

Francis A. McGowin and the Buckets

Dick Culver

While this one may sound a bit far fetched, it is a true story of days gone by at the Recruit Depot at Parris Island, South Carolina.

Young McGowin was selected to fill a Drill Instructor's billet at PI about 1958 and went there with what would have previously been the humble rank of Corporal. Mac however was in the new promotion system and was a Corporal in the 4th pay-grade, handling many of the same responsibilities as a Sergeant had previously. Please understand that this was just following the large rank restructuring that took place in the Armed Forces when they went from a rank structure having seven total ranks from Private to Master Sergeant in the Marines. This was done by adding the rank of Lance Corporal between Private First Class and Corporal and renaming the older ranks and adding the *actual* rank of Sergeant Major (as opposed to it being an assigned billet). This upped the ranks following L/Cpl. one pay-grade making Corporal an E-4, Sergeant went from E-4 to E-5 and Staff Sergeants became E-6s. They then brought back the much venerated rank of Gunnery Sergeant as the seventh pay-grade. From Gunnery Sergeant you could go two routes. If your expertise was technical, you usually went from Gunny to Master Sergeant, and at the top of *that* pay scale was Master Gunnery Sergeant. Conversely, if you were a line NCO (troop handler), you went from Gunnery Sergeant to First Sergeant, and thence to Sergeant Major.

A man who had made Corporal in the fourth pay-grade was usually an exceptional Non-Commissioned Officer in 1958. In this sense, Mac was indeed extraordinary, and in all the years I have known him since, he has always proven himself to be an outstanding and inspirational troop leader. His personality was such that the troops always liked and looked up to him as a role model. Much like the fabled heroes in the old song/poem, "*Abdul the Bulbul Ameer*", if you wanted anything done (like harassing the foe from the rear), Mac would have been the man you would send to get the job done. Recruit Training served to prove the point. He rapidly made his way up the promotion ladder, first making meritorious Sergeant, and then being selected as meritorious Staff Sergeant, all in the space of his first year on the drill field – a truly noteworthy accomplishment, especially when the new rank structure was just getting started!

As noted above the troops literally loved Mac, and while he was hard on 'em; he could have inflicted severe physical punishment on them, and they'd never have said a word, thinking that they deserved what they got. Mac was that kind of man! Not exactly an imposing figure physically, he probably stood about 5' 8" or possibly 5'9" on a good day, he weighed in at 150-pounds. Mac was a hard physical specimen, and an exceptional rifle shot. He would often shoot on the Parris Island Rifle Team between Platoon assignments, and was always welcomed by the team. Mac could regularly shoot 295+ out of 300 on the Marine Corps



**Sgt. McGowin
during an
awards
ceremony - 1966**

Match Course, which I can tell you from hard experience was one hell of a feat considering he wasn't shooting on a regular basis.

NOW ON TO THE STORY

Since this was 1958 and only two years since the notorious McKeon incident that turned Recruit Training in general, and Parris Island in particular, on its ear, extremely close supervision was the order of the day! The *Mothers of America* had arisen and were determined to save their little darlings from those horrid Drill Instructors.

In getting their platoons ready for inspection, the DIs were expected to have their recruits cleanly shaven, not to mention, pressed, shined and well drilled. While having your recruits closely shaved seems trivial, when you are dealing with a bunch of 17-18 year olds, it's not quite as simple as it sounds. Many of the young lads still are plagued with "peach fuzz" and the application of shaving cream simply matted the whiskers (fuzz) down, allowing the razor to often skim right over the fledgling whiskers. The resulting left-over fuzz was worth many scowls and admonitions from the inspecting officers.

Mac however, was up to the challenge. One night in the barracks just before the inspection, Mac piled two footlockers, one on top of the other, and sat his first recruit on the makeshift barber chair under the strongest light available. He then broke out a propane torch and demonstrated on his own finger that running flesh through the resultant flame was painless and removed all the offending hair from the singed digit! The troops were ready and lined up dutifully to have their peach fuzz removed by "Mac the Barber."

