

# KEYHOLE

## LARRY WORMINGTON

Tracer rounds whiz by, their light reflected in the Concertina wire just inches from my face. Flat on my back, I dig in my heels and inch forward. My body tenses and I jerk sideways as the ground erupts to my right, covering me with chunks of dirt and debris. Deafened and tingling, I push on. It can't be much farther. God, please don't let it be much farther. I slide along, trying to stay as flat as possible, my Kevlar helmet pushing a line through the sand as I go. All I can focus on is my forward progress and the vice-grip I have on my M16.

My helmet hits something solid. Someone is up ahead, but isn't moving. The ringing in my ears and the strobe effect of artillery make it hard to focus, like watching fireworks from the deep end of a swimming pool. I manage to pull myself up to the man's side. His voice is a broken record of panic.

"Can't do this. Can't do this. Can't do this."

It's Wallace, a small freckled recruit from St. Louis they'd just dropped back to our platoon. His legs are moving, but the rest of him isn't. Tears slide down the sides of his camo-streaked face as he mutters and continues to squirm. The muzzle of his weapon is wrapped in razor wire, but he doesn't seem to notice.

"Wallace, your weapon's stuck."

He continues to struggle.

"Wallace."

He flinches, and then looks at me through coke-bottle lenses.

"What? I'm okay. I'm okay."

"The wire, Wallace. Here, let me help."

Bad idea. I wait for the next tracer flash and try to grab his rifle barrel as it and the nest of Concertina swing back and forth. Just as I think I've got it, Wallace jerks the weapon downward, ripping my fingers open on the wire's many teeth.

"Damn, man, watch it."

"I'm s-sorry,"

The artillery stops and the field we're crossing lights up from a line of surrounding flood lamps. I shut my eyes and put my hand to my mouth, tasting the coppery sting of blood. Deep laughter and clapping make me forget about my shredded fingers. A few feet away, to the right of the live-fire training course, is the man I wish death upon several times a day, Staff Sergeant Pena. He stands in a pressed camouflage uniform, his chest puffed out and his tan arms crossed. He has a weasel grin and his drill instructor cover is cocked back like a halo on his balding head. The rest of Kilo Company is at a position of attention behind him.

"Recruits, take a good look at these two," Pena says. "They're the ones that'll get you killed in real combat. Cole, you and your lover get your asses out of there. The shitters need cleaning." Still lying on my back, I crane my neck and glance behind me. Another few feet and I'd have made it.

"Fucking Wallace," I whisper.

Pena and the other D.I.s have my number now. Up until this point, I'd kept a low profile. My dad told me, "Keep your head down and don't volunteer for anything." That was the formula for surviving Marine Corps boot camp. It was working, too. Now I'm a shit-bird, and everything I do will be mocked and scrutinized.

To make matters worse, my little act of chivalry turns Wallace into my shadow. They put him in first squad, right behind me in platoon formations. He's also on my fire team in training exercises and made my bunkmate, in the cot above me. I can't get away from him. I'm one-twenty soaking wet, a little slow, and somewhat uncoordinated, not the best candidate to carry another—mentally or physically. Staff Sergeant Pena and the other drill instructors even have a name for us, the Turtledoves.

“Where are my love birds? Turtledoves, get up to my classroom now,” Pena says.

The classroom’s an open space, about thirty by thirty, outside the drill instructor’s duty hut in each training barracks at MCRD, San Diego. In theory, it’s a place of instruction, thus the name. In practice, it’s a torture chamber, a place where D.I.s punish the guilty and innocent. On any given day, a drill instructor can be heard yelling: “You wanna fuckin’ play boys, we’ll play. I got more games than Milton Bradley.” Before I met Wallace, I managed to skip class. Now, I was setting attendance records.

“Push-ups boys, drop,” Pena said. “Too fucking slow, get up. Now drop, on your backs. Sit-ups. Sit-ups. Too slow. Up. Bends and thrusts. Faster, faster. Too fucking slow. Stop. Drop. Push-ups, stop in the up position. Stay there. Wallace, I better not see your chest touch the deck. Down. Mountain climbers, get those knees up. Faster dammit. I got all-fucking-day, boys.”

I piston my legs, push, jump, then do it all again. Sweat burns the cuts on my hand, and they sprout fresh blood spots through my bandages. I don’t have time to care. I just make sure I do everything a little better, a little faster, than Wallace. It isn’t that difficult. He just thrashes on the floor like a dying bug, trying to get his bony body into the right position for whatever Pena calls next. Each time he gets into a rhythm, Pena calls out a change. The wiry D.I. smiles the whole time, putting his head down when I look up, hiding his enjoyment beneath the brim of his Smokey Bear.

