Not on the Level

by

Michael V. Maddaloni

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CHAPTER ONE

Most of us, as we grow older, have tried to recall our earliest memory. Experts have written that few can remember anything that occurred before three or four years of age. My sister and only sibling, Rita, always claimed she could remember, in great detail, her birth. I never had as good a memory as Rita, but then again, she always had a great propensity to exaggerate. As we grew older, she also became quite adept at sticking a knife in my back to make me look bad to my mother and other relatives.

The earliest recollection of mine is Thanksgiving morning of 1949, when I was three years old and Rita was five. We were on the front porch of our three-story row home on Blavis Street in Philadelphia with my mother, Delores (Dottie) Dando De Falco, and other family members who lived with us at that time. These included my paternal grandparents, Joe and Deana De Falco, their sons, Tony, Nunzio (also known as Sal), Tony's wife, Olimpia, and their daughter, Conchetta, who was known as Connie. Joe and Deana's other child was my father, Charlie, who had been killed in action in 1945 while serving as an Army cook during mop-up operations on Okinawa. Weeks later, the United States dropped two atom bombs on Japan, and within a few days, the war was over.

My mother and father had last been together in May of 1945 before his outfit left California.

Before he shipped out, they got me started, and I came into the world in February of 1946, an early issue in what became the massive generation of baby boomers born between 1946and 1964. My mother dutifully named me Joseph Charles De Falco, in honor of my grandfather and father. It was a centuries-old tradition in the De Falco family to name the first male child in the family after the baby's grandfather; my mother was not one to make waves. As such, there had been many males named both Charles and Joseph in the DeFalco family.

My uncles had also served during the war. Tony participated in the 1944 Normandy landings as a member of the 101st Airborne. He was part of a unit that parachuted into Normandy early on D-Day to capture the roads that prevented the Germans from reinforcing Utah Beach. Tony was seriously wounded near Bastogne during the

Battle of the Bulge in December of 1944 and should have been sent home. Instead, he left the hospital early, returned to his unit, and was in Germany when the European war ended in May of 1945. He then returned home and married my Aunt Olimpia, known as Ollie, whom he had known since they were in grammar school. After the war, Tony returned to work as a math teacher at Simon Gratz High School. Tony was the first person in the family to go to college, having graduated from Temple University just before the war. By 1949, he had earned a master's degree in finance from Temple. Tony and Ollie's daughter, Connie, was born in 1948.

Sal, after enlisting in the Navy and completing basic training, had managed to bribe a civilian naval worker to obtain a job at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. He remained there until the war was over and then returned to his pre-war job, working as a bellhop at the Ben Franklin Hotel in downtown Philadelphia. By 1949, Sal had already been married and divorced twice. He had one son, Artie, by his first wife. Artie, who lived with his mother, was a year older than me and saw his father two weekends a month and during the holidays. Sal had dropped out of high school at sixteen to take the job at the Ben Franklin. Ambitious, good-looking, well connected, and street smart, he managed to become a deputy steward in the local Hotel Workers Union by the time he was twenty-six. The war proved to be a temporary inconvenience for what most union insiders saw as a rising star in one of the largest and most militant unions in the city.

My father had not been as fortunate. After graduating from Germantown High School in 1940, he went to work at Mama Lombardo's, a local restaurant known for serving good pizza, pasta, and veal dishes. Having learned the art of cooking from my grandmother, my father fit well into the busy kitchen atmosphere at the restaurant. He chose not to enlist when the war broke out, but by 1943, just after he married my mother, he was drafted and went off to Ft. Dix, New Jersey for basic training. He then attended cooking school and was later assigned to the 62nd Infantry Division stationed at Fort Ord, California. Charlie spent almost a year stationed on the West Coast until late in the war when his outfit was shipped to Okinawa to participate in mop-up operations there. The Army felt that this would provide his unit with some combat experience that would better prepare them for the planned invasion of Japan. He was on Okinawa for only nine days when a field latrine he was using took a direct hit from an errant fourteen-inch shell fired from an American cruiser positioned off shore. There was nothing left of him to bury. His name was later inscribed on a monument at the Punchbowl Cemetery just outside of Honolulu. No one in the

family had ever been to Hawaii to see the memorial.

The entire family, particularly my mother and grandparents, were devastated by Charlie's death. My mother, without a family of her own, had moved into my grandparents' home with my sister, Rita, who had been born in 1944 while Charlie was in California. When I was born, the three of us occupied the two bedrooms on the third floor of the house. The other family members used the three bedrooms on the second floor. We all had to share a single bathroom located on the second floor.

The home had a large living room, a dining room, and kitchen on the first floor. There was also a large unfinished basement with a coal-burning furnace. The back door of the house led to a patio covered by a grape vine supported by a series of pipes that had been built by Grandpa Joe. There were steps off the patio leading to a grassy area that contained three fig trees that yielded delicious fruit every fall. The yard was fenced in and faced the back yards of Cayuga Street, which ran parallel to our street. An alley, which ran between the yards of Blavis and Cayuga Street, was used by most of the children who lived on either street.

In 1949, our neighborhood was one hundred percent Caucasian, mostly people with European backgrounds. Most of us were first and second generation Americans, including some displaced persons who had come from Europe right after the war. North Philadelphia, which was about forty percent black at the time, was just about a mile to our south.

Shortly after I was born, my mother went to work in a neighborhood grocery store on nearby Germantown Avenue. She worked six days a week and had to work late on Wednesday and Friday nights. As a result, my sister and I were often in the care of my grandparents, Joe and Deana.

Grandpa Joe was a tailor. He had operated a small tailor shop just around the corner from our home since the 1930s. Joe took in cleaning, did alterations, and could turn out a great-looking tailor-made suit. He had to work long hours, six days a week, but managed to squeeze out a decent living for his family.

Joe and Deana were both from a small town in the Molise region of Italy. Joe had served in the Italian army during World War I. While fighting against the Germans in 1915, his outfit was hit with a mustard gas attack, and Joe suffered severe damage to his lungs. He returned home, married my grandmother in 1918, and went to work in a local tailor shop. They promptly had three sons: Tony in

1919; my father in1921; and Nunzio (Sal) in 1922.

By 1922, the post-war economic situation in Italy was deteriorating badly and Joe lost his job. He learned from a friend that job opportunities in his trade were good in the United States. With the help of a distant relative who had immigrated to Philadelphia in 1910, Joe managed to line up a job in a men's clothing store in downtown Philadelphia. After some tearful goodbyes, Joe boarded a ship in Naples bound for New York. He made his way to Philadelphia and started work as a tailor at the Arrow Store, which was adjacent to the Reading Terminal on Market Street. He learned English within a short time by going to school five nights a week after work. Within a year, he was able to send for the rest of his family who arrived in 1924. Left behind in Italy, never to be seen again by Joe, were his mother and a younger sister, Antonia. The move was easier for my grandmother, an orphan who left no one behind.

The family of five settled into a two-bedroom, third floor apartment on Snyder Avenue, which was a predominately Italian section of South Philadelphia, not far from what is still known as the Italian Market.

By the early 1930s, Joe and Deana had saved the money needed for the down payment on a home on Blavis Street, located in the city's Nicetown section. Within a few years, Joe's health was deteriorating from his war injuries and he developed serious respiratory problems. The condition was exacerbated by the fact that he carried more than 200 pounds on his five-and-a-half-foot frame. In order to conserve his strength, Joe decided to open his own tailor shop and found an available storefront within a two-minute walk of our house. Before long, he established a reputation as a tailor with excellent skills, and within a few years, he was earning almost twice as much as he made in his previous job. The word in the neighborhood was that if you needed a good tailor, see Joe De Falco.

While Joe worked, my grandmother ran a clean, orderly, and efficient home. Only five feet tall, she was clearly the person who ran the De Falco household. Her sons were enrolled in St. Michael's Parish Grammar School on Germantown Avenue.

St. Michael's was comprised of a congregation and clergy that were all of Italian descent. In fact, there was a requirement that parish registrants had to be of Italian descent. Ethnic parishes were common in the city at that time, due to the unwritten exclusionary policies of the Irish Catholic hierarchy that ran the archdiocese

during the first half of the twentieth century. The archbishop of Philadelphia for most of that era, Dennis Cardinal Dougherty, was in charge of the diocese from 1918 until his death in 1952. Under his leadership, most Catholics whose last names ended in a vowel were encouraged to join ethnic parishes. All others were accepted at mainstream parishes that were often just a short distance away. St. Michael's, for example, was located just one block from St. Francis of Assisi, a parish attended primarily by Catholic ABIs (Anybody but Italians). More than ninety percent of the Catholics who attended St. Francis Parish in the post World War II years were of Anglo-Saxon or German descent.

Deana walked a mile and half to attend Mass each morning rain or shine. She took her boys to the mandatory children's Mass at nine o'clock every Sunday morning and made sure that she went to confession every Saturday afternoon. It didn't matter that she never had any sins to confess. She felt she needed to partake in as many sacraments as possible to makeup for the shortcomings of my grandfather.

Grandpa Joe only went to Mass on Christmas and Easter. He would also go to church for weddings, christenings, and funerals. He didn't believe in confession, grace before meals, and prayers before bed. He took numbers in his tailor shop and ran some high stakes poker games late into the night. Some of the poker regulars, all of whom were married, used the back room of the store to schedule liaisons with girlfriends or prostitutes. The local beat cop was paid a few dollars a week and occasionally got laid to look the other way.

Joe never interfered with how his wife raised their sons. Except for Sal, the boys were well behaved and respectful at all times. Deana was fairly successful at getting Sal back in line when necessary. She didn't hesitate, if needed, to threaten Sal with the prospect of a beating by Grandpa Joe. The three boys all knew that if Joe had to be brought into a disciplinary issue, a beating and confinement to their bedroom for a week was normal punishment. Some of the beatings were so severe that in today's world, the boys would probably have been taken out of the home and placed into foster care. As it was, corporal punishment was de rigueur in most homes during the pre-war years, and my uncles never complained about the severe beatings they received from my grandfather.

Deana did things very much by rote. Always dressed in a blue or gray housedress, she went food shopping early most mornings to buy fresh meat, fruits, and vegetables. She went to the chicken

store on Germantown Avenue, selected the live chicken she wanted, and watched as the bird was drowned in a pot of boiling water right in front of her. Deana sometimes took my sister and me with her to the chicken store, and we watched in horror as the chicken selected became our entrée for that evening. During Easter season, she bought a dozen chicks at a local pet store as gifts for my sister and me. The chicks would run loose in her basement until they grew a bit; she would then execute one each week to come up with the main course for dinner. I can still see her running around the basement with a pair of my grandfather's tailoring shears trying to catch chickens literally running for their lives. It never seemed to bother her that by then, my sister and I regarded the chicks as pets and had given them names. Neither Rita nor I were able to eat meals when one of our pets was the main course.

Deana cooked spaghetti and meatballs every Sunday and served leftovers of the same on Monday. Tuesday was chicken night, which I have trouble eating to this day because of what went on in the basement. Wednesday was veal, Thursday lasagna, and Friday some type of fish. On Saturday, we always had steak. My grandmother followed this routine without fail for more than fifty years. Deana meticulously cleaned the house every Wednesday, did wash on Thursday and ironing on Friday. She took Sunday off and expected everyone else to do likewise. All of her living room furniture was covered with plastic slipcovers that she only removed for special occasions. She was superstitious to a fault. It was bad luck to open an umbrella in the house or to use your left hand. Deana did not like odd numbers and stayed clear of the number 13, refusing to even utter that word. She refused to even look at Mrs. Di Virgilio, a harmless elderly neighbor with palsy, who Deana thought gave people the evil eye. Deana's boys had to be in bed every night by 8:30 and were awakened promptly at six in the morning, including weekends. The boys were all given specific chores that had to be performed at designated times on the same day each week.

Deana was an excellent cook. Her homemade pizza, made from a century-old recipe developed in Italy, was so delicious I can still recall the taste. Unlike Americanized pizza that is thickly coated with cheese, her pizza was actually a rectangular-shaped tomato pie. It was covered with tomato sauce and sprinkled with grated Parmesan cheese. At times, she would use a pepperoni topping. The pizza was so highly regarded that a few local restaurants approached her to purchase the sauce recipe. The recipe was never sold, and it remained a secret for years until I was able to extract it from Deana shortly before her death. Even then, she

reluctantly gave me the recipe with the stipulation that I never sell it. Since Deana's death, I have made her pizza on most Friday nights, and despite numerous offers, refuse to sell it.

