

A young man comes of age in the Air Force.

**North of Knoxville - South of Atlanta**

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## Chapter One

### Diary of a Dipshit

**P**ut them gawddamn cigarettes out, Dipshits! Hurry up! Do it! Now!" I cursed my recruiter.

Even though I hated him now, he was a nice enough guy who had treated me right when I went to visit him at the Air Force Recruiting Office. When I walked in, he flashed a big smile, stuck out his hand, and said, "Hi. My name's Tech Sergeant<sup>1</sup> Tommy Trotter. What's yours and what can I do for you?"

This guy's a little too slick, I thought as I took his hand and said, "Wayne Babb. I might want to join the Air Force. Is this the place?"

"Sure is. Let me get you a cup of coffee and we'll sit down and talk about it."

I sat in the chair in front of Tommy's desk while he poured my coffee, returned to his desk, and handed the cup across to me. "And just why do you want to join my Air Force, Wayne?"

*What?* That's the last thing I expected him to say, so I didn't have an answer right on the tip of my tongue. I ran all the answers I thought he might want to hear through my mind: patriotism? —learn a trade?—boredom?—dodge the draft?—steady job?—get a neat uniform to impress my girl? I decided on the truth. "Sergeant Trotter, I could stay in Chattanooga, get a job as a welder at Wheland Foundry, and live out my life right here. Then, when I'm old and gray and my grandkids ask where all I've been, I could look them right in the eye and say I've never been north of Knoxville or south of Atlanta. I don't want that. I want to see what's on the other side of Lookout Mountain and I figure the Air Force is the only way for me to do that."

The Sergeant nodded knowingly. Then he stood and said, "I think we can help you out, Wayne. You got time to take a couple of tests?"

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“Well, my lunch hour is almost over and I really should be getting back to.....”

“Good,” he said. “Step right back this way and lets get started.”

That had been almost a month ago and now here I stood at 1:30 in the morning<sup>2</sup> outside the “Arrivals” gate at San Antonio<sup>3</sup> Regional Airport listening to some idiot scream at my fellow recruits and me. My stepbrother, Bob, poked me in the arm with his elbow. “So Air Force basic training ain’t all that tough, you said,” he whispered. “My ass! You talked me into this and now here I am with some gorilla yelling at me like I was some kind of.....”

I guess you could say I was partially responsible for his being there. As soon as I left the recruiter’s office, I called in sick to McKesson & Robbins Drug Wholesalers where I worked. Then I went to the Kayo Station on Rossville Boulevard where Bob was pumping gas and fixing tires. I told him where I’d been and said he should think about going to see old Tommy Trotter, too. It didn’t take much arm-twisting. He did it and jobs were abandoned, farewells hastily said, and we were off to the wild blue yonder.

“Get on the bus, Dipshits! Hurry up! Do it! Now!” I and 29 other recruits scrambled onto the blue Air Force bus and took our seats.

“That wasn’t fast enough. Get off!”

Back off the bus.

“Get on the bus hurry up do it!” The scramble was repeated. “That *still* wasn’t fast enough,” the gorilla yelled. “When I tell you Dipshits to move, I mean *MOVE!* Now get off the bus hurry up do it!”

I was one of the last off and, just as my feet hit the tarmac, I heard, “Get on the bus hurry up do it!”

Before I could turn to go back up the steps, I caught an elbow in the nose as the stampede thundered by. I recovered, wobbled back onto the bus, and found my seat. I fished out my handkerchief to daub at the blood on my upper lip.

When the bus began to roll, our one-man welcoming committee stood at the front next to the driver to address us. “I want to

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welcome you gentlemen to Lackland Air Force Base<sup>4</sup> and the United States Air Force.”

That was nice, I thought. But then, he continued.

“You are Basic Airmen,” the gorilla said, “the lowest scum on earth. But I'll be calling you ‘Dipshit’. This base is made up of three thousand scum bags just like you and the whole lot is nothing but a big pile of shit. Now, if you take a spoon and dip out one piece of that shit, what you have is a Dipshit. When you hear that name, listen up—I’m talking to *you!*” He made a sweeping gesture that covered the entire group.

“Right now, we’re headed for the base where the first stop will be the chow hall and you *will* enjoy your first Air Force meal. When you finish there, you will be taken to the ‘Initial Processing Center’ where your Tactical Instructor<sup>5</sup> will take possession of your miserable bodies. Then you will go to your barracks for a good night’s sleep.” Something about the way he said “good night’s sleep” made me believe he was not being completely sincere.

