

Smedley D. Culver

By Dick Culver

So how did my youngster come by the name of Smedley D. Culver (his real name was James Richard Culver of course, but then that's the gist of the story)? It started out as a joke originally, but got out of hand and lasted for a number of years. Unfortunately my reputation as a slightly unhinged Marine fully capable of naming his young'un "*Smedley*" wasn't that far out of the realm of reality in the mind of many of my acquaintances. I'm not totally sure it ever got totally squared away, but it was fun for a while. Here's how the thing got started.

I had served several years in the old 1st Force Reconnaissance Company at Camp Del Mar, and was subsequently sent over to become the XO of Golf Company, 2nd Battalion of the 5th Marines at Camp Margarita. While I had a great tour with the Force Recon Company and made many friends, eventually however, all good things must come to an end. Certainly being assigned to the legendary 5th Regiment could hardly have been construed as a punishment. I found myself as the Executive Officer of a Rifle Company sporting more men than the entire Force Reconnaissance Company was a new experience.

About the time I was departing 1st Force, the Reconnaissance Units, specifically the Force Reconnaissance Company units belonging to FMF Pac, were beginning to expand their presence throughout the Pacific Theater (under the guidance of FMF Pac in Hawaii). First Force started by placing a Pathfinder Team on Okinawa to support any potential helicopter landing efforts, should we be required to "*land the landing force*" on a foreign shore. In the 1961/1962 time frame, we hadn't actually worked out our "*heli-borne tactics*", and we were not actively at war with anyone in the Far East. The Vietnam fracas was several years into the future, and we had never actually utilized a full blown Helicopter Assault from amphibious shipping – all this was to be in the not too distant future!

The individual tapped to take our first "permanently deployed" Pathfinder Team to the Far East was an extremely squared away young Marine first lieutenant named Dick Rigg. Now Dick was the sort of individual you would have selected to eventually become the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and when taken as an individual Marine Officer, he "oozed" the personality and good looks that the Marine Corps Recruiting Service would have selected for a recruiting poster. Dick was a tall, good looking (or at least, so the girls seemed to think) individual who had everything he touched turn to gold. He had come out first in virtually every school he had attended and was of the staunch and sterling character recruiting officers would kill for.

Dick certainly had nothing against an occasional beer, although he very seldom consumed more than one during "Happy Hour". He was a devoted family man who taught Sunday School when he was together with his family at Camp Pendleton. When Dick arrived on Okinawa, he bought two of the then obligatory (family) tape recorders at the local PX, and sent one home to his wife Lynn. Dick would then find suitable "kids-books" at the local Army and Air Force Exchanges, read the book into the tape recorder and send it, along with the book back to his wife so she could play it for his youngsters! There was certainly nothing phony about his entire persona, he was truly a good Marine and one of the most dedicated family men I have ever

known! A man of extreme good character and love of family – essentially what the Corps was looking for!

Dick and I had become good friends at the old Recon Company, and while I was bemoaning his getting such a fine assignment (as the deployed Pathfinder Platoon Commander), he was trying to figure out how to trade jobs with me so he could remain in California with his family. It wasn't that he had anything against being assigned to Okinawa, it was simply that he truly loved his family, and his familial togetherness. Dick departed for Okinawa before the entire transplacement evolution had taken place, while I was still with Golf, 2nd Battalion of the 5th Marine Regiment. As prestigious as being a member of the old 5th Marine Regiment was, I would have traded jobs with him in the proverbial heartbeat! I simply liked jumping out of airplanes!

The 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines was selected, (according to the transplacement scheme of the times), to head for the "Rock" (the slang terminology for Okinawa) in June of 1961. The "transplacement evolution" was a way of switching Battalions from the West Coast to the Far East by simply changing Battalion designations when the new battalion arrived in place and the old Battalion headed back for the 1st Marine Division. Hence, 2/5 (2nd Battalion, 5th Marines) departed Camp Pendleton, and arrived on Okie as the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment. People had changed places, but only unit designations actually swapped. It could be a bit confusing, but it was a workable scheme when the Corps was attempting to save money and make the Department of Defense appear to be getting more for it's defense dollar. OK, back to the story...

Originally, 2/5 destined to become 2/9 was assigned to Camp Sukiran on the Rock (Sukiran was area later to be spelled Zukiran and still later for the (Marine) Camp itself to be re-designated Camp Foster). Sukiran was located not too far from the Army's main encampment at Camp Buckner and a fair distance south of Kadena Air Force Base. Within reason at Sukiran, we were allowed to select our roommates if we were collocated with another unit located within the same complex.

