

Private Moore

I had been comfortably ensconced as the Company Commander of Alpha Company, 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion for about five months that morning in the early Spring of 1966. My XO, Skip Hartnett was deployed with his platoon in the Mediterranean, and “A Company” was reduced to myself, First Sergeant Martin, and my acting Company Gunny, Sergeant Francis A. McGowin for senior people. With Hartnett gone, it seemed like we were all performing multiple roles, taking up the slack for the deployed personnel. The Division was stripped to the bone since not only did it have to work with bob-tailed Battalions, but also had to satisfy Fleet Marine Force Atlantic’s requirement to keep a Battalion Landing Team in both the Mediterranean and the Caribbean. New personnel reported in daily, but in many instances were shanghaied to fill quotas for Vietnam deployment before the month was out. Hectic doesn’t quite cover it.

When we had good NCOs to take up the slack, somehow we managed to survive, and in many instances even thrive. As mentioned elsewhere, McGowin was a noted former Drill Instructor, rifle coach and instructor from Parris Island. Mac had previously gained some small amount of fame shaving his recruits with a blow torch, although that part of his past had settled down to something of a chuckle. Since we were almost in a “cadre” status, running an under strength Recon Company presented no great challenge, especially with the assistance of such able individuals as Sergeant McGowin and First Sergeant Martin.

McGowin as related elsewhere, was an individual who was totally dedicated to the Marine Corps and could be counted upon to do any assigned task and do it well. Mac always had the troops squared away for inspections, and they would have literally charged the gates of Hades with buckets of gasoline had he even indicated that such was his desire. He was a motivating, and charismatic NCO that the troops would have followed anywhere without the slightest hesitation. It was in this guise that Private Moore came to my, and hence McGowin’s attention.

Private Moore was something of an enigma. He had graduated from Boot Camp as the Platoon Honor Man and was noted as being totally motivated and highly squared away. He had asked specifically to be assigned to the Reconnaissance Battalion, but once he had settled in, his entire demeanor seemed to change for the worse. His formerly noteworthy attitude degenerated, and he became surly in his dealings with his NCOs and slovenly in his personal appearance. This once “Marine’s Marine” had become the Battalion \$hit bird. Several companies had been graced with his presence, but if anything, he went from bad to worse.

Moore’s past performance saved him from being instantly relegated to the trash heap or the Brig, but everyone seemed at their wit’s end in how to deal with this miscreant. All that was shortly to change. I got a call from Colonel Black Jack Westerman roughly outlining Moore’s past performance and recent attempts to salvage what could and should have been a good Marine. When the conversation with the Colonel ended, I had accepted the responsibility for giving Moore one more chance at personal redemption. Enter Sergeant McGowin.

“Mac,” I said, “we’ve got a problem to solve and the Colonel thinks we’re the ones to handle it!”

“Oh really Skipper, what seems to be the problem?” asked Mac.

I outlined Moore’s past performance, and told him that Colonel Westerman asked if we though we could square him away? Since I know troop handling is your forté, I accepted the challenge, knowing you could handle the job if anyone could.”

Mac looked at me with what I would eventually come to recognize as an inventive gleam in his eye, and evidencing a slight hint of amusement in his tone of voice.

“First question Skipper, do you care how I take care of the problem?” Mac asked.

Squinting my eyes, and with a small hint of apprehension in my voice, I replied that the idea was to make a good Marine out of Moore, not to hospitalize him, or worse yet to have me brought up on charges for maltreatment!

“Ah Skipper, you know I wouldn’t do anything like that,” Mac said with an inflection in his voice I would later come to recognize with “flashing red lights” in my comprehension of his intentions.

I wasn’t really worried, as Mac’s judgment was normally pretty level headed even if his methodology was a bit eccentric.

“Ok Mac, see what you can do with him, and give me a report your progress if anything gets way out of line.”

We were more than normally busy in the Battalion due to our recent move to Onslow Beach, and a Battalion fixation on getting our new area squared away. Unfortunately, Private Moore sorta’ slipped through the cracks of my conscious mind. At least he did until I noticed what had to be some sort of aberration. McGowin was checking the area which was a normal procedure early in the morning, but what wasn’t normal was that Mac seemed to have acquired what the Brits would call a “Bat Man”... When Mac would proceed to his next stop, following behind him about two paces to his left and two paces to the rear, was Private Moore. Not only that, but Moore was wearing boots that you could have shaved in using his trouser creases for a razor. Here was an entirely different Private Moore than the one I had turned over to Mac some weeks earlier. He stood at rigid attention when he stopped, and spoke only when spoken to. The first words out of his mouth were “yes sergeant. McGowin” or “no sergeant McGowin” leaving the definite impression that only the substitution of “sir” instead of “sergeant” would have been necessary for a carbon copy of proper Marine Recruit behavior. Ought oh! Alarm bells began to go off in my imaginative and now slightly apprehensive brain-housing group.

