

Snake Charming 101

Mc Gowin and the Boas, Panama circa 1966

Alpha Company, 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion had been selected to attend the U. S. Army Jungle Operations course located at Ft. Sherman in the Canal Zone. I had taken a more or less full compliment of troops to the course, many pirated from other units in the Battalion, and even some 6-Month Reservists to flesh out the unit to normal TO. This was our first attempt to deploy the fledgling Reservists outside the continental limits of the United States.

In fact it turned out to be a non-problem as many of the individuals selected to go were literally chomping at the bit. One of the things I had discovered about our reserve contingent was that often they were better educated than the regular enlistee, and when exposed to sufficiently gungy training, they often requested and were accepted for augmentation into the regular Marine Corps. This was to prove true in our jungle evolution. All of the troops were volunteers, as were the reservists selected to accompany our little band.

The curriculum of the Jungle Course was orientated towards acquainting the M1A1 "U.S. Troop" to the peculiarities of life in the jungle and the critters a youngster was liable to meet in his new environment. For instance, we were required to eat "monkey," snake, Coatimundis (a Central American cousin of the Raccoon), and other rare and wondrous taste treats. All this was done to prove to our neophyte Jungle Fighters that survival in the rain forests was not out of the question in the event you were cut off from your normal C-Ration Delights. One of the highlights in the orientation segment was what we came to call "Serpent 101."

Now the average youngster is brought up to have a rather "creepy" impression of our slinky cousins. A rather impressive case may be advanced that snakes are really an important link in the overall ecological plan in our cosmic universe, but still, snake handling 101 would not be one of my first loves. This training evolution was designed to actually have the troops handle a Boa Constrictor and discern that he (or she?) wasn't slimy and didn't bite in the sense of a Rattler, Copperhead or a Cottonmouth.

Since this was perceived to be a sort of "scary" operation, the Instructors decided that we would handle the "snake training aid" in reverse order of rank. This meant that the Commanding Officer went first, followed by the XO (Skip Hartnett), then First Sergeant Martin, followed by Sergeant McGowin, the acting Company Gunnery Sergeant. After the first four, the individuals would simply form a line (supervised by the instructors to make sure no one "finked-out" or attempted to escape!).

The "Training-Aid Boa" was actually a sort of Ft. Sherman Pet, and one of the residents in the Ft. Sherman Zoo. The Zoo animals were used to showcase the various jungle inhabitants to the new students, before they encountered them in the wild. The Boa was a



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special favorite of the instructors and was fed only the finest in rodents, and continually stroked and babied as if it were a pet kitty! This was one spoiled Boa Constrictor.

The constrictor family of snakes of course, devour their prey by throwing a “body-loop” (coil) around their meal of choice and squeezing the life out of their unfortunate item of interest. They would then stuff the expired remains down a very expandable mouth! Since these reptiles can devour animals many times their own size and girth, they have an extremely healthy squeeze-factor, and could probably ingest a wrung-out pig or perhaps a small ant-eater. You may rest assured that their constriction ability is much greater than that necessary to crack a walnut! No problem was anticipated with the duty Zoo Boa however, and although he was probably 12-feet long, he was considered both pampered and extremely docile – the perfect training aid for “Snake Charming 101”.

The methodology for grasping and picking up the snake was as follows. First the individual was to dangle his Utility Cover in front of the snake to attract his attraction (sorta’ like Indian Snake Charming), and while the snake was occupied with the swinging cover, the youngster selected to handle the “old slinky” was to grasp the snake behind the ears (ears? Dear Allah!). He would then pick the snake up to waist level, stroke him lovingly on top of his head, and then gently hand the snake to the Marine behind him. Sounds simple enough, right? Well yeah, but the best laid plans of mice and Marines...

I went first and all proceeded as expected and the docile serpent looked almost asleep. I turned around and handed him to Hartnett who talked to the varmint like it was a puppy dog. The snake seemed to be loving the attention. Hartnett handed old “Joe No Shoulders” off to First Sergeant Martin who gingerly took the snake, made his obligatory strokes on the Boa’s head and gently handed the snake to Sergeant McGowin. While all seemed to bode well, I should have known that there had to be a wrench in the machinery somewhere. Mac took the seemingly slumbering giant and gently stroked the snake and was almost making love to the thing – I should have seen this one coming.

Just behind McGowin was one of our new Reservists who was as black as a coal pile. A nice enough kid, but his eyes were already the size of saucers and he hadn’t even touched the serpent yet. This obviously wasn’t going to be the kid’s favorite class in the entire Jungle Ops Course curriculum. He reached for the snake with shaking hands and arms extended as far as he could reach to keep the snake at maximum distance from his body. In order to sooth the kid’s feelings, McGowin personally walked the snake over to the extremely black and shaking Marine, but just as he handed it to him, Mac shook that snake’s head like he was trying to strangle it, and shake a martini at the same time! The shaking was nothing if not spirited and was totally unexpected by both the serpent and the crowd. A large gasp went up! The outraged and astonished serpent let out a most spirited “hissss” gaining the attention of all hands. The Boa, now located right next to the receiving Marine, recoiled and then threw a full coil around the terrified Marine’s waist, and was seemingly prepared to launch coil number two. By pure instinct, the thoroughly “shaken and confused” Boa started his involuntary constriction around the object of his hate and discontent! I mean this snake obviously meant business and had absolutely no idea why these humans were mistreating him after such a genteel existence!

What did the kid do? Well, it’s kinda’ hard to say as he promptly passed out and turned as white as a sheet (no small accomplishment for this guy!). The resultant mayhem is difficult to describe. Everyone (except the encircled Marine) was in hysterics including the Instructors, and those who managed to wipe the tears out of their eyes made a project out of recapturing

the pet Boa before he actually thought of making a meal out of my now lily white Reserve Private. Order was finally restored and we received a firm lecture on not taking the class seriously enough, but even then the instructors were still wiping their eyes.

After recovering old “Joe No Shoulders” and soothing *HIS* jangled nerves (my young Reservist would be several days recovering his composure and his natural color), the class resumed where it had left off. The instructors re-demonstrated “the petting drill” personally in front of the class to give them confidence that they were not going to become a possible item on the snake’s menu. Snakes apparently have a forgiving nature, all except for the Fer-de-Lance (a smaller cousin of the Bushmaster) which has been noted for stalking a native to his village to inflict some sort of “serpent revenge.”

None the less, it was an extremely reluctant Marine Recon Company that finally finished the elementary “snake stroking” class. My completely shaken Private was given credit for having “touched” the snake, although I doubt seriously if he could have told anyone if Boa Constrictors had a slimy feel! As an aside, I never saw the rest of the company out “serpent hunting” in the bush. Boa or not, the next one could be a Bushmaster, or worse yet a Fer de Lance, and the entire Company (including yours truly) slept with our K-Bars close at hand. Shudder...

McGowin as I have previously noted, retired in LA (Lower Alabama), and as a diversion, when not working at the Alabama State Veteran’s Affairs Office, teaches “Hawk Throwing” and Wilderness Cooking to youngsters in a sort of Rendezvous Atmosphere similar to those who are “mountain man re-enactors” from the early 1800’s. If he has a class reminiscent of Snake Charming 101, I suspect that his classes do not attract many repeat students. While the wily Boa is not a resident of his part of the country, it is populated with great numbers of Rattle Snakes, Copperheads, and Cottonmouths. I would personally handle such a class with a sawed off 12-gauge! With McGowin, ya’ just never know!

Semper Fi,

Dick