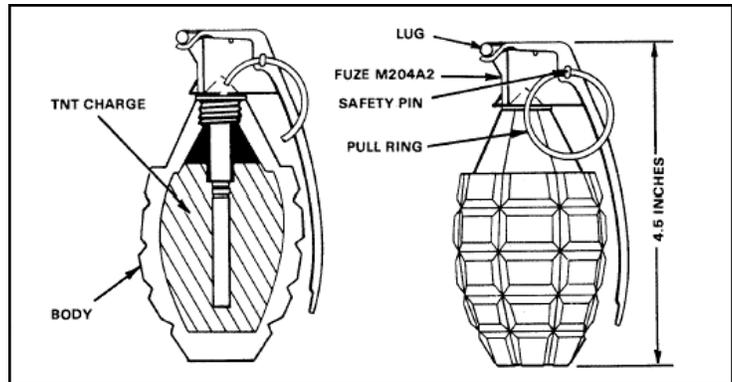


High Jinks and Hand Grenades

A Study in Sea Going Explosive Ordnance Disposal

You've probably all heard the expression of "the morning after" bemoaning the activities of the night before. One November morning in 1961 this expression had a special significance for this old Marine. I was standing on the fantail of the USS George Clymer, an aging APA with the hull number of 27 bespeaking a rather ancient "attack transport" with extensive service in the island hopping campaigns in WWII and participation in the Inchon Landing. I was looking wistfully over the railing commiserating with my buddy, a Lieutenant named Harold R. Scott, and we were both thanking a merciful Odin for not blowing the boiler tubes of the aging APA the previous evening.



The Mark II Fragmentation Hand Grenade

A Bit of Sea Going History

The old Clymer had been rode hard and put away wet as the saying goes, and had definitely seen her time in the blast. WWII service had varied from the invasion of North Africa, to the Island Campaigns in the Pacific. She not only carried Marines of the 2nd Raider Battalion, but participated in the Bougainville landings, reinforced and supplied the troops on Guadalcanal, participated in the Kwajalein and Saipan invasions, the invasion of Leyte in the Philippines, participated in the Guam invasion, and the final push in the invasion of Okinawa. This was followed by duty as the flagship for Transport Division 11 during atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. She supported the Nationalist Chinese in the Chinese Civil War in 1948, and later when the North Koreans crossed the 38th Parallel, she left San Diego carrying units of the 5th Provisional Marine Brigade to Pusan. A short time later, she embarked men of the 1st Marine Division at Kobe, Japan for the amphibious invasion at Inchon on 15 September. Following the successful landings, she served as amphibious control and hospital ship before returning to Sasebo 29 September with casualties from the succeeding operations around Seoul. Continuous transport duties followed the Korean unpleasantness, she continued various transport duties in the far east. ...And as I am about to relate, transported the 2nd Battalion of the 9th Marine Regiment back from Neumazu, Japan headed for Okinawa to occupy the then new Marine Base at Camp Hansen in the central part of the island in November 1961.

The entire discourse above is given to imbue the reader with some appreciation of a faithful, but tired Assault Transport that wasn't exactly a youngster. Twenty years of hard duty, much of it in combat, had taken its toll. In a grunt's vernacular, she was tired and probably needed a rest and time in dry dock to bring her mechanically into the 1960s. The word amongst the troops and even members of the Clymer's black gang was that the old girl's boilers were a bit "iffy" and needed some expert attention. This sets the stage for a bit

of sea going Explosive Ordnance Disposal some 43 years past. In order to understand the full scenario, we need to go back to Camp Fuji and the town of Neumazu on the coast of Japan just before 2/9 embarked for their return trip to the Rock.

A Quick Background of the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines 1961-1962 Deployment

The 2nd Battalion of the 5th Marines had “transplaced” from Camp Pendleton in late June of 1961 on the APA 222, the USS Pickaway. The 2nd Battalion of the 5th Regiment originated in the 1st Division at Camp Pendleton, and was magically transformed as/into the 2nd Battalion of the 9th Marines of the Third Marine Division when we arrived at Okinawa for our thirteen month deployment in the Far East. The entire 3rd Marine Division was split between Hawaii, Japan (the Wing component and the range detachment at Camp Fuji), and Okinawa (Okinawa was still considered to be separate from Japan at that time) to act as a deterrent to enemy aggression, and to act as a holding force until more troops arrived in the event of a major war.

Okinawa was a wondrous place in those far off days, and it had only been 16 years since the island had been taken by the U.S. Forces. The natives were still sucking respectfully through their teeth, and were most solicitous to the latest arrival of U.S. Marines. They still knew we had our (invisible) foot on their necks and they were appropriately subservient (as they should have been in my opinion!). The dollar was “gold plated” and you could literally buy anything you wanted for a bit of “green”.

