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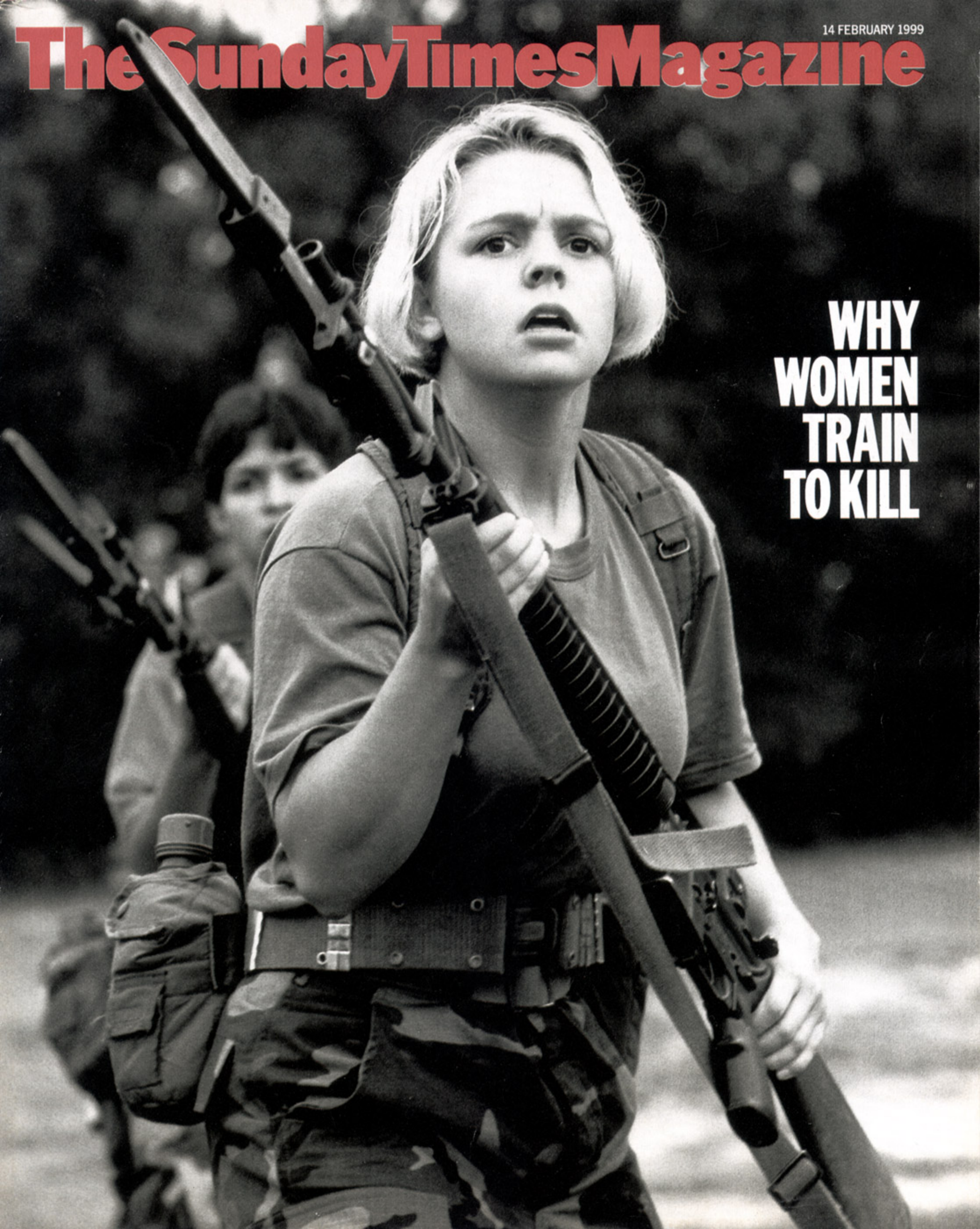

WHY WOMEN TRAIN TO KILL

DRESSED TO KILL

Each year, thousands of young American women swap their heels and mascara for fatigues and an M-16, in a bid to join the ranks of the marines – the elite of the US military. But what drives them to go through the hell of basic training? Photographs by Tom Stoddart. Report by Christine Toomey

PHOTOGRAPHS: IPG

Parris Island, South Carolina: 6.15am, December 31. Temperatures have dipped below freezing after one of the coldest nights of the year. A full moon hangs low over thick stands of Carolina pines. There is complete silence until, in the distance, the faint sound of singing filters through the mist.

