

Black Jack Westerman

~ and a Request Mast with General Krulak~

By Dick Culver

In September of 1968 I was assigned to attend the U.S. Army Civic Action and Military Government School in Ft. Gordon, Georgia. I was not thrilled with the assignment. This conjured up visions of serving in the rear with the gear as the old saying went, I and wanted to head for a combat unit in Vietnam, not to serve with an S-5 or G-5 (Civic Action) outfit in a Regiment or Division Headquarters.

Skip Hartnett¹ and I had virtually haunted the assignment branch at HQMC making our desires known for assignment to WesPac². Our first efforts had been greeted with the “shut up and wait your turn” routine” and we would return to Camp Lejeune with a begrudging eye to those who had been so honored. If we had only known! The last time I went up however, they wanted to know when I could be packed? My how times change – the casualty lists were beginning to make the rounds and what had seemed like a great adventure had turned deadly serious almost overnight. Wives were no longer eager for their warrior husbands to go out and perform mighty deeds if it meant becoming a widow and raising a bunch of kids on her own! There’s an old saying that a *Career Marine* looks forward to his next duty station, a *Professional Marine* looks forward to his next shooting situation... The ranks of the true *Professional Marines* seemingly thinned rapidly when the aluminum boxes started coming home.

I had always dreamed of serving as a Rifle Company Commander, and being assigned as a staff pogue was not something that warmed the cockles of my heart. Since it was not in me to deliberately do anything but a workmanlike job in any assigned task, I put my heart into the school, and eventually came out number three in the class. Since we had been entrusted with our own OQRs (Officer Qualification Record - the officer version of a service record book), I cleverly removed the page from *my* record book that chronicled my accomplishments and attendance at the Civic Action and Military Government School. This I filed it away for reinsertion when I got back from Vietnam. Hopefully no one would notice my two month absence from the Corps. I was given a set of orders to Staging Battalion³ at Camp Pendleton, only to find that Skip (now assigned to the 3rd Force Reconnaissance Company) had already departed for Pendleton awaiting the formation of the entire 3rd Force Company. I on the other hand, was thrown in with all the other hands heading for Wes Pac. While I was somewhat relieved, I secretly envied Hartnett who was soon to be deployed (as an aside note, I actually beat him into country, but that is something in dispute as to being permanently deployed as opposed to being down there in a TAD duty status).

When I had finished the Staging Battalion phase of training, we were told that 10% of those finishing Pendleton were due to deploy by ship. Knowing the luck of the Irish/unlucky English, I immediately packed my seabag, and we departed on the *USNS⁴ LeRoy Eltinge*. While at sea, some of us received advanced notice of our assignments, and I was somewhat thrilled that I had been assigned as a Company Commander in the 1st Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment. The real thrill was that the Battalion Commander was a certain Lt.Col. Black Jack Westerman, late of the 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion. I couldn’t have been happier, and was scheduled to join the Battalion on Okinawa, now refitting and preparing to deploy as one of the two floating Battalions known as the SLF (Special Landing Force). Now this was a job

much to my liking, as it promised potential fireworks and was being skippered by one of my favorite Marine officers. A plan was beginning to come together.

THE BEST LAID PLANS OF MOUSES AND MARINES

Upon reporting to the Regimental Headquarters of the 26th Marine Regiment⁵ (the base unit at the time monitoring the training and deployment of incoming Battalions, and the units providing training for the deploying Marines), I was informed that I had been reassigned from the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines to being the CO of A Company, 5th Reconnaissance Battalion then detailed to conducting raid training for the Battalions being refitted for the Special Landing Force. I of course, was outraged! I beat a straight line for the Regimental Headquarters. The CO of the 26th Marines at that time was an old Colonel named J.J. Padley, a veteran of Iwo Jima, who believe that all Marine should served where they are assigned without questioning the wisdom of the assignment. I protested that I would be better suited as a rifle company commander, and he pointed out the my multiple reconnaissance assignments made me the perfect candidate to take over the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade Raid School (then under the cognizance of the 26th Marines). He told me in no uncertain terms that he was going to hold me on Okinawa for 6 months and **then** he'd see about getting me down to Vietnam. **I** explained in no uncertain terms that I hadn't requested assignment to SEA⁶ to spend half of it sitting on my posterior on Okinawa. He then explained that **HE** was running the outfit, and I'd damned well do what I was told! We did not part friends!

