

Overview and Comments

By Robert L. Rohrer

Court-Martial at Parris Island – The Ribbon Creek Incident

By John C. Stevens III

Not a suggestion regarding Stevens excellent and objective text, but I have always disliked books or reviews that require one to try and unravel a writer's or reviewer's point of view. Sometimes a viewpoint is never made explicit and we only come away with an implicit feeling as to the writer's point. Therefore I want to begin my comments by saying up front this is a thoughtful, balanced book and that Stevens deserves a lot of credit. I would highly recommend it to any Marine or others interested in Marine Corps history or military history in general. It is a story that needed to be told!

I will also state that I feel S.Sgt. Matthew McKeon was a good man who just made a tragic mistake. The factors leading up to the events of the evening of April 8, 1956 are manifold and can only be fully understood by reading Stevens' book. My objective is to simply focus on some of the material that substantiates my perception that McKeon was a good guy, and would have become a good DI!

My perspective comes from having served in the USMCR and USMC from October 1956 until October 1962. My service number was 1551264 and I was Honorably discharged as a Corporal E-4. I went to Parris Island in early February of 1957 and was in Platoon 43, First Recruit Battalion. My recruit-training period virtually overlaps the events of a year earlier, which put me at the rifle range at about the same time of year.

As it was for Stevens, six months later, the events of Ribbon Creek were fresh in everyone's mind. We were greeted with a recount and told right up front: "We can't touch you little maggots but we can sure work your ass to death" and they did. We were also told we could write our Congressman if we wanted to, but they were still going to make Marines out of us "By the Book!"

The pressure was intense during the initial "fear and shock" period and I saw several buckle under the stress into a Section 8 discharge. This is not the place to relate my recruit training, other than to admit I was mildly "thumped" one evening and years later met that same senior DI at Pendleton. I still treasure the experience of becoming a Marine!

Like all of us who went though boot training, I too pulled butts at the range. As Stevens points out the discipline and control there was far different than it was back at main side. This lack of supervision was especially true in the butts where there were no DI's. Only those who know me well know my quest for understanding things, and I wanted to understand this incident. On several days I took the opportunity to spend my entire lunch break walking all over the Ribbon Creek area. That was nearly 46 years ago so I don't remember a lot of detail, but I *vividly* recall my reactions and those thoughts will be expressed in this review.

Definitions from Webster...

Marine: Of or relating to the sea.

Amphibious: Able to live on both land and in water.

Swim: To propel oneself in water...To float on a liquid...

DI Motto: Let's be damn sure that no man's ghost will ever say "If your training program had only done its job."

And from Chesty Puller we learn the mission of Marine Corps training!

"...success in battle..."¹

From Stevens' book, and my opinions...

Stevens tells us "At that time platoons were numbered consecutively as they were formed in each calendar year."² McKeon's February 22, 1956 platoon was number 71. A year later my February 5, 1957 platoon was number 43.

The average platoon in February 1956 was between 70 and 80 recruits. A year later my platoon had 60. Run the numbers and you will see recruitment to Parris Island had been cut in half. Command's concern over the incident affecting the Corps ability to attract the necessary supply of new recruits was well founded and was the principal reason for needing to make McKeon the bad guy – not the Corps.

I was well aware of the incident when I enlisted. I also had been told a great deal about what to expect by Peter Daly, John Vaughn and Peter Kettle, hometown friends, who had each been through PI boot camp in 1956. I clearly remember thinking, am I man enough to make it through and become a Marine. It was a challenge to myself I never thought twice about and I enlisted in the USMCR in October 1956 and left for Parris Island in February 4, 1957.

Stevens' also points out the duration of recruit training in 1956 was "...eleven weeks of basic training."³ "...twenty-four hours a day for the next eleven weeks."⁴ Near the end of the book he separates the orientation week to emphasize "...disciplined basic marines out of raw recruits in ten weeks."⁵

By 1957 the standard training schedule was three months or between 12 and 13 weeks. I got to PI on February 4, 1957 and was still there for a platoon picture on May 2, 1957.