As the voices get louder they are underscored by the thrash of stomping feet. Then the flicker of a hundred "moonbeams", military slang for torches, dances into view and the words of a marching song become clear:

Momma, momma, don't you see
What the corps is doin' to me
I used to drive a Cadillac
Now I'm humpin' with a pack

As the platoons advance in the semi-darkness it is impossible to tell the gender of the moving figures. Only as their voices become louder does it become clear that they are all women:

Momma, momma, don't you see
What the corps is doin' to me
I used to wear a miniskirt
Now I'm rollin' in the dirt

The recruits of November company emerge in a clearing and are instructed to take off their "covers", helmets, and lay down their 52lb backpacks for a short break and a "hot wet" – a cup of heated apple juice. Many start crying with exhaustion and pain. Over the past 53 hours these young women have "humped" 40 miles at a fast pace and tackled 37 obstacles, including mock combat with live fire and hauling massive fuel cans over 100ft walls. They have had less than eight hours' sleep and eaten two meals of reconstituted pap. They have been shouted at, insulted and cajoled. They have had enough.

The women – 109 of them, aged between 18 and 23 – are in the final stages of a gruelling endurance trial known as the crucible. This military rite of passage, ⟶

As she waits to receive her marines badge after surviving the final test in basic training, Shauna Powell's emotions catch up with her. Opposite: a recruit screams out encouragement during the final forced march of the 54-hour endurance test dubbed the crucible

designed to "forge strength of character from adversity", is the culmination of the gruelling basic training that all men and women must pass before being admitted into the United States Marine Corps. Those who survive the rigours of this 12-week boot camp earn the right to call themselves – in typical transatlantic hyperbole – one of "The Few and the Proud".

It is a far cry from the demands made of the first women to become US marines 50 years ago this month. Nicknamed "bams" (broad-assed marines) in the days before political correctness permeated the American psyche, the most exacting requirements made of the first female recruits were that they knew how to keep their knees together as they exited a car, walked with a "graceful gait" and wore Montezuma Red lipstick, specially created for them by Elizabeth Arden, a regulation later softened to include the use of Certainly Red lipstick by Revlon.

Squatting on their helmets in the mud as paramedics inspect their bruised and blistered feet, today's recruits of platoons 4000 and 4001 cannot muster the energy to laugh at the contrast. Even though they are less than an hour from reaching the end point of the crucible – the parade ground at the heart of Parris Island where the memorial to the marines' most memorable and bloody second-world-war victory at Iwo Jima stands – some are beginning to give up hope. Many are limping badly. Some are so tired and disoriented they simply sit staring blankly ahead, tears streaming down their faces.

"Sing Amazing Grace, Chischilly. Sing Amazing Grace," Lana Morgan whispers to her fellow recruit as drill instructors march up and down the line barking at everyone to get their packs back on and "Step it *out*."

Dawn is breaking as the recruits fall into line and start hobbling across the final bridge leading out of the cordoned-off woodland and back towards the main base. A stunning pale purple and orange light bathes the salt marshes surrounding Parris Island as Kimberly Chischilly, an American Indian from the Burnt Corn Valley Reservation, near Pinon, Arizona, rasps the opening lines of Amazing Grace in Navajo:
Niin yos Niin go, yos ba de sa
Those remaining recruits with dry eyes start to cry and trudge forwards.

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As for many of the women who dream of becoming "devil dogs" – the nickname marines relish – the toughest part of making it into the corps for Chischilly was not the hardship of the crucible or the gruelling months that led up to it, but the opposition of her family, who disowned her when she announced her decision ➳→

Above: training was a little less arduous 50 years ago; this marine is having her hair permed to comply with dress regulations. Right: after just 24 hours on Parris Island, Lana Morgan is exhausted, disoriented and ready to drop as she is given inoculations. Below: all eyes are on the drill instructor as these recruits prepare to tackle an assault course during basic training

Above: as dawn breaks over Parris Island, exhausted recruits in platoon 4000 lend one of their number a helping hand on the final stretch of the crucible. Right: two weeks of a marine's basic training are dedicated to rifle marksmanship – and hundreds more hours are spent learning how to maintain the M-16 rifles that become their constant companions. Below: a marine corps drill instructor coaxes a terrified recruit into abseiling down a 60ft-high tower during basic training

to sign up. "Before this recruit left, this recruit's family told this recruit not to come back because they thought this recruit was being disrespectful and disregarding their tradition that women do not go to war," Chischilly says in the stilted, formal style of a would-be marine, forbidden to use the words I, me or mine. The rationale for this oddity is to strip recruits of any sense of personal identity and instil in them an esprit de corps.

