

Senior Projects

For Eric Harris, going to college and majoring in computers was a maybe. The military was another option. Probably taking his cue from *Doom*'s main character, Eric had long wanted to be a Marine. (He once wrote that he wanted a job to "blow up things.") And he literally dreamt of the military. Loaded with gear, he walked through a deep forest one night as flares flew through the air and cast shadows. Eric emerged onto a beach full of dolphins, whales, and stars as a voice said, "Watch out for the flares and have a swell time." Then Eric himself got launched into the stars.

So Eric must have thought it was divine intervention—and a scene right out of *Doom*—when the Marines found him his senior year. Specifically, it was Staff Sgt. Mark "Gonzo" Gonzales. Thirty years old at the time of Columbine, Gonzales had started out as an embarkation specialist, ensuring that planes were properly loaded before missions. Over the years, he had been based in Norfolk, Virginia; Okinawa; and Camp Pendleton, California. He had been in eighteen countries but had never seen combat.

To progress in the Marines, Gonzales needed to sign up for a "special assignment." His first choice was drill instructor. "Unfortunately," he says, he was chosen to be a recruiter in 1998. But he adds, "My mom was happy."

A good recruiter is like a good salesman, and Gonzales was selling the branch of the military with a reputation for gung-ho. "Every young man or woman is different," Gonzales says. "They all have different needs. You just try to relate it to what you know about the Marine Corps."

In an interview shortly after Columbine, Gonzales wears a short-sleeve khaki shirt, blue, creased dress pants, and a buzz cut. His build is firm and trim. He does not want the interview, which takes place in the conference room of a Denver recruiting office, to be tape-recorded. The room is adorned with televisions, videos, flags, black cushion chairs, and maps of Colorado.

Gonzales figures he had brought forty-seven recruits into the Marines, seven of them women. In Texas, Gonzales had lots of walk-ins who wanted to sign up. In Colorado, he had only one. Cruising malls and county fairs in uniform was part of his strategy. So was setting up tables at high schools. "We're basically just like a counselor in high school," he said of recruits. "Trying to improve their

circumstances.”

Gonzales focuses on those ages seventeen to twenty-nine. Some recruiters will walk up to anyone and everyone, although he shies away from the overweight because they probably won’t meet the fitness standards.

Gonzales is also a Columbine High School graduate, class of 1987. That was part of the reason he was recruiting in the area. As a military recruiter, he had access to a list of local high school students. That’s how he called Eric Harris on Friday, April 2, 1999, eighteen days before Columbine. They had a twenty-minute phone interview as Gonzales did a pre-screening. He asked about medical background, divorce, mental health, counseling, prescription drug use, along with height, weight, and any use of glasses. Eric said he had had a broken nose and broken wrist when he was younger; Gonzales didn’t recall how they happened.

Eric did not let on to seeing a psychologist or taking prescription medication, an obstacle to joining the Marines, whether he knew it or not. “You run into that a lot of times because the kid might be embarrassed to tell you,” Gonzales says. “It’s kind of impersonal to give it over the phone.”

Eric told Gonzales he worked at Blackjack and liked computers, soccer, and weapons. Nothing out of the ordinary, Gonzales thought. Eric said his grades were A’s and B’s. “He’s very smart,” Gonzales adds.

Gonzales asked what Eric’s parents thought about him joining the Marine Corps. “They wouldn’t mind,” he said.

Gonzales set up a time to meet Eric three days later, on Monday April 5 at 1:00 p.m. “I felt he might be a good lead because he thought about the Marine Corps and he was interested in weapons.”

