

A QUICK (AND ROUGH) HISTORY OF THE MARINE CORPS PARACHUTE UNITS

OK you clowns, grab a can of “Cs” use your sterno cans for heat, and smoke ‘em if you’ve got ‘em! I’ll try to clarify a few things for you youngsters.

While it’s true the Corps doesn’t have any “Paramarines”, they do (and have had) parachute capable units dating from the formation of “Test Unit One” back about 1954. The Parachute and Raider Battalions of WWII had been disbanded about 1944 when it became obvious that there was probably not going to be an opportunity to use any highly specialized units in the Pacific Theater of Operations. The former members of the units were disbursed into several straight-leg infantry outfits and fought with great distinction throughout the remainder of the war. Even Ira Hays of the flag raisers on Iwo Jima had been in the Parachute units (as I recall they used to call him “Chief Falling Cloud” or some such).

During the “great Armed Forces Reorganization of 1947” they tried to give the Marine Corps the mission of furnishing the parachutists, but the individuals fighting for the Corps’ very existence wisely passed on the airborne, and decided to sell Congress on their demonstrated expertise, that of conducting Amphibious Operations. In retrospect, it was a wise decision, and probably saved the Corps’ bacon in the great armed forces unification effort in the wake of a nation wishing to wash their hands of the military following what they considered to be the final great war (little did they know!).

I have a “Camel Tail” posted on Bob Rohrer’s page under Jousting Tails, titled “*The Unintended Consequences of Changing Times and Situations*” that goes into the rationale of the formation of the Force Reconnaissance Units and their assigned missions prior to the invention of the reconnaissance satellites. The missions made good sense at the time, but that was in a different day and time. The article can be read at if you have Acrobat Reader (most modern computers come with it pre-installed):

http://www.bobrohrer.com/sea_stories/the_unintended_consequences.pdf

All that having been said, the Corps suddenly wound up with a Parachute Qualified Company, “The First Force Reconnaissance Company” working directly for FMF Pac, albeit hanging their hats at Camp Del Mar (Pendleton) and administratively attached to Headquarters Battalion of the 1st Marine Division. This little evolution occurred in the 1957 time-frame. The concept seemed to be going well so they split off a fairly good chunk of 1st Force (along with Major [selectee] P.X. Kelly) and sent it back to Camp Lejeune to form the 2nd Force Reconnaissance Company.

The Company(s) consisted of roughly 14 officers and 147 enlisted and had a Major for a Company Commander, a Captain for an XO, Ops Officer, and Intelligence Officer and a Captain for a Pathfinder Platoon Commander. As originally set up the Company consisted of:

- 1) A Parachute Reconnaissance Platoon (usually called Para Recon)
- 2) An Amphibious Reconnaissance Platoon (usually called Amphib Recon)
- 3) A Parachute Pathfinder Platoon

- 4) Various sections (Admin, S-3, S-2, Parachute Packing Unit [usually hanging their covers in a place called the “para-loft”], Radio Section, Medical Section and Supply)

As the situation worked out the kinks, several things sorta’ evened themselves out. Originally the Amphib Platoon was **NOT** parachute qualified, and this engendered a certain amount of natural resentment, since these Para-Recon guys were eligible for jump pay, whereas the Scuba Qualified gents didn’t even have the silver diving bubble to wear (that came later), and drew no pay for hazarding their fannies underwater in what was probably a more dangerous occupation than jumping out of airplanes. Jump pay was the munificent sum of \$55/month for enlisted members and a whopping \$110/month for officers. Don’t laugh, a fresh caught 2nd Lieutenant (with no longevity) drew only \$222.22/month and a Private was still drawing less than \$80/month! Finally about 1959 they combined the Amphib Recon Platoon and the Para Recon Platoon (cross training all hands) to form simply “The Recon Platoons”, and they dropped the title of “Parachute” Pathfinder Platoon to simply “The Pathfinder Platoon”...

There were no officers in the company below the rank of 1st Lieutenant, and most of the enlisted folks were NCOs with a fair amount of prior service within their MOS. The Hospital Corpsmen were Parachute Qualified, as were the Communicators and the Parachute Stuffers. As a side note, some of the Navy Hospital Corpsmen got their jump wings from the Navy at the LTA (Lighter than Air) facility at Lakehurst N.J. (same place the Hindenburg crashed and burned) – the Navy still had blimps in the early 1960s believe it or not!

In the 50s and early 60s you were **NOT** allowed to attend Airborne School (in the Marine Corps) unless you were assigned to a unit having jump billets, and were personally assigned to such a billet (an occasional exception was made for General’s Aides and political paybacks, but they were few and far between). Only “X” number of official “jump billets” were available and it often took a number of months to work your way to Ft. Benning. I (for instance) arrived in late 1959 and didn’t go to Jump School until August 1960.

