



How it all Started...

A Quick History of the Beginnings of the RSMC (Amphibious)

While I didn't get in on the absolute beginnings of the formation of the Royal Saudi Marines, I arrived shortly after the graduation of the first class of stalwart Saudi "Camelnecks"... I suppose I was much like the legendary second Marine to report to the Bonhomie Richard when John Paul Jones was assembling his crew. The first Marine reported to the Officer of the Deck and was reputed to have been told by the befuddled OD to go aft and have a seat until he figured out what he was to do with a Marine. Shortly thereafter, Marine number two arrives and is told by the OD to go aft and find a seat next to the first. The first Marine is said to have greeted the second Marine with the salutation "Boy you should have been in the Old Corps!" – and so it was. I can definitely identify with the second Marine to report to the Bonhomie Richard! I suspect that generations of Marines have been so welcomed!

Some years later, and following the 1st Gulf War, I was told by some active duty Marine that he was one of the first Marine Instructors to form the Royal Saudi Marines. I chuckled a bit and told him that he was mistaken, that we had preceded him by about six years. He insisted that THEY had formed the Corps and were its first instructors. Obviously a history lesson was needed for this "Johnny-come-Lately Leatherneck."

He stared in disbelief but after hearing our story, his reply was, "well yeah, but you guys were **civilians!**" And so we were, although a bit rougher sobriquet has occasionally been applied. I pointed out to him that the Baron von Stueben who trained the Continental Army for George Washington was also a non-citizen, and initially operating at the behest of General Washington and not actually a legitimate part of Washington's stalwart band. The young Marine went away shaking his head, absolutely sure that I was trying to rob him of his place in Saudi Marine History. Those of us who had been there knew better! While I don't place us in the same status as the *Prussian Drill Master*, we had done our part. I encountered another Marine at the National Rifle Matches during the summer of 2003 who also was somewhat befuddled at my revelations, as apparently he too had had a hand in training the RSMC, albeit somewhat later than our efforts back in the late 1980s. Perhaps these Camel Tails will serve to set the record straight. I suspect that for anonymity I should use some sort of *nom de guerre* to give plausible denial in the future!

My own contact with the (soon to be) stalwart “Camelnecks” came at a New Year’s Eve Party in 1984 while perusing a copy of the *Spokane Spokesman Review*. Being somewhat bored and attending in the singular, I checked out the classified ads. Lo and behold, an item virtually jumped off the page at me – “military instructors wanted for the Royal Saudi Marine Corps” by some outfit called SIBC Basil out of Delaware. I surreptitiously copied down the telephone number lest anyone think that I would be interested in such an undertaking. At this time I was a contract firearms instructor for the Idaho POST (Police Officer’s Standards and Training) Academy and usually held my classes in the Coeur d’Alene area. I called the company (Basil) only to find out that all the positions were spoken for with the exception of “The Gunnery Instructor”... Hummm... I have often wondered if Allah was smiling on me that day – later I thought that perhaps I found that damned ad as some sort of opportunity to atone for some of my misdeeds? Either way, it was the start of a great adventure. Apparently the scuttlebutt spread rapidly and I got a telephone call from a gentleman by the name of Pat Teague who was then serving as the Marine Instructor for the Kellogg, Idaho USMC ROTC Unit. Pat had also signed on with this worthy undertaking marking the beginning of a long friendship. We adjourned to a local “watering hole” known as *Gibbs Tavern* (an establishment perhaps to occupy a spot in RSMC History not unlike that of Tun Tavern in Philadelphia in 1775). We proceeded to down several libations (or was it pitchers?) and trade stories. It seems that we had once served together in a rather small (but prestigious) Marine Corps unit back in 1960-61 known as the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company. This was really something of a fluke, as the entire company of that time consisted of only 14 officers and 147 enlisted, AND we were one of two such units in the entire Marine Corps with legitimate parachute billets. Needless to say, we walked with a bit of a swagger in those far off days. Pat had served in the Reconnaissance Platoons, while my dubious distinction was as a Pathfinder Team Leader (sometimes referred to by the “bubble-heads” as “trashfinders” – insensitive dolts!). We traded stories and personages from our mutual past, reminisced over the old days, and were looking forward to heading to the dunes – had we only known! Pat and I had also served together in the early 1970s in the 1st Battalion of the legendary 4th Marine Regiment, so it was almost like a gathering of the clan.

Since I was a bachelor at the time with no one to assist in closing down the homestead, it took me a few days longer to head for Saudi. Pat arrived in February 1985, and I followed in April. It was the start of a long friendship that continues to this day.

