

Lance Corporal Steegle

It was late January of 1966 and A Company, 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion had just successfully finished the Army's Jungle Operations Course at Ft. Sherman in the Panama Canal Zone. We were dutifully returning to Camp Lejeune on a C-130 dispatched to remove us from the jungle environs to more northern climes of our base, laughingly referred to as "Swamp Lagoon," North Carolina. Regardless of our somewhat irreverent reference to our home port, we were glad to be getting home.

The course had been comprehensive and informative, and the troops had enjoyed themselves with a routine that wasn't strictly geared to area maintenance as often appeared to be our principal concern at Camp Lejeune. The course was structured to jungle operations, and unlike the earlier peacetime versions of the course, the current curriculum did not provide for any satisfying after hours liberty. Needless to say, the lads were beat. We had gotten one minor exposure to the civilian community just prior to departure, and the youngsters had taken full advantage of their "parole" by hitting the local shops for souvenirs to take home some reminders of their "snake eating" and jungle "escape and evasion ops". In short, they, as most young Marines, felt that they had just earned one more "swaggering right"... This mental attitude tended to influence their choice of Panamanian keepsakes. It would seem that one item available with very few restrictions, was a selection of quite "gungy" appearing, and fully operational switchblade knives, for extremely attractive prices. Needless to say, there were very few who didn't avail themselves of such a macho piece of gear.

Now the average individual that I had taken to Panama was *not* a gang oriented knife fighter, but the fact that purchasing and ownership restrictions on such items (switchblade knives) stateside, tended to make their purchases seem all the more desirable. Kids are like that, doncha' know? Ah well, it would seem that we had a very well (if somewhat illegally) armed contingent upon our return. Never having been a switch-blade aficionado, I had no idea that such items were being purveyed in the local ville, and worse yet being imported by our returning Marines. It was only through L/Cpl. Steegle's wild ride back to Camp Lejeune from his weekend liberty following our Panama adventure, that I learned of the widespread ownership of the damned things.

Now Lance Corporal Steegle was a nice enough lad, but hardly an imposing one. He was probably 5' 6" tall, and may have topped 135-lbs wearing a pack and appropriate 782 gear. He had been one of the individuals who had harangued the First Sergeant incessantly until he was one of the group selected from the Battalion to attend our snake-eating evolution. My first impression of the youngster was not one to give me great confidence in his aggressive "Marine-Like" nature, but you couldn't fault his enthusiasm. Along with Steegle's rather diminutive stature, was a slight "lisp" that made him pronounce his own name as "*Theegle*". Appearances and first impressions however, are sometimes misleading, and so it was in the case of our highly motivated, if somewhat diminutive Lance Corporal.

As related elsewhere, the customs officer who met our aircraft returning out of the Panamanian jungles on the Saturday night of our return had been through if nothing else. He had managed to delay the company's return to our battalion area in Montford Point until almost midnight. The kids, with the lone exception of a quick trip to the native "thieves market" in the Canal Zone, had been deprived of liberty for almost a full month. Needless to

say they were anxious to either quaff a few brews, go on an extended liberty, or for the married folks, to get back to their families.

I have always trusted the troops (usually with great success) to occasionally pull a liberty that exceeded the official geographical boundaries of approved "liberty limits" with the proviso that as long as they were back to the company (or battalion) area in time for reveille on Monday Morning, I wasn't going to ask any embarrassing questions. With very few exceptions, I was never disappointed in or with the kids. I found early on, that if you treat them well, treat them like Marines instead of high school kids, and make it plain that it's *YOUR* (in this case my) fanny on the line, they will usually take care of you and magically appear at the appointed place at the appointed time.

It is and always has been a two way street. It was using this criterion that I told my returning jungle fighters to go have a great liberty, but be prepared to work their fannies off when they got back on Monday morning. I gave the little tools my home phone number and told them to give me a call (day or night) if they were going to legitimately miss Monday morning muster. I made it plain that "I" would be the deciding factor on whether or not it *WAS* legitimate, not them. I also pointed out that I too had been a "troop" and knew all the dodges, and was very seldom bamboozled by the wily Pfc! Everybody grinned and departed for Gawd knows where. All hands, as expected, reported back on time. However...

