

GROWING UP GREEN

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*I dedicate my book to the family and friends
who have always believed in me and to
all the soldiers with whom I proudly served.*

CONTENTS

1. Enlisted at Seventeen.....	1
2. The Decision.....	3
3. Picking My Job.....	11
4. Saying Goodbye.....	19
5. Amnesty.....	27
6. In-Processing.....	33
7. Drill Sergeants and Punishments.....	39
8. Cattle Truck.....	45
9. Private Upchuck.....	51
10. Battle Buddy Sadique.....	59
11. Bunk Check.....	65
12. Haircuts.....	75
13. First Sergeant Snur.....	77
14. First Sergeant Snur: Part 2.....	83
15. 4th Platoon: The Dog Pound.....	87
16. First Call Home.....	93
17. Getting Smoked.....	99
18. PT in the Morning.....	105
19. Razor Bumps.....	113
20. Blue Falcon.....	121
21. KP Duty.....	129
22. BRM (Basic Rifle Marksmanship).....	137
23. Phases.....	147
24. Fireguard.....	155
25. The Grenade.....	163
26. Home Run Race.....	171
27. Fraternalization.....	177
28. Pushups, Sit-ups, and Run.....	185
29. Bivouac.....	195
30. Proud To Be an American.....	203
Acknowledgments.....	211
About the Author.....	215

GROWING UP GREEN

**Or How To Survive U.S. Army
Basic Training and Live to Write About It**

KHALID SALEEM



HELLGATE PRESS

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*We are all clay molded by our experiences,
Hardened by the fire of our trials,
And displayed by the way our deeds
Are reflected upon the mirrors of life.*

Enlisted at Seventeen

ENLISTED AT SEVENTEEN! WOW, EVEN saying it out loud sounds crazy. Whenever I tell people how young I was when I signed up, their initial reaction usually is, “You were a baby!” And to that I say, *I guess I was.*

I was young, but the military was the best decision of my life because I found me. I wasn’t ready for college. I wasn’t that confident and I was flat-out too lazy to fill out college applications. I spent the better half of my formative years in the “Green.” If my first seventeen years with my parents made me a good person, the next ten years I spent in the Green made me a man. In this short book, I share with you tales of my experiences. I hope they tickle your sense of humor and encourage you to have your own adventures and self-discovery.

GROWING UP GREEN

The Decision

S CREECH! “We’ve stopped.” Heavy huffs of breath blow in the vast darkness as heartbeats race faster than a three-year-old on the verge of an ass whooping. Teeth clatter like cymbals in an orchestra, and droplets of sweat draw sounds of thunder to the metal floor. “The fragrance polluting this black hole is called *Ass du Fear* and it is drenched on every last one of us.” SKRRREEEK! A rusty metal door slides open and a wave of sunlight floods through, revealing a seventeen-year-old kid holding two duffel bags. Eight silhouettes appear in the light and demand, “Everyone get off my cattle truck!”

Wait. Let me back it up a little and explain a few things. My name is Khalid Saleem and up to this point, prior to my enlistment, my name was by far the most

exciting thing that had ever happened to me. I come from a family of revolutionists, which is where I got my name. That doesn't explain, however, how in hell we became a military family, but we did!

My path to the Army was as simple as could be. I could go to Ms. Brown's English class, where I didn't do my homework yet again, or take the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery exam, better known in the streets as the ASVAB. To me, it was simple. ASVAB wins!

Due to my lack of interest in filling out college applications, my test scores would be a welcomed sight. When they arrived, I'll never forget the local recruiter calling me into his office and saying, "I've got good news for you my friend. You are smart, lucky, and can choose any job you want."

He had me instantly — hook, line and sinker. Recruiters are kind of like pimps that way, with their perfectly pressed clothes, pearly teeth, slick shiny shoes, and crisp hairdos. They know exactly what their prostitutes need to hear to get them in the streets. Only thing I had to do now was tell my family and girlfriend about this great opportunity. If they could see this as a great opportunity... well, that was another question.

Leading up to that fateful moment, I was sweating bullets and pacing a hole through the pavilion floors of Sunny Isle's outdoor mall. The fear of confronting my parents produced a loop of questions that jogged in my head:

How would they take it?