¹ Page 139

² Page 16

³ page 16

⁴ Page 17

⁵ Page 155

The “Swimming” section⁶ of my Graduation Book states in part: “For Marines, whose primary role in the Armed Forces is amphibious operations, swimming is an important phase of each recruit’s 12 weeks of training.”

During my training I was surprised to see recruits who could not swim had joined a service called the Marine Corps. I also thought it strange the USMC would then accept anyone who could not swim, but I guess the Navy did too. To me it seems like a basic requisite.

How much W.W.II footage have you seen with Marines wading ashore under heavy fire when the Peter and Mike boats could not make it to the beach? Or, in jungles up to their chests and necks in water at Guadalcanal and then all over the south Pacific and Vietnam as well.

HELLO! This is the mission!

In training “...the nonswimmers had been taught how to float, tread water, and dog paddle. All recruits in the platoon had received ten hours of swimming instruction before April 8.”⁷

Platoon 71 got themselves into trouble by not following McKeon and by “joking, kidding, and slapping others with twigs while yelling “Snake” or “Shark! Suddenly there was a cry for help and panic broke out...”⁸

One of the lost recruits was Thomas Hardeman. At the trial McKeon met his mother, Maggie Meeks, and stated “Your son was one of the finest boys in my platoon...”⁹ There is no way to know but this would indicate those who McKeon euphemistically called “foul Balls” may have caused the death of good Marines who were trying to save them. There are several descriptions in the book of panic and desperate clinging and dragging down into the shallow water.

“The impressive and valorous performance of the Marines in combat was considered to be a testament to the rigorous training program that had been used for years, and essentially the DI was free to use whatever methods of discipline and punishment he chose.”¹⁰

As the common saying goes McKeon was being “hung out to dry”. Marsh marches had long been a common threat and practice at PI but with the political storm over this incident no one, especially another DI was going to risk his career by coming forward. Except, no less than Platoon 71 SDI, Staff Sergeant Huff, himself.

Under oath Huff was asked “...if he knew of a practice, for the purpose of training discipline and boosting morale, of taking platoons on night marches into the boondocks, swamps, marshes and water around Parris Island, Huff replied, As far as I know, yes, sir.” “He also acknowledged that he had earlier told the recruits of Platoon 71 that if their performance didn’t improve, he would take them into the swamps.”¹¹

⁶ Page 43

⁷ Page 99

⁸ Page 98

⁹ Page 117

¹⁰ Page 14

¹¹ Page 95

Also under oath, McKeon stated "...that swamp marches had long been an accepted practice in boot camp" and as a recruit that he had been taken "On several occasions, sir."¹²

"At best, a congressional investigation would generate widespread negative publicity for the Marine Corps as well as risk further budgetary constraints..." and "...publicity seeking congressman could find and use [this incident] to stir up public passion against the Corps"¹³ for their own political advantage.

Not to excuse McKeon's tragic mistake, but this is just plain disgusting politics! The Corps, and McKeon, who had fought so valiantly in W.W.II and Korea, were now on the defensive. However, the Commandant, "General Pate, by proclaiming that the Marine Corps was on trial, may have skillfully averted a congressional investigation".¹⁴

The initial negative reactions of both Chesty Puller and Commandant Pate were motivated by a defense of the Corps and to support there was "...nothing wrong with the system..."¹⁵

In the Court Martial itself Commandant Pate stated "...I suspect I would have transferred him away for stupidity, or, if you want to be more polite, for lack of judgement. I would probably have written in his service record book that under no conditions would this Sergeant ever drill recruits again. I think I would let it go at that."¹⁶

Puller then stated "...I think from what I read in the papers yesterday of the testimony of General Randolph MacPate [sic] (Puller apparently misspeaks the Commandant's name!) before this court, that he agrees and regrets that this man was ever ordered tried by a general court martial."¹⁷ I think this, and Stevens' whole book pretty well says that McKeon was in a political situation that never would have developed if the Corps had not been on the defensive!

