minds quickly became crystal clear. The corporals spent the morning discussing the previous evening's excursion into the hill, and ways to improve our night time observation skills. If we were in enemy territory, we all would have been killed or captured.

This carried on till 10:00 when Frik and his colleagues brought our brunch. I was starved even more than usual. The fresh air ensured we all had healthy appetites, and after a brief chat with Frik, he made sure I got an extra portion of powdered eggs and sausages. He also sneaked his four poker friends each a chocolate bar, which we appreciated.

The food was still making its way down, when we were told to line up again. We were led to an area that looked like old ruins, but there were sunken passages, almost like trenches. We were dismissed to the side and told to wait there.

"What do you think this is?" Rex asked.

George shook his head and said, "From the looks of this place, nothing good can come of it."

I smiled at George, who was his normal pessimistic self. As optimistic as Charlie was about everything, George was the complete opposite, with Rex and me in between.

There was a loud pop, followed closely by another. White smoke appeared not far from us. The smoke drifted on the wind, directly towards us. The next moment I couldn't breathe. My eyes watered, my throat felt like it was on fire, and my chest closed up. I couldn't see through the tears in my eyes, everything was just a blur. My instinct told me to get away from the smoke. All around me people were having the same reaction, and coughed uncontrollably. I didn't plan to stay in that, and ran towards the side, away from the smoke.

When I hit clear air, I drew a deep breath of air, but my lungs burned, and breathing was difficult. It took a few moments for the burning sensation to subside, and I wiped tears from my face. Blurry figures rushed towards me as others followed me away from the smoke. I tried to ask what the hell was going on, but I opened my mouth and no words would come out. I coughed uncontrollably as my lungs tried to clear whatever shit was in it. It felt like an eternity before I stopped coughing and was able to breathe and see again.

"What the fuck was that?" George asked when he got his voice back.

"Teargas," Frankie guessed.

"Who's the fucking idiot who thought that was a good idea?" Tony demanded with a crazy, furious look on his face.

I looked over to where the smoke originated from. Two corporals laughed their asses off. If Tony got a hold of them, they wouldn't be laughing anymore. Corporal Minnie walked towards us. He was not laughing. Later I wondered why not. I was pretty sure for any onlooker point of view, it must have looked hilarious.

He looked us over and said, "Gentleman, that's tear gas. Now you know what the effects of it feel like. It's primarily used for riot control, but also very effective in flushing out enemy troops, provided they're not wearing gasmasks."

The corporal tried his best to avoid Tony's stare, who was still not happy. If looks could kill, Corporal Minnie would have dropped dead in his tracks.

He pulled another canister from his pocket and held it up for us to see. We all took a few steps back.

The corporal smiled and he said, "Relax, this is a harmless smoke grenade."

I looked at the army green canister with the yellow writing on it that said, "M18 Smoke Red."

He explained how it is used for signalling purposes, or if there is little wind, it could be used to hide advancing troops.

"That's a bit dumb," Rex said. "Surely if the enemy sees the smoke, they would expect something and be ready for it."

The corporal gave a slight smile and said, "Yes that would be stupid. It is better used in retreat to help you get away. It would make for a more difficult target to shoot at."

Corporal Minnie pointed to a pin attached to a ring.

"This is the safety pin, and to pull it, you would unhook it from its safety position, grab it with your middle or fore finger, and pull."

We all stood there in disbelief as he pulled the pin and stood with the grenade in his hand. He grinned when he saw our expressions.

"As long as you hold on to the release lever, it won't go off. When you throw it the lever releases, and sets off the grenade."

He turned to the side and tossed the grenade. The canister flew through the air. There was a ping sound when the lever released and flew to the side. A soft pop followed, and then red smoke poured from the grenade. We watched in amazement as the smoke kept billowing from the grenade. I could hardly believe that so much smoke could come from such a small canister.

"Now this is the ugly and more deadly cousin," the corporal said, and pulled another grenade from his pocket. The size of a man's fist, it had an oval shape and the outside was smooth. I looked at the dark green grenade.

"Corporal, I thought hand grenades had a more of a pineapple texture?" I asked.

The Corporal shook his head and explained, "Some do, but this is the kind we use. This is an M26 fragmented grenade." He went on to explain the inner workings of the grenade and what it does when it explodes. We all eyed the corporal, weary and ready to duck for cover if he decided to pull the pin on that baby, but he didn't. It was only a demonstration model.

"Now it's time for the fun part, you'll practice throwing a grenade. Follow me," he said.

He led us to the trench area and would take us in one at a time. There were several stacked crates, and he opened the top one and lifted a grenade. It was a practice grenade, but had a real fuse. The grenades were painted blue and were full of holes to allow the blast to dissipate without blowing the grenade apart. That way they could reuse the grenades by just replacing the fuse and lever. He demonstrated how to throw the grenade, which was similar to bowling a cricket ball, and I knew how to bowl.

“Although this is a practice grenade, do not mess around with it, as it can and will hurt you.”

One of the Corporals had only three fingers on his right hand, and held it up to demonstrate what could happen if you mess around with the grenades.

Then it was time for us to practice. I watched a few of the guys as the corporals took them into the trenches and they each threw two practice grenades. Then it was my turn. My heart started to race, and pounded hard against my ribs. On instruction I took the grenade in my right hand, and with trembling fingers, twisted the ring from its safety position and pulled the safety pin with my left middle finger. The pin didn't come out smooth, and I had to wiggle it loose before it released. Then I stood with the ring in my left hand.

I pulled back my right arm, looked where I wanted to throw the grenade, and then tossed it over the wall. I didn't wait to see where it landed and ducked behind the one and a half meter high wall. With a loud bang and a puff of dust the grenade exploded. I lifted the second grenade with more confidence, pulled the pin and bowled it. This time I watched. It sailed through the air before it disappeared behind the wall, roughly in the area where I aimed. I ducked down and four and a half seconds after the lever was released, the grenade exploded.

We all managed to get through the exercise with all our fingers intact. The only incident happened when Frankie tossed a grenade almost straight up in the air, landing only a few meters in front of them. Everyone behind dove down, and Frankie himself ducked behind the wall. The grenade exploded harmlessly on top of the wall, only kicking up a bit of dust. That did earn him a slap to the back of his head. It was a good thing the army issued Frankie a battle helmet, or he would have suffered from a permanent concussion.

When we returned to the tents, Sergeant Major Wise waited for us. They searched for possible candidates for the Section Leaders program, something I was interested in. I immediately paid attention to what was said. The rest of the afternoon they conducted interviews in the officer's tent. When it was my turn, I marched in sharply and came to a halt in a swift, crisp movement. There was a lieutenant present, so I saluted. The sergeant major ordered me to stand at ease. Although I assumed the position, I was anything but.

Sergeant Major Wise stared at me through his brown eyes that looked through you, instead of at you. He asked me a lot of questions. My name, id number, army number, weapon number, school exam number and various other things that was probably aimed at testing my memory. One of the numbers he asked, I couldn't remember, only that it started with a two, and was seven digits long. So I made up the rest with confidence. He took some notes, but did not record the numbers. I figured, unless he had a photographic memory and checked on the numbers, I was safe. The interview only lasted five minutes. When I marched out of the tent, I could only hope that I made a good enough impression.

“How did it go?” George asked.

I pulled up my shoulders and said, “I don't know. It wasn't like a test where they give you the results afterwards. The Sergeant Major asked a bunch of questions, and probably was more interested in how I answered it, than the answer itself.”

Charlie made a clicking noise with his tongue.

“Don't worry, you'll be fine. You have great leadership qualities,” he said.

I looked up in surprise and Charlie said, “Don't look so shocked. You always take the lead in almost everything we do, and most follow you because they trust your leadership. I know I do.”

I felt uncomfortable by Charlie's praise, and when George nodded his head in agreement, even more so.

At that moment Rex came marching our way.

"Soldier halt!" George called out to him.

Rex switched from a march to a walk, with a sheepish grin on his face. He looked nervous.

"How the hell am I supposed to remember all that stuff? I told the Sergeant Major that I can't remember everything, but know where to look for it if he really needs it," he said.

We busted out laughing and I asked, "How did he take that piece of logic?"

Rex pulled up his shoulders and said, "He looked at me with a straight face, and said, OK. The Lootie looked a bit stumped."

We were discussing the interviews when I saw it.

"Look!" I said and pointed to the two vehicles that were driving past on the dirt road.

Our jaws dropped open. We stared at the Ratel troop carriers that came rushing past, on their way somewhere in a hurry.

"Our future transport," I said with stars in my eyes. Up to then, I have only seen pictures of the Ratel. Seeing one in person, even if it was only for a brief moment, sent chills down my spine. By the look on the faces of the others, I could see it had the same effect on them. When dinner arrived, we were still talking about the Ratels.

The next morning after a few runs and drills, we broke down the camp, loaded the equipment on Samils and headed back to the base. We passed close to the shooting range. Another company was on the shooting range, and for some platoon it didn't go well, running up and down the humps, with a corporal who hurried them along. We all groaned in sympathy when one guy lost his footing, and went tumbling down a hump.

Although it was good being out of the base, the sight of it when we returned filled us with familiarity and security. It started to feel more like home, rather than a prison. The prospect of a warm shower later was something to look forward too. We didn't have breakfast and missed brunch, so lunchtime I was starved. Frik served sandwiches and made sure we got extra.

I smiled at him grateful and said, "I owe you one."

Although we were not in the same platoon anymore, he was still our friend and visited us regularly. Sunday afternoons he joined us for our usual poker game.

If we had any ideas of having the afternoon free, we were woken out of our dream. We formed, and double time marched our way to the classroom tents for afternoon lessons. The first hour the corporal spent explaining and illustrating the basics of infantry movement in the field. He explained something called dash, down, roll or crawl, observe and fire. We looked at each other and without saying a word I could see the words on George's face.

"This cannot lead to anything good," and for once, I was inclined to agree with him.

The army was a big believer of on the job training, and believed we would learn better by doing. With the instruction completed, it was time to practice. The corporal divided us into three groups and all four of us ended up in the first group. The corporal ordered us into a straight line, and when he blew his whistle, we had to sprint forward. On the second blow of the whistle, we dove for the ground, rolled or crawled into position, observed, sighted our weapons on a target to shoot at, and then fired. Of course it was only training, and we didn't have any ammunition. When it was time to fire, we had to shout, "TAP TAP," to emulate the firing of two shots. On the third whistle, we got back to our feet and ran forward again, waiting for the next whistle before we fell down, rolled, observed and fired.

All that wouldn't have been so bad if we did the exercise in a nice field, filled with a luscious cover of soft cushioning grass. Instead, the ground was hard, and filled with even harder rocks, bushes and thorns. When we sprinted and the whistle blew, we didn't have time to pick out a nice soft landing spot.

We dropped down and hoped for the best, which in most cases, if you dropped and it didn't result in blood, it was a good landing.

When our group returned after our first turn, I looked over at the others. We were all covered in dust, scratches and all had blood somewhere on your bodies. Rex had a gash across his forehead.

"Did you land on your head?" George asked.

Rex shook his head and said, "No, I dove through a bush and it whacked me silly." He crossed his eyes and added, "I still can't see straight, and might even have brain damage."

Charlie laughed and said, "Nah, you're safe there. You don't have a brain to damage."

We broke for the day an hour before dinner, and raced for the showers. After three days in the field, and a bout with dash, down, roll, observe and fire, we all needed one. After we were cleaned, we visited Charlie to get a dose of his grandma's stinky, miracle salve. By now we had a standing order with her to send more, and asked her to keep it coming. We constantly had to treat new wounds. That evening, we were all in bed early, and after sleeping on the ground for a few days, we appreciated our beds. I gave a sigh, and drifted off to a solid, dreamless sleep.

Chapter 13

The following morning we were ordered to report with battle gear, webbing, battle helmet and rifle. We were loaded on the Samils and headed back to De Brug.

"I hope it's not more field manoeuvres," Rex said.

"Or more fall, crawl and shoot," George added.

One thing we learned in our time in the military up to that point, everything was unpredictable. You would think you were about to do one thing, only to end up doing something completely unforeseen. I didn't even try to guess what we were up to. But listening to my friends speculating before hand was always amusing.

For once it wasn't that bad, a day at the shooting range. With a sigh of relief we got off the Samils and platoon 4 headed to the target pit. Hitler ordered us to the 100 meter hump. The sergeant informed us we were about to shoot for points as practice for our upcoming shooting evaluation. We looked at each other curiously. It was the first word we heard about a shooting evaluation.