2/9 was initially stationed at Sukiran (later spelled Zukerian and eventually called Camp Foster by the Marines). It was a great place and allowed the youngsters of the Corps to acclimate themselves to the Far East. We got in some excellent field exercises in the surrounding countryside, were exposed to the native typhoons, and learned how to bargain and palaver with the natives.

Our local PX was abysmal when compared to their Stateside Cousins, but we could occasionally catch a bus up to Camp Buckner (the adjacent Army Base) and the PX on the Army digs was first class, and as good as any I ever experienced in the States. I learned about the local history. Being a history buff, I managed to visit many of the historical landmarks, and 1st Sergeant Hoaglund (our 1st Sergeant in Golf Company of 2/9) was a WWII Marine participant in the Okinawa invasion, filled in the rest.

We conducted rubber boat training off of the small islands on the coast, and generally got acclimated to the climatic peculiarities of the Far Eastern environs. The only thing we were missing was a range facility suitable to exercise our mortars, recoilless rifles, 3.5” Rocket Launchers, Machine Guns, rifle grenades, and heavy ordnance. Since we were scheduled for a “float” encompassing many of the potential trouble spots of the Far East of the time, zeroing our heavy weapons and gaining experience for our new kids was a mandatory element of our projected training. We were all looking forward to our projected deployment to the firing ranges at Camp Fuji in Japan at the end of the summer. We were scheduled to leave our digs in Sukiran, and return to the newly finished camp at Hansen. We would be the first infantry Battalion to take up residence in the newly finished camp although the 3rd Tank Battalion had been the first aboard.

Camp Fujji

We finally arrived on the island of Japan, and took up residence in the Marine encampment at Camp Fuji. We lived in strong backed tents with stoves in the center of the digs, and took our showers in specially set up “shower tents” with the water heated by the engineers to keep us from douching off with frozen water droplets... A stove in the entrance of the “shower tent” made things bearable while drying off, and we were able to maintain a certain modicum of cleanliness, albeit with a bit of icy stiffness. Weekends were great, we hit all the centers of attraction including Tachakawa, Yokosuka, and of course, Tokyo. Shopping was incredible, with the rate of exchange in those far off times of ¥360 to the Dollar. Anything your fertile mind could imagine was there for the a little good will and green folding money. The use of the U.S. Dollar was prohibited at the time in Japan however (although legal in Okinawa), and we had to trade our “green” in for what were known as MPC or Military Payment Certificates. They were better known to the U.S. Service personnel as “Mickey Mouse Money”... These certificates are perhaps better covered in a later sea story, but they made up some of the distant memories of the time and place. I spent a couple of weekends running down a gentleman in Yokosuka who was known as the finest firearms engraver in Japan at the time, and I had brought along several items for him to practice his talent. Such things are strictly prohibited now of course, but the Japanese Government was still operating in the shadow of U.S. administration, and had not yet made their aversion to firearms a national centerpiece. Blades now of course, were a “whole ‘nother smoke to the home of the Samurai tradition.

We were still hanging our covers at Camp Fuji for the Marine Corps Birthday in 1961, and our Commanding Officer, Lt.Col. J. M. Jefferson, Jr. had decided to use the occasion to further our Far Eastern Education. Colonel Jefferson was a Japanese Linguist who had been left in Japan following WWII to assist with the administration of the new Japanese Government under the gentle hand of Douglas MacArthur. As a result of his experiences he had become well acquainted with many of the well placed Japanese families, especially those who would have been thought of as “the upper crust”. His close association with the Japanese hierarchy and their family life gave him an insight to the country far above what would be gained from normal academic research.

Idle Hands and Hand Grenades

A few more days on the various ranges at Fujii allowed us to throw the old pineapple Mark II Fragmentation Hand Grenade (the Marines would not go entirely to the M26 “egg shaped grenade until the beginning of the Vietnam War). Normally unexpended ordnance was disposed of by EOD personnel, as hot rounds not still in the boxes by “lot numbers” were simply blown in place. This may sound wasteful, but the rationale is that if you discover a “bad lot” of ammunition, all of that lot is withdrawn from service prior to an investigation by ordnance to discern the cause. Loose ammunition, not absolutely identified by lot number becomes suspect, and thus it is considered to be safer to dispose of the remnants rather than risk inadvertently using an unsafe lot. This is ordinarily not a problem as nobody has a place to “stick/stash” a leftover 3.5 Rocket Round, and Mortar Rounds are too heavy and too bulky. The problem starts when we leave a grenade range. Somehow, it just seems sacrilegious to leave a perfectly good “frag grenade” laying around loose. Unfortunately, it is not terribly uncommon to have a few stuffed in field jacket pockets or other convenient spots by

individuals who were loath to leave perfectly good left over grenades to be blown up by EOD for no apparent reason!

