

The Designated “Dinger”

By Dick Culver

“Dinger” – In military parlance the term has the inference of an individual who can continually “ding” a bell in a shooting gallery (i.e., in a circus or carnival). The term is normally used to describe one who is extremely proficient in shooting skills. ...However, there is also a negative (military) connotation to the term denoting an individual who spends most of his or her time on the range instead of plying their other military skills out in the FMF¹ (Fleet Marine Force).

Here’s a sea-story that while amusing, may well have stretched the regulations a bit to allow for unforeseen technical difficulties with wartime manufactured ammunition, a somewhat difficult transition period of changing to a different “fowling piece” (the M14 versus the tried and true M1), all while getting used to a new concept in marksmanship courses (the “C”-Course). If you tie the above problems in with the 2nd Marine Division having become a de-facto “casual”² organization that seemingly had the unspoken privilege of being a replacement pool for those being sent to Vietnam while simultaneously required to keep deployed expeditionary units floating around in both the Mediterranean and the Caribbean. The everyday tasks of running a bob-tailed Battalion, Regiment or Division were formidable indeed!

All of the above variables descending on the 2nd Marine Division simultaneously, had the makings of a minor disaster. Marines, being creative cusses, found ways to satisfy every requirement, albeit sometimes in rather unorthodox ways. Hopefully, the Statute of Limitations (if such would apply) has long since expired. This particular story simply points out the inventiveness and craftiness of an imaginative and dedicated NCO, and the intelligence of an assigned Officer in Charge of a detail to do a bit of creative “looking the other way” for the good of the unit. For better or worse, here’s the tale...

RIFLE MARKSMANSHIP TRADITION WITHIN THE CORPS:

The Marine Corps has an old and time honored tradition – EVERY Marine is considered a rifleman first and a specialist second. While this may sound like a “buzz phrase”; in the case of the Corps, the concept and actuality of the “Marine Rifleman” are most definitely true. The ability of the cooks, bakers, and candle-stick makers to grab a rifle and defend the perimeter has come in extremely handy on a number of occasions. There is simply no such thing as a non-combatant in the Corps. Everyone goes to the range to keep their hand and eye in, even if they’re clerk typists, supply, motor transport troops, or disbursing (finance) folks! The only exception is when you are actively engaged in combat or stationed so far away from chimney smoke that no ranges are available (say at the North Pole...?). An old story related from the days in Korea, illustrate the “rifle-warrior” tradition. The story is told of a reporter in the field, interviewing a Marine Aviator serving his “time in the barrel” as an Infantry Battalion Forward Air Controller. Being a “FAC” means that an active duty pilot draws a tour (usually on a rotating basis) with the infantry calling in air strikes and other close air support missions often within yards of the front lines – it simply doesn’t get any more personal than that. The reporter asked the Marine FAC what his job was (having no clue of the Captain’s current assignment). The Captain looked him straight in the eye and said with utmost sincerity, “Sir, I’m a Marine Rifleman currently assigned to fly aircraft in support of an

Infantry Battalion.” The attitude prevails to this day – *Every man a Marine, and every Marine a Rifleman*. It’s a shared tradition that makes us different from the other services...

ON TO THE STORY:

It was the Spring of 1966 and the 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion was attempting to get all of its troops qualified on the rifle range as required by Marine Corps Regulations. Normally, this would have been a no-brainer, as virtually every Marine has gone through extensive rifle training in Boot Camp, and it is a relatively rare individual who cannot qualify as at least Marksman (the lowest rung on the rifle qualification ladder) on the rifle requalification course. Those individuals who have repeatedly gone “unk” (unqualified) are held in low esteem by their fellow Marines. An occasional “oppsss” can be excused, but repeated inability to hit what you are shooting at is viewed with a jaundiced eye. The *old* term for an “unc” was a “bolo”, and if you did not qualify you were said to have “bолоed” (a verb). The inference and legend was that if you couldn’t hit anything with your rifle, you should perhaps, be issued a “Bolo Knife” (also called a Machete in other climes) as an alternative means of doing-in the enemy, or at least clearing the brush for those who could. This term may well have been taken from the Marines’ extensive service in the jungles of Cuba, the Philippines, and/or the Banana Wars, but the negative connotation is and was the same.

