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Shirley

Kathleen Harrison

I met Shirley Gibbs at Officer Candidates School (OCS) on June 9, 1980, in Quantico, Virginia. Shirley's appearance was striking. She stood five feet eleven inches tall and weighed one hundred thirty pounds. Her skin was dark and clear, her eyes were big and brown, and she had a smile. That smile. It was a big, wide toothy smile that warmed your soul. That girl loved to mess with people. Someone would say, "Hey Shirley," and she would give you a look of disapproval. Then, as you started to apologize, she would laugh that big hearty laugh.

Quantico in the summer is not a pleasant place to be because of its sultry summers, especially without air conditioning. It didn't seem to bother Shirley who hailed from Burton, South Carolina. As a Buckeye, I felt like I was sweating constantly, even after a shower. When I complained about it one time, Shirley said, "Ladies don't sweat, we glisten!" Then she laughed that big hearty laugh of hers. I'd chuckle to myself and think, "Oh my God, Shirley."

According to the Marine Corps website, "The mission of Officer Candidates School (OCS) is to educate and train officer candidates in Marine Corps knowledge and skills within a controlled and challenging environment in order to evaluate and screen individuals for the leadership, moral, mental, and physical qualities required for commissioning as a Marine Corps officer." Shirley and I saw it differently: OCS was a necessary evil to endure so the Marine Corps would continue to pay for our college. So while we agreed to do our best, we weren't going to engage in cut-throat tactics to make it through as part of 6th Platoon, C Company, OCS. A few in the platoon were so competitive that they wrote untrue negative comments on the peer evaluations, so they could be rated in the top of the platoon. Shirley and I knew these tactics would backfire in the end.

The 6th Platoon Sergeant marched us around everywhere. Gunnery Sergeant Mercer, known to us as Platoon Sergeant, was there to guide us. Shirley and I saw it differently as well: The Platoon Sergeant was there to create chaos and exert pressure to see what we would do. The twenty-nine candidates lined up many times each day according to height. We formed into ten across and three rows deep. Before we started to march, we all turned to the left so that the formation marched three across and ten deep. Shirley and I were the tallest, so we were at the back. Shirley loved to tell jokes while we marched and she could talk without moving her lips. She was so funny and one time I couldn't help myself but laugh out loud. Platoon Sergeant screamed at me, threw me out of the formation and wrote a chit. The chit is a report, good or bad. This one was bad. "Laughing in formation. Instructed on the importance of bearing and self discipline. You not only bring attention to yourself but every woman in the platoon." All I could think was, "Oh my God Shirley!"

Ten weeks later, we finished OCS. Shirley and I bid our farewells until next summer and returned to our respective colleges to finish our senior year. After college graduation, we were ordered to report to Quantico by the tenth of September 1981, this time for six months of The Basic School (TBS). According to the Marine Corps website, the mission of The Basic School is to "train and educate newly commissioned or appointed officers in the high standards of professional knowledge, esprit-de-corps, and leadership to prepare them for duty as company grade officers in the operating forces, with particular emphasis on the duties, responsibilities, and war fighting skills required of a rifle platoon commander."

Yeah, right. Except women weren't allowed to fight—to be in combat. This was known as the Combat Exclusion Policy. That's only one of the multitude of reasons why most of us referred to TBS as "The Bullshit School." Second lieutenants were supposed to be treated as

officers. Females were supposed to be treated equal. It didn't take long to realize that, at least during TBS, neither would be adhered to consistently. Shirley lived in a suite that was across and to the left of my suite, so we saw each other often. We commiserated about disparity between the ways the Marine Corps advertised proper officer conduct and what was condoned. It was consoling to have found a kindred spirit in Shirley.

The challenges of TBS were constant and numerous, so you have to remember that TBS is a marathon. You wanted to do well because TBS is where you are given your military occupation specialty (MOS), which is meted out according to your class standing. Many MOS's were closed to women because of the combat exclusion policy and the macho marine Corps was only too happy to enforce it. That didn't matter to Shirley, as she wanted to go into administration. I, on the other hand, wanted to go into intelligence. We went to class, took exams, endured physical fitness tests, and participated in field exercises. Before we knew it, it was Christmas break. I was going to Florida to meet my brother, who was stationed in Jacksonville. Shirley volunteered to help with the driving so she could get dropped off near Savannah, Georgia, where her family lived. I was only too happy to share my driving with her.

