

Over the years I have been asked what it was like being a Marine. A breath later would produce a comment suggesting that I didn't seem the type. The Marine Corps for me was a crucible that appeared when I needed it most. Except for times of war when the draft helped filled the ranks, Marines are volunteers. I was a volunteer. At the time of this story young men across America put their signatures to their first contract as their fathers had. A contract with America. On blind faith they placed their lives in the hands of the Corps. Faith that the Corps would build and guide them. Would make them men. I recall that in the midst of the sleepless chaos of my boot camp arrival I enjoyed a great sense of belonging. I now look back in dismay, even at age of eighty, that in February 1963, I stepped through a small window away from my childhood and boyhood life in the deep South and out into the soft breeze of history, a soft breeze that would soon roar the firestorm of war and death, politics and revolution on many levels. Long developing events abroad were in the final stages of critical mass. Marines then coming out of Parris Island were receiving their orders for FMF PAC. Fleet Marine Force Pacific. A nice clue to our future which completely blew by us all, at least us Privates.

THE PARTY

1964: "It was a dangerous time to present an ultimatum to Hanoi, where moderate voices were having a difficult time surmounting clamor raised by such hawks as Vo Nguyen Giap, Nguyen Chi Than, and the Premier himself. Viet Cong gains made it seem only a matter of time until the Saigon Government collapsed."

Robert Asprey, War In The Shadows

August 1964- Hanoi, North Vietnam: An obtrusive Caucasian walked among Vietnamese, Chinese and DRVN Party officials, some ducking into a hotel café for a noon bowl of pho. Canadian Envoy and delegate to the International Control Commission, Blain Sandhurst walked though the hotel lobby across a worn red oriental carpet and stopped at a news kiosk. Surprisingly no heads turned. Perhaps it was because a few tall white skinned Russians could also be seen in town strolling through the endless bicycles and cyclo processions teaming about the city.

Sandhurst purchased a copy of the *Vietnam Advances*, a Party magazine, folded it tucked it under his arm and walked back out and down Ban Nuoc Soi past a man welding bicycle frames in a darkened shop. The blackened framework and debris spilled out onto a crenellated walkway as blue electric flashes strobe-lit the silhouettes of many workers inside. Sandhurst carefully stepped over the debris his black leather dress shoes contrasting sharply with the crumbles and feverish primitive industry.

He waded through a quiet blur of teeming bicyclists on the way to a million destinations. Party destinations, Sandhurst thought to himself. Then he stopped glanced upward to the portico of building number ten. It was here that he was to meet at precisely nine o'clock in the morning, in side-door secrecy with Democratic Republic of Vietnam Premier, Pham Van Dong and his staff, all members of the Communist Party Central Committee. There was the increasingly glaring presence of the Party in newsprint, colorless clothing as well as the large propaganda bill boards scattered about Hanoi. Large portraits of President Ho Chi Minh were everywhere.

During his three days in the city Sandhurst had observed a turbulent population full of conflicting images. There was the presence of old classic French Colonial days with the hotels and conspicuous consumption, food, fine wine and the beauty. There was also the anonymity the colony offered its administrators safe affairs distant pleasures vanished in the polemic storms.

But in the countryside reeducation had reached the villages and suburbs. Sandhurst had spoken discretely with a street vendor on his first morning in the City.

"Business is brisk." Sandhurst had said trying to goad the vendor into some commentary. He noticed how the morning light caught the man's unique facial features. Tight brown skin, an air of self assuredness. Prominent cheek bones. Black well combed hair, a gray beret and dark moist intense eyes. Small in frame compared to Russians or tall North Americans.

"Business is always brisk here." the man replied tersely. "Who are you?" Sandhurst interpreted the question as *who was he to open up a conversation with a stranger on the street in Hanoi.*

"Oh, excuse me, Sandy here, Canadian magazine writer. Just sampling life Hanoi for our readers. Hanoi's such a lovely city."

"Lovely for you maybe."

"How do you mean?" Sandhurst asked in French.

The vendor looked around cautiously. "Bowl of noodles?"

"Yes. Please. That sounds splendid."

The man opened a pot steaming over a water table heated by charcoal beneath. He carefully ladled a bowl of hot noodles and vegetables for Sandhurst. "My wife works with me here sometimes." Still looking around. "Today she works on the roads north of here."

"What does she do? The same thing as here I'd guess?"

"Ha! No she digs ditches. Next week it will be my turn. Everyone works in the fields and on the roads. It is the new system."

"Do you have children?"

"Yes, a son and two daughters. They are in re-education camps. They denounce me for this thing. Making a profit. Tell your readers not to be deceived by the fading beauty of the city. I have seen better days brother." He looked around again. "I can't talk with you any longer. Eat your noodles they're getting cold."

"Merci monsieur, good luck to you and your family." The man shrugged and closed up his stall. The mechanisms of the Party were well underway.

Ringling the bell of Ten Ban Nuoc Soi as instructed the bespectacled Sandhurst was visually surveyed by a woman then escorted quickly into a large austere conference room where twenty senior officials greeted him with silence. Party officials dressed in stark black tunic and trouser, uniforms of the North Vietnamese Communist Party, coldly received him. The formality was exceeded only by the stone faces of these men; one woman of obvious equal rank sat sullenly among them. It was a formality that strangely complimented the early autumnal breeze from the Hong Song. Coldness he'd expected. Sandhurst counted them and made special mental note of the meeting's attendees, faces which he had carefully memorized. He noted General Giap was not present.

Earlier that day sirens had whaled and the masses of women and children preceded quickly and orderly to deep concrete slit trenches and cylindrical underground shelters a daily occurrence since early April in this city.

Colonel Hai Van Lau, Sandhurst's liaison stood alone and briefly addressed his fellow communist in crisp tonal North Vietnamese dialect. He was dressed in dark olive military attire with plates of red campaign ribbons and a single Communist star on his cap. Hai would be his intermediary. Wearing a dark gray Brooks Brother's suit and carrying a thin leather folio, a trained diplomat and negotiator, Sandhurst's eyes affixed upon a lovely vase in the corner of the conference room, a faint warm smile upon his face. Then Colonel Hai turned to Sandhurst and gestured to please take his seat which he did along with the Colonel.

"The Central Committee extends a welcome to the Canadian Envoy Sandhurst. We trust your travels to our beautiful and venerable city were uneventful." said the Colonel warmly. Colonel Hai had noticed Sandhurst's inventorying the table. "General Giap regrets he can not attend since he is in the field. The General sends his personal regards to Envoy Sandhurst." smiled the Colonel.