While nothing exists in hard copy, the *expected* qualification percentages for a unit (or range detail) was (and probably still is) that at least 90% of the personnel were/are expected to qualify. It was not unusual for the percentage to go higher than 90% if the coaches are doing their job. Several things had entered the equation in the Spring of 1966 that were to throw a temporary monkey wrench in the usually well oiled machinery.

SOME FLIES IN THE OINTMENT:

First, the old reliable M1 rifle was in the process of being replaced by the M14³. The new rifle fired a 7.62mm NATO Cartridge (essentially the same as the commercial .308 Winchester Cartridge) as opposed to the more familiar .30-'06. Some of the early wartime 7.62mm ammunition production was suspect. While the operating system of the M14 was similar to the old reliable M1, it was not exactly the same and took some getting used to.



The M1 Rifle

The new ammunition being furnished for the new rifle system was in great demand due to the conflict in Southeast Asia and the quality control of the G.I. Ammo was not up to its usual excellence. Even some of the major brands such as Winchester were beginning to show up in the supply system without the primer hole being punched in the primer recess in the brass cases. Initially, this was causing a lack of confidence among the troops and commanders. These glitches were to soon disappear, but then this story deals with the initial screw-ups encountered in late 1965, early 1966.

The vast number of troops being groomed for service in Vietnam was putting a strain on the system. Unfortunately, some of them had not yet been trained on the M14 (coming back

to the FMF from detached or reserve duty), and some of the newer troops had never fired the older M1. In other words, not everyone was on the same page in the book. All *little* things you understand, but when all of them were put together, they could (and did) cause some perturbations in the system. Many of the older coaches were not yet totally familiar with the M14, and while the armorers had the basic skills to assemble and disassemble the new rifle, there were some tricks to making it shoot well that were not yet totally understood. All of this was being driven by the desire of Division Headquarters to get high requalification percentages since Headquarters Marine Corps took great interest in rifle requalification. Officer's fitness reports (OER's for the Army) for those assigned as unit commanders, depended, at least in part, on the normally expected high requalification percentages, as well as other training mileposts.

If you will add the possibility of normal growing pains that come with newly adopted rifle systems, suspect ammunition, and throw it in with a brand new (and initially unfamiliar) rifle qualification course then being tested in the Division, you have the formula for a possible debacle. And so it was, at least initially.

THE NEW COURSE OF FIRE:

The new C-Course had initially been called the X-Course (X standing for "experimental" as well as anyone could figure) as opposed to the older A and B courses fired on a bullseye target). The C-Course was to be fired on varying points of aim (they couldn't be classified as bullseyes exactly, although the purpose was the same). The course was designed to teach "center-hold" (a good thing in my opinion) as opposed to the old 6 o'clock sight picture (it made sense of course, just where in hell is 6 o'clock on a man or a game animal?).



Instead of simply a single aiming point (The M14 Rifle) at each yard line, each shooter was presented with **three** targets (3) per shooter (on each target frame) at both 2 and 3-hundred yards, and two (2) targets at 500-yards. You were required to fire all stages in a rapid fire mode, and all stages were based on the 20-round magazine capacity of the M14 Rifle. This included 20-rounds offhand (standing) **rapid** fire, 20-rounds sitting **rapid** at 200-yards, 20-rounds prone **rapid** at 300-yards, and 20-rounds prone **rapid** fire at 500-yards, for a total of 80 shots fired on the entire course. Each shot was either a hit or a miss, no 4s or 3s, etc. you either hit the damned thing or missed it!

The targets for each man's firing point were made using a sort of modified E-Silhouette Target.⁴ The three targets at close range being (variously) cut in half at the waist, sliced at an angle from shoulder to waist, cut straight down the center of the E target, and either glued to the target straight up or at about a 45% angle all designed to keep you from finding a 6 o'clock hold to shoot your string of fire! You were required to distribute your rounds so as to get multiple hits on each of your shortened/modified silhouette. For every target with the appropriate number of hits (I think it was 4-hits minimum) you got to "square" your number of targets with qualifying hits and add that to your total score (example: 3-targets with at least 4-hits would be 3 X 3 or a total of 9 bonus points at any given yard line). The idea here was to

teach fire-distribution as well as rapid fire and center-hold. This is/was essentially a sort of individual National Infantry Trophy Course (the “*Rattle Battle*”) fired in the National Trophy Matches each year at Camp Perry Ohio. No alibis were allowed – if you could safely clear the piece, well and good, but the firing didn’t stop (no alibis in combat of course). The most interesting feature of the course was that you got a different array of aiming points (at the two and three hundred yard line) each day. It certainly kept the shooter on his toes, and required that he “learn” his rifle.

