

The Unintended Consequences of Ill Considered Statements...

“Be careful what you say” is most probably the ugly sister to the old saw of *“be careful what you wish for, you might just get it”*... I was reminded of this while watching an interesting, if somewhat fanciful movie called the *Wishmaster*. While the story line was a bit far out, it was indeed interesting to watch the results of an ill thought out wish granted by a demon with an evil sense of humor. As I sat there musing over some of my own past misdeeds and experiences, I was reminded of two different instances during my misspent youth when an innocent utterance resulted in unexpected consequences. The results were quite amusing in retrospect, but were not terribly funny at the time. Consider the following two, absolutely true tales. As the old saying goes, the primary difference between a sea story and a fairy tale is that a fairy tale begins with *“Once upon a time”* and a sea story begins with the exhortation, *“This is no \$hi+!”*... the following two instances rightfully belong in the latter category.

Sea Story Number 1:

The time frame? Late Spring of 1961. Circumstances? I was the Executive Officer of Golf Company of the 2nd Battalion of the 5th Marine Regiment located at Camp Pendleton. The 2nd Battalion was scheduled to “transplace” to the 3rd Marine Division on Okinawa in June of that year. I was newly assigned to the 5th Marines having just been transferred from the 1st Force Reconnaissance Company. Disciplinary problem simply didn’t exist in the old Force Company as it was considered to be an honor to be selected to serve in that organization. The slightest transgression by anyone (officer or enlisted) resulted in a transfer to the far reaches of the planet. The Recon Troops may have gained a small dollop of arrogance, but they were so squared away they “squeaked!” My point being, that I wasn’t used to being involved with a bunch of bandits who were constantly scheming to beat the system.

It’s not that I was totally inexperienced in the wily ways of the “M1A1 Enlisted Man” (as I had 5 years enlisted service myself), but my recent exposure to a bunch of totally dedicated professionals had lulled me into a false sense of security. I was soon to be reeducated in the ways of calculating youngsters. We had one such clown that was a real contradiction in terms. While on duty or in the field, his conduct was faultless, and he performed in a manner that would have made his NCOs and Officers proud. On liberty, however, this guy was a wild man. One of his favorite tricks was to throw a wild liberty starting in Oceanside and wind up below the border in Tia Juana, Mexico, usually better known as “T-Town.” While T-Town wasn’t usually off limits, it wasn’t unusual for a young lad to throw a wild liberty and wake up in the Tia Juana Jail (immortalized in the song sung by the Kingston Trio a few years back). Young dusky maidens (well... maidens MIGHT be stretching it a bit, ahem...). Coming back late to your unit a bit late wasn’t something that normally called for a public beheading, but it was usually good for a few extra hours of EPD and perhaps a weekend’s restriction to remind the lads that promptitude was a military virtue.

The problem with the lad in question was that disappearing over the border wasn’t an occasional transgression with him. In fact, about once a month he would come back several days late, just enough to require him to be run on the unit diary as a deserter. This required that his platoon sergeant inventory the entire contents of his foot locker and wall locker, type out the inventory sheet, and store the lad’s stuff in the unit property room for safe keeping. This is a tremendous pain in the posterior! Invariably the kid would show up, all apologies and

excuses swearing that it would never happen again. The First Sergeant and I saw a bit of potential in him and would usually give him a good healthy slap on the wrist and hope that the upcoming move to Okinawa might just square him away – after all, where in the he++ can he go on the island? Or at least that was our reasoning.

A couple of weeks before departure, I called the lad in and read him the riot act. I explained what a stupendous pain in the fanny it was to inventory his gear and explain away his misconduct on the unit diary and basically cover for him with the Skipper. He nodded appreciatively and indicated that any misconduct was a thing of the past. I wanted to believe him, so to punctuate my admonition, I explained that the First Sergeant, his Platoon Sergeant, and I were up to our ears in having to inventory his gear every time he decided to go on liberty below the border, and if he EVER did this again, he was to inventory and pack his own gear, and leave the inventory slip on top of the seabag, or I was gonna' make sure that he spent the next year in the Portsmouth Naval Prison. He looked at me and seemed to blanch almost a white as a sheet of paper. He gulped a couple of times and assured me that I would never have to inventory his seabag or lockers again. I, of course, took this to mean that his unauthorized mini-leaves to Tia Juana were a thing of the past.