The roads were icy in several places and traffic was slower than usual, but the first five hours went without incident. I was bone tired, so I woke Shirley up so she could drive for a couple of hours. That's when she told me she can't drive a stick shift.

"Are you kidding me?" I asked.

She responded, "No, but I have an idea."

My eyelids were heavy and all I wanted to do was let them close. I pushed my seat back as far as I could, and Shirley, all five feet eleven of her, crawled into my lap. Then I, at five feet

ten, crawled out from under her and over the stick shift into the passenger seat. Oh yeah, all this while going seventy miles per hour on the freeway!

I fell asleep for a couple of hours until Shirley told me she needed to take the next exit. I told her to stop when she got to the stop sign and we would switch. As she hit the brakes for the stop sign, we jerked a little and the engine died. We ran a Chinese fire drill and I started the engine. Her parents were going to meet her at the McDonald's, so we wished each other a Merry Christmas and off I drove. Oh my God Shirley.

After Christmas break, we had less than two months left until graduation. We had more classes, exams, physical fitness tests, and field exercises. The interesting thing about field exercises is that women were not allowed to take offensive positions, only defensive positions. This meant a lot of digging and then waiting. You had to dig your own foxhole, officially called a defensive fighting position. This hole in the ground was big enough for two people to kneel in, with your weapon on solid ground, and defend themselves against enemy fire as well as provide a firing point. All this training was leading up to the "Three Day War" in February 1982. Shirley and I were assigned our position to dig a foxhole and we were happy when we got that done. One of the training officers pushed the boundaries and told me I was going out on patrol, which left Shirley to stand guard in the foxhole. I was out patrolling for several hours when the weather took a turn for the worst. It had started raining and it didn't let up. Then the temperature dropped rapidly, and ice began to form on the ground.

After my patrol was over, I returned to our foxhole. I could tell something was wrong with Shirley. She was kneeling in waste high water, her lips were blue, and she was babbling, "I tried to keep it dry, I tried to keep it dry, I tried to keep it dry." Oh my God Shirley!

She was suffering from hypothermia and I knew I had to get her out of the foxhole fast. I grabbed her jacket collar to lift her out, but she was dead weight. She was weak and so heavy and slippery from the muddy ice water. Several times I snagged a piece of her clothing and attempted to haul her out, but I lost my footing in the sloppy mess at the rim of the foxhole. Finally, I managed to drag her upper body out before I had to regroup. With her legs still dangling in the water, I snatched her by the belt and pulled the rest of her out of the foxhole. I opened my sleeping bag and made her get in with me to get her body temperature up. Just as I got her to stop shivering and babbling, the hardnosed training officer came over to “check our field of fire.” The field of fire of a weapon is the area around it that can easily and effectively be reached by gunfire. I assured him we had excellent fields of fire, but he insisted that we get out of the sleeping bag. There was no use explaining the situation about Shirley to that one. As soon as he left, I got her sleeping bag out and in it we went, with my M16 rifle sticking out. I was so angry I kept thinking the training officer was lucky these rounds were only tracers. Within an hour, the “war” was over after only a day and a half. Our company suffered a 50% casualty rate due to hypothermia. Although most recovered before graduation on February 28th, one guy was still in a coma when we left.

Shirley and I both got our respective wishes for MOS's; she received administration and I obtained intelligence. We knew it would be awhile until we saw each other again. I had orders to California and she had orders to North Carolina. But it didn't matter. In the military, you were often separated from your friends. You learned to pick up where you left off, as if no time passed at all.