As luck would have it, Dick Rigg had a room at Sukiran, but needed an additional roommate to keep the BOQ (Bachelor Officer's Quarters) fully occupied on the books. I was thrilled, and got together with Dick. Sharing a room was a good deal for both of us, being old friends and old ponyos from the Recon Days. This allowed me to scrounge an occasional "permissive jump" with the Pathfinder Detachment, keep my hand in the parachute business, and maintain my association with some of my old Pathfinder troops from my former unit – it was, in the vernacular, a "love-love"



Culver "bumming a permissive jump with the Deployed Pathfinder Platoon. Sergeant Bob Happy with his hands on his hips and back to the camera.

situation, and I settled in with a smile. Lynn (Dick's wife) and Carolyn (my memsahib) were friends from our days at Pendleton.

When I was scheduled to "transplace" to Okinawa, my wife was 7 months pregnant and thus by the rules of the day, I could have opted out of the transplacement cycle until the youngster was born. Being one of stalwart duty (some would have used the term "duty struck"), I opted to have my wife go back to the East Coast and live with my folks while I was "frolicking" on the Rock putting me in a position to get a bit of an adrenaline rush should the United States be drawn into a war in the Far East. Carolyn wasn't exactly ecstatic with my decision, but she kept the traditional stiff upper lip, and having been raised in a Marine Corps family, said nothing while I departed on the U.S.S. Pickaway (APA 222).

Dick Rigg and I had a number of discussions during the days that followed, and he watched with interest as my proximity to impending fatherhood drew near. Finally one day I received a telegram announcing that Carolyn had given birth to a new Marine at the Bethesda Naval Hospital. I was thrilled of course, and immediately went to the local PX and procured a box of Cigars to pass out, as is the practice within the male military (and I suppose civilian) community.

While I was dispensing the stogies, Dick Rigg was strangely silent but was watching me with interest. Finally he broke his silence.

"Well Dick, what ya' gonna' name him?" he asked.

Always being quick with an answer (I knew this question would be coming, and I had prepared myself), I replied, "Why, Smedley D. Culver of course!"

A look of absolute horror (well concealed of course) came over his face.

"Smedley D. Culver?" he said – "Smedley? Really?"

I could see I had him hooked so I let it hang in the air a bit.

"Of course I said, what else would be appropriate?"

"Why **Smedley**?, he asked (a really strange look coming over his countenance).

"Why for Smedley Darlington Butler of course!" was my reply! "You know, for Major General Smedley D. Butler, two time Medal of Honor Winner – if it was good enough for Smedley, it's gotta' be good enough for my kid! Wouldn't you agree?" (I of course was chuckling, but kept my amusement to myself!).

It was pretty plain that Dick was horrified, but was too polite to make mention of my ill thought out choice of names!

"I see", said Dick as he walked away as if to consider his next comment. None was forthcoming so I figured I'd won round one.

Several days went past with no further discussion until one afternoon Dick came into the room and made mention, (most discretely of course).

"Hey Dick, you know it's not too late to change the name from Smedley you know!"

Now it was my turn to be (or act) aghast! “Change it?,” I replied, why on earth would I want to change it?

Seeing a change of names appeared to be a lost cause he dropped the subject, but it didn't take too long (unbeknownst to me personally) for the word to spread throughout the entire 3rd Marine Division. I even had one young NCO who had served under me as a PFC at the Rifle Range in Quantico back in 1959, that picked up on my youngster's name while serving as an NCO in the Division in 1961. The die was cast, although it would come back to haunt me years later. I promptly forgot about the whole conversation, since Dick was a most sincere individual and thought he was doing my youngster a favor – little did he know, even Dick Culver wasn't that off plumb!

I should have suspected the story had gotten out of hand when I picked up my wife from my folks in Alexandria, Virginia, stopped by her family's house in Triangle, and swung by General George Van Orden's firearms and equipment store in Quantico (“*Evaluator's Limited*”) to pass the time of day prior to departing. *Evaluator's Limited* was located just down the hill from Carolyn's folks' house in Triangle (the Quantico local).

The Van Orden's were a shooting family, with Mrs. Van Orden, an old competitive pistol shooter herself, and the wife of General George Van Orden, the father of the U. S. Marine Corps Ordnance School at Quantico. The General being a famous Marine Corps shooter in his own right, started “*Evaluators Limited*” as mentioned above and literally evaluated and recommended various firearms for the Marine Corps and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (specifically Sniper variations of the Model 70 Winchester, and well honed and polished versions of the Smith and Wesson .357 Magnum for the FBI who had co-located their FBI Academy on the Marine Corps Base at Quantico).