“Stop,” Pena says. “Stand at attention. Lock your damn body, Wallace.”

My heart thuds as I catch my breath with a closed mouth and a rigid body. Seconds tick by and Pena stands there, flipping through a folder spread out on his training pulpit. I watch without appearing to, my peripheral vision skills vastly improved after the last two months of training. I see Wallace’s name in bold type on the top of the folder.

“So, Timothy Wallace, how it is you’ve been dropped from training by three platoons and you still look like a skeleton?”

“Sir?” Wallace says.

“Did I tell you to fucking speak?” Pena asks. “Shut the hell up. It says here you’ve failed to qualify three times at the rifle range. Is that right? You can answer now.”

"Yes, sir."

Pena approaches him, turning his back to me and leaning in close, as if he's about to tell Wallace a secret. Wallace swallows hard, lips trembling. The rest of the platoon sits at the end of their bunks, polishing boots while feigning inattention.

"Know what happens when you go UNK your fourth time?" Pena says.

Wallace opens his mouth, but nothing comes out.

"You go home," Pena says.

Wallace closes his eyes. Pena leans in even closer.

"That's why you're such a fuck-up, isn't it? You found yourself a way out. Well, there's nothing that says you have to go home in one piece."

Wallace's eyes are wide. Pena slaps him hard on the back and executes a perfect about-face. He's facing me now, and looks surprised, like he forgot I was behind him. I'm a statue, my eyes locked on the far wall. He studies me, moving closer and closer, stopping only when he's pushed up against my right shoulder. His breath is hot on my ear.

"You didn't hear shit. Understand?"

I nod.

"If you give a fuck about him, Cole, you'll help him," he says.

I stare back at him.

"Get your fucking eyes off me, recruit," Pena says.

He snatches the folder off the podium. "Taps" warbles from the loud-speaker, and he dismisses us.

"Guide and squad leaders, square away this platoon. We leave for the rifle range at o-six-hundred tomorrow. All your shit better be ready."

The rifle range, known to west coast Marines as Edson Range, is located inside the largest Marine base in the United States, Camp Pendleton, California. To get there from MCRD San Diego, we take a half hour bus ride in silence. Although Pena and our junior D.I.s patrol the aisles frequently, I feel alive for the first time in months.

Each day in boot camp is like a week trapped in a cramped box with no food and no light. We see no one but our D.I.s and our fellow recruits, day in and day out. There are no phones, no television, and no news, the only contact with the outside world comes via letters from friends and

family, delivered twice a week. If no one writes, you never get out of the box. But here, today, speeding down I-5, I remember the world. We pass Burger King and flame-broiled aroma fills my nostrils. Girls with wavy hair drive by in gleaming sports cars, windows down and blouses aflutter. They smile and wave, driving me to arousal. Rows of empty phone booths outside a 7-11 beckon. I hear my girlfriend's voice and her laugh. I see her stretched out on a blanket, waiting for me. The ocean sparkles in the California sun and I remember coconut-tan legs and long, blonde hair.

Pena yells the moment we go through Pendleton's main gate, reminding us what world we belong to.

"Recruits, welcome to Camp Pendleton. You are now surrounded by the largest population of Marines on the planet. In honor of this occasion, we're throwing you all a little party, in the gas chamber," Pena says.

Wallace, my seatmate, groans.

"Fourth time," he says.

I give a small nod, keeping my eyes on our handlers up front. I'm not looking forward to it, but anything Wallace could survive three times can't be all that bad.

A stump of a Marine takes us through the basics of bio-hazard protection. He speaks too loud and too fast, just like all the others. Without asking if we have questions, he hands us each a gas mask before dividing the platoon into pairs. Pena makes certain I stay with Wallace. After a short march across a parched field, we reach a cinderblock building. Yellow buckets filled with water and sponges are lined up by a huge metal door. With only a few small windows, the place looks like an above-ground bunker.

"Recruits, this exercise will teach you to trust your gas mask if you're ever exposed to a biological or chemical attack," the instructor says. "Put your gas mask on, then don and clear. You should have a tight seal and be breathing clean, filtered air. Once you've done this, turn to your buddy and make sure his mask is secure. When everyone is ready, we will enter the chamber in teams of two. It is important for each team to work together throughout the exercise. Stay with your partner at all times, he's your ticket out of my little house of horrors."

