

“Lead Foot Hartnett” and the Onslow County Sheriff

By Dick Culver

For you newcomers, this one will require a bit of background and an explanation of how the MARS system worked (an antiquated concept in the current day of the cell phone, but don't forget, we still got slivers in our fingers from wooden ram-rods in those days).

By the time I had taken over Alpha Company, 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion, it was October 1965, and the Battalion (as were most of the units of the 2nd Marine Division) was well under their TO (Table of Organization) strength. Most of the graduates of both the Basic Officer's Course, and the enlisted alumnae of Infantry Training Regiments (a post graduate course following Boot Camp, concentrating on infantry tactics) were being scheduled as replacements for Southeast Asia. We were what would have been termed a “Casual Outfit” (individuals collected in a [replacement] “pool” to be used as cannon fodder for the rice paddies when the casualty lists came in). The 2nd Marine Division was kept in operating condition by a skeleton crew in order to satisfy our NATO commitment to keep a floating Battalion Team in both the Caribbean and the Mediterranean. Those of us who were left cooling our heels were literally chomping at the bit to run the Commies back up to North Vietnam. Frustrated would have been an appropriate term to describe the mood of those stuck in the flatlands of North Carolina.

I had just come from 3 1/2 years stuck in the 8th Marine Corps District Headquarters in New Orleans. While the city was marvelous, they had me signing discharges (as a lowly Lieutenant, while Majors were sometimes seen emptying trash cans). My previous assignments had been with either the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company, or as the Executive Officer of two Rifle Companies. While I was relieved to be back from being a glorified clerk, cooling my heels in an under-strength replacement pool wasn't what I had dreamed of. I had a 1st Sergeant named Martin who was a fine individual and had inherited an old friend, Sergeant Francis McGowin as my acting Company Gunnery Sergeant. Still, I was the only officer in the Company, and while the Company was almost an over strength platoon in size, things seem to go better when you have someone else to share the load – not only that, but it gives you someone to use as a sounding board when you are tempted to beat your head against the bulkhead. My prayers were about to be answered. Enter, 2nd Lieutenant Stephen M. Hartnett, USMC!

I got a call from the Battalion Adjutant that he was sending me an XO – and he promptly hung up before I could ask any questions. Shortly, young 2nd Lieutenant Hartnett entered the office, popped to attention in front of my desk, and reported in the best “brown-bar” fashion, with heels appropriately locked.

I don't know if you have ever met anyone who gave you an immediate sense of déjà vu, or the feeling that you have known someone before, but young Hartnett was one of those. We had a sort of instant bonding with nary a word spoken – it was spooky, to say the least. We formed a bond that would last even some 40 years later. Skip and I have followed each other around, both in the Marine Corps, and later teaching firearms in a private company following retirement. We put two tours in Saudi Arabia training the Saudi Arabian Marines and the Saudi Air Defense Force in the 1980s and '90s.

In October 1965, Skip had just finished the Basic Officer's School in Quantico, and had in fact been commissioned in the Marine Corps out of A Company, 2nd Reconnaissance

Battalion as a young corporal. He had put in some time at the Citadel in South Carolina, but his adventurous soul caused him to join the Regular Marine Corps. He wasn't exactly a newbie, having already graduated from the Navy Scuba School, put in a tour in the Marine Barracks, Naples, Italy and had accumulated a fair amount of Recon experience as a young NCO. None the less, getting assigned (reassigned?) to the Battalion and the Company you were serving with prior to commissioning was unusual, to say the least, and in normal times this just wasn't done – but as I have explained, these were not normal times. Colonel Westerman seeing his name on the roster of incoming officers into the Division had asked that he be reassigned to our Battalion.

I asked Skip if he would like to be assigned to another company, since most of our troops had served with him in enlisted status. Hartnett told me, "Naw, it's not necessary, I was a no good SOB before I left and I ain't changed a bit!" He was, of course, right, and the troops took to him like to a duck to water – he must have been a hell of an NCO...

I had yet to meet Hartnett's family (he was married and had three kidlets), but our introduction was to define Skip's and my relationship for the next 40 years! Skip's Memsahib was Kay, and the children were still rug-rats. This was her first duty station as the wife of a gen-u-wine *Ossifer* in the FMF, although her step-father was a Chief in the Navy and Skip had met her when stationed with the Marine Detachment in Naples.