"Sometimes this recruit thinks this was a bad choice," says Chischilly, casting a wary eye in the direction of her drill instructor, the statuesque, intimidating Staff Sgt Melanie Browne, who is constantly haranguing her platoon: "Let's *go*, let's go *now*. Hurry *up*. Get it *right*."

Like many others from poor backgrounds, however, Chischilly's choice to sign up was influenced by the incentive that all branches of the military offer to those who enlist – help to pay hefty college tuition fees if they choose to leave the service after their first four-year tour.

"This recruit is good at drawing and wants to be an architect or work in computer graphics," Chischilly explains, running her fingers through cropped auburn hair. Nobody told her she did not need to cut her waist-length hair before joining up; regulations dictate only that long hair remains tightly knotted above the collar.

Chischilly's decision to enlist in one of the elite branches of the American military – the marine corps is the smallest and most combat-ready of all the services – was also influenced by a desire to impress. As with many of the other young women I spoke to, she craved the respect of her largely absent father, who was once a marine. She talks hesitantly, perched ramrod-straight on the edge of her chair, unable after 12 weeks of military straitjacketing to relax, and the pain and emptiness of her dislocated childhood become evident.

"This recruit never really knew her dad. But on this recruit's high-school graduation day he turned up and it surprised me," she says, lapsing momentarily into civilian-speak. "This recruit always wanted to be like her dad and she thinks he is proud of what she is doing but does not really know as he never talks to this recruit," she says, finally adding in a state of emotional confusion: "so his opinion does not really matter."

Facing strong family disapproval forged a special bond between Chischilly and her fellow recruit Lana Morgan, from Lumberton, Texas.

"When this recruit told her father she was joining the marine corps he refused to speak to her for a long time," says Morgan, a small 18-year-old with shoulder-length blonde hair and saucer-like blue eyes. "She talked to him the night before she left for Parris Island and he was still very upset... He said some very harsh things, which she doesn't actually think he meant, like she was the biggest disappointment of his life and he couldn't believe his daughter would do such a stupid thing and he didn't want her to be his daughter... A lot of hurtful things. A lot of swearing."

Morgan remained close to her father after her parents' divorce and says his "high, high expectations" had always pushed her to excel even though he never seemed satisfied; after she set two national records in power-lifting he wanted to know why she had not set a third, and when she graduated second in her year at high school, he was disappointed that she had not come first. When she won three full scholarships to different universities to study law, her father, an oil refinery supervisor who had struggled for years to complete a

law degree at night school, could not understand why she did not seize such academic opportunities. "He always expected me just to follow in his footsteps. He wanted me to become a lawyer," she says.

But Morgan has her sights set on joining the FBI, an ambition fuelled by the novels of John Grisham and Tom Clancy. She believes that a grounding in the military followed by a degree in criminal justice will move her up the intelligence career ladder more quickly. Such clear ambition and determination quickly marked her out as a leader in November company. On Christmas Eve she was chosen as the honour student of platoon 4000 and guaranteed promotion from private first-class to lance corporal once she had completed the crucible.

While both Morgan and Chischilly are determined to prove themselves, many are looking for an escape: "Some come into the marine corps for the challenge. Some are running away," says Lt-Cdr William Steele, the chaplain for November company. "What has shocked me is the number of recruits who have been abused either physically, emotionally or sexually."

Shauna Powell is one such runaway. The 18-year-old from Largo, Maryland, was living in a women's refuge in Washington, DC, before she came to Parris Island. Raised by her mother in North Carolina, she went to live with her father when she was 15 but was placed in foster care because of his drug habit and abusive behaviour.

"This recruit wanted to be a model or play professional softball," she says. "But this recruit's life was going nowhere. This recruit wanted to prove to her father that she could come here and do this to better herself." Adapting to the military regime has been hard for her: "This recruit misses her heels and stockings and little miniskirts."

Jennifer Engel's reason for wanting to escape was rather different. The shy 20-year-old from Crescent Springs, northern Kentucky, says she joined the marines because she felt she had led too sheltered a life. Engel says she was bullied by other children from a young age because she was born with a cleft palate and had a speech impediment. Her parents, especially her mother, had been overprotective. "This recruit joined because she had very low self-esteem. This recruit's mother didn't want her to leave home. She wouldn't let this recruit grow up." She dreams one day of "becoming a cop".