The family was on our porch that Thanksgiving morning, watching the entrance of a massive garage complex located almost directly across the street. The garage was where most of the floats for the Philadelphia Thanksgiving Day Parade were assembled in the weeks leading up to the holiday. Their assembly was always kept under tight security so that no one could discover in advance what the themes were of the various floats. The first glimpse of the floats was early on Thanksgiving morning when they were moved out of the garage, one at a time, and staged in parade order on Blavis Street. From there, they would be attached to cars and taken two short blocks to Broad Street, the main thoroughfare in the city. Once on Broad Street, the floats would be placed in the parade and begin their trip south on Broad Street to City Hall. The parade would then travel down the Ben Franklin Parkway, past a reviewing stand, and wind up at the art museum.

Close to a quarter million people would line the route each year to watch the parade pass. After the floats left the garage, we would take the subway downtown to watch the entire parade. When the parade ended, the floats returned to the Blavis Street garage. Before the floats were garaged, neighborhood kids would jump onto them and retrieve as souvenirs anything that wasn't nailed down. It was a rite of passage in the neighborhood that before you were about six years old, you had ransacked at least one Thanksgiving Day float. My first experience was on this Thanksgiving Day of 1949, when my Uncle Sal lifted me onto a float with instructions to retrieve a large Italian flag. I can remember doing this and even recall that one of the neighbors took a photo of me. As I grew older, I sometimes wondered why my earliest recollection was stealing. I always wound up justifying the action on the premise that if someone was going to steal that flag, why not me?

CHAPTER TWO

By the time I was three years old, the family decided it was time to send me to nursery school. Everyone went off to work each morning except my grandmother, and at the age of fifty, she simply could not look after me as she had her own children. So for a year, I was sent each day to what would today be known as a daycare center. After that, I was enrolled for kindergarten at the local public school, located just a block from our home. At that time, Catholic schools started with first grade so I had to attend kindergarten in public school. Deana reminded me each day to stay away from any kids in school who were not Catholic. She said there was no use getting to know them because they would not be going with me to St. Michael's for first grade.

One night at dinner, I mentioned that one of the kids in school who was not Catholic only lived a block away. I figured that even if he wouldn't be going to St. Michael's, we could still be friends in the neighborhood. My mother said that perhaps he should come over one day after school to see how we got along. Deana said that it wouldn't be a good idea, Grandpa Joe agreed with her, and the idea was never mentioned again.

I settled into the routine of walking the one block to school each morning, playing with Catholic kids, and returning home by early afternoon. Uncle Tony would get home by 3 p.m. and make sure that I had completed any homework assignments received from my teacher. By 4 p.m., Uncle Sal would usually be home and play a game with me. In warmer weather, we walked a few blocks to a local park to meet neighborhood kids and play various types of games. A lot of the kids weren't Catholic, but Sal encouraged me to play with them anyway. He said it was important to play with non-Catholics, because there were a lot more of them in the world than there were Catholics, and most of them were decent people. Sal always cautioned me not to tell my grandmother that I had played with non-Catholics.

After leaving the park, Sal and I would usually stop by the Acme Food Market on Broad Street. Sal would pick up two packs of Lucky Strikes, and let me pick out a candy bar for myself. Grandma Deana never allowed Rita and me to eat candy at home, so I had to finish my treat before we got home.

By the time I went off to St. Michael's for first grade, I had the benefit of my sister Rita's two years of experience at the school. Rita dutifully showed me how to walk the five blocks from our house to the trolley stop on Germantown Avenue. She also showed me how to use a school token as trolley fare and how to get off the trolley at the stop in front of the school. As a third grader, Rita knew the reputation of the nuns that taught at the school, as well as the nuances of the two parish priests: Father Cavalucci, the pastor, and his assistant, Father Scioli. Overall, the guidance and information she provided enabled me to start school with more knowledge than most first graders.

My first-grade class included thirty-one girls and twelve boys. While that would represent an excellent ratio in later years, it was not a welcome sight at that time to me and the other boys in the class. The girls were generally better behaved than the boys, and this made typical boy behavior seem even worse to our teacher, Sister Mary Agnes. Sister Mary, who was probably around twenty-five years of age, looked and acted a lot older. She was one of eight nuns in the school who taught first through eighth grade. One of the nuns, Sister Charles, taught seventh grade and also filled the role of school principal.

All of the nuns and the two parish priests were of Italian descent and spoke at least conversational Italian. Father Cavalucci had actually been born in Italy and came to this country as a young child. He was the first pastor of St. Michael's when the church opened in 1925. During the next ten years, he saw the parish grow from two hundred to eight hundred families. In 1930, he opened the school in response to a plea from parishioners who did not want their children to attend nearby St. Francis. The parishioners, with good cause, felt that children of Italian descent were not treated well in the predominately Irish-Catholic parish school located only a block away. Initially, Father Cavalucci did not even have a facility to use as a school. He actually started the school in the parish hall, using portable room dividers to split the large hall into the sections needed to accommodate eight separate classes. By 1950, he had raised enough money to build a single-story school with eight classrooms and an office for the principal. The school was completely built by parishioners, who worked pro-bono under the supervision of Joe D'Angelo, a parishioner and local builder.

When I started first grade in the fall of 1952, the new school had only been open for one year. My class never knew what it was like to attend class in the parish hall, where the sounds of eight different classes created distractions that challenged even the most

dedicated teachers and students.

Sister Mary Agnes, like most of the nuns who taught Catholic grade school at the time, had only a high school education. She had entered the convent right out of high school and took her first vows three years later. Assigned to St. Michael’s as a twenty-one-year-old with no prior work experience, she had been mentored by older nuns to rely on order, discipline, and repetition to effectively teach first graders. Accordingly, all students at St. Michael’s were extremely regimented from the day they started school.

The boys wore green uniform trousers with tan shirts and green ties. The girls wore tan blouses under green dresses that dropped well below their knees. All students were allowed to wear their own selection of shoes and socks, but the socks had to be a solid color and sneakers were not permitted under any circumstances. Seats in class were assigned in alphabetical order with girls arranged first and boys behind them. While seated, hands had to be folded on top of the desk. Prior to speaking, students had to first raise their hand and be recognized by the teacher. The student then stood to speak, because speaking from a seated position was forbidden.

More than two violations of any classroom rules would result in a day of detention after school. Additional violations would result in more days of detention; for example, a sixth violation would result in four consecutive days of detention. Any student who exceeded twenty days of detention during a school year was expelled from school. The only real option for dismissed students was to enroll in public school. Public school was regarded by most Catholics as one step from reform school, so most students were conditioned to avoid at all cost the possibility of expulsion. Of course, none of us realized that, for the most part, public school teachers were better educated and more experienced than the nuns who taught in the Diocesan grammar schools.

Thanks to Uncle Tony, who was a teacher in a public high school, I learned good study habits at an early age. Tony made sure that my homework was complete, checked assignments before they were turned in, and helped me develop the ability to figure out what teachers required from students.

In addition to classroom behavior and homework completion, students were evaluated on test results. Usually, we would be given four exams in a subject during each marking period. At the end of each school year, students had to take in each subject a standardized diocesan exam given to all students in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. There were six marking periods for

each school year, and at the end of each period, we received a report card. The report card consisted of two main sections: One for citizenship, character, and health, the other for school subjects. The traits for the first section were obedience, self-control, perseverance, courage, cooperation, orderliness, and health habits. In these areas, students received an A, B, or C with an A the highest grade, B satisfactory, and the dreaded C a failure. The C grade was not only a stigma, but also assured severe punishment at home. Luckily, there were no Cs on any of my report cards.

School subjects included religion, oral English, written English, reading, spelling, social studies, math, handwriting, art, music, and health education. For these subjects, we received a numerical grade from 65 (failure) to 100 (perfect store). We were also given numerical grades for thoroughness in daily work, attention during class, and home study. The receipt of Bs or above in the traits and 85 or above in the school subjects earned second honors. All A's and 90 or above in the school subjects would earn first honors and special recognition at the school assembly that was held at the end of each marking period. At the opposite end of the spectrum were grades that would require summer school, repeating a grade, or expulsion from school. End of year failures required summer school for eight weeks to clear the failure. Failure in two subjects required a repeat of the grade. Students who failed three subjects were expelled and had to enroll in public school.

Uncle Sal told me that the sextant at St. Michael's, Giorgio Scarpati, always needed about twelve helpers to assist with various maintenance projects that were normally handled during the summer months. According to Sal, Giorgio always filled these vacancies with students who had received a C on their final report card. Since the traits were not school subjects, per se, there was no requirement for these students to attend summer school. Instead, these students came to school each day for eight weeks to help Giorgio with a myriad of chores in the school, church, and convent. Since the younger students in the school would provide Giorgio with more of a babysitting task than a work force, he tended to use only sixth and seventh graders. According to Sal, Giorgio always got the number of students he needed for summer work details, even if the nuns had to fail students who had actually earned a passing grade. Of course, grades in traits such as courage, cooperation, and perseverance are very subjective, so it didn't take much justification to fail a student; especially if that student had already run afoul of their teacher or one of the priests. Sal spoke from experience. While he was at St. Michael's, he was assigned to Giorgio for three summers in a row.

Students who were headed to summer school or expelled discovered their fate at an end-of-the-school-year assembly that included the entire student body, faculty, and parents. The assembly was always held on a Friday night in June in the school auditorium. The students sat in the front section, arranged by grade. Then came the faculty, followed by the largest section comprised of parents, relatives, and friends. Our pastor, Father Cavalucci, would start the ceremony with the Pledge of Allegiance and a rosary. He would then call to the podium students who had received honors on their final report card. Awards would then be given for outstanding achievement in individual subjects, followed by awards for the top student in each grade. There would then be entertainment provided by the school glee club. This entire process would take about ninety minutes. Finally, when all the good news was exhausted, Father would somberly announce the names of those who needed to attend summer school and, finally, the names of students expelled for receiving multiple failures. As names were announced for these unfortunate students, predictable reactions would emanate from the parents' section. A groan, perhaps a shriek, maybe a shout of "No, not my baby!" would come from a parent or grandparent who, from that day forward, would themselves be labeled as failures. At times, an over-wrought relative would faint and fall right out of their chair.

On one occasion, at the end of fifth grade, my classmate, Jimmy Dellaporte, was expelled from school. Jimmy had teetered on the brink of expulsion from the time he started school; it was just a matter of time before he got the axe. His father, Nicky, a loud, burly bricklayer, apparently was not prepared to get the news. When Jimmy's name was announced, Nicky jumped out of his chair, picked it up, and tossed it at Sister Theresa, our fifth-grade teacher. He called her every foul name imaginable and came within a few feet of her before he was tackled by a group of fathers, whose intercession saved the diminutive nun from serious injury. Nicky Dellaporte was never seen again in church or around the parish, and the rumor was that Cardinal Krol, the Archbishop of Philadelphia, had expelled him from the Catholic Church.

At the conclusion of these assemblies, Father Cavalucci would give a final blessing. He then reminded everyone that students needed to work hard for the entire school year. "Do your best and God will do the rest" was his advice to us. To our parents, he would say, "Make sure your children do what they are supposed to do in school. I don't want any parents coming to me at the end of a school year and asking me why their little tootsie wootsie didn't get promoted. As you saw again tonight, there are always some who don't take my advice."

Once the assembly was over, the entire audience was invited to stay for pizza and soft drinks provided by Jimmy Scalea, a parishioner and owner of an Italian bakery. Of course, the main topic of conversation during these pizza parties was not the students that had received honors. The buzz was always the students who had failed and the mistakes their parents made raising them. Luckily for Rita and me, we were never among the unfortunates. In fact, we both managed to earn honors most of the years we were at St. Michael's. We can both remember to this day, however, the dread and apprehension that many students felt in the days prior to final assembly.

By fifth grade, I had become adept at stealing candy bars from the local Acme. Most of the time, I had the money to pay for the candy but stole it because it was easy. Besides, there were occasions where I had been with Uncle Sal when he stole cigarettes from the same store. Sal always claimed that the items were overpriced anyway.