Initial qualification at Boot Camp was of course on the A-Course, to be followed by three years on the new course (now called the “C-Course” vice the earlier X-Course designation). The course made a lot of sense, and as outlined above, it was decreed to be fired for three years in a row with the 4th year requiring a return to the old bullseye “A Course” to reinforce old basic marksmanship principles. While I personally thought the idea was great, you can see how it could have been a bit confusing for the newcomers! Some of the old “mossbacks” of course, were opposed to any sort of change, but that’s true in virtually any new or innovative system.

The entire above scenario including a montage of experience by the coaches had thrown the Division requalification efforts into a cocked hat. Tempers were flaring and everyone was pointing the accusatory finger at different items causing unit embarrassment over the slumping requalification percentages.

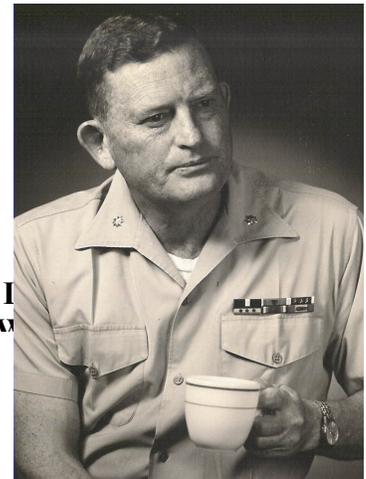
THE SCENARIO IS SET:

The Second Reconnaissance Battalion had just walked away with the honors in the Division Intramural Rifle Competition with a four man contingent, beating all the other units in the Division including the Infantry Regiments and Separate Battalions (Tanks, Engineers, etc.). Black Jack Westerman, our Battalion Commander was having great fun lording it over his competition, and with the sagging requalification percentages then prevalent in the Division, all eyes were on Black Jack and his somewhat maverick outfit.

Lt. Col. Westerman called me into the Battalion office and presented me with an ultimatum. Produce or die trying! Hummm...

“Produce *what* sir?” I asked.

“Look Culver, you gave me a winning rifle team, and now I expect you to take charge of our rifle requalification efforts and prove to the rest of these yahoos that it wasn’t just a fluke. Take whoever you need and get started on our first rifle detail.”



“Right Colonel, give me Sergeant McGowin and Corporal Foley and we’ll do our best to prove to the rest of the Division that it’s simply a matter of good coaching and determination!”

“You’d better do more than **TRY** Culver, your reputation and your fanny is on the line on this one!”

“Aye, aye Sir, I’ll get started right away!”

“Ought oh,” I thought, think fast Culver... “McGowin, meet me in the company office in 15 minutes,” I directed at the hapless McGowin who was passing by as I walked out of the Battalion Office!

A Council of War:

“Mac, what do ya’ think is happening to the Division requal percentages?,” I asked.

“Dunno Skipper, but give me a couple of days out on the range while you have the “S-3” make up the requalification rosters. I’ll have a report for you when I get back!”

“Right Mac, something just ain’t right on this one, I’ve never known of such a slump in requalifications scores - see what you can come up with!”



Sergeant F. A. McGowin

MCGOWIN’S ASSESSMENT:

“Skipper, I’ve got a plan,” said Mac in my office when he came back from his orientation trip to the range.

“OK Mac, let’s have it!”

“Well Skipper, the trick is going to keep our first couple of details small and composed of mostly experienced shooters! I *KNOW* they’ll qualify, and we can use them for coaches on the following details.”

“Makes sense Mac,” I said, “what’s the real problem?”