Engel's father was also a marine. "This recruit's father was a truck driver in Vietnam... In the basement of this recruit's house he had boxes of articles and stuff about Vietnam. But he did not talk about it much... He has flashbacks... This recruit looks up to her father a lot. He plays a big role in her life and she wanted to be like him."

Perhaps most extraordinary among November company was Malissa Maquilon, 22, from New York. Maquilon spent last summer working as a cocktail ⋙→

Above: in 1949 recruits were ladies first and marines second – and deportment lessons taught them graceful posture. Right: now it's pugil sticks at 20 paces

waitress in Las Vegas before moving to Bay Shore, Long Island, where she became a go-go dancer. She was drinking heavily and talks of how "this recruit had started losing track of things, what she was doing and where she was going". She enlisted after a bout of heavy drinking. "This recruit woke up from that party and realised she was going the wrong way. Her father used to be a marine and the idea just popped into her head. So she called the operator and asked for the recruiting office for the marine corps. She had some questions answered and was literally picked up from her home an hour later... After she saw how things were going with her life she thought this would be a good kick in the butt, ma'am. And it has been."

The crooked smile she has worn up to that point fades and she stares hard at the floor. Maquilon explains that she has a 4½-year-old daughter called Kayla, whom she is prevented from seeing by the girl's father even though she has joint custody.

"This recruit joined the marines because she hopes to be part of something," she says. "She wants to know where she is going and she wants some security. She also wants her daughter to have a good idea of her. This recruit has not been there for her little girl and she is hoping to change that."

After slogging her way through the crucible, she faces a far more heart-wrenching battle in court to fight for the right to visit her daughter. Once Maquilon has an established posting with the marines, complete with housing and on-base childcare facilities, she hopes her daughter will be allowed to come and live with her.

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From the moment these five women are ordered off the bus that brought them from Charleston to Parris Island in the dead of night and told to plant their feet in the yellow footprints painted on the asphalt, their pasts and futures cease to matter.

"Get off my bus *now*!" are the first words they hear. They are thrown into a maelstrom of ritual humiliation and complete regimentation that extends to dictating exactly how long they can spend in the "head" – row upon row of open-plan lavatories – so that they barely have time to think. For three months they are forbidden coffee, alcohol, music, television and wristwatches to ensure they remain permanently disoriented. Failure to comply immediately with orders results in being banished to a "punishment pit", a giant sandbox, to perform endless push-ups.

Hours are spent each day learning maintenance of the M-16 rifles that will remain their constant companions, hung on the ends of their beds at night. They are drilled from dawn to dusk on the parade ground and are given 33 hours of instruction in "core values" to inculcate them with marine corps history, tradition and ethics, stressing the importance of honour, courage and commitment. Some lessons have an edge of bizarre schmaltz: recruits are shown an excerpt from The Wizard of Oz to impress on them that "courage comes from within".

Other lessons are in fear. For 15 terrifying minutes they are placed in a gas chamber and forced to take off their masks to learn to overcome panic at being engulfed in tear gas. They spend one week continually diving off a springboard into a pool wearing combat gear and carrying heavy equipment, which they must learn to swim with. There is another week in basic combat training and two weeks practising rifle marksmanship.

For Morgan it was the latter that nearly broke her will. "I was terrified, terrified, terrified of guns, because I have had one pointed at me before by my stepfather... Since then guns have not been my thing and the rifle range was the hardest part for me to overcome. I hated it, hated it so bad. One night I cried all night and just wanted to go home."

One measure of how gruelling this regime can be is that Riddick Bowe, the towering New Yorker once regarded as the best heavyweight boxing champion in the world, could not stay the course. At 29 he retired from boxing and swapped his satin shorts and gloves for combat fatigues to fulfil a childhood dream of becoming a marine. He left boot camp after just eight days, complaining that the training was too tough.

For nearly all the recruits it was the crucible that constituted the greatest test of will. Endless speculation about what was to come only heightened their anxiety. Deliberately kept in the dark about what would be expected of them to simulate the confusion of combat, many relied on the hyped accounts of former recruits and Hollywood fantasies of military masochism like GI Jane, where a shaven-headed Demi Moore is physically assaulted and nearly raped by her drill instructor.

