

Culver and the “Fang Mechanic¹”

By Dick Culver

Dental visits have never been on my top ten in terms of enjoyment. As the old saying goes, I'd rather have a “root canal” than do (whatever). Nevertheless, occasionally it's necessary to get your fangs attended to for maintenance or repair, albeit with little enjoyment.

While attending the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, academics occupied almost all of my scheduled time, leaving little buffer to attend to medical or dental tasks that did not fall under the heading of a legitimate emergency. Over a period of time however, the old amalgam fillings in your teeth tend to loosen, crack or just plain fall out. If it's not causing pain or interfering with normal eating - or perhaps the sharp edges cutting your tongue - the average individual simply puts it on the back burner until pain or inconvenience forces his (or her) hand.

Following daily classes one afternoon, I found myself without any afternoon labs, and a friend and fellow Marine classmate of mine, Mike Burns, had an appointment at the Navy Dental Clinic. He asked me if I'd like to accompany him, and while visits to the dentist have never been on my top ten (as noted above), conversely I had no idea where the Dental Clinic was located, so this provided an opportunity check out the location in the unlikely event I should have occasion to darken their doors.

Mike went in for his appointment, and I sat in the waiting room checking the place out. Sitting behind the desk was a lone 1st Class Duck² “Tooth Fairy” apparently lost in reading the local fish-wrapper. The paper hid virtually his whole persona, and I could only tell that there was a real person behind the news by the occasional appearance of a disembodied hand and arm reaching around the side to retrieve a coffee cup. Had he not been wearing a uniform blouse, I would not have been able to ascertain his gender, military specialty or rank.

Since I did have a couple of broken fillings, I decided to check with the faceless minion of dentistry to see what procedures were necessary to get the things fixed when the academic schedule would permit. Since I had given up on seeing the actual peruser of the newspaper, and it would have been considered impolite or even rude to have taken my hand and mashed it down to get a glimpse of his shining face, I simply said something to the effect of “what do you have to do to get a couple of missing fillings replaced?”

The disembodied Duck voice replied without taking the paper down, “Come back at Sick Call.”

Since these two missing fillings were hardly an emergency, it would seem to have been an unnecessary step to have waited in line with the “sick, lame and lazy” who frequent the sick bays of the Naval establishment, to simply get an appointment.

“And when might sick call go?” I enquired out of pure interest.

“O'Eight Hundred every morning” was the reply from the Duck, who had still not taken his newspaper down from his face. “Then the Dentist can take a look and see what's wrong!”

“I don't think you understand,” I said, “I *know* what's wrong, I just want to get a couple of

fillings replaced that have fallen out! I don't need a rocket scientist to tell me I'm missing a couple of fillings!"

"Come back at Sick Call," the Duck reiterated with the paper still in front of his face, although there was a distinctly nasty tone in his voice, "Don't you understand English?"

"Marine Officers don't take a ration of \$hi+ off some First Class Dental Duck!," was my reply, "Who in the hell is running this joint?"

The Duck set his coffee cup down for the first time, hurriedly put down his paper, and went running back into the bowels of the Dental Offices!³

After a few minutes, an older gentleman emerged from the inner sanctum. He was wearing a white hospital-type coat (smock?) which covered his shirt, leaving only his dark trousers showing. He could have been anything from an Admiral to an aging Chief.

The newly arrived, white coated figure demanded to know who in the office didn't know how to follow instructions? This guy obviously had been briefed by the smart-mouthed 1st Class who had fled previously.

"I'm not sure to whom I'm speaking," I said, "but I'm the one who asked how I could get an appointment to have a couple of fillings fixed that have fallen out."

"Don't you understand the concept of sick call?" this equally abrasive character asked.

"I understand, alright," I said, "and I understand the concept of sick call if I was just coming in for an assessment of my molars, but I already know what's wrong, I just want my fillings fixed!"

"Well, I'm *Captain*⁴ Keenan," was the reply, "who in the hell are you?"

"Major R.O. Culver, USMC," was my answer, "and I meant no disrespect, but I have classes every morning at 0800, and nothing hurts badly enough to miss class to have someone tell me something I already know; that I have a couple of missing fillings – I can feel 'em with my tongue!"

"Well Major," was the reply, "what are you doing right this minute? I wouldn't want you to miss any of your classes!" The tone of voice was MOST sarcastic!