My mask gives me trouble right away. The straps are cinched too tight

in the back, making it almost impossible to get over my head. Others are already entering the building and I see that we might be the last group. I yank the straps.

“Relax,” Wallace says. “Turn around and I’ll loosen the straps in the back. We’ll get it.”

His voice is muffled by his mask, yet calm. I look back, making sure it’s really him. His mask is secure and he’s ready to go.

“Come on, face forward,” he says. “I have to get it seated. There, all good.”

He spins me back around.

“Now you have to clear it, like this,” he says.

He does the move twice, pinching down the nose of the mask while exhaling, then inhaling while covering the circular filters on either side with his hands, to make the seal. I follow his lead and the mask tightens around my face. I nod and we walk inside.

Canisters of CS gas are already popped, fogging the inside of the dark chamber as we enter. Something is wrong. My hands and neck sting, and my eyes tear up.

“Recruits, jumping-jacks, counts of four, exercise,” Pena says from a loudspeaker.

We start counting off, and I hack phlegm. Others around me are coughing as well. My eyes sting so bad I can’t open them. All my exposed skin is on fire.

“Stop, recruits. That’s good. Now, I want you all to remove your masks,” Pena says.

The words make me laugh aloud. Remove our masks? Are you kidding?

“Now, recruits.”

I shake my head then rip off the mask. The burning is everywhere now. I can’t stop coughing, which makes me inhale even more CS gas.

“Don and clear your mask now,” Pena says. “If you don’t clear it, it won’t work.”

The coughing and oozing snot render me helpless. I fight with the mask and end up falling backward on the floor, kicking empty CS canisters

as I go down. I fold into a ball and rip at my eyes, my mask forgotten.

“Cole, come on,” Wallace says. “You gotta get that mask on.”

I can’t speak. Everything hurts.

“Give me your hand, Cole,” Wallace says.

I can’t think. Wallace grabs me and pulls hard, bringing me to my feet. There’s an opening and he drags me toward it. We reach the door and someone closes it. I can’t see anything now.

“Please, Staff Sergeant, I need to get him out,” Wallace says.

“Nope. He can’t leave without a mask on,” Pena says. I can just make him out, his big arms crossed, his stance wide.

If I had a weapon, I’d empty it into him.

“Here, Cole. Take mine. I’ll go back and get yours,” Wallace says.

He slips the mask over my head as I sit on the floor, useless.

“Breathe in, now blow out,” Wallace says. He then starts to cough.

Pena is laughing.

“Look at my little turtledoves, looking out for each other. Aww.”

I sense the difference right away. I can breathe without going into a coughing fit. I squint and see a small blur coming toward me.

“Cole, it’s me,” Wallace says. “Your mask is fucked, but I got it on. Let’s get out of here.”

Pena finally opens the door and we stumble out, snot, saliva, and tears pouring out of us both. The sky never looked so blue.

We’re given the afternoon to clean up, square away our temporary barracks, and recover from the gas exposure. With our drill instructors in a large Quonset hut next door, we’re able to talk at a low whisper for the first time in weeks.

“Thanks for today.”

“I owed you,” Wallace says.

As I apply a fresh coat of polish to my mucus-covered boots, I finally ask what has been on my mind for weeks.

“Is what Pena said true? Are you trying to get out?”

“Fuck no. Getting out’s the last thing I want.”

“Really? No offense, but you don’t exactly seem to be cut out for this stuff.”

Wallace doesn't answer right away. He just pulls something from his footlocker and hands it to me.

"Maybe I'm not, but he was," Wallace says.

It's a weathered photo of a Marine in dress blues. The man in the picture resembles Wallace, but is older and much larger. The inscription on the back reads: *Semper Fi, brother.—Tom*

"Your dad?"

"My brother. He died in Beirut, when the barracks were bombed in eighty-three. I was fourteen."

"I'm sorry. So, is that why you joined, you're following in his footsteps or something?"

"Or something," Wallace says.

He takes back the photo and removes his thick glasses.

"Those things keeping you from qualifying at the range?"

"No, I can see well enough. I get up there and I just get so nervous. I can't control my breathing. Rounds go all over the place. Once I even shot the wrong target."

He smiles as he says this and I realize I like him. Maybe I had all along. I picture him up there on the firing line, his brother's face bouncing through his head.

"Well, you'll get it this time, right?"

He just nods and wipes his spectacles with a green T-shirt.

