

## To Other Sailor's Girlfriends

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*Yes, it makes you cock-a-hoop to be "Rider" to your troop,  
And branded with a blasted worsted spur,  
When you envy, O how keenly, one poor Tommy being cleanly  
Who blacks your boots and sometimes calls you "Sir."  
-- Rudyard Kipling, "Gentlemen Rankers"*

After effectively flunking out of college, I enlisted in the Coast Guard. While that is not something that punk rock DJs typically do, particularly during the Reagan administration, I knew on some level that I needed to learn some self-discipline. My political views precluded any thought of joining the army or navy, but I had been impressed by the Coast Guard as a boy and thought that it would be a positive experience for me. I had fantasies of living at the beach and rescuing people, and being immensely popular for it. The reality, of course, was dramatically different. In the brief period I was in the Coast Guard, it's culture changed from that of being the fire department to being the police department. It troubled me deeply, and I found myself looked down on socially as an enlisted man. But that was later. The first experience common to everyone in all military services is boot camp.

The image of boot camp in the popular imagination is fairly accurate. If you haven't been there yourself, the boot camp portion of Stanley Kubrick's film, *Full Metal Jacket* captures the experience. I've heard that the Company Commanders (as Drill Instructors are called in the Coast Guard) are no longer allowed to curse, and that the experience has been somewhat softened in other ways, but boot camp remains intensely challenging and stressful.

At 21, I was older than most of the other young men in my company. Most were 18 or 19. Some had enlisted right after graduating from High School. Others had cast about for 6 months or a year without ever finding a job. I was the only one who had attended any college at all, though I was careful to conceal it. Even so, it's impossible to fake one's social class for long—in either direction—even in a place of complete uniformity like boot camp, for language is a dead giveaway. "Ain't got no" and "doesn't have any" are simply not heard in the same social circles.

One of the first things you learn in boot camp is that there is never enough time to do everything that is required of you. This is intentional, and fosters the development of teamwork and a natural division of labor.

For example, some people polished boots while others ironed uniforms. Some shined brass while others swabbed the deck. A few specialized in making the racks, as bunks were called. I was on the ironing crew. By specializing in our relative strengths, we managed to somehow get our Company ready for inspection in the allotted time.

Over the weeks, a curious sole-proprietorship went into business in this primitive economy:

It started when Hanson, the guy who occupied the rack above mine, saw me writing a letter and jokingly asked me to write one to his girlfriend.

“It would be a hoot. I’ve never written her, and I’ll bet she wouldn’t know it wasn’t me.”

Why not? I wrote her a page or so, signed Hansen’s name to it, and handed it to him for his approval. In retrospect, our minds were sharpened by the intensity and adversity of daily life in boot camp, and my letter probably had a depth of observation and introspection that is rare in young men in ordinary civilian life. Hanson read it, nodded approvingly, and dropped it in the mailbox. When I pointed out that she would surely notice that it wasn’t in his handwriting, Hanson reminded me that he had never written anything to her before, not even a note, so she would have nothing to compare it to.

A few days later, a reply showed up, which Hanson quickly handed me.

“You might as well read it. She wrote it to you, whether she knows it or not!” he said with a laugh.

Lisa, his girlfriend, wrote that she had never known that he (I) was interested in the sorts of observations and issues I had apparently written about. Boot camp operates on a pen and paper system and the contents of a letter, once sent, are only as permanent as the memory of their author.

“You’ve got to write her back,” Hanson said, still smiling, thrilled to have received a letter.

Someone who hasn’t experience the mass isolation of boot camp or prison or a war cannot understand the deep value and significance letters hold for their recipients. Even though many, if not most, of the men in my boot camp company were thoroughly uneducated, if technically literate, they treasured letters as much as anyone. Hanson had received an emotional expression uniquely constructed for him, even if it had been prompted by someone else’s ideas. In the anonymity and sameness of boot camp it made him feel special, and he wanted more.

“Go ahead, write her back,” he urged me with a good-natured laugh that masked a profound sense of need. When I protested that I really didn’t have enough time to write my own letters, much less his, he would hear none of it.

“Yes, you do. Write her back. You’ve got to keep this girl happy so everything will be OK when I get out of here. If you keep writing her letters, she’ll stay interested and I’ll get laid.”

He took the iron from my hand, replacing it with a pen and official light blue US Coast Guard Training Center stationery.

“You write rite her back,” he said with quiet urgency. “I’ll do the ironing.”

So far as I could tell, there were two general categories of relationships between my teenage colleagues and their girlfriends. The first was a committed relationship on a fast track to premature marriage, children, obesity, domestic violence, and divorce. The second was purely sexual. Hanson’s relationship fell into the latter category. In asking me to write his girlfriend, he was asking me to help keep her interested in him, so she would be less likely to stray during the 11 weeks of Boot Camp, an eternity to a 19 year old. Seen from that perspective, I was helping Hanson keep his girlfriend and ensure that he would get laid after graduation. In that spirit, I agreed to answer her letter.

There is no privacy in boot camp, and everyone soon knew I was writing Hanson’s letters for him. Soon, several other guys soon approached me asking me to write their girlfriends, and in return offered to polish my boots, make my rack, or shine my brass. How could I refuse?

Soon, I was writing half a dozen letters a night. Each was uniquely composed, more to forestall clerical boredom than to express any particular ideas on my part. The girls were writing back, and my customers insisted that I reply so they would continue to receive letters.

My experiences and observations in boot camp were evidently common enough for them to have been credible products of anyone who shared that common experience. Nevertheless, more than once a girl noted how I seemed “different,” “boot camp has certainly changed you,” and “you never used to talk about stuff like this.”

I don’t know what ultimately became of those relationships. I do know first hand that some of them intensified during boot camp, both emotionally and intellectually, though I doubt any of them lasted.

This continued until just before graduation. Although all of us who had been in boot camp together swore we’d stay in touch forever, that didn’t happen. Sure enough, not one of those guys has ever written me.