One afternoon soon after Skip's arrival, Miss¹ Kay arrived in the Company Area to deliver some gear he needed. The stuff had just arrived with the household boxes and furnishings, and Kay had dutifully brought it to the Company Area. Skip took me out to meet her, but not before he mentioned that they were just moving into quarters in Tarawa Terrace, and the household goods shipment was awaiting unpacking. Skip was not looking forward to helping her unpack and square the quarters away. He asked if I would emphasize how busy we were and that he would be working late for a week or two until we got the company back in operating shape. The company was actually in as good a shape as could be expected considering that we were operating on about a 50% manning level.

Miss Kay was a relative youngster at the time, although throughout the subsequent years I have come to consider her my younger sister and a part of the family. Our initial meeting, however, was not designed to cement solid relations between me and my brand new Executive Officer. I was most charmed upon that first meeting, as she was most gracious, and quite a nice looking young lady. Miss Kay and my wife were to become close friends over the years. Our initial conversation went sorta' like this:



Miss Katy circa 1965 – they would have demanded picture ID to allow her into a candy store! My goodness, were we ever that young?

Skip - "Skipper, I'd like you to meet my wife, Kay."

Culver - "Good afternoon Mrs. Hartnett, I'm Captain Culver, it's certainly nice to meet you!"

Kay - "Oh yes, and I've heard so much about you, I'm glad to finally meet you in person."

Culver - "Miss Kay, I know how much of a hassle it is moving into quarters, and I want you to know that we have a slack period right now, and I can spare your husband for as long as it takes to get unpacked and moved in!"

Kay - "Why thank you Captain, I really appreciate this, Skip was sure he'd be too busy to help. Thank goodness you can allow him to help with the move!"

Culver - "My pleasure Miss Kay, you make sure you keep him busy!"

Kay - "Oh I certainly will, and thank you again!"

Culver - "My pleasure my dear, and it's certainly been nice to meet you!"

Somewhere in the background, I was sure that I heard my brand new 2nd Lieutenant say something to the effect, "I'm gonna' get you for this Captain!" Heh, heh, heh... The rather evil sense of humor here manifested by the pair of us is part of the story.

As is recorded in these pages, we continued to evolve into something resembling a combat ready organization. Skip and Kay were safely ensconced in quarters in "TT"², and I had taken my first step towards home ownership. Having used my GI Bill, I obtained a home loan and purchased a very nice centrally air-conditioned three bedroom house with attached garage. This seeming palace was located on a landscaped half-acre lot! Not only that, the entire munificent total mortgage was only \$17,500! My new quarters were located in a developing residential part of Jacksonville, North Carolina, known as Northwoods.

Now, in order to commute to our assigned "sub-camp" of the Lejeune complex, there was a newly built road going roughly from Northwoods to the front gate of Camp Lejeune, with but a single stop light on the entire road. This four-lane super-highway, called "Belfork Road", was, in those days, virtually devoid of housing or businesses. The only scenery on either side of the road was tall pines, and virtually no habitation of any type (don't forget, this was in the Fall of 1965, some 40-years ago).

Tarawa Terrace, however, wasn't too far away, and there were certainly no traffic jams to materially impede vehicular traffic to and from Northwoods. Tactically speaking, over the ensuing months, we had progressed from a somewhat confined Reconnaissance Battalion located at Montford Point, sent a Recon Company (ours), to Panama to the Jungle Operations Course, and returned. We eventually moved our entire Battalion to Onslow Beach. To cut to the chase, not too long after our session in Panama (in order to satisfy our NATO commitment), Hartnett had been dispatched with a composite reconnaissance platoon to the Mediterranean.

Kay and my Memsahib had become close friends and socialized on a daily basis. One afternoon after visiting our Northwoods abode, Kay departed and headed back to Tarawa Terrace. When she arrived home, I answered a call, from our recently departed guest, Kay Hartnett. She was quite upset, as she had been stopped on Belfork road for speeding while on her way home. Kay was not a happy camper, and wanted to know what she should do? I told her not to get too excited, as I would check around and see if we could "schmooze" the local Onslow County Sheriff's Department, run at that time by a gent named Tom Marshall.

Kay and the Memsahib yakked a bit, and Kay hung up to contemplate her fate. Hardly had she hung up when I got another call, this time from Skip from his floating base in the Mediterranean. Prior to the invention of the cell phone, the local Ham Radio aficionados ran a service connecting radio messages aboard ship (or from other widely separated locations, even Vietnam), and would place a telephone call to your loved ones and “*inter-hook*”(?) their radio connection to the military installation through their Ham Radio Set allowing you to actually have a conversation from the service member to a local (non-long distance) home telephone number via what was known as a “phone patch.” The system was called the “MARS”³ system, and the only disadvantage was the fact that your conversation had to follow radio procedure, in that when you finished your transmission, you had to say “over” so that the Ham Operator would know to send the next transmission in the other direction. The tongue-in-cheek saying amongst the troops was “*I love you, over*”...