"Nothing at all Captain, what did you have in mind," was my answer.

"Get back in my office, I'll take care of *you* personally!" The tone of his voice was anything but reassuring!

"Sit down in that chair," he said, motioning to the only dental chair in the office.

I complied, loosening my tie with a certain amount of apprehension. The Captain did NOT look happy.

"You don't seem like much of a Marine to me!", the Captain said, "I was with the Marines on Guadalcanal!"

The first reply I could come up with was "Well, Captain, you certainly LOOK old enough to have been with the Marines on the 'Canal!'"

"I'm beginning to understand what kind of Marine you are," the Captain continued.

"I don't think you have a clue Captain," I replied, "but *I'm* beginning to see what kind of *dentist* you are!"

By now the Captain was approaching apoplexy! Keenan and his "tooth fairy" are close enough to touch me, but the Captain chose to cross over into the 3rd person method of communication!

"Tell him to open his mouth wider!" was the Captain's reply.

I opened wider, of course, and the Captain began his assessment.

"Tell Major he's missing two fillings," the Captain told his 'tooth fairy'.

Hummm, this guy is gonna' get the Nobel Prize in "Dental Triage"!

"Tell the Captain I suspected as much," I relayed to the 'tooth fairy' to convey to the Captain.

Captain Keenan rummaged around in his dental cabinets, coming out with an absolutely huge Syringe. He installed a small needle on the syringe and extracted the necessary amount of Novocain from a small bottle into the outsized syringe. The unnecessarily large syringe was an affectation to see if he could make the nice Marine cringe...

"Well 'Nails'," you'll want a local anesthetic I suppose," the Captain said with an evil look on his face, squirting a small amount of liquid from the end of the needle.

Knowing what was running through his mind, instead of cringing I chuckled! NOW the Captain was *really* urinated off!

I'll give the old gent his due, he was one hell of a dentist, as he was through with both teeth in less than forty-five minutes. The Captain arranged for an additional session, and gave the slip to the "low-life" Duck who had started the whole thing! I noticed the Captain had arranged for my appointment for the afternoon when it wouldn't interfere with my class schedule.

Later that afternoon I received a note to report to our academic advisor, a Navy Commander (the equivalent of a Marine Corps or Army Lieutenant Colonel). Upon entering his office, he mentioned that he had received a nasty phone call from Captain Keenan at the Dental Office. I explained what had happened in great detail, making mention that Marine Officers are not used to receiving a ration of \$hi+ from either Marine Corps *or* Navy enlisted personnel, and it didn't reflect well on the individual service, in my opinion. I also pointed out that I had had absolutely no idea who the older gentleman in the white medical smock had been, since no rank was evident, and I had never even been in the dental office before. As far as I was concerned, he could have been an aging Navy Chief. The Commander hemmed and hawed a bit, but I could see a look of understanding coming over his face.

"Well, Culver, I don't suppose I'll write you a fitness report stating that you are a surly SOB, but, you should know that the Captain had just finished with a *VERY* bad day. It seems that his youngster had just been picked up this very morning for drug possession, and having a student "defying" his receptionist was the final straw!"

"The Captain has my sympathy of course," I said most sincerely, "but in all honesty HE

started the altercation, not 'moi'. He never even asked what my problem was, he just jumped in my feces with no warning after I had just taken a ration of stuff from some Tooth Fairy reading a paper, drinking coffee, and never having the courtesy of looking at me before giving me orders with a disembodied voice! Doesn't sound like anyone is keeping track of their personnel over there!"

"Hummm," was the reply. "Well, I know Captain Keenan personally, and he's usually one hell of a nice guy; I'd appreciate it if you'd make a few amends for my sake. How'd you like it if your kid had just been picked up for drug possession?"

"Your point is well taken," I replied, "I'll see what I can do."

Now nobody wants to be known as a "surly SOB" on his fitness report, just as John Wayne commented in *"Rooster Cogburn"*; "Nobody wants to be known as *high smellin' and low down*" in a movie by the same name some years later. Perhaps a bit of schmoozing was indeed in order. I decided to see if I could mend a few Marine Corps and Ordnance Engineering fences. Actually not a bad move, both for my Academic Advisor's sake, and of course for the preservation of my own molars, should I have to return to Captain Keenan's emporium with a real dental problem!

