

Chapter 1

Becoming a Marine

It was a beautiful, sunny southern afternoon in Lexington, Kentucky. A gentle breeze wafted across the University of Kentucky ROTC Field Day graduation exercises. Marion Milton Magruder's military career began punctually at 2:30 P.M., 22 May 1936. Among the honored guests in attendance were the governor of Kentucky and the mayor of Lexington. Marion's parents, William and Augusta, his brother Eldon, and his sisters Aliene and Jane attended to confirm the reality of this propitious achievement. They were all impressed with how dashing Marion looked in his crisply tailored uniform.

As ranking senior officer, Magruder reveled in his final opportunity to lead the unit passing in review. Parading past the grandstands, they wheeled around in perfect order at the end of the field and returned to the area in front of the podium. He ordered the men to an abrupt halt followed by a sharp right face and then parade rest. With a final salute to the unit, Magruder executed a smart about face to the podium. Many thoughts raced through his mind. Realizing that almost everything he had ever known was about to come to a close with the events of this day, Marion felt a little melancholy.

Up until just recently, Marion was well aware if someone mentioned his name in conversation there would be but one response: "He's never going to amount to anything."

Marion reflected upon his rowdy and somewhat troubled youth. It took an extra year for him to get through grade school and a second tenuous senior year to struggle through high school. Mr. Skinner, the principal at Henry Clay High School, expelled him several times and the final time vowed to make sure no school in the area would let this troublemaker attend. Every time Mr. Skinner found out where this "no good" managed to enroll, the principal saw to it that he was summarily ejected. However, Marion noted with a tinge of satisfaction, he had managed to avoid detection because of his mother's ingenuity (and assistance from the parish priest) by enrolling in an all girls Christian academy as its only male student. With a great deal of forbearance from the nuns and a near miracle, he admitted, he had managed to graduate in June 1932.

In this moment, four years hence, high school seemed like a lifetime ago as Marion took a long, slow, deep breath, his thoughts returning to when his old high school principal Mr. Skinner had called him in for a meeting after discovering he was graduating from St. Catherine's Christian Academy. He recalled being somewhat puzzled, but he did report to Mr. Skinner's office as requested. Marion now realized how insightful Mr. Skinner was as he recounted every word seared into his memory.

"Now Marion, it's not my policy to offer advice to students, but in your case there needs to be an exception. I must admit you have impressed me by the way you somehow managed to slip by in the one place I never would have expected. Regardless, after more than thirty years as an educator, it is my opinion continuing education is definitely not for you. I strongly suggest you buy some overalls, get a pick and shovel, go down to the city, and apply for a job digging ditches."

Marion thanked Mr. Skinner for his advice and left. He had no idea of what to do with his life. He was certainly glad that his mother, Augusta, counseled him to enroll that next fall at the university several blocks away from their home.

"Maybe you will discover something you like," she offered. "If it's not for you, you will know soon enough. You don't want to look back someday and regret you didn't make the effort."

He reluctantly complied. Now, three years after an extremely rough freshman year, he could hardly hold back the grin that radiated across his rigid demeanor. Marion slightly pursed his lips and inadvertently allowed his head to nod affirmatively, grateful for this amazing twist of fate and his mother's loving wisdom.

Since taking a particular required class for freshmen (a class he never would have chosen for himself), he finally found something of which he couldn't get enough. He was soon shocked into a rude awakening when the course instructor declared he must maintain a certain grade point average throughout all his classes or the instructor would be forced to drop him from the Army ROTC program. Magruder assured the instructor he would not let him down, although he had to really scramble to catch up. He had no study skills developed from his checkered past. By the slimmest margin, he managed to get beyond his freshman year and stay in the ROTC. Magruder's whole world changed when he discovered himself and recognized his destiny.

In a few minutes, Magruder and two other selected cadets from this senior class would receive their commission into the United States Army as second lieutenants. He wondered where his new life would lead him. The moment the ceremonies commenced, these thoughts disappeared.

Brig. Gen. Guy Henry, U.S. Army, the first dignitary, delivered a poignant speech about the Army and its honored traditions. The general sternly followed, "You three officer candidates are extremely fortunate the military even offers commissions since so few are accepted into the service in these austere times."

A man of few words, the general abruptly commanded the three graduates the Army had selected to raise their right hand as he administered the oath of office.

"I do," Marion responded as though the general had spoken individually to him.

The U.S. Army had a brand-spanking-new second lieutenant.

At the conclusion of the swearing-in ceremony, a number of special awards were presented to deserving cadet graduates. Surprised, Marion heard his name called to receive the American Legion Cup, awarded to the graduating cadet officer who was "Outstanding and possessing in a marked degree those inherent qualities necessary in the making of an officer and a gentleman." Magruder stood tall for awards that followed: Phoenix Hotel Cup for the "Member of the Advanced Reserve Officer Corps having the highest average in Military Science for the academic year," and the Reserve Officers Rifle Team Medal "For excellence on the Rifle Team." Marion could hardly contain himself.