I would always tell Father Cavalucci or Father Scioli about my candy bar thefts during our mandatory weekly confessions. The penance was always the same, regardless of what I confessed; three Our Fathers, three Hail Marys, and an Act of Contrition recited in the confessional. Regardless of whom I spoke to about confession, everyone received the same penance—three Our Fathers, three Hail Marys, and an Act of Contrition. On one occasion, I accidentally ate a hot dog on a Friday, which at the time was a mortal sin. Based on what I had learned in school, my soul would go straight to hell if I died before I was able to confess this sin. I wasn't able to attend confession until the following day and barely slept that night fearing that I wouldn't wake up. At confession the next day, my penance was the same as it was for candy bar thefts, which greatly surprised me.

Years later, after the Second Vatican Council, Catholics were permitted to eat meat on most Fridays of the year. It was still a mortal sin to eat meat during Fridays in Lent. I sometimes wondered if the many Catholics who had gone to hell for eating meat on Fridays were then allowed passage into heaven. When I asked this question of a parish priest, he said that once in hell, you remained in hell, even if the sins that put you there were no longer sins on earth. If this was true, it remains a prime example of the need to be in the right place at the right time.

It was well known among the students that Freddy Angelucci, who was a seventh grader, once confessed to setting fire to a

neighbor's home, to see if Father Scioli would deviate from the usual penance. Apparently, Father Scioli felt burning down someone's house was pretty serious, so he gave Freddy a severe tongue lashing and told him to say twenty Our Fathers and twenty Hail Marys as his penance.

Since Freddy hadn't really set any fire, he chose not to perform the penance. He did, however, decide to press his luck a little further by confessing to a more serious offense. One of the elderly parishioners, Mr. Piccolo, had been stabbed and robbed while walking his dog a few blocks from the church. The old man was pretty seriously injured and still in the hospital when Freddy walked into Father Scioli's confessional and confessed to the attack on Mr. Piccolo. Freddy disguised his voice and because of how confessionals were designed at that time, Father Scioli couldn't see him. As Freddy knelt anxiously waiting for Father Scioli's reaction to his confession, the confessional door was flung open, and before Freddy could react, Father Scioli, who weighed about 220 pounds, had thrown him to the floor and beat him senseless. By the time Freddy was able to convince Father Scioli that his confession was a hoax, he had a broken nose and two loose teeth. When Freddy's parents were told of the incident, he was subjected to a worse beating at home than he received from Father Scioli. Father Cavalucci also gave Freddy sixty days of detention. During that time, he was made to perform various janitorial duties under the supervision of the sextant, Giorgio, who was always happy to get free help. Freddy was also stripped of his privileges as an altar boy, which at St. Michael's in the 1950s, was a stigma that was very difficult to live down.

During fifth grade, it was a rite of passage for all boys to become altar boys so they could assist priests in the celebration of Mass and other religious services. Altar boys enjoyed considerable status among the students, within their families, and among the parishioners. In order to become an altar boy, candidates had to pass a course given by Father Scioli, who was in charge of the altar boy program. The program consisted of memorizing several dozen movements required during the course of a Mass, along with recitations, which at that time, were in Latin. During the first day of "altar tryouts," Father Scioli gathered all twelve of the fifth-grade boys in the church and gave us a syllabus of what was required to make the altar. In addition to memorizing all the movements and Latin responses, we received homework each night and had to take verbal tests at the end of each week. The test questions revolved around movements and responses that had to be made during regular Mass, High Mass, Solemn High Mass, Nuptial Mass,

Funeral Mass, Benediction, and Stations of the Cross. A failure in any of the weekly verbal tests meant dismissal from the altar class and a label as a failure. Thanks to some tutoring from Uncle Tony, who himself had been an altar boy at St. Michael's, I learned the various regimens more quickly than other students. At the end of six weeks, three of the twelve original altar students had been dismissed from the class for failing weekly exams. As the survivors sat in front of Father Scioli one day after practice, he looked at me and said, "De Falco, you will serve the 8 o'clock Mass tomorrow morning. Be at the sacristy by 7:30."

When the shock wore off, it dawned on me that I had become the first in my class to make the altar. The Mass that I would serve was a standard daily Mass during Lent, meaning it would be attended not only by parishioners, but also the entire student body and faculty. I quickly rushed home to tell the family of my success and received many accolades. Even Grandpa Joe was impressed that his grandson was the first in his class to make the altar. He even agreed to attend Mass the next day, which amazed the entire family. The word of my success spread quickly and by that evening, about two dozen friends and relatives came to the house to offer their congratulations and have coffee and cookies. My mother sobbed quietly, reminding me how proud my father would have been to witness my success.

After a sleepless night, I got up the next morning and arrived at the sacristy a half an hour early. The sacristy was located in the front of the church, adjacent to the altar. This was where priests and altar boys put on their vestments prior to Mass. It was also where the wine, Communion hosts, and chalices used during Mass were kept. At about 7:45 a.m., Father Cavalucci arrived and started getting dressed for Mass. He congratulated me on making the altar and gave me a server's outfit to put on. One of the seventh graders, Dominic Simone, was the other server and offered me a few words of wisdom just prior to Mass. Once the Mass started, I saw that the congregation consisted of my entire family, the whole student body, and dozens of parishioners who knew me. I immediately was overcome with stage fright and couldn't remember any of the Latin responses. Uncle Sal had told me that if this happened, to mumble some Latin words under my breath. I did this for the first part of the Mass until I was able to compose myself. Once composed, I was able to get through the Mass without any obvious mistakes. After the Mass, Father Cavalucci pointed out a few things that he felt could be done better, such as refraining from the use of pig Latin when I couldn't remember a response.

Within a few weeks, my classmates still in altar training all served their first Mass and we were all put on the regular servers' schedule. The schedule included serving one Mass on Sunday and holidays of obligation. Other assignments included weddings and funerals, which were highly sought after because the families usually tipped the altar boys between five and ten dollars for serving these Masses. By the time I was an altar boy for a month, I learned that tips had to be shared with Giorgio, the sextant. If Giorgio didn't receive his cut, you were never again assigned to serve a funeral or wedding. Rumor had it that Giorgio had to give half of his take to Father Scioli. Since the priests already received their own stipends, the altar boys regarded this practice with contempt. Uncle Sal called Father Scioli "a crook who wears a collar."

In addition, there was strong evidence that Giorgio regularly helped himself to part of the cash collections taken in at Sunday Masses. He brought the collection baskets to the sacristy after Mass, and as he emptied the collection baskets, he made two piles of cash. One was small, the other pile much larger. He would always check to make sure one of the priests wasn't watching and then slide the smaller pile in his pants pocket. As youngsters, none of us knew how much money Giorgio took during the many years he was the sextant. I heard Uncle Sal tell various people that Giorgio had three homes, one near the church, one in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and a third in Miami Beach. He drove a late-model Cadillac and put his children and grandchildren through private high school and college.

According to Uncle Sal, the priests never suspected Giorgio of taking money. He was always the parishioner that contributed the most money to the church each year, and his name was displayed prominently in the parish bulletins that listed donations from parishioners. He even donated several of the expensive stained glass windows that were installed on either side of the church.

When I was in seventh grade, Giorgio went to his Florida home during the month of February. He left on a Sunday after the Masses were over and planned to fly back the following Saturday, so that he would be in church for the Sunday Masses. As it turned out, a snowstorm caused his flight to be canceled so he missed the Sunday Masses. After the Masses were over, Father Cavalucci counted the collection money and was surprised that the collection had taken in $1000 more in cash than normal, even though attendance was down that day due to the snowstorm. Father, who didn't have a suspicious bone in his body, surmised that the parishioners had been more generous than usual. The following

weekend, when Giorgio returned, the collection level dropped back down to normal amounts.

Giorgio remained the sextant at St. Michael's well beyond normal retirement age. Unfortunately, his good fortune ran out about three years after I graduated from St. Michael's. He walked into his home one night and surprised a burglar, who clubbed him to death with a baseball bat. The burglar, as it turned out, was looking for a large cache of cash that Giorgio was rumored to keep in the house. The year following his death, the annual collection receipts at the church increased by almost $50,000, and remained at those levels. By then, even Father Cavalucci figured out Giorgio had been a thief.

Overall success at St. Michael's was based on three factors. Most importantly, students had to be well behaved during school. Secondly, they had to complete homework assignments, since a large portion of each grade was based on completion of homework. Lastly, students had to score well in written tests given in each course during the various marking periods. Success in tests was based largely on the ability to recall subject matter that had been covered in class and in homework assignments. Neither my sister nor I dared misbehave in class for fear of recriminations both at school and home. Uncle Tony sat with us each night to make sure that we completed homework assignments. He checked all written work and had us recite summaries of all material we had to study. As far as tests were concerned, the ability to memorize facts was the single most important element for success. If, for example, a student could memorize the capitols of each state, they were guaranteed to score well in the geography quiz that covered that subject. Usually, there was little emphasis on the development of concepts such as why events like the American Revolution took place. If a student could remember relevant names, dates, and places, success in most tests was a virtual guarantee.

Fortunately for me, I developed the ability to memorize large numbers of facts. I can still recite all of the Latin responses needed to serve Mass, the capitols of each state and most foreign countries, the names of U.S. presidents, the Ten Commandments, the Stations of the Cross, and each major battle of the Civil War.

It helped that Uncle Sal recalled from his time at St. Michael's that the teachers routinely used the same tests year after year. He told me as early as second grade to remind my sister to save all of her tests and quizzes. Since tests were returned to students marked and corrected, you needed only to memorize questions and correct answers to assure success in tests. By the time I was in third grade,

I always had my sister's old tests to prepare for my own exams. Most of the time, the tests I took were exactly what my sister had taken two years previously. They were probably the same tests taken by my uncles when they went to school in the 1930s. Uncle Sal warned me not to tell my mother or Uncle Tony that I was using this method of study. He knew that they would become upset at him for teaching me to "cut corners."

The only exams that were somewhat different each year were final exams in each of the subjects. These exams were developed and prepared by the diocesan offices and they did change each year. Our teachers, however, were given the syllabus for these exams so that they could properly prepare us. If a student received a bad grade in a final exam; it still counted for only twenty percent of an overall grade. So, by behaving in class, doing homework, memorizing facts, and using Uncle Sal's study technique, I was consistently on the honor roll at St. Michael's.

By eighth grade, I was selected to take the entrance exams for three Catholic preparatory schools in the area. These tests were difficult and were timed much the same as SATs. In addition, I didn't have the benefit of studying from previous exams as I did during most of my years at St. Michael's. The result was that out of three entrance exams taken, I was accepted only to one school, La Salle High School, a preparatory school affiliated with La Salle University. The tuition at La Salle was $350 a year, a pittance by today's standards, but a lot of money at the time for a single-parent family. Since regular diocesan high schools were tuition free, it became apparent that the best course of action for me was to enroll in Cardinal Dougherty High School, the local Catholic high school. My sister was already there, and most of my classmates from St. Michael's were also planning to attend.

With grammar school drawing to a close, it was time to break my ties with the Boy Scouts of America, an organization I had joined as an eleven-year-old. Uncle Tony was an assistant Scoutmaster in the local troop that operated out of Holy Child Parish on Broad Street. He had coaxed me to join the troop, explaining that I would meet new friends and learn how to be a better citizen.

As it turned out, I liked the Boy Scouts. I moved quickly through the ranks and within a short time, was a Life Scout, just one rank short of the prestigious rank of Eagle Scout. I then ran into a snag in earning a merit badge in lifesaving, which was a requirement to become an Eagle Scout. Our troop, which was only ten years old, had never had an Eagle Scout and I wanted very badly to be the

first to attain the rank. I reached the point where only the lifesaving merit badge stood in my way, but after three tries, I still wasn't able to dive into a pool twelve feet deep to retrieve a fifty-pound weight from the bottom. The merit badge counselor, Mr. Klinkstein, wouldn't sign off on the completion of the merit badge. While Uncle Tony encouraged me to keep taking the merit badge test, Uncle Sal became increasingly irritated with Mr. Klinkstein, whom he began to refer to as the "fucking queer who can't cut a kid a little break." Finally, and without my knowledge at the time, Sal and his friend, Pete Masone, went to see Mr. Klinkstein one night to convince him to allow me some slack earning the merit badge. I was never sure of exactly what they said to Mr. Klinkstein, but the next time I took the test, he told me that he had forgotten to bring the weight with him and gave me a passing grade. Within two weeks, the entire family and many neighbors sat in the audience as our head scoutmaster pinned on my uniform the Eagle Scout insignia. After the meeting, my grandparents hosted a reception in my honor at local Sons of Italy Club.