“Skipper, if I could have these kids out there for about 3-4 days by myself on the old bullseye target, I guarantee that I could have everybody qualified, with no exception unless someone’s rifle blew up! Right now, if a kid goes up on the line with shaky dope on his weapon, he’s screwed all the way across the course with no slow fire stages to get a really good zero or to correct his mistakes – it’s all rapid fire, and you are either dead-on or not! It’s a good course, but it needs at least a day to get a really good zero on each man’s rifle!”

“Sounds like a plan Mac, let’s get things organized!”

A trip to the S-3 office insured that our first two requalification details would be composed of old timers with a history of firing Expert over the old A-Course. I relaxed a bit when our first details qualified with 100%. So far so good. Black Jack was happy, thinking that all the kids would have similar luck. Black Jack reckoned without Murphy...

I had enlisted an ally prior to our first “unvarnished” trip to the range. This was Corporal Ted Hollabaugh⁵ who was a rather talented Rifle Team Armorer who would go on to run the Rifle Team Equipment Shop at MTU (USMC Marksmanship Training Unit) some years later. Now Ted had never worked on accurizing the M14 Rifle, but the collective wisdom was that the principals should be the same. Good tight bedding, no extraneous rifle parts exerting any undue pressure against the barrel, and a good tight locking up of the trigger group, thus pulling the rifle tightly down into the stock’s bedding, coupled with a decent trigger pull. The only problem was that not all the rifles were tight in their stocks, even with a trigger group that locked up tightly. Hummm... What to do? We couldn’t make any permanent modifications to

the rifles, but temporary shims between the receiver and the stock might just cut down on movement once the trigger group was locked into place. We couldn't glass-bed the things, but what could we use for shims? Answer? Shirt cardboard of course! It didn't have to last forever, and all the shooter had to do was NOT to disassemble his rifle unless Mac, Ted or I were watching. We tried putting the cardboard in place and trimmed it with an ExActo Knife so it wouldn't show. voilà! It worked (at least after a fashion)!

Prior to each requalification detail leaving for the range, each man's rifle was inspected and tightened as well as the cardboard would allow. We got each group of shooters around in a circle with homemade bullseye aiming stakes using the new (simulated) "combat aiming points" used in the C-Course. Slings were inspected and tightened. Each man's position was worked on until they appeared to be solid. Leaving for the range was almost a relief.

Scoring and marking targets was a new experience for the new course. In the old days, each shot was individually marked and spotted allowing the shooter to correct for his mistakes, and make dope changes until he (and his coach) were satisfied that the individual had a good solid "zero" on his weapon. Here's where the rub came in. When the new shooter got down in position, his targets came up, the shooter simply blazed away until his magazine was empty or until his target went down, whichever came first. Newbies sometimes failed to distribute their 20-rounds on each of his individual silhouettes, thus losing their potential bonus points. In order to do workmanlike job on the course, the shooter (at least the most successful shooters – and again assuming they were right handed) started on the far right target and moved left into the remaining targets, thus serving to tighten the sling, and usually giving better, or at least tighter groups.

Since "offhand" (standing) rapid fire was the most unfamiliar to the new shooters, we assumed that most, if not all, hiccups would occur during the standing stage. While sitting is a good position for an experienced shooter, from the 300-yard line on back, the prone position offered the greatest potential for tight groups. Sitting only accounted for 20-shots out of a 80-shot course. Conversely at 300-yards, if you had a good tight position but bad dope, you could blow your entire course right at the 300-yard rapid fire stage. The 500-yard line was also prone, but with only two targets, you could be a bit more leisurely and take your time. We were just getting broken into the new course when Mac came back during noon chow and took me over behind the firing line with no one around.

"Hey Skipper", Mac said, "ya know something? The guys who laid this course out made a mistake! Now granted it's not something that the average guy would think of, but do you realize you can qualify on the C-Course without firing any stage but the 300?"

"Mac, what'enhell are you talking about? That's impossible!"

After doing a bit of clipboard work, Mac was absolutely right! You could skip the 200 and 500-yard stages and still qualify very handily! Somebody had screwed up – but then who'inhell would have even thought about that possibility? Worse yet, who in the heck would even *try* such a scheme? None the less, even though it didn't occur to me at the time, this obscure fact was to become the springboard for 2nd Recon's rubbing the 2nd Marine Division's nose in the unspoken rivalry of each Regiment/Battalions attempt to outdo the other on the range.