I appeared fairly early on Monday morning to find the Company Office occupied with an entirely new contingent of individuals, many of them wearing suits and ties. Uppsssss... Now what?

"First Sergeant, what do we have here, the FBI?" I said, in a joking manner.

"You're closer than you think Skipper!, most of these gentlemen are from the ONI!"

For you newcomers, the ONI is the predecessor of the current Naval Investigative Service (NIS), and essentially amounted to the Navy's version of the FBI. One of the ONI gentlemen, Agent Tom Stevenson, eventually became my next door neighbor in Northwoods, a housing area contingent to Camp Lejeune/Jacksonville, North Carolina. This however was my first introduction to Tom, and it was not a one that called for breaking out the coffee and cookies. First Sergeant Martin informed me that Lance Corporal Steegle was being accused of kidnapping a rather large and disheveled civilian being roughly surrounded by the ONI types.

"Oh my yeth," the large one lisped, "it wath just horrible!"

Something had to be wrong, this guy would have made three of Steegle, and had every appearance of being a flaming faggot judging by his mannerisms and speech! While Steegle and his accuser had matching "lisps" there is where any comparison ended. Steegle was anything but limp-wristed.

"What did Steegle have to say?" I asked.

"Don't have a clue said the First Sergeant, these guys just got here a minute ago!"

"Just a second," I said, let *ME* go get him! "I assume he's in the Barracks!"

"I would imagine so Captain, he signed in well before reveille, and this guy (pointing at Steegle's accuser) just showed up a couple of minutes ago with the ONI and the FBI"

"Mr. Stevenson, at the risk of "blowing" your investigation (using what could have been a horrible pun), I wanna' hear what our miniature Jungle Fighter has to say about this before he's confronted by what's gonna' be a shock to his psyche. I rather imagine that I'll get more meaningful answers before you guys start putting the thumb screws to him!"

"Captain, we don't use thumb screws anymore Tom said with a slight grin (indicating a sense of humor), but yeah, go get me a virgin explanation so we can put this thing to rest. This guy's story doesn't make too much sense he said indicating Steegle's accuser."

"Right, will do, I'll be right back," I said heading for the barracks.

I found Steegle putting away his gear from his liberty, and joking with his buddies without a seeming care in the world. Hardly the demeanor of a guy who had just kidnapped a civilian.

"Hey Steegle, what's this about you kidnapping Civilians?" I asked in a slightly humorous tone of voice.

"Thir, I didn't kidnap that SOB, he volunteered to bring me back to the base on hith own. I had him bring me back to the barracks! lth that faggot complaining to thumone?"

"Well, Steegle, I have an office full of ONI Agents and at least one FBI agent claiming you kidnapped that oversized oaf! What gives?"

"Well Thir, it wath like this. I wath running a little late and hitchhiking out on Interstate 95 juth outside of Richmond looking for a ride going thouth. Thith big Cadillac pullth over and the guy told me to get in. I did, and everything went fine for about 30-minuthets until we were not too far from Petersburg. He asth me where I was going. I told him Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and he thead he wasn't going that far, but he'd take me ath far ath he could. About 15-minutes later, he reached over and put hith hand on my knee real friendly like and indicated that I should get closer to him. Thir, I'm not into that thuff, and I told him to keep hith hands to himself and moved way over into the corner of the passenger theat right next to the door, trying to get as far away from that faggot ath I could. He continued to thlide over further, and I pulled out my thwitch-blade, backed further into the corner and told him to leave me alone. He immediately told me to thettle down and he'd take me all the way back to my bath. Since I wath running late, I decided to let him take me anywhere he wanted. But honeth Skipper, I didn't tell him I'd cut him if he didn't, he juth volunteered!," said Steegle with a totally innocent look on his face!