Aside from the Force Recon Jump Billets, the only others within the Corps allowed to attend Jump School and draw jump pay were the Air Delivery Outfits (they got to attend as most of their job was packing parachutes for air drops). When ANGLICO was formed, they too occupied genuine jump billets.

After it became obvious that the Force Recon concept was viable, at least two Reserve Force Reconnaissance Companies were formed, 3rd Force in Mobile, Alabama and 5th Force in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Once you were parachute qualified you could request “permissive jump orders” even after you had left the company(s) to keep current, but drew no pay for your efforts, but it was a way to keep your hand in.

The Marines in the old days were **only** allowed to wear the basic silver jump wings, whereas the Army could qualify for “Senior Jump Wings” with a “Star” on top of the Parachute, after 35-jumps (don’t hold my feet to the fire on the exact amount), and “Master Jump Wings” after 65-jumps (a star with a wreath on top of the canopy). In the Corps you could have 1000-jumps and still only wear the basic wings unless you had transferred from the Army and came with the Senior or Master Jump Wings as awarded by your former service.

In 1962 (it may have been early 1963) the Corps decided to come up with their own “advanced wings” to indicate more “time in the blast” as the saying went. They came out with the now familiar Gold Jump Wings (Officially called the Navy/Marine Corps Jump Wings). Unfortunately whoever came up with the idea didn’t make ‘em truly worthwhile, as all you had to do was complete an additional 10-jumps back with your Marine Corps (or Navy) unit – hardly indicative of extreme parachute expertise! Also in the mid-60s they lifted the requirement that you had to be filling a “jump billet” to attend Airborne School. The Army turned loose a relatively large quantity of jump quotas over to the Corps and everybody with a friend in an S-3 Shop got to go to Benning.

Now that they had the coveted Parachute Wings, the newly anointed jumpers went straight back to the Division (or to whatever unit they were assigned) and immediately put in for permissive jump orders to get in their obligatory 10 additional jumps so they could trade their silver wings for gold. One big problem! The regulations specified that you had to be assigned to **a jump unit** and filling **a jump billet** to qualify for the gold wings no matter HOW many jumps you made! For a number of years, virtually the entire Corps ignored the regulations and changed their silver wings for gold. Eventually some of the old timers got tired of “joe staff-puke mope” bumming an additional 10 permissive jumps and wearing the same wings as the old time Reconnaissance or Anglico troops! Things got ugly for awhile, and eventually most of the “pseudo-tactical jumpers” had to take off their gold wings, but it took a number of years. There were a number of red faces when the “wing change” was made mandatory!

There were still a few of the old time WWII Parachute Troops on active duty when the Companies were started, and one of our Company Commanders was a Major McAllister who had been a Staff Sergeant in the Parachute Battalion when it was started in 1941 (a rather salty gentleman I might add!).

When I was the S-3 of the 2nd Reconnaissance Battalion (as a Captain no less) in 1966 I began to get jump quotas in that I could assign almost at will. One of the gents I sent was 1st Lieutenant Skip Hartnett, my old XO who had been drooling over my gold wings since we first met. I inadvertently shot myself in the foot with that one however, as in the Spring of 1966 they decided to for an active duty 3rd Force Reconnaissance (to train with 2nd Force over at Geiger) and I lost a most able assistant. I volunteered to help train the new guys in their parachute operations (jumpmaster training, etc.) during my off duty hours (which usually meant I got in a bunch of night jumps). One of their new Lieutenants named John Sheeble (while training as a jumpmaster) put me out over the Camp Lejeune water tower thinking the light was supposedly on the DZ! Egad... (Sheeble is now a rather well-to-do and highly paid political lobbyist in Tallahassee, Fla.) - The entire stick wound up in the trees except for John who wound up on the road and wondered why we were all hacking our canopies out of the pines!

While in the Corps we jumped almost every imaginable aircraft! We jumped C-123s at Benning (like those in the movie Air America), R4-Ds (later redesignated C-47s, al la Army designation), C119s (Flying Box Cars), H-19 Choppers (the Army Flying Banana), HUS Helicopters (later renamed UH-34D), CH-46 Helicopters, CH-53 Helicopters, the GV (later renamed the C-130), the Beaver, and even the A3-D jet exiting through a hatch in the belly for free falls (we were doing free-falls for clandestine entry techniques before the Army was calling ‘em HALO). For tactical Pathfinder Team delivery, our usual aircraft was the TF-1 which could carrier launch and carry a fully equipped 10-man pathfinder team.