The target was divided into square segments, with the smallest, the bull's eye, counting five points the next square four, and anywhere else on the target three. If you missed the target, no points were awarded. We got two practice shots to ensure your weapon was sighted correctly. Once you fired your practice shots, the guys in the pits pointed with a big red arrow mounted on a long stick, exactly where your shot hit the target.

I spread my bivvy on the ground and got comfortable for our first shoot, standing position, which was also my least favourite shooting position. The flags at the end of the range waved lazily in the slight early morning breeze. Shooting from a standing position can get quite tricky when it is very windy, as Frankie could testify.

Since we had a few practices under the belt, I was a lot more comfortable with the rifle, which was easy to operate and shoot. My two practice shots both hit the target in the outer square, one left and one right of centre. It had nothing to do with the rifle. I was nervous and my hands trembled, which resulted in a shaky aim.

I took a deep breath and made sure I planted my feet firmly, while the pit crew covered the holes we made with our practice shots. The order came that we could shoot in our own time, at our own target, and then the order, "FIRE."

The shots rang out all over the range. I delayed my first shot to steady my aim, and with the centre of the target in my sights, I squeezed the trigger and felt the kick against my shoulder. By the fifth shot I

got into a rhythm, squeezed the trigger, inhaled, aim, breathed out slowly, steady, squeezed the trigger. After my last shot I was fairly confident that all my shots hit the target, but I couldn't be sure.

We weren't allowed to inspect the targets before they were covered so the end result remained a mystery. The guys in the pits were given a score sheet and they recorded the score after each shoot. They were only informed which rifleman was at which target after the entire shoot was done, to prevent any cheating. Shooting from the kneeling position was slightly better than standing, as you could steady your weapon, but lying down gave you the steadiest aim.

Unfortunately it wasn't a simple matter of aim and shoot. We had to go through a variety of shooting exercises ranging from timed, where you only had a limited amount of time to fire your shots, and non-timed, where you could take your time and make sure of your aim. With timed shoots you just aimed in the general direction of the target, squeezed the trigger and hoped for the best. It was more on instinct, and the talented shooters scored higher with that exercise.

In the last shoot we started at the two hundred and fifty meter mark. When the whistle blew we had to run to the two hundred meter mark and had ten second seconds to get off five shots. When the whistle blew again, we had to run to the hundred meter mark, squeezed off five more shots in ten seconds, and on the third whistle we dashed to the fifty meter mark for five more shots. By the time we got to the fifty meter mark, my heart was racing, my breathing rushed, and my hands shaking, which made aiming and shooting a lot more challenging. I suppose it was to teach us to shoot accurately on the move. When faced with an enemy, you can't stick up your hand and say, "Just wait a bit, I need to catch my breath. We can commence war in five minutes."

With the shooting completed, we were ordered to collect all our spent shell casings and drop them in an empty ammo crate. We then cleared the way for the next group, and made our way down to the pit.

"How did you score?" Charlie asked excited, still high on adrenalin.

"I probably missed the target with every shot," George answered, but nobody took him seriously. We all saw how accurately he shot before.

"I am quite curious to see my score," Rex said.

I agreed and said, "I wonder what the requirements for the shooting evaluation are?"

But not even Frankie knew that.

The corporal in the pits explained to us what to do, and then we had to get ready as the first shots rang out. The hole where the bullet ripped through the paper target appeared. It seemed like magic. The one moment the target was still clear, the next there was a hole in it. I lifted the pole with the red marker, indicating to the guy out on the range where his shot struck the target.

Strangely, after we had our turn in the pits were taken to the side, behind the next firing group, and were allowed to clean our weapons. Normally we waited till the evening, because we were too busy running up and down the place to do anything else. The smell of gunpowder hung heavy in the air, as I stripped my weapon to clean it. Carbon stuck everywhere, and I had to scrub every corner of every part. We worked in silence, because we didn't want to risk a chase around the place.

By the time the last group gathered their shell casings, the sun hovered low in the western sky. We barely made it back to base in time for dinner. It seemed that whenever we were out in the field for the day, I had an increased appetite. All four of us were thankful for our friendship with Frik, and he got quite skilful in dishing out double portions without the watchful eyes of the corporals seeing anything.

With all the running around, constant buddy PT, and variety of other forms of torture we endured, fitness evaluations posed no problem for any of us. In platoon 2, when we started basics, there was a guy who almost as wide as he was tall, and had a tough time of it. But after six weeks of basic training with all the trimmings, he was half the size he used to be. At first, he had to link two webbing belts together to get around him, but he was down to only one. If nothing else, the military turned us into a disciplined, fit bunch.

Friday evening I received a letter from my mother. I had not yet told her that Charlotte and I broke up, and, as luck would have it, she ran into Charlotte and her new boyfriend somewhere in town. Of course my mother wasn't happy. Her son was serving his country while Charlotte stuffed around, so my mother gave Charlotte a piece of her mind, leaving the girl in tears. I felt a pang of guilt for not telling my mother about the breakup, but on the other side, from my point of view, it was quite funny. I sat down and wrote a letter explaining everything, and asked my mother to rather ignore Charlotte in the future.

After a rather quiet weekend, we spent most of Sunday afternoon either doing washing, or playing poker. We started Monday with renewed energy. Monday was the first time the corporals combined all the platoons of Charlie Company for drill practice, and that posed a whole new challenge. We got used to drill with each other, and with our own corporals in our own platoons. But when we did it with other corporals, it made us unsure again. Everybody in the Company had the same problem, which also resulted in our first Company run around the tree together. By the end of the drill session, we were much improved and the corporals almost looked satisfied.

The afternoons were still spent with lessons, and some more infantry manoeuvres that resulted in new wounds, and more usage of grandma's salve. We received a box full of the stuff, and with more serious scrapes, were happy to share it with the rest of the platoon. As Thursday crept closer, I could feel the tension building in the bungalow. For no reason what so ever, we were very nervous about the shooting evaluation. Wednesday evening we spent cleaning our rifles thoroughly and ensured they were ready for the next day.

Thursday morning arrived and we were all up early and ready to go, well before our transport arrived. I stepped out of the bungalow to observe the weather for the day. The sky was a brilliant blue with not a cloud in sight. There was a slight early morning breeze. It was a bit cool but tolerable and carried the promise of autumn. I drew a lungful of early morning fresh air and I was ready.

"A beautiful day for shooting," Rex said behind me.

"Yes, it is," I replied.

When the Samils arrived we were ready to go and eagerly piled into the trucks. The ride out to De Brug took longer than normal that day, or so it felt. When we arrived at the shooting range, the breeze was stronger than earlier at the base. The wind blew over the wide open area, with no buildings to interfere or block it. Sergeant White ran us through the procedures for the day and we were ordered to line up. Platoon 1 was going first. We got set up and ready, while Platoon 4 was readying the targets. My hands were sweating and my heart pounded against my ribs. I took deep breaths to calm down, breathing in and out slowly. I could feel my heart rate slowed down, and my hands stopped shaking.

The procedure was exactly the same as we practiced the week before. Only, we all concentrated more. It wasn't just for practice or fun, it was for a serious purpose. I looked at the red flags fluttering in the wind, which blew right across us from left to right. I aimed my first practice shot at the left side of the target, and it struck roughly where I aimed. From only a hundred meters away, the wind didn't have much of an effect on the projectile. I aimed my second shot at the centre, and the red arrow indicated that I hit the target just off centre.

Once the shooting started, I blocked out everything and concentrated hard on the target. Nothing else mattered. I only focused on the centre block. From the static positions I thought I did well, but didn't feel all that confident when we had to fire on the move. When my last shots were fired, I gave a sigh of relief. For a moment I wondered why I worried so much, it wasn't all that bad. We retrieved all our spent casings and dropped them into the empty ammo crate, then made our way to the pit. We concentrated just as hard in the pit scoring for the next platoon, as we did out on the range. No mistakes were allowed that day. Four corporals did duty in the pit to ensure everything went smoothly.

"How do you think you did?" Charlie asked me when we were done with our pit duty, and reported behind the firing range.

I pulled my shoulders back.

"I think I did ok until the fire and running bit," I said.

Rex nodded, "Yes, the same here."

George looked worried and said, "I think I missed at least half my shots. I couldn't stop my hands from shaking. I lined up the target in my sights, and it moved all over. I tried to guess when it was in the middle, then squeezed the trigger and hope it hit something." He demonstrated how he was shaking, and we all laughed, happy the tension was over. The discussion continued while we cleaned our weapons.

It was late when we returned to the base and had to hurry to the mess hall for food. The other companies already ate, but we worried for nothing. Frik made sure there was food for our company. He knew we went to De Brug for our shooting evaluation, and kept our food in separate hotboxes. There was a canteen on base where you could buy most things you need, from washing powder to shoe polish to beer. We were told that we were not allowed to buy beer until after we completed basics, but when that time came, we owed Frik a lot of beers. As long as we were there, he never bought a single beer. We provided.

Monday morning the company drills intensified. The platoons lined up behind each other, and we being Platoon 1, were in front. The corporals informed us there would be a pass out parade at the end of basics, and all the parents and related family were invited. They wanted our drills razor sharp. Not only did we carry the pride of Charlie Company, but also that of 1 South African Infantry Battalion. We had to show everyone their tax money was well spent in training competent soldiers. As part of our uniform, we had to buy company and regiment flashes, to be displayed on our shoulders with our browns. We also had to buy a regiment belt with a silver belt buckle that had the regiment emblem of three ostrich feathers, together like a bunch of flowers.

That evening we all stood in queue at the canteen to buy our flashes and belts. Although we were not allowed to wear them yet, we were proud to have them. With the mail call that evening, I received a letter from one of the children I wrote, the girl named Karen. She was excited to get a letter from a soldier and said how proud she was of the soldiers. She thanked me for what I did, and for keeping her and her family safe. I read her letter a few times, and for a while, just sat there, staring at it. She included a little pocket size photo of her. I looked at the little girl with the light red hair, sparkling blue eyes and the shy smile.

"Don't tell me that bitch wrote you again," George said when he saw the expression on my face.

I shook my head and handed him the letter. He read it and all he could say was, "Wow."

I folded the letter, looked at him and said, "This is why we're here. All the training and hours of running we do. The sweat and all the crap we have to take from the corporals. In the end, it will make us better soldiers so that we can do a better job of protecting people like this little girl and her family."

For the rest of my time in the military, I kept that letter close. Every time when I thought things were getting too tough, I read that letter.

Chapter 14

Our platoon always ran together. Charlie, Rex and I had made it a habit, whenever the corporal chased us somewhere, or around something, we stuck with George. Of course, this meant more often than not, we finished last. When the corporal chased us around the tree that Tuesday afternoon, we thought nothing of it. He herded the last eighteen, and I thought he was going to make us run again. But instead, he ordered us to line up to the side.

"Gentlemen, thank you for volunteering for guard duty," he said.

That was a new one. No one trained us for guard duty, but apparently, you didn't need training. We were ordered to grab our eating utensils and report to the kitchen. We were having an early dinner. Afterwards we had to report to the guard house with our weapons, sleeping bags and coats. We retrieved our varkpans and marched to the kitchen. I walked in and saw Frik, busy dishing mashed potatoes into a hotbox as he prepared for the dinner crowd.

He smiled when he saw me and asked, "Chris, what are you guys doing here?"

"We were selected for guard duty. Hitler sent us to early dinner," I said.

"Oh," he said. "Sit at that table in the back. The kitchen staff normally eats there, but we also use it for the guys doing guard duty. If I knew you were guarding tonight, I would have fixed you something special."

Frik made sure we got double servings of everything. At least guard duty had some privileges. We ate early and got enough food.

After dinner we collected our gear and lined up for guard inspection, before we reported to the sergeant at the desk of the guardhouse. He divided us into three groups, and informed us that we would stand guard in shifts of two hours at a time, starting from 18:00 till 06:00. All four of us were in the second group, and our shift would be from 20:00 till 22:00, and then again from 02:00 till 04:00.

The inside of the guardhouse was like any other bungalow, with the notable exception of the counter at the entrance, and a wall that separated the counter area from the rest. Past the welcome desk, a doorway led to the rest of the bungalow. Beds and cabinets lined on the shiny floor like any other bungalow. The sergeant, only slightly taller than George, but just as stocky, told us to settle in and get some rest. The first group reported for their guard shift. He showed them what to do, and they would then show us when we took over from them. It was early and none of us could sleep, so we sat around and chatted until the officer on duty, a lance corporal, came to call us for our shift, fifteen minutes before we were due to start.