Pete Masone had done some hard time for a variety of crimes. Many years later, as an undercover U.S. Secret Service agent operating under an assumed name, I purchased $100,000 in counterfeit U.S. currency from Pete. Even though there were three undercover meetings with him, he never recognized me. Of course, by then, I was in my early thirties and bore little resemblance to the kid Pete had known. When Pete later learned my true identity, he laughed and reminded me of the merit badge incident. Out of curiosity, I asked Pete what he and Uncle Sal had done to encourage Klinkstein into giving me a passing grade for the merit badge.

Pete chuckled and said, "We didn't do much, we just told him if he didn't pass you, we would cut off his balls, dip them in lighter fluid, and set them on fire. All I had to do was show him I had a can of lighter fluid and a switchblade knife in my pocket. Of course, your uncle and I knew Klinkstein was a child molester, and that's what we did to guys like that back then—cut off their balls and set them on fire. So if he wound up that way, no one would have been surprised and the cops couldn't have cared less. That's why, back then, we didn't have a lot of child molesters running around; we took care of them ourselves. It's how they took care of things like that in Italy, and it's how we did things here until all these fucking social workers started trying to reform these creeps. Back then, you didn't need to check registries to see if a guy was a child molester, you took care of the problem yourself. Anyway, you got to be an Eagle Scout, that's all that mattered, and Klinkstein stopped being a merit

badge counselor. He only did it so he could get off on seeing young boys in wet bathing suits."

Pete wound up serving four years in prison for the sale of counterfeit money. Years later, I ran into him at my Uncle Tony's funeral. He was cordial and bore no apparent grudge toward me for causing him to spend time in prison.

As grade school drew to a close, the family was jolted by the sudden death of Grandpa Joe at the age of sixty-four.

Grandpa hadn't been well in years, but no one expected him to die suddenly while taking a nap in his favorite chair. Dr. Sposato, his physician, concluded he had died from a heart attack. Grandma Deana, while devastated, said that Grandpa really wanted to be with my father. There was probably a good bit of truth to that because Grandpa had not been the same since my father's death. He had become very withdrawn, seldom saw his old friends, drank, smoked, ate to excess, and at times, sat in his chair staring at a wartime photo of my father. He couldn't even find comfort in how my father died, since he was not killed in combat, but by friendly fire while sitting on an outdoor commode.

Grandma Deana was old school when it came to arranging a funeral and observing traditional mourning protocols. Grandpa was prepared for burial by Erichetti's Funeral Home and then laid out in our living room for three days and three nights. The area around the casket was decorated with floral arrangements; the largest was in the shape of a clock with the hands pointing to the exact time of death. Friends and relatives were free to call at any time to pay their respects. A buffet table filled with various types of Italian food was always available in the dining room. Some of the neighbors came all three nights just to eat the buffet. When no one was present, Grandma sat by the casket and spoke to her husband in Italian. She immediately began to dress in black and observed this old tradition for one full year.

After Grandpa's requiem Mass at St. Michael's, which I could have served but didn't, the funeral procession, led by the hearse, returned to the neighborhood and drove around our block three times before proceeding to Holy Sepulchre Cemetery. After graveside prayers, Grandma Deana and Aunt Dorina, Grandpa's second cousin, threw themselves onto the casket as it was lowered into the grave. Screaming hysterically, they were both carried back to the limousine and given a sedative by Dr. Sposato. Aunt Dorina was so sedated she didn't wake up until the next morning. Many years later, I learned that my grandfather had carried on a long

affair with Aunt Dorina, who had never married.

The family then hosted a reception that lasted well into the evening, past the time that the food and liquor were gone. By the time we got to bed that evening, it was well after midnight. The hero of our family was gone, and we would all have to navigate the road ahead without the comfort provided by his presence and wisdom.

A few days later, still with a heavy heart, I graduated from St. Michael's with honors and went to work for the summer at the BelAir Cleaners for seventy-five cents an hour. In a few short months, I was to begin high school.

CHAPTER THREE

Cardinal Dougherty High School, which I had never seen until my first day as a student, was one of the largest Catholic high schools in the world. Built and opened in 1956, it was named in honor of Dennis Cardinal Dougherty, who had been the Archbishop of Philadelphia from 1918 until his death in 1952. The peak attendance at the school in the late 1960s was around 7,000 students. During my years there, attendance was about 6,000, and there were 1,200 in my 1964 graduating class. The student body, about ninety-five percent white, came from a variety of ancestral backgrounds, mostly Irish, Italian, German, and Eastern European. Located within a few blocks of the city's northern boundary, it drew students from a very wide area that included the affluent suburbs of Montgomery County to the North, but mostly the working-class, row-home neighborhoods of Philadelphia. The school was gender segregated with boys in the north wing, girls in the south wing. The two sexes had no classes together, ate in separate cafeterias, used separate libraries, and were discouraged from contact while on school property. There were opportunities to mingle with the opposite sex at an athletic event or in a few after-school activities. The school today is home to under a thousand students; half of those are minorities. All classes and school-related activities are held without regard to sex. Tuition is about $3,000 a year; in 1960 there was no charge.

During my time at Dougherty, also known as CD, students were placed into sections or tracks based on a combination of academic performance and scores from IQ tests taken in elementary school. Students were placed into numerical sections that ranged from one to as high as eighteen. The number of the section was preceded by a letter from A to D. Senior sections were designated with an A, juniors a B, sophomores a C, and freshmen a D.

On the first day of school, all incoming freshmen were herded into the school auditorium and seated as the registrar, Father Donadieu, announced section assignments. Those deemed to be the best and the brightest were placed into section D-1. As sections were filled, students left the auditorium and went to their assigned homerooms.

By the time Father Donadieu got around to what would be the last section, D-18, there were about sixty boys left in the auditorium. Rather than call out their names individually, as he had when announcing all of the other sections, Father simply said, “Okay, the rest of you geniuses are in D-18 and your homeroom is right here in the auditorium for now. That way, we don’t have to worry about any of you getting lost trying to find your way around the school.”

As it turned out, section D-18 was comprised, to an extent, by students who today would be in special education classes rather than in mainstream schools. The average IQ score was under 80 and more than half of the students had repeated at least one grade in elementary school.

One of the students assigned to Section D-18 was William Phillips, who had gone to school with me at St. Michael’s. William, who was seventeen when he started high school, had taken eleven years to get through elementary school. William couldn’t count to 100, didn’t know that Philadelphia was part of Pennsylvania, and was unable to properly pronounce polysyllabic words. There were some public schools in the area with special education accommodations, but none existed in the parochial school system at the time. Rather than refer William to public school, his elementary school teachers simply shuffled him through their system. Finally, in complete frustration, William left school after tenth grade and enlisted in the Marine Corps. I was never able to figure out how he managed to complete Marine Corps Basic Training until I later went through the same training. William did complete basic training at Parris Island and was later assigned to the First Battalion, Third Marines as an ammunition carrier. He was in Vietnam for only three weeks in 1965 when he stepped on a landmine. William became the first of four from our neighborhood to die in a war that was to claim more than 58,000 men and women, largely from our baby-boom generation. He was a prime example of a person abused and mishandled by systems we were taught to trust.

Life at CD was much different than St. Michael’s. To begin with, the students were from diverse ancestral backgrounds, so it was the first time I attended school with students that weren’t Italian-American. We had a different teacher for each subject and changed classes between periods. While all of the teachers at St. Michael’s were nuns, the instructors for boys at CD were either priests or laymen. Few of the teachers hesitated to use threats and corporal punishment to keep the students in line. Students weren’t in school very long before learning the reputations of some teachers. Father

Foster, a biology teacher who stood six feet, six inches tall, carried a huge wooden paddle under his garment and didn't hesitate to hit students for minor transgressions. Father Dunne, a geometry teacher and former Golden Gloves boxer, used to take errant students into the school elevator and force them to don a pair of boxing gloves. He would then put on a pair of gloves, close the elevator door, and force the student into a boxing match for three minutes. If you wound up in the elevator with Father Dunne, you were likely to come out severely battered and bruised. Only one student, a boxer himself, got the best of Father Dunne. After beating the priest senseless, the student was expelled from school.

Father Geiger, who later was accused of multiple counts of pedophilia, was in charge of maintenance. One of his tasks was to assign two students, on a rotating basis, to clean homerooms. If Father felt a room wasn't cleaned properly, he would come to that homeroom the next morning and beat the student cleaners into tears. One of my friends, Chuck Rogers, was beaten so badly by Father Geiger that his nose was broken and a tooth dislodged from his mouth. Chuck had to go to class all day with an oozing, bloody nose until he was able to get to a hospital emergency room after school. When Chuck's parents complained about the incident to the principal, Father Dean, they were told that if they had a problem with Father Geiger's actions, they should remove their son from school.

With a few exceptions, I stayed clear of serious trouble during my time at CD. I did, however, manage to become involved during my sophomore year in what became known as the Great Pen Scandal.

There was a rule in the school that all homework was to be done at home. It wasn't to be done in school, not even during study hall, lunch period, or free time. In order to better enforce this rule, the administration, at the start of my sophomore year, ordered that all homework was to be done in pen and only pencils were permitted in school. The logic was that if you couldn't bring pens into school and homework had to be done in pen, you couldn't do homework during school hours. Of course, this rule had no sooner been published, than students devised ways to beat the system. One of the favorite methods was to hide a pen in a sock and later sit on a bathroom commode to complete a project. Within a short time, some students figured out ways to disguise pens as pencils. The school administration countered with methods to detect students who brought pens into school. One was known as pen raids, which were random, unannounced, and sudden. During pen raids, faculty members suddenly entered a homeroom, searched school bags,

and patted down students. Another method was to stop and frisk individual students on a random basis. Students suspected of carrying pens were patted down more often. If a pen was found, the student was given detention for five days. Ten days of detention in one school year led to a suspension and two suspensions a year were grounds for expulsion.

Quite a few students, fearing disciplinary action, stopped bringing pens into school. I came close to getting caught twice and stopped bringing pens to school. A few of the students, who were entrepreneurial by nature, decided that the reluctance of students like myself presented an opportunity to open a business. These students, known as pen dealers, would smuggle large quantities of pens into school and hide them in places such as lockers, underneath the inside bottom of book bags, and in coat closets. If a pen was needed, one could be purchased from a dealer for a dollar, which in the early 1960s,was enough to buy lunch in the cafeteria. Of course, these dealers were buying the pens for about twenty-five cents each. One of my friends, Jerry La Rosa, was one of the biggest pen dealers in school and was able to buy his pens wholesale for a dime each. In his heyday, Jerry was netting about $300 a week as a pen dealer, which adjusted for inflation, would be equivalent to $1,871 a week today or about $97,000 a year. During the first semester of sophomore year, one of the students, an informant for the faculty, notified the administration that Jerry had just carried dozens of pens into school in his book bag. It was Jerry's intention to sell the pens later that day. During morning homeroom, before our first period teacher arrived, several students, including me, had purchased pens from Jerry. During first period, Father Mc Devitt, our diminutive but stern disciplinarian and three other priests raided our class. Within a short time, they discovered Jerry's pen cache as well as the pens that several of us had just purchased that morning. We were all told to report to Father McDevitt's office at the end of the day.

Later that day, we all stood abreast in Father McDevitt's office to hear our fate. Father, a native of Ireland, announced in a very distinct brogue, "Morgan, De Falco, Kopitski, and Hershman, you each were found with pens in your possession and will receive five days of detention. Mr. La Rosa, your book bag contained more than sixty pens. This makes you a pen dealer, perhaps the biggest pen dealer in school. You, Mr. La Rosa, are suspended from school for a week. You are to report to me upon return with both of your parents so that they are aware of how serious this is and know that you are on very thin ice. Now, all of you, get out of here!"

The following day, on the public address system piped into each classroom, Father announced the results of what the faculty proudly dubbed The Great Pen Raid. He mentioned the names of all of the guilty parties and added, "Now, we know that there are more of you pen dealers and pen users out there. Furthermore, we know who you are. If you come forward on your own, admit your transgressions, and turn in your pens, you will only receive detention. If I have to come and get you, you will be suspended from school even if you only had one pen. You have until noon to turn yourselves in."