Mrs. Van Orden had been personally acquainted with General Smedley Butler in the 1920s when General Van Orden had been stationed at Quantico as a Second Lieutenant. Mrs. Van Orden had, of course, personally met General Butler during several of the obligatory military receptions held by the Commanding General throughout the year. She (as were most Marine Corps Officer's wives) was acquainted with General Butler on what might be termed cordial speaking terms (“Why yes Mrs. Van Orden, how are you and the family doing?” type of verbal exchange). This would not have been unusual of course, since the entire United States Marine Corps was smaller than the New York Police Department in the 1920s!

I had once dated Mrs. Van Orden's Daughter *Florette* (Mrs. Van Orden's name was Flora), and in fact I had escorted *Florette* to our VMI “*Ring Figure Hop*” at the Institute in 1956. “*Ring Figure*” was a traditional formal dance when a 2nd Class Cadet with serious “designs” on his lady, presented their date with a miniature copy of their Class Ring as a token of their impending esteem. Florette and I were not yet that close, and Florette ultimately married a Marine 2nd Lieutenant named Kelly, but our families remained close. Still, Mrs. Van Orden treated me as a sort of 2nd Momma and couldn't resist “*winding my watch*” when she got a chance.

The first words out of her mouth when I stopped by her store were, “How's little Smedley doing?” I should have smelled a large rodent, but having known her for many years, it went right over my head!

“Why fine Mam,” was my answer, never thinking about the sobriquet “Smedley she had dropped on me without even a hitch. I later joked with her about my naming (even in jest) my

kidlet, Smedley, even as a joke, and she never let on – apparently there had been a fair amount of joking in the Corps about my naming the kid Smedley, and many of the Marine Corps shooters who did business with the Van Orden firearms supply business had exchanged “tee-hees” about the slightly unhinged but widely known character (Culver) who had saddled his young’un with the name Smedley D. Culver. I had actually named the youngster James Richard Culver, but obviously it was more fun to spread the name Smedley than Jim. In later days we all had many laughs about the entire evolution.

All had essentially been forgotten until I had a set of orders sending me to Vietnam in the Fall of 1966. I had traveled west with my squirt and Memsahib heading for Camp Pendleton with a side trip through Idaho to find some decent land to build a ranch and settle the family when my wandering days were over. I finally found my “dream 160-acres”, did the paperwork, and took the wife, the youngster, and myself down through Salmon, Idaho to meet Elmer Keith (a notable Shooting figure of the day). The Culver family eventually arrived at Camp Pendleton in the fall of ‘66.

My old Executive Officer, from the 2nd Recon Battalion who I had left (or *thought* I had left) at Camp Geiger on the East Coast helping the 3rd Force Reconnaissance Company get organized, had preceded me to Pendleton and was already in Quarters. Since Skip’s memsahib (Miss Kay) and Carolyn were old friends, we dropped our anchor at their digs while I was out practicing my soldiering skills at what was known as “Staging Battalion”.

While out on one of the ranges we were required to put our troops through, I noticed my old NCO who had been with me in Quantico in ‘59 and again on Okie in ‘61 when I was with the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment was now one of the range NCOs at Staging Battalion. What was the tie-in? A bit strange I suppose, but the Corps was relatively small even in those days! Well, the relatively young NCO had known me when I was an unmarried brown-bar (2nd Lieutenant), and later on Okinawa when I was the Executive Officer of the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines. He of course was there as I mentioned in 1961 when the word got out that I had named the youngster “Smedley D. Culver”... You can probably see this one coming? Heh, heh, heh...

While we were putting rounds downrange on the field firing range my old NCO and I renewed our acquaintances and caught up on the years that had ensued since we last served together. He was a great Marine, and I was again to meet him some years later when he had been commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant on the Rock in 1973.

After our conversation however, I noticed he was having a rather hushed conversation with one of his fellow S/NCOs (well out of earshot of the maddening crowds), and delivered in a quasi-private manner. As we were finishing our range firing exercise, the other S/NCO came over to me and asked in a very discrete manner if it was true that I had named my youngster “Smedley D. Culver”? Seeing the humor of the situation, I answered, “Of course, I thought it would be appropriate for the lad to be named for a two-time Medal of Honor winner – who knows, he might even become Commandant some day!

The young S/NCO privately agreed (after all, what else could he do, heh, heh, heh...?). and went away to further spread the “Smedley D. Culver” rumor! To my knowledge, it’s still going to this day!

And so it should! If he didn’t become the Commandant, he should have! His mother and I would have had it no other way! Oooh Rah...

Semper Fidelis,

Dick