"Quite a comfortable flight Colonel Hai. It appears from the air that the rains have already begun in the highlands. It is good to see my friends and distinguished Party members once again."

Sandhurst was performing precisely what he had devoted a third of his life to in study and infinite patience. A diplomat moves about in much the way all men move but differs in some secret core within himself, a core containing a gift which one either does or does not possess. It is a domain in which the considerations of all finite complexities of political issues are weighted and sifted; ponderous agony that would be enough to drive some mad. But the intellectual middle-ground challenged and intrigued him. Especially in an explosive political environments rife with violent reactionary conduct Sandhurst's posture was the polar opposite manifested by delicate questions and gestures, steel diplomacy and cool negotiation.

The life of the professional diplomat is measured by time zones through which he travels to seek the most infinitesimal clue to the true issues between governments however diametric their ideologies. More often to fail would mean lost import revenues or another meeting next year. To fail this day and in the series of meetings that followed would mean a far greater cost in lives of

American and Vietnamese as well as their alliances who would carry the banners of their nations in full pitched military conflict.

Today Sandhurst was the vaudevillian interlocutor who comically swivels his head between two polemic circus acts delivering to one the words of the other. In his attaché case laid a document containing a list of particulars from American President Lyndon Baines Johnson.

There was a long moment of silence to which no one responded. Each man bore the Party struggle on his face and offered no kind solace to the envoy who skillfully avoided the rejection by focusing on yet another fixture in the room, a beautiful vase of red Cannas Lilly resting upon a polished corner table. It was a struggle, Sandhurst thought to himself that reached back before Japanese occupation of Indochina. Examining the vase from a distance he noticed a great tropical bird with colorful plumage of gold. Flecks of red, blue and green decorated the gentle curvature. Suddenly a door opened in the rear of the long room and Sandhurst saw it was Pham Van Dong who had entered. Like the street vender he was a man small in stature exuding a power most common in Vietnamese elders, a towering inner strength. Sandhurst sensed it instantly but squelched any acknowledgment of the receipt of the silent message.

All stood and awaited Premier Pham's greeting and the meeting concerning Envoy Sandhurst's communication with the United States Department of State began.

There were preliminary ramblings about recognition of officials from the Canadian Embassy and their expected status should hostilities escalate. Then the Premier sharply lit into Mr. Sandhurst.

"Perhaps you have come to us with some clear explanations about the most recent acts of aggression by the U.S. Government against the people of Vietnam." Pham stated icily.

"Distinguished Premier let me convey in the most unambiguous language that the U.S. patience with the situation in South Vietnam is running out. If the existing conflict should escalate further the greatest devastation would of course result for the DRV itself. Further, Premier Pham the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam has implications extending far beyond Southeast Asia." Sandhurst fired back staring directly at Pham making eye contact at comfortable intervals.

Pham laughed aloud. "I indeed appreciate that fact Mr. Sandhurst!" Pham stifled a second laugh. "I do appreciate the problem. A U.S. defeat in the South would in all probability start a chain reaction extending much further. The stakes are just as high for the National Liberation Front and its supporters. We are determined to continue the struggle regardless of sacrifices. Pham sat back comfortably in his black lacquered ladder-back chair.

"And with regard to the war in the South being fueled by your NLF?" Sandhurst coldly inquired.

"We will win!" Pham said raising his voice. "The DRV will not enter the war. We shall not provoke the U.S. But if the war is pushed to the North," Pham switched emotionally to French to convey his exact meaning. "*Nous sommes un pays socialiste, un des pays socialistes, vous savez, et le peuple se dressera!*" Pham audibly exhaled through his nostrils returning Sandhurst's ferocity.

Sandhurst took a long drink of water and allowed a moment of silence. “I am told that there are two factions emerging in Hanoi, Mr. Premier.”

“Ah yes the hawk and dove story.” he replied laughing again flashing a gold tooth. “Do not mistake patience for pacifism Mr. Sandhurst. Our hawks have insisted on a more active participation in the affairs of SVN. I wouldn’t base strategic plans upon perceived divisiveness, if I were you. The issue before us is the Tonkin Gulf attack.” Pham replied changing the focus.

“Judging from the statement in yesterdays Le Monde, you are clearly seeking to cast the U.S. as a paper tiger. Those were dangerous accusations! I assure you your remarks reach the upper limits of provocation.” leveled Sandhurst.

“There was no provocation Mr. Sandhurst!” replied the angry Pham. “The matter is quite simple. The U.S. has found it necessary in this incident to carry the war to the North in order to find a way out of the impasse in the South. At least now a clear image has emerged! Mr. Sandhurst, up to now we have tried to avoid serious trouble; but it becomes more difficult now because the war has been carried to our territory. If the war comes to North Vietnam it will come to the whole of Southeast Asia!” Pham pushed his chair back from the table. “I see no constructive reasons to pursue further discussion at this time. For now the door will remain open. Good day Mr. Sandhurst.”

Pham stood quickly turned and exited the room, leaving his staff fumbling to rise in unison at his departure. At the moment the door closed, the staff members turned to watch the envoy collect his documents from the table, slowly insert them into his attaché case, lock it and pivot coolly to depart from the opposite end of the room. Colonel Hai escorted him through a tiny foyer and to the side exit of the building.

In the previous weeks there had been a similar flurry of diplomatic dialogue with Premier Pham. A negotiating technique, Sandhurst did not dwell on particular passages in the rhetorical storm. He was more instinctive. The dialogue was always a matter of record and could be studied ex officio for context and meaning. Instead, he probed for the feeling of the whole individual within the maelstrom. What was the true message? The truth? Settling into a waiting black Peugeot limousine in route to his waiting ICC flight to Siagon Colonel extended a friendly goodbye. Sandhurst recalled exactly what Pham had said earlier in late April during their first meeting.

“The United States must show good will, but it is not easy for the USA to do so. Meanwhile the war intensifies. USA aid may increase in all areas, not only for the SVN Army but in terms of USA Army personnel as well. I suffer to see the war go on, develop, intensify. Yet our people are determined to struggle. It is impossible, quite impossible, *excuse me for saying this*, for you westerners to understand the force of the peoples will to resist and continue. The struggle of the people exceeds the imagination. It has astounded us too!”

The Hanoi meetings continued over the next few months until the war in SVN escalated to a new level following the Viet Cong attacks on the American Special Forces units advising the ethnics and ARVN units around the mountain

base at Pleiku. Only a month before the following message had been dispatched from Saigon.

