

A DIFFERENT KIND OF STRIPES

I've often noted similarities between my current prison experience and my time in the Army. Of course, there is some obvious differences: choice versus obligation, the pride a family feels for a soldier versus the shame felt for a convict, et cetera. But, I'm referring to the personal emotional and psychological challenges that must be overcome in both worlds in order to survive and sometimes, even thrive.

I joined the Army shortly after my 17th. birthday. I spent the next year and a half training in Oklahoma, Texas, and Georgia. Almost every week I would write my mother a letter. She kept them and turned them into a sort of journal. After my initial incarceration, she sent them to me with a note that read: I want you to remember that you are able to overcome challenges you never thought possible. Prison will not break you.

It was in re-reading these letters that I began to note many of the similarities. I was no more scared as a newbie getting off the Bluebird bus at Savageville prison than I was as a new recruit getting off a familiar bus at Fort Sill, Oklahoma Basic Training Center. In both cases, I didn't know what to expect or what was expected from me. I feared the unknown, feared I didn't have the courage necessary to survive. Life's truest challenges are rarely physical, life's real tests are emotional, mental, and spiritual. Prison is no exception.

In one early letter I wrote, Drill Sergeant Lopez told us today that this was not a training facility, this was a laboratory and we were about to get a shot of self-awareness serum. After Basic Training I mention that quote again and further note, I thought I knew who I was and what I was made of...I was sadly mistaken. The Army stripped me of all my personal preconceptions to show me that my potential is rarely limited by the physical, but much more likely the mental walls we put up and the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

As I read that today, I see that prison indoctrination is eerily similar. We are stripped of anything and everything that is physically ours; we are introduced to a para-military type of life with strict rules and consequences. Therefore, like the Army, prison is where an individual's true nature emerges.

In yet another letter, during a particularly nasty part of training referred to as Hell Week, I wrote, Yesterday I was thinking, I'm cold, wet, hungry, exhausted -- I can't remember the last time I actually felt good. This is killing me from the inside out. Why am I putting myself through this? Nothing is worth this type of abuse. Today, I finally got a full night's rest, hot shower, and a warm meal. It makes me want to cry that I almost quit on myself yesterday. Please pray for me, ask God to never let me think like that again. ...I'm starting to believe I may make it through this.

My military training has helped me cope with prison's inherent limitations. I've already learned to appreciate hot chow, a shower, dry socks, a few hours sleep, and a letter during mail call. Many new convicts will endure years behind these cold walls before they learn these valuable lessons -- in that way, I am fortunate.

I can't help but laugh sometimes when I hear a fellow inmate complain about not being able to shower after a gym or yard period -- forced to either take a bird bath in the cell or wait until later that day or the following to take a warm shower. They complain about the smell and inconvenience. Words can not describe what soldier feet and body funk -- after several weeks of minimal bathing and several recent hours in the swamps -- look and smell like. Prison stench is like a beautiful spring day compared to what I've endured in the military.

In the Army, like in prison, we are separated from our loved ones and often develop strong comraderie with our fellow brothers. We lean on each other as we commiserate through the valleys and celebrate through the peaks. I have no doubt I will remember many of my fellow inmates with the same heartfelt sincerity as I do my brothers-in-arms. We have all spilled the same blood, albeit in different mud. *in different mud.*

Prison, like the Army, is a world lived in extremes. We learn hard lessons about the utter violence capable by man as we do about the humanity that lives inside most of us. I once wrote, angels and monsters live among us and in us. Nowhere is that more true than in the battlefields of dusty deserts overseas and concrete jungles hidden in plain sight across America.

Re-reading my Army letters to my mother, I notice a similar thread: nature -- as in the nature of a person. Who one is at their very core, their nature.

Our nature is a deeply embedded trait that is hard to deny because survival instincts can trump even the most resolute intentions when the shit hits the fan. But, it is in these tiny, painful moments that real growth happens because when every part of you wants to close your eyes, lie down, and just give up- you can't. There are two kinds of people, those who are faced with adversity and go into a shell, refuse to act, think, or solve problems -- these people will fail both in the Army and prison (and arguable, life) and then there are those who will do the opposite.

I see inmates using the same psychological tricks we used in the Army. They both learn to block out thoughts of pleasurable things in the civilian world. We stay busy and find joy in the mundane, in the small things others take for granted. We live in the present, refusing to wallow in the past or fantasize about an unknown future. No one teaches us these strategies, they are created out of desperation to keep some control over our lives.

In one of my father's recent letters he wrote, you are going through one of life's toughest schools right now, so by definition it is going to be difficult. You live like a savage but it is identifying what you have been lacking and making you a stronger human. Embrace the pain. Lean into it. This too will pass and either you got something out of it or it got something out of you.

That letter resonates as strongly here today as it would have 20 years ago to a young recruit struggling through his training.

By Leo Cardez

You have my expressed permission to edit at will and as necessary -- no further approval required.