“That’s all I have for you right now. It’ll be a while before we get to the base. Stay seated and keep your mouths shut.” Then he sat down.

As we bumped along, I strained to make out my fellow Dipshits in the dim light inside the bus. Short flattops and burrs, as was the fashion of the day, dominated their hairstyles. There was a smattering of sport coats and ties, but since it was early April, the majority wore summer slacks with short sleeve shirts sporting button-down collars. A few were dressed in wool—Yankees, I assumed. What it came down to was a cross section of young American manhood—circa 1961—who had come together for a bus ride with a very rude man headed for God-knew-what.

Shortly after the bus passed under the sign that read “Lackland Air Force Base—Gateway to the Air Force”, it stopped in front of the chow hall. “Here we go,” I thought as I spring loaded myself to charge off the bus. As expected, the gorilla stood by the driver and yelled, “Get off the bus! Hurry up! Do it!”

The first man to reach the bus door encountered a terrible dilemma for, just outside the door, there was a carbon copy of

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gorilla number one yelling, “Don’t step on my grass! Don’t step on my grass!”

When the first man stopped and blocked the door, the exit routine came to a halt. This sent gorilla number one into an arm flailing hissy fit. “Get off this gawddamn bus Dipshits, and I mean right now. Get off! Get off! Get off!”

Gorilla number two kept the first man frozen in the door with, “Don’t step on my grass! Don’t step on my grass!”

Mass finally won out over fear as the 29 of us behind the door blocker rushed forward to escape gorilla number one, dislodging the man in the door. Like water rushing past a broken dam, we were on the grass in seconds.

This sent gorilla number two into an arm flailing hissy fit. “What are you Dipshits doing on my grass? I *told* you to stay off my grass! Get off my grass—get off my grass! Me and my pet ducks are the only ones allowed on this grass. Get off! Get off!”

We scurried to and fro, looking for a way off the grass. A couple of guys headed back for the bus. Bad idea. “Stay off my bus! Stay off my bus!” gorilla number one yelled as gorilla number two continued with the “Get off my grass” routine.

Everyone finally made their way into the street and the yelling stopped. We stood there for a moment, breathing hard and waiting for the next harangue to begin. Nothing happened. Momentarily, the two gorillas came wandering around the back of the bus, talking to each other in a normal tone of voice, but loud enough for the milling recruits to hear. “.....and you know, it’s a shame,” gorilla number two was saying. “My grass has been defiled. Nobody but me and my ducks have ever been on that grass and now these Dipshits have trampled all over it. I’m just crushed.”

Gorilla number one empathized. “I know; I know,” he said, patting his colleague on the back. “But you know what; I think I may have an idea that’ll make you feel better.”

“What’s that?”

“We’ll make them honorary ducks!”

“How?”

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“Watch this.” Gorilla number one turned in our direction. “You Dipshits have screwed up big time. Only Airman First Class Miller and his pet ducks have been on that grass until now, but I’m gonna fix that. Now I can’t turn you into Airman Miller, but I can turn your asses into ducks. Now SQUAT! GIDDOWN!”

We looked at each other wondering what the hell he wanted us to do. Our inaction sent him into an arm flailing hissy fit. He ran amongst us screaming in our faces, “Squat, dammit, squat. Giddown! Giddown!”

Someone finally realized what he wanted us to do, and went into a squat. The rest of us followed suit. “That wasn’t fast enough—giddup—giddown! That’s better. Now start waddling, and when your left foot hits the ground, I want to hear you call cadence. Let’s hear it: QUACK! QUACK! QUACK!”

My legs ached and I felt completely ridiculous. Back and forth and around in circles we waddled, squatted on our haunches, looking for all the world like a flock of disoriented ducks. There were a few snickers, but they died out quickly as flabby legs began to react to the unorthodox walk. “QUACK. QUACK,”

Just when I thought I couldn’t take another step, gorilla number one spoke. “That’s it—giddup. Not fast enough—giddown!” And repeat, and repeat. Then gorilla number one bid number two an adieu and herded us into the chow hall.

At 2:30 in the morning, the cooks and KPs<sup>6</sup> were in no mood to be cordial. Two rock-hard fried eggs were slapped onto my plate, followed by a glob of mashed potatoes, dry toast, and crumbly bacon.

“I like my eggs sunny side up.” It was the guy in line behind me. Bad move, I thought. The lad looked on in disbelief as the surly KP behind the counter dipped his hand into the mashed potatoes and removed a glob. “If I want any shit out of you, Boy,” he snarled as he flung the potatoes onto the recruit’s chest, “I’ll squeeze your head. Now get out of my sight.” Whoa!