**Amembasy SIAGON 4083 TO SECSTATE
(CONFID/LLIMIS) Rev'd Jan 7, 1965-2:06 AM:**

“Canadian ICC commissioner (Sandhurst) told EMoff results of his latest week-long visit to Hanoi, from which he returned yesterday. (Sandhurst) said that he is persuaded from his conversation with diplomats and DRV officials that DRV is not now interested in any negotiations...”

March 1965: Grayhound Bus Station, San Angelo, Texas. Two young men, a Sailor and a Marine discussed how they might reach California in two days. Unaccustomed travelers the vast geography, timetables, military orders and the endless waiting for buses made them uneasy. Buses that might get them out of the predicament caused by a nationwide air traffic controllers strike were filling quickly with stranded air travelers. They held a tight grip on their orders and discussed their next move.

“I gotta report to my ship day after tomorrow.” said the worried sailor.

“Look,” said the Marine. “Why don’t we head into Dallas and catch a Trailways.”

“You sure we can’t get a commercial flight out of here?”

“That’s the word. Strikes shut ‘em all down.”

“I have an aunt in Dallas. Maybe we can go see her and re-group.”

The sailor was clearly worried.

The two were not boys but they were not men either; they were young men: They departed for Dallas on a Trailways bus. In an hour they rolled into Big “D”.

The sailor’s aunt beamed at the sight of her nephew. The Marine checked the brim of his cover for finger prints he might have mistakenly left on the spit polish he’d carefully applied at his Georgia home before hugging his parents good bye.

“Why Johnny, look at you.” the aunt continued. “You have just grown so. I just can’t believe it. How’s your mama?” The Sailor blushed with embarrassment.

The conversation between the two continued over cookies at the aunt’s dinning room table. The Marine introduced himself standing at attention in his tan worsted uniform.

” Well I do declare.” said the Aunt. “ Look at you two. Here, sit your self down.” she gestured toward the Marine. The Sailor dressed in immaculate dress

white sat in his aunt's cushioned arm chair absorbing his relatives loving adoration. It was a momentary respite from their overland transit to oblivion.

"We are still so stunned from the events of the last year boys. I tell you sometimes I cry. It was so horrible. This town just *frooooze* to a standstill."

"Is it near here?" asked the Sailor.

"It's not far. We'll go by there on the way to the bus station. Too bad about the strike. You boys got quite a ride ahead of you." she said fanning her self.

Finally they all stood, John hugged his aunt. The Marine fidgeted with his cover. Then they disappeared into the garage.

The aunt drove the boys into the downtown area of Dallas in her 57 stick shift Chevrolet. "There it is. The whole area here is Dealey Plaza. Right on around and..." she turned left onto Elm, "it happened about right here. That's the book depository right over there. They're saying some shots came from over there. She pointed toward a grassy area as the street curved to the left. It just gives me chills to do this." she said driving along.

The three stood on the loading platform. A loud speaker announced the westbound express to Los Angeles. "God bless you Johnny." said the aunt her words muffled by a last urgent hug before their brief visit ended. "You write me now yah hea?" She turned to the Marine. "Vance you boys look after each other, yah hea?"

"Yes mam." replied Poplar. "It was sure nice of you to drive us over here. Thank you for the cookies."

The station was a mob scene. Civilian and military passengers bumped from cancelled flights crisscrossed the old clay floor tiles of the station. The rest rooms smelled of overflow and the bus station grill was doing land office business. Vance and the Sailor stood at the grill drinking coffee.

"Well, by this time next week you'll be at sea I recon." Vance said making conversation.

"Yea. We got a shake down cruis, then we'll head out to WestPac. I got three years to go."

"Jezus! I got two. Don't' guess I'll ship over either."

"Me neither."

"GRAYHOUND ANNOUNCES EXPRESS SCENICRUSER SERVICE TO ELPASO, TUCSON, YUMA AND LOS ANGLES, BOARDING AT PLATFORM SEVEN. ALL PASSENGERS ABOARD PLEASE."

The two stacked their sea bags next to their bus and kept strong grips on their canvas AWOL bags containing their orders. Through the throngs the voice of Richie Vallie rang from the juke box. "*Walk like a man; Walk like a man; Walk like a man, My son...*" In an hour the passengers squinted at the sun setting on the bad lands of West Texas. Through the long rolling night the transit was interrupted only by a flat tire which was repaired at a dilapidated Shell station in the middle of the desert, and a boarding by the police who pulled someone off the bus for exposing himself to a female passenger in the back of the bus.

The bus rolled on and on into the night across Arizona until Southern California glowed in the pink of dawn, rolling still finally into Los Angeles's 5th

Street bowery and bus station. Pigeons, papersacks and an occasional drunk welcomed them to LA.

“Well good luck John.” The two shook hands. “What ship you going to?”

“The Iwo Jima.”replied the Sailor.

Connecting to a local for Oceanside and a third Pendleton Base bus, which was a rundown olive drab school bus Poplar decended back into the only life he knew. In a few short hours, he once again gazed at the dry baron hills of Camp Pendleton. Camp Las Pulgus lay slap in the middle of the sprawling Reserve. In architecture, plant species, dried up river beds, treeless golden hills, government vehicles and even the painted yellow stones that marked the dusty walkways through countless Quonset huts, it differed little from San Mateo, Poplar’s first duty station before rotating out with his unit to the Far East as the Asian assignments were commonly known. With only hours to spare, Poplar walked up to the duty NCO’s desk and presented his orders.

“Poplar, Vance C. L/Cpl reporting as ordered.” said Poplar loosely.

“Lets see. Poplar, Poplar...Here you are.” said the Corporal looking at the roster and sipping a mug of coffee. “81s Platoon. Last barracks next to the road.”

“You need help with your luggage?” deadpanned the Corporal.

Poplar heaved his sea bag to his shoulder and left the Quonset hut laughing. With two years left in the Corps he now knew enough to realize that 81s was in the Headquarters and Service Company. Eight Ones’ referred to the diameter in millimeters of the mortar barrel. He supposed the 81mm Mortar to be heavy, though at this moment he did not know how heavy. Except for the 3.5 Rocket Launcher, perhaps the M-79 grenade launcher it was the only artillery in the U.S. Marine Corps arsenal that did not have wheels.

“...At the State Department the idea of mounting independent U.S. air operations against North Vietnam had been under consideration even before the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Although several operations were outlined in working papers drawn up by (Secretary of State) Bundy’s policy planning group, until the last week in November 1964, no firm decision had been made.”