*Will my mom cry?
Would they let me go?*

Then I had a brilliant idea. I could run away and fake my own death. It seemed a more appealing option than telling my parents. I ended up not choosing that option and instead took the dollar taxi home. It was a closer call than you'd think. What I can remember from the moment I stepped in the door is that I was shaking in my pants, on the verge of peeing, as I called for the family to come into the living room. We weren't the Cosby family, but everyone came on demand. My father, who had never left the living room to begin with, was already there watching *The Godfather* for the billionth time. You would think it was a sitcom as often as he watched it. My youngest brother, Zayd, waddled over with his chubby self. He was ten years younger than me, so not quite a real person in my eyes yet. Amir, the brother right under me, trudged in, not really wanting to be there, but my mother can be compelling. By compelling I mean my mother dragged him by the earlobe as he winged and, in turn, dragged his size-twelve sneaks along our marble floor.

When everyone was finally in the living room, all wearing "WTF?" expressions, I squirmed and perspired in front of them uncomfortably. I kept saying in my head, *Just blurt it out*. My father, the impatient one in the family, barked out in his gruff DMX voice, "Just say what you want to say!"

Like a kid with Tourette's, I vomited out, "I signed up for the Army!" I covered up my body as if I were

protecting myself from a verbal firing squad. Surprisingly, nothing happened. For being the first person in my immediate family to join the military, you'd think there'd be some flopping on the floor like a Southern Baptist church catching the Holy Spirit or at least a question, but nope! Nothing. *No one gave a damn!*

My dad was like, *Cool, one more off the roster, two more to go.* My brothers broke into a flash mob MMA fight as they jostled for my room, and my mom pursed her lips for a quick second and then nodded in acceptance. Yep, no emotional breakdowns or political struggles there, just the boot out the door. I trudged out the room taking quick glances before I exited. In my eyes, I saw someone who was being forgotten before he left. I wondered how my girlfriend would take it next.

The next day I met my girlfriend at school at our third favorite meeting spot, under the steps next to old Rasta Woman's French class. I took the more direct route this time and only waited through five minutes of sweating before saying, with my voice full of a deep bass sound, "Woman, I am going into the Army, and you better like it, woman!" The way it came out of my mouth didn't quite sound like that, but I did tell her, in what ended up being a somewhat bass-like and sheepish voice, that I was joining the Army. Margarita gazed up at me with her beautiful emerald eyes, smiled and said, "Cool, I wouldn't mind talking to them, too."

I was so surprised, not because she was weak or anything like that. She was furthest from an authority-following person than anyone I had ever met, so I was thrilled. I took her to meet my recruiter, but after an

hour, she was not impressed. I was sold once again on the promise of the world, which tells you what side of the maturity spectrum I landed on. She asked question after hard-hitting question, such as:

What doors will my military experience open for me when I get out?

Can you assure I can go to college while I am enlisted?

Can you guarantee me my duty station of choice?

I sat in my seat with this stupid, plastered-on grin, frozen with embarrassment as my recruiter just stared daggers back at me. I never broke my character of a smiling, embarrassed politician even as he ushered us out the glass door. If there were any confusion about his displeasure with the conversation, it was cleared up with the hammer of the door lock a second after leaving. Margarita glanced up at me with those emerald eyes of hers and tossed me a quick peck on the cheek. She apologized for interrogating my recruiter and said she'd think about it.

I tried not to look disappointed and smiled, but my veneers could not hide the growing unrest and feeling of melancholy that stole into my heart. Looking back, I realized she was right, and I should have been more concerned about what she asked. The reality then was if you flashed something shiny in my face, I was gonna smile and nod.

The next day Margarita and I met at our second favorite meeting spot next to old man Gonzales' room. His electronics class was always packed because he spoke little

English and gave out lots of “A’s.” Hence, the alley by his room had little to no traffic. It was the perfect meeting spot. This time she had something to tell me. She sat me down on the step. Nothing good ever happens when someone sits you down. She led with those emerald heart-piercing torpedoes again and chimed out, “I’ve signed up for the Navy.”