After I was seated at a table across from Bob, I saw the gorilla for the first time in good light. He was small, matching his mentality, with a beer belly hanging over his belt buckle. He had a

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black mustache on his craggy brown face and he wore three stripes on his stiffly starched fatigue<sup>7</sup> uniform. There was a blue strip of cloth with white letters above his left breast pocket that read “U.S. AIR FORCE” and one above the right that told anyone interested in looking that his name was “LOPEZ”. He prowled the tables like a cat in a room full of mice, dispensing heartache and grief liberally sprinkled with profanity. Then he found me.

“What are you looking at, Boy?” I didn’t look up.

“I been watching you watching me every since the airport. Are you queer or something?” I ignored him while I salted and peppered my eggs.

“Look at me, Dipshit!” I took a bite of my eggs and toast, chewed a few times, then looked up at him with a non-verbal, “Yes?”.

This sent Airman First Class Lopez into an arm flailing hissy fit. I went back to my meal and ignored him while he called me unkind names and threatened to mop the floor with my head. He finally tired of the exercise and moved on to another poor soul at another table. I looked across and Bob and said under my breath, “Can you believe this crap?”

When Airman Lopez tired of harassing us, he ordered us out of the chow hall and back onto the bus. We did the on-off-on routine again, then the bus rumbled off toward the Initial Processing Center.

The center turned out to be a large auditorium where fifty or so young men much like us were already seated. They had undoubtedly undergone similar ordeals with their own Airmen Lopez and were now waiting for our arrival so we could receive our “initial briefing”.

Airman Second Class Nobody stepped to the raised podium and began to read from his script. He was obviously bored and spoke in a monotone of The Uniform Code of Military Justice, the Air Force as a promising career, how to fill out next of kin paperwork, etc, etc, etc. He droned on for over 30 minutes while two men wearing four stripes on their sleeves milled around in front of the podium. These must be our Tactical Instructors, I thought.

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Both men looked tough as leather, but one of them looked especially vicious. He was tall, maybe six feet two or three, and muscled like a young bull. His uniform looked as though he had fallen into a vat of starch and his boots glistened like polished glass. His nametag told me his name was Ramsey. I couldn't see Ramsey's eyes—they were hidden under a "Fidel Castro-style" cap bill pulled low on his forehead. The only part of his face that showed was a slightly bulbous red nose and a mouth that never knew a smile. The only flaw in his awesome appearance was an unsightly bulge above his shiny belt buckle. Despite that, I was impressed by this man.

I nudged Bob and whispered out the side of my mouth, "I hope we don't get that big dude for a TI. I'd hate to even think of living with him for the next eight weeks." Bob nodded his agreement.

A2C Nobody *finally* finished his briefing and A1C Lopez made his way to the front of our group. "It's been a real pleasure dealing with you Gentlemen. We will now turn you over to your TIs. From this point to my left," he made a chopping motion with his hand, splitting the group exactly in half, "will be Flight<sup>8</sup> 514 and go with Staff Sergeant Harding. From here to my right will go with Staff Sergeant Ramsey and be Flight 515."

Unknowingly, Lopez had spared my being in Ramsey's flight, but had also separated me from my stepbrother. The imaginary line he had drawn had fallen between my left and Bob's right shoulder. Dilemma—had to think fast. Did I want to go through basic training without a comrade and confidant in Flight 514, or with one in Ramsey's flight? I crossed the line into Flight 515.

We boarded the bus (no "get on—get off" routine this time) and a clipboard was passed around to collect the names that became the flight roster. SSgt Ramsey counted the names. "Alright, which one of you Dipshits got on the wrong bus?"

The words were no sooner out of his mouth when SSgt Harding appeared at the top step of the bus. "Hey, Luke! I've only got forty-nine. Did we lose one?"

Everyone had the old "deer in the headlights" look as Ramsey scanned the group. "No. Some dumb-ass got on my bus by mistake.



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I've got fifty-one." I could have sworn he was looking straight at me.

I slumped low in my seat as Ramsey turned back to Harding. "Take this one," he said, grabbing a fellow with dried mashed potatoes on the front of his shirt. With the number situation resolved, we departed for the barracks.

The beds were made with clean, crisp, white sheets covered with new Army blankets<sup>9</sup>. God! they looked inviting. I had been awake for over 22 hours and was more than ready for some sleep. But first I had to unpack.

