

“Arrest those Two Scoundrels ...and Bring ‘em to the Battalion Headquarters by 0800!”

By Dick Culver

It was fairly early in 1966 and I was the newly appointed Battalion Operations Officer of the 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion. We were located in our new “digs” on Onslow Beach, having fairly recently moved from Montford Point. Our new Battalion Executive Officer was a no-nonsense, very squared away Major by the name of Dale N. Davis.

Now I had served with Major Davis previously in the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company at Camp Del Mar, (a beachfront subsidiary of Camp Pendleton) in the early 1960s and held him in extremely high regard. He was a professional soldier and adventurer having served a spell as a “slightly” under age member of the Merchant Marine during WWII, being a bit young for his true love, the United States Marines. When I first met Major Davis, he was a Captain, and having been blessed (or cursed) with prematurely gray hair, along with an impressive array of “fruit salad”¹ we youngsters walked softly around this font of military knowledge. Captain Davis has already done a tour in French Indochina (as it had been named prior to becoming the infamous jungle paradise of Vietnam). Although it was never widely publicized, he had served as a part of an almost unheard of military advisory group tasked with organizing and training the Vietnamese Marine Corps in the 1950s. Already having been to Airborne School prior to his arrival at 1st Force, Captain Davis was the Operations Officer of the Company, and for a spell, had been the interim Pathfinder Platoon Commander following the departure of Captain Duff Rice, and prior to the arrival of Captain Bill Weise.² I was personally convinced that Dale Davis has been quietly assigned as my personal “keeper”.

We had just begun to receive some Vietnam returnees with combat experience, one of whom was a young 1st Lieutenant named Seán DelGrosso³ a genuine recipient of the Bronze Star for valor. Needless to say, we were impressed and regarded Seán with a certain amount of awe! Seán had served in the 3rd Recon Battalion in RVN with my old *Officer’s Basic School* roommate, Pat Collins as his Company Commander.⁴ We in 2nd Recon had seen very few young individuals who had actually served in combat at that time. A veteran 1st Lieutenant with a legitimate combat decoration was a real standout, and treated with a certain amount of deference.

Seán was assigned as a Recon Company Commander, and his reputation and “combat aura” gave the lads assigned to his company a certain amount of bragging rights. One of Seán’s buddies was Paddy Clark, a Marine Lieutenant who was a semi-professional baseball player. Unlike Seán (a professional Marine), Paddy Clark couldn’t wait for his obligated service to expire so he could get back to his first love, baseball.

The Officers in the Battalion lived in Jacksonville (there being no BOQ or Officer’s Quarters available on the Beach), or with their families in Government Quarters aboard the base. Onslow was “a fur piece” from town and the main base for that matter, and most took their noon chow at the Battalion Mess Hall, or married folks sometimes brought “brown bag”

lunches to satisfy their culinary urges. Except for certain training evolutions to prepare deploying Recon Platoons to either the Caribbean or the Mediterranean, or a specific training cycle (rubber boats, scuba, helicopter repelling, etc.) we often had some weeks that were somewhat slack for want of sufficient personnel. You must understand that because of the constant drain on the 2nd Marine Division manpower keeping a flow of Marines to Vietnam, many “separate” Battalion units (recon, tanks, amtracs, etc.) operated almost as a “replacement pool” for RVN bound personnel. We usually had a table in the Recon Battalion Mess Hall where the Officers congregated for a bit of humor, sea-stories, and just plain old yarnin’ during the noon break. Major Davis was often in attendance, Seán and his buddy Paddy were regulars, along with “watash”⁵ in what could laughingly be called “The Officer’s Mess”.

One Monday morning I received a call at my quarters (I had a house in Northwoods at the time) from Major Davis who sounded just short of apoplectic!

“Dick, I want you to stop by DelGrosso’s and Clark’s apartment in Jacksonville, place ‘em under arrest and have ‘em in front of my desk by 0800!”

“Sir?” was my response, “what in the world is happening?”

“Those clowns went over the hill for a four day weekend to New England or at least somewhere up north, but definitely out of bounds, without any authorization, and the only way they’re going to get a lesson they’ll understand is a General Court! If I let this one go, half of the Battalion will disappear to Gawd knows where anytime they take a notion! Now get ‘em in here!”

“Oh my Gawd” was my reaction, uh oh, now what? I began to plot a way out of this disaster on my way to their quarters!

I pounded on the door to their apartment and informed ‘em to stick their hands in the air (in jest) that they were under arrest for “going over the hill”! A look of total disbelief came across their faces!

“You’re kidding, right?” was the response.

“Nope, I just got a call from Major Davis to put you two clowns under arrest and have you in his office no later than 0800 in preparation for Court Martial proceedings – no kidding, the Major is hotter’n hell, and is almost foaming at the mouth if I read the phone conversation right! You’d better be thinking of a damn good explanation!”