All was going well until an unexpected visitor showed up in the squad bay – the Officer of the Day, a much dedicated and resolute Lieutenant who had been told of the wily "recruit abusing Drill Instructors"! All of Mac's explanations fell on deaf ears and the Lieutenant wrote him up for 76 counts of "scorching a recruit with a blowtorch." Simply knowing the Company Commander was going to reward him for his diligence in the morning, the lieutenant left with a sneer on his face. Mac was in hot water and he knew it... It wasn't so much what he had done, as it was that it *sounded* like! Mac was being painted as Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan rolled into one! This did not bode well!

The next day Mac was summoned to the Commanding General's Office to answer the charges. Normally individual disciplinary action was taken care of on a lower level, but McGowin was a relatively favored and colorful Drill Instructor, having been given two meritorious promotions in a one year's period of time, and the "Scorching a Recruit with a Blowtorch" charge had the General fascinated! As noted, Mac wasn't an unknown personage in the General's office since the General had personally promoted him twice for his outstanding performance.

The General asked for an explanation, and Mac, never being at a loss for words, said something to the effect that it was actually the *General's* fault! Grasping each corner of his desk, the General barely managed to keep from falling out of his chair. Mac continued, explaining that it was against regulations to "dry shave" a recruit (the older and much less imaginative solution). Since the reorganization of recruit training, using a dry razor on unlubricated whiskers (although effective) was considered painful and thus prohibited under the current regulations. McGowin asked the General if *HE* had ever run *HIS* finger through a match flame, pointing out that it doesn't hurt a bit! There are different versions of the General's reply, but most agree that it had as its intent (if not the exact wording), "drag this @\$shole out of here!"

McGowin's dilemma was also one for the hierarchy on the field, due primarily to his previous exemplary performance with his recruit platoons, turning out several Honor Platoons on his way up the promotion ladder. While the brass was scratching their heads, and while agreeing that the "torch method" was in fact harmless if applied with caution, it did leave itself open to the possibilities of abuse. Mac went back to his platoon awaiting the decision of the legal beagles, but not yet relieved of duty. About mid-way during the week, McGowin's platoon was being closely supervised by Mac himself. He had the little scumbags holystoning the decks in the head and cleaning the cracks with a toothbrush. For those of you who have experienced the evening head cleaning details, normally the rule of thumb is that these duties are accomplished in total silence! As Mac was going past the head, he heard several of the Boots whispering back and forth. Taking immediate action to make his point on the unquestioning obedience of orders, he grabbed the first miscreant and stuffed his head down in the commode (surgically clean of course), and flushed it (this is known in the trade as giving the lad a "Whirly!"). When Mac let the kid up for air, much to his horror, he saw the unbelieving face of his nemesis, the same Lieutenant, again serving as the Officer of the Day!

The "Whirly" incident sealed Mac's fate, and he was tried by general court martial for maltreatment of recruits. Mercifully, his sterling prior performance saved him from complete ruin, and he was reduced in rank from Staff Sergeant to Lance Corporal (E-3), and relieved of his duties as a Drill Instructor. This wasn't the worst he could have gotten by a bunch, and he was retained on the field as a primary marksmanship instructor due to his skill with a rifle. Because of his personality and ability, he was assigned the duty of instructing the truly hopeless cases who as of yet had been unable to qualify on the range. As expected, he did an exemplary job and was salvaging virtually every non-qual from the ignominy of leaving Parris Island as what is known as an "Unk"...

As usual, McGowin had his own methods, many of which didn't exactly mesh with the desires of the training command. Being smarter than the average bear(s) however, they left him alone as he was achieving the desired results with no complaints from his charges!

In the old days they used to have what they called a "Bucket Issue." When you processed in as a Boot, you went through the line in the Exchange with a G.I. Bucket and put all of your purchases in the receptacle as you passed each item (tooth brush, scrub brush, tooth paste, soap, etc.). The bucket also served as a tub to wash your clothes when utilizing the wash rack. The ubiquitous bucket was also often used when attending classes as stools when turned upside down. A truly versatile item, your bucket! As I remember, everyone was terribly afraid of "losing their bucket" – an unpardonable sin for a newly minted recruit!

