I was a sophomore at a boarding school for troubled youth nestled within a valley of the Green Mountains off exit five of a highway that only had sixteen exits running vertically through the great misunderstood state of Vermont.  The institution, Norwich University, is the oldest private military college in the United States, second in martial longevity to West Point across the Hudson River in New York.  Distantly far behind West Point in reputation, athletics, academics, intelligence, and social standing; on par or exceeding in tom-foolery, satanic rituals, hazing, depression, abstinence, assaults of every kind, paranormal activity, cold, burlap clothing, cold burlap clothing, incompetent leadership, incomprehensible actions, and group showers.

On Tuesday afternoons each ROTC branch, would gather for mandatory laboratories in leadership.  The Air Force labeled their two hour attempt at realism as Lead lab, the Army, Navy and by association the Marine Corps similarly called their version of leadership a Mil Lab or as every cadet that had accepted that the next two hours of their life was about to be wasted, Kill Lab or Thrill Lab.  Before that, even worse than Kill/Thrill Lab was Tuesday Afternoon Training, an institutional event that could be labeled as cruel and unusual however this was no punishment, but a weekly occurrence. A two hour exercise in futility to remind anybody that managed to have a good Monday that their week was only going to get better after the forced formation, forced parade, forced presentation or all three… it was usually all three.  After lunch upperclassmen cadets would start walking out of their respective barracks and begin falling into a mass of wind milling confusion in their respective company staging areas.  There was no sense of organization until the freshmen of each company marched up in silent stoic confusion.  Six across and three to five deep.  All the while being yelled at for every infraction imaginable or unimaginable by their respective cadre; who were charged with the wellbeing, personal growth, and physical as well as mental exhaustion of the freshmen platoons. Without the freshmen’s preformatted example how to stand in a formation the upper classmen would not know how or where to stand in any type of organization that could be viewed as militaristic.  As the upperclassmen start melding together while others begrudgingly get dressed into burlap pants within their rooms; a steady chorus of “fuck you” starts to bleed from the rooms and hallways out onto the parade field followed by yells of “lock it up” by cadets who have chosen order and conformity over common sense and decency, they are quickly and ultimately drowned out by more obscenities.

As the formations slowly take form and the tall tap is conducted giving the freshmen a reprieve to mingle into the formation of upper classmen.  The final threats and yells are heard coming from the barracks as the S2 cadets in charge of “security” go through each floor checking and listening for any sort of noise that could be an upper classmen attempting to evade their compulsory attendance to conformity.  With a final “STAND BY” the band starts up and the Regimental Commander calls “REGIMENT” followed by “BATTALION” quickly echoed as “COMPANY” and with a final “fuck you” from some stalwart sentinel hidden in their barracks that leads to S2 charging in an attempt to find the fugitive. The entire formation of some 1200 cadets starts moving and snaking along the parade field, passed the administration building down the parade road to the armory where each company seamlessly dissolves on the steps and filters into the main auditorium.

I had been through my fair share of these events to hate and despise them.  I had already counted all the rafters and lights on the ceiling, memorized every state flag in a drooping configuration and had been told too many times not to assault myself or kill someone, or was it the other way around?  During one forced march down to the armory I decided I was going to escape before the presentation began.  The armory was an old two story field house with a basement that contained a labyrinth of vacant offices, storage rooms, locker rooms, workout rooms, but only two bathrooms.  As I walked into the armory I broke off to the side and headed for the stairs.  Turns out my idea was not so original because S2 stood by the stairs vainly trying to prevent the steady stream of likeminded compatriots from descending down the stairs in an attempt to stave off boredom by briefing.  I filtered down the stairs as S2’s threats rang out behind me and headed to the bathroom.  Why the bathroom?  There was a stall right next to a fogged glass window.  I figured I could enter that stall, wait, then crawl out the window and begin the exodus back to my room and relish the next hour and a half in comfort.  I entered the bathroom found the stall and surveyed how to put my eight minute old plan into effect.  The window was there, a screen covered it and the latch for the window was within reach from inside the stall.  Then a voice called into the bathroom from S2 “you all have five minutes or you’re getting tours.”  Tours were hour long marches back and forth in front of the administrative building at night or on the weekend shouldering a 10lb rifle while being watched over by S2.

I tested the screen, pulled it out and placed it against the wall, then I reached up to undo the latch that secured the window.  While another cadet who had long since relieved himself, but still standing at the urinal stared at me with envious understanding as my plan was unlatched and lifted up.  Another yell from the outside “you have two minutes!”  I lifted a foot and put my weight on the toilet to make sure it would not collapse, hefted my other foot up and lifted myself up to the window and pulled myself though and struggled out onto the asphalt of the parking lot alongside the armory.  Freedom!  I stood up and dusted myself off and felt the heavy stare of someone behind me.  I turned around and standing a few feet away from me smoking a cigarette was a Staff Sargent in the Marine Corps going through MECEP (Marine Corps Enlisted Commissioning Education Program).

I looked at him and said “uh… hello” and he uncaringly replied “carry on cadet” and took another drag of his cigarette then exhaled upward in a long stream of smoke.  I started walking around the armory to some pine trees that I figured would shield me from S2.  I rounded the corner came into contact with a senior S2 cadet officer.  He stared at me dumbfound and asked authoritatively perplexed.

“What are you doing?”

“I am trying to get inside.”

“Well get in there!”

I continued to walk around the building passed all the S2 cadets staring at me, equally perplexed.  How did I not ever notice the S2 cadets crawling all over the place during these parades? I returned to the front, to my right was the entrance to the armory I had recently escaped from.  To my left a gravel track, no cover, but it did lead to the athletic center that I knew very well.  Being on the cross country team I stored my athletic apparel in a locker there.  I decided to make a break for it and hope that any S2 looking around would think I was one of them.  I started walking confidently down the gravel track when I reached the halfway point I heard.

                “HEY YOU STOP!”

I turned around and saw two S2 cadets sprinting towards me.  I took off running towards the door, grabbed the handle and pulled, nothing.  Grabbed the handle pressed the switch down and pulled, nothing.  S2 was getting closer I ran around the building to a side entrance that was open and ducked inside.  I had never been in this part of the building before.  I walked around and found a hallway I recognized, ducked into the men’s locker room.  I and grabbed some clothes and shoes from my locker and headed for another bathroom stall.  Within the dark bathroom stall I quickly took off my shoes and burlap pants, put on sweat pants and running shoes and waited.  Listening intently to falling footsteps that grew distant.  I completed my metamorphosis from shit bag cadet to shit bag cadet pretending to be a civilian. After 2 days or 4 minutes, whichever came first?  I opened the stall and trying my best to be a civilian athlete, stepped into the hallway, walked upstairs, out of the athletic center towards freedom.  I took the long way around all the barracks and entered an academic building and walked out the other side heading for my barracks.  All the while doing my best to look nonchalant and unsuspicious as I suspiciously eyed my surroundings, not a soul was stirring not even a mouse.  I reached my barracks walked in through the back, up the stairs to my room.  Gently opened the door and slowly and easily closed it without a sound.  I can’t remember what I did once I got back, but I can tell you the nothing I did for an hour and half was better time spent than being briefed on how to be a better person.