**Bui Diem, Ambassador SVN
*In The Jaws Of History***

Poplar walked into the barracks which by now on the last day of leave was filling rapidly with returning Marines. Private Butcher had come by bus from New York State. Levett drove his used convertible from Connecticut. Weaver and Rizzo caught a military air transport hop from McGuire. Private Hilton flew standby on Eastern Air Lines. Corporal Langford came by Greyhound bus from Kansas City. And Platt, the gunner took the westbound Santa Fe Chief out of St. Louis. Every region and ethnicity were represented. Even Hispanic, Samoan and Native Hawaiians and one or two French Canadians were among them. Native American Indians, from reservations in Arizona and New Mexico too were there. And of course, the great American Southeast was amply represented.

“I don’t get it.” said Poplar. “I’m 0311 rifleman.” Why was I assigned to 81 Mortars?”

“You musta been a shit bird on the Rock.” came a voice from the row of bunks. Hoots of laughter.

“Oh Three Hundred is a big pole the Corps sticks up your ass before you realize you done made a big mistake?” chortled a tall black Marine lance corporal to no one in particular.

“Blood Ellis is oh three hundred and he ain’t qualified in two years. Aint that right E.L.?”

“Shit you say.” Snapped Ellis. “I’m a marksman! Here’s the gatdamn badge.”

“You stole it.” said a private lying on a top bunk reading Stag magazine.”

Langford flipped a page of his note book in the confusion. Poplar you’re the A-Gunner on gun four. That’s my gun. Platt here’s your gunner.” Langford looked back at his note book. “Weaver! Hilton! Rizzo!” Get over here. May as well unpack your shit over here.”

The other squad leaders were yelling the names of their gun crews and as the dew formed on the ice plants and cactus growing copiously out side the barracks. The fluorescent lights came on for long night of squaring away. Reveille would go at 05:00 hours. Barracks clean up at 06:00, Morning Chow at 06:30 hours and morning formation at 08:00.

In William Manchester’s old Corps of the Forties and the Army that was the focus of James Jones’s *From Hear To Eternity*, reveille and other times of the military day were sounded with a bugle. In Poplar’s Corps, the duty firewatch walked through the barracks at 05:00 A.M. and flipped on the lights. That bugle would re-surface again.

“Anyone loan me five for ten?”

“Otto, a gunner from gun one produced a quick five.” Take that business any day.”

“Eagle Shits in two weeks.” Paid vacation, travel, meals, shit, Marine Corps best deal in town.” said Langford to a sputtering of laughs.

Corporal Langford was now two years into his second enlistment. Six years in the Corps. A hard chiseled freckled face and a quick wit, he took his new command, Gun Four with ease. He would look out for his crew and as time allowed have a little fun in town. Except for periods of extreme discipline to lock the units into a high state of training; readiness for unforeseen duties around the globe, the garrison Corps was oh eight hundred to seventeen hundred hours and except for duty Marines, it was liberty call at seventeen hundred hours, 5 PM. If, during the long hard days of training you happened to have been married, the unofficial quip was that Corps had not issued you a wife so any complaints from that quarter would not be entertained. And the single Corporal D.L. Langford was what was widely known in Corps parlance as a liberty hound.

“Without an effective central government with which to mesh the U.S. effort, the latter is a spinning wheel, unable to transmit impulsion.” November 27 (1964) Position Paper to Secretary of State from Maxwell Taylor.”

**Bui Diem
Ambassador SVN
In The Jaws Of History**

Those twilight days at Pulgas for Vance Poplar’s Corps were, as he would always remember, when he transformed from a boy to a man. It happened to most of them along the way, that vague demarcation between the two being crossed and suddenly a Marine could stand up for himself. He could speak clearly to an officer or senior NCO representing himself the tone of his voice saying, “I am squared away. I have done my duty. What is it you want from me? When do you want it?” Some Marines emerged from boot camp with this maturity. For others it took a while. Some never crossed over into emotional certitude.

The coming of this so called metamorphosis did not settle by accident upon Vance Poplar, rather it was delivered by way of a nasty legal matter that slammed into him full speed out of the oblique. It taught him a lasting lesson.

The custom of the old guys, as the Marines among them with *time-in* had referred to themselves, teaching the new guys, the boots, had continued in rhythmic regularity through the entire history of the Marine Corps. Vance was now an old guy by this definition, an appellation he dearly cherished, but he did not know the mortar. The Marines with *time in* and mastery of the mortar would teach it to him. Other lessons also loomed close. In one of the many classes about the weapon he caught a hint of the roving Sergeant Gutierrez’s ominous threat that had begun to encircle him.

One morning after formation the mortars were assembled along the walkway in front of the barracks. The teams hunkered around the weapons listening to their gunners discuss the particulars.

“Now you don’t shoot an 81 millimeter mortar at anything.” instructed Lance Corporal Platt to his new gun crew. He had worked busily to set up the red and white striped poles out in front of the gun position. “We haven’t located those poles correctly but I just wanted to demonstrate to you that the target might be way the hell on the other side of Pulgas. Say the NCO club.” he laughed. “When a set of numbers comes over the telephone Weaver here calls them out to me.

“Rizzo here listens for the charge and strips the correct number of fulminate propellant bags from the fins of the round. The A-Gunner, Poplar here, will listen for fire direction numbers and move the bipod into place. I make the fine adjustments on the eye piece and then traverse the adjustments with this instrument wheel so the bubble is level and the aiming stakes are right in my cross hairs. At night the stakes have two red tactical lights which I can see in the eye piece. Night or day if the adjustment is right the round hits the target. If it’s not right you will be in deep shit.

“The mortar is a trajectory weapon so, theoretically, there is point in the near to far range where the round will begin to fall short.

“Theoretically?” chuckled Private Weaver. “Use words Rizzo here can understand.”

“Fuck you!” snapped Private Rizzo to the laughter of the team.

“Knock it off” said Platt turning from his beloved recital. “Any way that is the maximum effective range. The round unpacks from the canister here. Fire Direction Control computes the numbers. Just make sure the goddamn aiming stakes are placed right, that you Poplar, and the round has the correct number of charges.”

“You got that Poplar?” came a voice from behind the team.

“Poplar spun around. “Yes. I’ve got it sergeant.” He replied with a puzzled look on his face. The sergeant walked away.

“What the fuck’s with him?” said Poplar

“I don’t know. That’s Gutierrez. He just came into 81s from MP duty somewhere. I think Portsmouth Prison.” Platt said fiddling with the eyepiece.

“Fucker.” said Poplar.

“Some of those MPs are sadistic mutha fuckers.” mumbled Weaver.

”Alright knock it off.” continued Platt. “OK lets talk about assembly and cleaning. Take the gun down and hump it around the parade ground for an hour or so. Then we’ll set it up by the numbers. You guys are going to get really good at this.”