The Saudi Corps had several false starts, and was initially fleshed out with a retired Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel by the name of Tom Beldon, a retired Gunnery Sergeant named Norman Jennings, and a Marine Reserve Sergeant named Rod Roper who was to serve as the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Expert. A retired Marine Master Sergeant named Paul Shomper was tagged to become the Gunnery Supervisor, and I was to be the Gunnery Instructor. Basil was still looking for a “Seamanship Instructor”... What the hell? Seamanship Instructor? What was going on...??

I checked with Basil and they allowed that the billets had been set-up by the British and reflected their somewhat offbeat cut on naming and organizing a newly formed Marine Corps. In the meantime, Lt.Col. Beldon was called home to take care of some pressing family matters and never returned. Norm Jennings was caught up in some sort of “alcohol libation sipping bash” and was summarily shipped out of country. I had called an old Marine Corps friend of many years, Skip Hartnett, also a Force Recon alumni, and my former Executive Officer in A Company of the 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion in 1965. Skip had some experience handling sail boats and since Basil was almost at their wits end trying to find a

Seamanship Instructor, Hartnett became the natural billet filler, and joined us during the 3rd week in May. We were slowly attaining our complete compliment of instructors. Paul Shomper was delayed for a number of weeks and I was promoted by Basil (even before I left the States) to become the Gunnery Supervisor. Paul joined us in the early Summer of 1985 and took up the Gunnery Instructor's billet.

By April of 1985, Pat, Rod Roper and Tom Beldon had turned out the very first class of Saudi Camelnecks, and voilá, we had a ready made Corps of approximately 40 Amphibious Warriors ready to repel boarders should the Arabian peninsula be invaded by enemies of the Kingdom. With the exception of the wealth of "black gold" currently sitting under the dunes, I was having a problem wondering who in the blue blazes would want the place? But for an accident of geology, the Arabic Rag-Heads would still be purveying used Camel Manure.

With Beldon gone to take care of familial problems, Pat inherited the job of Training Coordinator, the head of our stalwart band who acted as a sort of buffer between Commander Ammar Al Quatani, (the defacto Commandant of the Royal Saudi Marine Camelnecks), and the rest of the instructors. As I watched the events unfold, I did not envy Pat his job. Dealing with Commander Ammar was like dealing with a kid in a candy shop run amuck! The Commander spoke perfect English, and had attended all the "hot dog staff schools in the States" including the USMC Command and Staff School. Problem? I don't think Commander Ammar really understood the curricula that was offered. Oh he heard the words, but didn't always understand the underlying instruction. Better that they should have started him in Boot Camp and let him work himself up. It was our job to give him what he *THOUGHT* he'd heard, and this wasn't always as easy as it sounded.

Roper was an old timer, and kinda' rolled with the punches, and I had decided to sit back, do the assigned job and enjoy the entire thing as a large adventure. All we needed now was our Seamanship Instructor. Enter Skip Hartnett during the 3rd week of May, boy sailor, and quiet cynic observing the goings on in the manner of the old timers referred to in Thomason's book, "Fix Bayonets"... Much as the old-timers described by Thomason, he had a tolerant scorn of nearly everything on earth except the American Marines, but in many ways, that described our entire crew. We were shortly joined by Paul Shomper, aka "Paulie-Poo" (an affectionate name he still holds to this day), and occasionally referred to as "Four-Egg Shomper" making reference to the fact that Paul was able to consume prodigious amounts of chow. We were "*ready*," if just one word could describe our attitude! In a single phrase, it would have been, "bring on the *Allah Condemned Feline!*"

Initially we were assigned to the Royal Saudi Navy Base in Jeddah and turned out classes that lasted about 3-month's duration with the Officers and Enlisted personnel intermixed. Our classes were elemental, and in many ways were a sort of Boot Camp, combined with an Advanced Infantry Training Course (much like the old ITR – Infantry Training Regiment, a sort of post-boot camp tactical training phase). We taught elemental and advanced marksmanship, infantry tactics (raids, ambushes, helicopter assaults, and night infantry tactics).

Map and compass work was high on the list, and thank goodness, the annual magnetic declination constant for Saudi Arabia was less than 1-degree per year, otherwise we'd *STILL* have fledgling Camelnecks lost in the Desert! We ran the little tools every morning and put them through obstacle courses. They swore we tried to kill them on a very high rappelling tower. Swimming and water indoctrination was a challenge (Arabs don't like to get wet) but

we always made enough progress to keep our interest up. We eventually acquired our own armored cars, not totally unlike the U.S. Marine LAAVs except that the Saudi versions had six wheels vice the eight of the United States versions. We taught amphibious raids, and practiced rubber boat training with the old U.S. Navy/Marine Corps seven man rubber boats. Aside from the occasional frustrations borne of an Arabic tribal lack of motivation, the entire evolution was fun and games.

Occasionally we had a few classes that kept the adrenaline flowing. For instance, our Explosive and Demolition Classes would probably have cancelled our life insurance policies had the appropriate “insurance carriers” been notified, but we survived by pure dumb luck!

