

Turning the Tables

(An early lesson in Tactical Disinformation)

For whatever reason, my mind occasionally returns to yesteryear as they used to say on the old Lone Ranger radio program. Specifically, I am reminded of a tour at the 1st Infantry Training Regiment located at Camp Geiger some 48-years past.. Why? Heck, only Odin knows, but perhaps it was the lingering innocence of youth, and a last fling at having no responsibilities beyond that of a Marine Infantry Squad Leader. ...Or was it something greater?

I was a Corporal of Marines serving in a rather interesting capacity encompassing that of an ITR student, a Marine NCO, and a troop handler all rolled into one. This strange assignment was due to a change in the training policy of the Marines in 1956. Prior to this era, basic combat training had been conducted at Parris Island in conjunction with Boot Camp, and upon graduation you proceeded to your assigned unit, considered to be a fully trained Sea Soldier ready for whatever came along. Times they were a'changing however, and those at Headquarters Marine Corps decided that young Marines should spend more time on the basics at Recruit Training (drill, history, weapons, marksmanship, Uniform Code of Military Justice, and any basic military skills not covered above). Infantry Combat training was to be conducted separately at ITR following your initial introduction into the initial intricacies of becoming a fully trained "M1A1 Marine".

There were a number of old timers who had received recruit training prior to this new training edict, and in the interest of uniformity of experience and training techniques throughout the Corps, all those who had not yet achieved the rank of Staff NCO were considered fair game to be recycled through the Infantry Training Regiments on either coast, as time and assignment permitted. As a "sop" to the old timers, we were allowed to go through ITR in our current rank, and if above Pfc. (don't forget, they wouldn't have the rank of Lance Corporal for several years yet), you would be assigned as both a ranking member of the platoon (squad leader or perhaps platoon guide), and yet be used as a "troop handler" to move the younger and less experienced lads from point A to point B during the training cycle. Hopefully those who had missed any combat assault instruction in an earlier training evolution would soak up what they had missed along with any new techniques being proffered in the latest ITR Courses.

Upon reporting to ITR, I wound up as a squad leader in Poppa Company, then collocated with Foxtrot and several other Companies during our upcoming training cycle. It had been a few years since I had gone through such instruction as an assault on a fortified position, squad tactical formations, and of course we had several new rifle grenades since my earlier training. We also had courses on demolition that had not been available at Parris Island in the earlier training cycles. All in all, the instruction was a great refresher, and covered things that we had not been exposed to when the combat training was incorporated in Boot Camp.

Like all old timers (I wasn't *really* such an old timer, dating only back to 1953, but then everything is relative), we viewed the kids out of Parris Island as extremely wet behind the ears, but then I'm sure the older Marines used to look at us in the same way a couple of years before! That having been said, we got some real jewels who reported to Camp

Geiger that summer. At least one of these rocket-scientists was assigned to my squad for the July training cycle. He was more than willing, but not necessarily overly endowed with Einstein-like brain power. Simply put he was long on enthusiasm but a bit short on common sense. For purposes of identification, I'll refer to him as Private "Ding-Bat"...

The various Platoons and Companies were in a constant arm-wrestling contest for some sort of perceived tactical, military, or training supremacy. Company Guidons were stolen from the Mess Hall when no one was paying attention, and if a detected perpetrator was chased down, he would often receive an appropriate amount of (illegal) corporal punishment. It normally didn't amount to bloodshed, but it kept us on our toes. Essentially we were always trying to get "one-up" on our rivals. ...And so it was with Foxtrot Company and Poppa Company.

During the 1950s, we were working a 5 1/2 day week assuming we were not involved in a weekend training exercise or deployed. We would participate in whatever training was scheduled throughout the week, come back to Camp Geiger on Friday night, clean our gear, and fall in for Saturday Morning Inspection the next day. Assuming that you didn't fall through your grommet when answering questions, your footwear was appropriately shined, and you didn't screw up coming to "Inspection Arms" there was a very good chance that you would be given your liberty card and turned loose for weekend liberty.

Weekend liberty in Jacksonville, North Carolina in those halcyon days offered many diversions, a few of which still remain in my aging memory banks. If you wanted to go home appropriately adorned with a gungy Marine Corps Emblem, you could avail yourself of the services of the well known tattoo artist, Ace Harlan¹; indulge your Italian cuisine cravings at "The Brooklyn Spaghetti House,"² or watch the latest John Wayne offering at the Iwo Jima Theater.

Those with a hankerin' for the seashore, could catch a Base Bus taking you out to Onslow Beach for a little sun and waves. Those with a desire to appear more salty than their contemporaries could take their dungarees³ (most of us didn't call 'em Utilities until the 1960s), out to the beach, get them amply wet with the salt water and allow them to dry and get bleached in the sun while you frizzled your bod to get that seasoned campaigner look. Most of us youngsters still wore our uniforms on liberty and nobody thought you were strange for doing so. It was a simpler, more patriotic, more gentle, and perhaps a more gentlemanly time. I often think back on those days and smile.

After several weeks of relatively uneventful campaigning, the rivalry between the companies was seemingly calm with no overt interaction between the companies. This was just a lull in the constantly brewing squall however, and things were rapidly coming to a head. We had just come in from a constant week in the field and Private Ding-Bat came to me with an exceptionally sneaky look on his face.

"Hey Corporal," said Private Ding-Bat, "I've got a way of getting one over on Foxtrot Company!"