Each of them took a part of the gun. Weaver swore no part weighed less than thirty five pounds. The base plate, the most awkward part would bang up against the clavicle bone, the hip bone and triceps as a Marine shifted his load. The bipod would dig into his muscles and shoulder and neck muscles. The tube the easiest to carry perched like a sewer pipe upon the shoulder and the precious sight box and aiming stakes rattled in a heavy surveyor box with a suitcase handle, always carried by the gunner.

“Jap infantrymen carried 60 pounds. A Marine in an amphibious assault was a beast of burden. He shouldered, on average, 84.3 pounds, which made him the most heavily laden foot soldier in the history of warfare. Some men carried much more: 20 pound BARs, 45 pound 81 millimeter mortar base plates, 47 pound mortar bipods, 36 pound light machine guns, 41 pound heavy machine guns, and heavy machine gun bipods, a man thus encumbered was expected to swing down the ropes like Tarzan.”

**William Manchester
“Goodbye Darkness”**

Gunner and A-Gunner carried a .45 Automatic Service Pistol. Gun team leader, Langford as well as the ammo humpers, Weaver, Butcher, Hilton and Rizzo carried the M-14 semiautomatic 7.62 mm gas operated high powered rifle with peep site and wooden stock. Live rounds were issued only for firing exercises or range qualification. Or combat, but to them combat was then a remote possibility. To the old guys it was an impossibility.

“Close it up Weaver. Let’s go Butcher. Sounds like you’re breathing hard Poplar. Let’s go close it up.” said Platt goading his crew onward around the dusty parade field. Just you wait to the first force march with this gear. You ain’t lived until you humped this mutha over those hills. Here take the base plate from Hilton, Weaver.”

“Gee thanks” joked Weaver. Private Hilton a short muscular African American grasped the rope handle of the base plate with one arm.

The puffing joking Marines returned to the starting point in front of the barracks. As the guns were reassembled the men of Gun Four wiped the sweat from their faces. “Okay that’s about it. We will do this a lot. You will be able to ready a gun in your sleep, in the dark. There will be several range firings in a few weeks. Know your jobs. Be ready. That’s all. Chow call.” Platt snapped shut his sight box.

“Hey Poplar come here.” yelled Murray from an adjacent gun.

“Yea?”

“We are thinking of getting an apartment in Oceanside.”

“Whose we?”

“Levette, Otto, Ryan. Mack will come in I think. McCormick said he would.”

“Well I can kick in something. Lance Corporal pay ain’t much.”

“No shit. Tabinsky is kicking in most of it. From his dad I guess.”

“Vance had been promoted along with many of the new salts, many of whom had been his boot camp buddies. The pay was a little better and the Gunney even stopped him on the parade field one afternoon and gave him a once over.

“What’s your name Marine?”

“Lance Corporal Poplar, Assistant Gunner, Gun Four, 81 Mortars. Gunny.”

Checking out his starched uniform, newly starched ironed and blocked cover, spit shined field boots and sparkling belt buckle the Gunnery Sergeant looked him in the eye and said simply. “I like the way you operate Marine.”

The term shit cooley was a term Poplar had first heard in boot camp. His Drill Instructor Corporal Baines had used the phrase frequently but Poplar guessed that it was derogatory because Baines always used it on a recruit, himself included, who was in error. The term had its origin in the Boxer Rebellion in China where U.S. Marines were inserted to extract Americans trapped there as well as assist in putting down the rebellion.

Marines making port of call in Shanghai and along the rivers were ordered to pay for whoring and laundry services only with chits. At the end of the week, before their ship pulled out, the chit cooley would be sent from the brothel to collect hard currency from the ships bursar.

The term apparently evolved over time to become *shit cooley*. Both terms equally derogatory. It is likely the immaculate DI Corporal Baines, an African American, had seized the phrase for himself to use in the training of hopelessly raw recruits never knowing or caring about its etiological source. For Lance Corporal Vance Christian Poplar with two years in the Corps and two yet to serve, *shit cooley* was way behind him.

The weeks that followed transformed into back breaking ten and fifteen mile field marches over the sun baked hills of Las Pulgas. The ever inquisitive Private Weaver wiped the sweat off his neck during a short hump to the Six-By trucks awaiting them at Golden Meadows.

“I think its getting more chicken shit.”he said. “I’ll bet you a pitcher of beer we have a junk-on-the-bunk when we get back to the barracks.”

“You hear Krenner fucking with his squad yesterday?” mumbled Poplar leaning into the bunch of Marines now huddled in the bed of the huge truck.

“I sure as hell did. Smity came this close to cold cocking the mutha fucker, ought a get a blanket party.”

Blanket party: An Marine razes and harasses the members of his unit. The level of intensity of the activity combined with the psychological makeup of his charge is an unknown. A blanket party can also be directed to a problem Marine. The subject of the blanket party is ambushed by one or more attackers, who pummel him violently, vigilante style usually with the victim covered in a blanket to insure masking the identities of the attackers.

Severe penalties for insubordination, disrespect for superiors, disobedience of a direct order, dereliction of duty, conspiracy, stealing, negligence, striking a superior, are among the many powerful legal forces exerted by the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Young Marines gain a quick awareness and respect of the U.C.M.J. as it is commonly referred. Order, impeccable execution of direct orders, respect for superiors, devotion to duty, loyalty to fellow Marines, and more specifically to the fire team, platoon, company, regiment and division and to the Corps mark the distinct fiber of the Marine Corps. A blanket party is diametrically opposite to the Marine Corps and all it stands for. It is also a distant relative to conspiracy and mutiny, which if convicted the accused can look forward to a few years of incarceration in the likes of Levenworth or Portsmouth. Murder is also covered under the UCMJ.

It was the late Spring of the year. Training of the Regiment was on schedule. The Line Companies, their attachments from Headquarters and Service Company were now all TI. A few final marches and field exercises remained before the units would be deemed ready for combat.

The Marines of 81s Platoon were in high spirits during the final march from San Onofre to Los Pulgas. Weaver and Poplar had become acutely aware of the activities in their adjoining squad. Langford too noticed but wisely ordered the two to squelch any editorials regarding Corporal Kenner’s handling of his squad.

As the final forced march wound down from *Smokey* and *Ball Buster*, mountains they had come to know intimately, till the distant sparkling lights of Pulgas were in sight. The Marine’s fantasies of cold beer showers and waiting girl friends began to lighten their loads. The dust caked their sweat soaked utilities. Their helmets cocked back on their heads as they bobbed down the long winding grades to the road leading to the camp.