'THIS RECRUIT MISSES HER HEELS AND STOCKINGS AND LITTLE MINISKIRTS'

The marine corps office of public affairs' Major Rick Long goes to great lengths to stress that no physical abuse of any sort is permitted these days. Such close attention to the corps' public image follows a series of notorious incidents such as the Ribbon Creek "death march" in the late 1950s, when a drunken drill instructor marched a platoon of male recruits into a tidal stream behind the rifle range and six drowned in deep "trout holes". In the demoralised post-Vietnam days of the 1970s, the abuse of recruits became institutionalised.

More recently, like the rest of the American military, the marines have been reeling from allegations of sexual misconduct. Unashamedly the most macho branch of the military – women still only make up 5% of the corps compared with 16-17% in the other services – it is the only one that still segregates the sexes during basic training "to avoid any unnecessary distractions". Yet its reputation is marred by reports that its female fighters experience higher rates of sexual harassment once they graduate than those in the other services.

Despite "gender norming" of physical fitness tests, which means, for instance, that women can complete the qualifying three-mile run in 31 minutes rather than the 28 minutes required of their male comrades, twice as many women as men drop out of boot camp. Officers argue this is for physical rather than emotional reasons.

"Females have much less muscle surrounding their bones, so they are more prone to injury," says Long. Of the 139 women initially in November company, 30 did not make it through to the final weeks of basic training. Most dropped out for health reasons.

Increased sensitivity to the welfare of recruits, both men and women, does mean, however, that the crucible – only introduced as the final test in basic training three years ago – is sometimes more reminiscent of It's a Knockout than Full Metal Jacket. After being shaken out of their bunks at 2am and forced to "hump" from their barracks to the isolated zone on the island where the trial takes place, the recruits spend much of their first day standing around discussing how to tackle various obstacles, entitled "warrior stations". These include tasks such as passing through rubber tyres without touching the sides and falling ramrod-straight off a raised platform into the arms of their team members. ⟶

They move on to a more difficult problem-solving sequence in what is known as an "enhanced confidence course". Just how the course is supposed to boost young recruits' confidence with drill instructors – otherwise known as "hats" – spitting forth a stream of insults at them is not always clear: "What are you doing standing there in the rectum of the group again, Chischilly? I'm tired of seeing you stuck there at the back. Get up here and stop screwing up," Staff Sgt Melanie Browne screams at her charge as the young aspiring architect stands bemused in front of an obstacle that entails swinging from one platform to another wearing a backpack and a gas mask.

"You are pathetic, weak, sorry and embarrassing. You make me sick. I hate you for coming into my marine corps. Don't you cry on me. Better to be pissed off than pissed on, right?" another staff sergeant, Matilde Brown, shouts at Shauna Powell as the Amazonian teenager skirts around the edge of a concrete barricade, pleading injury, instead of hauling herself over it.

"You can lie there waving your legs around in the air like a roach but I am not letting you off this, Maquilon," Brown shrieks down at the New Yorker as she struggles to drag a hefty fuel can under a roll of barbed wire with simulated machine-gun fire crackling through the clear night air and orange flares lighting the mock battlefield. "Low crawl, low crawl. Get your face in the dirt!"

"They're having problems with their motivation at this point," Brown, 32, explains calmly. Sitting on a log in Leatherneck Square, named after a battle site where many marines lost their lives in Vietnam, Brown talks about how the public perception of women entering the marine corps has changed since she joined 10 years ago: "Most people expected women entering the marines to be strong and ugly and thought they must either be dykes or too ugly to get a husband. But now most people see what we want as a higher calling." In the 1980s a

What makes it all worthwhile: recruits who have survived the rigours of the crucible are presented with the coveted badge of anchor, globe and eagle signifying they have joined the ranks of 'The Few and the Proud'

series of witch-hunts conducted to "out" lesbians arriving for training on Parris Island received widespread publicity and, despite the 1994 introduction of a "don't ask, don't tell" policy, women still receive homosexual conduct discharges in greater numbers than men.

Opportunities for women in the marines have been greatly expanded in recent years to include all areas of the service except preparation for positions of frontline combat. But the military argues that this distinction is now academic. "The battlefield is much more dynamic. A Scud missile can reach right back into the rear area. So everywhere is a combat zone today," says Long. "Anyway, you would have to be a few bricks short of a load to actually want to go into combat."

Few of the recruits in November company seem to have given much thought to the fact that one day they could be called on to kill for their country: "We sometimes talk about what we would do if we had to go into combat," says Powell. "And only one recruit said she did not want kids because her sole purpose in coming

here was that one day she might have to go to war... That's like a first. I guess our thoughts on coming here should have been that we wanted to serve our country, but most came because they wanted to get college fees or just wanted a challenge."