Regarding Platoon 71, "About three-fourths of the platoon was squared away. But the remainder were foul balls."¹⁸ "For example, eight of the men in Platoon 71 were either illiterate or had General Classification Test scores – approximately equivalent to an IQ test – below 70."¹⁹

McKeon's colorful assessment that 25 percent of the platoon were "foul balls", may not have been far off the mark based on the testimony of several members of the platoon at the trial and in later interviews"²⁰

"The quality of some of the men under McKeon's tutelage may also be measured by their behavior after completing boot camp. At the time of the court-martial, two men were AWOL from Parris Island, one was AWOL from Camp Lejeune, one had deserted, one was in the brig, and one was awaiting punishment by his commanding officer."²¹ Remember these men did not complete their recruit training under McKeon, so other DI's also had a chance to make these guys good Marines.

¹² Page 118

¹³ Page 38

¹⁴ Page 129

¹⁵ Page 138

¹⁶ Page 133

¹⁷ Page 141

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²⁰ Page 168

²¹ Page 169

In Platoon 71 “Staff Sergeant Huff was the senior of the three DI’s... had been a drill instructor for more than a year and a half and had trained four previous platoons...”²²

“Huff was held in the lowest esteem by the recruits in Platoon 71...he just wanted to get it over with.”²³ Huff was tired of being a DI and was dumping the majority of the responsibility on McKeon with little or no disciplinary help from King. “Huff, ...viewed Platoon 71 as the most undisciplined of the five platoons he had worked with.”²⁴ It also needs to be emphasized that “Staff Sergeant Huff’s testimony that he had threatened to take the platoon into the swamps authorized McKeon by implication to do the same...”²⁵

Staff Sergeant Huff had basically washed his hands of the young men under him...Sergeant King ... was hardly more than a recruit himself...The upshot of it all was that Sergeant McKeon became the man in the middle – a combat-savvy but inexperienced drill instructor trying to mold a quality platoon from extremely raw material with only limited help from his two colleagues.”²⁶ “Neither McKeon not King had prior experience. Both had graduated from DI school on February 5, 1956.”²⁷

Sgt. Richard J. King had also countermanded Huff’s disciplinary order that the men were to forgo cigarettes for two weeks when he “...surreptitiously allowed the men a smoke.”²⁸ This was not the “good guy, bad guy” game sometimes played by the DI’s, but plain evidence that King was not helping square away this “rag tag” platoon!

Stevens states “McKeon was failing, and he knew it.”²⁹ I think it was Huff who was failing. He had abdicated setting an overall standard of discipline and King was further undermining any chance of correcting the “foul ball” behavior of a quarter of the platoon. McKeon was taking it on, himself, to try and get the situation under control.

Matthew McKeon “...left high school in 1942 before graduation to serve in the navy and was assigned to the Carrier *Essex*, which saw extensive service in the South Pacific until the battle of Okinawa was won.”³⁰ His tour of duty took him...around Bougainville, Rabaul, the Gilberts, Marshalls, Mariannas, Iwo Jima, up through Okinawa”³¹

“He received an honorable discharge from the navy in 1946 and enlisted in the Marine Corp in 1948.”³² After his first tour in the Corps he reenlisted again and served “...briefly at Camp Lejeune before being sent to Korea in December 1952 for a combat assignment as sergeant of a machine-gun platoon.”³³ “Following his third honorable discharge in 1955, he promptly reenlisted and volunteered for DI school”.³⁴

²² Page 17

²³ Page 17

²⁴ Page 92

²⁵ Page 53

²⁶ Page 169

²⁷ Page 17

²⁸ Page 17

²⁹ Page 1

³⁰ Page 17

³¹ Page 118

³² Page 118

³³ Page 119

³⁴ Page 17

On February 4, 1956, McKeon completed the intensive...drill instructors training program...finishing fourteenth in a class of fifty-five..."³⁵ in a class that had started with 90. "Platoon 71 was his first assignment since graduating from drill instructor's school two months earlier."³⁶ "Every approach he had used so far to instill discipline and cohesiveness seemed to have failed. Now, at wit's end, McKeon was about to try a different approach".³⁷