I opened my little travel bag and placed the pathetic contents in the locker at the foot of the bed. As I did, I noticed my fellow recruits doing the same. Apparently, their recruiters had given them the same checklist Trotter had given me, for the contents of their bags were the same as mine: razor, shaving cream, soap, comb, one change of underwear and socks, toothpaste, toothbrush, mouth wash and one picture of a person of your choice. Mine was of the lovely Miss Janette Dickson, the girl I left behind.

As soon as I was unpacked, I undressed and crawled between those gorgeous white sheets. My head hit the pillow and I was instantly asleep. Seconds later, the fire alarm went off.

"FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!" the barracks guard<sup>10</sup> shouted as he circulated among the beds banging on a trashcan lid with his flashlight. I glanced at my watch: 4 a.m. Moments later, we were on the lawn awaiting the order to go back to bed when an almost exact replica of Lopez appeared.

"It took you Dipshits almost two minutes to get out of that barracks. What are you doing with your pants on, Boy? If that building was really on fire, would you stop to put your pants on? Now, we can do this all night, or you Dipshits can do it right. What's it gonna be?"

"Do it right, Sir!", some asshole yelled from the back of the group. We filed back into the barracks and into our comfortable beds. Five minutes later, the fire alarm went off again. Six times we scrambled out of and into the barracks until the Assistant Squadron Fire Marshall decided we had done it right. It was 4:45.

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At five o'clock, the alarm clock went off. The alarm clock was amazingly similar to the fire alarm. It was SSgt Ramsey banging his flashlight on a trashcan lid and yelling, "GIDDUP! GIDDUP! GIDDUP!" Not very original, but extremely effective.

"Get outta them gawddamn beds, Dipshits! This ain't your mama talking to you—this is Big Luke Ramsey." When everyone's feet were on the floor, Big Luke headed upstairs to roust the troops on the upper floor.

I made my way in to the latrine, but doing my morning t'walet was almost impossible. There were 25 of us trying to use three sinks, three showers, and three commodes—and we had 10 minutes to do it. Through the entire routine, Big Luke urged us to hurry up. Some things just went undone.

With everyone dressed, Big Luke stepped to the front door of the barracks. "FALL OUT!", he bellowed. After milling around a few seconds wondering what had fallen out, Big Luke explained himself. "Get your asses outta this gawddamn barracks! NOW!"

Out on the street, he formed us into a reasonable facsimile of a flight. In the predawn darkness, Big Luke stood ramrod stiff in front of his ragtag charges and reported to the Squadron Commander. "SIR—Flight 515 all present and accounted for! All available safety equipment in use—SIR!"

The Squadron Commander was a block away on the chow hall steps. He accepted Ramsey's report without question. After all, there were 15 flights lined up along the big "H" that formed the central Squadron area. With the flights situated along each leg of the "H" and the commander on the crossbar between the legs, there was no way he could even see the Flights, much less inspect them. So he had to take each TI's word.

After the morning formation, it was into the chow hall for breakfast, which was only slightly better than our first meal. When we finished, Flight 515 dawdled off toward the "Green Monster". The Green Monster was a huge building that derived its nickname from its size and color. It consumes civilians and spits out Airman Basics. My first Air Force benefit was received in the Green

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Monster—a *dandy* little haircut for only 65 cents. As I sat down, the barber said, “Where you from, Son?”

“Tennessee, Sir.”

“Next!”

Bald as a billiard ball, I followed the herd to draw my uniforms. The only items that fit were the shoes and the hat, and those not too well.

“But I don’t have 42 inch legs.”

“Shaddup and keep moving hurry up do it!”

The last stop in the Green Monster was a little post office where I folded and packed my civilian clothing and mailed them to my Mom and Dad, cutting my last link to “civilianhood”.

Proudly wearing the uniform of my country (four sizes too large), I stepped outside, where some strangers with bald heads in ill-fitting uniforms were just standing around. Not knowing what else to do, I stood around with them. Then one of them approached me and said, “Is that you, Wayne?” It took me a second to realize it was Bob. And once I recognized him, I began to recognize other familiar faces—I was standing in the middle of Flight 515.

When Ramsey came out of the Monster and formed us up, we were off to the Base Chapel where some no-talent preacher attempted to deliver a sermon that would make us feel all better. “Someday, you men will look back on this experience and have a good laugh,” he promised at the end of his talk.

As if to punctuate the minister’s remarks, someone in the back of the church cut loose a magnificent fart that reverberated through the rafters of the large room. The flight rewarded the unidentified culprit with a thunderous round of applause. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Big Luke leaning against the wall with just a hint of a grin creeping across his face. The reverend, on the other hand, was not amused.



The next two days of basic training were crammed with activity and I began to see a pattern emerge.

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