

“Should old acquaintance be forgot”...

By Dick Culver

The lines of the old Bobby Burns' song, “*Old Lang Syne*”, bring to mind the subject of this Sea Story. “*Should old acquaintance be forgot*” doesn't normally bring to mind visions of Odin's Great Hall of Valhalla in more peaceable times, however the hazards of being shot at for whatever reason, by those intent on canceling your birth certificate, sometimes bring about some interesting and often very personal conversations concerning the fate of Marines, drunks and puppies.

I've never been a “Bible Thumper” as some who dwell on the Holy Scripture are called, but even as a young'un, those of us in the ranks were reminded that “there are no atheists in a foxhole!” Yeah, yeah, I know the current correct terminology is “*fighting hole*” but then I came along in a different day and age. Regardless, the message was clear, but seemingly somewhat detached during peacetime.

Once the rapidly rotating cylindrical projectiles (bullets in the vernacular) started flying, one somehow seemed a bit closer to one's Maker. I once remarked to a friend that I am still trying to make good on some promises made under fire.

When we actually had genuine Chaplains who made it to the field for Sunday Services, I was always careful to attend such services. I told myself that such attendance gave some small amount of comfort to the troops to think the “Skipper” was a man of faith. While I told myself such small fibs, in actuality, I *did* receive some spiritual comfort from the services... the experiences of childhood run deep. I even attended the verbal messages given by the “lay leaders” assigned to the Companies, and quite frankly, some were as good as those given by individuals being paid by the military to be professional “Sky Pilots”... I always figured that those who had to participate in “bullet ducking” on a frequent basis (the “lay leaders”), had perhaps, a better feel for the realities of the ongoing daily situation.

Don't get me wrong, once back safely on Stateside soil, I tended to revert to my usual sinful ways, and very rarely attended church on my own. Not that I no longer believed, but the daily reminder of our personal vulnerability was absent and my soul was perhaps, the loser in the long haul. Alas, 'tis the nature of the beast I'm afraid.

I have always believed in the power of prayer however, as even in my less than constant attention to the Supreme Being, I have seen prayer seemingly work wonders, even in peacetime. I could regale you with personal experiences, but if you are of the normal bent, there will always be some sort of question that might lead you to believe, or at least wonder, if the same sort of thing would have occurred even without the intervention of a bit of Divine assistance.

Do such things as prayer actually work? If you choose not to believe, I'd say you are much the poorer for doubting. When a friend or even a pet is seriously ill, I still resort to a bit of knee bending, but usually keep it to myself rather than be branded as some sort of “Holy Joe”... I rather imagine that most have had similar experiences over the years. The fact that more often than not, the asked for assistance seems to work, making such requests definitely worth the effort. I may “poo-poo” such efforts publicly, but deep down, I'm not so sure!

When the bullets are actually flying, all bets are off and I get a bit more serious about such things. I recall one instance after I had become the Battalion S-2, when we had crossed

the Hai Van Pass, and dropped down into what we jokingly called “The Bowling Alley”. A truly nasty place in terms of defensive military posture.

Our new Battalion Commander was “queer for” (*enthusiastic* about – a term no longer in general usage) erecting tentage for the battalion (a “by the book man” on such matters), whereas his predecessor, Major Moose Beard, had operated primarily out of his hip pocket, orchestrating the tactical situation from his personal foxhole. The VC (or even possibly a few itinerant NVA) had located their mortars in/on the high ground surrounding the long flat plain that followed the pass defined by the high ground to our northeast. It was a nasty enough location that our 105mm Gun Battery was forced to dig holes in the surrounding flat surfaces to allow the gun tubes to recoil deeply enough to gain sufficient elevation to fire back at our assailants.

The VC weren’t the most accurate mortar gunners in the world, but they had the legendary high ground. Constant patrolling action by various Rifle Companies however, kept ‘em in hiding for the most part. I suspect that they had buried their mortar tubes (in what they figured was a reasonable angle of elevation and deflection, topped off with a makeshift muzzle cover, and a few sprigs of local “flora” for camouflage). Our assailants could simply come by when the coast was clear and dropped a few rounds into the buried tube(s) and beat a hasty retreat without having to carry the guns and bipods with ‘em. If this was what they were doing, it answered in part, for their relative inaccuracy. None the less, in my personal opinion, the “Bowling Alley” was a particularly unhealthy location for those on the receiving end!