As far as the charge of being drunk the testimony is flawed and inconclusive. "In sum, McKeon's alcohol consumption was no more than – and perhaps less than – about three ounces of vodka near midday, a sip of whiskey and a few swallows of beer at about 1:30 P.M., and probably a swig of vodka near 8:00 P. M. [This last drink was a gesture of tipping a capped bottle to his lips and not a swig] In the meantime, he slept for about two hours in the afternoon and ate a full meal shortly before 6:00 PM. It may be that McKeon had an odor of alcohol on his breath. It defies common experience to conclude that such a modest amount of alcohol, nearly all of which was consumed seven hours or more before he first set foot in Ribbon Creek, would have had the slightest influence on his judgement or conduct on the evening of April 8."³⁸

"Not until the court-martial nearly four months later would Dr. Atcheson admit that there was no clinical evidence of intoxication."³⁹

His own recruits "...testified that there was no evidence that Mckeon was drunk or impaired by drinking". Of all the recruits in the platoon who had made statements "...not one...had anything negative or critical to say about Sergeant McKeon".⁴⁰

"...the survivors had spoken not of maltreatment, but rather 'almost to a man have sung [McKeonn's] praises'."⁴¹ Gerald Langhorn, the former section leader, did his best to defend his former DI, whom he thought "was the best on the Island, in my opinion, and I think most of the men agreed with me, sir."⁴²

By contrast T.Sgt. Elwyn Scarborough, the Platoons Range Instructor "...had a checkered military career."⁴³ Scarborough came to McKeon's room and asked him to drive him to his car to get a partially consumed bottle of vodka since he had had a rough night and needed a drink.

Scarborough then asked McKeon to drive him to the NCO club "Here's your bottle, Gunny. Take it with you. Leave it here. I'll pick it up later"⁴⁴ The bottle would not have been there later if Scarborough had taken it back to his car, as McKeon had asked him.

McKeon was victim of being a nice guy by helping Scarborough with his bottle, allowing him to leave it in the barracks, driving Scarborough to the NCO club and accepting congratulatory drinks he never finished. Granted, McKeon used bad judgement but he was certainly not a bad guy. McKeon left the NCO club about 1:40 PM. Back at the range he took a nap till 5:00 PM.

³⁵ Page 18

³⁶ Page 1

³⁷ Page 4

³⁸ Page 168

³⁹ Page 48

⁴⁰ Page 46

⁴¹ Page 53

⁴² Page 102

⁴³ Page 21

⁴⁴ Page 22

The scene of the accident was described as “Some fifty to seventy-five feet beyond the marsh was a meandering tidal stream known as Ribbon Creek.”⁴⁵ I want to stress that S.Sgt. McKeon was the first person in the water and he was the last one out. He was leading, not just ordering recruits into an unknown situation. It is empirically obvious that if they had just followed him, as instructed, they all would have gotten back safely. Basic for military training!

“One day in the butts Sergeant McKeon had seen a drill instructor march his platoon out that pier and off the end, right into the creek. The men had emerged chastened, muddy, and perhaps wiser for the experience. The incident had not been lost on Matt McKeon.”⁴⁶ “He (McKeon) was also led into the marshes behind the rifle range into water up to his knees and ordered to drop into the mud when his drill instructor simulated an air raid alert.”⁴⁷

I also want to point out the caption on one of the Ribbon Creek photos in Stevens’ book says, “The view is toward the ocean...” giving the impression that Ribbon Creek was directly adjacent to the Atlantic. In fact, Ribbon Creek adjoins Edding Creek, and they both empty into Broad River and Port Royal Sound. The Ocean is several miles down the Sound to the east. Let’s not have images of a surging swamp with the tide acting like the parting of the Red Sea!