The evening air was cool, but not cold. I only wore my jersey over my overalls. The corporal marched us to the main gate. He then told us to turn right, and walk down the perimeter fence to relieve the guards on duty. George took dibs on the first one, and the guy explained to us that we were to walk guard along the fence, and cover an area of roughly a hundred and fifty to two hundred meters. I took over from the second guy, and he showed me my turning points, before heading back to the guardhouse to catch some shuteye before his next shift.

I had a magazine clipped to my weapon to keep up appearances, but we received no ammunition. We had to walk with the weapon in patrol fashion, your right hand on the trigger grip, your left on the barrel grip, and with the weapon pointed at a downward angle. On a real patrol, although the weapon was in a relaxed position, it could come up and ready to fire in an instant.

The footpath next to the fence was clearly noticeable, carved by previous guards, and I followed in their footsteps. On my first downward walk, I met George at my turning point. He saw me coming and waited for me.

"So what do we do if we see anyone scaling the fence?" George asked.

I pulled up my shoulders and answered, "We sure can't shoot them. Maybe we should throw them with rocks."

We looked around, and there were plenty fist size rocks scattered around on the ground.

George groaned.

"I'll rather whack them silly and leave them for the next shift," he said.

"Yeah, you're right. There's probably too much paper work involved," I replied.

The cool night breeze tugged at my bush hat, and the yellow glow of the security lights created an eerie feeling when I walked in the opposite direction. I think the fact that they had someone on guard, was as much a deterrent as an actual armed guard. I don't think anybody would have been stupid enough to sneak into the base, although later we heard the occasional rookie was dumb enough to try and sneak out.

At the top of my turn, Rex walked towards me and I waited for him.

"If someone tries to climb the fence, what do I do? Throw him with my rifle?" he asked before he even came to a halt. I chuckled.

"George and me were just chatting about the same thing," I said. "Maybe they're scared we'll be too jumpy and would shoot at everything that moved. They might have given ammo at one point, but it would only take one rookie to take a shot at the sergeant coming to check up on them, to put a stop to that."

Rex thought about it for a moment, then grinned and said, "You're probably right. I know I might, and would hate it if I hit you or Charlie by mistake."

I shook my head at my trigger happy friend who wanted to shoot everything.

Walking guard duty quickly became old and monotonous, and after the first hour, I wished I brought my coat. The night air cooled and the cold seeped into my bones. A few cars drove by on the main road, oblivious to us. If anybody noticed me, they probably thought, "Look at that poor fool."

I walked down and met George again.

"Are you still awake?" he asked.

I smiled at him and said, "I'm not tired, but I'm freezing."

He nodded in agreement and said, "I suppose we should have worn our coats. Hindsight's a great thing. Do you think anyone would mind if one of us run back to grab them?"

I eyed him suspiciously and asked, "And I suppose by someone, you're referring to me?"

He grinned and said, "We both know that you run much faster."

I shook my head.

"I think if we leave our posts, they would probably court martial us," I said.

George sighed and said, "Yeah, you're right. Suppose we have to tough it out."

When George walked away, I could see him breathing.

I sighed with relief when Herman walked my way, wearing his coat. I quickly explained to him his boundaries, and hurried back to the guard house. George and I were already tucked into our sleeping bags, when Rex and Charlie came in. We had to keep quiet not to wake the guys that were sleeping. I felt my body relax when the heat of my sleeping bag seeped through me, and I drifted off to sleep.

It felt like I was asleep for only a moment, when someone shook me, and said it was time to get up. I sat up and stared at my watch, which showed 01:46. George was harder to wake, and the guy had to grab him with both hands, and almost shook him off the bed before George said, "Huh, what's happening?"

The guy looked at him and said, "Shhh, it's time to get up."

I could see the confusion in his eyes, and smiled at him sympathetically while I slip my boots on.

Even with wearing my big coat, it was still cold. My hands were freezing. I was sure no rank would come by at 02:30 in the morning, so I slung the rifle over my shoulder, and buried my frozen hands deep into the warm pockets. George had the same idea. He walked towards me with his hands in his pockets. When I reached Rex, he still carried his rifle. When he noticed my rifle, his eyes stretched wide. He didn't wait for an invite and slung the weapon over his shoulder, blew onto his frozen hands to get some heat in them, before he stuffed them into his pockets.

"Shit, I didn't realize it got so cold out here at night," he said with trembling lips. We wouldn't have known, normally we were asleep at that time in nice warm beds.

When we finally got back to the guardhouse, it didn't take us long to fall asleep. Only moments later, the corporal woke us for breakfast. That evening we learned a very important lesson. The second shift on guard duty sucked, and from there on, if we landed guard duty, we always went for either the first or the last shift, but never the second. The guards ate breakfast separate from the rest, at the tables in the back of the kitchen. Frik made sure the coffee was hot and extra strong, because that morning we needed it.

That day we continued practicing the Company drill, which improved every day. We marched up and down the parade ground, and practiced drills with our rifles, until tea time. There was an autumn chill in the air when Frik served coffee. After tea time, we didn't go for our normal lessons, but instead we marched around to the medical centre, and were told to form a single line.

At first I thought we were in for another round of vaccinations, but it was worse than that. They drew blood to determine our blood group. That information was important to know, especially when you were operationally deployed. If you got wounded and needed a blood transfusion, or if someone else needed your blood in an emergency, they needed to know what blood type you were. Most of us had no idea about our blood groups.

A number of beds lined the walls on both sides of the building, with several male and female nurses in attendance. They were all from the military, but most of the guys haven't seen a woman up close for almost two months. It was like tossing a raw steak to a hungry pack of dogs. When I was called forward, a young nurse with short blond hair motioned me to the empty bed. Her pale skin was in stark contrast with her brown uniform. Unlike me who was in it all the time, she hardly ever got to see any sunlight. I hopped onto the medical bed with its back raised about halfway, and made myself comfortable. She had a clip board in her hands, and asked me my name, military number, company and platoon.

She was friendly, only a few years older than me.

"Are you allergic to anything," she asked.

I shook my head and said, "No, only to needles."

She looked at me with sympathy in her blue eyes.

"This will only sting a little," she said. She wore latex gloves and her slender hands worked with precision. The nurse searched for a suitable vein in my arm, and cleaned the site with an alcohol swab. She applied a tourniquet to the upper part of my right arm, four or five finger widths above the vein.

I turned my head when she inserted the vacuum tube into the vein, and felt the little sting. If the nurse wasn't so cute, I would have let out a loud, "OW," but kept it to myself. I looked back just as she inserted a glass vial into the vacuum tube, and it filled with my blood when she removed the tourniquet. She pulled the vial out, screwed the cap on and marked it with my name. She removed the vacuum tube, and kept a piece of cotton on the puncture site when she pulled the needle from my arm.

"Hold this with your finger," she said.

I held it down, while she cut a strip of plaster. She placed it over the cotton to hold it in place.

"There, it's all done," she said, and her smile made me forget about what just happened.

I smiled back and said, "Thank you."

She picked up her clipboard and said, "Next," as she turned her attention to the next guy. I was already forgotten. Rex followed close behind me, pale as a ghost.

"Are you alright?" I asked, scared he might fall over at any moment.

“Gmf,” he groaned.

“You get a pretty nurse, and I saw how nice she was with you. The guy I had, was about as gentle as a runaway elephant.”

George and Charlie walked out moments later, and Charlie stumbled when he exited the door. George steadied him.

“Charlie, are you ok?” he asked.

Our small friend nodded, but like Rex, looked pale.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be ok. It’s just a little blood,” I said.

“He’s so small, that was probably half his blood,” George remarked.

Charlie punched him in the shoulder, but George smiled. I doubt he even felt it.

We returned to our bungalow and were left alone till after lunch time. The corporals were probably ordered not to run us for the rest of the day. For a change, I saw no one running anywhere.

After lunch we lined up in our platoons. The corporal and lieutenant, carrying a clipboard and a small container, walked around the corner. The lieutenant read the results from our shooting evaluation, and awarded a Marksman Proficiency Badge, according to our scores. The scores worked to a total of two hundred and twenty points. One had to score more than two hundred to receive a gold badge. In our platoon there, only one person achieved that feat, Frankie Thompson.

I don’t know who was more surprised, Frankie, or the rest of us. With a sheepish expression, he walked forward and collected his badge from the lieutenant. He threw a crisp salute, took his badge, another salute, and did a sharp about face. Two months ago, I thought it was impossible, but Frankie looked like a soldier, even if he was dressed in scraggy overalls and a bush hat. The effect the military had on him was amazing, and I was sure if you looked at each of us, you would have seen the same thing.

The Corporal read out the names for the silver badges. You had to score at least a hundred and eight points. All four of us fell in that group.

“Somebody can’t count,” George muttered as he took his place with the badge in his hand, but smiled from ear to ear.

I was happy with my result, especially after the lieutenant informed me that I missed a gold badge by only four points. The rest of the platoon, who didn’t receive silver, got bronze badges for a score of a hundred and sixty or more. We also received cloth badges, and another string of cloth that contained our surnames. We could cut those out and sew them to our uniforms, jackets, and overalls.

The rest of the afternoon, the corporal showed us how to correctly wear our browns and flashes. Regiment flash on the left, and company flash on the right. We were also shown how to wear our complete parade uniform, which included a dark green cravat. Just before the corporal left, he dropped the bomb on us. The next morning we would have an inspection by our Company Commander, Captain Hammond. If we pass the inspection, we would get a weekend pass to go home. We haven’t been home in more than two months, and that was something to look forward to. But there was a catch. It wasn’t an ordinary inspection, everything had to be outstanding, or else, no pass.

We were up for the challenge, and after dinner, we got to work. I packed out my cabinet and trommel, cleaned it thoroughly, and took care repacking it.

“What are your plans for the weekend,” Rex asked the rest of us.

I pulled up my shoulders, and honestly didn’t know.

“Don’t get too excited, they’ll probably find a reason to cancel it at the last minute,” George said, and got smacked by a pillow.

Charlie wasn’t going to have his excitement spoiled.

“My parents will probably be on the farm, so I’ll go straight there,” he said. Charlie’s parents had a horse farm just outside Johannesburg, where their race horses were kept and bred.

Rex looked at me and asked, “Will you see her this weekend?”

I shook my head and said, “If I do, it’ll be by accident.”

George smacked his huge fist into the palm of his hand.

“I think we should pay that girlfriend thieving scum a visit,” he said with menace in his eyes.

“Yeah,” Rex agreed, emulating George but not with the same effect.

I smiled at the two of them.

“Thanks guys, but that won’t be necessary. If I do bump into them by chance, I’m sure I can handle it,” I said.

George looked disappointed.

“I’ll give you my phone number, in case you change your mind.”

Charlotte, I haven’t thought about her all week. The possibility of seeing her again brought her back to mind. I wondered if I should look her up, and what her reaction would be. Maybe her new boyfriend would be there, and I could have a friendly chat with him. It was hard to believe, that until the day of my birthday, we were happy, or at least I thought we were. Things must have been worse than I thought for it to go south so quickly. For the rest of the night, her short curly black hair and dark brown eyes kept appearing in my mind’s eye.

Come midnight, I ironed my browns with care. We were warned not to iron any creases into them to give them attitude. We still had to earn that right and privilege. I heard a loud thud, and stuck my head around the corner of the ironing room. Herman lay on the floor. “Are you ok?” I asked.

He got up rubbing his ass.

“Yeah, I’m ok. These floors are so dam slippery,” he said.

The floors were polished several times, and we had to walk around on socks, which meant you couldn’t hurry anywhere, or end up like Herman.

By 02:00 everything was done, but our beds. We already decided we would work the whole night on the inspection, so no sleeping in them. At one stage, Clive fell asleep on the floor next to his bed, but was brought back to the land of the waken, with an earful of shaving cream. By breakfast time we were ravenous. When you are awake, you use more energy than sleeping. When Frik served an extra helping of eggs, my smile was grateful. We hurried through breakfast, and scampered back to our bungalow to put the finishing touches on our inspection.

The four of us walked together back to the bungalow, discussing our weekend plans. We approached the building, and a loud shout of anguish and frustration came from inside. We hurried inside and stopped in our tracks. I couldn’t believe my eyes. It looked like a tornado hit the bungalow. Everything we worked on so meticulously through the entire night was dumped on the floor.

Chapter 15

“What the fuck?” George roared, echoing our sentiments.

“Somebody’s going to die!” Rex said.