Once told to locate a CP for the S-2, I set about it with a will, Mrs. Culver’s youngster did NOT intend to be on the receiving end of a zip mortar round! I dug a fairly deep hole to house my personal hole/bunker/CP, and then went to work scrounging a fair number of barbed wire stakes to act as sandbag supports for the “overhead” of my new “digs”. These stakes, placed horizontally, were ultimately to be topped with numerous layers of sandbags to soak up the nose cone detonation of a Chinese or Russian mortar round.

Having finished the hole and the placing of the barbed wire stakes, I went on a sandbag safari. Having procured a “wired” bundle of sandbags, I set about filling them with a will, inspired by our (more or less) daily afternoon and thus quasi-predictable mortar attack. I was located fairly close to the Artillery Battery Commander’s tent and FDC (Fire Direction Center), and he had solved the problem by building a sandbag revetment close by that made it fairly easy to dive into in the event of emergencies.

That particular afternoon, our Arty Commander was enjoying his afternoon gourmet delight of C’s, (a can of “Beans and Franks” as I recall) when our afternoon calling card from “Charlie” came dropping in! He set his Cs down carefully, and most gracefully dove over the revetment into the relative safety of his sandbag retaining wall. When the smoke had settled, he was unscathed, but his can of C-Ration “Beanie Weenies” had taken a direct hit! Arrggg... I noticed a certain flurry of activity in the Arty area constructing an overhead cover. It would seem that my activities had been vindicated, mercifully with no one injured! Our afternoons in the “Bowling Alley” environs began to take on the same daily regularity of the legendary “*Washing Machine Charlie*” on Guadalcanal. I was not amused.

I had inherited the S-2 Shop while I was in the Hospital aboard the USS Tripoli, and was used to operating with a Rifle Company. This quasi-small shop existence was going to take some getting used to. The day after I had finished my makeshift bomb shelter, one of the Rifle Company’s S-2 Scouts stopped by the Battalion CP and was directed to the new S-2 Shop (my hole). Shortly after his arrival, the afternoon mortar barrage began to make our life

miserable. I motioned for the young Marine to join me under my newly sandbagged CP, and hoped I hadn't guessed wrong on their ability to soak up the blast from a zip mortar round.

The youngster wasn't used to such cramped quarters and seemed to be a bit hesitant to join me in my newly finished shelter. I didn't wait for his less than enthusiastic presence and plastered myself against my dugout bulkhead, knowing that the barbed wire stakes would probably be strongest in their shortest span. His reticence came to an abrupt end when the first round landed close by. Suddenly I was joined by an enthusiastic, if somewhat questioning, Marine. He heard me mumbling in my personal position and naturally figured that I was talking on the PRC-25.

Being naturally curious as are most youngsters, he asked "who I was talking to"?

I told him that he'd (my S-2 Scout) better hope that HE was listening, as I was having a personal, enthusiastic, and most earnest conversation with "The Almighty"...

My young Marine looked at me like I had two heads.

"The Almighty"? he said.

"Yep, how long have you been in country lad?"

"About two weeks sir," was the reply.

"Well son, you'll find that you can often get more help from above than you can from other folks who are also hugging the sides of their foxholes! Hopefully, "HE's" on our side this afternoon!"

The mortars stopped as soon as we got a few artillery rounds in the air, and all calmed down to a dull roar with most of us "making book" on the political leanings, lack of marital status of the parents of, and probable (collective) devious sex habits of our opponents. As usual, the Zips had been unsuccessful in extracting their pound of flesh, but our nerves didn't truly appreciate the relative calm for another half hour or so.

I never got to talk to that particular lad again in a "one-on-one basis", but hopefully the youngster got my thinly veiled message, ...that a bit of humility expressed to our Creator often went a long way.

To this day, often the strains of Bobby Burn's tune play softly through my subconscious, when thinking back over the years...

*"Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
...And days of auld lang syne!"*

Perhaps, *just perhaps*, "The Almighty" was listening after all? On that day (as on a number of others), I'd remembered one very helpful "*Auld Acquaintance*". I'd like to think he was looking out for one very humble Marine Captain, and an appropriately apprehensive S-2 Scout in a fighting hole.

Semper Fi,

Dick