The following Monday, First Sergeant Hoaglund came into my office with a scarcely disguised smirk on his face. "Lieutenant," he said, "I think we have a problem!" Uh Oh... the First Sergeant was a smooth old character that was unruffled by virtually any occurrence. He handed me a hand written piece of paper that read approximately as follows:

"Dear Lieutenant Culver,

I have inventoried my gear and gone over the hill as instructed!"

– signed –

Pvt. Zlotch" (not his real name of course)

I learned a real lesson that day, and once I thought about it, I didn't know whether to roll on the deck in hilarious laughter or consider killing the little SOB when he showed up again. Obviously he had me on this one as no (intelligent) Courts Martial would convict the little snot, and besides which he had taught me a heck of a lesson. I never again mixed tongue-in-cheek admonitions with what I considered legitimate fanny chewings.

The rest of the story? Pvt. Zlotch never again went UA in T-Town, he transplanted to Okinawa with the Battalion and went on to serve an honorable enlistment, making Lance Corporal before he went home to terrorize his home town folk. I wish I had kept closer track of Pvt. Zlotch, with a mind like that he had the potential for a real career in government.

Sea Story Number 2:

The time frame? Late April of 1967. Circumstances? I was assigned as the investigating officer for a man accused of cowardice during the "Hill Fights" near Khe Sanh in RVN. I had just been transferred from A Company, 5th Reconnaissance Battalion to the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Marine Regiment due to the heavy casualties taken in the battles for Hill 881 (North and South) and Hill 861 (North and South). These were the muvas of all firefights and when

the flag was finally raised, the NVA had been awarded their own fannies and sent packing north to explain their lack of success to Ho Chi Minh personally. We had won, and won in a most glorious fashion, but winning a pitched battle is never without its "butcher bill" as the Brits used to call it. It took several days to sort out the casualties, vacancies, awards, and administrative requirements. As a relative newbie, I was called in by the Battalion Executive Officer and told that I had been chosen to be the investigating officer for charges filed against one of the troops judged to have exhibited cowardly conduct during the battle for Hill 881.

Now handling military investigations has never been one of my favorite pastimes, but the new guy on the block always draws his share of the onerous tasks that become necessary from time to time. This one did not promise to be a pleasurable experience. I was absolutely sure that all Marines are (by definition certainly) NOT capable of cowardly behavior and I certainly wasn't looking forward to proving the rule by coming up with the legendary exception. I was handed a large stack of statements that had been collected by the previously assigned investigator. My predecessor had weaseled out of the job claiming that he was personally acquainted with the accused, and therefore should be excused, lest he possibly interject some personal prejudice into the proceedings. I carefully read through the stack of statements and the story (according to the statements) shook out as follows:

- 1) Pfc. Figowitz (not his real name of course) had several times pleaded with his fireteam leader, squad leader, platoon sergeant and platoon leader to be allowed to go to the rear to keep a dentist's appointment.
- 2) Pfc. Figowitz was turned down on each occasion due to the ongoing nature of a desperate battle occurring at the time, making Pfc. Figowitz's request seem trivial.
- 3) After being repeatedly turned down, Pfc. Figowitz then on his own recognizance, ran to and jumped aboard a medivac helicopter loaded with wounded, returning to the LPH (Landing Platform, Helicopter – basically a helicopter "aircraft carrier") Princeton.
- 4) These actions were observed by many individuals who witnessed Pfc. Figowitz deserting his unit under fire and thereby exhibiting cowardice in the face of the enemy.