Once I detected the tendency of a few of our youngsters attempting to save the Government money by hoarding left over Mark II frags, I knew it was time to nip this one in the bud. While gang warfare was not to start in earnest for several years, and most of our young Marines were not inherent bad@\$\$es, I could still see the formula for a potential disaster brewing. All we needed was a bit of horseplay gone horribly wrong, and I'd be filling out paperwork from my cell in Portsmouth for the next 40-years. I did what any dedicated 1st Lieutenant of Marines would do. I got the company together out in the field to keep from broadcasting this potentially dangerous practice to the entire world. I indicated that I understood such efforts were in the best interest of the Government in general and the Marine Corps in particular, but for the sake of security and safety, I wanted them to turn any such ill gotten gains into myself either in the field, or in my tent prior to departure for Okinawa. I was amazed at the unexpected volume of illicit ordnance that poured into my tent, and I secured them in my footlocker for safe keeping. Just prior to our departure from Fujii backload onto the George Clymer, I called in the local EOD folks and turned over my stash for proper disposal. They thanked me profusely, and departed with their next day's work cut out for them.

I was proud that our lads had responded so responsibly and breathed a sigh of relief. The following day we departed for Numazu and thence to shuttle out to the George Clymer and hoist ourselves over the traditional debarkation/embarkation nets dangling over the sides of the ship. All was going well until just before climbing aboard the Mike Boat headed for the ship, a young L/Cpl., apparently having second thoughts or having genuinely having overlooked a stray Mark II, came up to me and in a very low whisper thrust his prize in my hand and asked if I could dispose of it for him? Uppsss... Now what? I looked around, and seeing no one watching the "transaction" took the Mark II and put it in my Field Jacket pocket. I thanked the lad for his contribution to the safety of the organization and made plans to throw the damned thing over the side once we were underway. All of a sudden, still another lad with a sheepish look on his face came over and deposited grenade number two in my hand! Holy Catfish Batman! I looked carefully around to see if there was a waiting line of lads waiting to make a similar contribution to the now growing pile. Seeing no one else, I put the second grenade in my Field Jacket and climbed into a Mike Boat headed to the waiting cargo nets. Hopefully a fall from the nets would not displace any safety pins or we'd have a real blast (sorry, I couldn't resist).



Embarkation Nets on the USS George Clymer

Upon being assigned a cabin space, and making sure no one was watching, I broke out a roll of rigger's tape (an OD version of Duct Tape) and taped the safety levers (often called "spoons" in the vernacular) of the grenades to preclude any surprises. Now all I had to do

was to wait for the appropriate minute under cover of darkness to throw these things into Davy Jones' Locker and breathe a sigh of relief. Alas the best laid plans of mice and Marines... My somewhat evil sense of humor began to emerge and a plan to combine duty with entertainment began to hatch. All I needed was a coconspirator with a sense of adventure. The first individual who came to mind was a 2nd Lieutenant by the name of Harold R. Scott (better known as Scotty) who was serving as one of my platoon commanders. Since I had every confidence of Scotty's ability to keep his mouth shut, I approached him with my scheme.

Every evening aboard ship they showed a movie in the wardroom (a sort of officers dining room, card playing space, and quasi-lounge). I suggested that during the evening movie, we adjourn to a well hidden dark spot with unimpeded access to the wash of the ship as it ploughed through the Sea of Japan. There at the appropriate moment, we would remove the pins from the grenades, and on a synchronized count, throw the things as straight down into the sea as possible. Having done this sort of exercise in water-filled gravel pits some years before, I was sure that it was safe as far as fragmentation goes, and the noise would be appropriately muffled. We should still be able to see the underwater flash from our elevated perch. Since we would be unobserved it sounded like great fun for a couple of bored lieutenants.

Underwater Explosive Ordnance Disposal

Scotty and I excused ourselves at different intervals from some ancient movie being shown that evening, adjourned to my cabin, picked up the illicit Ordnance and headed for our prearranged vantage point. Everything seemed to be going perfectly. Once in place, we carefully unwrapped the "safety tape" from the grenade spoons, and threw the debris into a dark sea. The conditions were perfect, no moon, cold night discouraging other individuals from taking in the night air, and an apparently totally deserted deck. We looked at one another, grinned in the darkness, and pulled the pins on the count of one. On the count of two we threw the pins overboard to dispose of any lingering clues should things go awry. On the count of three we simultaneously cocked our arms into a throwing position, and on the count of four we threw the illicit ordnance as hard as we could down into the waiting ocean.