My next stop was Colonel Jack Westerman's BOQ Room. He acknowledged my visit with a hearty handshake and wondered what had taken so long for me get over to see my new Battalion Commander. I regaled him with my tales of sorrow and woe and cursed the entire chain of command that was trying to keep me from serving with 1/4 in general and Colonel Westerman in particular. Black Jack considered the situation for a few moments and asked if I had heard that Lt. General Krulak (Commanding General of FMF Pac) was shortly due on Okinawa for a visit? Being somewhat ignorant of the movements of senior officers, I had to admit that I hadn't heard of such a visit.

Colonel Westerman's solution was simple. He explained that any Marine Officer (or troop for that matter) had the right to "*request mast*"⁷ with the CG FMF Pac (or any senior officer) if he was readily available. I considered that for a moment just knowing Black Jack might just possibly have come up with a solution to my unsolvable problem. I headed back to the Regimental Headquarters looking the Regimental Adjutant (an old friend of mine from Basic School days, a Captain named *Mike Salmon*). When I told him of my intent, Mike recoiled in horror (his dad was a retired Marine General from the Aviation Community, and he was not used to bucking the system).

"Dick," he said, "Colonel Padley will have your @\$\$ for this, he was pretty specific in keeping you here for six months. "

"You and I both know the Colonel can't keep me from requesting mast, and I've gotta' give it my best shot!"

"Culver, you're right about getting shot," Mike sez, but in this case I ain't sure we're not talking about the firing squad!"

My request mast request was submitted with Mike shaking his head. You could hear a near nuclear explosion coming from the Regimental Headquarters all the way up to my

Company Office a couple of blocks away. To save tender ears, I will omit the conversation that ensued between Colonel Padley and wata⁸, but it was as masterful fanny chewing as I ever had. I refused to withdraw my request and the Colonel began to plot my demise. Little did I know how deep the evil intent and desire for retribution-in-kind ran when a man pinned on his bird – this however was a lesson I was to learn in spades in the months to come!

I was sitting in my Company Office feeling pretty smug a couple of days later when the phone rang. It was Mike on the ding-wa (Japanese slang for telephone). Not knowing the content of his message, I answered just knowing that he was calling to give me a time for my request mast. Quite the contrary, Mike said in almost hushed tones, “Culver, you’d better dig in deep, General Krulak has just cancelled his trip to Okinawa!”

Uh Oh... my worst nightmare had just materialized. The General isn’t coming and Colonel Padley had made sure that I knew the consequences of my ignoring his explicit orders! I had visions of spending a whole year on Okinawa, and only getting south by requesting an extension of an additional six-months or a year to get to Vietnam as an object lesson! I went back to Colonel Westerman and explained the result of my ill thought out plan of action. He sympathized, but allowed as how it was now out of his hands and it looked like I was going to have to lay in my own nest of thorns.

BUT IT AIN’T OVER YET!

The young lad I had relieved as the Company Commander of A Company, 5th Recon Battalion had taken my place as one of Black Jack’s company commanders. I had known the gentleman for quite some time and we often talked. He came to me for advice on how to handle a knuckle dragger like the Black Jack. I gave him my best advice, and he returned almost on a daily basis. Finally he showed up during noon chow one day in somewhat of a panic.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Culver, we were having a skull session sitting around in a circle discussing our solutions to various problems that might arise. His last question was what were our solutions to having to give a “body count” to the higher echelons when asked by Division Headquarters. The Colonel had just gotten through the first three Company Commanders, and was satisfied with absolutely NONE of their answers! What do I do?”

“Well, what solutions did they come up with I asked?”

“Well a couple of ‘em suggested sending troops out to count the bodies, and one suggested that he’d personally go out and count ‘em to verify the correctness of the count! The Colonel was visibly irritated, and made his displeasure known! I’m next, what-in-hell do I tell him?”

I sat back in the chair and grinned. That’s easy was my reply, just listen up and do exactly what I tell ya’. What ya’ tell him is that you intend to verify the count by collecting ears, but specify that in order to get a correct count, you only intend to take left ears to keep from being accused of double counting!