“Pussahhhhh” roared a Marine in the column.

Laughter reverberated through the column. They all knew it would be only an hour until sweet Liberty Call would sound.

Eight One's troop column among the other companies of the Regiment by now began spread out. Their loads were twice that of the fast moving line companies. The NCOs were yelling and pressing their squads to close it up. The Battalion commander had sped up the columns and left the heavily loaded Eighty Ones Platoon struggling for all they were worth to keep up.

"FUCK HIM: GOD DAMN IT! FUCK THAT SON OF A BITCH." came the muttering from under sweat soaked helmets. "YOU GAT DAMN MUTHA FUCKA!" A painful hour of fast forced march continued until the platoon straggled onto the parade ground in front of the waiting regiment some one sparked a mutinous chant.

"HIM HIM, FUCK HIM!" sang the entire Eight Ones Platoon in a chorus.

"KNOCK IT OFF EIGHTYONES! KNOCK! IT! OFF!" snapped the Lieutenant. The Platoon Commander Sanders swiftly marched in full combat gear up and down the columns to reign in his mutinous charge. The Gunnery Sergeant stepped out of the moving column and pivoted into a backward walk, sparking a cadence call that finally ended in. "PLATOOOOON HALT" They coughed, panted and desperately sucked in the dusty air.

At the command "Dismissed." Helmets flew off and were thrown to the ground. Sweat soaked packs slipped off of their aching shoulders as did the heavy mortar tubes, base plates and bipods. The march had pushed the Marines of 81s to the limit.

And so with the exhausted animals collapsed about the squad bay, Corporal Krenner rose from the scatter of gear and aching bodies and belched one of his commands a command that belonged to another place.

"FORTH SQUAD ON-THA-ROAD ONE HALF HOUR FOR WEAPONS INSPECITON."

"Fuc..." the gunner slapped his hand over the mouth of the private who had nearly signaled his own hanging.

As everyone watched from the windows, the bedraggled, blistered squad stood in isometric quivers on the parade ground. Corporal Krenner stood waiting for them to settle, his Neanderthal profile, exaggerated mandible and exophthalmoses glare underlining his bull headed desire to discipline and lead. The inspection completed he made his proclamation.

"No liberty call for Gun Three. Next time you are sucking hind tit, holding up this troop column, you will remember this. Square away your gear. Have a nice weekend Squad Three. Dismissed."

In less than two hours the slab concrete barracks and desert like grounds of Camp Los Pulgas were empty. The exodus of Marines fleeing to liberty call can be likened to thirsty stampeding cattle running for water hole. But the Marines of Gun Three lay in their bunks reading, writing letters or just staring at the fluorescent light fixtures overhead. The fire watches, that infinite detail that leaves no Marine garrison unwatched, reported to their stations. As the darkness fell, only the faint soft sound of Martha and Vandallas playing on a E.L. Blood Ellis's battery powered turntable drifted through the barracks. Then it was lights out.

The firewatch continued on his post walking up and down the rows of angle iron bunks. Private Rossi of the second watch, midnight to Two AM, walked in trance like cadence wishing for the end of his watch so his aching body might once again slip between the white sheets of his rack and recapture his precious sack time. Then it happened.

“Ohhhgatdamn, Uhgggg..Fuck...” the sickening crashes and sounds of fists and flesh came from the far end of the squad bay. At first the fire watch only cocked his head and listened.

“Huggg Ohhhlll Gawd..” then a choking sound. A thump. The shifting of the steel framed rack. Then a window crashed.”

Rossi moved into the darkness cautiously. “What the fuck is going on down there!” he barked. No answer. Everyone was either drunk in town, drunk at the EM Club, drunk asleep or in hasty egress.

Private Rossi walked toward the sounds and drawing closer he saw in the dim light from the lamp outside the window the crumpled up body of Corporal Krenner doubled over in a pool of blood, his body half covered by a blood soaked green woolen blanket with the letters USMC .

“Holy Fuckin’ Shit.” exclaimed Rossi who turned and ran out the squad bay for the duty NCO. “Better get the OD Corporal, there’s some bad shit down in 81s.”

The brilliance of Monday morning formation seemed atonement to all souls for sins of the darkness. Fresh uniforms and cheery accounts of liberty call exploits restored the Marines to a unity punctuated only the slam of their boot heels and a resulting puff of dust when they would be called to attention.

Platt’s gun had barracks clean up detail. Poplar leaned on the handle of the mop he used to do a final swabbing of the deck. “You know what? Next weekend I’m going up to Dohenny and sleep on the beach.” said Poplar. Maybe I’ll meet a surfer girl. You ever do that Rizzo?”

“Sleep on the beach? You mean just lay down in the sand and go to sleep?” Rizzo’s distinct New York accent contrasted with Poplar’s Southern accent. Rizzo seemed to be trying to visualize Poplar laying in the sand all night and searching for the sense in it.

“Nah. I’m from a place in New York, where, we got a beach and I never slept on the fuckin’ beach. Why do ya wana sleep on na beach? I don’t get it. You fuckin crazy or somethin’ Poplar?”

“Where you from Rizzo.” Asked Butcher.

“Far Rockaway. You ever hear of it? It’s out near Sheep’s Head Bay. The Rockaways?”

“Yea I heard of it.” Butcher tightened the sling on his M-14 readying for morning formation and inspection.”

“We better get out there.” groaned Platt looking his gun crew over. The Gunner is responsible for the conduct and readiness of his men. “Where’s your Forty Five Poplar?”

“Poplar was in a panic. He looked back at his bunk then clanged is wall locker. Then he stared back at Platt. “Alright which one of you turds took my pistol?”

No one answered. Poplar waited for a moment then realized that either someone was playing a friendly prank or his weapon had been stolen.”

“Lance Corporal Platt. I am reporting a stolen weapon.” Barked Poplar sharply.

Now they were out in the sun light. They quickly discussed the chronology of the morning since reveille. Then Gunnery Sergeant Kelly walked up.

“Poplar I understand you have lost your weapon.”

“No Gunny, I have not lost my weapon. It has been taken from my possession.” At that the Gunny produced Poplar’s .45 caliber pistol. Sergeant Gutierrez then stepped out from behind the towering Gunnery Sergeant flashing an expression Poplar could only interpret as pleasurable.

God damit, I’ve been snake bit Poplar thought.

Lance Corporal Poplar you are to stand by for office hours on a charge of negligence. Sergeant Gutierrez will escort you to the Company Office at Ten Hundred hours. Dismissed.