We played the game straight according to the rules, but squeaked by with a measly 89% for our first unfettered go at getting the Battalion's qualification out of the way for the year.

Black Jack wasn't homicidal, as the 6th and 8th Marines had an 80% and a 75% requalification respectively, but the Colonel clearly wasn't ecstatic.

Mac and I went into a council of war, and Mac suddenly grinned and said. "go home and have a good weekend Skipper, I have a plan!" I should have known better, but went smilingly out to the Range on Monday morning. Mac was ready for the challenge, but I thought I saw a few extra Marines out there that had fired for qualification previously. Just a nagging feeling you understand, but still...

In order to understand what was about to happen, you have to picture the firing line, the scoring points, and how the migration to the firing occurred from the ready bench. It went something like this:

Shooter "A" leaves the "ready bench" and reports to his designated firing point on the line, got into position and prepared to fire the appropriate string of fire. When he fired the string, the line was cleared, and the shooter came back to the coach/score-keeper to receive his score. The targets would come into the air, and the score would be duly recorded and the shooter would return to the benches behind the ready line, with the next relay coming up and taking their place on the firing line. And so it would go until all the relays had fired, and the shooters would then repair to the next yard line for their next string of fire. During practice, this was a pretty cut and dried procedure, but on "Record Day" things got a bit more hectic. The next shooter would take their place on the firing line checking out their position, and getting ready to fire their string, while the shooter who had just fired would be standing back with his coach to catch his score as the targets came into the air. Think about the possible confusion, one shooter leaves the firing point and occupies the scorekeeper's attention while the next shooter took his place in position before the targets come into the air with the spotters in them. If you weren't watching closely, things could get pretty hectic.

On Record Day, the scorekeepers/coaches were shuffled so that no aspiring coach could pad his shooters scores, or give unauthorized help to a shooter who got into trouble. This would be tempting of course, because the coaches were given "kudos" for high requalification percentages of their protégés, and the temptation might well prove too great if the "big shuffle" was not instituted on "*der-tag*".⁶ This shuffle also insured that the scorekeeper wouldn't be terribly familiar with the shooter who would be firing on his particular firing point, which fit right in with McGowin's emergency plans.

Although I was not aware of it, this particular record day would be McGowin's "test-bed" for emergency procedures in case some kid went totally spastic over the course, or couldn't hit the deck with his cover if he threw it straight down. Had I known what was coming, I would have had some real misgivings.

One particular youngster was willing but about as nervous as a prostitute about to receive communion from the Pope! He had been having trouble all week, and couldn't seem to get his dope right or make meaningful "come-ups" from yard line to yard line. I was really sweating his upcoming performance. As the lad in question took his place on the firing line, we were all holding our collective breaths. Mac conversely seemed relatively unconcerned. The targets went into the butts to be scored, the lad made his weapon safe, and got out of position. When the targets came into the air, I breathed a sigh of relief as the lad had seemingly gotten his feces in one burlap sack! He had dead center groups and marvelous fire distribution. Our lad qualified quite handily. As a matter of fact, all of our somewhat questionable shooters suddenly seemed to have gotten help from an understanding "Odin"

and the rifle percentage came close to 100%! Holy Catfish, Mac had come through again, and I headed back to the Battalion to give Black Jack the good news. In the next day or two, there was a council of war in the Division G-3 (Operations) shop with all the Regimental and Independent Battalion Commanders in attendance. It seems that all of the outfits with the exception of the 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion had turned in abysmal qualification percentages. The fact that Black Jack's outfit had done well, essentially made the Infantry Regimental Commanders' explanations that the horrible performance was due to either the faulty rifles or ammunition meaningless or at least sound like lame excuses. Black Jack of course, gave them no slack and pointed out that we simply had superior coaching and were devoting more time to this most essential of Marine Corps skills!

I was of course, patted appropriately on the posterior for our extraordinary performance and I left the Battalion Office with something in the back of my mind that didn't quite set well. I called in McGowin and we sat down to have a little talk.