While the majority of teenagers joining the marines 20 or 30 years ago came from poor backgrounds with poor educations, the corps insists most of those enlisting these days are high-school graduates. Recruiters play heavily on the qualities the corps instils in all those who make it: "responsibility, respect, pride, loyalty, persistence, discipline and achievement".

"These are all qualities that are invaluable in whatever these young people choose to go on to do afterwards," says Long. Nearly three-quarters of marines leave the service after serving their first four-year tour. Many go on to college.

Great stress is also laid on the unique sense of team spirit. But as November company drag themselves around the early stages of the crucible, it appears this quality has yet to filter through. When asked why they should help each other in times of difficulty, one young woman ventured: "So's the other recruits'll feel obliged to share their food rations with her, ma'am."

It is Maquilon who suffers the most dramatic failure of esprit de corps during one of the most difficult operations, called "casualty evacuation". Designed to teach the sacrosanct ethic that marines never leave one of their own, dead or alive, behind in battle, drill instructors designate one member of each team to play dead so that the others can practise carrying her body through a "kill zone" while mock mortars are hurled in their direction. "F*** this!" says Maquilon, dropping her comrade and attempting to run until Staff Sgt Brown screams her back into line.

By the time platoons 4000 and 4001 reach the final stages of the crucible, and the sleep and food deprivation and forced marches are seriously taking their toll, a much stronger sense of unity seems to have evolved. As the women stagger towards their final goal those who are feeling the strongest take the backpacks from those suffering the most. Powell is one of those in most pain. Though others carry her pack for a while, she is deemed unfit to march most of the final mile because of a stress fracture in her foot. Bundled into the back of a van for part of the way, she does, however, manage to walk the last few hundred yards.

"We're nearly there. You can make it, Chischilly," Morgan spurs her marching companion on as her singing voice cracks and Chischilly starts short-stepping and then stumbling. Paramedics who have been pacing alongside the platoon rush forward and squeeze a tube of liquid glucose into her mouth to keep her going over the last half-mile of the march.

But when November company finally file onto the parade ground and stand to attention in front of the bronze Iwo Jima memorial to receive the marines' coveted badge – the anchor, globe and eagle – it is Morgan who goes down. As loudspeakers blast out Lee Greenwood's country-and-western classic I'm Proud to Be an American, and a giant Stars and Stripes snaps in the wind, she slowly slumps to the ground.

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Even the most ardent pacifist would be hard put not to admire the perseverance of these young women – and men – who stay the course to become a marine. Just who would put themselves through such agony, especially when the US economy is booming and there are plenty of well-paying alternatives, appears something of a mystery. But the brutal honesty these recruits display about their own failings and weaknesses and their absolute determination to do something to address them is fundamental to understanding their willingness to put themselves through hell.

Whether a spell as a "devil dog" will equip them to lead the changed lives they want remains to be seen. But after returning home on leave for 10 days after graduation, and prior to being assigned their occupational training posts, the omens were good.

Back home with her mother in North Carolina, Shauna Powell felt transformed and emboldened: "I feel like I am on my way to doing something with my life. I have proved to my father what I am capable of. Now I would like to throw it in his face."

Snowed in at her parents' home, Jennifer Engel sounded less upbeat: "I miss boot camp," she said. "My mom is still hooked on me and doesn't want me going out anywhere." She at least felt she was beginning to grow up: "I feel like I have my own life now. Before, it seemed to belong to my parents. That's a big change."

Malissa Maquilon turned up in her marine uniform for a child custody hearing in a Pennsylvania courtroom less than a week after she graduated. "The judge could see I had got my act together. My life was straightened out. Everyone, including my daughter's father, was very impressed. There won't be any trouble with me seeing my little girl in future."

Lana Morgan, who avoided speaking to her father until the last day of her leave, was "completely amazed" by his change of heart. "He pretended there had never been any trouble between us. He said he loved me and was proud of me. He has rarely, rarely done that."

Finally, after tormenting herself for days as to whether she should risk her family's wrath by returning home, Kimberly Chischilly made her way back to the Burnt Corn Valley Reservation to see her mother and grandmother. She too was astonished at their response: "They said they knew everything I had gone through. They said they were proud of what I had achieved. They butchered a sheep for a big feast. That is an unusual honour." ■