“Aye Aye Gunny.” Poplar looked at his gunner Platt who seemed to be saying in a glance “Keep Your Mouth Shut.” Then Poplar returned to the barracks and awaited adjudication while his platoon underwent weapons inspection.

Office Hours: The lowest level of disciplinary judicial action that can be applied against the accused. Though it is a legal function it is a non judicial action presided over by Marine Officers and at times senior NCOs to discipline a Marine who is perceived to be out of line or in need of correction related to his duties.

Performance, conduct, appearance or general misalignment to the units mission are common charges that result in Office Hours.

“Unda stand you got yo ass in a bind Poplar. “came a voice from the head. It was Blood Ellis.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in inspection?”

“Just come from sick bay. Gota a bad case of the shits.”

“Yea, Gutierrez is running me up. Somehow he got my weapon.”

“You know when Platt sent you to the company office this morning to get batteries for them aiming stakes?”

“Yea.”

“Where was your weapon?”

“Shit. I was cleaning it and put it down on my bunk. I wasn’t gone for more that ten minutes.”

“At’s when the snake bit ya.” Blood Ellis “When’s your office hours?”

Poplar looked at his watch. “Half an hour.”

Ellis laughed. “Damn. So you standin’ in front the Captain. You are given a chance to speak. What are you gona’ say.”

“That I am guilty of negligence I guess.”

“Don’t use the word negligence. Damn Poplar! That’s what they’re running you up for. You got a good record?”

“Yes.”

“Here’s what you say. Say, umm sir my attention was momentarily diverted from my gear while I was readying for inspection. I was ordered to the company office to get batteries for my gun and my weapon was taken from my locker or bunk or where ever the hell it was. Do not use the word negligence and defend your good record.”

“Poplar! Stand by for office hours!” barked the Gunnery Sergeant as he entered the barracks. Ellis retreated back into the head. The Gunny no doubt sought to maximize the disciplinary effect of the Uniform Code of Military Justice that was present and in full working order right in their very midst.

Poplar walked with the Platoon Sergeant to the company office. *‘I might as well be going to my own hanging’* he thought. He had put on his last pair of starchys. His cover was blocked and his boots were spit shined for the inspection he had missed because of this nasty weapon matter. The company clerk knocked on the captain’s door. “You will walk in smartly, stand at attention before the captain. After your have been sentenced do an about face and leave the office.” He instructed.

“Come!”

“Good morning sir.” Said the Gunnery sergeant removing his cover. Poplar stood at attention as he had been instructed. Sergeant Gutierrez will be here shortly. A moment passed and the Sergeant appeared in immaculate dungaree attire.

“What is the charge?” asked the captain.

“Sir, prior to morning formation for inspection this morning, Lance Corporal Poplar did leave his weapon unattended during squad bay clean up. I have observed a lackadaisical attitude in the Lance Corporal’s attention to his gear. I secured the weapon for the purpose of this disciplinary action.”

The captain carefully flipped through the few pages in the Marine’s file jacket. A moment passed. No one spoke. The three Marines before the captain remained at attention. Poplar’s eyes were fixed to a point through the window out beyond the road. The distant hills of Los Pulgas, the closing vise of military justice, the close proximity of supreme authority, all caused him to stop breathing for a moment. But then he felt the serge of confidence, what Blood Ellis had told him. *“Don’t use the word ‘negligence’ damn, that’s what they’re running up for.” Ellis also seemed to be telling him to stand on his own two feet, to defend himself.*

“Lance Corporal Poplar, loosing your weapon is a serious charge in the United States Marine Corps. I rank it very close to desertion.” Poplar felt an icy chill go down his spine. “Each Marine has a duty to care for and secure his weapon at all times. A company of negligent Marines in West Pac would be disastrous. How say you to this charge?”

“Excuse me sir?”

“WHAT IS YOUR ANSWER TO THIS CHARGE MARINE?! Do you have any explanation?” snapped the captain sharply and evenly. His voice was crisp and sharp as a Gillette blue blade. Poplar thought the captain a Flash Gordon look a like, his head, coverless in his office, was almost completely brown and shaven. His tropical military blouse bore knife edge creases and upon his collar two blindingly silver captain’s bars seemed to illuminate the room.

Poplar's legs were locked into attention so that his knees began to ache. A bead of sweat trickled down the center of his back.

"Sir. My weapon was taken from me. I did not loose it. My attention to this gear was only temporarily diverted when my gunner Lance Corporal Platt ordered me to get aiming stake batteries from the company office. Sergeant Gutierrez here took my weapon and returned it only after I reported the weapon missing as required by regulations. I plead guilty only to this temporary diversion caused by my duty to my gun crew."

"I see. Who is the sea lawyer to whom you have sought council?"

"Sir?"

"You will take responsibility for your actions Marine! Did you or did you not fail to secure your weapon? Answer yes or no?"

"Yes sir, I failed to properly secure my weapon."

"Very well. Then to the charge of negligence I find you guilty. This is a first offence. Your record is clean therefore you are hereby confined to the base for three weeks and work duty after hours to be dispensed by the duty NCO to whom you will report at Seventeen Hundred Hours weekdays and Zero Eight Hundred on the week ends. Dismissed."

* * *

Murray and Mack finally signed the lease on the small cinder block aqua marine apartment in Oceanside. For the short few months they would reside in the States it would be home away from home for these wiry, fun loving Marines. A cluster of shiny Triumph Bonneville 500 motorcycles soon corralled at the front curb of the cul-de-sac and Sandy their landlord came and went in his surf board toting plumbing truck, scavenging parts for his plumbing business.

"You guys just want a place to get laid. Don't shit me." laughed the long haired Sandy. Look all I ask is you don't wreck the place. Shit you're a month late. You shoud'a seen the chick that just moved out next door. She wore a white bikini around the fuckin' house all the time. I shit you not. Went back to Kansas somewhere. Damn she was nice. Had a kid, but damn she was nice."

**April 1965: Assistant Secretary of Defense-
Washington to Ambassador Taylor-Saigon: "Highest authority
believes the situation in South Vietnam has been deteriorating
and that, in addition to action against the North something new
must be added in the south to achieve victory."**

**Ambassador Taylor to Secretary Rusk: "...I badly
need a clarification of our purposes and objectives...Before I
can present our case to GVN (Government of Vietnam). I have
to know what that case is and why. It is not going to be easy to
get ready concurrence for the large-scale introduction of
foreign troops unless the need is clear and explicit."**

Bui Diem- SVN Ambassador- In The Jaws Of History

Two years before, as Vance and his father seated at their kitchen table back in

Lydalya Georgia only a hour before Vance was to leave to begin his enlistment in the Marine Corps, his father must have noticed a hit of fear as the boy dropped his determined posture long enough to ask his Dad a question.