Then she went on this long soliloquy that I translated to say, “Their recruiter offered me less shiny things and more assurance of quality of life.”

Yeah, like that’s important. For the record, though, quality of life is actually a big plus over shiny items. She then serenely asked me with her velvety, perfectly sized hands wrapped around my hand, “Would you come with me to the Navy?”

Whoa!

When I brought up the subject, it wasn’t that big of a deal, but when she mentioned it, I couldn’t help thinking it was now a huge deal. For one, it wasn’t my idea anymore and I had been doing this for me; and, for two, the Navy uniforms sucked and I didn’t want to wear them for four years. All that aside, I loved this girl and this was an enormous monkey wrench in the decision-making process. Not only was I wrestling with the decision of should I join the military at all, but also with the decision of whether to join the military for a girl I love.

Days passed and my recruiter was getting restless. He started calling me two times a day. We didn’t have cell phones back in those days, but I know it was two times a day by the amount of times my mother screamed at me, “Tell that man stop calling this house, geez!”

I would be lying if I said that the attention wasn't flattering. I mean, someone is treating you like the fate of the Army hinges on your signature. That's exhilarating. Putting my ego to the side, I had to make a decision soon. My recruiter needed me to sign up and join, and Margarita needed to know if she could tell her recruiter to type up those military matrimony forms. It was so much pressure that I needed to act fast, which meant I needed to procrastinate just a little more in my world. So I called the funniest person to take my mind off of the situation. My cousin Scot might as well have been my older brother as we were that close. He had caught wind of my dilemma from my mom. Scot wasn't around for most of my senior year angst, but before I could personally catch him up, he blurted out, "Dude! I am so proud of you!"

Scot had wanted to join the military ever since we were kids, but a machete accident to the eye took that dream away when we were eleven. He was now over the moon for me. I had fulfilled one of his dreams and he pretty much saw it as becoming Uncle Sam's nephew because of me. We spoke for hours, mainly about how awesome it was going to be joining the military. He asked me about Margarita. He really liked her and thought that she was good for me. We did take the occasional break so he could talk about his extensive porn collection, but we mostly discussed joining the military. After I hung up with Scot, I knew what I was going to do.

I drove over to Margarita's house on top of a big hill that night. I hated driving up there. My little Dodge Neon would always bottom out going over those craters she called potholes. As I arrived at the top, she was waiting for

me outside. She took us to our number one favorite meeting spot, her roof. It was quiet up there. She could get away from the chaos of her teenage life and I could sit next to someone who thought I was important. I took her hand this time and gazed into her eyes. I smiled and then she smiled. I then said, "I can't go with you."

In full teenage dramatization layered with a little Korean pop music score, she kissed me and whispered, "I know." We lay there gazing at the stars a little longer, not saying anything but saying everything. We knew nothing would ever be the same.

The next day, I honored my deal and told my recruiter I was ready to be on the team. He beamed with a smile that lit up the one-man recruiting station. He then grabbed my hand with a handshake similar to a vise grip. I smiled to hide my wincing. My recruiter was so overjoyed that he dropped everything he was doing and said, "Let's celebrate! How does Chinese sound to you?"

Back then, in the Virgin Islands, Chinese food was like eating at the Waldorf Astoria since it was so expensive. I snickered and replied, "Yeah, De'man!"

It might seem like a lot of factors played into my decision, but at the end of the day, it was really simple. The Army wanted me. I felt a new type of pride this time, the pride of making a grown-man decision. For most of us, who we are now is really a domino effect of a series of decisions that start in our teens. This was the first string in my series.

Picking My Job

YOU PROBABLY WANT ME TO GET BACK to the story about me on the verge of being slaughtered by a pack of drill sergeants, and I will. First, I have to tell you about the best part of signing up for the military. It's picking your job! Well, that's if you got higher than a fifty on the ASVAB, which was the magic score to get back in 1998.

See the ASVAB is the SAT of the military and organizes the military folk into three job classes:

- 1) the "I'm Hella Book Smart and Can Change The World" jobs (the sh!# you get in Wikileaks);
- 2) the "I'm Smart Enough To Make Sure The Military Maintains" jobs (the stuff you see on commercials); and
- 3) the "I May Not Have Had the Highest Score, But Dammit I Keep The World Safe" jobs (the stuff you see in movies).