The president of the University of Kentucky followed with the presentation of academic degrees and honors. Marion's name was called over and over again as the university honored its undefeated Welter Weight Golden Gloves Boxing Champion with a bachelor's degree in psychology and the distinction of "Honor Graduate for 1936."

The governor of Kentucky bestowed upon Magruder the title "Kentucky Colonel," and the mayor of Lexington came forward to close the graduation ceremony by presenting him with the "Key to the City of Lexington." The proceedings were brought to a close and the graduates dismissed; caps instantly burst wildly into the air.

Marion had finally vindicated his parents' enduring belief in him. Marion realized Mr. Skinner was right about one thing: at one time he wasn't worth a damn.

During the past year, Marion had fallen head-over-heels in love with Martha Ann Kelly, a freshman at UK. The most incredible day of his life had one more achievement yet to be revealed. He made a dash to Martha's house and whisked her away to their special hideaway where they had shared so many wonderful evenings. This quaint little restaurant was nestled among a plethora of stately magnolia trees on a protected inlet of the Ohio River.

A gentle breeze intermingled harmoniously with the soothing sounds of the night. The flickering glow of candlelight created the perfect setting for romance, and the magnificent aroma of magnolia blossoms permeated their senses.

Intoxicated with love, Marion rose from his chair and, bending to one knee, gently placed Martha's hand in his. While softly imploring, "Sweet-heart, will you share your life with me," he presented her with a sparkling diamond ring.

Tears erupted from Martha's eyes as she promptly replied, "Yes. I will."

In the blink of an eye, however, her expression suddenly changed. Awkwardly withdrawing her hand, she stammered, "I'll . . . I'll have to ask my parents. Ah . . . I'm only sixteen."

Dumbfounded, Marion gulped, "But . . . but Martha . . . you're in college. I never even thought . . ."

"I know. The Sisters at St. Catherine's kept moving me ahead because I continued to exceed my classes."

After a few moments of tongue-tied silence, Marion recovered from this revelation. "Well . . . OK, let's go see your parents. This doesn't change a thing."

Martha snuggled closely to her man as they silently motored along the winding road to the Kelly residence. Hand in hand they went inside. Marion proceeded to make his case: "Mr. and Mrs. Kelly, you undoubtedly know by now Martha and I are very much in love. Tonight I have asked her to marry me, and I am asking you for your blessing." He quickly added, "The wedding will have to wait at least a year, because Army officers must have a minimum of one year on active duty before they can marry. I will leave for advanced training very soon, so I hope you will give me your answer tonight."

Clem and Popie Kelly turned to Martha, "Is this what you want?"

"Yes, this is the man I intend to marry," she beamed.

"Martha's happiness means everything to us," Clem stated. "I don't know how I can turn you down. Yes, you have my permission and our blessing . . . I'm glad we have time to get used to the idea."

After handshakes and hugs, the happy couple proceeded to the Magruder residence to share the wonderful news. Even though Marion had not informed his mother of his intentions, Augusta already knew—she always did. They were officially engaged.

Marion had a very important decision to make regarding his career. He was well aware the U.S. military services had been badly neglected since WWI. Funding by the Congress had just barely kept the services operating. He was also cognizant military commissions were rare. In his case, a very

unusual situation presented itself. He had proven to be an outstanding military prospect. In fact, since completing his junior year, he had been informed the Marines and Navy wanted him, along with the Army. All three services had held open a commission slot for him. The Marine Corps had not offered a commission at UK in the past nine years. Although he was commissioned into the Army at graduation, Magruder had thirty days to choose where he actually wanted to go. He considered his options carefully and came to a decision.

1 July 1936: Marion Milton Magruder was sworn in as a second lieutenant in the USMC and was ordered to report to Officers Basic School, a one-year course, at the Philadelphia Navy Yard in Pennsylvania in fifteen days.

15 July, 06:45 hours: Marion's train pulled in to Philadelphia after an all night ride from Lexington. This was Magruder's first extended trip away from Kentucky. Excited but at the same time irritated about feeling a little homesick, Marion joined the group of new Navy and Marine officer trainees at the main gate of the Philadelphia Navy Yard.

Punctually at 08:00 hours, Basic School Commanding Officer Lieutenant Colonel Turnage presented himself and addressed the men with a pointed indoctrination. He turned the proceedings over to Captain Chriswell, the class commander, who promptly ordered the men into formation for roll call. Captain Chriswell wasted no time in letting everyone know just where they stood, what was expected of them, and how OBS (Officers Basic School) operated.

The students were summarily notified they would march in formation everywhere they went and would need permission to do anything but breathe. Marion was also informed that henceforth he would be officially addressed as Magruder, Marion M. However, since it was customary for the military to shorten everything, he was already being referred to as "Mac."