I stepped over the debris and made my way to my bed. The sheet and blanket was ripped from the mattress, which was propped up halfway against the bed frame. I tossed the mattress back in its place, and retrieved the sheet and blanket from the aisle. My trommel was tipped over, the contents spilled into the aisle. Only my cabinet wasn't touched, probably because my weapon was inside, and it was locked. More people walked in and stared at the carnage in disbelief, stumped and dejected. I gathered the contents of my trommel onto my bed, and double checked that I had everything that I should.

At that moment four guys from platoon 2 came storming into our bungalow, fuming, but stopped dead in their tracks when they saw the chaotic state of our bungalow.

"Oh! Yours too huh?" They said sheepishly.

"Get the fuck out of here," George yelled, and they made a hasty retreat when George headed their way, desperate to rip someone's head from their shoulders. Herman walked in and said, "Platoon 3's bungalow is also trashed."

Tony groaned and said, "I bet you the fucking corporals are behind this!"

We all looked at each other. That was the only explanation that made sense. We only had half an hour left before inspection.

I looked at the others and said, "Come on, we can still do this."

A mad scramble of activity ensued as we tried to be ready in time. Months of practice helped to get my trommel and bed back into shape in no time. I went over everything one more time to make sure all is where it should be.

Rex had trouble with his bed, so I jumped to help him. Working as a team, we whipped the bungalow together again. When Herman shouted, "He's on his way," we scrambled to our positions at our beds.

"Stand up!" Herman shouted when the corporal walked in.

Surprise registered on his face when we stood ready. He expected to walk into a mad rush of activity, and probably wondered if he only dreamed about tossing our bungalow. There was no sign that it was in utter chaos only half an hour before. He walked down the aisle and looked around, but instead of being impressed, he looked rather pissed off. We made his work harder for him. I could hear the corporal from the bungalow next door yelling about something. Apparently after more than two months, the guys from platoon 3 still hadn't learned to work together.

Then Hitler started. He found fault with everything, Rex's boots weren't clean enough, George's face wasn't shaved properly, my trommel was a mess, and Charlie's weapon was dirty. As far as he went, he found something wrong, and everything got tossed. When the corporal tossed Tony's bed, I saw the look on Tony's face. For a moment I feared he was going to say or do something, which would have made it worse for everyone. But remarkably, Tony kept his cool.

By the time the corporal reached Herman, all our stuff was on the floor again.

"One hour," he shouted. "When I come back, I hope your inspection look a lot better." He left the bungalow and we looked at each other stunned.

"This is bullshit. There's nothing wrong with our inspection," George growled. He picked his bedding from the floor and tossed it back on his bed in disgust.

"You know it's not about the inspection," I said.

Tony stopped in his tracks and asked "Then what the fuck is it about?"

"This is just another way to get to us. We can have a perfect inspection every time and he will find fault with it," I said.

"So the whole going on pass thing is a ruse?" Tony asked with disappointment and anger on his face. Tony haven't seen his family for two months and missed his wife and kids.

I shook my head.

"No, I don't think so. But I'm sure Hitler's going to test the limits of our endurance before we go," I said.

Tony looked around him and said, "Well, then let's make sure we get through this so we can go home."

Once again we started over. Squared the bed, repacked the trommel, cleaned our rifles, polish our boots, and shined the floor. By 08:30 when the corporal returned, Herman didn't have to say anything. We were already at attention next to our beds.

Hitler hardly even looked at our inspection before he shouted, "Do you think this is a joke? It seems like you don't want to go home today. Maybe if you clear your lungs you'll take this more serious." To make his point, he chased us around the big tin building.

As we ran, many of the guys were moaning, but it was in vain. The moment I stepped back into the bungalow, I knew why he chased us as far as he did. He needed time to toss the place again.

"Son of a bitch," Tony roared as he caught sight of the disaster zone that once again looked like it did after breakfast.

Tony knew the corporal tried to find a reason not to allow our pass, but his anger was beyond reasoning. He had murder in his eyes when he stormed towards the corporal, who made a hasty retreat and exited the bungalow. I jumped in front Tony, both my hands on his chest.

"Tony stop! Don't do this, he's not worth it. They'll just send you to the detention barracks and then you won't see your family for even longer," I pleaded.

He tried to shove me out of the way, but I held my ground.

"He's not worth it," I said again, and could see the fire and anger in his eyes subside, and sighed with relief when he came to a halt.

For a moment he stared at me and his shoulders slumped.

"Thanks," he said.

I slapped him on the shoulder and said, "Relax Tony, unlike us, you don't have much time here. Don't let them get to you. In less than a month you'll be done with all this shit."

He nodded and gave me an uncomfortable smile, then turned back to his bed and kicked at the mattress on the floor.

"You should have left him to bash that asshole's head in," George muttered when I got back to my tossed bed.

I shook my head and said, "That would just make it worse for everyone."

George knew I was right but stubbornly said, "Yeah but it would make me feel better, if only for a little while."

I thought about my bag that stood packed and ready to go in the civvy room and sighed. Once again we fixed everything and got ready for inspection. Shortly before lunchtime, the corporal walked down the aisle again. He didn't say a word and didn't toss anything. He stopped at the last bed, and turned.

"After lunch you have half an hour to get dressed in your browns. You will form up outside in platoon formation for personal inspection," he said.

Rex let out a loud sigh as the corporal exited the building, but George and I looked at each other, and the look on his face echoed my feelings. After so many months in the army, we learned not to trust the corporal. We were certain there was more to come. It was not the end yet. After lunch I dressed in my browns. It was a good to finally be able to wear them, instead of the overalls. I made sure the pins that kept the flashes from flipping up and down were in place. Last was the beret. I have never worn one before, and after I put it on my head, it almost looked like a chef's hat. I pulled it down on the right side like the corporal showed us but it returned to its original position. I kept flattened it with my right hand until it made an attempt to stay in place. I made sure my boots were shined, and then joined the rest of the squad outside.

The lieutenant arrived with the corporal for inspection. Hitler gave the open order command and the lieutenant proceeded with inspection, walking in front of each of us, checking the state of our uniforms, whether we shaved or not, were our boots polished, and if our overall appearance was acceptable. When the Lootie completed his walk-through, he had a quiet word with Hitler.

He turned and said, "Tony, can I have a word with you?" and they disappeared around the corner. The moment that happened, I knew we were in for a lot more shit.

The lieutenant barely made it around the corner, when Hitler shouted at Herman, "What the hell is that on your head?"

Herman blinked nervously and answered, "My beret, Corporal."

Hitler snorted and said, "That looks more like a seven single than a beret! Didn't I show you how to wear your beret?" He turned his attention to the rest of us and waved his hands up and down.

"Do you honestly want to go out in public dressed like this? Your boots are dirty, your clothes are wrinkled, and some of you haven't shaved. You call that pride in your uniform? Do you want the civvies to think we run a Mickey Mouse outfit here?" Hitler was red in the face when he finished, the veins in his forehead pulsing.

He stared at us for a moment, probably wondering what torture he could bestow on us, but he seemed to have thought better of it.

"You have one hour to improve your appearance or you stay here this weekend," he said.

With that, we were dismissed and scrambled back to the bungalow. I removed my boots and clothes, grabbed my iron and shuffled to the ironing room in my socks and army underwear. My clothes were only slightly wrinkled from normal wear, but I ironed them again. When done, I lay them out on my bed, while I re-polished and shined my boots. I only got dressed ten minutes before inspection, to minimize any wrinkling.

Exactly an hour after we were dismissed, we were back in formation, looking sharper than ever. I heard a loud roar of engines behind us, and we all looked back to see the luxury liner busses pull into the base, drove past the parade ground, and parked in the open field next to the tin building. We all looked at each other excited, but when Hitler approached, and we saw the look on his face, the excitement disappeared very quickly. He brought us to attention and gave the open order command, then started his inspection. Everyone was thoroughly inspected and it looked as if it went well, until he got to Frankie.

He stood in front of Frankie, staring at him, knowing something was up, but he couldn't quite put a finger on it. He slowly walked around him with a puzzled look on his face, trying to find what was wrong. He even bent his tall frame down and sniffed Frankie. I could see his eyes light up when he realized what puzzled him.

"Thompson, what have you done to your clothes?" he asked like he couldn't believe what he saw. I looked over, and Hitler poked the back of Frankie's shirt, but the shirt didn't budge. It was cast in concrete. Frankie looked puzzled at the corporal, a face full of innocence. He had no idea why Hitler made such a fuss about his brilliant idea.

He blinked a few times and said, "Eh, nothing Corporal. After I ironed my shirt, I sprayed a little starch on it, so it wouldn't wrinkle."

Hitler shook his head in amazement and asked, "How much starch did you use?"

Frankie still looked puzzled and said, "Not much, because the can ran dry."

I almost choked. He used a whole can on his clothes. He stood there like he wore a knight's silver armour suit, only, his were brown. I was scared if he fell down his clothes might crack. "Well, you can't go on pass looking like this. You have half an hour, and if you don't look better, the entire platoon will stay here this weekend," Hitler said, and the look on his face said he meant every word of it.

"Frankie, when you were a baby, did your mother perhaps drop you on your head?" George inquired when we returned to the bungalow.

Frankie pulled up his shoulders and said, "Not that I know of, why do you ask?"

George stared at him in disbelief. His pure innocence amazed the rest of us. I knew hassling him wasn't going to get us on pass any quicker.

"Frankie, where's your spare browns?" I asked.

He pulled it out of his cabinet, all wrinkled. I grabbed the clothes and tossed the pants to Charlie.

“You iron that while I do the shirt,” I said, then turned to George and Rex. “Make sure the rest of him is in order.”

When Charlie and I returned with his clothes, he stood in his underpants, socks and cravat. His beret fitted neatly on his head, and his shiny boots next to him, glimmering in the afternoon sun that shined through the window. I attached his flashes. It felt like dressing my little brother. Frankie didn't say a word. He just stood there and let us dress him. I think, not only did he want to go on pass just as badly as we did, he felt rotten that he might be the reason for everyone else staying behind. “What about my other browns?” He asked.

I looked to where it lay on his bed, still not a crease in them, holding the same shape it did when he wore them.

“Just hang them in the civvy room, you can soak it Sunday night when you get back,” I said.

When we formed up, the first busses loaded with happy troops left the base, on their way home. They shouted and whistled at us, but we ignored them. We had more important things to worry about. I looked anxiously towards the busses as another pulled out, and saw there were still two busses and a Samil waiting, the impatient bus driver looked at his watch as he lit a cigarette. We were ready and waiting. It felt like an eternity before Hitler decided to grace us with his presence. He walked slowly, looking almost bemused. I realized we all must have looked very anxious.

He gave the open order command, and slowly walked through, doing his inspection. He stopped behind Frankie, poked him in the back, and I caught a glimpse of a slight smile before he continued his inspection. He stopped by Herman. Without a word he pulled his beret down on one side, back into place. The corporal returned to the front of the platoon, gave the close order command. He promptly marched us to the armoury, where we were instructed to hand in our weapons for the weekend. Each Company had a designated area inside, and we placed our weapons in the last remaining spot.

“It's a pity I can't take her home for the weekend,” Rex remarked.

I looked at him sideways and said, “Probably a good thing, because we're not visiting you in jail.” He just grinned.

After I stored my weapon safely in the armoury, and signed the log book, we formed up again in front of our bungalow.

Hitler stared at us for a moment then commanded, “Platoon, dismiss!”

We followed the command instinctively and then looked at him puzzled. He frowned.

“What are you waiting for? Grab your bags. The bus won't wait forever,” he said.

It took us a few moments to realize that we passed, and were free to go. I didn't wait around another moment and sprinted to the bungalow, grabbed my civvy kit bag, and could hear the heavy footfalls of running boots behind me as the others followed. We ran to the bus, where a corporal waited.

“It is about bloody time. If you go to Johannesburg, get on the bus. To Cape Town, get on the Samil. The driver will take you to the station where a train is waiting,” he said.

We didn't need a second invite and piled into the vehicles.

I chose an empty seat, and scooted in so I sat next to the window. With a sigh Rex, dropped in the seat beside me. Charlie and George filled the seat behind us.

“If they call us off the bus now, it's going to be somebody's funeral,” George growled with menace thick in his voice. We sat there waiting for the driver to start the bus, too scared to say anything. The driver, dressed in jeans and a red and blue chequered shirt, got in, smiled at us.

“You almost missed the bus,” he said.

