

# A BARRACKS DISCUSSION OF LONG, LONG AGO ...WITH A SLIGHT WHIFF OF SULFUR

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Ok Ladies and Gentlemen, here's one probably more appropriately told on Halloween, but occasionally this old soldier's remembrances drift back over the time and space of some 48-years. Spooky? Well, you might say so, but it wasn't the actual conversation that raised the goose bumps, but rather the possibilities of what *MIGHT* have happened, lo those many years ago.

While I am not necessarily a believer in Ghost Stories or weird tales, every so often I get to thinking back to my youth, and of one particular Friday evening in July of 1956 and a conversation with another Marine while we shined shoes and cleaned rifles for the following morning's inspection. Not Halloween you say? Indeed 'tis true, but some things just make the hair on the back of your neck stand up regardless of the time of year. This particular evening was one of those times. Halloween, which always seems to evoke such stories, would seem to be a particularly apropos time to relay such an interesting story, but even on a July night, it was wondering what the outcome *might* have been that is the gist of the story. I'll relate it as I remember it and allow you to decide for yourselves.

## LET'S SET THE STAGE:

For you youngsters who have done time in the military, the modern day Corps (and I assume the Army), pretty well lets the troops off for weekend liberty at the cessation of military activities on Friday evening. Back in the mid-1950s, we worked five and a half days a week, normally culminating with a Saturday morning inspection. Assuming that all went well with the inspection, and if you didn't personally get your liberty card confiscated for real or imagined transgressions (dirty rifle, un-shined boots, wall locker in disarray, or a lack of appropriate military savvy when asked questions by the Platoon Commander during the inspection), you were pretty well free to "debauch" from about 1200, on Saturday until reveille on Monday morning (unless your unit imposed what was called "Cinderella Liberty" indicating that your wild nights on the town came to a screeching halt at 2400). We were not burdened with Cinderella Liberty, and as a result could do as we pleased. As a result, we pretty well busted our fannies to make sure we were squeaky clean, very shiny and extremely well informed for our weekly parade before the "brass". . .

Now during the Summer of 1956 I was assigned to the 1st Infantry Training Regiment. ITR in those days had the mission of teaching fledgling Marines (who had just completed Boot Camp), combat tactics and field work when they left Parris Island. The attendees of ITR were already well versed Marine Lore, close order drill, rifle marksmanship, first aid, physical fitness and other such, but for several years, combat techniques had not been taught at Parris Island or San Diego.

In the interest of splitting up the training cycle, they decided to concentrate on the basics in Boot Camp followed with intensive combat training at Camp Lejeune (or Camp Pendleton on the West Coast). Many of us had been through Boot Camp several years before when combat skills were still taught as a part of the basic recruit curriculum, but as an after thought, the Corps decided that all hands *MUST* attend ITR even if you were already a NCO. This was done to assure an across the board standard of training for all hands. As a sort of 'sop' to the old-timers, we were allowed to attend ITR and act as squad

leaders, platoon guides, according to our rank, and to simultaneously function as Troop Handlers, and still get our tickets punched.

The infamous McKeon debacle had just occurred at Parris Island in April, and ITR at Camp Lejeune inherited a number of McKeon's platoon who had been held over at Parris Island for the court martial. These clowns were scattered throughout the East Coast ITR that summer. Some of these survivors of McKeon's Platoon were pretty salty and had come to think of themselves as "bulletproof" from the standard "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" normally wielded by mere Marine NCOs, and they all knew that Marine Corps discipline was going to get much easier now that such evil tactics had been exposed to the world. After all, they had the "mommies of the world monitoring their progress"... Boy did they have a comeuppance coming!

The basic combat training was pretty much old hat to most of us having been out in operational units, but orders and regulations are written in stone and we attended with good grace, if not exactly waiting with baited breath for our post graduate combat training. When not out in the field, we hung our dungaree covers at Camp Geiger in the large Quonset hut complex that was to be our home for the duration of the training. If you've seen the movie, "Heartbreak Ridge" with Clint Eastwood, you have seen essentially what our quarters looked like. The "heads" (latrines for the Army folks) were separate Quonsets, and gave us a place to shine shoes, press uniforms, and clean rifles after lights out, since lights were left on in the heads all night! It was in just such a setting that the following tale was told to me.