It's ten a.m., day one, and I already hate marksmanship training. My legs are stiff from sitting in one place for two hours, aiming my empty M16 at a barrel as a shooting coach talks about site alignment, site picture, trigger squeeze, and breath control. Half the platoon wears eye patches on their non-shooting eyes. The result of being told they possess poor eye control in relation to target focus, a fancy way of saying they can't keep their off-eye closed when they shoot. Evidently, sight alignment is hard to achieve when both eyes are trying to achieve it simultaneously.

I sit for hours in a fixed position, dry-firing as my arms, legs, and ass fall asleep. I pull the trigger about a thousand times, looking forward to doing it for real.

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The first shooting day arrives. I load my first clip and tap it on my helmet to settle the rounds evenly in the clip, just like I'd seen on TV. It's goofy, but it excites me, too. I'm about to fire an M16.

"Groups one through four, you're up first," Pena says. "Follow your shooting coaches to your assigned boxes at the two hundred-meter line. All other groups get down below the berm line to pull targets."

I'm in group three, with Wallace and several others, so I head to the firing line. Since I'm the next-to-last shooter in my group, I sit back at the spotter box and watch. It's ugly at first, shooters not getting set before they fire, or firing before the targets appear. Just a bunch of crazy eighteen-year-olds, stressed to the max, and outfitted with loaded assault rifles.

My time comes and I feel good. Everything comes back to me—the training, the breathing. It all feels natural. I finish at the two hundred-meter line, hitting twenty-three out of a possible twenty-five bull's eyes. I'm rolling. On the three hundred-meter line it's the same story, only this time I put all fifteen shots in the center. At the five hundred-meter line, Staff Sergeant Pena and several shooting coaches start paying attention. I take ten shots from the prone position at five hundred meters, registering nine bulls out of ten. I finish my first full course and run three points shy of perfect, something I'm sure few recruits have ever done.

For each good shot I made, Wallace makes an equally bad one. I watch him all afternoon, hands covering my face as he jerks, lurches, twitches, and coughs while squeezing off shots. I talk to him, saying whatever I can think of to calm him. At the five hundred-meter line, he seems a little more relaxed, but the damage is done. Out of a possible two hundred and fifty points, Wallace scores one hundred and twenty-five. A recruit needs a minimum of one hundred ninety to qualify.

"That's why they call it a practice round, Wally," I say. "Don't sweat it. You have four more cracks at this."

The week changes everything for me. Pena stops his constant harassment and ridicule. He even asks me to help other recruits having range difficulties. Instead of spending hours down in the pits dragging targets, I stay up on the line and watch other shooters, offering advice. The man I wished dead is acting like a human being for a change, but I don't buy it. I'm just a

big feather in his cap now and I know it. Graduating a recruit that aces the rifle range, a feat only a handful of Marines have ever accomplished, would probably mean promotion. Still, gratitude and respect trump bullying and condescension every time.

Wallace continues to shoot abysmally—low scores, once even dipping below one hundred. Pena lets me help him more and more, even allowing me up at the firing line, something range officials aren't happy about. The more I try to help though, the worse Wallace shoots. Tomorrow is Friday, qualification day, his last chance. I'm not feeling too good about it.

"Cole, go see Staff Sergeant Pena," a junior D.I. says. I stop collecting spent casings on the firing line and head back to the squad bay.

Pena sits in the Quonset hut, his feet up on a desk.

"From Cole to diamonds, right, recruit?" Pena says.

"Yes, sir."

"You shot a two-forty-nine today. You going to get that last point for me tomorrow?"

"I'll get it, sir."

"Good man. I'm counting on it."

"Sir, about Wallace."

"Don't worry, Cole. It wasn't a real threat. I was just trying to motivate him. If he blows it tomorrow, he'll be home by Monday, in one piece, where he belongs."

"Thank you, sir."

"Of course, now get back to the platoon."

For the big day, they pair the platoon up again, saying they want no more than two shooters per target for qualification. Wallace and I are together, as usual. We get an early morning run as well, so the sun will be behind us the entire time. Wallace goes first. He's all nerves, but seems to be keeping it together. I squeeze his shoulders and push him forward.

"Your brother's with you, man. I feel him. Go finish this."

He nods and approaches the line.

"Stop thinking, stop hesitating, and stop adjusting your glasses," I say.

"Just aim and squeeze. Shut everything else out."

At the two hundred-meter line, he looks calm and determined. He fires

without hesitation, the difference in him is immediate. Shots that had been misses all week turn into twos and threes. He finishes the first leg with a score north of one hundred for the first time all week.

I follow suit with a perfect score and we head to the three hundred-meter line.

More of the same there. Wallace is dialed in. Maybe it wasn't just hollow talk, maybe there is a ghost on his shoulder.