Uppsss... That explained a lot, and although I had my reservations about just HOW innocent Steegle really was, I honestly don't think Steegle told him to take him back to Camp Lejeune or he'd cut his gizzard out. I do think the faggot had a rather vivid imagination, fueled somewhat with some of Steegle's stories of his daring-do in the jungle. Human nature and conjured up visions of self preservation no doubt had a large hand in the ensuing trip back to Steegle's digs. It wouldn't have been a very smart maneuver on Steegle's part to have that homosexual clown take him back to the front of his very own barracks. I began to plan Steegle's defense.

I told Steegle to continue to square away his gear, but not to move two millimeters out of the area. I wanted to find him on demand when I finished my story to the ONI and FBI Agents.

I relayed Steegle's story to the awaiting Agents, perhaps embellishing the faggot's overt attempts to impose his will on an innocent and very small Marine of my command. The faggot of course looked outraged and threatened to go to the Commanding General with his story. Giving him a minute to think about his course of action, I allowed as how it was obviously going to make the front page of all the papers after I had called the *Richmond Times Dispatch*, and the Local Jacksonville fish wrapper. Since open displays of homosexual behavior were frowned upon by virtually the entire straight community in the mid 1960s, I let this guy envision his roll in kidnapping a young impressionable Marine who was simply defending himself from a sexual deviate!

"I am *NOT* a thexual deviate!" the accuser protested.

"Well maybe not, but it's sure gonna' look that way in the papers! The readers aren't that stupid and you can explain to your boss exactly *WHAT* you were trying to do to a 135-pound Marine simply trying to get back to his barracks on time! Perhaps it'll be interpreted as getting caught with your hand in the cookie jar!"

Tom Stevenson was having great difficulty suppressing his personal mirth at this sudden reversal in the overall turn of events. Suddenly the accuser was the accused, and had much more to explain to his employers and neighbors than he would have gained in the self satisfaction of taking revenge on one small Marine who had been put in a position of having to defend his sexual honor from a guy roughly three times his size. At Tom's direction, I sent for Lance Corporal Steegle who had suddenly become the hero instead of the villain!

Our oversized corksocker had mulled over his options and decided to drop the entire accusation and simply head for home. This was underlined in spades as Steegle made his appearance.

"Thath's him Skipper, heth the one who tried to thaduce me! He put hith hand on my knee and all I could do was get over as far ath I could in the theat and keep him from touching me with by pulling out my knife! I was thimply defending my thelf!"

Our accuser beat a hasty retreat vowing to forget the whole thing as long as we didn't turn in any reports or call the papers. A deal was hastily sealed and Steegle's honor was vindicated! Sometimes life is good!

Tom and I got to be good friends in the next year or so after he bought the house next to mine, and we often got a huge laugh at the look on the "kidnapper's" face when he was verbally backed up against the wall.

I held a "voluntary" shakedown of my Panamanian Raiders, and confiscated their quasi-illegal switch blade knives, allowing them to box them up and send them home if they'd promise not to bring them back to Montford Point, or threatened any deviates who offered them rides back to the barracks.

Steeple got his wish and was sent to Vietnam, and apparently survived, as for several years following the kidnapping incident, I got a personal Easter Card from the little miscreant. Steeple was a man who appreciated Commanding Officers who got his tail feathers out of a wringer. I always wondered if Steeple took his switch blade to RVN to subdue any deviant Viet Cong! Heh, heh, heh...

The "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" mentality had not yet permeated the military forces in those far off times! ...Thank goodness! Still although it has been many years ago, when I am contemplating a Marine Corps now long gone, I can still hear Lance Corporal Steeple's vehement protest.

"But thir, I'm innothent!" ...And in a way, he was absolutely right.

If "Odin" has a sense of humor, Steeple is now a successful businessman who has many memories of his jungle adventures and his subsequent kidnapping in a kinder more gentle time. Today, Steeple, First Sergeant Martin, Tom Stevenson, and of course yours truly would be in a world of hurt defending our actions to the ACLU and "The United Corksockers Union" in today's screwed up world.

Semper Fi,

Dick