While we were constantly monitored, for the most part we were left alone to conduct our training in the manner we chose. Now this is heady stuff! Have you ever wanted to start your own Corps? Design your own emblems? Organize your own units? All this we did and more, all in the name of the defense of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)!

Eventually, the three month classes began to become a thing of the past, and we were often left to twiddle our thumbs occasionally punctuated with a new class reporting, being oriented, and the class newly started, only to have the entire crew disappear over a long weekend – no explanation, no nothing, just boredom! The lack of running legitimate three month classes was leaving us to contemplate our navels rather than to overtly train young Saudi Camelnecks. Boredom was beginning to set in!

A little known regulation with the U.S. Military surfaced that indicated that all retired military expats were required to have permission from their individual services to work overseas and out of CONUS in a tax free status. The penalty for not having permission was the immediate stoppage of your retirement pay, coupled with a requirement that you repay all of your retirement that was paid to you while so employed! Most did not, and there was much “breath holding” going on by the entire Basil contingent. By purest chance, and advice from Skip Hartnett before we left, I had applied for and received the requisite permission. Skip, my personal mentor on this little stumbling block, had mentioned this regulation to Basil prior to departure, and they had told him not to worry about it, as it didn’t apply! Thus the guy who had recommended that I apply for permission had not, and was to rue the day he had taken Basil’s advice.

It seems that some lady Lt. Col. Disbursing Officer (finance to you in the Army), remembered some previous run-in (on active duty) with Skip, and caught him with his knickers down. She stopped his retirement pay, and only his memsahib found out about it in the States on payday. Needless to say, our Seamanship Instructor departed for his home digs to get his pay sorted out, all the time regretting he had referred to the Lady Lt.Col’s prowess as a Marine in terms that only a “female-canine” could understand. Goodby Skip, hello Lee Barta!

Lee, a retired Amphibian Tractor Marine, took over the Seamanship Billet (logical in a way I suppose). Lee was a great guy, but I always got the impression that he was more of a gentleman than the rest of us “unwashed” old grunts. He lent a shade of dignity to an otherwise uncouth gaggle of pirates.

Eventually Commander Ammar, the titular head of the Marines, in order to keep the billets filled to make Basil happy (they were paid according to the filled billets), promoted Rod

Roper to the billet of Assistant Training Coordinator, and a search went out for a new Explosive Ordinance expert. Rod could have handled the job without any problem as the job as Assistant Training Coordinator wasn't one that was particularly demanding, but as pointed out, filled billets put money in Basil's corporate pockets.

Even though the billets for the Saudi Marine Corps were to be filled with retired U.S. Marines, occasionally a recruit from one of our sister services slipped in unnoticed to keep the Table of Organization filled. Rod Roper's replacement was a retired Army EOD man (whose name escapes me at this late date) who was absolutely horrified at the prospect of doing a three mile run every morning to keep our Camelnecks in shape. He immediately pointed out to us that he had experienced a mild heart attack and declined to participate in our physical fitness program. This of course did not exactly "tweak" the cockles of our Training Coordinator's heart, and Pat approached the individuals running the Personnel Offices. After appropriate grilling, our new arrival also fell back on the "weak heart" routine with the hierarchy and he was given a one way ticket back to the States. We continued to train our youngsters with the personnel on hand. At least during my tenure, we never did fill the EOD billet, and the Marine Advisory Group continued to function without a hitch.

Eventually, the classes began to totally wane on the west coast of the peninsula (by the Red Sea), and our contract with SIBC Basil was coming to an end. The entire end of contract found the entire Saudi Naval Amphibious contingent (both the Marines and the Naval Special Unit, aka SEALs) preparing to move to the Persian Gulf side of the peninsula (don't ever let the Arabs hear you call it anything but the Arabian Gulf!).

We were offered the option to sign on directly with the Saudi Navy vice an intermediary U.S. Corporation, and Pat, Rod, Four-Egg, Lee, and I decided to try our luck with a bit of mercenary free lancing. We drove across the peninsula eventually arriving at the Sea Port of Jubail, and hanging our training hats at a place called "Ras al Gar" ("Ras" meaning "point" as in a point of land) a few kilometers below Jubail. Eventually in 1990/1991 Ras al Gar became home to the U.S. Marines as their jumping off point for action in Kuwait and points north during Gulf War I.

Jubail was a new experience as the weather had changed almost 180 degrees. We now had some semblance of seasons, with the spring being cool and wet (light jacket weather) and the summers didn't seem so hot. We were no longer living in hotels rented by the Basil Corporation, but rather in rehabilitated house trailers, and not too well rehabilitated at that! Chow was no longer cooked in the Corporation Dining Facility by retired British Military Cooks, but rather the chow was contracted for by the Saudis at as cheap a rate as they could get. Our messhall (Saudi Expat Mess) was run by a Pakistani Group who specialized in both fish and chicken as the cheapest of fares (both of which I cordially hate!). The fin and feather chow almost starved me to death that last year, but the overall take home pay had increased enough to keep my mouth shut (both in eating the food, and the increased take-home!). Where Jeddah had been over-run by stray felines, Jubail was over run by dog-packs (friendly enough, but very tribal, much like the Arabs themselves).