I didn't see Shirley again until February 1989 in Quantico, seven years after TBS graduation. By that time, we were both Captains and looking hopefully at the possibility of

promotion to Major. She was the Administration Officer at TBS. I was the Marine Corps Assistant Foreign Liaison Officer at the Navy Annex in Arlington, Virginia. Shirley helped me coordinate a visit by the German Federal Minister who was looking to incorporate women into the German military. The diplomatic party was able to see women in training which had progressed a little since we were at TBS. The combat exclusion policy was still in effect. The big advancement was we finally had our first female general in 1985. I made plans with Shirley to go out to dinner the next week.

We were supposed to meet on Friday, March 3rd, 1989. I called Shirley to delay a day, until March 4th, and she was fine with that. Normally Shirley was upbeat and joking, but our conversation was strained. Her words were so guarded. Shirley told me she was separated from her husband after eighteen months of marriage and that she would tell me more when she saw me. Her voice was tremulous, and I could tell that she was scared of something, which struck me as odd because I never knew Shirley to be afraid of anything. She had moved out of her Quantico married officer quarters, on base house, and was staying with another female from our TBS class, Annie Mack. We said our goodbyes and I looked forward to catching up with my old friend.

But Shirley never showed up the next evening. I called Shirley at Annie's the next day to see what had happened. Annie told me that Shirley met her husband to clean out their quarters on March 4th and she hadn't been seen since that time. She had picked up her final version of her marital separation agreement on Friday and put a down payment on a condominium. Shirley's estranged husband was stalking Shirley and using listening devices to keep tabs on her. He had numerous affairs, drank to excess, and recently received an other-than-honorable-discharge from the Marine Corps. He was relieved of his duties due to drinking on duty, dereliction of duty, and

defrauding the government. OH MY GOD—SHIRLEY! I was in a state of shock. I couldn't comprehend how Shirley could be involved in this mess. I kept wondering, where could she possibly be?

Annie had called the Naval Investigative Service (NIS, now NCIS) to report Shirley missing. I called them too and left a message to tell them about my conversation with Shirley, but they never returned my call. Shirley had gone to help clean her old quarters to prepare for the official housing inspection scheduled for some time later. This inspection is very picky regarding washing and dusting everything possible. Although this is a "white glove" inspection, the quarters are expected to be clean, not perfect. Unless there are holes in the walls that were repaired, there was no need to paint. According to Robert, he last saw Shirley when she left the residence to walk to a store five miles away to buy paint in forty degree weather! This didn't make sense. Why would Shirley walk to the store, especially in the cold?

Days passed and no one saw Shirley. A criminal investigation commenced, revealing Shirley's passport and driver's license had vanished as well. Her credit cards and bank accounts were never accessed. All of the property she had placed in storage remained there. Foul play was suspected due to the circumstances involved. Her husband contended Shirley left on her own accord because she was tired of military life. Preposterous!

Shirley's husband was convicted of Shirley's murder in 1991 and sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. The case against him was circumstantial. Prosecutors said that Robert shot Shirley with a .25 caliber pistol while they were in the storage shed next to the base house, then dismembered her body and dumped her remains in a mine shaft in rural Pennsylvania. The murder weapon that Robert purchased was never located, although he had purchased it only a few days before Shirley's disappearance. Shirley has never been located.

Robert wrote a 26-step recipe for murder on his computer which the prosecution used to convince the jury that Robert murdered Shirley. A former lover who had an affair with Robert testified that Robert told her that he wanted to murder his wife.

Robert has made numerous attempts to overturn his conviction, but all have been rejected. He filed several times to get a new trial because “newly discovered evidence would prove his innocence in the killing of Capt. Shirley Gibbs Russell.” They have been rejected on the merits. His last filing was rejected in 2015.

I was robbed of a much-anticipated reunion with a dear friend. My hope is that Robert will finally tell the truth, so Shirley will get a proper burial with military honors. The playing of Taps to honor the extinguishing of her life. The removal of the American flag from the casket and ceremoniously folding of it so it can be presented to the next of kin with an expression of gratitude for the sacrifice she made.

I have not seen any of the three television specials about her murder because I want to remember to celebrate her life. Sometimes my heart weeps for my old friend but I like to remember those other times. And I want a moment to say to myself as I smile, “Oh my God Shirley.”