“Dad, what’s it like? In the beginning, I mean?”

“Well Vance I’ll tell you. They do everything in a big way. You’ll have to take care of your equipment. They will issue you lots of equipment. And you will meet all kinds of people. They have clubs too for enlisted men. And I hope you will never forget the kind of home your mother and me provided for your and your sister.” he said pausing to look away to hid the tears in his eyes.

Vance’s father Tom had lost his own father after the great crash of Twenty Nine. At the age of ten he’d seen his mother alone and penniless. His brother Joe jumped a freight in Illinois to look for work in California. And as many young men had done in those hard scrabble years, Tom had joined the Army for regular meals and a warm bed. He got a lot more for soon after, he was on the Queen Mary east bound from Jersey City out Verrazano Straits across the cold dangerous Atlantic swept up in a great war

Vance’s father Tom made no secret to his children that his one wish was that they could have a home to which they could always return.

“And you will discover a great and enormous world out there Vance. You will do okay ol’ buddy.” he concluded ruffling the dark brown hair on the boy’s head. “You will come through it okay.”

As Vance paused at his push broom in the front of the NCO club at Camp Los Pulgas on the last day of his restriction, he peered out over the Quonset huts and trucks in motor pool at the long afternoon shadows settling over the camp. His father’s prophesy had been realized. There was the base E.M. Club, the myriads of characters that could fill a book and plenty of equipment. He had journeyed to the Far East and bivouacked at the base of snowy Mt. Fuji, Japan and at every duty station he had a wall locker full of equipment which if not cared for, could unleash some very unpleasant disciplinary action.

“The strongest drugs had not worked. Now the patient must be operated on.” “Overwhelmingly,” said Bundy, “the Ambassador’s case for bombing rested on its effect on moral and political performance in the south.”

Bui Diem quoting (a) Secretary of State William Bundy manuscript.

In The Jaws Of History, David Chanoff

This was at last the *Real Corps* Poplar had asked Drill Instructor Baines about two years before at Parris Island. The young private listened to the final words of his Drill Instructor before he boarded the buses that would transport them to Infantry Training Regiment at Camp Geiger.

“What will you be doing, Poplar? Replied Baines in a near incredulous whisper as he turned to address the private’s question. “You will be working your fucking ass off.” Then the immaculate Corporal Baines turned and walked from his life leaving his infinite brand emblazoned upon him and all other Marines who passed his way.

Column Of Twos

Dry weeds and dirt of Pendleton
Straw gold with dusty puffs
Beneath their boots. The “clang”
Of stacking swivels on the stocks
And M Fourteens at “sling arms” as
The March began for company “D”

Early morning sun did warm the chill
From mountains by the sea. Thin dual
Columns of Marines wound ‘round and upward
Coughing spitting, passing gas like beasts
Traversing hills bare without a tree.

Privates White Cloud, Reyes and Gindowsky
Suckin’ air of dust and morning heat.
Same with Smith, OC, and Blood Ellis shifting
Loads to synch their straps on field packs.
Top Kaminsky felt the load upon his feet..

They saw the gleeful stride of hopeful Mr. Smith
At snake’s head a’winding upward through the dust.
He showed his bars and dreamed of stars
And led Marines with lessons learned
From classrooms at Annapolis.

The sergeants puke at early hour,
Their bodies loosing youth
They’d seen Chosin but that was Fin
And all they knew was truth. One was
Task and one was Flask, another was abuse
“Close it up or I’ll kick your ass!”
They heard the yell, and march on was the only truce.

New guys took the load quite well
Privates every one. Carulo, Chester,
Malinowsky, no rifleman yet had fell
Old guys marked the days they’d count
Till exit from the Corps. New and old
Together, were feeling mighty sore.

Five miles, seven, eight miles more
Till look ‘neath helmets hung
And saw the wide Pacific stretch before the

Sergeants sung, "Hold up! Don't guzzle those
Canteens! Will make you sick, we know the trick
Just rest here by the road."

They'd rest a spell then Serge would yell
"Saddle up, Gawd Damn, lets go!"
And groan they did, but made the bid
For march back home by dusk. They stopped
One time and took some class
On killing ambush fire, then heard some tales
Of mountain folk from Private Bobby Viar.

"Fall in!" said Sergeants Star and Myers
Headed out amidst the shouts of lifers loaded down
Dreamed of girls and frothy beer that evening in the town
Twas all down hill they marched back down
To cots and showers hot. The day was long and
They were strong and years were still around.

The rosy western sun had set and
Low dull rumbles from their boots a'pounding
Weary troops did stir damp dark late evening air
The serge croaked tunes of timeless cadence
On the grounds of garrison. T'was the lot of a lonely Corps
As well as Company "D".

So it was and still is
The Semper Fi tradition
Shinning shoes and column of twos
And counting their munitions
Till that black call to
Load them all for
Bloody Interdictions.

The Marines of Third Battalion, Seventh Regiment, Third Marine Division did get that call around April of 1965. In long quiet columns of green buses loaded with Marines in full field pack, helmet and sea bag, convoyed past the towns and bars, the streets cluttered with pigeons, paper sacks and real estate offices, places they frequented on liberty call, past surfers bobbing in quiet contemplation upon their boards and finally to Naval Base Long Beach where they embarked upon the U.S.S ACC Kitty Hawk loaded down with equipment of war, westbound for a long Pacific

crossing. In a few short months they would, on August 18, 1965 participate in the first amphibious battle since the end of the Korean War, Operation Starlite.

MTM
November 2024

The content of the dialog between DRVN Communist Party officials and Envoy Sandhurst was modeled from details of these meetings documented in the Pentagon Papers. Some names of the Marines in this story have been scrambled, changed or simply created from a composite of my recollections. Any chance similarity is a coincidence. The blanket party did occur much as I describe, though participants are from my own imagination. The victim made a miraculous recovery, did not testify on his attackers and resumed command of his squad. Camp Pendleton, Las Pulgas and many of its garrison camps are still there but I hear that much if it will dissolve into the civilian real estate sector. Other names throughout the manuscript and in Column of Twos, have tumbled from the memory of my four year hitch in the Corps and are a call to reunion, scattered though we are. To the Marines who now stand their posts steadfastly in emerging conflicts and in Embassies world wide, all who have gone before you think of you and bid you a good safe watch though you be ever ready. Your country sleeps more soundly as you carry on the great fighting tradition of the United States Marine Corps.

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