

7-1-1997

Mathematical Rebuses

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Arthur V. II (1997) "Mathematical Rebuses," *Humanistic Mathematics Network Journal*: Iss. 15, Article 16.
Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/hmnj/vol1/iss15/16>

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When I arrived at Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego, CA, I was treated like all of the other poor slobs who had chosen the Marine Corps as their way to fulfill their military obligation. I felt very intimidated at first because I was not sure whether I could handle the physical challenges (running all day, carrying a 30 lb. pack and a 14 lb. M-14 rifle). I knew that most of the other recruits were younger than I and in much better physical condition.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered after a few short weeks that not only could I keep up with the physical challenges, but I was surpassing most of the younger recruits. It took me a while to figure out why this was so. I could not immediately see any logical reason why this was happening. Later, when it finally dawned on me, I had difficulty believing the truth that I had discovered.

The truth that I discovered is that Marine Corps Training, while it is extremely demanding physically, is also demanding both emotionally and psychologically. The Marine Corps, after all, is attempting to train its people to go into the worst of situations (a battlefield where an adversary is trying to kill you, where you may be outnumbered and out-gunned, where there is seemingly no hope . . .) and function as a soldier to the best of your ability. When this emotional/psychological

element is added to the physical challenges, the training can rapidly become more than many young men are able to endure and they break down. First, they break emotionally and then they break physically. If your head is not in the right space, all of the physical strength in the world will not pull you through.

The Marine Corps drill instructors are trained to break recruits emotionally first. They know that they have succeeded when they begin to see the physical breakdown. Once this occurs, they then begin to rebuild the recruit emotionally to prepare him to survive the reality of warfare. Once the emotional component is back in place, most recruits quickly regain their physical powers.

I discovered through this experience that all of the mathematics I had studied had actually prepared me to face the "impossible." I already had acquired the emotional discipline that carried me through those harried few weeks of boot camp. It sustained me and carried me through that terrible, nightmarish experience. As I look back on my life, I can recount other times when the discipline that I learned in mathematics truly came to my aid when I was faced with a difficult life challenge, but few events will compare with my experience in the Marines.

Mathematical Rebuses

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