He sat there in disbelief.

“Culver, he’ll kill me if I come up with that sort of cockamamie scheme. He’d think he was dealing with a mad-man.”

“Listen, have I ever given you bum information on Colonel Westerman? Trust me on this one, just tell it exactly like I told you. If he jumps in your fecal matter, tell him “I personally told you to tell him that to see what his reaction would be. It’s a win-win situation!”

“Culver, if you screw me up on this, I’ll personally come back here and take a few ears!”

“Not to worry,” sez I, “I know what I’m talking about! – oh yes, and be sure you come back and tell me how it comes out!”

I had almost forgotten the noon time conversation when the door flew open about 1730 followed by a much relieved Company Commander. I looked up and grinned and asked, “well, how’d it go?”

“**Great!**,” sez Black Jack’s new Company Commander, looking greatly relieved.

“The Colonel looked at me with a small smile and said, “*not bad, I like it*, but no, we can’t take ears, the hierarchy will panic it and it’ll get lots of unfavorable publicity. Still, I like the way you think!”

“Dick, was Black Jack serious? He wouldn’t *really* have had me collected ears would he?”

“No me lad, he was simply testing you to see what sort of testicular fortitude you had. You passed the test in spades! Congratulations!”

“OK now that you have dodged the first bullet, I told the newly indoctrinated Company Commander, I have some more advice for you. If Colonel Jack asks you to do a job, be damned sure you do that and as much more as you are capable of. Level with him, and do the job or die trying. He’d do the same for you. He’s a commander worth savoring and you have no idea how much I envy you your job.

By the time Black Jack and 1/4 left the Island, I had conducted a raid school for one of his Rifle Companies, and helped his assigned sniper platoon fit their M14 Rifles with scopes in anticipation of receiving the then new M40 Remingtons. Both the Sniper Platoon Sergeant and his faithful armorer, Sergeant Ted Hollabaugh were old friends of mine and I turned to with a will. Unfortunately I personally never saw Colonel Westerman again, but heard through the grapevine of several Network Reporters that interviewed him for the waiting American Public. He sat with his feet apart, wearing a soft cover and casually dusting the ashes from the end of his cigarette. The more irritating the reporter, the further the ashes would be flicked towards the camera. When the interview was over, he left no question in anyone’s mind that he was in Vietnam to finish killing the Commies he hadn’t managed to “off” during his time in Korea. If the American public had been listening carefully, they’d have learned a valuable lesson! You go to war to win and that’s why he was there! I tried to keep track of Colonel Westerman over the years but circumstances beyond my control kept us apart.

As a final touch to the story, the Hill Fights (881 and 861) at Khe Sanh broke me loose from Padley’s curse⁹, and I served on the Special Landing Force Bravo in the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines as a Company Commander for 9 thrill packed months before we ever got an in-country base camp, for my last two months. This was the first and only time we gotten hot chow, a shower, and a rack we didn’t have to dig (excepting a total of 12 days out of the 9-month SLF tour spent aboard ship)! Life was good!

I still occasionally wonder while puffing a good cigar and quaffing a snifter of Cognac what it would have been like to serve with Colonel Westerman in combat, but of course, it's one of those unanswerable questions that will forever linger in my mind...

ROC

¹ Skip Hartnett was my Executive Officer of A Company, 2nd Recon Battalion during Colonel Westerman's reign as the Battalion Commander. He talked me into sending him to Airborne School when I became the Battalion Operations Officer. Skip had always "drooled" over my Gold Jump Wings (well "drooled" might be an exaggeration, but the little drops of saliva often appeared when checking the front of my shirt). Skip had decided he wanted such a sign of individual manly prowess for his own. We did not yet have a silver "Scuba Bubble" in the Naval Service, although Skip had been through Scuba School when he was a Corporal in the Battalion prior to getting commissioned. I shot myself in the foot by sending him to Jump School as almost as soon as he had come back to 2nd Recon, the Corps was starting to form the 3rd Force Reconnaissance Company out at Camp Geiger, and Skip became history although we served together several times following our initial encounter including two tours in Saudi Arabia. After a minimal amount of training, 3rd Force was whisked off to Camp Pendleton awaiting a fleshing out in personnel and additional tactical training.