Nobody answered. We didn't even want to consider that possibility. There was a beep beep sound, and then the engine roared to life. As we drove past our bungalows, I looked over. Everything seemed so peaceful, quiet and abandoned. When we drove through the main gates, I felt a little more at ease. Rex had a huge smile on his face.

“We're going home,” he said.

We turned into the main road and drove past the base. From that distance it looked so peaceful, and it was hard to believe all the blood and sweat that we spilled there the past two months.

The sun hovered low in the western sky when the bus turned onto the highway heading towards Jo'burg. Within an hour it would be dark, and we had a long trip ahead of us. The trip to Johannesburg would take almost four hours, but we wanted to get home as soon as possible.

George went to talk to the driver and asked, "Sir, we're anxious to get home. Can't this bus go any faster?"

The driver looked at George, smiled and answered, "Yes it can, but if I get ticketed for speeding, I have to pay it out of my own pocket."

George thought for a moment, then turned around and addressed the bus.

"The driver can go faster, but if he gets ticketed for speeding, he'll have to pay the ticket out of his own pocket. So we can either crawl home at this pace, or we can agree to club together if there's a ticket, and pay it for him."

A roar of agreement was answer enough. George looked at the driver.

"Is that good enough for you?" he asked.

The driver smiled, and pushed down on the accelerator pedal.

Chapter 16

It was late when the bus pulled into Johannesburg station. We passed the other bus on the road. Apparently their passengers didn't have the insight to offer their driver the same deal we did ours. Before we arrived in Jo'burg, we took a collection, and our driver received a handsome tip. Only a few people waited at the station for our arrival. Some of the guys managed to phone ahead to say they were on their way before we left the base. My parents were not part of the waiting crowd. I didn't inform them I was on my way home, neither did Rex and George. Charlie's dad picked him up, and George caught a metered taxi to Melville. Rex and I planned to catch a train once we arrived at Jo'burg station, so after we said goodbye to our friends, we rushed to the ticket office and found the last train departing in five minutes.

We ran onto the platform, just as the train arrived, on time. We boarded the empty passenger carriage, not many passengers that time of the night, especially not on a Thursday night. Rex got off at Benoni station while I continued on to Brakpan. When I exited Brakpan station, everything was quiet and the place deserted. Being a weekday, there wasn't much going on at that time of the night, and I walked quickly through the empty parking lot with my balsak slung over my shoulder.

We lived only a few blocks from the station, so it was only a short walk home. It was almost midnight when I knocked on the front door of our house. I stayed in a room out back, but my parents had the keys, so I had to wake them. I knocked, but instead of a few raps, I knocked continuously. I heard my father swear at the other side of the door as he exited his bedroom and yanked the door open.

He looked me in the face and said, "What!"

I stood there with a grin on my face. He stared at me for a few seconds.

"Oh, it's you," he said and closed the door again.

For a few moments I stared at the shut door, and then I heard my mother yell. The footsteps from her bare feet fell lightly on the wooden floors when she came running. She yanked the door open and threw her arms around me, almost knocking me off my feet.

Five minutes later we sat by the kitchen table, sipping on hot coffee.

My father walked in and asked, "Why are you home? I thought we were rid of you for a while. Did they kick you out already?"

I shook my head.

"They got tired and sent me home for the weekend," I said.

He looked at my mother and said, "He has that hungry look in his eyes. You better lock all the food cupboards, or there won't be anything left come Sunday evening."

My mother smiled and winked at me. She thought my father was joking, but I wasn't so sure about that.

When I finally got to bed it was almost one o'clock, but by 04:30, I was wide awake. My father left for work at 06:00 so I waited till he left before I went looking for breakfast.

"You look good," Mother said.

I nodded my head.

She stared at me for a while, and then asked softly, "Will you go see Charlotte?"

I looked up at her and answered past a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

"I'm not planning on it."

She looked at me, pity all over her face.

"He's a real twat," she said.

I looked at her, acted all surprised and said, "Not my fault, you married him."

She smacked me at the back of my head.

"I'm not talking about your father," she said.

I gave her a wry smile and said, "Yes, I know."

"I hear he's a phone technician, and from what I saw, he treats her like shit," she said with venom in her voice.

For a moment I stared at my mother. She made it her own mission to know as much about Charlotte's new boyfriend as possible. My mother always liked Charlotte, and in her eyes, would have been the perfect wife for me. I ignored her and continued to wolf down my breakfast.

My mother frowned and said, "Since when do you scoff your food down like that?"

I didn't even notice, but I ate like I was late for inspection. I smiled sheepishly.

"Since they don't give us much time to eat, we have to do it in a hurry," I answered.

She frowned at me and said, "Well, you're home now, so watch your manners."

I had to make a real effort to eat at a slower pace.

The weekend was sprung on us, so I never made any plans and decided to take it as it comes. I dressed in jeans and a blue t-shirt, surprised to find that the clothes were a tight fit. It felt strange to wear civilian clothes after two months of wearing nothing but brown. I decided to walk around town. I had most of my military pay from the past two months in my pocket, which wasn't much, but could buy a few things. I walked around town for two hours, wandering from shop to shop, just browsing around. All the walking made me thirsty, and I decided to walk to the other side of town to have a milkshake at my favourite roadhouse. To get there, I had to cross the middle arena of the shopping mall. Halfway through the middle walkway, I saw her.

She wore a long flowered skirt with a loose fitting pink blouse. Her short, curly black hair fluttered around in the morning breeze. If I didn't stop to stare at her, she wouldn't have noticed me, but I did, and she saw me. Surprise registered on her face when she recognized me. For a moment I hoped she would keep walking, but she changed direction and rushed my way.

"Chris, what a surprise," she said, sounding happy.

That caught me off guard. I wanted to be angry with her, but it was impossible to be angry with someone so happy to see you.

I smiled and said, "Hi Charlotte. You look good."

After the initial surprise, she was uncomfortable and didn't know what to say.

"Aren't you suppose to be in the army?" she asked.

I acted nonchalantly and answered, "Weekend pass," hoping my racing heart was not about to betray my act.

"Where are you headed?" she asked.

I frowned. It was none of her business, and she had no right to ask anymore.

“I’m on my way to Casbah for a milkshake, care to join me?” I asked, and immediately regretted the invite. But it was out there, and before I could retract it, she said, “Sure, it sounds good.” On our way there we made small talk, asking about the welfare of our respective families, the weather, and anything else but the topic of us.

When we each had a chocolate milkshake in front of us, I asked, “So how’s Stan doing?”

She stared at me, eyes full of suspicion, but I had my poker face on, sipping innocently on my shake.

She sighed and said, “His name is Steve, and he’s doing fine.”

“Oh,” I said, and took another long sip from my milkshake, avoiding eye contact with her.

She was quiet for a while, and I could see she wanted to say something, but struggled to find the right words. I wasn’t about to make it any easier for her, and waited patiently.

“Chris, I’m sorry for the way things ended with us,” she finally blurted out, and for once I was speechless. I wanted to yell at her, tell her how much I hated her, but I knew it was a lie. Staring into those dark brown eyes, I realized how much I still cared for her.

My silence must have been encouraging because she continued.

“That night of your birthday, you got drunk, and way too friendly with that blonde. When you danced with her, I got jealous and ran home. When I told Linda the next day, she said all kinds of bad things about you, telling me I was better off without you. It was her that introduced me to Steve,” she said.

I looked at her, shock on my face when I realized which blonde she referred to.

I sighed and said, “Charlotte, just a couple of things. I realize I drank too much that night. Both my cousin and I was about to report for military duty, and we decided to celebrate together. Yes, we probably over did it. You know I don’t normally drink, and the alcohol was too much for me that night. I found that when I drink, I get friendly with everybody, but it’s nothing what you think. The girl you referred to, her name is Trish. She’s my sister’s best friend, and like a little sister to me. In fact, she tells everyone I’m her big brother. I thought you knew me better than that.”

Now it was Charlotte’s turn to look shocked.

“Why didn’t you discuss this with me before you ended our relationship?” I asked.

Charlotte looked at me puzzled, almost ashamed.

Before she could say anything I said, “Let me guess, Linda?” I never liked Charlotte’s best friend, a conniving bitch, and she made no bones about the fact that she despised me. Charlotte knew it. I saw it in her eyes. That moment when she realized she made a huge mistake, but didn’t know how to make it right.

She just nodded and said, “Sorry.”

And there it was, supposed to fix everything. I boiled inside, but kept my cool as we finished our shakes in silence. I almost got up and stormed off, but didn’t want to waste half a milkshake.

“Are you busy tonight?” she asked when we got ready to leave.

I stared at her for a moment, and then shrugged my shoulders.

“I have nothing planned, why?”

She paused, her mind racing, fighting. She came to a decision and said, “Why don’t you come over to my parent’s place tonight. It’s my brother’s birthday, and he would love to see you.”

That much was true. I always got along well with her brother.

Without thinking it through I said, “Sure, but isn’t Stan going to be there?”

She looked at me with a strange glint in her eyes, and said, “It’s Steve, and I don’t know. He might.”

Restraint was never one of my stronger traits, at least not before I joined the army. I had to bite my tongue to stop myself from asking.

“What time?” I asked.

“Around seven,” she answered.

“Ok, see you then,” I said, turned and walked away without another word.

Walking back to our house, it took me two blocks to realize what I got myself into. If Stan was there when I get to her parents' house, it wouldn't end well. I didn't tell my mother where I'd be going, she was sure to stop me. The whole afternoon I mulled it over, and for a while I even considered phoning George and Rex for reinforcements. But in the end, decided to go alone. By the time I knocked on Charlotte's door, I hoped Stan was there.

Charlotte's mother opened the door, and her face lit up. She greeted and hugged me like her long lost son. When the kind woman led me to the back where everyone gathered, I changed my mind, and decided to behave myself. Everyone greeted me friendly, surprised and happy to see me. Apparently Charlotte didn't inform anybody she invited me, or thought I wouldn't show. I searched through the people, and found her. Charlotte sat in the corner, her arms folded over her chest, looking very unhappy. The source of her unhappiness sat next to her.

His blond hair was cut in a mullet, he had a thin moustache which was barely visible, but his whole demeanour said he was full of himself. Stan, a scrawny punk, about a head shorter than me and he had a cruel face. I couldn't believe Charlotte dumped me for that. I spent most of the evening ignoring him, chatting to the others and despite my earlier doubts, actually had a good time.

"So how's our soldier doing?" Henry asked me.

Charlotte's brother walked over to me and put his arm around my shoulder. His breath reeked of alcohol.

"We miss you around here," he said before I could answer his first question. He looked at the soda in my hand.

"Hey, what's that? You got to have a beer with me," he slurred.

I shook my head and said "Henry, not tonight. I need to keep a clear head."

I didn't have a drink in two months, and with all the fitness training, one beer would probably have put me on my ass. Luckily Henry did too much celebrating, and what I said didn't even register. Something else caught his attention and he stumbled away.

At one stage Charlotte came over and said, "I'm glad you came."

I smiled at her.

"Yeah, me too. It's nice seeing your family again," I said.

I stared at her for a moment. Her eyes were red and puffy. She cried not too long ago.

"Charlotte, what's wrong?" I asked.

She shook her head and said, "Nothing, I'm fine." But she didn't convince me. She looked everything but fine.

I decided to call it an early evening to spend some time with my own family and was on my way out when he stood there, to the side, waiting for me.

"Why don't you leave her alone?" he asked, trying to sound menacing, but it didn't scare me.

As was my nature, I decided to leave it alone and ignored him. I wanted to walk past him, but he stepped forward, blocking my path. His cocky attitude really annoyed me, but I didn't want to make a spectacle at Charlotte's home. I held up my hands.

"Listen, she chose you. I just came by to see the family. Let's just leave it at that," I said.

But I could see in his eyes that he didn't plan to leave it.

"No, I'm sick and tired of listening how great you are," he said and stepped forward. The alcohol smell on his breath made me nauseous. I found out later, Charlotte's parents were not very fond of Stan, and didn't waste an opportunity to let him know that she would have been better off with me.

I tried to walk around him, but as I passed, he grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. As I came about, I instinctively hit him. He had his arm pulled back to sucker punch me, when my fist smashed into his nose. I heard the crunch when it broke. Instantly everyone was quiet and stared at us. I looked at Charlotte, her face filled with shock.

I turned to leave when Stan said, "My friends and I will get you."

The threat made me see red. Months of frustration and pent up anger rose to the surface when I swung around, and grabbed him by his denim jacket. I lifted him from the ground, and slammed him against the wall.

