

Lieutenant Kaag and the Sleeping Indian

By Dick Culver

This one is a tribute to the paranoid mindset of the military brass. It started when (then) Second Lieutenant Donald B. Kaag reported to the 3rd Marine Division and was subsequently assigned to the 3rd Tank Battalion, then located at Camp Hansen, Okinawa. Now Don wasn't your everyday 2nd Lieutenant, being 27-years old, and a former enlisted Marine who had at one time been scheduled to attend the Naval Academy.

The hate and discontent in Southeast Asia had given off the unmistakable whiff of burning cordite, and Don decided to quit his preparatory studies for Canoe U. and volunteer for the beckoning jungle environs of former French Indochina. Being assigned to a rather hush-hush radio relay unit, his (and his unit's) actual service is not well documented, but his experiences subsequently left him with a rather perverted sense of humor, and a sometimes overpowering urge to gently screw with the powers-that-be. The following story may or may not have been a deliberate attempt to leave the command structure scratching their heads, but none the less, deliberate or not, the effect was the same!

Before departing for the "Rock" in mid-1972, Don had ensconced his bride in one of the most picturesque locations in the entire United States, Jackson Hole, Wyoming. To get the gist of the story, a bit of local terrain appreciation is necessary for the reader not familiar with the area. It is located in a high mountain valley, with the Grand Teton Mountains on the Western Side, and nestled in by the Sapphire Mountains on the Eastern Side. Many movies have been set in the Teton Mountain area including such classics as *Shane*. It is truly spectacular country if nothing else – however it does have one characteristic that keeps the area from being overrun by fleeing Californians, it snows – a lot! As beautiful an area as it is, the snow sorta' acts as flea-repellent to those who would change it into a socialist paradise. Thank the 'Weather Gods' for small favors.

Like all locals, the old timers of Jackson Hole have various tales that predict the fearsomeness of a coming winter. Little things, like extremely long fur on the caterpillars (somewhat reminiscent of "Oracle Jones" in the movie *"The Hallelujah Trail"*)¹, or the squirrels storing more nuts than usual, are said to be sure-fire indicators to lay in a goodly supply of firewood. One legend the Jackson Hole residents *HAVE* agreed upon over the years however, is a bit more understandable. It seems that one mountain rock formation on the Sapphire Mountain side of the valley, has the appearance of an Indian laying on his back in a supine position. It may take a bit of imagination to see it clearly, but this one has a universal consensus of being a resting (if not sleeping) Native-American (heh, heh, heh). Local lore has it that early snow on "The Sleeping Indian" is indicative of an early winter – it would certainly make sense to me, sorta' like opining that the river is rising when your feet are getting wet. Considering various local legends, early snow on the Sleeping Indian falls into the same niche as the Groundhog seeing (or not seeing) his shadow on the 2nd of February in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. Now that we have set the stage, on to the story that inadvertently set the 3rd Tank Battalion's brass glancing and whispering.

Don's wife was sitting by herself in Wyoming and pondering the length of her husband's deployment. Since this was their first lengthy separation since tying the nuptial knot, she was a faithful correspondent, and included many of the local goin's-on and small talk, because it made her feel closer to her other half. Low and behold, one morning she saw the infamous

harbinger of an early winter; the snoozing Redskin had a snow comforter! Since sending this tidbit by normal mail would have made the hot (cold?) news old-hat by the time he received it in the normal course of things. Being new to the Corps and extended separations, she used the universally accepted method of semi-instant communications, *the Western Union Telegram!*²

What she DIDN'T realize was that when *telegrams* are sent to deployed service members with an APO or FPO address, they enter the military communications channels, and are delivered much like any military message. Normally, telegraphic communications to deployed service members were reserved for emergencies including such things as births, deaths, or serious illness in the immediate family, *and* sent by some sort of *official* agency such as The American Red Cross. Hot ticket local weather predictions were not the norm for military message traffic! It's not illegal, but tying up the message center with trivia is not generally considered to be good ju-ju. It's hard to fault a naive young wife however, and the received message was cryptic enough to avoid an immediate fanny chewing by the local Commanding Officer.

