

YourCorps

Parris Island purgatory

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Justin Henderson shuffled off to boot camp ready for the 13 weeks of hell enlisted Marines must endure before earning the coveted eagle, globe and anchor. The 18-year-old from Raleigh, N.C., joined the Corps with hopes of becoming a ground-pounding infantryman, but he caught pneumonia 13 days into recruit training. The illness left his lungs permanently scarred, torpedoing any chance of a military career.

Yet nearly a year and a half later, Henderson, now 20, is still at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, S.C., one of the roughly 25 recruits per year who break down during boot camp and are branded too injured or sick to resume training. He's had two birthdays in that time and earns an E-3's monthly pay of \$1,757, but Henderson can't wear the lance corporal chevrons to match since he never graduated. He wears a utility uniform, sometimes, but never with a nametape.

His best friend at Parris Island is Leonard Carter, 21, whom doctors deemed unfit to serve — more than a year ago — after surgery to remove a tumor from his leg left him with nerve damage. He stays in Henderson's squad bay, having completed more than eight weeks of recruit training.

Although each has been granted a few days of leave, Henderson and Carter are required to remain at Parris Island while their medical discharge requests are processed by a Physical Evaluation Board. This convoluted system, designed to ensure sick or injured service members are fairly evaluated for disability benefits, has been criticized by the Government Accountability Office, which published a report May 23 calling it consistently inefficient.

It has left these guys and others like them in a boring, rigidly strict purgatory. They're not treated like Marines, and they're not treated like civilians either. The Marine Corps, they say, doesn't know

These recruits can't train, did nothing wrong and can't go home

what to do with them, so the drill instructors who are their supervisors just keep treating them like recruits — and Henderson and Carter are sick of it. Their families, meanwhile, are worried about the psychological toll this ordeal is taking on them.

They awake each morning at 5 a.m. Lights out by 8 p.m. They're allowed to phone their families once a week, only during a 30-minute window. They have no Internet access and TV time is limited to about an hour each day or during free time on the weekends. They aren't allowed to have cellphones and have to ask a DI for permission to eat a snack.

"I feel like a prisoner," Carter said. "But prisoners get yard time. We don't get anything like that."

Marine Corps Times submitted questions May 30 to public affairs officers at Parris Island and MCRD San Diego, seeking to explain the Corps' process for handling recruits like Henderson and Carter. The questions were forwarded that same day from the depots to public affairs personnel at Training and Education Command in Quantico, Va., which oversees recruit training. The Marine Corps did not provide responses to those questions by press time on June 8, despite numerous requests.

A subsequent list of questions,

seeking to address specific claims made by Henderson and Carter, was sent to Parris Island on June 5. Those questions were not answered either by press time. However, 1st Lt. Melanie Salinas, the depot's director of public affairs, emailed the following statement: "All recruits aboard Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island ... are treated with fairness, dignity and compassion."

Henderson and Carter don't dispute that. They just want to go home.

"I've been here too long," Henderson said. "My drill instructors from boot camp will see me, and they're shocked I'm still here. They'll ask, 'When are you going home, son?'"

Monotonous, repetitive, boring

Marine Corps Times reported this story over three weeks in May and early June, after Henderson and Carter contacted the newspaper. Through multiple interviews with them, their families and former recruits who have endured similar, painstakingly long ordeals at boot camp, a vivid description of their experience emerged. Henderson and Carter asked only that their means of communication with the newspaper not be disclosed for fear it could lead to restrictions for others in the same predicament.

Around the squad bay, Henderson and Carter dress in PT gear. If they're carrying out an official assignment off base, they'll don cammies. In order to look more like Marines when they leave the island, they are allowed to blouse their boots. Carter made it to that phase in boot camp, but Henderson did not.

"After 495 days on the island, I think he's earned it," Carter, of Indian Trail, N.C., said of his friend.