Yours truly pulled off such a feat with a score of 51, better than average, and was thrust into the middle class of the job pool. I was particularly geeked by such a score because my recruiter told me that I had the pick of the litter, which meant I had the safe jobs. This pleased my mom very much. Even though I entered the military during a time when there was no major war, things could pop off at any time. My mom knew the reality of the world better than I did, so if I could pick a cake job, that would make her feel more secure.

Being a Virgin Island resident, I had to travel to Puerto Rico for my Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS). This is where you find out if the military wants your ass or not. The perks of your MEPS visit include:

Eye exam game show—It's not really a game show, but if you fail, you are rewarded with ugly brown glasses that only Mr. Magoo could love.

Getting your testicles cupped—Not as fun as it sounds.

Inspection for flat footedness disease—Your recruiter tells you exactly how to cheat on this test.

After cruising through the first two medical exams, it was time for the only examination that I was worried about, checking of my flat-ass feet. I heard horror stories

about people not getting in on the make-up of their feet. They were not able to complete road marches in war, so it was a big deal. My recruiter told me all the tricks to beat the system, but my feet might have been designed by a Lego maker. There is absolutely no arch. I walked into the examination room, half on my tiptoes and the other half on my heel. I waddled in like a giant black man impersonating a king penguin. The nurse gasped to hold back his chuckle. I placed the pressure on the outside of my feet to fool the examiner, as I'd been coached. I stood there against the wall proud and tall with my gut tucked in for some odd reason, like that was gonna help. The nurse circled around my feet similar to a seagull looking at trash. As he looked closer, I cupped my feet more. And more. And more. I cupped my feet so high to the point when he couldn't hold back his laughter anymore. He cried out, chuckling, "Dude! Please just lay your feet normal. I see about a hundred of these a day and this has to be the most obvious."

His honest reaction forced me to laugh a little and relax. I flattened down my feet and then he blurted out, "Damn!"

I immediately stiffened back up upon his reaction. The nurse then said, "On second thought, try to fool me just a little bit."

So I found a happy balance of broad-jump stance and plié dance position. You know what? It worked. The nurse gave me the stamp of approval and it was showtime, the part every young recruit can't wait for: da job!

This was it, the moment of truth. My heart thumped through my jersey as I stared forward, cracking my neck. My fate lay behind a metal door. As I walked through that gateway, thoughts rushed through my brain.

What jobs did I qualify for?

Where would I go for Basic?

What were the exact lyrics to Smash Mouth's song "Allstar?"

The last question was about the hot band of that summer and oddly comforting to me somehow.

I slid into a tiny gray cubicle and eased down into a chair that felt like it was padded by plywood on top of more plywood. The only advantage that gave me, as tight as my ass had become from nerves, was the plywood-cushioned seats raised me three feet higher and I could look at the gigantic Army staff sergeant across from me at eye level. He had to be seven feet tall and forged from an Abercrombie clay-model mold. I was trembling as he seemed to flash me a Stepford smile with his pearly white teeth. It was the kind of awkward smile that you might get from a robot trying to analyze you. So I did the only thing you could do back. I eked out my own smile, only I resembled a constipated dog asking to be mercifully put to sleep. After a twenty-second smile-off, he finally broke the silence with, "Congratulations, Mr. Saleem, on choosing the greatest Army in the world! Now let's complete this journey and make sure you get the job of your dreams."

He spoke in a fast-food takeout voice and I fully

expected him to ask me if I wanted fries to go with that dream job. He reached under his desk, pulled out a gray binder, rested it on the desk, and said, "This is the binder of dreams, Mr. Saleem."

He then tossed me a creepy, used-car salesman wink and smile, opening "the binder of dreams." My heart fluttered as the binder glowed when it opened. Sergeant Abercrombie said in his Stepford fast-food takeout voice, "Aha! I have just the job for you."

My eyes widened and my ass raised me up even higher on my seat, surpassing imagination. Before he could utter another word, I suddenly had a calming and clear thought navigate through the sea of jumbled thoughts. They were the wise words of my recruiter. He warned me in his best G.I. Joe voice, "Don't forget to ask questions. Take your time. Understand the clear description of your job."