During the remainder of the morning, there was substantial debate among the student body regarding whether Father was bluffing or actually had evidence against other pen violators. Most of us that had even rudimentary street smarts concluded that he was bluffing. In my case, I had already been caught red-handed, plus Uncle Sal had drummed into me that you never confess to anything. However, when noon rolled around, there were no less than eighteen students lined up outside the discipline office to confess to various pen violations. No one else was apprehended after the fact as Father had threatened, and within a few weeks, it was known that Father McDevitt had managed to perpetrate a hoax. There was considerable debate among the students as to whether Father would have to confess that he had lied the next time he went to confession. My guess is that he probably didn't confess, and if he did, he was forgiven without penance.

Even Uncle Tony was incredulous over the time and energy expended enforcing pen laws at CD. He said there was no such problem in the public school since homework could be completed in study hall and in the library during free periods. It made sense to me. What didn't make sense was why almost all of us at CD were scared to death of being expelled and placed in public school. The overall graduation rate in the neighboring public high school was about equal to ours, and the percentage of graduates that went to college slightly exceeded our own school.

I also got into trouble during the Cafeteria Strike of 1963. There was a consensus among the students that although the food in the cafeteria was inexpensive, it tasted terrible. The two staples each day, either a roast beef sandwich with mashed potatoes or hot dogs, looked worse than what was found in a World War II can of C-rations. None of the food was fresh and the mashed potatoes turned green from a thickening additive. In addition, the food was usually cold because the steam tables were in poor repair. The Friday lunch, either pizza or tuna fish sandwiches, was somewhat

tastier but still sub-standard. Students could purchase a fresh Philly soft pretzel for a dime, and on most days when I bought my lunch, I paid twenty cents for two soft pretzels with spicy mustard. It wasn't high on nutrition, but it was fresh, tasty, and filling.

During the last part of junior year, one of the outgoing seniors organized what was supposed to be a mild protest over food quality. The plan involved about thirty students who were to get in line with their trays, order their food at the counter, and place the food on their trays. Just before getting to the register, each student was to dump the contents of his tray into a large trashcan and then sit on the cafeteria floor. As it turned out, the first dozen or so students through the line did follow the plan. Then, an overly reactive, panicked cafeteria worker, who was the grandmother of one of the students, tripped a fire alarm. Within a minute, Father McDevitt advised on the public address system that there was a riot in the cafeteria and ordered all faculty members to report there immediately. Within a very short time, a dozen faculty members descended on the cafeteria, some of them ready to do battle. Father Foster had his paddle out and Father Dunne had his fists cocked, looking for action. When some of the protesters were pointed out to them, the two priests, joined by Father Geiger and Mr. March, an alcoholic typing teacher, started to indiscriminately beat about twenty students, only half of which had discarded their lunches. The faculty members had things under control until one of the students, Pete Dennery, picked up a chair and cold-cocked Mr. March from behind, knocking him senseless. At about that time, in response to the original alarm, the Philadelphia Fire Department arrived armed with hoses and axes. Most of the remaining students in the cafeteria, probably about eight hundred, then made a mad dash for the exits, not sure if they were about to get hosed, axed, or beaten. It was a chaotic scene, which was exacerbated by the arrival of the Philadelphia Police Department, who had come to assist with what they thought was a fire. What they encountered was a thundering, frightened mob of teenagers who literally ran them over in an effort to get out of the cafeteria. Contending that they were assaulted, the police arrested four of the escaping students. Also taken into custody was Pete Dennery, who by the next day was expelled from school. Mr. March, who was drunk before Pete knocked him out, was taken to the hospital where he was treated and released after a two-hour nap.

When Father McDevitt tried to sort out what became a near riot, he could only identify some students who had actually started the fracas by discarding their lunches. He knew there were more culprits, but he just couldn't identify them, and none of his student

informants would talk for fear of reprisals. The next day, Father came out with what he thought was the best solution—he gave five days of detention to all of the students in the lunch period, eight hundred in total. A few of those punished already were working on their second and final suspension of the year, so the five days they received resulted in expulsion from school.

One of them, Frank Fenton, was from my neighborhood and only three weeks short of graduation. It turned out that Frank wasn't even in the cafeteria that day. He was two blocks away having sex on his lunch hour. Frank was going steady with a girl from nearby Olney High School, the public school closest to CD. The girl's home was vacant during the day, so Frank managed to get to her house about three times a week for a baloney sandwich and sex. This was quite a feat back in the sixties, when most of us could only dream of a situation similar to Frank's cozy arrangement. None of us had great remorse for Frank because he would have been expelled anyway for truancy and having sex outside of marriage.

Frank Fenton managed to pick up his diploma in summer school and went on to La Salle College that fall. He later married his girlfriend and they went on to have four children and nine grandchildren. He still complains at class reunions that he was unjustly expelled without due process.

The administration at CD felt it was well within their purview to mete out discipline for bad behavior that occurred outside of school. Students who were arrested by the police for any reason were expelled, even before their cases were disposed of in the courts. Girls who became pregnant were summarily expelled from school.

One student, Jim Gabriel, was arrested for clubbing his drunken father with a bat to stop the beating of his mother, who was terminally ill with breast cancer. His father, who was not charged, had Jim, an honor student, arrested by the police who came to the home to assist Jim's mother. Jim was expelled as soon as Father McDevitt learned of his arrest.

Probably the most notable example of the school reaching beyond their boundaries occurred at the very end of my junior year. On the Saturday before school ended, a large number of students, mostly seniors, went to a park in Sellersville, a suburb of Philadelphia, to have a graduation party. Since there was no such thing as Spring Break in those days, this was about the only opportunity the seniors had to blow off some steam before graduation. The students, about half of whom were girls, had in their possession several kegs of beer and some hard liquor. After several

hours of drinking, swimming, and softball, the party inevitably turned into a sexual free-for-all. Eventually, someone called the police, who raided the park and took about three dozen students into custody. About half of them, including seven girls, were at least partially nude. Luckily for me, I had left the party with some friends only forty minutes before the arrival of the police. The four of us were drunk, but we managed to drive about ten miles to a local restaurant where we sobered up on large amounts of coffee. The incident, which probably wouldn't even be newsworthy today, managed to find its way into the *Philadelphia Inquirer* the following day.

The administration at school acted swiftly. By Tuesday of the following week, all students who were apprehended were suspended from school pending further action. That Friday, which was the last day of school, the students were declared expelled by our principal over the school public address system. Their names were announced individually, along with students who were expelled for academic reasons.

Each school year ended as it began, with Mass in the auditorium. We then went to our homerooms to hear the year-end announcements that included those who received various academic honors, students expelled from school for various reasons, and finally, names of students who had to attend summer school due to failures.

The academics taught at CD were the same in all diocesan high schools. Freshmen and sophomores were given essentially the same curriculum. Juniors and seniors were assigned subjects depending on whether they chose the academic, commercial, or general tracks. The academic track was the most challenging and designed for those definitely headed for college. It consisted of religion, algebra or trigonometry, social science, a foreign language, and either chemistry or physics. Commercial students were allowed to substitute bookkeeping and typing for math and science, and the general students were, for the most part, given courses to keep them busy for the last two years of school. Uncle Sal, ever the corner cutter, saw my choices and told me to take the commercial track. He insisted that bookkeeping and typing would be a lot easier than trigonometry, algebra, chemistry, and physics. Uncle Tony agreed, but said the academic track would better prepare me for college, which was where I wanted to wind up if we could raise enough money. Uncle Sal, who had never attended college, insisted that if I wanted to be a business major in college, it wouldn't matter what courses I took in high school. After thinking things over, I agreed with Sal and chose the commercial curriculum. The

commercial courses were easy and the two years of typing served me well the rest of my life. I managed to easily make the honor roll during my last two years of school and was sure that acceptance into a college of my choice would come easily.

Of course, what Uncle Sal hadn't mentioned was that the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) contained a lot of questions in math and science. I had trouble with the math portion of practice SATs and wished that I had taken the academic curriculum. When I finally took the SATs for the first time, I scored 600 in the verbal portion but barely 400 in Math. I wasn't sure this would be high enough to get into college.

Finally, with the college application period quickly approaching, I followed a scheme devised by Uncle Sal to improve my SAT scores.

I requested permission to take the SATs at a different school, claiming I would be out of town during the next SAT weekend. The unsuspecting school administration granted permission, and I applied to take the SATs at a high school located at the New Jersey shore, about sixty miles from Philadelphia. Then, for fifty dollars, I persuaded Jim Monte, an honor student, to take the test for me. At that time, only a student ID card, which contained no photo, was needed to gain admission to SAT testing centers. I let Jim carry my driver's license, which also lacked photos at that time, in case he needed it.

Jim, Uncle Sal, and I drove to the shore on Friday night and stayed at a home that was owned by one of Sal's friends. On Saturday, we dropped Jim off at the testing center to take the SATs in my name. That evening, Sal cooked a spaghetti dinner, served with several bottles of wine. We returned to the city on Sunday, and as far as the family was concerned, we had all enjoyed a weekend of fishing at the shore.

A few weeks later, I received my predictable test results—575 in verbal and 580 in math. Jim could have scored higher, but Sal had coached him to avoid a high score that could arouse suspicion. With improved SAT scores and good grades, I had no trouble getting into La Salle College, St. Joseph's College, and Penn State, which was located about 150 miles away in the mountains of central Pennsylvania.

My first choice was Penn State. It would get me away from home for the first time in my life. Also, the school was known to offer a good education at a reasonable tuition. I was also impressed that

the student body of 30,000 included about 12,000 females, which were 12,000 more than I would encounter at all-male La Salle and St. Joseph's. Once I crunched the numbers, however, it became apparent that if I were to attend college, it would be La Salle. A popular commuter college in the city at that time, La Salle was considerably cheaper than Penn State, where I would have to board, and St. Joseph's, where tuition was higher. Also, La Salle was only two miles from our home and about two hundred CD graduates a year enrolled there.

Once accepted into college, I knew I could coast academically as long as I got at least average grades. This didn't turn out to be a problem. I even got straight A's in Mr. March's typing class while attending class only for tests. Mr. March was an alcoholic, who had been hired to substitute for a teacher who had become ill. He admitted to us that he could not type and warned us early on, "It's my job to baby-sit you goofy cock-suckers. So don't fuck with me; just come in here, practice some typing, and when the bell rings, get the fuck out of here."

Since I had typing during last period, it didn't take long for a number of us, including me, to tell Mr. March that we had to skip his class so that we could attend baseball practice. By the time the semester ended, only eight students were attending typing class on a regular basis. The remaining thirty-six students were signed out to baseball practice. I'm not sure if Mr. March ever discovered that the school baseball team only had eighteen members, taken from the entire student body. If he did find out, he never let on. Mr. March drowned at the New Jersey shore in 1968. I later learned that while drinking heavily and fishing off a pier, March fell into the water. His knee-high fishing boots filled with water and he was quickly taken to the bottom of what was only about eight feet of water.

My school schedule left plenty of time to earn some extra money for college and attend parties on weekends. I already had a part-time job at the BelAir Cleaners, located near my home. None of the cleaning was done on premises, so the business needed just one attendant to take in and hand out dry cleaning. Except for a few times that the owner dropped by, I worked alone. This enabled me to do homework, talk on the telephone, watch television, and entertain friends. By the start of my senior year, I had managed to save about $200 toward college from my part-time job. I knew I would need about $1,000 by the time I started college, and my earnings at BelAir weren't going to get me close to that figure. My mother didn't have any money to give me, and Uncle Tony was strapped with his own family expenses.

Uncle Sal said he might be able to help me earn extra money and within a few weeks, came to me with a proposition. Sal had a friend, Nick Petrucci, who was a local numbers banker. According to Sal, Nick was willing to let me take in some numbers action at the cleaners. It would give Nick an additional numbers drop in the neighborhood and I would earn extra money. I agreed to this arrangement and within a few days, we started using the cleaners as a numbers drop. A few times a day, Nick would stop by to pick up the action. Any winners would collect directly from Nick. Within a few months, the action at the cleaners picked up and I started to make more money from numbers than dry cleaning.

I had to be discreet when the owner, Howie Zibbleman, was in the store. I came up with various excuses to explain why so many people came into the store without dropping off or picking up cleaning. My two favorite excuses were that people were asking for directions or wanted change for the public telephone or soda machine located outside of the store. Howie sometimes shook his head at the number of non-customers who came into the store, but if he suspected anything, he didn't show it. This was surprising because at times, more than thirty people an hour came into the store to drop off their bets.