The following afternoon I wandered over to the Dental Clinic, and arranged to palaver with the Captain. Our advisor had been correct, Captain Keenan was a nice gentleman whom I had caught during a moment when his fur was ruffled from other directions. After several cups of coffee, I managed to get him to tell me a few Guadalcanal stories, and got considerably more comfortable with having the Head Fang Mechanic working inside my mouth with drills, needles, and other implements of torture. Before I left the school, Captain Keenan and I got to be good friends and would wave at one another across the Campus when we'd occasionally pass.

While Captain Keenan turned out to be a first class Naval Officer, somebody needed to "Jap Slap" his First Class Tooth Fairy and teach him some manners. Hopefully, he wound up arranging dental appointments in Adak, Alaska! To paraphrase a curse I learned much later in the sand dunes in Saudi Arabia, "May the fleas of a thousand Camels infest his armpits, and may his arms be too short to scratch 'em!"

Semper Fi,

ROC

End Notes:

¹ Marines have long referred to the Navy Dentists serving with Marine Corps organizations as "Fang Mechanics." This was not meant as an insult, but rather as a way of good naturedly ribbing the Dental Corps. The Dental Corpsmen (enlisted Sailors in the Dental Field) were also referred to as *"Tooth Fairies"* with the same good natured intent. Line Hospital Corpsmen (as opposed to Dental) were jokingly called *"Chancre Mechanics"* and of course they reciprocated, often calling the Marines names that would make a civilian blush. There was, however, a close relationship between the Marines and Sailors of the Medical Corps, as they often saved our lives in times of great danger. We considered them fellow Marines and they were (and are) allowed to wear the Marine Corps Uniform when assigned to the Marines. Regardless of all the good natured ribbing, it was truly a love-love relationship.

² “First Class” (actually the whole term is 1st Class Petty Officer) is a rank within the Naval Service equivalent to a Staff Sergeant in the Marine Corps. A Second Class Petty Officer is the equivalent of Sergeant (E-5), and a Third Class Petty Officer is the equivalent of Corporal. The next step up from 1st Class is Chief Petty Officer, usually abbreviated CPO. Third, Second, and First Class Petty Officers can be identified by what would appear to be upside down chevrons with an eagle sitting in the middle on top of the “specialty designator” (crossed anchors for Boatswain’s Mate, crossed cannons for Gunner’s Mate, etc.). Sailors below the rank of CPO still wear the “Middy Blouse” (with flap-like collar) and bell bottom trousers as a service uniform. The term “Duck” is simple “Marine-speak” for sailor, much as they often refer to the Marines as “Jarheads” or “Sea Going Bell Hops”... Nothing derogatory, simply good natured ribbing on both sides.

³ As an aside, while attending the Naval Postgraduate School, all students were required to wear civilian clothes to class, to include dress trousers, a sport coat, decent civilian shoes (no tennies), and a necktie (“field scarf” for all you old time Marine Corps buffs). There was truly no way for the Navy 1st Class to have known my (or anyone else’s) rank or service. This did NOT preclude his being polite and respectful to all hands, however. Such an attitude and rudeness would have gotten him fired in short order in civilian life. Simple politeness is incumbent upon all hands as a matter of common courtesy. The Duck’s attitude and discourtesy were unfortunate, and they reflected badly upon the Dental Clinic. Unfortunately, they simply had the wrong person in the wrong place at the wrong time.

⁴ The rank of Captain in the U.S. Navy is the equivalent of full Colonel in the Army or the Marine Corps or Air Force. The next step up is Rear Admiral (Lower Class), much like the next step up from Colonel is Brigadier General. Rear Admiral (*Lower Class*) is the equivalent of a Brigadier General, but the holder of the rank wears “2-Stars” instead of one – this was reportedly done to give Navy “Flag Officers” a “one-up” on any sister services who merely wore one star, albeit holding the same pay grade. The Navy DOES have a one star grade known as a *Commodore*, but it is generally used only in wartime, and is usually a “frocked” rank, good only until the cessation of hostilities. Naval officers with special small boat talents (sailing skippers, etc.) were occasionally inducted during WWII as Commodores to handle anti-submarine patrols off the coast of the United States. Some years back an attempt was made to reintroduce the rank of Commodore to replace the Rear Admiral (Lower Grade) rank but was “feces-canned” shortly afterwards, no doubt due to some resistance from the brass who didn’t want to remove a star from their epaulets. The Navy has always been extremely rank conscious...