



## **The Unintended Consequences of Changing Times and Situations**

*Taken from Camel Tails – A Saga of the RSMC*

The conversation started in the office of the Marine Corps School in Jeddah. It was during a slack time between training sessions, and the subject of our rambling discourses often ran from politics, to our varied and sundry military experiences from the misty past. All in all, great fun and gave us a chance to regale each other with half truths and remembered encounters during our various military assignments. In the space of some 20+ years the exactness of our memories were no doubt clouded with a rather personal take on various adventures. All except one...

Pat Teague, our training coordinator and I had served together several times, and had a number of shared acquaintances and experiences. Pat and I had served in the 1<sup>st</sup> Force Reconnaissance Company in the 1961 time frame. I later left to go to the 5<sup>th</sup> Marines and later to the Far East and serve as the XO of two Rifle



**Culver pondering  
the possibility of  
becoming a tent peg**

Companies in the process. My tour as the XO of Golf Company with both the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion 9<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, was followed by an assignment to the Reserve



**Pat in Jeddah**

Branch in the 8<sup>th</sup> Marine Corps District Headquarters in New Orleans. My somewhat (personally) unwelcome presence in the former abode of Marie Laveaux had me signing discharges in a small office cubical just prior to the infamous Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. To say that I was not a happy camper is something of an understatement. Pat however (lucky dog), was still serving in a Recon Platoon in 1<sup>st</sup> Force. During one of our daily bull sessions in Jeddah while complaining about my unceremonious assignment to

New Orleans, somehow the conversation swung around to how close we came to invading Cuba, and finding out just how serious the Rooskies were about starting WWIII. From my point of view, I was sitting literally under the gun with nothing more lethal than a government

issue pen a mere 90 miles off the Cuban shore, and most probably a juicy target for the missile batteries, controlled by the Russian advised Cubans. While the Cubans would probably have done us a favor by wiping out the snarled administrative garble common to our District Headquarters, it did not engender warm fuzzy feelings in the New Orleans clime, most especially since I couldn't find a single place to affix a bayonet to that damned pen!

The United States stationed an invasion fleet a few miles off the Cuban coast with full intention of "Landing the Landing Force" if negotiations broke down! Fur was standing up on virtually all necks and of course nowhere quite as stiff as with those scheduled to go ashore. Pat told me that his recon team was scheduled to parachute into Cuba ahead of the invasion and set up a radio site to relay ground surveillance of the Cuban's actions prior to actually sending troops ashore! Much to his dismay, Pat pointed out that some "rocket scientist" had discerned that the Recon Teams scheduled to be dropped into Cuba would only be armed with a .45 M1911A1 Pistol and two hand grenades! What sort of idiot would have come up with such a scheme?

I was sitting at my own desk gently chuckling, with Pat looking at me like I hadn't understood what he had just said. Unfortunately, I understood exactly what he said, and worse yet, I knew exactly where such insanity had come from. Unfortunately, "I" was the culprit, albeit a year or so removed from the actual situation in 1962. I had simply misjudged the acumen of those running the show for the Cuba "dust-up", who had apparently not thought out the changed tactical and strategic situation from those envisioned in the original armament concept... In my opinion they had failed to consider the old adage that everything depends on the situation and the terrain. I had of course, underestimated Murphy's eternal influence.

I debated telling "Ugh Teague" (so called from his imposing stature and hairy appearance approximating that of the legendary cave man) where the scheme had originated lest I become an after-the-fact "tent peg" even though it was 25-years in the past by the time we were reminiscing. After some deep thought and soul searching, I decided my companion needed to know what had prompted such a seemingly idiotic decision. To make it more understandable to the "unwashed" we need to go back to the 1950s and 60s to get a take on how the Force Reconnaissance concept was perceived and how their assigned missions had evolved.

### **Setting the Stage:**

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the reconnaissance satellites were not yet a part of the equation. The Recon community had taken it's origins from the Recon Platoons deployed in the Pacific that landed and brought back important information that was rendered down to hard military intelligence prior to amphibious landings. Good stuff, but it relied entirely on the expertise and guts of the recon platoon members and was always at the whims of weather, surf, and inadvertent discovery by the enemy, thus conceivably blowing the cover of an entire operation.

Following WWII, reconnaissance doctrine continued to evolve and recon platoons were used in Korea to great advantage. Following Korea, an organization known as Amphib Recon was born (although there are those who claim that the Amphib Recon sobriquet was also used in WWII and Korea). The Amphibs were conceptually working for the Fleet Marine Force Headquarters, both FMF Atlantic for the East Coast, and FMF Pacific for the areas, reaching from the West Coast of the United States and thence to Hawaii, and the Far East. Essentially these outfits performed duties that are now the job of highly sophisticated

reconnaissance satellites, but at the time worked for what was then referred to as FMF Lant (usually located in Norfolk, Va.) and FMF Pac (usually located in Hawaii).