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Eric seemed to be on another track. After speaking with Gonzales, he recorded his thoughts in his diary the next night:

Months have passed. Its the first Friday night in the final month. much shit has happened. Vodka has a Tec-9, we test fired all of our babies, we have 6 time clocks ready, 39 crickets, 24 pipe bombs, and the napalm is under construction. Right now I’m trying to get fucked and trying to finish off

these time bombs. NBK came quick. Why the fuck can't I get any? I mean, I'm nice and considerate and all that shit, but nooooo. I think I try to hard. but I kinda need to considering NBK is closing in. The amount of dramatic irony and foreshadowing is fucking amazing. Everything I see and hear I incorporate into NBK somehow. Either bombs, clocks, guns, napalm, killing people, any and everything finds some tie to it. Feels like a Goddamn movie sometimes. I wanna try to put some mines and trip bombs around this town too maybe. Get a few extra frags on the scoreboard. I hate you people for leaving me out of so many fun things. And no, don't fucking say "Well that's your fault" because it isn't, you people had my phone#, and I asked and all, but no no no no don't let the weird looking Eric KID come along, ooh fucking nooo.

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On April 5 Eric was on time to meet Gonzales at the Littleton recruiting office near Columbine. He wore a black Rammstein T-shirt, black cargo pants, and tennis shoes. Following procedure, Gonzales re-screened him on the same questions to make sure his answers were consistent and there were no obvious road blocks. Eric then took the Enlistment Screening Test that measures word and math skills. Gonzales scored the twenty-two minute, multiple choice Scantron test on the spot. Gonzales said an average score is forty to sixty. A score over sixty allows someone to qualify for almost any division of the corps. Eric scored seventy-four out of ninety-nine. Gonzales told him he did pretty well. Then he assessed Eric's values.

The Marines' reputation is first on the battlefield, bayonets drawn. But like any wise corporation, they actually look for character traits that vault their people above the lemmings. To that end, the corps has a list of eleven traits needed for success and gathered from a survey of former Marines in the Fortune 500. The traits are presented to applicants on eleven small tiles in different colors to make them easier to see. They then pick the tiles that explain their reasons for wanting to join the Marines.

Eric's top three picks, Gonzales recalls, were physical fitness, leadership, and management skills, and the triple-header called self-reliance, self-direction, and self-discipline, or "self times three."

Gonzales did not recall why Eric chose the particular traits, but the “self times three” was not any sort of a red flag that a potential recruit was selfish. “I’ve had captains of the football teams pick this,” he said.

On the battlefield, Eric was most interested in Special Forces or infantry. Like most people, Gonzales said, “He was basically looking for the excitement.”

Their meeting lasted one to one and a half hours. Gonzales noted that Eric wasn’t a bookworm, but he wasn’t a jock. He just seemed down the middle, a “normal person.” Eric never mentioned Dylan, nor made any remarks about shooting up his school. He did not say anything about the van break-in, which likely would have been uncovered in a background check and would have raised questions. Gonzales gave him some pamphlets and Eric asked what the Marines provided for college tuition. He seemed genuinely interested in joining up.

Next came the closing. “Are you ready to be a Marine?” Gonzales asked.

But Eric wanted to graduate high school first, which was typical enough. And Gonzales wanted Eric to talk to his parents. He figured they would have questions. Gonzales also knew that people begin to hear negative things about joining up once they tell friends and family, so he arranged a follow-up meeting.

Three days later, on Thursday April 8, at 1:00 p.m., he met with Eric, one day before his eighteenth birthday. The meeting lasted fifteen to twenty minutes, and Gonzales says, “He [Eric] was pretty much sold on the Marine Corps but he wanted to have the parents involved.”

If a recruit is seventeen, Gonzales says he is required to meet with the parents, so Eric’s case was a judgment call. But Gonzales usually sees the parents when someone is still in high school, and he wanted to meet the parents the night of the eighth. Eric said he would talk with them and call Gonzales.

The next day, Friday, April 9, Eric celebrated his birthday. His friends gathered at the Draft Bar and Grill in nearby Southwest Plaza shopping mall. Chris Morris was there, along with Nicole Markham. It was the last time Cory Friesen would see Eric and Dylan, and he remembered them saying they wished the jocks were all dead. He didn’t take it seriously. Dylan and Robyn finished off the night with Eric at the Rock N’ Bowl bowling alley, which dimmed the lights and featured a DJ from midnight to 2:00 a.m.