AND NOW THE ORIGINAL TALE

It was a spring morning in the South Carolina sun and McGowin had inherited five absolutely hopeless cases, virtually guaranteed not to qualify with the rifle (a transgression very close to performing illegitimate sex with your fellow monks in a monastery). It just isn't done amongst polite society, and certainly *good* Marines can *at least* qualify, even if it is as a mere Marksman (the lowest rung on the qualification ladder). Now Mac was addicted to chewing tobacco, and being an old Alabama boy, he would often pass his time away whittling stray sticks with his ever present pocket knife. There under the shade of a couple of palm trees, sat McGowin, his Field Hat tilted jauntily forward. He was spitting and whittling, sitting on a bucket, also surrounded by four more buckets, all placed mouth down on the sand.

Now the Lieutenant assigned to watch over the range qualification details was a young lad of sizeable bulk named Dudley Thomas. While Dudley would probably not have been

expected to come up with the theory of relativity, he was an amiable guy who had considerable talent with the .45 pistol. Dudley shot for the Marine Corps Pistol Team during the summer seasons, and more to keep him out of trouble and put his singular talents to use, he was assigned to the range at Parris Island during the off season. Since he always wore his Field Hat (Campaign Hat to the “unwashed”), and because of his size, sense of humor and ability with a belt gun he became known as “*Dudley Do-Right of the Mounties*”. It just seemed to fit.

This same spring morning, Dudley came by McGowin’s ring of buckets, and asked Mac how his new charges were doing, and if he thought they’d all qualify? Mac allowed as how he was sure they would, and that all was going well.

Dudley told McGowin to get his young non-quals together so he could give them a pep talk (Dudley took his job seriously). Mac drug his toe in the sand a bit, and told Lieutenant Thomas that if he’d (Thomas) go over to his office, he (Mac) would bring them right over for the lecture. Dudley seemed adamant, and told Mac that he’d rather do it out in the spring air, and to go get them. Now McGowin is beginning to sweat a bit, and repeated his suggestion that it’d probably be more effective to give the lecture in his office. Dudley again demurs and insists that Mac bring them over under the trees, and with that, Dudley sits down on one of the buckets!

Mac is about to have kittens, and the sweat is now running down the brow one of the most composed NCOs I’ve ever known.

Mac hangs his head a bit and says “but Sir, I can’t!”

“**Can’t**,” says Dudley, “why not? Now get those lil’ tools over here! I don’t wanna’ have to tell ya’ again!”

McGowin says, his voice virtually dripping with regret and apprehension...

“Sir, I can’t because you’re sitting on one of ‘em!”

I’ll give Dudley one thing, he didn’t lose his composure easily (probably why he made a good pistol shooter). He stood up and said something to the effect of “I see!” ...And with that he strides off telling Mac he’ll be back in about 10-minutes and he expects to have them all assembled for his lecture!

It was a somewhat sandy, but attentive group that Dudley addressed, and to put the perfect end to the story, they listened intently, and all qualified (ALL Mac’s charges **always** qualified)! He was truly the best all around NCO I’ve ever served with.

Mac is now a retired Master Sergeant of Marines who finished off his career in the intelligence field after having served as my company Gunnery Sergeant some years later, and putting in a most illustrious tour with the grunts in RVN. He later served with the 2nd Force Reconnaissance Company, and was the Marine intelligence officer during the S.S. Mayaguez incident (hijacked by the Khmer Rouge in 1975). I still call ol’ Mac from time to time as he has hung his hat in Andalusia, Alabama and works in the State Veterans Affairs Office. In his spare time he teaches “hawk throwing” and wilderness cooking holding what amounts to mini-rendezvous, for the local kids.

The tale isn’t quite over yet... The summer I was retiring, I was the OIC of MTU Quantico and the Reserve Rifle and Pistol Team was reporting in for duty and practice. Who should I

see but (now) Major Dudley Thomas whom I hadn't seen for years. I went over and we talked over old times. With a particularly evil sense of humor, I asked Dudley if he had sat on any recruits lately?

Dudley grinned and said "How the hell *is* McGowin anyway!"

I'd love to know what happened to Dudley, as besides being a right talented pistol shooter, he was an understanding man!

Semper Fi,

Dick