² WesPac was a commonly used abbreviation for Western Pacific which included South East Asia and the climes of Vietnam.

³ Staging Battalion was an administrative and training outfit based at Camp Pendleton charged with the preparation of troops who had not yet had the thrill of operating in the wiles of Vietnamese Jungle Fighting. The school phases were usually run by individuals freshly returned from "France's Folly". Courses were given to update everyone's map reading skills, classes on booby traps, the latest weaponry, grenade throwing and radio techniques. It had been many a year since some to the troops who attended had seen combat.

⁴ A USNS Ship is actually a *Navy Auxiliary Ship*, skippered by a Naval Officer on active duty but manned by a merchant crew. The Gun Crews were regular Navy and manned by US Navy Gunner's Mates. The USNS stands of United States Naval Ship. This deployment was to be the LeRoy Eltinge's final voyage. She was to drop us off, pick up some Korean Marines in Vietnam, take them back to Korea and then make her final voyage home to be scrapped. She sailed with a permanent 7 degree list, and only calm seas kept it from being a wild ride!

⁵ The 26th Marine Regiment was initially stationed on Okinawa, and had cognizance of the training of all troops going to Vietnam or being re-outfitted and trained to perform the duties of the Special Landing Force. The entire thing was being overseen by The 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade who had cognizance of the SLFs. The SLF was a Battalion Landing team (actually a bob-tailed Regiment) designed to make small circles in the South China Sea to act as a rapid reaction force to send in if any organization got in a feces sandwich in country either in the 1st or 3rd Marine Division Areas. It in fact operated much like a huge "Sparrow Hawk" rapid reaction force to pull hot chestnuts out of the fire. It was not a job for the faint of heart. The 26th Marines eventually deployed to the Khe Sanh Area and under the redoubtable Colonel Lownds, fought off great hordes of Ho Chi Minh's finest.

⁶ SEA stood for South East Asia.

⁷ A "request mast" is an interview with a senior officer that can (technically) be requested by an individual who feels he has a grievance. Sometimes this works out to the advantage of the requesting individual, but often is used to point out to the "requester" why he should be happy with the decision that has not met with his approval. I suspect that this would have been the result of my requested audience with General Krulak, as General Officers ordinarily side with Regimental Commanders as a matter of principle. I had decided to take a chance since General Krulak had a reputation for being a fighter, and had won a Navy Cross in WWII as a Para-Marine. The worst that could happen was for "The Brute" (as he was nicknamed in the Corps – he stood about 5'5" tall and had to get a waiver from the Marine Corps to be offered a commission out of his Naval Academy Class) to tell me that he understood that I wanted to go "close with the enemy", but in this case my services were needed in a training mode. While that wouldn't have made me happy, at least I would have made a maximum effort. Technically speaking, at that time, "The Brute" and the CG FMF Lant (for Atlantic) were the two most senior

officers in the Corps ranking just below the Commandant (this was before our participation in joint staffs and now having more 4-star generals than were needed to run a bob-tailed squad. When General Walt was made Assistant Commandant, he too was given a 4-Star Rank which was to be used only when the Corps strength was above a certain level. For whatever reason, the Assistant Commandant has retained his 4-Star since. This of course is sometimes handy when dealing with officers in sister services...

⁸ Watash is an old far eastern term meaning "yourself, or myself", etc. It is roughly the same as *moi* in French.

⁹ Colonel J.J. Padley took RLT 26 south to occupy Khe Sanh in May of 1967, but by then I had left for the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines. How does the old saying go? *All things come to him who sits and waits*. Needless to say my fitness reports for the remainder of Padley's tour weren't exactly designed to get me promoted on the fast track. If I had already been indoctrinated into the wiles of pitched combat, the job of Raid School Commander would have been a fine one indeed. It was the only time during my entire career that I had wall-to-wall submarines, and helicopter support and a full compliment of rubber boats (also known as LCR's for "Landing Craft Rubber" sometimes known as the IBS for "Inflatable Boat, Small" but forever known in the vernacular as *LBRBs* standing for "Little Bitty Rubber Boats"... My real bitch had been that there were any number of individuals who would have sold their souls to be assigned out of harm's way by an "unfeeling" Colonel of Marines. Ah well, so it goes!