Sadly, however, that wasn't my soldier way. The Abercrombie sergeant flashed a smile and said, "How would you like this job?" He showed me the description in the book. That's when hard, fast, gut instinct was the technique I chose to use. So after only twenty minutes of listening to the most glamorous description of the most mundane job known to man, my interview concluded.

Wearing a big grin on my face, I shook the flashy sergeant's manicured hand and walked towards the door. Once I was out of eyesight, I broke out the George Jefferson strut and twirled out of the door, back into the waiting room. I strutted a little more for the audience of the waiting room. They gawked and gazed with their judgmental mouths pursed up and noses in the air, but I

didn't care and moved on. You would have thought I'd just won "The Price Is Right" or had selected the most amazing job in the known universe with the swagger I was exuding. In all actuality, it couldn't have been further from the truth. I had chosen the Ford Pinto of jobs, communications specialist. This was on the lower end of the middle-class job spectrum.

My recruiter eventually sprinted over to me with his hands in the air, asking for news. As I showed him my slick dance steps, his smile and slight fist pump said it all, "another soldier in the stable." That smile quickly dissipated when I cockily told him my M.O.S (military occupational specialty): "Guess who has two thumbs and just became the Army's new communications specialist?"

He retorted with an, "Excuse me?" Then he proceeded to turn beet red to the point that I thought he was going to explode. I don't remember the exact words he said to me that day, but it went kinda like, "That was a crap job! (Some Spanish bad words). Wire dog! Don't you listen? Let me talk to this mother-(four-letter variation)! (Some more Spanish bad words of the really, really bad variety)."

And then he was finished. Every muscle in my body had contracted and I stood there staring at him the same way you do when your mom or pop shot you a quick slap because you said something rude. He could barely look at me but somehow found the strength and shot me a soul-strangling gaze. My recruiter then shouted, "Don't move!"

So I didn't and he stormed back into the room that I had just left victoriously. I stood there for what seemed

like hours (five minutes tops) with my pride down for the ten count and drowning in my own puddle of embarrassment. *Tick, tock, tick, tock* rung in my head as I paced back and forth from chair to chair in the waiting room. Then after my billionth or so pace, I turned around and, like magic, my recruiter had returned. This time he was grinning, his eyebrows had leveled and his face was the creamy-cool vanilla color that whispered peace. His calm appearance told me that everything was going to be all right. He straightened my body up and told me some brief instructions, "Go in and sit down. He'll do the rest."

So I strolled in and sat inside that same cubicle, but this time Sergeant Abercrombie's face cringed with fear. That is the moment I found out that my recruiter was actually the freaking man! I was his proud soldier as the shaken Sergeant Abercrombie reached under his desk this time and pulled out a brand new book. This binder was blue and I may have heard Gabriel's horn when he opened it up. This was a whole new catalog of jobs for me. I was still in the middle- class realm, but damn it, I was on the *bougie* side now.

Sergeant Abercrombie laid out the top ten jobs and the packages that he could offer me. He pointed out the most favorable one first, which was medical supply specialist in Ft. Rucker, Alabama. He glared intensely at me and, like before, I was a little confused and glared back at him with one eyebrow raised. His face cringed in frustration and he nodded, saying, "Great choice, Mr. Saleem."

I squinted in confusion and replied, “Thank you?” in a questioning voice.

He rushed and pulled out paperwork from his manila folder and then proceeded to grab my hand and sign for me. I don’t remember fighting that much because by this point I didn’t know what was the right thing to do, and he was making it easier for me. After the deed had been done, he smiled and smugly said, “Thank you, Mr. Saleem, and I hope you enjoy your time at Ft. Rucker, Alabama, as the newest member of its medical supply team.” He nodded. Then I nodded. Then he ushered me out the door.

The first person I saw on my way out was my recruiter with folded arms and a sly snicker on his face. He was a man that I had been convinced did not have my best interest in mind.

Reflecting back now, I don’t know what my life would be without a man who was more than my recruiter. He was definitely my guardian angel.