By 1954 a new concept was envisioned and tested by an organization known as Test Unit 1, operating primarily out of Camp Pendleton, California. Test Unit 1 was in charge of developing reconnaissance techniques (among other things), to include the existing amphibious reconnaissance units, and a relatively new concept, that of clandestine parachute insertion of reconnaissance teams, as opposed to strictly seaborne entry, utilizing submarines, rubber boats, and Scuba techniques.

A third facet of the “tested” reconnaissance unit was designed to provide initial terminal guidance for helicopter insertion of the landing forces, to augment the normal ship-borne landing craft. LPHs were a relatively new idea (Landing Platform, Helicopter – a miniature aircraft carrier for helicopter operations), but no one had worked out the final doctrine on Heliborne Assault techniques. These “terminal guidance teams” for the envisioned Helo Ops would be responsible for clearing designated landing zones of obstacles, setting up landing panels, and defending the landing zones until the assault waves of helicopters could establish an airborne “beach head”... The idea was to insert a “Pathfinder Team” by parachute several days to perhaps a week prior to the/an invasion to prepare and defend the landing zone. The Pathfinder segment of the Marine Recon unit took its name from the Army Pathfinder units that jumped into assigned (parachute) landing zones to prepare them for the main assault waves of Airborne troops in WWII and Korea. The Marine Pathfinders would have a number of teams assigned to the platoon to cover multiple landing zones, including alternate zones if any of the primary zones were compromised or under heavy fire.

The entire recon unit under study by Test Unit 1 consisted of an Amphibious Recon Platoon (initially not airborne qualified), a Parachute Recon Platoon, and the Parachute Pathfinder Platoon. In 1957, the reconnaissance portion of Test Unit 1 morphed into a new unit called the 1<sup>st</sup> Force Reconnaissance Company, having (as set forth above) an Amphibious Reconnaissance Platoon (still not airborne qualified), a Parachute Reconnaissance Platoon, and the Parachute Pathfinder Platoon. Further thought (and a small amount of resentment by the non-parachute qualified amphibious reconnaissance folks who didn't get to draw jump pay or wear the coveted silver wings of a jumper) caused a reshuffling of the concept to include the airborne qualification of the Amphibious Reconnaissance Platoon, and brought the Amphibious Recon Platoon and the Para Recon Platoons together under the collective banner of simply the Reconnaissance Platoons, both cross-trained in amphibious and airborne operations. The Pathfinder Platoon dropped the “Parachute” Pathfinder Platoon designation and became simply the Pathfinder Platoon. The concept seemed to be working well, and in 1958, 1<sup>st</sup> Force broke off a sizeable chunk of their experienced personnel and sent them to Camp Lejeune, N.C. to form the 2<sup>nd</sup> Force Reconnaissance Company. For purposes of this discussion, the rest is history, as there are a number of books out there that chronicle the progression of the Reconnaissance Companies in a most workman-like fashion. The mini-history lesson is simply a prelude to explain the rest of the story.

About the time the Force Reconnaissance Companies were being formed, a second reconnaissance concept came about that set forth a sort of division of labor within the Reconnaissance community. Each Marine Division was to be blessed with a Division Reconnaissance Battalion, designed to be the eyes and ears of the operating infantry. Essentially, the Division Reconnaissance Battalions were designed to provide tactical reconnaissance information directly in front of each operating unit on a real-time basis. The

Recon Battalions were not tied in with Force Recon at the time, and worked for and were part of the Table of Organization of each Marine Division as opposed to being attached to the Fleet Marine Force Headquarters. For better or worse, we of the Force Reconnaissance Community considered the Division Reconnaissance outfits to be “pogues” – after all, if you hadn’t been to jump school, you weren’t \$hit as the saying used to go. The feeling in the Force Companies was that the Division Recon folks were “wanna-bees” and not worthy of consideration by we “Force Types”... Being assigned to a Division Reconnaissance unit was considered to be a fate worse than death! Gag, wretch, wheeze!