If these statements were to be believed, Pfc. Figowitz was in deep doo-doo! I wasn't quite ready to wind up the proceedings for a couple of reasons. First, no one had actually ASKED Pfc. Figowitz what had happened, and maybe (in the heat of a major dust-up) something may have been left out of the story. Worst case, Pfc. Figowitz certainly deserved to have his story heard first hand. I called him in. Pfc. Figowitz entered the cabin with a couple of his own witnesses. From the look on his face, Pfc. Figowitz was in a great amount of mental distress (understandably so in my opinion – this kid had the potential of being drawn and quartered!). I asked Figowitz to give me his version of the tale. While it wasn't anything to be particularly proud of, nor did it smack of the actions of John Basilone or Dan Daly, the kid DID have a point... Here's the way his version of the story went:

"Sir, I wasn't running from the fight, I had an absolutely horrible toothache and needed to get at least a pain shot so I could concentrate on shooting back!" Well, I went to my fireteam leader and told him my jaw was killing me and I needed to see the dentist! The fireteam leader was busy directing the other riflemen and told me to ask the squad leader. The squad leader told me that I must be out of my mind and the answer was NO I couldn't

go back to the ship to see the dentist. I told him that this hurt as much as being shot and I needed to at least get some Novocain to dull the pain... the toothache hurt so bad I could hardly see and tears were coming out of my eyes. The squad leader refused to talk to me anymore and sent me to the platoon sergeant. The platoon sergeant had several wounded and was extremely busy directing the firefight. I told him that I couldn't return fire if I couldn't see the enemy and I'd come right back as soon as I got a shot. The platoon sergeant told me that if I didn't get out of his hair, HE'D shoot me, but I was welcome to talk to the platoon commander. I crawled about 50-yards up to see the platoon commander and told him my story and he told me to go back to the ship!"

Hummm... Something didn't mesh here! What was I missing? Obviously time to call in the fireteam leader, the squad leader, the platoon sergeant and the platoon commander and try to pin this thing down. Turns out that the kid's story was closer to the truth than they had given him credit for, albeit not in the tradition of Sergeant York. An in-depth study of the statements made to and about Pfc. Figowitz come closer to the following:

Sure enough, Pfc. Figowitz had gone through the chain of command attempting to gain permission to leave his comrades to return to the ship because of a roaring toothache. In each case, the answers given to Pfc. Figowitz were much as reported in Figowitz's narrative above – HOWEVER the final instructions given to Figowitz by the platoon commander hadn't EXACTLY been to go back to the ship and see the dentist! It was finally agreed by both Pfc. Figowitz and his platoon commander that the Lieutenant's final words to Figowitz had not been, "Yes Pfc. Figowitz, I understand your problem, certainly you should go back to the ship and get your dental problem resolved!" – the Lieutenant's actual last words were "Figowitz, get the F++K out of here!" Figowitz of course, took the meaning to "get the F++K back to the ship," whereas, the Lieutenant swore that he left no doubt that Figowitz was and idiot and his statement REALLY meant get out of my face and get to fighting.

I went to the Battalion Commander with my recommendations, one of which was to drop the entire thing. It was pretty apparent that Figowitz had taken advantage of the situation, and Figowitz's interpretation of the somewhat cryptic statement by the Lieutenant was taken by him to mean exactly what he (Figowitz) had been hoping for. Several things were against ever getting a conviction of cowardice for Figowitz, the least of which was that Figowitz had been with the battalion for a number of months and in prior firefights had never exhibited any cowardly tendencies... If I had been the trial counsel (plain old vanilla officers, i.e. without legal education could act as trial and defense counsels in those days), I'd have gotten the little miscreant sprung. Was Figowitz truly a coward? Maybe, or at least in this particular instance. ...But conversely he had conducted himself well in previous firefights.

And then there was the "unintended consequence" of the Lieutenant's rather forceful direction for Figowitz to "get the F++K out of there!" I rather suspect that the Lieutenant more carefully considered the consequences of a misinterpretation of his hastily made statement(s) after this little incident. I know that after having personally directed a young lad "to go over the hill after inventorying his seabag and lockers" and later listened to the consequence of a statement that was interpreted as an order to flee a bullet swept battlefield taught me an important lesson – If an order or a statement CAN be misinterpreted, believe me it WILL be misinterpreted.

As to what eventually happened to Pfc. Figowitz? I don't have a clue – I inherited a rifle company of my own shortly after this incident and the Battalion took a total of over 800 casualties before our stint on the Special Landing Force ended. Given the excitement experienced during the following 9 months, I CAN guarantee that I never yelled “GET THE F++K OUT OF HERE!” during any of my major firefights – ya' just never know who may have a toothache!

Semper Fi,

Dick