Jubail was a sort of "hick town" compared to Jeddah, and even the Arab Slave Market was still standing, although I'm not too sure when they used it last, although rumors abounded. The people were friendly, and while they were susceptible to a little arm twisting and bargaining, it still didn't have the variety and familiarity of our old digs. Dhahran however, was within shopping distance and had plenty of variety for the most sophisticated shopper.

Availability to the monthly parties at the Consulate in Dhahran, and some “pork-based chow” in the club on the U.S. Airbase there made it seem like home and gave us a way of saying “intercourse-you” to the Arabic hierarchy...

We were still training Saudi Camelnecks, but it seemed that we were becoming more of a Christmas Tree Ornament for the Saudi Navy, in a sort of “see here, we’ve got real Marine Instructors” type of thing. Got wet a lot holding rubber boat classes, and had lots of time to get in some really long runs on Saudi Saturdays (the Saudi Weekend is Thursday and Friday with Friday being the rough equivalent of our holy day).

Our contracts required that the infidels go to work on Thursdays, with the entire Saudi Navy off for the weekend, we got creative for entertainment. Pat and I would often go on 10-mile runs on Thursdays, but it was just for entertainment and we’d run slow enough to discuss ballistics and Elk Hunting expeditions while hoofing it through the desert. I got my primer from Pat on how to “super-glue” Forrest Service Gate Locks when they were used to deny access to legitimate hunters, we solved most of the problems of the world and even came up with a few they’d never even thought of...

Rod Roper started taking a correspondence course on photography and was getting right clever with his Japanese Glass. Four-Egg had gotten acquainted with a young Cypriot Girl of Greek extraction when on R&R and was either writing, calling or romancing her on R&Rs. Lee Barta and I would often make shopping expeditions to Dhahran, while Pat and I would hit the U.S. Air Base to partake of the various forbidden delights of the States, or the Consulate in Dhahran for some of their monthly parties.

Eventually we all began to break up and go our separate ways. I had gotten a job offer from the Kellogg (High School) ROTC Unit (on a tip from Pat Teague who’d worked there before we wound up in the sand dunes) at the expiration of my contract. Paulie-Poo went to Cyprus when his contract expired and married his little sweetie. Pat hung around for another year along with Rod Roper. Lee Barta went home to Missoula, Montana, and of course Skip Hartnett had left when the Marine Corps stopped his pay back in ’86.

I seriously considered an enlistment in the French Foreign Legion on my way home, but found out the minimum enlistment was five years! Uppsss... Five years as a Frog somehow didn’t appeal to me, although I was in good enough shape at the time to have faked the age restrictions. Somehow I couldn’t picture myself munching Brie Cheese and quaffing vino on liberty in some African hell hole... It was one thing to be with your friends in the dunes, but among thieves and scalawags with no way out for five whole years decided me against such a course of action. Adventure is one thing, but deliberate masochism is another.

The crew was breaking up, but in some ways even today it’s almost like we were all there only yesterday. Rod Roper unfortunately passed into Valhalla due to cancer some years back, but I am still in contact with most of rest of the scoundrels.

After working for the Census Bureau in the 1990 census, Pat went to work for the Idaho State Veterans Administration where he’s still employed. I had his young’uns in the USMC ROTC classes in Kellogg as you might have expected. Young Steve Teague joined the Corps, went to Saudi and occupied some of our old “digs” at Ras al Gar during the 1st Gulf War.

Skip Hartnett and I went to Saudi in 1993 for another year of fun and frivolities, this time training the Royal Saudi Air Defense Force. While I haven't seen Paul Shomper for a number of years, we still trade e-mail and stories from long ago. Skip and I tried to get him on the Air Defense Force Contract in Saudi back in '93 and we had received permission on a supposed "follow on contract" that never transpired. Too bad really, as Paul was one of the all time good guys. We used to joke that Paul never met a lass that he wouldn't marry, but to his everlasting credit, he had made a good life for his family in Cyprus.

This series of stories then simply fleshes out the bare bones of the history I've given here, and hopefully will give you the flavor of our life of adventure in a land far, far, away in a time long, long, ago!

Semper Fidelis,

Dick Culver

Retired Major of Marines

Gentleman Adventurer

Fancier of Genteel Ladies

~ and ~

Fine Beagle Hounds (not necessarily in that order)

Coeur d' Alene, Idaho

A.D. 2003