Three days later, on Monday April 12, Gonzales still hadn’t heard back from Eric about meeting the parents. So he went to Blackjack Pizza. It was eight days

before Columbine.

"Hey Eric, how come you didn't call me, what's up?" Gonzales asked.

Eric may have said he was too busy working, Gonzales recalls. But they set a meeting with the parents for Thursday the 15th at 6:00 p.m. at the Harris house.

Gonzales and Eric's dad hit it off. They had both been to Okinawa and reminisced about the beaches, jet skis, boats, and golf. They stayed in the living room in the front of the house and made other small talk about work. "Their house was nice," Gonzales added. "Normal parents."

Wayne Harris wore a dress shirt and slacks, having just gotten off work. Katherine Harris dressed "casual." Gonzales believes Eric was wearing shorts and a T-shirt. Gonzales himself was in military dress, ready to conduct business.

He said he understood the parents had questions. Indeed, they were most curious about educational opportunities and the delayed entry program, which allows high school seniors to join the Corps immediately, but go to boot camp after graduation. "Mom wasn't too keen on combat-related jobs," Gonzales said. "I explained to her it'd be his choice and there's a lot of other jobs to choose from."

There were no other questions. Gonzales was there about a half hour. He was getting ready to leave when Katherine Harris left the room and came back with a prescription drug bottle.

"What about this?" she asked.

"What's that?" Gonzales asked.

Katherine Harris said it was Luvox. Gonzales had never heard of it before. He asked if it was like Ritalin or Prozac, which he classified as mood-altering drugs and therefore a disqualifying factor for the Marines. She said it was.

"We got a problem," Gonzales said, and explained to them that recruits cannot be on any prescription drug, even penicillin. For more serious drugs such as Ritalin, recruits had to be off the drug for a year.

"After a year," Gonzales told Eric, "give us a call if you're still interested."

Gonzales isn't convinced that Katherine Harris tried to sabotage Eric's recruitment because she didn't want him in the Marines; she was supportive of the college opportunities the Marines offered.

"I just told them that was it, thanked them for their time," Gonzales said. Eric looked "disappointed, but not devastated."

The Harrises said nothing further, but “were disappointed as well.” Gonzales himself was also let down.

If the meeting had gone well, the plan was for Eric to do some more screening then sign up on Saturday the 17th, take a physical exam, and be sworn in at the federal courthouse in downtown Denver (where the Columbine lawsuits would later be heard). Instead, Gonzales went to his car and called his boss on the cell phone. Eric Harris wasn’t going to be a player, he said.

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Eric Harris also made a call Thursday night to Mark Manes. Eric was now old enough to buy his own ammo, but asked Manes to get him some 9mm ammunition. Manes said OK, but then forgot to do it.

On Friday, April 16, Eric talked at school about being rejected by the Marines. “He seemed disappointed, even though he talked like he was blowing it off,” according to Brooks Brown.

“Dylan and I were the first ones Eric told about the rejection,” Nate Dykeman told the *National Enquirer*. “He asked me, ‘Where do I go from there?’ He saw it as a last option.” In a dead end sort of way at least one thing was looking up: Eric received a promotion that day at Blackjack to shift manager. But none of it really mattered.

As the shooting started at Columbine, Gonzales was on his way to the school to pick up transcripts on another student. Then he remembered he had an 11:30 a.m. appointment in the nearby suburb of Lakewood, and flipped a U-turn. He later saw Eric Harris’ house on television. He was shocked. “It was weird,” he adds. After authorities released Eric’s name, Gonzales called his boss and said he had interviewed Eric the week before. He was told not to speak with anyone, but word got out and the Lakewood recruiting office was so mobbed with reporters that Gonzales had to go out the back door. That lasted about a month.