Both said they look forward to being allowed to get high-and-tight haircuts soon. But right now, they still get the recruit haircut, so their heads are completely shaved.

They've been at Parris Island so long, the command has given them jobs. They are tasked with escorting fellow injured recruits who need MRIs and other services to the naval hospital at Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, about seven miles away. They ride a shuttle bus and wait for the recruits while they're being seen by medical staff.

They go to the air station Monday through Friday, until about 5 p.m. each day. By the time they return to Parris Island, the other recruits have usually already had their chow, so Henderson and Carter eat box meals by themselves. The

schedule is the same on holidays and weekends, minus the trips to the hospital, with a bit more TV time. Monotonous, repetitive and boring are how they describe their days.

"It's the Marine Corps' dirty secret," Carter said.

Richard Brown, 19, of Fort White, Fla., spent time in the sick-kid platoon before being cleared to leave in March — after eight months on the island. Like Henderson, Brown caught pneumonia on day 34 of training. After he was hospitalized in Beaufort, Brown moved in with Carter, Henderson and the others awaiting the PEB.

Brown described the unit as having a secretive feeling. Most recruits never see the place, and even drill instructors he spoke to were unfamiliar with what goes on there.

"They would see that we wore a darker green shirt at medical appointments and things," Brown said. "They'd ask why I had a support battalion shirt on and I'd say, 'I'm PEB, sir.' They'd say, 'What's that?'"

Carter and Henderson said they get in trouble if their appearance isn't squared away. The few freedoms they have, like bowling or TV time, also can be taken away if people in the unit fight or misbehave. And they have little contact



FACEBOOK



COURTESY OF LAURA HENDERSON

Leonard Carter, left, had surgery during boot camp to remove a tumor from his femur. Resulting nerve damage left him unfit to serve. Justin Henderson, right, completed 13 days of boot camp in January 2011 before contracting pneumonia. After three hospitalizations, he has been deemed unfit to serve. Both have been at Parris Island more than a year.

with the outside world. That has taken its toll, they said.

With the Marine Corps no longer a career option, Carter said he would like to make better use of his time while waiting on the PEB. He said he requested time to visit the depot's library so he can explore taking courses toward an associate degree. So far the request has not been granted, he said.

"We're doing nothing productive with our lives," Carter said. "I could tell you how many bricks are on my wall, how many tiles there are in here, how many light fixtures we have. I should not know those things, but there is nothing else to do but count them."

Going to the hospital breaks the day up. Holidays, they said, are excruciating because no one's around to take them there. Otherwise, the only time they leave the squad bay is for a weekly trip, escorted by their DIs, to the bowling alley and Marine Corps Exchange. One allowed them to order Chinese food while they were there, Carter said, but otherwise any food they buy has to be eaten by the time they're done at the bowling alley.

Carter's aunt sends him care packages, which include candy for

everyone in the squad bay. But Carter has to give the candy to the DI, who keeps the candy in a drawer. They have to ask for it during free time, he said.

Stefanie Herrera, 20, of Ocean-side, Calif., broke her back during boot camp at Parris Island in August 2011. She was released seven months later. Her experience awaiting the PEB was so negative, she doesn't even like to think about it anymore, she said.

"We literally sat all day," she said. "From 6 a.m. until 3 p.m., you're stuck sitting at medical all day. Then [we'd] go back to the squad bay and sit some more."

Carter, Henderson and Brown all said that cleaning was their main duty. Brown said it was because their drill instructor didn't like to see them just sitting around. They clean their squad bay with bleach when they run out of Lysol or Pine-Sol.

"We would sweep, mop, clean bathrooms, clean toilets, brass, anything steel and shiny, cleaned the windows, dusted, things like that," Brown said.

Henderson's lung scarring, a condition called bronchiectasis, is not curable. His lung airways are abnormally stretched, which can lead to

bacteria growth and infection. The DIs don't force him to clean, he said, but he'll do it anyway to help pass the time.

