Prisoner of War

by Christopher R. Lientz

When I was sent to prisoner of war camp, a training program for the United States Marine Corps, I nearly lost control of my emotional stability. I had been a hospital corpsman with the marines for twelve months when I became a member of a "super-squad." A "super-squad" is a group of thirteen marines and one corpsman who are chosen to represent their battalion in worldwide marine corps competition. The training for this competition lasted six months and involved vigorous mental and physical training programs. One such program was to prepare marines to cope with the physical and psychological problems of being a prisoner of war. Prior to this training I considered myself emotionally stable; however, after a few hours at this camp I considered myself emotionally disturbed.

When I arrived at this "marine corps disneyland" I was greeted with a blindfold and obscene language. I was instructed to take off every article of clothing I had on. This procedure was rather humiliating, but I considered it endurable. A rope was tied to my arm, and I was led off into an interrogation room where I was set on a chair and tied securely to it. After several minutes of being completely immobilized with my arms tied to my sides, every inch
of my body began to itch. I tried to think of something else; however, the
need to scratch my nose was becoming unbearable. I sat uncomfortably for
several hours when I heard someone open the door. The next event I
considered unnecessary; however, my captors believed otherwise and
slapped me across the face. Normally I would have responded violently; but,
my response to such unexpected treatment was limited because I found
myself on the floor, still tied securely to the chair. My captors set me back up
and began asking questions concerning my military organization and
government. In order to maintain my patriotic loyalty, I refused to answer
their questions; consequently, I received their so-called “deserved slap and
floor visit.” After several hours of periodic interrogation, I was told I could go
to bed.

I never thought the word “bed” could mean anything different than a
mattress, two sheets, and a pillow. I soon found that my bed consisted of a
three-foot square box with a three-inch window. The thought of sleeping
was irrelevant at the time. I just wanted to get away from my inhuman
captors, so the idea of being locked up in a box was appealing in that I’d finally
be left alone. With my blindfold removed and hands untied, I “crawled into
bed.”

My bare buttocks against the cold metal floor and my knees up against my
chest to keep warm were only a few of the annoyances I endured throughout
the night. I heard other members of my squad screaming as they were led to
their “beds.” I began to think of claustrophobia and realized what a terror it
would be to have claustrophobia and locked up in such a small box. After two
hours, my captor’s humane characteristics were shown when I was served
supper, a slice of beef jerky. At about the same time, I became aware of
another discomfort. The need to urinate was creating a significant problem
inside this locked box. I screamed at my captors trying to explain my
situation; however, no one answered. I tried to convince myself I didn’t really
have to urinate, but after several minutes I realized what had begun as an urge
had turned into a very painful physiological problem. Having outgrown the
adolescent stage of “peeing the bed,” I came to the conclusion that I must
attempt to rearrange myself so I could urinate through the three-inch
window. The result of this attempt was far worse than “peeing the bed.” I
finally managed to get some sleep, but this was interrupted when my captors
put a small white mouse in my box. Having just awakened with what seemed
to be a two-foot rat crawling all over my naked body, I became hysterical. I
began screaming and begging, proclaiming I’d give them any information
they wanted.

Sharing a three-foot box with an unknown animal is one of the most
terrifying experiences I’ve ever endured. An animal crawling all over my
naked body was the limit in keeping my sanity. I tried to kill this creature with
my foot; however, mobility in such a small box was nearly impossible. I must
have sounded like a child scared of the dark screaming for his mother.

The door to the box was finally opened and I came out screaming and
hitting anybody in sight. My captors managed to subdue my hysterical
behavior by tying my arms and legs. I was led into the interrogation room
again, only this time I was more than eager to tell them anything they wanted
to know. I began to rationalize my behavior, and after talking to other squad
members I found that everyone had reacted the same way.

I have often thought about this experience and I’ve questioned my
behavior during this incident. The emotional misery I had in that box lasted
only a few minutes; yet, my confidence in my own emotional stability was
altered permanently.