"You got a little edgy there at the end, Wall, but you're still good to go," I say. "You only need thirty-one points at five-hundred meters and you have ten shots to get it. That's nothing."

I take his spot and feel a familiar calm. Everything slows down until Wallace and the other shooters melt away. A light breeze blows on my forearms and the sunlight warms my back. Then there's nothing, just me, my weapon, and the target. I don't miss.

Wallace walks beside me, kicking empty brass and smiling as we approach our last firing position.

"Regardless of how this turns out, Cole, I want to thank you. You're the first friend I've had in four platoons worth of recruits."

I pat him on the back and nod, trying to remain focused. After all, I have a perfect game going.

"You know the drill," the range officer says. "Five hundred-meter line: ten shots from the prone position at a body silhouette target, ten minute time limit. Anything in the black gets you five points. This is where you earn your first Marine Corps badge. Shooters down and ready."

Wallace is all over the place from the start.

"Slow down," I say. "You're rushing your shots."

Six shots in and he has two fours, a three, and three misses. Eleven points. He needs twenty more, which means four straight bulls. I cringe as he pulls the trigger on his seventh shot. When they raise the red lollipop indicating a bull's eye from down in the berm, I can't believe it. Wallace doesn't respond. He just waits for the marker to drop and fires again. The red marker rises again. When it drops, Wallace fires. The marker comes up a third time. To say I'm shocked would be an understatement. This guy hasn't hit more than two bulls all week, now he's popped three in a row. I

hold my breath as Wallace squeezes off the last shot.

Nothing happens for almost a minute. The shooting coach at the line goes over to the range officer and asks him what's going on. He radios down to the berm and I hear a crackling response.

"No hole on the last shot. Shooter missed."

I watch as a white marker appears and is swung in a half-moon in front of the target, waving Wallace a miss for the last shot. He stands and stares down range, then looks back at me, his eyes full of tears.

"Next shooters, take your places," the range officer says.

Wallace walks past me to the spotter box then stumbles to his knees. I have no words for him and no time.

I get to the line needing to forget and dial it in. Nothing feels right, though. I squirm around my mark, trying to find a comfortable shooting position. Four minutes pass before I take my first shot. Bull. Okay, just breathe. I take another shot. Bull. I stay in position and take five more shots, all bulls. Wallace's face fills my head. Try as I may, I can't push it away. Bull. My breathing hitches a little, but I still have enough rhythm to squeeze off another shot. Bull. Now I not only can see Wallace's face, but that of his brother. What will he tell his family when he goes back home?

Last shot, I pull the trigger.

I wait, but nothing happens. Rolling over on my back, I look up at the group gathered behind me, four range officers, several of my junior D.I.s, and Staff Sergeant Pena. They look down at me then back down range, confusion evident in their faces. The range C.O. is among the onlookers and he calls down to the berm.

"Stop fucking around," he says into the walkie. "This isn't funny. What? Are you serious? No way," he says.

I get up and walk over, but I already know before the white marker appears down the line, waving from left to right. I missed my last shot. I walk over to Wallace and sit down. He doesn't even look up.

Ten minutes later, Pena pulls me aside, grinning.

"They just called up," he says. "The range officers pulled the target to verify your score. They found a keyhole shot. A fucking keyhole, can you believe it?"

“Sir, I don’t understand,” I say. “What’s that?”

“A shot so close to a prior shot that it basically passes through the same hole. You did it, Cole. You scored a perfect two-fifty. All you have to do is go down to the range office and sign off your card,” he says.

With each dusty step, realization hits me. Wallace and I shot on the same target. The keyhole shot could just as easily be his. How the hell am I supposed to confirm it’s mine? I turn around and head back to the line to find Wallace. I see him sitting on a bench, staring at his feet. Before I reach him, Pena stops me.

“What are you doing? I ordered you to go down and confirm your score.”

“Sir, Wallace shot on that target too. He only needs one bull to qualify.”

“You must be kidding. Look at him, Cole. He doesn’t belong here. Plus, what are the chances that’s his keyhole shot and not yours? Come on.”

As he says this, another image of Wallace appears to me, one of caged terror that night in the razor wire. Countless others follow, ones of him stumbling, flailing, and falling, a stamp of fear ever-present.

I look over at Wallace, who’s watching us. Can he hear what we’re saying? He waves, and then drops his head. A question occurs to me just then. Was his brother a good shot?

“Wallace,” I call out. He doesn’t move. “Wallace?”

He shifts, turning his back to me.

I do an about face and head back down to the range office to sign off on my perfect score.