This enterprise came to an abrupt end when the Philadelphia Police Department vice squad raided the cleaners after receiving several tips from an informant that numbers were accepted there. Luckily for me, I wasn't working at the time, but I had left a sizable drop in the store that Nick had not yet picked up. The police searched the store and found the drop, consisting of about $700 and betting slips. They arrested Howie and his wife, Sophie, who were working in the store at the time. Sophie Zibbleman, a sixty-year-old, diminutive mother of five, very active in her synagogue, screamed and then fainted as she was handcuffed and put into a police car. She and Howie were booked for illegal gambling, but the district attorney later dropped the charges. Uncle Tony and my mother were furious with Uncle Sal and me over the incident and insisted that I both apologize to the Zibblemans and tell the police of my involvement in the numbers business. Sal emphasized that this would not be possible because the numbers business was protected by organized crime figures, already upset that they had lost a drop and were on the hook for bets that lacked records. Fortunately for Nick, Sal, and probably me, there were no large winning claims from the confiscated betting slips. I never went back to the cleaners since I knew I was persona non grata there. Also, I suspected that Howie Zibbleman would bring my head into contact with a baseball bat he kept in the store.

In the end, I had to make good to Nick for the $700 that was lost in the police raid. After feeling very guilty for about a month, I also dropped off $350 for the Zibblemans as compensation for the expenses associated with their arrest and lawyer fees. By this time, I had exactly $75 left for college, which was only four months away. I knew that a legitimate summer job would not enable me to save nearly enough money to pay for my first semester of college. My dismal record as a numbers runner precluded me from aspiring to an illegal job. After several frustrating attempts to devise a plan that would leave me with enough money for tuition and expenses, I came to the conclusion that college would have to wait.

The realization that my major blunder had cost me a chance to go to college caused me to spiral into a very depressed state. I did nothing for several weeks but go to school and stay in my room. Uncle Sal assured me that plenty of opportunities existed for those who did not attend college. He even promised to use his union connections to help me find a good job. Uncle Tony suggested two options for me to consider. One was to go into the military and later use the GI Bill to attend college. The other was to work a full-time job and attend college in the evenings. He said that a lot of employers would probably provide assistance with the tuition. When I checked out Tony's options on my own, I realized that as usual, he was right and there were still ways to get a college education.

Eventually, due to Tony's support and wisdom, I came out of my brief period of depression as I looked forward to high school graduation and the rest of my life.

After a final semester that saw the loss of my college savings and a steady stream of weekend parties, my high school years finally came to an end. On the Friday before graduation, we sat in our homerooms while our principal, Father Dean, announced over the public address system the names of those receiving honors, along with the unfortunates who would not graduate due to academic or disciplinary issues. Due to my mistake at the BelAir Cleaners, it was my misfortune to be one of the few honors graduates that would not be starting college in the fall.

The following day, I joined 1,200 classmates at Philadelphia's Convention Hall for graduation ceremonies. At the time, it was the largest graduating class in the history of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

After a vacation at Ocean City, New Jersey, I returned home, said goodbye to my family and friends, and reported to the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve Training Center at the Philadelphia Naval Base.

Within a few hours, I was on a bus with seventeen others headed to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot at Parris Island, South Carolina.

CHAPTER FOUR

My decision to join the Marine Corps had been made quickly and without much deliberation. I had already registered for the draft when I turned eighteen, a requirement at that time. I knew that if I went to work and enrolled in college at night, the military draft would catch up to me within two years. An enlistment in the armed forces would put my military obligation behind me and enable me to pursue a college education without interruption. In addition, time in the military would qualify me for significant education benefits under the GI Bill.

The Marine Corps made a very favorable impression on me as I grew up. Stories of how Marines performed in World War II on Iwo Jima, Tarawa, and Saipan were well known to young men growing up in the post-war era. In addition, there was the personal challenge of completing the demanding regimen of Marine Corps training.

At the time of my enlistment, the Marine Corps offered two-, three-, and four-year tours of duty.

The two-year option best fit my overall plans. First and foremost was a promise to my mother, still grieving from my father's death in World War II, that I would minimize any time spent in the military. Also, I wanted to start college as quickly as possible. A two-year enlistment would enable me to start college that much sooner.

The sight of a recruiting sergeant, outfitted in dress blues, combined with my already high regard for the Marine Corps, was all that was needed to make a decision that would take me away from the Philadelphia area for the first time.

The trip to Paris Island was an adventure to most of us on the bus. Of the eighteen on the bus, twelve were white, five black, and one an American Indian. We were all between eighteen and twenty years of age and, with a few exceptions, had only been away from Philadelphia for vacations at the New Jersey shore. A few of us had been to New York City and Washington D.C. on family or class trips. We passed just to the east of Washington D.C. and were able to spot the U.S. Capitol and Washington Monument in the distance. I was surprised at how close Washington was to Philadelphia and

promised myself to return there someday for a visit. I wondered what it would be like to have my picture taken in front of places like the White House and the Capitol. Perhaps I would even be able to get into these places as a tourist.

The bus continued south until we arrived at Richmond, Virginia for a scheduled stop. The outside temperature was a good deal warmer than what we were used to at that time of year in Philadelphia. While we were in Richmond, a local bus depot employee boarded the bus and spoke briefly to the driver. The driver turned to us and said, “Okay, guys, you’re in the South now. All white guys sit up front, you black boys, sit in the back.” He pointed to the Indian, whose name was Craig, and said, “Not sure about you, so you better sit in the back, too.”

After Richmond, the trip became a long, hot ordeal as the temperatures grew warmer and the scenery rural and desolate. By the time we arrived at Parris Island, South Carolina, it was dusk; we had been on the road for fourteen hours. We were tired, hungry, and perspiring profusely in a hot bus where the temperature was about ninety degrees. A Marine sentry asked the driver a few questions and gave him directions. Within a few minutes, we arrived in front of a wooden, three-story barracks building that was old but had a neat appearance. A Marine corporal boarded the bus and directed us into the barracks that was furnished with about forty cots, equipped only with thin mattresses. We were told to get some sleep and advised that our drill instructors would pick us up early the following morning. One of us asked the Marine if we could get something to eat and we were told that the mess hall was closed until the next morning.

Since none of us had eaten since breakfast, the prospect of missing dinner was hardly appealing. Neither was the hot barracks where we had to spend the night sleeping on cots without sheets or pillows. The Marine left the barracks without saying another word.

Once we were alone, we opened the windows to get some air into the barracks. Within a few minutes, we were introduced to what would be one of our chief tormentors at Parris Island, gnats, or as they were known in the South “no-see-ums.” These gnats were appropriately named, because before you ever saw them, no-see-ums would bite you any number of times on exposed parts of your body. After being attacked by the no-see-ums for about ten minutes, we quickly closed all the windows and tried to kill the thousands of gnats that were now in the barracks. Finally, at about midnight, most of us collapsed on the cots and managed to fall asleep hot,

hungry, and ruing our decision to enlist. What we failed to realize was that things were about to get much worse.

I was in a deep sleep brought on by exhaustion when all hell broke loose. The barracks lights suddenly came on, followed by the very loud clanging noise of an empty, twelve-gallon trashcan thrown along the floor of the squad bay. Then came a loud booming voice, "Okay, you slime ball assholes, get up, it's 4:30!"

Before I could react, my cot, along with everyone else's was upended by one of three drill instructors that had suddenly stormed into the barracks. While I had been tossed free of my cot, most of the others wound up under their cots and were, in turn, stomped on by the drill instructors. As I sat on the floor watching these unfortunate recruits trying to extricate themselves, I was punched in the side of my face by one of the drill instructors. I never saw the punch coming and fell on my side as my mouth gushed blood from a cut caused from my teeth cutting into my gums.

By the time everyone managed to escape from under their cots, six of us were bleeding from assorted beatings, cuts, and scrapes. We were quickly shown how to stand at attention shoulder to shoulder as the three screaming drill instructors continued to insult us, our mothers, where we came from, and in the case of our minority recruits, their race.

Our drill instructors, or DIs, as we would come to know them, then introduced themselves. Our senior drill instructor was Sergeant Wilson from Georgia. His assistants were Sergeant Powell from Florida and Sergeant Johnson, who was from Tennessee. All three were white.

"Okay, listen up," said Sergeant Wilson. "You have exactly five minutes to shower, shave, shit, and get back out here, dressed. If you don't get back here in five minutes, you will not have breakfast this morning. Now move, get it done!"

As we all ran into the bathroom, known in the Marine Corps as a head, most of us realized that in five minutes, the most we could do is shave. Going without a shower was an easy choice over missing breakfast, especially since we hadn't eaten in over twenty-four hours.

Unfortunately, two recruits took the instructions literally and were sitting on toilet seats as our five minutes ran out. When these two, who were black, joined us in the squad bay, Sergeant Powell started to punch at them wildly and connected with some hard

blows to the head and chest. As both of these recruits fell to the floor, Powell grabbed the head of one, Artis Adams, and bit off the tip of Adams' left ear lobe. Adams screamed as Powell spit the piece of ear lobe to the floor and shouted, "You miserable fucking nigger! You better get off CPT and get on Marine Corps time or I will run your ass out of my Marine Corps! Do you know what CPT is, Private?"

"No, sir," answered Adams, quietly sobbing from sheer pain and undoubtedly as scared as the eighteen-year-old from North Philadelphia had ever been.

"Well, it means Colored Peoples' Time, asshole, and from now on, you will be off it, understand? And that goes for the rest of you fucking niggers, too. And, any of you white guys that want to act like niggers."

Sergeant Wilson then said very calmly, "Okay, you will not eat breakfast this morning because these two shitbirds took too long to shower, shave, and shit. Instead, you will get down and do pushups for the next half hour that you would have been eating breakfast. And, if anybody stops, you will not eat lunch. Understand?"

"Yes, sir!" we all shouted, pretty much in unison.

Sergeant Johnson then walked up to Adams and examined his ear, which was still oozing blood. Johnson reached into the first-aid pouch on his duty belt, removed a small tube of antiseptic ointment, threw it at Adams, and told him to put some on his ear. We all then began to do pushups for the next half hour. No one dared stop, despite our rapidly deteriorating physical conditions.

After our pushup session, we spent the day getting our heads shaved, collecting our military issue gear, and receiving no less then eight shots at the base dispensary. The drill instructors continued to shout at us on a regular basis, but they did not beat or abuse any of us for the remainder of the day. We even got five minutes to eat lunch and ten minutes to have dinner. The food tasted slightly better than the lunches at Cardinal Dougherty High, but none of us really knew what we were eating.

When we returned to the barracks after dinner, there were forty new recruits waiting for us. They had arrived during the day and were sitting around still dressed in their civilian clothes. Those of us who had arrived the night before were already wearing our green utilities and had our military gear, including rifles. We felt like veterans and gave the new recruits a knowing look that conveyed

our veteran status.

Without hesitation, our three DIs pounced on the newest arrivals with as much zeal as they had us earlier that day. The DIs found an excuse to deny the new arrivals dinner and then bedded them down for the night on cots that contained springs without mattresses. The rest of us spent our second night on mattresses without pillows or sheets. The next morning, after breakfast, the DIs took the forty newest recruits to get their haircuts, shots, and military gear. The rest of us were left in the barracks to completely clean the floors and heads. When the others returned that afternoon with the DIs, all fifty-eight of us were marched, complete with our gear, about two miles to the 3rd Recruit Training Battalion. Once there, we took up residence on the third deck of a three-story brick barracks building that was to be our home for the next three months. Unlike the receiving barracks, the barracks at 3rd Battalion were newer, cleaner, and luckily for us, had air conditioning. All of the cots had mattresses, pillows, and bedding. The DIs showed us how to make up cots in a military manner. Sheets had to be folded under the mattress in a certain way, and the blanket had to be tight enough for a nickel to bounce in the air when dropped on the cot by one of the DIs. If a cot failed to pass the coin test, the recruit who slept on that cot had to spend the evening sleeping on mattress springs.

After dinner, we returned to our barracks and were summoned by Sergeant Wilson to come to the front of the squad bay and take a seat on the floor in front of him and the other DIs. He then announced in a rather clam, modulated voice, “Okay, Ladies, you now have a little idea of what things are going to be like here. It’s going to be tough, real tough, and we are going to be on you like stink on shit. When we are finished with you, you will be Marines or you will not be here. If you think you cannot handle what’s in store for you, now is the time to let us know. If you don’t want to be here, we don’t want you in our Marine Corps. You can leave here now and go into the Army, Navy, or Air Force. But we need to know by tomorrow morning. After that, it’s too late. So, think about it. Tomorrow morning, after morning chow, we’ll meet back here and anyone who wants to leave will be able to do so. Now, get out of my sight and clean up your bunk areas.”