Don got a summons from his company commander, with instructions to immediately report to the 3rd Tank Battalion, Commanding Officer. Uppsssss... A second lieutenant being sent to report to a Battalion Commander? Such a summons for a young Lieutenant is not considered to a good thing, and he was a bit apprehensive when he checked with the adjutant. The adjutant informed Don that the Colonel was awaiting his presence! Uh oh, now what? Upon locking his heels in front of the Battalion CO, Don was handed a military message by the Colonel who had a quizzical look on his face. The message read:

SNOW ON THE SLEEPING INDIAN LAST NIGHT

Now Don knew exactly what the message meant of course, but the Colonel certainly didn't. The cryptic message no doubt conjured up visions of the message traffic sent to and by the Partisans in the French Underground prior to the Normandy invasion – such things as “Pierre has a long moustache” and other enigmatic communications. These messages of course had meaning to the partisans, but would be total gibberish to the German intelligence folks. Since the major part of Don's message was filled with the obligatory military acronyms and message routing, the originator of the message was not immediately obvious.

Absolutely brimming over with curiosity, the Colonel asked Don if there was anything he wanted to tell him? Don having an absolutely evil sense of humor as noted above, and being quick in his mental machinations, came up with the perfect answer. “No sir, but this is very good news!!” With that a relatively long-of-tooth 2nd Lieutenant took the appropriate two paces to the rear, did a smart about face and headed back to the company area.

As in any military organization, it didn't take long for the word to spread that Lieutenant Kaag was some sort of “spook” as opposed to a standard, M1A1 2nd Lieutenant. What else would fit the profile? Being somewhat smarter than the average Bear, Don kept his mouth shut, and conveyed the message that most of 'em *wanted* to believe with a occasional knowing smile, and exuding an aura of “clandestineness”. Since everyone *wants* to know a “spook”, his contemporaries simply filled in the blanks for themselves. Don's status as just another brown-bar was over, and all hands, including the CO, treated him with a bit of deference as would befit a member of a “three lettered” intelligence community!

Some months later, I became Don's Company Commander³ when he was assigned to III MAF, and have kept in contact with him over the years. He later retired as a Lieutenant

Colonel in the Army Reserve establishment, having served with the Army tankers for several tours including one in Germany.

Don continued his education and is now a high school history teacher in Moscow, Idaho a stone's throw from Coeur d'Alene, and the home of the University of Idaho. I would rather imagine that his history classes have a unique flavor, nudging ever so slightly towards a strict interpretation of the Constitution.

Semper Fi,

Dick

End Notes:

¹ The movie *The Hallelujah Trail* was the story of the residents of Denver panicking due to a prediction by the local seer (Oracle Jones) who had noted that the fur on the caterpillars was longer than usual, thus foretelling a long winter. It was feared that Denver might get snowed in, cutting off their supply of hooch. The prediction by "Oracle" caused the locals to send for a wagon train loaded with liquor to ward off the winter chills. The Army was sent to guard the train. The Women's Christian Temperance Union organized another wagon train to stop the delivery. A truly fun movie, with Burt Lancaster, Lee Remick (head of the WCTU), Jim Hutton (the straight man for Lancaster), and Donald Pleasance as "Oracle" Jones. The Indians of course have their own column bent on hijacking the booze on the wagon train. Check Amazon to acquire a copy of this little jewel.

² None of this would have occurred in the modern era of course, but then e-mail didn't become the de facto means of instant communications that began to emerge in the 1990s and is now a fact of life. In the early 1970s the thought of communicating with your family from the Far East with a lap-top computer would have fallen into the same realm as Buck Rogers.

³ For several months I served as CO of Headquarters Company of the 3rd Marine Division, a job I cordially hated, but it did have some perks in that I was also the Company Commander of the Commanding General (naw, don't ask, it's too complicated and not worthy of a detailed explanation). I worked my bolt until I was finally assigned as the S-3 of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines and got a trip to Phnom Phen from the assignment. All things come to he who sits and waits!