## **A TALE WELL TOLD AT MIDNIGHT:**

It was a Friday night late, and we had been in the field all week. The entire crew was dirty, foul and dust-covered when we got back to Geiger. I spent what was left of the day making sure my squad was shined and squared away for the following day's inspection. When I was satisfied with the squad, it was getting on well towards midnight. I grabbed my boots and rifle and headed for the nearest head facility since lights in the huts had been out for a bit.

Boot shining was a bit more complicated in those days as the Marines were issued rough-out combat boots that were never meant to be shined, but rather were supposed to be treated with a concoction known as "Dubbing" that was issued in small cans when you bought your footwear (Boots and Boondockers, *not* dress shoes) from what we then called "The Quartermaster". ...Somewhere in late 1954 some unmentionably foul clown learned how to get around the rough-out leather, and had found a way to "matt-down" the small leather protuberances (knap) that are common to the "unshiny" leather surfaces NEVER meant to be shined in the first place. This idiot found that using a small glass milk container that were furnished with your coffee when you grabbed a cup of joe in the restaurant, could be used to matt down the leather by using the open neck with lots of dye and Kiwi Leather Polish.

It worked, but that SOB should have been relegated to Hell to tend the eternal fires! Unfortunately the practice spread like wildfire and soon the entire Corps was deliberately short circuiting the well intentioned issue of "non-shineable boots." If there's a will, some fool will find a way. The technique became known as "bottle shining" and was practiced until McNamara decided to take away our "Marine Corps Peculiar" uniform items in the

mid-1960s, and our comfortable "Marine Corps Last" boots were replaced by the Army (Munson) Last... Easy to shine, but the darned things simply never fit like our old originals.

Thinking the bottle shining method to be a bit artificial, I personally had worked out a more serviceable method of boot shining. I simply cleaned them up, gave 'em a good dye job and then used a 1/4" drill motor held in a vice. I buffed the polish into the boots. until all the knap was worn off or matted down, and then you could spit shine them in the normal manner. Still, spit shining a pair of rough-out boots always seemed to be the height of idiocy to me, but I digress, "boot shining techniques" wasn't why I started this yarn... Back to the story!

When I entered the head, I figured that I was the only guy there (it was late by now) until I noted another lone Marine in a more well lighted area. It's always easier to get on with your tasks if you can shoot the bull with some other poor soul. Since we were simply wearing skivvy shirts with no chevrons, we struck up a conversation with no amenities of rank. This guy appeared to be a bit older than most of our new kids and I assumed that he might also have been one of the guys being "retrofitted" into the new ITR training cycle.

After a bit, it turned out that he was a bit older than most, and had three years of Med School under his belt. His folks had sent him to some pretty high-powered "prep-schooling" as well. He had simply gotten tired of the academic routine, and decided to "play" Marine before he became intermeshed into a career pattern that would never allow him to indulge in his childhood fantasies. He had dreamed of becoming a Marine (having been exposed to the patriotic fervor of WWII and Korea) before he was old enough to join, so he had bailed out of "academicia" and headed for the Marine Recruiter (a not uncommon act in those far off days) - adventure still held a bit of glamour before we (as a nation) were informed that everyone DESERVED a college education, and the government undertook to pay for such insanity. No one headed for Canada to avoid the draft, and in fact, (at least in the Marines) we usually had an overflow of volunteers when the international situations indicated some danger to our country.

We began to discuss the academic environment, and how it was often necessary to find a place to study after lights out (much as we were cleaning and shining in the head in the Corps), and he got to relating a story that caught my attention. It seems that he had attended a prep school in Pennsylvania with a bit of religious bent, and one of the only places to study late at night was the basement of the old Chapel on the campus. The study area was anything but well lit, and had a single exposed light bulb with a twist switch hanging from the overhead by a single wire as was still common in some of the older establishments. The basement held a large number of very old (and no doubt very valuable) tomes that had been brought to this country on sailing ships, many having to do with early day Catholic Religious edicts and explanations. These books were obviously not meant for the "unwashed" as the Catholic Church even in 1956 was very cagy about what they allowed the lay brethren to read without clergy supervision.