That night, many of us discussed in hushed tones the offer made by Sergeant Wilson. One of the recruits, a kid from Buffalo, told us that his father had been in the Marine Corps for twenty years and had just retired the previous year. He was certain that we could not change branches of service and felt that the DIs were just trying to weed out malcontents. While most of us agreed with him, there

were several who felt that Sergeant Wilson had been very forthright and believable. A few of them, having experienced the initial hazing we had gone through, wanted to be anywhere but Parris Island.

The next morning, when asked by Sergeant Wilson if anyone wanted to leave, three recruits raised their hands. They were ordered to the front of the squad bay and were pounced on by the maniacal Sergeant Powell. He got close to them and shouted, “You pussies don’t want to be in my Marine Corps? Where do you want to be?”

When informed by the now petrified recruits that they all wanted to join the Navy, Powell dragged them into the head, one at a time, grabbed them by their necks and held their faces at the bottom of a toilet bowl until they nearly passed out. He then dragged them back in front of the rest of us and proceeded to kick them continuously in the testicles, asking if they had any balls. Eventually, the three of them were on the floor, screaming as they tried to protect their crotch areas.

While they were on the floor, Powell spit on them while keeping their necks pressed to the floor with his foot. The three recruits were then given five minutes to pack all of their gear into their sea bags. They were then marched out of the barracks by Sergeant Johnson, never to be seen by us for the remainder of recruit training. I did learn later that they were not sent to join the Navy. Instead, they were sent directly to what was known as the Motivation Platoon. This unit, quartered in a remote part of the base, was designed to improve the overall disposition of recruits who demonstrated that they lacked the courage or motivation to endure the rigors of recruit training. It was actually a hell-hole far worse than regular recruit training where recruits were made to exercise to exhaustion, go with very little sleep, and put up with DIs like Sergeant Powell at all hours.

Usually, after a week or so in the Motivation Platoon, recruits were very eager to rejoin a regular training platoon and do whatever was necessary to finish boot camp. They were never sent back to their original platoons, so their former platoon-mates never knew what happened to them. That left the DIs an opportunity to create a little suspense regarding the fate of recruits that had left the platoon.

It wasn’t uncommon for DIs to hint that they had killed recalcitrant recruits and dumped their bodies in the alligator-infested swamps that surrounded Parris Island. A few years before my arrival at Parris Island, a group of drill instructors had formulated a plan to put the fear of God, and drill instructors, into their next group of new

recruits. As the story went, the DIs, before picking up their new platoon, had a young, off-duty drill instructor pose as a new recruit known as Private Pyle. Pyle spent the initial three days with this platoon acting as a new recruit, but deliberately made more mistakes than the average recruit. He was quickly singled out by the DIs as a screw-up and told that if he didn't shape up quickly, he would be shot and thrown into the swamps. At the end of the third day, the platoon was on a three-mile run near a remote part of the base. Pyle fell out of the run, claiming that he was too tired to continue. In front of the entire platoon, one of the DIs produced a .45-caliber pistol and appeared to fire two rounds into the chest of Pyle. Of course, the rounds were blanks, but Pyle managed to fall on his stomach to hide the fact that there was no blood. One of the other DIs then checked Pyle's pulse and announced that he was dead. Two of the DIs then picked up Pyle and carried him into the woods toward a swamp area. When the DIs returned, the recruits were told that they could be easily killed and disposed of if they performed as Private Pyle.

Apparently, the staged murder of Private Pyle was all the motivation the platoon needed to excel during the remainder of recruit training. As a group, they received every award that they could earn: best overall platoon, highest scores on the rifle range, highest scores in drill competition, and the highest marks on written tests. They were the honor platoon of their series, which translated into high proficiency marks received by their drill instructors.

For drill instructors, good proficiency marks were the ultimate goal of their time assigned to the drill field. These marks determined promotions and future assignments, which to career military personnel, ranked very high on their list of priorities. In order to receive good marks, drill instructors had to assure that their platoons, when compared to other platoons in training, were ranked near the top in all activities. These activities included academic excellence, measured by written tests, physical fitness, marksmanship, close-order drill, swimming, and hand-to-hand combat.

From the start of recruit training, it was obvious that our DIs were strongly focused on achieving high proficiency marks, using any methods necessary. Each DI had a pre-scripted role to play. Sergeant Wilson, our senior DI, was the stern father figure. He was the oldest of the three, but couldn't have been over thirty-five. While capable of physical violence and emotional outbursts, he usually used patience, logic, and occasional praise to move us in the direction he wanted to take us. Sergeant Powell was the enforcer.

Only about twenty-five, but already a Marine for eight years, he was a born psychopath who truly enjoyed beating recruits senseless. A blatant racist, he took particular delight in beating and harassing the black recruits in the platoon. Sergeant Johnson, probably the most intelligent of the three, was about thirty years old and had been a Marine for twelve years. His job was to harass us, often with subtle tactics designed to pressure us. He rarely hit anyone, but he was capable of incredible sarcasm and nasty behavior. He made recruits stand at attention for up to four hours, do an hour of push ups, and forced us to urinate in our pants before he would allow a head call. Each DI, in their own way, was focused on getting us through recruit training while earning high proficiency marks for them. In the main, the methods used by the Marine Corps were successful in transforming civilian teenagers into viable and ambitious Marines within three months. The DIs needed only to follow written training plans and in three months, the vast majority of their recruits became hard core Marines.

The main obstacle was that only about ninety percent of the recruits had the mental and physical skills, along with the motivation to achieve these goals. The remaining ten percent didn't belong in the Marine Corps and, most likely, should not have been in any of the armed forces. In today's military, these individuals are weeded out, discharged, and sent home without recrimination. In the 1960s, and for many years after, discharges came only under extreme circumstances. Once you enlisted, you were indentured to that branch of service until the expiration of your enlistment.

From the start of recruit training, our DIs were strongly focused on high proficiency marks. Recruits who failed to progress in the various aspects of training were goaded, beaten, coached, and harassed into improving their performance. If these tactics failed, the drill instructors didn't hesitate to cheat in order to achieve desired results.

An example of this occurred during the first two weeks of training. We all had to study for a written test in basic military proficiency. This test included things such as Marine Corps history, general orders, and other areas of what was considered basic military knowledge. We were drilled extensively through the use of practice exams graded by the drill instructors. Those who failed the practice exams were placed in the "slow learners" group, where they received tutoring from recruits who scored well in those exams.

My practice scores were high, so I was given the task of tutoring Craven Malpass, the seventeen-year-old son of a migrant worker

from West Virginia. In addition to having only gone to school through sixth grade, Malpass couldn't speak English that any of us understood. He couldn't add a column of more than three numbers and was barely able to write his name and address. Despite my efforts, Malpass couldn't pass any of the practice exams. On the day of the written exam, I was ordered by Sergeant Wilson to take the test for Malpass. Wilson listed me as sick and rescheduled me to take the test the following day. Following Wilson's orders, I took the test for Malpass while he hid in a barracks closet with two other recruits who were failure risks. The following day, I took the test again, using my real identity. Malpass had scored between 30 and 40 on the practice exams. I scored a 92 when I took the test for Malpass, one point higher than my own score. Sergeant Wilson was irritated with me because he wanted me to score no more than an 80 when I took the test for Malpass. Due to his high score, Malpass was selected for computer programming school after basic training. I would have liked to seen the reaction of his instructors during his first day of programming school.

The irony of the test manipulation was that three recruits who were allowed to sit for the test received failing grades. This incurred the wrath of all three drill instructors, especially Sergeant Powell. The three recruits, all black, were called to the front of the squad bay where they were beaten and humiliated by Powell. He then announced that from that day forward, these recruits would no longer be known by their last names, which was standard in recruit training. From that day forward, they were to be known, respectively, as Moron Nigger, Stupid Nigger, and Dumb Nigger. They had to refer to themselves by those names and be addressed as such by the DIs and the rest of the platoon. If the DIs heard them addressed by their given names, there were to be serious repercussions. Years later, I learned that one of these recruits had distinguished himself during combat in Vietnam, earning the Bronze Star, Silver Star, and Purple Heart. One of the others, a fellow Philadelphian, earned an MBA from Temple University and had a successful business career.

As recruit training progressed, cheating by the drill instructors became more pervasive. Those who couldn't pass the basic swimming test were hidden in the barracks while the rest of the platoon was taking the test. The initial test for those who couldn't swim was to jump from the top of a forty-foot high platform into twelve feet of water. This was to test the courage of recruits. More than a few non-swimmers were dragged to the top of the diving platform and thrown into the water. Artis Adams, who had already had the tip of his ear bitten off by Sergeant Powell, was so afraid he

literally walked on water to reach the side of the pool. After that remarkable feat, Adams was nicknamed “Walking Jesus” by the drill instructors.

On the rifle range, three recruits who consistently failed to qualify during practice sessions were sent to sick bay when the rest of the platoon shot for qualification. On drill competition day, six recruits, clumsy at close-order drill, were taken to the base golf course to mow the lawn. Just before graduation, four recruits unable to pass various elements of the physical fitness test were hidden for two hours in a rat-infested crawlspace underneath our barracks.

The selective omission of recruits from mandatory testing bore favorable results for the drill instructors. Our platoon edged out the three other platoons in our series for the award of honor platoon. While the DIs of the other three platoons also cheated, our DIs either cheated better or perhaps had more talent in their platoon.

Recruit training finally came to an end, and about two hundred new Marines, including me, graduated on the main parade deck of Parris Island in November, 1964. Many of them, including some who couldn’t shoot straight, think quickly, or swim, were later assigned to combat units in Vietnam.

Craven Malpass flunked out of computer school and was sent to Vietnam to carry ammunition for a rifle company. He was in Vietnam for three weeks when he stepped on a land mine and lost both legs.

All of our DIs went to Vietnam during the next several years. Sergeant Powell, assigned to a reconnaissance unit, distinguished himself in combat and was awarded two Bronze Stars. He came home with a necklace of a dozen ear lobes he had cut off the heads of dead enemy soldiers. About six months later, Powell was shot and killed during an argument in a bar while on leave in his hometown of Brooksville, Florida.

Sergeant Wilson became a warrant officer and retired from the Marine Corps after a distinguished twenty-eight-year career.

Sergeant Johnson retired after twenty years in the Marine Corps and went to work in assorted security-related jobs in South Carolina. In 1995, I met Johnson while he was working as a security officer in a resort community near Charleston, SC. He didn’t specifically recall me after more than thirty years, but he managed to laugh over how the DIs had cheated to achieve high proficiency marks. He seemed old, frail, and harmless, very different from the person who scared a bunch of teenagers so many years ago.

After completing infantry training at Camp Lejuene, North Carolina, I went back to Philadelphia for two weeks of leave. My family hosted a party for me that was attended by dozens of relatives and family friends. Almost everyone wanted a picture taken of me in my uniform. I took pride in my uniform and the fact that I was already a Private First Class with an Expert Marksmen's badge. On my first Sunday at home, I wore my uniform to Sunday Mass at St. Michael's. After church, I mingled with several of my high school classmates and for the first time, felt much older and experienced than them. We had been in high school together only six months earlier.

Once my leave time expired, it was back to reality and twenty more months of active duty. I had orders to report to the 2nd Marine Air Wing based at Cherry Point, North Carolina. Once there, I was assigned to a helicopter squadron and prepared to begin on-the-job training in my assigned MOS, (Military Occupational Specialty) an Aviation Ordnance trainee. During my first day of training, I was busy on a typewriter, completing a myriad of forms required of new trainees. Thanks to my high school typing courses, I was able to type about sixty words per minute. While working, I sensed someone standing behind me. As I turned around to see who was there, I noticed the silver bars of a Marine Corps captain on the collar of my observer. I immediately jumped to my feet and snapped to attention. The captain, a short, stocky man of about thirty-five, smiled and spoke in a soft, almost mellow, voice.

"At ease; where did you learn to type like that, private?"

"In high school, sir; I had two years of typing."

"Well, I'm Captain Lipoli, the squadron admin officer, and I need a few admin men that can actually type. It's an eight-to-four job Monday to Friday in an air-conditioned office. What do you think?"