"I have friends too. A whole platoon of them, and we're trained to kill people. If your friends are useless and pathetic as you are, you better stay out of my way, or we'll bury you," I snarled at him, my voice cold and menacing. I shoved him back to the ground where he fell hard on his ass. He was pale and swallowed hard, but didn't say another word. I looked at the smiling faces around me.

"Sorry everyone, I didn't come here to start trouble," I said. I didn't mean to cause trouble, but it felt good none the less. With one last look at Charlotte's angry face, I turned and left.

The next morning, I was still in bed, when a light knock on the door caught my attention. I thought it was my mother who brought me coffee.

"You may enter my kingdom," I said.

Charlotte pushed the door open and stuck her head through the opening.

"May I come in?" she asked in a small voice.

The sight of her caught me off guard. After the previous evening, I thought I would never see her again.

Charlotte had been crying, a lot. Her big, brown eyes were red and puffy, and tired. I couldn't find it in my heart to send her away. Motioning her to enter, I cleared a space at the foot end of the bed.

"Chris, can we talk?" she asked.

She sat down and looked so vulnerable. In that instant I forgave her for everything that happened.

I jumped out of bed and pulled on a T-shirt.

"Hold that thought," I said. "We can't talk with dry throats. Let me get us some coffee, and then we can talk."

I really needed the coffee, but it gave me a moment to gather my thoughts.

My mother walked into the kitchen while I made the coffee.

"Don't they give you coffee in the army, or are you that thirsty?" she asked curiously, eyeing the two cups.

I shook my head.

"Charlotte is here. She wants to talk," I said.

Mother raised an eye brow, although her face was full of questions, she didn't say or ask anything.

Charlotte and I spent the next few hours talking about everything, from my party before I left for the army, up to the events of the previous night.

By lunchtime the air between us was cleared, and we decided to give our relationship another chance. We spent the rest of the afternoon making up, and it felt good to hear her laugh again. When my mother knocked on the door later the afternoon, and asked if Charlotte would stay for dinner, we looked at each other and smiled, which was answer enough.

Around the dinner table we sat and chatted like a family as if nothing had happened. My mom looked exceptionally pleased that Charlotte was there, and must have informed dad about the situation. He didn't say a word when he walked in and saw Charlotte.

Halfway through the meal my father looked at me.

"Chris, tell me how's the army treating you and what you do there," he said.

"We run," I answered, before I shoved another fork full of mashed potatoes into my mouth.

He lifted his eyebrows and said, "Surely that's not all you do?"

I shook my head and said, "We drill a little, did some shooting, fall and crawl a bit, but mostly we run. We run everywhere. I almost forgot how to walk."

My father looked at my suspiciously, but when I didn't elaborate, he let it go.

Charlotte spent the night in my room. I half expected my mother to kick up a fuss, but she didn't say a word.

Sometime during the night she sighed and said, "Chris, you have changed."

I frowned. I thought I was still the same person.

“Changed how?” I asked.

“She placed a hand against my chest and said, “You have much more confidence. You were always so shy, but I’ve watched you at our house last night, you handled Steve with self-belief. It’s a side of you I’ve never seen.”

I considered it for a moment, and realized she was right. I had more confidence than I did before I started my military training. In the army you didn’t have a choice. You had to grow up in a hurry.

Charlotte went home early Sunday morning to wash and change. She wanted to come along to see me off at the station. My parents said they would take me, and she was welcome to tag along. By the time she returned I was dressed in my uniform, and her eyes sparkled when she saw me. If she had any doubts about me, the uniform took care of that. We said our goodbyes before we left the house. In front of everyone else, there was no way to do it properly.

We had to report to the station at noon, but were there half an hour early. In the army you learned to be punctual. I took my bag out of the car, when Rex and George came strolling our way. I introduced my friends to my parents, and to Charlotte, who hung onto my arm.

George nodded politely at Charlotte, and then stared at me.

“Sounds like you have a lot to tell us,” he said. Both Charlotte and I blushed, and I caught a brief glimpse of my mother’s frown.

When it was time to go, there was only a quick hug and a goodbye kiss before I stepped onto the bus. My parents and Charlotte stood on the sidewalk, waving goodbye. This time I felt more optimistic about leaving than I did the first time. I had someone waiting for me back home, and it gave me hope, and something to look forward to.

We spent most of the trip back discussing what happened the weekend. The others were more interested in my weekend, and most of the conversation centred on my initial meeting with Charlotte, and the consequent run in with Stan. All of them, even Charlie, crooned with delight when I described how I put Stan down, and my response to his threat. When the ride home was done in relative silence, the trip back to the base was noisy, with not a moment’s silence. We didn’t mind that the driver did not speed. When we turned into the base, a hush fell over everyone. We realized our break was over, and it was back to the reality of life in the military.

Chapter 17

If we had any illusion that things might get easier for us, the corporal ran it out of us that Monday morning. Although with everything in tip top shape, the moment Hitler walked into the bungalow, we were in trouble. There was no, “Good morning my platoon, how was your weekend? Did you miss me?” kind of thing. Instead, the moment he walked in, we had to drop for thirty push ups. When, in his opinion, we took too long to fulfil his request, we did twenty more. When our arms became so tired they couldn’t keep our bodies up anymore, we had to run around the tree.

“One weekend in civvy street and you get all soft on me,” he shouted and we ran again.

When I woke up that morning, I felt refreshed after the nice weekend at home, but a determined Hitler wanted to change that. Apparently our drills were pathetic. We could not keep in sync, and everyone marched to their own call. When ordered to attention, our boots came down as one. He heard a clattering of feet. For every flaw he saw, most imaginary, we ran. I almost believed us to be utterly crap, until I noticed all the other platoons received the same treatment. I suspected while we enjoyed time at home, they attended a corporal’s camp where they discussed strategy on what to do with us when we got back.

Exhausted by tea time, the memory of our weekend a distant and vague recollection, which I suspect was the whole point behind the exercise.

“I think while we were on pass, Hitler received more asshole training,” Rex muttered, while sucking down his cup of orange flavoured drink.

“Yeah, and here I thought he was already a champ,” George said sounding sour.

I looked over to the side near the mess hall. All the corporals stood together, chatting and laughing. Trained to give us a hard time, they were doing a fine job of it. I could only imagine if our combat training occurred with the same iron hand, we would make fine soldiers.

After tea, two of our company’s lieutenants walked towards us, one carrying a clipboard. They had a brief chat with the corporals, and ordered us to form in company formation. One lieutenant informed us that the names that he was about to read, were picked to attend Section Leading training. My heart rate increased, that was my aim. I wanted to be a section leader. The names were alphabetically listed, so it wouldn’t take long to get to my name. When he read, “Chris Dempsey,” I almost thought I heard wrong. He also read Rex’s name, and when I looked at him, I saw freckles and teeth.

We were informed that whatever happened after lunch, we should keep in mind that we were spoken for. We looked at each other.

“Can’t they just tell us what’s going to happen?” George muttered as the Lootie’s walk away.

Charlie snorted and said, “No, what fun would that be,” his voice dripping with sarcasm.

The morning’s activities must have got the better of Charlie. That was one of the few times I heard frustration in his voice. With enough time left before lunch, it was our Platoon’s turn to retrieve our weapons from the armoury.

During lunch there was a lot of speculation what would happen that afternoon, especially when some strange vehicles pulled in and parked next to the big tin building. At least we knew the location of the action, and sure enough, after lunch, marched double time to the big tin building. With everyone seated the major addressed us. All the other people present, were there to do recruitment for their respective units. Each unit had a spokesperson who gave a brief introduction of their units, and what they did. The last one to speak was probably the most awesome, a captain from the South African Special Forces unit, popular known as the Recce’s.

After the presentations, the different units setup in some of the lesson tents, and we visited each area to learn more about what they did. If interested, you could leave your name, and they would interview you. If they thought you were not of the right stuff, you would be told right there and then. If you had a chance, they said they would get back to you.

Charlie looked at George and asked, “So Rambo, will you try for the Recce’s?”

George shook his head.

“No, if I leave, who’s going to look after your scrawny ass?” he said.

George glanced over at Rex and said, “It is a pity you put your name down for Section Leading, you could have signed up for the Bats.”

Rex looked at him shocked, and then shook his head and said, “There’s no way I would jump out of a perfectly good airplane.”

I nudged Charlie and asked, “Why don’t you sign up for the Dog Unit?”

For a second, fear made his eyes sparkle.

“That would be suitable. I already worked with you lot of dogs, but sadly, the K9 species and me don’t see eye to eye,” he answered.

George looked at him innocently and replied, "Yes, it's because you're so small, they think you're lunch."

We walked from group to group until we stopped at the drivers. George spoke to the sergeant, and after a few questions, wrote his name on the paper. No interview was necessary. They always searched for drivers.

George walked back to where we waited.

"Shame, they're so desperate for drivers, they'll take anybody," Charlie said, and had to duck before George's flying backhand cut him in half. When we arrived at the gunner's tent, the twenty millimetre canon caught Charlie's attention, and he signed for gunner training.

"With you behind one of those babies, nobody will give you shit," George said.

"Yes, and for once my size won't matter when I fire it," Charlie answered with a smile.

By the time we were done, it was late in the afternoon. The corporals let us get back to our bungalows, and left us alone for the rest of the night. After dinner we sat around in the bungalow discussing various points of the day's events. Frankie came running into the bungalow, looking more disorientated than normal. Following him, were four guys from Platoon 3, swinging pillows.

Frankie visited a friend in Platoon 3's bungalow, when they took exception to his vast knowledge and understanding of military matters, and attacked him with their pillows.

"What the fuck?" George yelled, and the four pillow carriers stopped dead in their tracks. They fell over each other as they scampered back to their own bungalow.

Frankie smiled at George, grateful for the rescue.

George and I looked at each other then looked at our pillows, then looked at each other again and smiled as we turned, and grabbed our pillows.

It didn't matter what Frankie did, they attacked one of our own and deserved payback.

The whole platoon caught on to our plan, and soon, all armed with our pillows, we snuck out towards Platoon 3's bungalow. Rex's pillow looked a bit heavy, and I stopped him.

"What do you have in there?" I asked.

He looked at his pillow, and in the voice of Mother Theresa answered, "Nothing."

I grabbed the pillow and felt something hard. To my surprise I pulled out his iron.

Shocked I asked, "Really? We just want to have some fun with them, not kill them."

He looked at me and said, "Oh." He left the iron behind and we followed the rest.

George led the assault, and when we busted into their bungalow, there was pandemonium. Pillows flew everywhere. No real harm came from being hit by the soft, feather pillows, unless you got hit by George. The sheer force of his hit knocked people of their feet. The element of surprise totally overwhelmed the opposition.

A few brave souls tried to defend their bungalow's honour, but the rest turned tail and ran. It didn't take long before feathers flew everywhere. When we got back to our bungalow, George's pillow was a casualty of the war. We examined it, and found a tear in the one corner, from which the feathers escaped. Charlie sewed it, but the pillow lost most of its feathers and was rather flat. In the morning, come inspection time, he would be in trouble when the corporal noticed it.

Imagine my surprise the next morning, when I woke up and saw that George's pillow was all stuffed and fluffy again.

"How did you manage that," I asked curiously, but he just smiled.

"I fixed it," he said.

When we formed for breakfast, a guy from platoon 4 swore up a storm. Somebody stole his pillow in the middle of the night, leaving a flat one with hardly any feathers in its place. I glanced over at George, but he wore his most innocent face. I had to work hard to contain myself from bursting into a fit of laughter. I happen to catch a glimpse at Charlie, his face red from holding his laugh. We were saved when the corporal arrived, looking all serious, wiping any sign of a smile from our faces.

After breakfast, inspection and a few laps around the tree, we got back to the serious task of drill practice. Pass out parade was less than two weeks away, and we were drilled hard. Full focus shifted to the parade, and even the Regiment Sergeant Major, with his handle bar moustache, put in a regular appearance. We marched up and down, countless about faces, open order, closed order, about faces while on the march, and practised various other drills with our weapons. It got so serious that if someone made a mistake, Hitler got in their face, yelled and swore at them a bit, but then we continued. There was no time even for a good old fashioned run around our favourite tree.

Normally after morning tea we had some kind of lesson, but from that day, extra time was reserved for more drill practice.

“My arms is about to fall off from all the swinging,” George complained at tea break.

“They’re sure making a big deal of this,” Rex added.

That made me wonder why, as we were supposed to be trained for combat, and I couldn’t see how marching as one man, prepared us for that. After tea, we started dress rehearsals for the actual parade. The corporals explained where we were to line up at the side of the parade ground, how each company will march onto the parade ground, and take their designated place. How we would perform a number of drills as a regiment on the RSM’s orders.