"Mac, what in the hell is going on? I know you are a great coach, and your record in requalification training has always been outstanding, but something bothers me a bit! How in the heck did all of our screwed up shooters suddenly get religion and suddenly "find themselves" at the 300-yard line today?"

"Well Skipper," Mac said, with a slight grin causing the lines around his eyes to crinkle a bit, "have you ever heard of a *designated hitter*" in baseball?"

Designated hitter? Mac, what in the heck are you talking about?" ...but something deep down in the recesses of my brain housing group was beginning to click.

"Well Skipper, I didn't do it every time, but as a test, I came up with three *designated dingers*! One white, one black, and one Hispanic shooter each with outstanding 300-yard dope on his rifle. This was a "just in case" in the event one of our shaky shooters screwed up on the 200, or forgot where the nut behind the butt plate was located!. I got a double handful of different shaped dungaree covers⁷ to be used as appropriate, to give our "hitters" a different appearance, and to keep any undo attention from being drawn to any one individual. Here's the way it works. If I had any one (shooter) I was *really* worried about, I'd have the "designated dinger" go up and take his place on the firing line, and shoot his string of fire at 300. When the line was cleared, the shooter (instead of going to the scorekeeper) went straight back to the bench, never going near the scorekeeper. The guy who had supposedly just shot, came off the bench and joined the scorekeeper to retrieve his score. The coaches/scorekeepers were so busy, they never noticed the switch! Since I wasn't sure what color our screw-up was going to be, I simply had three different "designated dingers" of appropriate shades to take their place on the line."

"Dear Allah Mac, do you have any idea what they'd do to us if they got wise?"

"Don't have a clue Skipper? Send us to Vietnam? You *DID* say the Colonel wanted to beat the guys who'd been screwing with him didn't you? It's not like these guys haven't been getting lots of rifle practice and lots of good coaching. I'd take any of 'em to war with me, wouldn't you?"

Mac had a point, but this was like juggling glass balls of nitroglycerine! Full Bird Colonels have very long memories, and make evil adversaries when aroused. If this ever gets out, we'd all be toast! Somehow I had visions of a Marine Captain being assigned to parachute into Hanoi to capture Ho Chi Minh with a Bolo Knife as an object lesson.

Things were beginning to come to a head. Black Jack having just come back from the G-3 meeting after rubbing the Infantry Regimental Commander's noses in our outstanding performance on the rifle range. Black Jack was no damn fool either and smelled something slightly amiss.

"Culver, that was an outstanding performance at the range! Exactly how did you pull it off?"

Now the fat was in the fire.

"Colonel, McGowin found out that the guys who designed the C-Course overlooked the fact that in fact you can qualify if you ONLY shoot the 300-yard line without even shooting the rest of the course. We've taken advantage of this overlooked fact by concentrating all of our efforts on the 300!"

"No \$hi+ Culver? That's amazing, am I going to get in any trouble?"

"Not if I can help it Colonel, I'd be in the same spot in the nether regions right with you! We're just making sure we're taking advantage of any holes in the system," not going into great detail on *HOW* we were taking advantage of the slight screw-up in the course's scoring system. "By the way, just how high a percentage do you want the Battalion to maintain anyway?" I dropped as a trailing comment...

"Just how high a percentage CAN I get Culver?"

"A full hundred percent if you want it Colonel, I can virtually guarantee it!"

Now the Colonel was beginning to smell a rat, but he was enjoying every minute of messing with the Division Staff. His grin was infectious, and indicated he was fascinated with the possibilities, and he obviously wasn't ready to hang my scalp out to dry.

"Naw, we'd better back off from a full 100%, somebody's gonna' get suspicious – make it ...say 95% plus or minus a point or two," sitting back in his chair with a smug look on his face. Black Jack was obviously enjoying his day in the sun.

A CHANGE OF COMMAND:

Things continued to go nicely, but we were still losing personnel on a rapid basis, and our S-3 (Operations Officer) was transferred. I (as a mere Captain) as assigned as the new S-3 (Operations Officer, a billet usually calling for a Major), and senior staff NCOs were rapidly disappearing. I called on McGowin to be my new Ops Chief, a billet usually calling for a Master Sergeant. Quite frankly there wasn't a senior NCO in the entire Battalion that I'd have traded for Mac. He didn't have the exalted rank called for, but he definitely had the intelligence, savvy and drive to get the job done. Unfortunately we were also to get a change in command of the Battalion as Black Jack's talents were being sought for a command in the Republic of Vietnam. I wanted to go with him but I didn't have enough time in the Division to rate a transfer yet.

