Hand I been thinking clearly, I would have known what was coming, but the ten most difficult weeks of my life had taken their toll. I was beat up physically and emotionally. And I was not alone. That’s what Marine Corps Officer Candidate School (OCS) did to people.

Still, I was dead set on being a Marine officer. Graduation was four days away, and I thought the worst was over. Despite the hellish weeks at OCS, I had survived. I was convinced I had shown I had the right stuff to make it.

The problem was that the Marine Corps didn’t agree. It took years for me to learn that the decision had little to do with how I performed. Though no one would admit it at the time, the decision was based largely on who I was. It was made quickly, perhaps on the first day of OCS, and there was nothing I could do to change it. The officers in charge made sure of that; the racial epithets that the staff screamed at me almost every day sealed my fate:

“Kamikaze man!”
“Go back to your own country!”
“During World War II, we whipped your Japanese ass!”

Now, the screaming was over. The damage had been done. I had never in thirty-three years of life ever encountered the racial venom hurled at me at Officer Candidate School in Quantico, Virginia. Never in Hawaii, known for its rainbow of people, cultures, and ethnicities. Never in Japan, where at least I looked like I fit in, even if I didn’t.
Never at Georgetown Law School, where, if there was racial hostility, none was directed at me. I had no understanding of how racial harassment could spiral beyond mere words, of how it poisons minds, of how it dooms its targets to failure, especially when the harassers hold the power.

As a third-generation American whose grandparents had emigrated from Japan, I was fair game for these old-line Marines. At OCS, they played the race card early and often. They had a harmless-sounding euphemism for it: “controlled stress.” The Marine Corps claimed such harassment toughened up their officer candidates. Later, I would discover how it turned my classmates against me, and tainted the official record, especially with regard to the subjective “leadership” evaluation. Most important, I would secure Marine Corps statistics showing that the OCS command had routinely kicked out minorities at higher rates than whites. What I did with those statistics, and the facts on which they were based, would turn the Corps inside out over the way it treated minorities and women.

But I didn’t know any of that on April 7, 1989. All I knew, or wanted to believe, was that the racial harassment and unfair treatment had been a test of my mettle. It was the only explanation I could muster for the bizarre conduct of the OCS staff. The cruel reality was that it had not been a test at all, but a done deal from the beginning, and I was facing the inevitable slash of the executioner’s ax. And waiting with me were the four other minority candidates in my platoon. This wasn’t going to be a routine review.

It was called the final review board, and it had the power to recommend that a candidate graduate or be kicked out. The board had made its decision long ago, and now was prepared to finish the job.

Ordered into the office of the commanding officer (CO), I gathered myself for one final try at persuading them that
I had the mettle to be a Marine. I stood straight, looking as much like a recruiting poster as I could:

“Candidate Yamashita reporting as ordered, Sir!”

I had never been in this office before, and I risked shifting my eyes to take it all in. Certificates, awards, and diplomas covered the walls; the commanding officer, Colonel C.W. Reinke, was anchored behind a huge desk, flanked by the flags of the United States, the Corps, and Officer Candidate School. I rarely saw him during training, and the sight of him now, surrounded by all these trappings of power, was frightening.

The rest of the top brass was there, too: Major Winter, the company commander; Captain Mortenson, the executive officer; and Lieutenant Eshelman, my platoon commander. The only new face was Captain Garcia, the battalion executive officer. All seated, staring at me, their eyes expressionless.

Eshelman began to read a statement. “This candidate is still behind the power curve. I strongly recommend disenrollment.”

How can he say that? I wondered. He’s the one who let the harassment go on, let it spin out of control, and did nothing to stop it.

He went on with his case against me. Evaluations were unsatisfactory, he said. Leadership qualities were lacking.

It would take years for the Marines to admit that there were problems with those evaluations. It would take years for the Corps to acknowledge that there had been a pattern of discrimination against minorities. It would take years for justice to be done. But on this day, I knew none of these things.

Colonel Reinke asked if I had anything to say for myself.

I straightened up and proffered the only defense I had at the time. “To disenroll me now would be a mistake. I have made great progress, and . . .”
He cut me off with the slam of his gavel. “Candidate Yamashita, you are disenrolled.”

I can’t remember if I reacted. I do remember feeling like my life had ended, that my future was down the drain. I know at OCS they try to break you down in the guise of toughening you up. Regardless of how broken I felt right then, I was not going to give them the satisfaction of knowing they had succeeded.

“Aye, aye, Sir!” I yelled.

I wheeled about and started marching out.


“I heard you flunked your bar exam,” he called out mockingly. The other officers broke out in laughter.

They had done everything they could over nine weeks to make me quit. When I didn’t go along with their program, they had to kick me out. It was good for a laugh then, a little celebration perhaps for preserving the unwritten, lily-white tradition of the Corps.

Defeated and confused, I returned home to Hawaii. With no job and no prospects, I passed the time brooding over my fate. I had wanted to serve my country, and I had expected a fair chance to try. My questions were the same ones that everyone asks when they fail: “Why me? Why now?”

Family and friends told me to move on with my life. But I couldn’t let go of my experience at Officer Candidate School. It had shaken my belief in the system, which was the most important thing that my parents had instilled in me. In law school, I thought all those ethnic minority, women, and gay students who were clamoring for equal rights were wimps and whiners who should just learn to relax. But after coming face to face with the discrimination they had talked about, I was angry. All those boycotts and marches that I heard about during the 1960s and 1970s weren’t just interesting events. They sprang from pain and
humiliation—the same sort of pain and humiliation that I was feeling now. To accept what had happened to me would be cowardly.

My decision would take me on a journey of self-discovery. I began to see what for years I had chosen to ignore: that discrimination was a real, pervasive, and insidious part of American society. I began to understand the meaning of courage, unselfishness, and unwavering commitment to principle. I began to appreciate a new sense of duty to country, which would make me a better American.

Now, as I wear the bars that signify my standing as an officer in the United States Marine Corps, I sometimes recall the faces of those at OCS years ago. I hear their laughter, feel their mockery, and remember wondering: What kind of leaders humiliate rather than elevate, destroy rather than build? How many young people had they devastated through their crazy concepts of leadership? If that was Marine policy, wasn’t that policy wrong?

It took years to uncover the answers. But first, someone had to ask the questions.