“Christ, we didn’t have anything scheduled at the end of last week on the training schedule. We didn’t think anyone would care? What in the heck are we gonna’ do?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about this all the way over here, and I MAY have a way out! What you do when we go into the office is let *me* do the talking, and you two idiots simply nod your heads when I indicate, don’t say anything that could be taken for an official statement, scuff your toes in the dirt, and hang your heads when it would appear appropriate – got it?”

“Yes sir, but what are you gonna’ tell him?”

“Leave that to me and don’t get mouthy – if you’ll follow my lead, I think I can sell this one, but otherwise keep your mouths shut, it’s always easier if only one guy’s doin’ the lying! Do we understand one another?”

“Yessir!” was the dual response.

We rolled up in the parking lot of the Battalion CP about 15 minutes ahead of schedule. No smoke was emanating from Major Davis’ window... So far, so good!

All hands checked their military alignment, checked each other, and we entered the Major’s office with me in the lead. I stepped aside and allowed the two miscreants to come to a convincing halt two paces from a scowling XO! After an impressive fanny-chewing, and appropriate passages read from the UCMJ, the Major wanted to know what they had to say for themselves?

Before either of them opened their mouths, I decided it was time to make my plea. I effected an unbelieving look on my face and asked Major Davis if he had forgotten the conversation we had had the previous Tuesday at noon in the Mess Hall?

“Conversation? What conversation?”, was the comeback?

“Sir, don’t you remember these two making mention that they would like to take a long weekend the following week since the training schedule was clean, and they hadn’t been out of the area for months?”

Major Davis squinted his eyes, and looked directly into mine with what can only be called an unbelieving look on his face. The two charges I had brought into the office began to see what I had in mind. Both could be appropriately glib, and caught the drift I was attempting to take the potentially disastrous encounter.

“Yes sir”, said Seán, “I thought you had given your tacit approval” he interjected as if on cue. “If I had known you hadn’t caught our request, I’d have made sure it was OK before we left the table”, he said, his words fairly dripping with regret, slightly hanging his head.

“Yes sir”, echoed Paddy with an appropriately shamefaced countenance, indicating he would NEVER have gone if he wasn’t sure that it was OK... Both individuals were now acting appropriately cowed and very regretful that they had done something that was beyond the pale. Theirs was an act that would have done justice to a Shakespearean production.

Major Davis gave them his most malevolent stare, indicating with body language and what passed for a bit of appropriate growling that both these two scoundrels needed a good trip to the woodshed.

I breathed a huge sigh of relief, and waited for the final shoe to fall.

“Alright you two, get out of the office and don’t EVER let me hear of anything like this happening again!”

“Yes sir they said in unison”, taking one pace to the rear, executing a most proper about face and heading for the door, with me in trace doing everything I could to keep from wiping the sweat off my brow.

“Not so fast Captain, I want you to stay for a moment, the rest of you may leave!”

Uh Oh, I knew what was coming.

Once the properly chastised pair had cleared the earshot of the Major’s door, I heard a voice behind me.

“OK Culver, you and I have known each other for a long time, and if you figured you just bamboozled me, you’ve got another think coming! You and I both know that what you just produced was a first class rug-dance, but I must admit it served two purposes. First, the last thing I wanted to do is court martial DelGrosso, and second, hopefully it scared hell out of those two clowns in a manner that’ll convince ‘em never try that one again!”

What was the ultimate upshot of the dual “Lieutenant AWOL caper”? Well, certainly nothing untoward occurred while I remained in the Battalion. Paddy Clark had previously been approached by the Cincinnati Reds Baseball Team with some sort of contract, but since I never again heard his name or saw it in lights, I can only assume that he did not become the next Bobby Feller, Pete Rose, or Ty Cobb. I hope he did well, but I never heard of him again.

Seán/Carmine DelGrosso was one of the most talented linguists in the Marine Corps and eventually became their foremost Mandarin Chinese expert. After finishing the State Department School at Georgetown University, subsequently did a tour in Hong Kong as the Assistant Naval Attaché before the British Crown Colony reverted to the Chinese Communists.