The RSM was not one that was scared to make use of obscenities, and used it freely. The way he cussed us, you would have thought it was only our first day of drill practice. He turned red in the face, and his handlebar moustache quivered, as he shouted instructions and insults. In the time between tea break and lunch time we ran through the parade five times. The first few times we were uncertain what to do, and followed the corporal’s instructions, but then we got the hang of it, and knew what was expected. By the time we broke for lunch, we knew exactly how the parade would play out.

That evening during the Lootie’s time, he informed us that our parents, wives and girlfriends were invited to the parade. We could write them and issued an invitation on behalf of 1 South African Infantry Battalion. The parade would take place the following Thursday. I wrote my parents and Charlotte, inviting them to the parade. My father wouldn’t get time off from work, but my mother would make the effort. If Charlotte could get off from college, she would travel with my mother.

An excited Charlie was sure both his parents would attend, while George was unsure if his father would get away. He owned a petrol station, and his job demanded that he spend a lot of time there, and if his father couldn’t attend, his mother wouldn’t either. Rex was sure his parents wouldn’t make it. They both had day jobs and were unlikely to get leave on short notice.

The following morning we continued drill practice, and after tea, our practice took a new turn. During the parade there would be long speeches, and inspections, which required us to stand to attention, and be still for long periods of time. That was not something we did often. Up to that point in our military careers, there were very few opportunities to remain inactive for any period of time, so we had to practice it.

The first ten minutes of standing absolutely still was not too bad, but then it became a challenge. I tried to wiggle my toes in the boots without moving the rest of my body, but it wasn't helping much. So I tried to move my whole foot, pulling it into a ball and relaxing it. First the one foot, then the other, and it helped. Not only did it give my mind something else to focus on, it also improved the blood circulation to the rest of my body. One would think that after running around for more than two months, we would enjoy standing still for a while. But the truth is that it was easier to run around, than to stand completely still.

After about twenty minutes I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. Frankie stood in the front row, just to my left. He swayed back and forth, like a young tree in a strong wind. Before I could say or do anything, he toppled backwards and hit the ground hard. He still clutched his rifle in his right hand, but he was out.

I moved to help him, but the corporal shouted, "Leave him!"

Brilliant, I thought. *They finally managed to kill Frankie.*

I moved my eyes sideways, and saw the rhythmic movement of his chest. I sighed with relief. He breathed.

He lay there for about a minute, before opening his eyes, and sat up groggily. Frankie took a few deep breaths before he struggled back to his feet and took his place once more. He was still unsteady on his feet.

"Frankie, scrunch your toes inside your boots, it helps," I whispered to him. He nodded slightly, indicating that he heard, and his boots moved ever so slightly. The rest of the platoon must have heard me too, because they all did it. The movements were hard to notice, and if you were any distance from us, wouldn't detect it.

Just when I thought we couldn't take anymore, the RSM barked a command, taking us all by surprise. A few jerked from fright. We marched up and down a little, which proved to be a challenge, as our limbs were frozen by the lack of movement. Just when we got them working properly again, we were halted and stood still once more. With moving his feet, Frankie managed to stay upright, but it didn't take long for a few guys from the other Companies to fall over. It appeared as if they have been shot while standing. When we broke for lunch, my count was to ten.

That afternoon, just in case we forgot why we were there in the first place, and to get the muscles moving again, we did a little run, fall, observe and fire. After the immobility torture of the morning, I enjoyed the movement, so did the rest of the platoon. We tackled the task with enthusiasm, shouting loudly, "TAP TAP," to imitate the shooting of two rounds. Frankie got a little carried away, and at one stage when we tap tapped, he shouted, "RRRRRRR"

We all stopped and stared at him.

"Thompson, what the hell's the matter with you?" Hitler shouted at him, standing with his hands on his hips.

Frankie looked all serious and innocent.

"Just wanted to see what it feels like shooting on automatic, corporal," he said.

Hitler stared at him in astonishment, the only thing he thought to say was, "Yeah ok, but stick to single fire from now on. Don't waste ammunition."

Chapter 18

The following morning we did more drills, and the Corporals took it very serious, first in Company formation and then in regiment formation. The last 40 minutes of the session consisted

of another standing to attention endurance exercise. There were still a few guys who collapsed but none in our Company. Even Frankie managed to stay upright although for a few moments, I was worried. He swayed back and forth like a drunk sailor but didn't fall over.

After tea break, instead of more drilling, we were ordered to get into full browns, like we were going on a pass. We had 20 minutes then we had to form up. "Do you think we are going on pass again?" Charlie asked his eyes big with anticipation. George snorted and said "Don't be foolish, this is probably just another fuck around session" Charlie's face dropped and he sighed and said "Yeah, you are probably right"

We heard a rumble outside and I couldn't believe my eyes, a Ratel pulled up outside our bungalow, fully equipped with a 20 mm cannon and a Browning machine gun. It stood there in the bright sunlight, proud and in all its glory. The hull painted in Army brown, all six wheels polished black for the occasion. We dressed in a hurry, slammed our berets on and rushed outside to get a closer look. The Ratel backed up in the opening between the barber building and the guardhouse so that the cannons were facing our bungalows. A man in civvy clothes walked over and set up a camera on a tripod in front of the Ratel.

"Wow, that is a thing of beauty" Rex said drooling in admiration. We were so engrossed with the Ratel that we didn't even see the Corporal approach and only became aware of his presence when he said "Yes, yes, don't worry, you will see plenty of Ratels in the future, now form up" not that we took any notice of him. He informed us that we were going to have a photo session posing with the Ratel.

We had to form a line and when it was your turn, you climbed up on the Ratel, sat on the turret and posed with your rifle. When I was called forward I wanted to savour the moment with that magnificent vehicle but was hurried by Hitler, who had no appreciation for the moment. We were supposed to be all grown up but the sight of that Ratel brought out the little boy in all of us.

I climbed to the top and sat on the turret in front of the gunner's hatch. I placed my left boot on top of the 20 millimetre canon and held my rifle in a pose with my right elbow resting on my right knee and my left arm braced atop my left leg. The barrel of my rifle pointed skywards and I didn't even have time to smile before the photographer clicked his camera and the Corporal yelled "Next!"

When I was done, I stuck around while the others took their pictures. We stood around admiring the Ratel until our platoon was done and we were ordered back to our bungalow where we had to change back into our overalls. When our Company was all done, the Ratel drove up to Bravo Company for their photos. We were informed by the photographer that it would take about a week and I couldn't wait to see how it turned out with me holding my rifle proudly on top of that Ratel. I knew it would be a photo I could treasure for the rest of my life.

After lunch, we were told that we were not doing our usual Wednesday sports day, but instead we all went down to the sports ground to watch a rugby game. 1 SAI was playing 1 Parachute Battalion and we were required to support our regiment. I knew it was going to be a big deal and George was playing for 1 SAI, so we were more than happy to support him and our team. After we took the stands, the RSM, who was also going to be the referee, came over and asked for a volunteer to do duty as a linesman. I played a little rugby in school but never took it very serious and more often than not ended up handling the flag as a linesman, so I knew what to do and put my hand up.

The flag was mounted on a short stick and as linesman my duties were to raise the flag when the ball or a player carrying the ball, went outside the sidelines. The raised flag would indicate to the ref that the ball was out and from where a lineout should form. When a kicked

was aimed at the goal posts, I had to stand behind the poles and raise my flag if the kick went over.

They were sure to keep the supporters apart to prevent any unnecessary bloodshed. 1 SAI was sitting to the left of the stands and the Bats, as the troops from 1 Parachute Battalion were known, sat to the right. For once, the troops were allowed to make noise and support their teams, so when our team ran onto the field in their green and black outfits, our guys made enough noise that it could be heard from the other side of town. The Bats ran on in their Maroon and black outfits and took their places on the field with a roar of support coming from the other side of the stands.

From the kickoff it was clear that the RSM was going to have his hands full with the two teams and that the match was going to be very physical. After the first scrum collapsed, they were already pulling and shoving at each other but the RSM would have none of it. For nearly thirty minutes the game went from one end of the field to the other but neither teams managed to score a try. Each team managed to kick a penalty before one of the Bats scored an intercept try under the poles, to huge cheers from the supporters at the other end of the stands. Their fly half converted, after which the RSM blew the whistle for half time.

After half time the animosity between the two teams continued. After a particular play, the Bats were called back for an infringement and when one of their locks walked past George, he brushed past him, knocking him out of the way. George didn't retaliate but simply smiled. He stood there with his hands on his hips smiling the brightest smile he could manage, while making a mental note of who the guy was, and I knew my friend well enough to know that guy was in serious trouble. After the next loose scrum, the RSM didn't see what happened, but when the whistle blew for them to break apart, that lock stayed down with a bloody badly broken nose.

Shortly after that incident 1 SAI managed to score a try in the left corner but missed the conversion attempt. We closed in on their lead but were still 2 points behind. A few minutes later our fly half had an opportunity to give us the lead, but his penalty attempt struck the right hand upright and bounced back into the field of play. 5 minutes before the end we started a promising move and passed the ball wide. There was a whole bunch of players close to the side line, 10 meters from their goal line, when Ryan, one of our locks, broke away from the ruck on the blind side and made for the try line. I was supposed to be impartial but I willed him forward.

2 Meters from the goal line his right foot stepped just slightly over the side line. I could have ignored it and nobody would have been the wiser, but my flag shot into the air indicating that he stepped out. They didn't see it and he crashed over the line and the whole team was celebrating when the RSM blew the whistle and pointed towards me that stood there with the flag held high. 15 players gave me the death stare, including George. Ryan walked over to me and said "That wasn't necessary. I will get you afterwards" I held his stare and said "Yeah well, if you kept your big fucking feet inside the field of play then I didn't have to raise my flag"

Ryan took a threatening step towards me but in a flash George was between us and pushed him back "Enough" is all he said and Ryan backed off. It was their lineout, 2 meters from their goal line. Their lock jumped high and tapped the ball towards their scrumhalf, who caught out of the corner of his eye that a fuming Ryan was flying towards him. In his haste to catch the ball, he dropped it and Ryan was on hand to fall on the ball. The RSM blew on his whistle, awarding the try to Ryan. After he was done celebrating he walked past me and sarcastically asked "How was that?" I smiled and answered "Brilliant" which made Ryan shake his head and he smiled.

The fly half missed the conversion but it didn't matter. The RSM blew the final whistle and 1 SAI were celebrating. The Corporals kept us in the stands until the Bats were formed and on

their way back to their base, to avoid any physical conflict, which was a huge possibility. From that day onwards, whenever we played a game, the RSM handed me the flag to do line duty. We got back to the base long before dinner time, but the Corporals let us celebrate our win. We weren't allowed to drink till after basics, but that night we were allowed two beers each. Of course the guys who didn't drink also bought beers and sold them to the guys who were hard up for another beer, for triple the price.

Needless to say, the next morning there was quite a few guys who were running around the tree while they had to cope with terrible headaches. After we cleared our lungs, and some of the guys their heads, it was back to drill practice. We only had a week left to get the parade perfect, and we knew nothing but perfect would be good enough. We all concentrated hard and since we knew our parents, wives, girlfriends and grandparents were going to attend, we worked even harder.

After lunch we were ordered to form up in Company formation. When the Corporal's gathered they were laughing and looking our way, and I knew that wasn't a good sign. George looked at me and sighed, he was sure there were a lot of running in store. A Corporal stepped forward and said we had 5 minutes to report back dressed in our PT clothes. We dashed into the bungalows and changed in a hurry and I was pretty sure we were all back in formation within the 5 minute window, but not according to the Corporal's watch. All watches belonging to any Corporal apparently ran on a different time zone, or they couldn't read it. He chased the whole Company around the tree.

Upon our return we were informed to report back in 5 minutes dressed in overalls and full battle gear. "5 minutes? Is he crazy? It takes 5 minutes just to put my pants on" George complained as he ran into the bungalow, and he was right, there was no way all of us could be back in that time. By the time everyone formed up about 10 minutes have expired.

"Do you all think this is a fucking Sunday picnic? When I say 5 minutes I mean 5 minutes, not a second more, now get your lazy asses around that tree and lift your fucking feet. We haven't got all day" The Corporal shouted. "Dammit" Charlie said from under his helmet as we set off for the tree. When we started basics Charlie would never say a swear word, it was the way he was raised, prim and proper. But after a few months in the Army and spending time with the rest of us, his cussing was just as bad as ours. Having Corporals who swore at you from morning to night didn't help either.