“Sergeant McGowin, how about stepping into the office for a second, I have a couple of questions on one of our projects,” I said, raising my voice an octave or two higher than I should have.

“Right away Skipper,” Mac said, “what have we got going now?”

“Mac, what’in hell has gotten into Moore? I’ve never seen him like this before, and he gives the appearance of a well disciplined Marine Boot!”

Mac grinned and started to explain. I could hardly wait, but my eyes started to squint and I filled up my coffee cup for the 3rd time in 10-minutes.

“McGowin, what kind of trouble are we in?”

I can still see the old country boy grin and hear his Alabama drawl as he tried to suppress a smile that usually indicated he’d thought of all the consequences and had the situation handled. Dear Allah, I was praying so, but conversely I didn’t see any bruises on Moore, no black eyes and noted an apparent total willingness to perform McGowin’s every desire and command with enthusiasm and alacrity! – In short, Moore had once again become the personification of the perfect Marine Private. Something was eluding me, but I waited for Mac’s full explanation.

“The problem is Skipper, is that no one understood Moore, it just took a little NCO psychology to solve the problem!”

“Just *WHAT* was it that we didn’t understand Mac? He just seemed to change overnight from one squared away troop to a total \$hit bird!”

“Well Skipper, the story he told me was that he had always wanted to be a Marine, and Parris Island was exactly what he expected, squared away, tough NCOs that knew their stuff, and were hard disciplinarians. He found out that immediate and unquestioning obedience of orders resulted in praise and recognition. ITR was Ok too, and he was so busy soaking up his newly acquired combat skills, there was little time to think about anything else – essentially it was simply an extension of Boot Camp. When he came to the Division, everyone was being shipped to Vietnam, and while discipline wasn’t non-existent in a Recon organization, normally the troops were already well trained and required little supervision in their day to day tasks. Moore was so used to being fallen-in and counted-off, he wasn’t prepared for such a rapid transition, to a ‘team mentality.’ If Moore had simply been sent to a standard Infantry Battalion where the troops preformed normal infantry functions with NCOs vying to see who would have the most squared away squad, Moore would probably have made fire team leader and perhaps squad leader in short order. Moore’s problem was that he simply wasn’t ready for the camaraderie that’s usually the stock and trade of reconnaissance outfits that operate in small teams, and have a more relaxed attitude towards their mission.”

“Mac, do you mean to tell me that Moore simply misses the hard-@\$\$ discipline of Boot Camp? Is he some sort of masochist? A sort of ‘oh beat me, beat me!’ type?”

“Well Skipper, not exactly, but I think he would be right at home in the French Foreign Legion, with ex-Nazi NCOs! He has the ‘march or die’ mentality!”

“Un huh, and I suppose he just sat down and told you all this, right?”

“I just kinda’ figured it out for myself after having several conversations with the lad!”

“McGowin, you’re amazing, just how *did* you get your point across?”

“Skipper, did you ever hear the story of the old farmer during the Model T days who was whipping a mule when a guy pulls up in his fivver, and tells him to stop abusing that fine animal. The farmer asks if the guy has any other method for getting the mule to move? The fivver-driver gets out of the vehicle, takes the farmer’s whip away and throws it over the fence. The farmer was outraged, but held his temper and asked what the guy intended to do? The driver goes over and picks up a new fence post waiting to be installed, gets in front of the mule and hits him between the ears as hard as he can, dropping the mule to his knees. The panic stricken farmer asked him what in the hell did he think he was doing, as surely that was worse than the whipping. The driver took the animal gently by the harness and the mule went along willingly. The driver looked back at the farmer and said yeah, but the trick is first ya’ gotta’ get the mule’s attention!”

I sat down behind my desk, pinching my nose between my left thumb and forefinger, with my elbow resting on the desk top. I had my head lowered slightly and was looking apprehensively out from beneath my eyebrows, blindly searching for my coffee cup with my other hand. Mac stared at me with the most totally innocent look I’ve ever seen and awaited my reaction.

“Jesus Mac, what in the hell did you use for a fence post? ...Or don’t I want to know?”

“Don’t ask Skipper,” were his final words as he left the office.

I never did, and Moore remained a stalwart, dedicated and squared away Marine – just all depends on the fence post and the “fivver-driver” it would seem.

Semper Fi,

Dick