Initially you could acquire your jump wings from:

- 1) An officially designated Army Airborne School (courses varied from 3-4 weeks and required 5 satisfactory jumps including one “mass exit”). Usually this was done at Ft. Benning, but some graduated from Ft. Bragg.
- 2) **Make ONE Combat jump!** (Supposedly over 1/2 of the troops dropped into Normandy with the 101st and the 82nd had never jumped before (\$hitty weather in England before the jump prohibited the newly trained paratroopers from finishing the jump portion of their training)! This provision is still on the books last time I looked! – I had one Sergeant Major with a set of jump wings who had parachuted into Burma as an armorer with the OSS during WWII and never made a jump before or after!
- 3) Be designated as a qualified parachutist by an Army Jump Outfit in emergency tactical circumstances for operational expediency (the Army Special Forces sometimes does this, and I have known at least one Marine Corps Officer who sweet talked ‘em into designating him a qualified parachutist!).

In 1966/early1967 I was running the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade Raid School at Camp Schwab prior to heading south as a Rifle Company Commander. Officially I was the Company Commander of A Company, 5th Reconnaissance Battalion as a part of RLT-26. As such the Army Special Forces let me send some of my kids down to a quasi-official jump school they were running with the Army’s blessing (thus making an official Army Airborne School). Once they dropped the requirement that you had to be filling a (paid) jump billet to be assigned to Airborne School, the wings became a common as rifle qualification badges, and the mystique was gone. When we were one of only 14 Officers and 147 Enlisted folks (not counting the WWII old-timers) permitted to wear the wings as a member of the only Parachute outfit in the Marine Corps we were a VERY salty bunch to say the least!

The old Force Reconnaissance outfits almost died a natural death following the Vietnam War due to the more advanced techniques for gathering strategic intelligence. Eventually they came up with parachute qualified platoons for special operations, but I remember the old days. First Force was temporarily disbanded but reconstituted and rejoined the active units of the Corps not too long ago. I had an invite to attend my old alma mater for the commissioning ceremony but alas, I was already committed. Too bad, I still make the FRA Reunions when I can (my FRA number is 213), and for the most part we still keep in touch.

Out of the old Company in the late 1950s/early 1960s almost 50% of our enlisted troops were commissioned. We had one of our officers become the Commandant (P.X. Kelly), at least one made Major General (Duff Rice), Capt. Bill Weiss made Brigadier General (and was awarded a Navy Cross), a whole bunch of Colonels including one of my old Gunnery Sergeants from the Pathfinder Platoon (Wes Fox) who was also awarded the Medal of Honor. A passel were made Warrant Officers and later made Lieutenant and Captain including Bob Happy and Levoy McVeigh (lost extracting some of his people on a “spy-rig” in the jungle). S/Sgt. Shelton Eakin later made Color Sergeant of the Marine Corps, was commissioned and sent to RVN only to step on a command detonated 500-lb bomb when he led his men from the helicopter – a good man, I went to Airborne School with him, as I did with GySgt. Bobby J. Patterson. 1st Sergeant Woody Hamblin was my assistant Pathfinder Team Leader, and after I left the company, he landed in the power lines at Pendleton losing his lower leg.

Refusing to be retired, he was retained on active duty, passed the PFT Test, got back on Parachute and Scuba Status and put two tours in RVN working with the special ops/SEALS.

There are more stories but the big hand and little hand are on the top part of the watch, so it's about time to hit the sack.

Any specific questions? Just ask...

Semper Fi,

Dick



**Culver with General Purpose Bag
(abbreviated GP Bag)
On Pendleton Airstrip
Prior to Jump (circa 1960)**

This picture is something of a “tee-hee” as the “Parachute Stuffers” and I had a sort of unspoken joke going. In short it was that Culver never got to jump without a GP Bag. For those not familiar with the drill, a GP bag was a method of carrying a large load to the deck without having to land with it in your hip-pocket. It was attached to your harness with a 30 – 35 foot lowering line that could be activated by a pair of quick releases. The trick was to pop the quick releases once you were “out and open” with your legs wrapped securely around the GP Bag. Once you were tree-top high, you turned loose of the bag with your legs, and allowed the bag to tumble loose, take the weight off of your canopy, and allow you to land with your normal weight but not further away from your load than 35-feet.

As a sort of comic relief, the para-riggers would wait until everyone was suited up and then show up with whatever they figured would be a pain in the fanny to hook on the (my) harness. In order not to screw up the ongoing joke, I would simply smile and let

‘em hook me up with whatever they had prepared! Great joke, and got lots of chuckles from the troops. For tactical jumps however, I still got to jump with my beloved GP Bag, but then it was usually full of landing panels, explosives or whatever seemed

necessary to clear landing zones for the incoming initial assault waves of the landing force. A single sided bag with a similar lowering line was sometimes used for jumping heavy weapons (machine-guns, mortars, etc.). The trick was not to inadvertently (or in desperation) turn the bag loose in such a manner as to get it tangled up in the trees (nothing more embarrassing than dangling over a limb with the bag on the other side acting as a counterbalance! Heh, heh, heh...).

Just for the record, I did NOT have a tree magnet in my posterior, nor were the Pathfinders sometimes irreverently referred to as “Trashfinders” by the Recon Types!