After a full day’s missions night fell. It was time for my platoon in basic training to assault the rest of the company. Although we were outnumbered by 4 to 1, we were up to the task. Everyone was issued blank rounds for our rifles as well as MILES gear. The MILES gear is the Army's version of laser tag. There is a mounted laser on the end of your rifle and you have receivers on your helmet as well as chest. When the blanks go off, a laser is sent out. If someone is shooting at you and the laser is a near miss, you hear it whiz by. If you are hit, all your gear goes into a high whine. Outfitted with the high-tech gear, and the challenge of being the underdogs, our adrenaline was pumping as we set out through the woods to gain a better position. Although it was a game, we didn’t want to lose. We got as close as we could, running without being seen, but we knew we could get closer. Low crawling to the enemy's fighting positions, we waited for the order. We all rose like berserkers and charged through their line of fighting positions. There was chaos everywhere; flares were going off around us, while gunfire and high-pitched whines screamed in our ears. When the pandemonium was all said and done, according to the MILES gear, no one in our platoon had died (electronically, of course). Once we gathered up, cleaned up the camp, and done our after-action reviews, we set out for the final mission in basic training, otherwise known as the Night Infiltration Course.

When I was 16, I was like most other kids. Living with my parents, they provided my food, allowance, transportation, housing, and everything else I needed. I started making minor decisions independently (many of which still needed to be approved), but the majority of things were still completely up to the parents. About 3 weeks after I turned 17, I decided to join the army and serve the country. However independent this action seemed, even it required parental consent. After talking with the school counselor, I found out about the split option program the Army had that would allow me to do basic training during the summer between my junior and senior year of high school. I decided this would be a great opportunity to “start life.”   I remember the feeling as the time for me to leave for basic training approached. It was that gut punch you get when you are really dreading something. I was scared. I was neither a leader, nor was I very athletic. I was a scrawny little high-schooler that didn't even break 100 pounds and I was supposed to get through the US Army basic training? Despite my reservations, the day arrived. I reported to Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri to begin my basic training.

On the first day of basic, anytime one of the privates did something different than anyone else, there were at least 4 drill sergeants immediately screaming at him or her. I decided right there I would do everything I could to just fit in and remain anonymous.   Basic training is broken up into three segments. Phase I, or “Red Phase”, is what most people imagine our training to be. “White Phase” was the second set of three weeks. That entire time was dedicated to playing with our rifles and then qualifying on the range. “Blue Phase” is a culmination of everything we prepared for while going through the first two phases.

Those first 3 weeks of basic, we under total control. As we were under constant scrutiny, there were no decisions to be made, simply execution of the tasks given to us. From what clothes (down to our underwear), to how long to shower, we were given direction in every task. As basic continued, we were given more and more freedom. Our final test would be a field training exercise, or FTX, which would try the skills we learned throughout the course.   We started our march out to the training site later than expected. I remember we didn't leave until around 11 in the morning. As it was July, it was very hot and we were going to have a lot of people needing water. In addition to carrying my own pack, weapon, and other various gear, I was tasked with carrying the water jugs to everyone when we stopped on a break. The march there was only 7 miles, but with the humidity and heat it was exhausting. Once we got to the site, we realized there would be no rest for the weary that week. Immediately, we were hit with CS Gas (tear gas) and had to don all of our chemical protective gear. While we were in that gear we dug our fighting positions. That’s how the week went. We were actually playing war games, going on patrols and getting ambushed, practicing ambushes, and anything the drill sergeants could dream up. Throughout the week, our ambushes continued. We laid in our fighting positions, mostly fighting sleep so that we weren’t taken by surprise by the drill sergeants. More than once, we had to don our protective masks so that we could breathe while surrounded by the CS Gas. While this was all exhausting, none of it compared to the final challenge.

To get to the Night Infiltration Course, we had a 20-kilometer tactical road march. The tactical aspect of it just meant we had to stay quiet and keep the right distance between the people in front and to the rear. This march didn't seem as hard as the initial one to start the week had; partially because it was the middle of the night and cool, and partially because we didn't have as much gear with us.  After a couple hours, we got to a concrete wall about 10 feet high. There was a faint light coming from the other side. We had been told what was going to happen for this event, but no amount of instructions really would have prepared me for what would come.

  We started scaling the wall with the ladders that were mounted to the side. It was at that point that I noticed music was playing, and I immediately recognized it. The Ride of the Valkyries was being broadcast at the battle scene and even now, as I write this, I am listening to the same music, very nearly reliving the moment.  Once we got to the top of the wall, the sight was straight out of a movie. The field we were supposed to get across was 300 meters long and all sand. There were burning vehicles in our path with concertina wire surrounding them. Once we started low crawling to the end, we heard gunfire. At the other end of the field, were 2 automatic rifles firing tracer rounds in our direction. Looking up, you could see the paths of the bullets zipping over our heads. While crawling with my head as low as possible, the ground suddenly shook with a massive explosion. In addition to the burning cars and tracer rounds, there were cylinders around us that had been set with C4 to detonate while we were near. To make things even more intense, in addition to the war-like simulations, there were drill sergeants “motivating” us by yelling in our faces. They knew the rotation of the machine guns, so they knew when to stand and when to get down. I had never been this excited in my life. It was like I was in a Hollywood movie. I didn’t really believe that’s how combat was, especially with Wagner in the background, but it was still pretty cool. Once we got to the end of the field, there were some human silhouette dummies that we were supposed to charge with our bayonets. Since I had previously earned my expert badge for bayonets, I ran at him with a war yell and gave him a swift butt stroke to the head with the butt of my rifle.

  After calming down, I realized how tired I had become. I hadn’t even realized the amount of adrenaline pumping through my body to carry me through that. Luckily all we had to do from there was sit down and wait for transportation back to the barracks. By the time we stumbled off the cattle trucks, it was about 4am. Behind the barracks was the field of mulch, dirt, and rocks called the Pit. We would go there when we were undergoing “physical remediation.” Instead of going into the barracks to wash up and sleep, the herd of privates was going around to the back. All I could think was, "what did we do to deserve punishment tonight?” Instead, I started hearing more music, music to get you motivated to fight.

  As I walked into formation, the song playing was the Mission Impossible 2 theme song. I remember my steps were in cadence with the song beat. This unexpected formation was our unofficial graduation. Up to this point, we were called many names, some worse than others. That night, we were called soldiers. For the first time in my life, I made an accomplishment on my own. I, without the help of my family, went through basic training, and met all of the requirements to be a part of the US Army. At the end of the ceremony, even after the day’s events, we were still energetic enough to sound off with the soldier’s code. It has now turned into the soldier’s creed, but if you are ever lucky enough to hear a motivated group of soldiers saying it, the thunder will send a shiver down your spine.

Going back home after that, I walked with my head held a little higher. I did something most high school students wouldn’t even think of. Not only did I now have a solid job, but also it was one that was worthy of putting on a resume. Basic training wasn’t about the war games. It was really about learning how hard I could push myself, and what enduring really meant. Even now, I know that will be one of the most important accomplishments of my life. I had taken a risk to start my life. That night marked the very beginning of starting to be a man and letting go of childhood.