

Friends:

I am a member of a 1,000 member panel -- something of a "think tank light." One of the members posted an anxious note about her son having just left for RTC Great Lakes. She said she hoped he could watch the Superbowl. Here's the message I sent her:

He won't see the game. I'm Navy and old (but not Old Navy) and worked around NTC Great Lakes for a while. On day one, recruit graduation seems like an unattainable goal. You'll be thrilled at the young man your Navy sends home. He will hit a funk about three weeks in because that's the point where muscle and psychology get maximum stress. Less than 1% drop out after week three. The weak ones around him will quit, and they will complain to him. That kind of negativity takes its toll, so help him stay focused on the goal of becoming a member of the finest fighting force in the world. Send him a letter a day, even if it is only his favorite cartoon strips from the paper. Recruit training can be a very lonesome place. There may be three or four thousand people around the young sailor at one time, but the feeling is one of needing to find a "head" by asking street people.

After recruit training some of the legal-age graduates will throw a beer bash in a local motel. Tell him that attending that party is not a good idea. He'll get teased for staying away, but the police usually visit those parties and cart the cooperative under-aged participants back to the base. Then they go back and ticket the legal ones for serving alcohol to minors. The uncooperative minors spend the next two days in confinement at the base. In other words, "it ain't worth the risk."

His training will include the usual physical stuff, something like a really loud gym class with a coach who's a Ravens fan. He will sit, exhausted, through lectures delivered by sharp-looking Chiefs. Tell him to stay alert. The lectures are recorded and the lecturer often comes in from the back to rudely awaken those nodding off during "his" presentation. Endless written tests.

Everyone gets to swim, even if they don't want to. The time varies by class, but the object is to stay afloat without touching the sides or bottom of the pool. Everyone is assigned a swim buddy to keep one another safe. There are many Navy SEALs and UDT divers around the pool, too. Lifeguards, shorelines, and bottoms at sea are a really long way off.

He will be herded into a tiny room with everyone else in the company. He will be wearing a gas mask. The instructors toss in tear gas grenades, wait for the gas to get thick enough, then tell the recruits they can leave as soon as they remove their gas mask and shout their name and service number. Icky moments, those.

He will board the USS Neversail and learn line handling. He will be led through a building full of dense, oily smoke, training for how to save himself in a shipboard fire. Like the shore and bottom of the sea, fire trucks are a long, long way off when one is at sea. He will handle a hose as part of a team and learn to suppress a fire. On board a ship, there is no place to run, no safe place to hide.

We call one another "shipmate," an honorific that means so much more than "buddy" or "pal," and sometimes more than "brother." It's a way of telling everyone that being at sea is not always bright sun and tropical islands. Sailors trust their lives to one another every day, unlike members of the other services. Sure, she bobs on water like a cork, but she also weighs hundreds of thousands of tons. One serious bearing leak and the cork becomes a stone.

One little bit of savvy Navy lexicon: Sailors refer to their own ship as "he." All other ships are referred to as "she." Figure it out. It's one of the reasons proud crews have proud ships and vice-versa.

If at all possible, go to his RTC graduation. If you or your spouse are prior service, attend in uniform, or part of a uniform, or with your medals on the chest of a nice suit jacket. There is nothing more powerful from the recruit's point of view than looking into the review stand and seeing all of those moms and dads in uniform, including the recruit's own parents. It is a very special way of saying "I'm proud of you," a moment that will never come again. Rise and salute the passing of the colors. Applaud the recruit "band" (mostly trumpets and drums). There are going to be about 350 young men and women out there. Less than 20% will have parents in the stands. Of that number, less than half will be in uniform, so if you can attend in uniform be sure to do so, shake his or her hand and call him or her sailor. If you are Navy, first call your offspring by that secret family name (Poookie, Jeffie, Sweetie), and then never speak it again that day. Welcome your new shipmate aboard. Thank their Drill Instructors.

Ah, but the day isn't over yet. There's a small reception at the souvenir store where you can drink the evil Navy version of Kool-Ade and buy lots of Navy trinkets and your new adult Sailor's photograph packet.

One more stop. Go to the VFW post just outside the Navy base main gate. That's where the DIs go to put the last stamp on their own weeks of hell. They usually lose between 30 and 50 pounds per assigned company because of missed meals, insufficient sleep, non-stop work to show recruits how fit they themselves are, and fits of sorrow as this or that fledgling can't muster up that last ounce of physical or moral strength, or intellect, and drops out.

Tell him I wish him fair winds and following seas. Tell him to write his recruiter at least twice. Also tell him that he can write to me if he wishes. [Deleted due to privacy concerns.]