"Sometimes I have to go outside," he said. "It'll be too hard to breathe."

Carter surmises that their building must rank among the cleanest worldwide because the drill instructors don't know what else to have them do.

A flawed system

The PEB platoon, as Henderson and Carter call it, is co-located with the Recruit Separations Platoon. Those recruits are unable to deal with boot camp for various reasons. Since they're not awaiting Defense Department and Veterans Affairs approval to go home, RSP recruits usually check out within weeks. That's hard to watch, Brown acknowledged.

There are two systems the Corps has used to deal with injured recruits. Until recently, recruits awaiting a PEB were medically separated following the same process used for active-duty personnel. It's known as IDES, short for Integrated Disability Evaluation System. Those following this tract are retained on active-duty

status while all of their ratings are processed, said Shoshona Pilip-Florea, deputy public affairs officer with the Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery.

In an unfortunate twist of fate for folks like Henderson and Carter, BUMED announced May 3 that the Marine Corps would return to using the previous system to evaluate injured recruits. That doesn't hold people on active-duty status while they await their VA rating. It lets them go home.

Henderson and Carter are being processed under IDES.

"Any cases already submitted to the PEB will remain in the IDES process," according to the BUMED order about the switch.

The Government Accountability Office report cites major inefficiencies with IDES. Staffing shortages and lofty timeliness goals are to blame for the long waits, it says. The process should take 295 days, or about 10 months. The GAO found it was taking 394 days — well over a year.

Henderson and Carter say they feel forgotten. Beth Carter, Leonard's aunt, raised him along with his grandmother. She's worried about her nephew's physical and emotional well-being while awaiting discharge. Carter has been diagnosed with insomnia and stress-induced irritable bowel syndrome since he left boot camp, he said.

Nancee Cantu, Herrera's mom, said that while awaiting the PEB her daughter had no rights. Visiting hours are limited, she said, and families traveling long distances feel it's tough to justify a trip halfway across the country for a mere five-hour visit, she said.

"The way these kids are treated, that just shouldn't happen," she said. "They're not able to talk to their parents or their family. You should have those rights as a patient."

Brown said the female recruits awaiting the PEB have it worse because they come from all over the country, not just east of the Mississippi River like male recruits do.

"My parents were in Florida, so they visited me twice," he said. "But some of the female recruits would have family in Washington

state. They weren't able to do that."

Carter doesn't know when he can expect to leave Parris Island for good. Henderson told his parents on June 7 that he received paperwork indicating he could be going home as soon as June 11. Marine Corps Times was unable to verify that as of press time.

Their family members haven't known what's been going on, and that's been frustrating. They saw Henderson and Carter leave for boot camp and expected them to become Marines. Now they don't understand why they just can't come home. Henderson's dad said he has wondered if his son would ever get to leave Parris Island.

"Justin just spent his second birthday there on May 16," Henderson's father, Robin, said. "He's like Gomer Pyle," he added, referring to the TV character stuck at the rank of private first class throughout the series.

Carter and Henderson said they've both been told more than once that their paperwork had been lost, causing the process to bog down and make them wait longer than most who have to endure this process.

"I understand there are procedures and channels you have to go through, but this just seems a little out of hand," Beth Carter said. "The bureaucracy is ridiculous."

Messages left with VA public affairs personnel were not immediately returned. Brown defended the organization, though, saying the VA has a lot to deal with aside from recruits awaiting the PEB.

"They do make us one of the priorities," Brown said about the VA processing. "But they have to take care of you, those coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan and all the older vets."

After Henderson heads home, Carter will be left to do something he's become very good at during his time at Parris Island — he will wait.

"I'm losing my mind," Carter said. "I'm just sitting here wasting my life. People tell us we don't have it that bad, that we could be getting shot at. That's why I joined the Marine Corps. I don't have a problem with being deployed, but I do have a problem with staying here all day." □