Skip’s call was almost on the tag end of Kay’s call, and indeed Skip’s initial attempt to call had been to his young wife, but alas, the line was busy. This, of course, was simply Kay talking to the Culver household, thereby preventing Skip’s call from getting through. You can probably see this one coming, heh, heh, heh... My warped sense of humor almost immediately kicked in.

I told Skip about Kay’s call only a few minutes before and mentioned that she had been picked up for speeding on her way back to TT. He (being equally evil) immediately picked up on the possibilities. After a bit of socializing, and checking on my deployed platoon’s status, we hung up and Skip immediately called Kay, being careful not to mention that he had just talked to me on the MARS hookup!

Shortly after Kay and Skip hung up, I got another (somewhat panicked) phone call from Kay.



Katy and Skip on a more “genteel” ocean cruise in 2005! Dear Allah, where has time gone? In her more experienced mode, I suspect I’d now be speaking in high soprano along with Skip!
As of 2006, Katy and Skip have been married for 43 years, so I’d say it’s a pretty good bet she forgave at least Skip if not myself!

“Dick, I just got a call from Skip in the Med, and he told me that Sheriff Tom Marshall had just called him and told him he had picked me up for speeding on Belfork Road, cautioning him to control his dependent’s driving habits for the safety of the community. Dick, what do I do now? The Sheriff doesn’t really call individuals on deployment to report driving infractions does he?”

“Kay, I’ve never heard of it before, but it sounds pretty serious to me, what else were you doing behind the wheel? I don’t have a clue as to why he would single you out, it must be a new policy to keep deployed Marines informed of their family’s performance when they’re not around to keep track of their activities. Did Skip have anything

else to say about the call, other infractions or anything? This may be more serious than you imagine!" I said laying it on as thick as I dared without arousing suspicion.

Now Kay is a savvy individual, but she was new to the game and hadn't had any experience with the two of us messing with a third party! She'd have immediately smelled a rodent in later times, but she was newly alone, not having been picked up for speeding before, and was genuinely worried. Unfortunately, the life preserver she was reaching out to was being absolutely no help and was in fact throwing gasoline on an already burning fire. I was kinda' ashamed of myself, but not enough to salve her feelings that evening.

The eventual truth came out, of course, and I'm convinced that if Kay had been a homicidally inclined individual, Skip and I would have both been speaking in high soprano, and asking to have a last smoke before they put the blindfolds in place in front of a bullet pocked wall!

We have laughed about this one many times over the years, but for one instant in time Miss Kay (who is very rarely at a loss for words) was literally speechless. She's gotten her revenge many times over, of course, but thinking back, I no doubt deserved the fallout from that one!

My best to Miss Kay, and to the fact that she has (I think) forgiven me after all these years! ...But it still evokes a smile or two.

Semper Fi,

Dick

¹ In the South (both Skip and I were from below the Mason-Dixon Line), all young ladies, regardless of their marital status are referred to as "Miss" in deference to their youth, charm and genteel upbringing. The "Miss" has literally nothing to do with their marital status. You "Damn-Yankees" won't understand, but the Southern Ladies will know where I'm coming from.

² "TT" was the colloquial local terminology for Marine Corps junior officer's quarters in Tarawa Terrace, named for the famous island fight in November of 1943.

³ The Military Affiliate Radio System (MARS) is (and was) a [Department of Defense](#) (DoD) sponsored program that combines the resources and talents of military radio operators and volunteer radio operators of the US Amateur Radio Service. Under the authority of [DoD Directive 4605.2](#), each branch of the Armed Forces manages and operates individual MARS programs in joint support of the overall MARS program. Depending upon location and availability of equipment, MARS also offers service members the opportunity to place free phone calls home from overseas, from military aircraft, and from ships. This is accomplished by connecting phone lines to radio equipment with the radio link acting as the long-distance carrier, this processes is called "phone-patching." The Navy and Marine Corps became part of the MARS system in 1963, a mere 3-years prior to our infamous call from the Onslow County Sheriff's Department. While much of the telephonic traffic is currently handled by "cell phone", this wasn't always the case, and many a comforting phone call was placed by understanding MARS participants. Perhaps SOME messages were more comforting than others? Heh, heh, heh...