He then mentioned a practice elucidated in one of the ancient books called exorcism! **Exorcism?** What the hell was that? I had never heard of such! Don't forget, this was well before exorcism was a common word used outside the church hierarchy, and the famous book/movie, "*The Exorcist*" wasn't even thought of yet. Apparently the insiders and some of the more educated hierarchy of the church were knowledgeable of such practices, but

for me, this was a first (again, don't forget, this was in the Summer of 1956). It seems when studying in the basement of the Chapel, he had been getting stale in his interminable studies, and had began to browse some of the relatively ancient religious books on the shelves. This book on exorcism he skimmed through, recounted supposedly actual accounts of the casting out of the devil (demons, etc.), and he assured me that these were authentic occurrences, documented by the Roman Catholic Clergy. Even though I wasn't a particularly ardent religious fanatic, I still appreciated a good story, and I was fascinated! I urged him to go on. As he told his yarns, I continued to spit shine my boots, but had lost interest in the minutia of the process. I was all ears.

The keynote anecdote of his extracurricular studies, was a passage in one of these ancient manuscripts on exorcism that gave a detailed account of the technique of "the conjuring up of the Devil 'himself!'..." Hummm... Now he *really* had me interested! When you've just turned 20, what adventurous kid wouldn't be fascinated in bringing Lucifer up in a cloud of sulfurous smoke with perhaps a clap of thunder and lightening thrown in! Of course I had to ask the obvious question? Did you give it a try (knowing I personally would have had a hard time resisting such a challenge!)? He grinned, and went on with his tale!

It seems that the instructions in the book were extremely detailed and gave the appropriate time, dates(?) and other amenities necessary to bring about the fallen angel. This included the drawings of appropriate pentagrams, correct powders to be used (bat wing and eye of newt?). I disremember, but it's been 48 years ago, so give my aging brain a break!). At any rate, apparently it took some help to get prepared, so he enlisted the services of a couple of like minded young adventurers, and they got everything ready, even practicing the incantations just up to the point that would have consummated the ill considered deed!

On the appointed night, it seems that they repaired to the basement of the chapel (this probably wouldn't have gone over too well on the front lawn of a religious campus) where everything awaited their final incantations and machinations to bring forth "The Dark One"... By now, I'm sitting on the edge of the bench next to the showers, holding my breath and awaiting revelations from one who had really spoken to the legendary Prince of Darkness!

"Well, go on damn it," I said! (using perhaps an unfortunate choice of terminology), "What happened next?"

The young lad lit up a new smoke and took a couple of drags, letting the smoke slowly drift out of his nose while effecting a very convincing 1000-yard stare. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and looked sideways at me with a serious stare... "Nothing" was his answer!

"Nothing?..." sez I, "Did you guys get the incantations wrong? Did you even get a puff of smoke? What in Hell happened?"

"I don't think you understand," he said, sticking his cigarette back in his mouth, "nothing happened because we chickened out! We decided that we might be playing with fire (here almost literally), and we might be turning something loose on Earth that might shouldn't have been set free!"

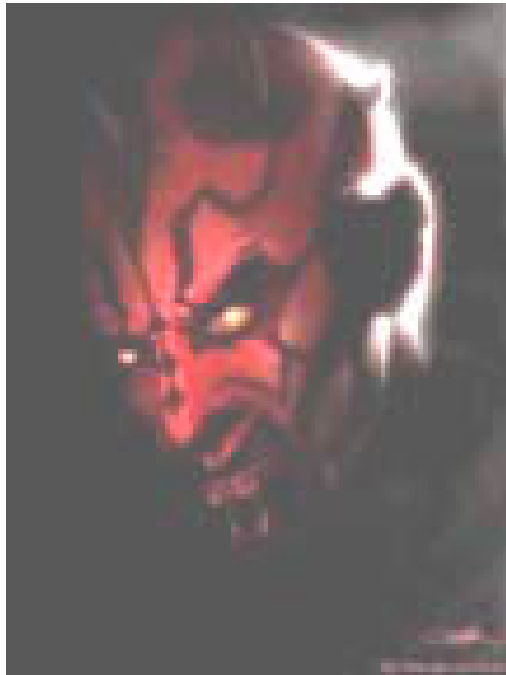
“But” I began, almost chewing the end of my cigar off, “surely you couldn’t just let it go! Holy Catfish! I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself without knowing what might have happened!”

“That’s what worried us,” he said, “we carefully considered the consequences and one of my buddies noted that while all the instructions were there for “*summoning*” the Evil One, there were absolutely **NO** instructions on how to get rid of him! My question to you lad, is what would **YOU** have done?”

With that, he picked up his gear, and left the Quonset hut to head back to the rack. As the screen door banged, I could have sworn I caught a slight whiff of sulfur gently wafting in the evening air...

Semper Fi,

**ROC**



**SOME THINGS ARE PERHAPS BETTER LEFT ALONE...**