Fast forward to 1986 when I was helping to train (or attempting to train) the Saudi Arabian Camelnecks⁶. The NCOIC of the Marine Detachment of the Consulate in Jeddah was a good friend, Staff Sergeant Tom Crawford. Tom told me that the new Battalion Commander of the Marine Security Guard Battalion⁷ (MSG) in Quantico, was Colonel “Carmine” DelGrosso. Hummm... DelGrosso, eh? I wonder? On a trip back to the States in 1987 while on R&R, I managed a stop by Quantico and paid a visit to the MSG Battalion. Sure enough, it was young DelGrosso (now officially calling himself Carmine). We had a good (but unfortunately short) visit. Carmine was now a “gen-u-wine” bird colonel – wow, I was impressed! I couldn’t resist asking him if he had ever told “his” staff about a “slight” brush with the UCMJ some 21-years in the distant past. He gently guided me out of the office with a knowing smile, and an apology for a prearranged conference. He did mention that such a discussion on matters of the UCMJ and their relevance to the MSG would probably be best accomplished in an Officer’s Club atmosphere.

Ah well, at least I didn’t have to lock my heels in front of the CO’s desk or do a sharp about face following a lecture about never violating the UCMJ again! It would seem that some rug-dances do conjure up a cloud bank with a silver lining!

Semper Fidelis,

Dick

End Notes:

¹ In Captain Davis' array of ribbons resided a Navy Commendation Medal (with Combat V) for bravery for service in Korea. It seems that he and another individual had unloaded an ammunition truck full of high explosives during a full blown (no pun intended) mortar barrage. Performing the same act under later guidelines (or guidelines emanating from a later era) would have most probably, have garnered him some something closer to a Navy Cross. Captain Davis would never have suggested such a thing himself of course, for that wasn't his style, but those of us closely associated with him, knew him and his combat mindset. He was truly a man to ride the river with!

² As an interesting side note, both Captain Duff Rice and Captain Bill Weise were eventually promoted to the rank of General Officer. While it is true the "unfeeling oafs" assigned to the Recon Platoons often referred to we Pathfinders as "*Trashfinders*" ...be that as it may, it would seem that the billet of Pathfinder Platoon Commander was at least occasionally, one rung up the step of a ladder to make General Officer! Of course it may have been the creative leadership that was necessary to keep a bunch of potential bandits in line!

³ "Seán's" name was actually Carmine John DelGrosso as inscribed in his OQR (Officer's Qualification Record). The story went that his mother was of Irish extraction and preferred calling him "*Seán*" (an "*Irishafacation*" of John). Seán eventually went back to "*Carmine*" and retired from the Corps as a full Colonel. It is rumored that to become a *true* Godfather, it would be necessary for a full blown Italian "*Paisano*" to use something more "Italian sounding" than an Irish surname. You do have to plan for your future following your retirement from the Corps you know! I understand his business cards are now printed as "*Carmine J. Del Grosso*" announcing him as "*Director-Americas, Africa and Middle East of The Boeing Company*", hanging his chapeau in Seal Beach, California! Egad! Note the spelling of DelGrosso is now divided into two words in Italian fashion. If he had chosen to go the Godfather route, perhaps some more descriptive moniker like "*Concrete Over-Shoes*" Del Grosso might have been appropriately suggestive?

⁴ Both Seán's and Pat Collin's early exploits in RVN are chronicled in a book, "*Marshalling of the Faithful*" by Charles Henderson. A truly great read, and will give you a feel for Seán's prowess and overall ability as a Sea-Soldier. "*Marshalling the Faithful*" is available through Amazon on the web, definitely a recommended read!

⁵ "Watash" is a term often thought to have been brought back from the Far East meaning "*me*" or "*myself*".

⁶ "Camelnecks" was simply a "bastardization" of the nickname "Leathernecks" for United States Marines, or "Bootnecks", a term utilized in the United Kingdom to refer to the British Royal Marines. The term "Camelnecks" was used in jest by members of our Marine Advisory Group attempting to raise and train a branch of the Royal Saudi Arabian Armed Forces. The *Camelnecks* of course, were to be used to launch amphibious assaults on invading enemies of "The Desert Kingdom"... Go figure?

⁷ The MSG Battalion is the organization responsible for recruiting, training, and supplying the Marine Security Guards who man (or perhaps "*person*" in a more politically correct atmosphere) all of the United States Embassies and Consulates throughout the world. Not only do they screen the applicants, and train them in their duties, but through a series of inspections they ensure the continued excellence of the assigned individuals. As an aside, the Marine Guard Force also ensures that all classified material is properly secured with nothing unintentionally left "adrift" in the heat of the moment by State Department employees. The Marine Security Guards are responsible, not only for the security of all posts, but are also charged with "repelling boarders" in the event of local political unrest, including defending the Civilian Embassy Personnel themselves. The individual who calls the final "shot" is the Ambassador or Consul General, even though the civilians often have a different way of looking at things – it's a delicate balancing act for the Marines in times where International Politics become a bit "left leaning" if you catch my drift! It takes a special breed of individual to successfully complete the MSG School and become a representative of both the State Department, and the United States Marine Corps. Carmine was virtually the perfect choice for the MSG Battalion Commander.