In fact, the tidal forces around Parris Island were not strong enough to “clean” the beaches let alone the marshes. A base order stated that due to “...the contamination of the water adjacent to Parris Island, all personnel of this Command are prohibited from bathing or swimming therein.”⁴⁸

This was not the case on the beach at Hilton Head Island where I vacationed for three years in the 1980’s. But even on the beach the tide is not a high-speed thing that can suck you away, but a gradual raising and lowering of the water. We swam there for weeks, women and children alike, building sandcastles and watching the tide slowly wash them away while cleaning the beach.

“M. Sgt. John E. Clement...had spent a total of seven of eight years at Parris Island...” He was “... assigned to water transportation...was familiar with Ribbon Creek...” and “...estimated the water in the marsh and the grassy area between the creek and the filled land behind Charlie range to be two and a half to three feet deep at high tide.”⁴⁹

John Stevens is from Massachusetts so I am sure he has gone “crabbing” in the tidal marshes off Cape Cod or the mainland. I first started doing this as a 10-year-old. Crab net in one hand and a fish head on a string in the other. I used to wade in tidal swamps and marshes catching crabs so I know about the pull of a tide in marshes directly adjacent to, and even in view of the Atlantic.

We used to work the drainage pipes that went under the road near Chatham. You could barely sense the tidal flow in the marshes, but at the inland mouth of the pipe there was a current with crabs riding it, which made them easy to net.

My preamble noted I had looked closely at Ribbon Creek while at the rifle range and my “*vivid*” reaction then, and on a return visit when vacationing at Hilton Head, was that someone would need to be retarded or radically incompetent to drown in that area! Several in platoon 71 fit this description.

⁴⁵ Page 2

⁴⁶ Page 5

⁴⁷ Page 17

⁴⁸ Page 83

⁴⁹ Page 87

Surely these men would never have survived the conditions in many amphibious landings, and they would have been in worse trouble in any combat situation involving water.

Then there was the claim of dangerous mud which "...was anywhere from several inches to more than a foot deep...in a marsh "...covered by two to three feet of cool water"⁵⁰ Big deal! In a monsoon in the northern training area of Okinawa I once slipped and fell dropping a machine gun in mud so deep it took three of us a minute to find it. Granted I was not in a tidal swamp but it was late at night, pitch dark, and we had been wading through creeks in a dense jungle for hours with lots of water and precipitous drops. I wonder what these guys would have done there!

At one point they got a shrimp fisherman to bring his boat over but " The shrimper proved to be of no practical use, however, as his boat ran aground in the ebbing tide."⁵¹ It is certainly interesting that after a shrimper runs aground they bring in "a Marine frogman named Gerald Seybold...to don his wet suit and comb the creek bed."⁵² I can just see him flopping around in the mud.

When the incident occurred it must be put in the context that McKeon had been a Junior DI for only a few weeks. He graduated from DI school on February 4, 1956 and did not pick up platoon 71 until February 22, 1956 and the accident was April 8, 1956. This was his first platoon assignment and he was only about six weeks into the job.

When the platoon left on this maneuver "...the tide, which had crested shortly after 6:34 P. M. was beginning to recede."⁵³ It was nearly two hours since high tide, yet Stevens characterizes it as "... coursing strongly back to the sea...The swiftly moving waters acted like an undertow on the men..."⁵⁴ Yet "...a body is invariably found near the spot of drowning even in swiftly moving tidal waters."⁵⁵

"About ten to fifteen feet from the point of entry, he [McKeon] ordered the column to turn ninety degrees to the right so it was now moving parallel to the bank in knee-deep water. McKeon advised the recruits within ear shot that in combat it was important to stay near the bank of a stream and out of the moonlight to avoid detection by the enemy".⁵⁶

"McKeon continued the platoon on its course parallel to the water's edge for at least thirty feet. He then turned toward the deeper waters for ten to fifteen feet, and then left again. The column now resembled a U-shaped snake as the men in the front were doubling back, again parallel to the water's edge but nearer to the center of the creek bed".⁵⁷