Conversely, the Force Reconnaissance Companies were designed to gather strategic (not tactical) intelligence/reconnaissance information for overall invasions of foreign soil. The Force Company recon teams were to be dropped by parachute (or even inserted by rubber boats or scuba via submarine) deep into enemy territory up to 6 months in advance of a planned invasion, gather information, and ideally to withdraw (or be extracted) hopefully without ANY enemy contact! The extraction was envisioned to be accomplished by clandestine means (rubber boat, air pickup, or even the helium balloon extraction [called “Skyhook”] as shown in the movie “The Green Berets”)... In those early days, the Reconnaissance Platoons were designed to do the jobs now routinely assigned to the spy satellites. Unfortunately, such did not exist in the early days.

### **The Evolution of Weaponry In the Reconnaissance Community:**

Our quasi-official armament on the platoon level (both Recon and Pathfinder), was the M3A1 Submachine-Gun (better known as the grease gun). This was a full automatic .45 caliber submachine-gun designed as an inexpensive replacement for the Thompson Submachine-Gun. Platoon Commanders usually carried a M1911A1 .45 Automatic Pistol, and those in both the Recon Platoons and the Pathfinder Platoons carried the ubiquitous Grease Gun.

In 1957 the new U.S. Service Rifle became the M14 and the mighty M1 was slowly phased out of system although we (in the Marine Corps) were not to see the M14 as our service rifle in the Divisions until late 1964, early 1965. Within the Pathfinder Teams, the official machine-gun was the M1919A6 utilizing a bi-pod and shoulder stock. This was to be replaced by the M60, and of course, the M79 Grenade Thrower came on the scene. In 1960-1961 however, we were still operating under the old weapons system.

Our operations officer in the First Force Company was an old time, very savvy Marine Captain by the name of Dale Davis. Captain Davis was a true warrior. Too young to enlist in the Marines for WWII, he had served as a (slightly?) underage seaman in the Merchant Marine, enlisting in the Corps as soon as he was of age. He was eventually commissioned in the Corps, served with distinction in Korea and came to us after having served in the Marine Corps Advisory Group in South Vietnam well in advance of our official involvement in Indochina. Having been blessed or cursed with gray hair at an early age, he came to us in First Force as a Captain with what we considered a wealth of fruit salad on his chest, and of course the obligatory silver jump wings. Captain Davis was definitely up to the task of running the operations shop. Captain Davis’ place in this evolution will become evident shortly.

Tactically however, we had inadvertently stumbled upon a dilemma! We were by definition, manned by the most knuckle-dragging group of enlisted troops and officers to grace any existing operational unit, unless of course we count the 2<sup>nd</sup> Force Reconnaissance Company. Our dilemma was this... Operational reconnaissance teams were “peopled” with individuals who wanted to go out and kill something; aggressive is something of an

understatement... “Kill a Commie for Mommy” comes to mind. Unfortunately, the adventuresome spirit necessary to talk a normal human being into jumping out of a perfectly good airplane, tended to slop over somewhat into the operational provisos of the assigned deep reconnaissance missions. With a satellite ball whirling overhead, you don’t have to tell the “*electronic intelligence gatherer*” not to engage the enemy, you just program it to gather the required pictures and transmit them back to base. Alas, it wasn’t that simple with the M1A1 “Knuckle-Dragger”, populating the Recon Platoons during the pre-satellite days!

Mercifully, this dilemma occurred about the time we were testing the (then) new weapons systems, and a realignment of weapons assignment within the Company was in the offing. Since I had previously shot in competition with various Marine Corps teams, and was something of a weapons aficionado, I was given the nod as the weapons test officer for 1<sup>st</sup> Force (subject of course to the approval of the powers-that-be), by Captain Davis. We ran multiple tests utilizing the newly available weaponry, and came up with the following recommendation:

**Pathfinder Platoon:**

1. Individual Weapon – M14 Rifle with sufficient magazines appropriate to the envisioned operations.
2. Side arm – M1911A1 Pistol with appropriate magazines
3. Squad Automatic (capable of defending the landing zone) – M60 Machine-Gun
4. Each pathfinder team was to carry an M79 Grenade Launcher
5. Appropriate demolitions, chain saws, brush axes, and explosives to clear any obstacles that would hinder any helicopter landing operations.

**Reconnaissance Platoon(s):**

1. Individual Weapon – M1911A1 Automatic Pistol with appropriate magazines.
2. Two hand-grenades per each member of the recon platoon members.

OK, I suppose the legitimate question is, what in the hell was going through your mind in recommending that each Recon Member carry ONLY a pistol and two frag grenades instead of their familiar Grease Guns?