I was only half listening, as this clown always had something up his sleeve. Usually Ding-Bat's schemes were not well thought out, and almost always held the elements of a disaster in the making.

“Well, what’cha’ got in mind Ding-Bat,” I said, busily stowing my gear in my wall locker.

“I smuggled a smoke grenade out of the field,” he said waiting to be patted on the posterior for his clandestine work.

As a note, bringing ordnance back out of the field wasn’t the big deal it would be in this current day and age. If the “filched item” wasn’t in the nature of high explosives or live ammunition, no one kept strict track of the large stacks of ordnance staged in piles at the training sites. We had no internal terrorist threats, and a missing smoke grenade would probably never have been noticed. Unless...

My devious young trooper regaled me with his latest scheme.

“Well Corporal, I figure we can throw it over into Foxtrot Company’s area tonight and have some fun and ruffle their feathers a bit!” the little miscreant said with a conspiratorial grin!

I must admit, I was tempted as our company rivalry ran deep following Foxtrot’s last Guidon snatching episode in the mess hall! Upon further consideration, I had a brilliant flash!

“Forget it Ding-Bat I said,” with a grin on my face, “give me that thing, I’ve got a better idea!”

“What ya’ wanna’ do?” he said, “burn their barracks down?”

“No but almost as good,” I replied, “and they won’t even see it coming! ...now give me that damned grenade!”

Ding-Bat kept pestering me, but I was pretty certain that if he didn’t know what I had in mind, he wouldn’t have enough information to shoot his mouth off until after the mission was accomplished.

As darkness fell and gentle sounds of snoring were heard from our adversaries snoozing in Foxtrot’s barracks, I figured it was time to make our move! I snuck over into Foxtrot’s area, hid in the drainage ditch and waited. When all the sentries seemed to have vaporized for the moment, I got up on one knee and gave our purloined grenade an arcing trajectory over into OUR (Poppa Company’s) area. Making sure no one was watching, and noting the sentries were still nowhere to be seen, I gently but hastily slithered out of the trench and back into our own lines.

I then went to the Duty NCO and reported that I had seen a smoke grenade come flying into our area from the direction of Foxtrot’s enclave. The die (in this case, the grenade) was cast! Very shortly, MP vehicles began to appear on the scene of the dastardly deed, while the yellow smoke was still wafting on the summer air. The OD was outraged, and I took pains to explain that I hadn’t actually **seen** who threw it, but it had definitely come from Foxtrot’s area (I of course, could keep an absolutely straight face, since I had thrown the darned thing from their area!).

The OD, just knowing he had a major incident on his hands, sent MPs into the barracks to hold reveille on the sleeping Marines and then had Foxtrot Company fall out on the company street. Since no one was immediately suspected of, nor confessed to the crime, all hands from Foxtrot were required to bring their footlockers out into the street while the guard force searched the wall lockers. A personal inspection of all the footlockers lasted well into the wee hours of the morning, and it was an exhausted crew still attired in their skivvy shorts (we all wore boxer shorts in those days), who were finally allowed to return to their racks after no additional ordnance was found. An entire week in the field preceding the late night inspection had insured that everyone was dead tired... Exceedingly salty language (some might even say obscene) was the order of the day (actually **night**) and of course, a curious Poppa Company looked on the proceedings with totally innocent, if somewhat outraged, looks on our faces.

Liberty was sweet that weekend, knowing our arch rivals were in lockdown in the company area until or unless someone admitted to having perpetrated the outrage. Since nobody had asked me, I didn't feel obligated to fess up. This was much better than stealing Foxtrot's Guidon, and of course, they never caught on. Young Private Ding-Bat had been threatened with summary castration if he ran his mouth! The last I heard they were still looking for the idiotic blighter who tossed a smoke grenade into the Poppa Company area! We of course, fully agreed! What sort of scalawag would do such a thing? The guy should have been horsewhipped or worse! Heh, heh, heh...

It was that weekend long ago that I learned the technique of tactical disinformation, and later was able to use it while plying my trade in the intelligence community. Hopefully the clowns in Foxtrot had learned their lesson, as had young Private Ding-Bat who had been hell bent on throwing the thing **into** our arch rival's area.

Out of pure curiosity, I've often wondered who flew the airliners into the Twin Trade Towers back on 911? I can't be the first (or last) guy to have come up with such a scheme, or can I? Hummm... The possibilities boggle the imagination – damn, maybe I'm just getting old, cantankerous and suspicious? On the other hand...

Semper Fi,

Dick

End Notes:

¹ Ace Harlan ran a famous (throughout the Corps at any rate) establishment called "*Ace Harlan's Gung Ho Tattoo Studio*" – many a young Marine of the era sported some of Ace's artwork.

² The Brooklyn Spaghetti House was still in business as of at least 1989.

³ The salty dungaree routine did not survive the infamous changeover from the herringbone material to the dark green sateen-style worn by the Army. This changeover was mandated by Robert S. McNamara in the early 1960s in the interest of service uniformity and cost of acquisition. No matter what you did to those damned things, you still looked like a dog-face. Only a miracle prevented us from having to get rid of our khaki belts and having to go to the Army black belt. We did lose our old and very comfortable Marine Corps Last (rough-out) boots going to the Army (Munson) Last type. In defense of the Army style boots however, they were easier to shine, and it was a case of one size fits all – you could do an about face in the things and never have your boots move.