Then "...several of the young men began what in military terms would be deemed "grab-assing." Someone yelled, "Gator!" Others were slapping the water and pretending to be in trouble..."⁵⁸

We then have Stevens dramatic description that "...the nervous and frightened young men, many quelling their apprehension by joking and fooling around..." were faced with "... the ever deeper water; the force of the outgoing tide; and the precipitous drop-off of the creek bed leading to the

⁵⁰ Page 5

⁵¹ Page 32

⁵² Page 33

⁵³ Page 7

⁵⁴ Page 7

⁵⁵ Page 32

⁵⁶ Page 6

⁵⁷ Page 6

⁵⁸ Page 6

sudden eruption of panic and chaos followed by a number of valiant and sometimes futile rescue efforts.”⁵⁹

“All five of the young men had been found within forty yards of each other in a depression in the creek bottom known to local fishermen as the “trout hole.”⁶⁰ This infamous “...trout hole, which he (S.Sgt. George W. Sparks) testified was about one and one-half feet deeper than the rest of the creek bed.”⁶¹

One of my former NCO’s who was later a DI told me recruits would rather sandpaper the ass of a lion in a phone booth than laugh at a DI if he had control of the platoon. I surely agree, but the most important question of this whole incident is, what about S.Sgt. Edward A. Huff? He was the senior drill instructor, and had been a drill instructor for more than a year and a half. He had also trained four previous platoons? Huff was the leader who should have set the overall tone of discipline and should also have been a trainer and mentor for his brand new junior DI’s.

Bottom line, McKeon was a new junior DI carrying virtually the whole burden of squaring away this platoon. When I got there a year later there was a “Motivation Platoon” along with “Slow learner” and “Fat Man” Platoons. I don’t know if this approach existed in 1956 but what I saw of the “Motivation Platoon” regimen would have straightened out these “foul balls”.

If a “Motivation Platoon” did not get their heads on straight they would have received section 8 or other unfit discharges and would not have been a disrupting influence on Platoon 71.

Having these men in a regular platoon was not only unfair to the whole training program but to the rest of Platoon 71, where seventy-five percent of men were good recruits. When I was there we wanted to look good! We were proud of our Platoon 43 and we all strutted behind our Guidon to the cadence of our DI’s. As we passed other platoons our DI’s used to say to us, “let’s show these guys how good we are”. We were becoming Marines and would have thumped these “foul balls” ourselves if they had been in our platoon!

Stevens points out that Platoon 71 was housed in “...building 761, one of a uniform row of H-shaped white wooden buildings with four squad bays that housed recruit platoons while they were at the rifle range.”⁶² They had stopped using these old wooden “H” buildings by 1957; at least all of us at the range were in Quonset huts along Wake Boulevard. Stevens points out they were called Nissen huts⁶³, a term I had never heard. Apparently Nissen was the inventor and Quonset was a brand name.

Anyway, there were only about half as many recruits on the range in March/April 1957. When I visited PI in the 1980’s the huts were gone, as were virtually all the old wooden barracks at main side. Air-conditioned brick buildings are now the order of the day!

Although busted to Private, McKeon was allowed to stay in the Marine Corps. At Cherry Point, North Carolina, he attempted to rebuild his career, capitalizing on his W.W.II carrier experience. He worked with an all-weather fighter squadron and supplemented his private’s pay by working nights in the kitchen of the EM club. Remember he had a wife and kids!

⁵⁹ Page 43

⁶⁰ Page 33

⁶¹ Page 42

⁶² Page 2

⁶³ Page 18

Still suffering from the same ailing back he had struggled with on that fateful night in 1956, he was found to be medically disabled and received an honorable discharge in 1959.

Earlier that year he had earned his squadron's "Marine of the Month" award.

"With one exception, all of the men interviewed forty years later spoke as highly of their former drill instructor as they had at the trial."⁶⁴

Enough said!

Sincerely,

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⁶⁴ Page 172