

Colonel William A. Lee, United States Marine Corps

When I get to thinking back on some of the characters I have known during my service in the Corps, Colonel Bill Lee is always one of my favorites. Edward H. (Hockaday) Walker IV, along with Gil (Suicide) Holmes are two others but unlike Bill, while those two may well have had the *potential* of performing in the manner of John Basilone or Dan Daly, fate was not to grant them the opportunity to demonstrate their prowess. Certainly no one could doubt their dedication, but a bit of extremism essentially killed their chances to remain in the Corps long enough make their mark.

It is indeed sad that such gentlemen as Walker and Holmes faded from the scene with little or no recognition (other than a few snide remarks made behind their backs). They honestly were good guys, but alas were just too "gungy" for their own good - I think they essentially made most folks a bit nervous by being just a bit *TOO* squared away (if somewhat eccentric) and it was easier to point them out as weirdoes than emulate them. They would probably have been right at home back before and after "The Great War"... Smedley Butler could have used 'em to good advantage, and in that day and time, probably no one would have thought them strange. But theirs is another story.

This one's about "Iron Man" Bill Lee who served as Chesty Puller's Gunnery Sergeant in Nicaragua, won THREE Navy Crosses prior to WWII, and was the heavyweight boxing champion of the fleet as a Gunnery Sergeant on a coal-burning battleship. Rumor says that he got the sobriquet of "Iron Man" from Chesty himself who remarked that Bill would have been the proverbial Iron Man during the era of wooden ships. While I was only acquainted with the Colonel during his "peaceable pursuits", his demeanor and reputation left no question in my mind that Chesty had called it right!

Colonel Bill decided he'd try competitive shooting, became Distinguished with both the Rifle and the Pistol and placed in the Wimbledon Cup. He was captured in China (steaming the Cosmoline off some machine guns in a tent) just as WWII broke out and spent 4 years in a Jap Prison Camp.

Bill was a Chief Marine Gunner in those days (they didn't have 4 or 5 rungs of warrant promotion prior to WWII), you were either a Marine Gunner (WO - non-commissioned) or a Chief Marine Gunner (CWO - commissioned). Both ranks rated Officers privileges, but only the CWO was truly a commissioned officer. Bill was no shrinking violet, when he reported in to his China Station, the Commanding Officer asked if he was the Bill Lee with the Navy Cross? Bill's Answer? NO sir, I'm the Bill Lee with THREE of 'em! Heh, heh, heh...

The Colonel once told me that he had Distinguished with both guns with both hands (technically impossible of course). What he meant was that he had fired the M1903 and the .45 left handed (no mean feat with the '03) and placed high enough in the competition to have been eligible for leg medals, even left handed!

Bill was well acquainted with Marine Gunner Calvin A. Lloyd, noted Marine Marksman, and winner of the International Matches in Buenos Aires (as I recall) in 1911. Bill (unlike Hockaday Walker and Suicide Holmes) had no hang-ups about marriage, and married Gunner Lloyd's daughter, having three daughters of his own by the union. Unfortunately his wife (Lloyd's daughter) died in an unfortunate bathtub fall while Bill was imprisoned by the Japanese.

I knew Bill when I was a young Corporal, and later after I was commissioned. To say that he was a character would have been the ultimate understatement. When Bill made it back to the States after being released from Jap confinement, he was assigned to Quantico. He was dropped off (I assume by air) in D.C. and called the OD at HQMC. He wasn't as universally well known by then of course as many of his previous exploits had been overcome/overshadowed by the horrendous events of the War - from Guadalcanal, Tarawa, and Iwo Jima. The point being, the OD didn't have a clue as to whom he was speaking. Bill requested transportation to Quantico (he had a seabag with his new [post-POW] issue of uniforms) and of course didn't have a car. The OD promptly told Bill that they no longer HAD such a rank as Marine Gunner, and that he sure as hell wasn't gonna' dispatch a car to take a mere Warrant Officer to Quantico! Bill growled a bit, threw his seabag over his shoulder and walked to Quantico, approximately 30-miles down the railroad tracks! Not too bad after having spent 4-years as a guest of the Japanese.