Our new Battalion CO was a gentleman named Kaiser, also a Navy Cross winner (as had been Colonel Westerman) from Korea (although I could never pin down anyone who knew what deeds of great daring garnered him the decoration).

Colonel Kaiser was as different from Colonel Westerman as night and day, and Kaiser was definitely one of the career planners. He made sure that “Kaiser’s Skirts” were clean no matter what the circumstances were.

I had been assigned as the S-3 one week before Kaiser’s arrival, and had been told by the departing S-3 that there were some loose ends that needed to be cleaned up. *Whooo* Boy, what an understatement!

It seems that during the previous “IG” inspection (2-years previously), the Battalion had not prepared a Operations Plan/Order for 2nd Recon, but ‘skated’ with the IG, claiming that a plan was nearing completion. Yeah *right!* When the IG left, they made a note of the “pending paperwork” and called attention to the fact that it should be thoroughly perused when the next IG made their inspection. Unfortunately, Cy Gonzales⁸ (the departing S-3) had never hit a lick on the plan after the IG cleared the door after the previous inspection. He just “casually” mentioned it to me as he departed for his new duty station! Huh? Oh good, ‘cuz the IG was due two weeks hence (the IG Inspections were usually interspaced with a Commanding General’s Inspection on alternate years, and the ramifications of not having completed the required Op Plan in two years was too horrible to contemplate)! “Cy,” I thought, “I think I’m gonna’ kill ya!”

Colonel Kaiser called me to task for not having a plan turned out (no matter that I had heard about it one week before), and while we were busily working on it, it was a long way from being finished. Kaiser also wanted to know why I had not selected a senior NCO as the Operations Chief, and instead had selected some Alabama hillbilly as my Ops Chief. I was not amused, but told Kaiser that McGowin was the best NCO in the battalion regardless of rank (the Sergeant Major was usually busily spreading flower/grass seed with a plastic seed spreader – virtually as worthless as mammary glands on a male hog!). I asked the Colonel if he wanted to get things done or have some clueless S/NCO running around the S-3 office getting organized. I needed things done, and done *now*. Kaiser bought off on my reasoning, but still used the lack of an Operations Plan as an excuse for anything or everything that might look bad on his record. It was hard to develop any warm and fuzzy feelings for our new CO. Kaiser was obviously looking out for Kaiser, not for the Battalion.

We did get two gleaming jewels into the Battalion however who were to keep the machinery well oiled. One was a Major I had worked for before in the old 1st Force Reconnaissance Company, Dale Davis, one of the true gentlemen to have ever worn the eagle, globe, and anchor, and a “wise-acre” young Naval Academy Lieutenant named *Rocky* Wirshing.

Skip Hartnett had still been my XO before I left A Company, but after the evolution in Panama, had been “pirated” away to take the Recon Battalion’s platoon deployed in the Mediterranean. Upon his return, I got him involved in the Designated Dinger operation, but while he thought it was hilarious, he was being groomed to go over to the newly formed 3rd Force Reconnaissance Company. He had been slobbering over my Gold Parachute Wings and since we had some quotas come in, I relented and sent him to Ft. Benning, thus inadvertently shooting myself in the foot for competent help who knew how to keep their mouths shut. With Skip Hartnett back in harness, freshly back from Airborne School, and Wirshing being broken in as the new ‘Requal-Guru’, I bowed out of the equation having my hands full getting the S-3 Shop in order.

As noted above, Hartnett broke young Wirshing in on the scheme, and Rocky proved to be extremely quick on his feet in dealing with the suspicious lads on the Regimental Staffs. With Black Jack gone, the Regimental Commanders decided to gang up on the new Recon Battalion CO. They had reckoned without the verbal BS skills of Lieutenant Wirshing. He broke into the conversation at Division Headquarters, and with one of the most talented rug-dances I have ever seen, had everyone in the meeting convinced that by calculating the fire distribution, and strict attention to the concept of “center-hold” we had found that the 300-yard line could be the savior of the young shooter on the C-Course. Wirshing was correct of course, but he obviously didn’t tell the whole story.