"Yes, sir, I'd like that," I said, feeling that a stroke of luck had come my way.

"Okay," said the captain. "I'll square away the necessary paperwork; you report to the admin office at 0800 tomorrow morning and we'll get you to work. By the way, private, what's your name?"

"De Falco, sir, Joe De Falco."

"Oh, a piason?"

"Yes, sir, one hundred percent."

"Me, too. I think you'll like working in admin. We've got a good

bunch of guys there."

"Yes, sir."

"Okay; carry on, Joe. I'll see you in the morning."

I wondered that night if I had made the right decision, if in fact the decision was even mine to make. Finally, I concluded that I'd be a lot better off in an office typing and filing than loading ammunition on helicopters.

The next morning, I reported to Captain Lipoli who introduced me to First Sergeant Gagliardi, the squadron admin chief. Gagliardi, a short, stocky, powerfully built man of about forty, was in charge of the enlisted men who worked in the admin office. He reported directly to Captain Lipoli.

Gagliardi smiled and shook my hand. "Sal Gagliardi, nice to meet you."

"Yes, sir, nice to meet you," I said.

"Don't call me sir; call me Top or Sergeant Gag. You're not in boot camp anymore and I'm not a fucking drill instructor," said Gagliardi. "Top" was Marine Corps jargon often used to address a first sergeant.

"Yes, sir, Top," I blurted out without realizing I had disobeyed Sergeant Gag's first order.

Both the captain and Sergeant Gag smiled and Gag said, "Okay, into my office and I'll show you what the drill is around here."

Sergeant Gag walked with me to his office and invited the rest of the office staff in to meet me.

"Guys," said Sergeant Gag, "this here is De Falco, Joe DeFalco. He's a cherry fresh off the island and he's going to be working with us here."

The four marines, all lance corporals and corporals, stepped forward to introduce themselves. They were Al Resignio, Joe Coppola, Andy Barratta, and Ralph Di Nicola.

They were all perhaps two to three years older than me. Sergeant Gag turned me over to Coppola, a corporal, and ordered him to train me in the various aspects of squadron administration.

During my first weeks in the squadron office, I did little more than answer telephones, type various reports, and file all types of

paperwork. I learned from Coppola that Sergeant Gag was a World War II veteran who hailed from Boston. He had fought on Saipan and Iwo Jima with the 26th Marines and then decided to remain in the Marine Corps for a career. I also learned that Captain Lipoli was the son of Italian immigrants who had come to New York City from Sicily right after World War I. The captain, a true Sicilian, was very wary of non-Italians, and it was no accident that he had somehow managed to put together an admin staff of only Italian-Americans. I suspected that he already knew my last name before he spoke to me on the day we met.

As I gained more experience in the admin office, it became apparent that the admin office had considerable power in the squadron. They had input or outright authority on a whole host of issues, including duty rosters, leave, transfers, disciplinary procedures, and promotions. Captain Lipoli reported directly to the squadron commanding officer and Sergeant Gag was the senior non-commissioned officer in the squadron. Most of what went on in the squadron that affected personnel found its way into the admin office.

There were stories told in the squadron of misfortunes encountered by those who somehow ran afoul of Captain Lipoli, Sergeant Gag, or even the lower-grade enlisted men who worked in the office.

One story involved Staff Sergeant Snellson, who worked in the mess hall. Two of the office clerks, Andy Barratta and Ralph Di Nicola, were on thirty days of mess duty and under Snellson's supervision. Snellson, who didn't like Sergeant Gag, took his hostility out on Barratta and Di Nicola, both lance corporals. Most of those assigned to mess duty were given various assignments that typically kept them busy about ten hours a day. Barratta and Di Nicola were assigned about twenty hours of work a day, including cleaning and polishing the entire mess hall floor each evening.

After five days of this, they were exhausted and more than tired of Snellson's obvious disregard for the amount of sleep they were missing. One of their tasks was to make a large pot of coffee each morning that Snellson kept in his office for his personal use. During the course of the day, he usually finished the entire pot and sometimes ordered his charges to brew a second pot. One morning, Barratta was making Snellson's coffee when Di Nicola suggested they use a combination of water and urine to brew the coffee. They glanced at each other briefly before a knowing smile crossed both of their faces. Without another word, both took turns urinating into

the large pot and then topped off the pot with water. During the course of the day, Snellson drank the entire pot of coffee without any complaints.

Feeling some vindication for Snellson's treatment of them, the two continued to make Snellson's coffee each day with a water and urine mixture. After five days of this, Snellson wound up in sickbay with stomach cramps. He returned to work the next day and Barratta, feeling that sufficient revenge had been extracted, made the coffee using only water. While Snellson was drinking his second cup of the day, he asked Barratta what he had done to the coffee that morning. Barratta, momentarily stunned, recovered and said he made the coffee the same way every morning.

Snellson remarked, "This is the worst fucking coffee I ever had, if I didn't know better, I'd think I was drinking piss. Yeah, that's what this tastes like, piss."

Snellson then looked into his coffee mug momentarily before he swallowed the remainder of his coffee and said, "Well, as long as it ain't piss, I guess I can fucking drink it."

Barratta then left Snellson's office and encountered Di Nicola, who was laughing so hard he was nearly on the floor. As it turned out, Di Nicola, without Barratta's knowledge, had taken the pot made by Barratta, discarded the coffee, and remade another pot using one hundred percent urine, obtained from himself and several other Marines assigned to mess duty.

By the end of the day, Snellson was back in sickbay with severe diarrhea and stomach cramps. This time, he missed two days of work before feeling well enough to return.

When he did, all of the urine spikers, including Barratta and Di Nicola, decided that they had pushed their luck far enough.

Sergeant Gag heard about the urine spiking and told Barratta and Di Nicola never to take matters into their own hands again. He would personally take care of anyone who tried to make life miserable for anyone in the admin section. Sergeant Gag then made a telephone call to a friend in the personnel section at Marine Corps Headquarters. Within two weeks, Sergeant Snellson was transferred to the Marine Corps Base on Okinawa.

Lieutenant Henry, a new arrival to our squadron, was another victim of Sergeant Gag's vendettas. Henry, a spit-and-polish Marine, spotted some of us returning from the mess hall one day. As he passed by us, we all threw him a half-hearted salute and

continued walking toward our office. Henry, displeased with our less than snappy saluting, insisted that we all stand in front of him and practice saluting until he felt our salute was adequate. Sergeant Gag noticed this impromptu exercise as he passed by and politely asked Lieutenant Henry if there was a problem. Henry explained what had happened and Sergeant Gag responded, “That’s fine, sir; it’s your prerogative to conduct this exercise, but may I remind the Lieutenant that all salutes received are supposed to be returned. So, if you want these men to practice saluting you properly, you should be returning each salute.”

Henry, red-faced and embarrassed at being chastised by someone holding a lesser rank, quickly terminated the exercise and dismissed us. By that time, we had each given him more than one hundred salutes.

About a week later, Lieutenant Henry was summoned to the admin office to complete routine paperwork required by new transfers. As he finished his paperwork, Sergeant Gag, with a poker-straight face, told Henry that we would need a sperm sample to send to sick bay. Henry, taken aback, said that he had never heard of such a request during his almost two years in the Marine Corps. Sergeant Gag said that the procedure was fairly new and the sample was required to assure that new personnel did not have venereal disease. Henry insisted that such a request was highly unusual, but wanted to know the procedure for submitting a sperm sample. Sergeant Gag told him that there were two options: Henry could report to sickbay and have a corpsman draw the sample from his testicles with a needle. Or, if Henry desired, he could go into the head (or, the bathroom) and masturbate into a specimen cup. While this conversation took place, Captain Lipoli walked into the squad room and, in a serious tone, reaffirmed to Henry that the sperm sample would have to be given soon. Henry, exasperated but resigned at this point, took an empty Dixie cup from Sergeant Gag and went into the head. About ten minutes later, Henry came into the office with the cup containing a sperm sample.

Sergeant Gag observed the sample, thanked Henry, and asked him to deliver it directly to the dispensary. Henry then left the office, carefully carrying the cup, and headed to the base dispensary. Once Henry left, the entire office staff, including Captain Lipoli, began to laugh hysterically at how completely Henry had fallen for the ruse.

At the dispensary, the nurses and corpsmen had already been alerted that Henry was on his way over with a sperm sample. The

dispensary personnel, all with tongue in cheek, accepted the sample from Henry. Henry, not realizing he had been conned, left still complaining of having to submit to a sperm test. The dispensary staff had conspired with Sergeant Gag in the past to perpetrate the same hoax, and had a good laugh before they quickly disposed of the evidence.

Two days later, Lieutenant Henry was told that he did in fact have "tertiary early stage surface STD" and would have to keep his groin area clean shaven for the next three months. He would also have to deliver samples of his shaven pubic hairs to the dispensary for weekly analysis. Henry, completely fooled and embarrassed, dutifully shaved his groin area and provided pubic hair samples for the next several weeks. When he reported for his routine annual physical, one of the corpsmen who was in on the ruse reported that Henry had a freshly shaven groin area. Henry, who wanted badly to keep the entire matter confidential, told the Navy doctor who performed his physical that he kept his groin shaved for sanitary reasons.

The Navy doctor, who held the rank of commander and thus outranked Henry, couldn't resist the urge to tweak a young, cocky Marine officer.

"You know, Lieutenant, I do physicals every day, and usually, men who shave their balls either had crabs or are faggots. You're not a faggot, are you, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir," responded Henry, in a shrill, not-so-confident voice.

"Are you sure? I don't want to find out later that you are a faggot. Because, if you are, there's no place for you in the Marine Corps. Understand?"

"Yes, sir, I understand. I'm definitely not a faggot; no, sir."

"Did you have crabs?"

"I guess so, yes, sir; I guess I had crabs because I was told to shave my balls."

"Then you were lying to me when you told me you shaved your balls for sanitary reasons."

"Not exactly, sir, having crabs is a sanitary problem, but I just didn't want to talk about it."

"Get out of here, Lieutenant. Don't ever lie to me again and you better start watching where you put your pecker, understand?"

“Yes, sir,” Henry blurted, as he quickly left the dispensary and became the newest addition to Sergeant Gag’s AWOP List, also known as “Assholes Who are Owed Payback.”

After a few months in the admin section, it was very apparent that I had inadvertently stumbled into a very comfortable assignment. Sergeant Gag and Captain Lipoli were good bosses that went the extra yard to care for their men. They were fiercely loyal and demanded the same level of loyalty in return. Those who did their jobs and stayed out of trouble were rewarded with a forty-hour work-week in an air-conditioned office. We had weekends off, thirty days of leave a year, and an occasional temporary assignment to warm, sunny locations such as California and Hawaii. We were all promoted as quickly as possible under guidelines published by the Marine Corps. In addition, we were able to have our assignments extended beyond the typical twelve-to-eighteen-month period. In my case, that enabled me to remain at Cherry Point for the remainder of my two-year enlistment.

Since I was only about an eight-hour drive from Philadelphia, I was able to visit home almost any weekend. Sergeant Gag always gave me off at noon on Fridays whenever I wanted to drive home for a weekend. I always made sure than whenever Sergeant Gag gave me the extra half day off, I returned the following Monday with a care package from the Philadelphia Italian Market. This usually consisted of Genoa salami, sharp provolone cheese, tomato pie, a couple of hoagies, and a few Philly soft pretzels. There was no way to buy those items in North Carolina at that time, so Sergeant Gag and Captain Lipoli always looked forward to lunch following my visits to Philadelphia. The two of them would lock themselves in Lipoli’s office and take about two hours to eat their lunch, usually washed down with a few bottles of Chianti supplied by Uncle Sal.

As my enlistment drew to a close, I calculated that my entitlement from the GI Bill, combined with income from part-time and summer jobs, would enable me to go to college. I then re-applied to La Salle College, where I had been previously accepted while still in high school. Within a few weeks, I was officially part of the Class of 1970. I would have only one month after my discharge to move home and get ready for college.

It was with mixed emotions that I said goodbye to my fellow Marines and prepared to become a college student. Sergeant Gag and Captain Lipoli both gave me a firm hand-shake and bear hug as they wished me well. I even detected that Sergeant Gag was a little red-eyed as he said goodbye. I would be forever grateful to these

Not on the Level

by

Michael V. Maddaloni

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