**The Rational for the .45 Automatic and two frag grenades:**

OK, here goes. Our initial problem had been to keep the extremely gungy Recon Team members from engaging the enemy in a concerted firefight (don’t forget the “Kill a Commie for Mommy” bit mentioned earlier!). Here we had some of the most motivated and aggressive individuals in the Corps armed with full automatic weapons and we told them not to pick a fight – yeah, right!. A chance encounter was more likely to engender a full fledged fire fight than not. “After all, they gave me a sub-machine gun did they not?” The flip side to that was (at least in the thinking of the time) that the individuals armed with only the M1911A1 would be extremely careful not to engage the enemy unnecessarily, and thus much more likely to return to the Reconnaissance Headquarters in the rear with their intelligence information so that the operating Infantry force could take appropriate and timely action.

You can no doubt discern the rationale that went into the armament argument. All this becomes simply academic when the bullets are flying however. The fragmentation (frag) grenades however (in concept) would give a determined and clever man a chance to “break contact” with the enemy, and continue to escape and evade – hopefully to the pre-assigned pickup point. Hopefully their rather light armament would discourage individual “chance taking” and make clandestine withdrawal more likely. In short it was a way of shading your/our reconnaissance bet. Using the deep pre-D Day reconnaissance concept of the time, calling in air strikes or naval gunfire to get our “snoop and poop” lads off the hook would go a long way to tipping off the potential enemy/invasion target! Well, what the hell, you volunteered to jump out of airplanes didn’t you? Who said the missions were gonna’ be a cake walk?

The powers-that-be bought off on my recommendations although Captain Davis did look at me a bit funny when I first laid it out on the table. Considerable discussion followed, and the hierarchy had to admit that there was some small truth to the rationale. Both I and Captain Davis wound up in the Far East following the unexpected relief of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division Chief of Staff (for a different matter), and I hadn’t thought about the weapons recommendations for eons until Pat and I were kicking the subject around some 25-years later.

### **A Miscalculation:**

Where I had screwed up was assuming that no one in a decision making position would take my recommendations as cast in concrete and not apply some common sense to the equation. Don’t forget, the original concept was for DEEP pre D-Day reconnaissance up to 6-months prior to an invasion. Here however, we have the entire fleet sitting off the shore of Cuba awaiting the nod to land the landing force! Inadvertent discovery of a reconnaissance team was obviously NOT going to blow the program, as the whole world was waiting with baited breath for the outcome! Planning to send the recon teams in with a .45 Automatic and two frags bordered on insanity given the circumstances manifesting themselves during the Cuban dust-up. My problem was that I had assumed a certain amount of tactical acumen would be utilized appropriate to the situation. Alas, the best laid plans of mice and Marines, sigh...

What would I have done? Since I wasn’t on the ground, I can’t give a definitive answer, but here’s what I *THINK* I would have done! I would have sent the recon teams in with a M1919A6 Machine-Gun (or the M60 Machine-Gun – but I don’t think we had totally switched over to the new weaponry yet), and an M79 Grenade Launcher (again, had they been readily available for the operation), along with a bag of grenades. I would have made sure that the teams would have had access (at least by radio contact with the shipping) to naval gunfire support and have several heavily armed aircraft awaiting on the off shore carriers to give the Cubans something to think about while the recon teams continued their mission or called for extract. Don’t forget, once the ball was opened down there, it would be a typical “Katy bar the door” situation. Clandestine’ness’ would have rightfully gone out the window, and air strikes and naval gunfire would have been the order of the day. The Machine-Gun would have given the hapless lads on the ground a hedge until they could be extracted or relieved. I can’t be too harsh here with those pulling the tactical strings, as there might well have considerations that are not apparent in this far off time, still...

Essentially, the law of “Unintended Consequences” had taken charge and the .45 Auto and two fragmentation hand grenades had been found wanting, not because the concept was

wrong, but rather because (in my opinion) someone had not factored in the old adage “It all depends on the situation and the terrain” truism! I could use the old “saw” of “the exception proves the rule” but then you just never know...

### **Culver “fesses” up:**

I considered the “tent peg” possibilities and decided to spill the beans on where the infamous .45 Automatic and two frag grenades had originated. I was MOST careful to be diplomatic in my explanation, and even though “Ugh Teague” eyed me suspiciously for several days, I think that even he saw the humor of a decision made in peace that under certain circumstances doesn’t wash in time of war!

I would have been most distressed if Pat had bought the farm in Cuba, sporting only a sidearm and a couple of frags. We would never have gotten to serve together in the 4<sup>th</sup> Marines and later in our efforts to make Camelnecks out of the Diaper Heads... A true loss! But then who would have thought that anyone would have taken the recommendation on weapons and armament so literally? As the title of this ‘tail’ most literally says, ***“The Unintended Consequences of Changing Times and Situation.”*** Ah well...

# **ROC**