What Bill DIDN'T know was that many of the surviving POWs had been steadily promoted during their imprisonment, but the promotions wouldn't catch up to 'em for quite some time (paperwork has always been on a slow boat so to speak). At any rate, Bill was suddenly receiving a promotion (or so it seemed) about once a month until he reached the exalted rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

Bill too, was out of his time, and they didn't know exactly what to do with him. The war was over, the Nicaraguan Rebels had been subdued, and Korea hadn't started yet. Due to his shooting expertise he was assigned as the CO of the Rifle Range at Lejeune (20 miles from mainside as you will recall, and helicopters had not yet made their debut).

The story goes (and this one was told to me by his daughter Nancy with whom I was well acquainted), that Bill caught some young miscreant "wasting food" by throwing the leftovers in the \$hi+can in the mess hall. Not exactly armed robbery, mugging or assault, but you've gotta' remember that Bill was shortly out of a Jap POW Camp where wasting food was a matter of life and death.

Bill sentenced the young lad to be tied to the flagpole in front of the range for three days, and so he was. Even though cell phones were in the future and communication by our current standards were somewhat crude, the word got back to the Base Commanding General seemingly at the speed of light. The Chief of Staff got on the phone with Bill (the General was of the old Corps and personally acquainted with ol' Bill), and told Bill that he had spoken to the General and the General's reply was that he understood the situation, but now that he (Bill) had made his point, he should cut the lad loose. Bill was outraged that anyone would interfere in what he considered an appropriate sentence, and told the Chief of Staff that if the General wanted the little 'tool' cut loose, he'd have to come out and cut him loose himself! Even with lack of Helicopter Transportation, the General arrived at the Range in an amazingly short period of time.

Bill had anticipated this of course, and was standing in front of the flagpole with a locked and loaded M1 Rifle. The General and Bill being acquainted from years past, cooler heads eventually prevailed and a much relieved lad was released (promising to never waste any chow ever again). Subsequently Bill was hustled off to the Naval Hospital for a bit of observation (under what would now probably be termed Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome).

Bill retired about 1950 according to the records, and due to his more than stellar performance in combat (three Navy Crosses), he was advanced to the rank of full Colonel under what they used to call a "Tombstone Promotion". Until sometime in June of 1958,

holders of the Medal of Honor, the Navy Cross or the Silver Star were advanced one (honorary) rank upon retirement. The "Tombstone Promotion" was aptly named as you could put it on your letterhead, your business cards, your office door, and of course your "Tombstone", but you weren't paid for the rank. The title, while honorary, was rumored to be the rank you would be recalled to active duty as, should a full scale war ever break out.

Not to be put totally out to pasture, Bill got heavily involved in Civil War reenactments (some would use the term "*Late War of Northern Aggression*" vice *Civil War* of course). He was out firing his accumulation of Muskets whenever the occasion would allow. He had a small house down in Quantico Town (prior to eventually moving to Fredericksburg), and finished raising his three daughters. In order to aid him in his familial tasks, Bill once more married (to a nurse he had met following his release from the prison camp as I recall). He eventually had a fourth daughter when he was 65-years old (it was definitely his, as there was some noticeable family resemblance). I DO know that one of his original three daughters married without asking his permission, and he disowned her, supposedly never speaking to her again (kinda' like getting permission from your commanding officer I suppose - as I said, Bill was from a different time and place, and most definitely a different era).

I would occasionally visit the Colonel in his quarters in Quantico (town). It was like going into a museum. He had a bearskin on the wall (another story all in itself), National Match Springfields, and all sorts of trophies (all with appropriate stories of course). He took to wearing a Confederate Uniform with the start of the Civil War Centennial (1961), and wore it all over Fredericksburg (until about 1965), and became a sort of tourist attraction (I still have a postcard of Bill in his uniform, beard and musket, shading his eyes with his hand, and looking over the rock fence down towards the river where the Union Forces were handily repelled by the Confederates). If nothing else, Bill was one colorful character! He often acted as an NRA Referee or Match Official at the local Quantico matches. He fired in the North South Shoots using his Whitneyville-Plymouth .69 caliber Naval Musket (one of the only rifled .69s used in the late unpleasantness). He was a champ in the "stake-cutting event" with his mini-artillery piece!