A careful count on our part was rewarded with the expected twin muffled "boomphs" and a visible fireball underwater. ...But, the fireball was much closer to the surface than I would have imagined! Uh Oh... I had reckoned without the effect the wash of the ship's wake keeping the grenades from reaching a comfortable depth before exploding! Horrors... We casually came down the ladderwell from our vantage point and onto the main deck as rapidly as possible without arousing suspicion, acting like we were simply getting some fresh air. We had been located well aft when we threw the things, and just as we passed an open hatch on the port side, a number of deck snipes



**The USS George Clymer APA 27
An aging Veteran of three wars**

came boiling up from down below. I asked the running mob what the hell was going on, and one of the last of the black gang who came through the hatch yelled "the boiler tubes have blown!" Oh my Gawd... I had forgotten the remarks casually made that the old lady being due for some sort of overhaul, and indicating the boilers were a bit "iffy" at best. Since water is essentially incompressible, it occurred to me that the seawater had simply acted as a very efficient "tamping" of the explosive effect of the TNT in the Mark II grenades! The noise down below must have been humongous with the exploding grenades being essentially right next to the hull. I could just see the headlines; "USS George Clymer's boiler tubes blow! Ship sinks in the sea of Japan!" It was all over but the General Court and a much chastened Dick Culver breaking rocks in a New Hampshire gravel pit!

Slowly the black gang began to reenter the open hatch and cautiously head back for the engine room. Apparently the boilers were still intact, and the worst that had happened was a resounding, water tamped, boom that scared hell out of the entire watch! Whew! And these damned Navy scows were dry as a bone, compliments of Carry Nation and her Saloon Smashers around the turn of the (20th) century. I could have used a quadruple snort of something, but the relief at not having caused the greatest sea disaster since the Titanic left me with an adrenaline high that was every bit as intoxicating as Pusser's Naval Rum! I had learned a valuable lesson, mercifully without getting my fanny handed to me as it ought to have been. My personal recriminations were probably as harsh as would have been handed out at a Courts Martial. All that was missing was the powdery stuff from broken boulders from a sledge hammer with a prison chaser in the background.

The Aftermath...

Apparently the George Clymer survived her attempted "boilertubectomy" by two young idiots and went on to continue to haul troop to Vietnam during the late hate and discontent in South East Asia. As far as I know she was still making trips to South East Asia as late as 1966. What was her ultimate fate? I dunno' although I have done several web searches with no results on her final decommissioning date. Whatever her final disposition to the Valhalla of old combat attack transports, I can almost see some beads of sweat on her boiler plates from a bit of high jinks in November of 1961!

Scotty changed his MOS to Rotary Wing Aircraft Driver after his tour as an '03 Platoon Commander in the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines and was initially flying the old HR2S heavy choppers. I visited him while he was stationed in Pensacola, and later when he was delivering decrepit HR2S choppers back for refitting, he'd stop by the house for a bit of socializing. Scotty was a combat pilot and the squadron maintaince officer of the first CH-53 squadron deployed to Vietnam in June of 1967 on board the USS Tripoli. True to his somewhat unorthodox nature, he had one of his "metal-benders" install an M1 bayonet lug/gas cylinder on a rod protruding from the nose of his "53" to act as a surrogate barrel. Before he took off everyday, he would "fix" his 16" M1903 WWI Bayonet to his makeshift rifle muzzle. Scotty was a warrior if he was nothing else!

Following my return from my tour with 2/9 in Okinawa in 1961-1962 I was stationed in the 8th Marine Corps Reserve and Recruitment District in New Orleans (later renamed simply the 8th Marine Corps District). I was assigned to such exciting duties as signing discharges for Reservists who had finished their obligated service, and among other things was designated as the Special Services Officer with custody of the 8th MCD 16' Sailboat which I kept stored in

my back yard. Being an old sail boat sailor, I often took it out on Lake Pontchartrain to keep her tiller and centerboard limbered up, and of course to keep my sailing skills sharpened.

...And then of course there was one final task, or perhaps EOD run if you will. An oversight on my part had left two suspicious round black tarred cardboard containers in the bottom of my footlocker when I departed the Rock. When I unpacked the thing in New Orleans, I was of course horrified, but knew that my duty was to finish what I had started the previous year. Another Captain also stationed at the 8th MCD Headquarters was brought into a devil's pact in the interest of community safety. One Saturday afternoon, we sallied fourth on the lake with our touchy cargo. Using a technique vaguely familiar to those southern fishermen who are known to use "Dupont Lures" we decided to use the small bombs as depth charges. Simply leaving them in a live condition would have been doubly dangerous as the average depth of Pontchartrain is only (approximately) 6'. The potential for some unfortunate fisherman to inadvertently hook one of 'em was too great, or perhaps it was simply that I couldn't resist pitching a couple of perfectly good hand grenades into the lake without pulling the pins? I have no recollection of what sort of aquatic life our efforts dredged from the lake bed, but we certainly weren't about to linger about to find out! The Good Lord is known for taking care of damn fools, puppy dogs and Marines; in this case perhaps a combination of all three!

Semper Fi,

Dick Culver