The Regimental Commanders and their Operations folks went away scratching their heads thinking they had just had a course in advanced rifle marksmanship. They had of course, but I had to give Wirshing an A+ in MBFM (male bovine fecal matter – or in other words creative BS). I think they knew in their heart of hearts that they had been had, but weren’t really sure just how!

Strangely enough (and perhaps Odin *did* have a soft place in his heart for the Battalion), the rifle requalification percentages began to pick up throughout the Division. I have always wondered if they thought that Wirshing had come up with the magic bullet (sorry for the pun).

My personal take on the outcome? I think that the meeting called attention to the fact that everyone had been used to simply getting their obligatory 90% requalification without putting in the requisite amount of creative and dedicated rifle coaching. In the long run, McGowin’s “Designated Dinger” scheme may have simply refreshed basic marksmanship fundamentals for a bunch of characters that had come to take them for granted!

So, here’s a salute and a tip of the Field Hat⁹ to Francis A. McGowin who may have come across the solution to the Division’s problem without realizing what he had done!

Semper Fidelis my good and faithful friend,

ROC

¹ In the negative connotation, the individual is sometimes referred to as “one of them damned dingers” – not usually conducive to great fitness reports! Conversely, at least two Commandants have been designated as Distinguished Shooters, and many well known competitive shooters have been highly decorated including at least two Medal of Honor recipients. Numerous General Officers had become Distinguished Marksmen prior to both WWI and WWII, and the command interest generated by such officers made the Marine Corps’ myth and tradition of a Corps of deadly Riflemen a reality.

² A “casual” organization is normally a loosely thrown together outfit that is utilized as a staging unit to feed other troops to operational organizations. In this case, since the main “hate and discontent” was occurring in South East Asia, the 2nd Marine Division was being used to feed required troops into Viet Nam while maintaining commitments in the Mediterranean and Caribbean areas of interest. Since the main assignment of troops out of Boot Camp and ITR were scheduled for RVN, the 2nd Marine Division got just enough bodies to keep the deployed Battalions filled. Every other available deployable individual went to the current combat zone. Those who were left at Camp Lejeune had to do double or triple duty!

³ While the M14 was officially adopted as the U.S. Service Rifle in 1957, it took a while for the rifle to filter down to the troop level. The Marines, always seemingly on the bottom rung of the supply ladder didn’t begin to assimilate the M14 into the FMF until about 1965, and even then it was a slow process. The M14 began to make its way to the National Rifle Competition in 1964 when the first NM M14s were supplied to the shooters at Camp Perry by TRW who produced the NM Rifles strictly for competition. By then it was obvious that the M14 could be made to shoot exceptionally well, but the improvements would be some years away from filtering down to the troop level. The Marine Corps was still using match conditioned M1s until the mid 1970s to conduct their Division Rifle Competition. Eventually all of the records set by the M1 rifles at the Nationals would be broken by the “tweaked” M14, but alas that was not yet the case in early 1966.

⁴ The E-Silhouette Target is a “field firing target”, roughly human in shape with a head and shoulders, and is called the “kneeling silhouette”. It is 40” high and 20” in width and used in many field firing courses.

⁵ When Ted retired from the Marine Corps, he went “next door” to the FBI Academy as their Sniper Armorer, and later became their “ballistician”. Following his retirement from the FBI, Ted went to work for *Federal Cartridge* as their Law Enforcement sales representative. He is currently retired and living in Luray, Virginia.

⁶ “Der-Tag” in German translates to “the day.”

⁷ Dungaree Covers are now referred to as Utility Covers, but old terminology died hard.

⁸ I had served with Cy Gonzales years before in the First Force Reconnaissance Company – a fine field “troop” but he hated paper work with a vengeance. Cy should probably have been kept in the legendary Con-Ex Box marked “*Release in case of War!*”

⁹ A “Field Hat” in the Marine Corps is the same piece of headgear commonly known as a “Campaign Hat” in the other services.