That carried on the whole afternoon. We had to report in PT clothes, then browns, back in PT clothes, battle gear, with our Big Bags, with webbing, it all got rather confusing. At one stage we all had to report in PT clothes when I saw the Corporal's eyes widen. Frankie was standing there in PT clothes, battle webbing and helmet. The Corporal walked right up to him and asked "What the fuck is the matter with you?" Frankie looked nervous to his right and realized he was the only one dressed like that. "Shit" is all he could get out. For the rest of the afternoon, every time we ran into the bungalow, someone yelled at Frankie to ensure he got the right dress code.

In the course of the past few months we had to endure a lot of physical abuse, but you learn to cope with it, pushing your body harder and further than you ever thought was possible. Sessions like we did that afternoon wasn't meant to break us down physically; it was to push us psychologically. The idea was to break us down before they built us up to what they wanted. If you throw a bunch of people together like that and you push hard enough, sooner or later someone is going to snap, and snap it did.

One of the Corporals was still yelling at us to stop taking our time and move our asses, when I heard a growl like a hungry bear. Before any of us could say or do anything, a guy from

one of the other platoons stormed forward and tackled the Corporal to the ground. By the time we got over our initial shock, he was sitting on top of the Corporal pounding the Corporal's head with his fists.

The guy was much bigger than the slender Corporal, who didn't stand a chance against his attacker. He tried to fend the blows of with his raised arms but the blows continued to rain against his head. It took five of us to drag him from the Corporal while he was still kicking and screaming like a man possessed, with a crazed look in his dark brown eyes that were black with rage. The bloodied Corporal was rushed to the medical centre while the crazed newbie was detained in the guardhouse.

That marked the end of the day's festivities and we never heard what happened with the unfortunate newbie who cracked under the strain. Some say he was taken to the detention barracks for assaulting a Corporal while others said he was declared medical unfit and sent home. That evening our Lieutenant discussed the incident and said that in training we would be pushed very hard physically and mentally. They had to make sure when we were sent into battle that we could handle it. The training they provided was aimed to make us stronger, both physically and mentally, but they would rather have someone break down while in training than in battle. In battle, a break down like that could cost everyone their lives.

In the days, weeks and months that followed, whenever we were put through hardships I tried to remember the words of our Lootie that night and I often had to ask myself "Are you up for it?" and even if the answer was "No" I pushed forward again. That was one thing our training forced us to do, pushed ourselves to the point that we never would have thought possible. If you reached your end and thought that was as far as you could go, you always found that you could go just a little bit further.

Chapter 19

Monday morning I woke before the sound of a whistle told me it was time to get up. I laid there, staring at the ceiling, listening to George's soft snores that rumbled from his bed. I got so used to his snoring, it was almost a comfort. Friday I received a letter from Charlotte, and I thought about it the whole weekend. She said how much she missed me, and that she was glad that we were back together. She was happy again and looked forward to watch me in the parade on Thursday. My Mother agreed that she could travel with her to watch the parade. If I had to be honest with myself, I looked forward to see her too.

A thought hit me, and that moment, I wondered if anybody else thought about it, because nobody mentioned anything. We, as a platoon, had been together for almost 3 months, and formed a fellowship. Thursday, the parade marks the end of basic training. After we return from pass, we were all to go in different directions, George to the drivers, Charlie to the gunners, while Rex and I attended Section Leading. So was the rest of the platoon, each going their own way. I sighed. It was something we had to get used to, our life in the military would be one of constant change. Some of our friends we would see again and some we won't.

I didn't have much time to ponder it. When it was time to rise, things happened quickly. Hurry to get ready for breakfast, hurry for inspection, and hurry to form for drill duty, hurry to the tree and back. The drill itself went smoothly. By then we knew what to do and what was expected of us, although you wouldn't know it from all the yelling done by the corporals and the RSM. We had another full morning, only breaking for tea and the occasional smoke break. By the time we broke for lunch, Thursday couldn't arrive soon enough.

The rest of the week flew by. I half expected a major inspection Wednesday night, but the RSM wanted us rested for the parade. I was excited and nervous about the parade. If anybody dared to stuff it up, there would be dire consequences. All I could do was to ensure that it wasn't me. Even Frankie with his two left feet looked sharp. Every move was drilled into us so hard, we could do it in our sleep. From some of the sounds I heard during the night, I suspected that some did.

Thursday morning was a clear and sunny day. Birds flew around high in the bright blue sky, not a cloud in sight. Even the forces of nature seemed reluctant to cross the RSM. Breakfast was served as usual, and you would think it was just another day, until you looked towards the parade ground. A podium was erected for the RSM, from where he did his shouting, and Colonel Hammond would do his speech. Temporary stands from the rugby field have been moved to the left of the podium to give the spectators a place to sit. Between the podium and the temporary stands was an area with special chairs for dignitaries that would attend the parade.

After breakfast, a quick inspection and some last minute instructions, we were left to prepare for the parade. I made sure my browns were wrinkle free, and checked in on Frankie. I wanted to make sure he didn't starch his browns again, but he learned his lesson the previous time. His browns were neatly ironed and starch free. The parade was scheduled to start at 10:00 and we were ordered to be ready at 09:00. That would give them an hour to ensure we were ready to their satisfaction.

I walked outside and stared towards the main gate. The whole camp was on maintenance duty the previous afternoon, to ensure everything was neat and tidy, just the way the army liked it. Our families were not allowed to drive into the base. They had to park in the parking area outside the main gate. Through the fence, I could see the people arriving. A number of cars already parked outside the gate.

People outside stood in groups, chatting. I wondered if my mother and Charlotte were among them. I smiled at the thought that they might be so close. My mind wandered to that last evening we spent together, and for a moment, I felt Charlotte's warm body against me, her soft lips lingering on mine, the passion that we shared, and a warm glowing feeling of content flowed over me. My feelings for her run deeper than I thought. It was all much more than mere lust.

"You're going to be late if you continue to daydream out here," Rex said behind me, and his voice yanked me out of my beautiful memory. I threw him a side wards glance. Without a word I turned and headed back to the bungalow to get dressed, as a flock of migrating geese passed noisily overhead. In the doorway I stopped and looked back to where Rex stood, staring at the gate, a longing expression on his face. His parents were not out there.

By 09:00 the corporal arrived, looking sharp in his step outs. He smiled a little when he saw us waiting for him, patiently ready. Almost three months ago he probably didn't think it would be possible to get us into that shape. All the yelling at us, him pulling at his own hair because we couldn't march together, all was just a distant memory. He stood there, and I had the feeling that he looked at us with pride, although he would probably have died before admitting to it.

"Platoon, atteeen . . . tion!" he ordered and our feet lifted and slammed down on the asphalt, sounding like one. He gave the open order command and the front row took two steps forward, and the back row two steps back, all in one crisp movement. That morning, we were all alert and especially sharp. He walked through us, inspecting each one of us, making sure we looked presentable. He stopped behind Frankie, and using his index finger, poked him in the back. He smiled when he felt no starch.

We were dismissed and told not to go anywhere, and not to get into a mess before the parade. Our platoon took a smoke break, and we watched the other corporals trying to get their troops ready, yelling and shouting. Before we knew it, it was time for the parade. The rest of the company joined us, and I made sure I lined up behind Frankie, just in case. Our corporal marched the company to the side of the parade ground, where we halted, and he brought us to rest.

I heard a murmur of voices, and looked over at the road between our bungalow and the barber. The guards let our families into the base. They were led by two Lieutenants, who ushered them to their seats. I searched through the sea of people until I saw them. Charlotte wore a plain, light purple dress. She walked next to my mother, and they were both looking around, their eyes searching for me in the sea of brown. From their viewpoint, unless they were up close, it would be difficult to distinguish individuals. Dressed in our brown uniforms, we all looked alike. The only one that really stood out, was little Charlie.

Once they were all seated, the officers and dignitaries filed to their seats, and the RSM took his place on the podium. I could only pray that everything would go smoothly, because the RSM would have no hesitation to shout obscenities if someone stuffed up his parade. I wiped the palms of my hands against my pants, to ensure there was no sweat that might cause my weapon to slip and fall. The same thought was in all our minds, I didn't want to be the one that messed up the parade.

The RSM barked the order, and instant silence fell over the crowd. Quite a few people in the stands jerked in fright by his sharp voice. The corporals brought us to attention, and marched all the companies onto the parade ground, where we took our places, just like we practiced. Once everyone was in position, the RSM took over and barked commands. The whole procedure was drilled into us the last few weeks, and each of us knew exactly what to do. We were brought to attention and the sound made by hundreds of army boots hitting the ground as one, echoed off the buildings. We were brought to open order for inspection.

That was not a normal inspection. Our platoon captain led a man dressed in a white shirt and a black suit through our company. The man looked vaguely familiar, and it took me a few moments to recognize him as a minister in the cabinet. The inspection dragged on, and I turned my attention to the colourful crowd. We got so used to seeing only army colours all around us, the sea of colour in the crowd looked out of place next to the parade ground.

I could see people in the crowd pointing when they thought they identified their family member in the sea of brown. My Mother and Charlotte sat in the third row of the stand, and I could see their faces, their eyes searching for me. I had to suppress the urge to start waving my arms and shout, "Hey, I'm here!" I could only imagine the look of shock on the RSM's face, but I knew, if I value my life, and if I didn't want to spend the rest of my military career running, I would just stand still and stare straight in front of me.

The inspection finally came to an end when the captain saluted the minister, and they marched back to their seats where they joined the other dignitaries that did inspections on the other companies. With that done, the RSM ran us through the drills we practiced to put on a show for the audience. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the wonder on our families faces. They had no idea their sons could be so disciplined, and marched to such perfection. The RSM brought us to a halt, and the crowd burst into applause. Even from where I stood, I could see the look of annoyance on the RSM's face. His handlebar moustache trembled in the slight breeze.

With a sharp salute, he handed over to Colonel Hammond, who started his speech by welcoming all the visitors to the base with a warm, friendly smile. Then he continued with his

speech about the history of 1 SAI, and the importance of the role it plays in the defence of our country. As his voice drones on, my mind wandered to Charlotte and our time together.

I noticed Frankie swayed ever so slightly, but before I could say anything, George next to me whispered, “Frankie Thompson, if you fall over today, I’m going to beat you in front of your mother.” Frankie immediately stopped.

The colonel’s speech dragged on, and I was worried that I might fall over too. I sure didn’t want George to slap me silly in front of Charlotte. Finally he finished and received warm applause from the crowd of spectators, which was probably more relieved that he was finished. The RSM stepped back onto the podium, and after a few final words, the command came, “Regiment, dismiss!” As one, we did a turn to our left, took three steps forward, and then it was over.

“I think that went rather well,” George said and slapped me on the back, so hard I almost swallowed my own teeth.

It took me a few moments to realize that we were done with basics, and then there were a lot of hand shaking and back slapping going on, as we congratulated each other. The RSM started yelling, and we knew we had to get off his parade ground in a hurry. After all, his parade ground was not a place to socialize. We made our way to the side of the parade ground, my eyes searching for Charlotte.

I spotted her and my mother, looking around, still searching for me, and looking the wrong way. I ran over to her and grabbed her in my arms, almost dropping my rifle. She yelled with delight and her arms went around me, and for a few moments it was just the two of us.

“That was beautiful,” my mother’s voice interrupted me, and I turned and hugged her. After a few moments together I excused myself. I had to check in my rifle at the armoury, and retrieve my bag from the bungalow.

Once inside, the corporal waited with a final message before we went on pass.

“Gentlemen, it was fun and you did well. Enjoy your pass.”

I turned to George and Charlie, shook their hands and said “Guys, behave this weekend.”

George laughed and said, “Now what fun would that be.”

My mother agreed to give Rex a lift to Benoni. He stood in the doorway, waiting with his bag.

I grabbed my bag from the civvy room, packed and ready to go. Just before I exited the bungalow, I stopped for a moment, and looked back to my neatly made bed. The first chapter in my military career was completed. I had a weekend at home with Charlotte, but I knew, when I returned, it would mark the start of a whole new challenge. My days of running, hardship and torture were far from done. But I would worry about that when I returned. I swung the bag over my shoulder and ran outside to Charlotte.

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Coming Soon:

Be sure to catch the second book in the Army Chronicles series: **Phase Two**

As our friends embark on the second phase of their military journey, learning new skills and being pushed further than they thought possible

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