The students billet was a three-story brick building, well used for over sixty years as part of the Naval Facility. On the third floor, Second Lieutenant Magruder joined twenty-two additional officers. This day had been a whirlwind of nonstop "do this, get that—on the double" and accumulating armfuls of gear. By the time Magruder was finally assigned quarters, he had very little energy left to get settled in.

At exactly 04:00 hours, blaring bugles roused Mac to a new life of military indentured servitude. The new routine consisted of reveille, inspections, calisthenics, chow, classes, tests, close order drills, classes, chow, training, classes, tests, and marching, until 22:00 hours and lights out—except for when night operations were added on.

The Pennsylvanian summer was unusually hot and muggy that year, amplifying a multitude of irritations simmering within this new recruit. The new life style with incessant hazing and endless, repetitive "stupid" drills, as

Magruder saw it, had the lieutenant a bit edgy. The situation seemed a lot like when he was pledging ATO at UK. Magruder certainly understood he was going to get paddled as part of initiation, but he had never taken crap from anyone . . . ever.

On more than a few occasions, Mac had had to bite his tongue to hold back from retaliating against one of his instructors, who seemed to get a great deal of pleasure out of messing with the trainees. He recalled what happened at UK when a fraternity man proceeded to paddle him. Magruder knew it was coming; he thought he could deal with it. However, on the first whack something snapped, and with a blood curdling growl he whirled around, snatched the paddle from the upperclassman who had hit him, and in the same split second broke it over the guy's head. Out cold, the ATO crumbled like a house of cards. Marion quickly apologized, "I'm really sorry. I just involuntarily defend myself. I can't help it."

Now, he smiled to himself, silently musing, "And soon they accepted me into the fraternity without any more stupid games."

Magruder quickly acknowledged this situation was a whole different ballgame.

Whenever a group of men are thrown together, there is a sorting out process to arrive at the male pecking order within the group. Marion quietly sized up the situation while some of the "fools" vied for attention. As long as they didn't mess with him, he ignored the shenanigans.

It wasn't long before one of the so-called tough guys decided to taunt Magruder as he passed through the lounge headed to his room. Arthur Barrows, a big burly loudmouth, wisecracked to some of the men he was playing cards with as Magruder strolled by, "Marion is such a girl's name . . . but what can you expect . . . he's from Kentucky."

Magruder spun around and immediately retorted, "I don't want to play this stupid game. This is the only warning you're gonna get. Knock it off!"

Mac abruptly proceeded on his way. He hoped this would stop this idiot, but he knew it wasn't really over.

On a Friday evening in mid September, Magruder topped the stairs of the third floor, proceeding to his quarters only to find the same guys playing cards and listening to music. Barrows decided this was a good opportunity to harass Marion again. He approached Magruder and began to make another wisecrack. Mac immediately flung away what he had in his hands, snarling, "That's it, you worthless piece of crap!"

The fight was instantly on. (Magruder weighed in at 148 pounds, and Barrows, a former collegiate lineman, weighed over 240.) It was quite a fracas. Barrows attempted to wrestle with Magruder, but Magruder's stinging

punches kept him at bay. When they did clinch, Marion used speed and strength to muscle Arthur off. The fighters knocked each other into the stairwell and somehow managed to tumble down the stairs to the second floor and eventually battled down to the first floor. Their clothes were in tatters; they were both a mess of cuts and bruises as they continued to brawl.

The combatants had managed to break open the door to the lavatory when Magruder knocked Barrows senseless with a powerful right to the jaw, left to the solar plexus, and a final right to the jaw. Arthur ended up sprawled out on the floor in front of the stalls. Marion finished the fight by dragging Barrows over to a toilet and then shoving Arthur's head into the latrine while flushing it, demanding, "What do you have to say, now . . . jerk!"

The clashing combatants managed to arouse the entire barracks. The drill instructor became aware of what was happening but chose to stay out of it even though it was against regulations for this kind of thing to take place. He already knew of Barrows's loud-mouthed bullying. Had he decided to break up the fight, a report would have been filed and possible charges associated with it. This was not how "his" men sorted things out. The word quickly spread, "Mac Magruder is one wicked 'scrapper.'"

The following morning at formation, the drill instructor made a few poignant comments to let everyone know he was privy to what went on. He also made it clear he would not tolerate anything like it in the future. As the day wound down, Barrows found the opportunity to approach Magruder about the previous night. Marion readied himself for anything as Arthur drew near.

All of a sudden, Barrows stuck out his hand while managing a slight smile through his swollen cheeks. Marion immediately responded with his own hand while stating, "I'm really sorry for what happened. I just don't like this kind of crap."

Arthur grimaced from the pain of speaking, "It was all my fault, Mac. I know it was stupid. . . . I've never been beaten so severely in my life."

The pecking order was now settled. Both men became friends on that day; all was forgiven, and once the black eyes, cuts, and bruises mended, all was quickly forgotten. Classes continued with a new sense of teamwork for the remainder of the course. Lieutenant Mac was ready for his first unit posting.