Some of the stories were told to me by Nancy Lee (his daughter, now a retired school teacher), and she wasn't given to exaggeration. I have every reason to believe they are correct.

While conversing with the old Sea Soldier, about 1965 when I was shooting with the Marine Corps Team, I mentioned to the Colonel that it was too bad that he had fathered all girls. While most charming, I was musing on what sort of potential rifle (and pistol) shooters he might have had with Calvin A. Lloyd as a Grandfather and Bill Lee as a Father? Bill had obviously had this conversation before, as he looked at me and grinned.

He said, "yep Culver, but think of what marvelous '*breeding stock*' they are!"

Holy catfish Batman ...only from Bill Lee! I didn't know whether to laugh or not, but I wisely kept my own counsel on that one! On the other hand, maybe the old boy wasn't too far off the mark!

In 1977 when I was the Operations Officer of MTU Quantico, we held our annual Marine Corps Birthday Ball in a rural restaurant (somewhat West of Quantico), known for fine cuisine. Searching for appropriate Guest Speakers, we narrowed it down to two. Colonel Walter Walsh, and Colonel Bill Lee. Since we could find nothing against such, we decided to invite both of 'em as they were great friends and both good speakers. Bill showed up in his

Evening Dress Uniform (actually quite new - ya' never know when you might be recalled to active duty!). He was wearing all of his appropriate miniature medals (3-Navy Crosses, etc.) AND both of his Distinguished Badges (against regulations to wear medals and marksmanship awards simultaneously, but who in the Hell would have had the guts to point such minor infractions to the old "Iron Man"? Certainly not moi!).

When the dinner and speeches were finished, and all hands were a departing mode, Colonel Lee sent his daughter (the youngest one) back to retrieve his "Boat Cloak" (no kidding, Bill loved the ceremony and grandeur of the Birthday Celebration). I decided to satisfy my curiosity on the "flagpole" incident of so many years before (told to me by his daughter, Nancy). The Colonel towered over me (he was a BIG man, and on a good day I might make 5' 9"), but summoning up the appropriate chutzpa, I posed the question as follows.

"Colonel," I said, "I once heard a story about you and some youngster tied to the flagpole in front of the Rifle Range at Camp Lejeune."

Dead silence prevailed and I perceived he was staring at me with a bit of amusement in his eyes. I was secretly wishing I hadn't broached the subject, as the quiet was almost overpowering.

"Culver," he said just as his daughter showed up with his boat cloak, "Do I look like the kind of 'hair-pin' [using a rather ancient colloquialism] who would tie some guy to a flagpole?"

My only reply was "Of *course* not sir!"

"Didn't think so," sez the Colonel, swirling into his boat cloak, and he and his daughter disappeared into the darkness... Alas, it was the last time I ever saw the Colonel.

A final footnote to the story is that in 1992 the Marine Corps named one of their new ranges in the Calvin A. Lloyd range complex at Quantico for Colonel Lee... Most appropriate in this case, since Calvin A. Lloyd was one his shooting companions, and his father-in-law. Bill is reputed to have taken an M16 downrange and personally christened it with a magazine of anti-rodent projectiles.

Colonel William A. Lee finally went to Valhalla to meet his final destiny on December 29th of 1998 at the tender age of 98. It would seem the old warrior was invulnerable to the Germans, the Nicaraguan Rebels and the Japs, and almost outlived the Grim Reaper!. Perhaps Odin, always on the lookout for a truly brave man, sent the Valkyries to fetch him for the fabled Hall of Heroes. It would be hard to find a better one!

Semper Fi,

Dick