

The Marines and the 173rd Airborne Brigade...

By Dick Culver

There are times when two units with equal legos and bragging rights are co-located in time and space. When this happens, the normal expected friction will usually manifest itself with predictable consequences, but every so often the inter-unit competition will get out of hand, and so it was with a regiment of Marines and a Brigade of Airborne Soldiers.

The story takes place a number of years prior to the unpleasantness in Vietnam. About 1961 I was the Executive Officer of Golf Company, of the 2nd Battalion of the 9th Marine Regiment, stationed on Okinawa. At that particular time, the 9th Marines were co-located with the 173rd Airborne Brigade at Camp Sukiran (later sometimes spelled Zukiran) on the "Rock" as "Okie" was generally called. Bear in mind, during the timeframe of this story, it had only been 16 years since the actual battle for Okinawa.



Culver suiting up for a Joint Jump with the 173rd, July 1961, Yomatan Air Strip Okinawa

Now the Marines have always been a proud organization, and had a reputation of taking virtually no verbal or physical abuse from anyone short of *Allah* himself. The 173rd was an Airborne Outfit, and were a bit salty themselves. The Marines often made reference to the Airborne's badge of honor (their jump wings), somewhat irreverently calling them "flying ice cream cones"... if the truth were known, the Marines were a bit jealous of the Airborne being able to sport such a symbol of macho bravado... Since I was an old Force Reconnaissance Marine, I already had my parachute wings, but I was one of only two such in our entire battalion. The Commanding Officer of the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment and I were the only ones with such elegant symbols of our manly prowess...

The 173rd was a really great outfit, and gave us a run for our money. The Marines of course simply sat around and grumbled a bit over our lack of such an ostentatious symbol (the jump wings) of our ability to impose our will on the enemy. The 173rd of course, sensed this, and took every opportunity to display a sense of quiet arrogance and superiority towards their brothers in arms. The stage was set for disaster...

The Army Airborne troops, during that particular time frame, had a rather maddening tradition of saying "*Airborne*" (rather loudly) as they passed their Airborne officers, while rendering a snappy salute. The closer to any observing Marines they happened to be, the snappier the salute and the louder the verbal exchange of course! The Airborne Officer was expected to answer "*All the Way*" as they returned the salute.

Now this gimmick was *MEANT* to be exchanged only between Airborne Troops and their Officers as a means of instilling morale and unit pride. The Marines felt that they needed no such artificial morale boost – after all, they *WERE* Marines, right? As long as we maintained our distance during day to day contact, everything went well – after all, we didn't care what these upstart “sky troopers” (or “Garri-troopers” as the Marines sometimes called them) had to do to convince themselves that they were worthy of respect – So far, no sweat, just a little healthy rivalry between two excellent units...

As the competition between the two outfits grew more intense, the 173rd lads, decided to rub in their self-perceived superiority over the Marines! As a result, they started giving the “Airborne” verbal greeting whenever they passed ANY officer (most especially Marines). Most of our Lieutenants simply looked at them as if they had two heads, returned the salute and continued on their way. The Airborne symbol of camaraderie seemed somewhat contrived to the conquerors of Belleau Wood, Iwo Jima and the survivors of the march out of the “Frozen Chosin”... The Leathernecks were convinced that there were *Marines*, and then there were “*all others*”. The Marines (with their own brand of arrogance), saw the Army, Navy and Air Force serving as “bad examples” against which to gauge the inherent excellence of the Sea Soldiers!

One morning after PT (Physical Training), all this changed! A bunch of young Marine Lieutenants were returning to their quarters following their morning run. By pure chance, they happened to pass a group of young 173rd Airborne troops also returning from their morning workout.

One of the young paratroopers saluted one of our Marine Lieutenants (rather smartly), giving the Paratrooper verbal greeting of “*Airborne*”. The Marine Lieutenant, happened to be one of the largest most aggressive Marine 2nd Lieutenants on the island. The young (if somewhat oversized) Lieutenant had been chafing a bit under the irreverent Airborne display of arrogance”, and snapped back (with a bit of obviously prepared rhetoric) – “*So's Bird \$++t*”... and the fight was on! It took two Regimental Commanders (one Army and one Marine) and all sorts of lesser beings, to get the diplomacy back on track... Since the ensuing melee was in the spirit of unit pride, cooler heads prevailed and things went back to normal.

I have always had a warm feeling for the 173rd and will always buy such a man a drink if we are in a local watering hole... There's just *something* about a man who's crazy enough to jump out of a perfectly good airplane.... I have more rather funny stories about the Marines and the 173rd – and with the right incentive, I'll reach back into the recesses of my memory banks...

Good troops, those “silk supported bird men!”...

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