

## Who the Hell is Dick Culver, and where did he come from anyway?

I recently sent the son's eulogy for Colonel Donald Conroy, USMC, *The Great Santini*, to Dick Culver, our very own Marine Corps Joustler. You can find this eulogy and other TINS Tales at <http://www.skyhawk.org/2D/tins.htm>.

Dick has now been kind enough to fill us in on *his* genesis and early shenanigans. The "ride" started early and, with a Daddy like Culver's, there was never a dull moment. *The Joustler* may have run off at 14 but after coming up through the ranks the Mustang found his way to the Virginia Military Institute; the Naval Post Graduate School; a Masters degree in Physics; retired a Major after a career in the USMC; and even taught high school for a while. There are too many other things to go into here – you will just have to read the *Joustler Tales* to fill in most of the blanks on marksmanship, jump school, Vietnam, Arabia, Kosovo and God knows what. Ha!

Semper Fi  
Bob Rohrer

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I got a copy of this when Pat Conroy wrote it, and it was in truth one of the most well written pieces of literature I have ever read. I was still in the Marine Corps when the book/movie came out, and while I could never get used to the idea of sitting on a blowtorch (my predilections for being a Marine aviator went down the tubes when we got out of the silk-scarf and moustache wax era), I could relate entirely to his dedication to the Corps.

I was still organizing the Marine Corps Scout Sniper School at the time, and was raising a kidlet on my own in the Corps at Quantico. I spent one too many years playing the dedicated vanquisher of the foes of our country to concentrate on raising the family in the early days. I came back from the French Indo-Chinese environs after spending perhaps a bit more time than was necessary (66, 67 and 68) to find that I was suddenly a single parent (I insisted on keeping the youngster) - I suspect that she had simply had enough, even though my wife had been born and raised in the Marine Corps herself, with a father that had served in China with John W. Thomason, and not been commissioned until he was 50-years old during the Korean fracas. I think she had been ODED on the military life and expected me to spend a lot more time at home and not volunteering for every fool thing that came along. Alas, too soon old, too late smart I suppose. My kid eventually went to High School down in Harlingen Texas to the Marine Military Academy, but enlisted in the Corps as soon as he finished... I should have spent more time "mentoring" the lil' varmint (to use the modern word), instead of figuring he had already picked up on the basics of life's unexpected turns... Alas, but it's a bit late to reminisce, but still I do have some regrets... I kept his hair cut Marine Corps Fashion even when the fashion was to let it grow, and he always kept his blue jeans properly secured with a belt, (well, you get the picture). By the time he got out of high school he already figured he had 18-years service (he was born in Bethesda Naval Hospital when I was with the 3rd Division even though I was offered the option of waiting until he was born - which unfortunately, my wife was aware of; I was convinced that the 9th Marines were in desperate need of my services). I even told my roommate on Okie that I named

the little rug-rat "Smedley D. Culver" (not true of course, but I never told the actual story nor his real name for many years). Having been raised in the Corps I was sure my Wife would understand my absence during my kid's entrance into the world, but alas, the feminine mystique is different...), and of course my extended stay in SEA didn't help things a bit... Sigh...

As a humorous aside, the Smedley D. Culver story got much wider coverage than I had intended, as it was meant to yank the chain of my roommate. My somewhat gullible roommate (a former comrade from my Force Recon Days and the current Team Commander of the Pathfinder Team/Detachment on the Rock at the time), thought I was just nutty enough to have done exactly that. Being very polite, and more of a gentleman than I, (he was a Sunday School Teacher in his stateside time when home with his family) was actually horrified, but didn't know how to tell me that perhaps it was perhaps cruel and unusual punishment to saddle a youngster with such a moniker. He looked at me a bit funny after the initial exchange, but didn't say anything for several days. Finally about three days later, he came in and politely mentioned that if I had time to reconsider, it still wasn't too late to change his name! I told 'em naw, any name good enough for a two Medal of Honor winner was good enough for my kid. The story followed me around the Corps for years, and of course made the rounds of Okinawa back in '61 unbeknownst to me. Years later when going through Staging Battalion prior to my departure for Vietnam, one of the Staging Battalion instructors was a former NCO that I had known since I was a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, and had been on the Rock when the naming incident took place. I saw him sorta' whispering to one of the other NCOs behind the firing line, and the second gent couldn't resist and got me aside asking me if it was true that I had named my youngster Smedley D. Culver. I looked at him a bit strange (as if anything else would have been unthinkable) and said, yep, and let it go at that!

My dad had entered the Corps at 15 in 1918, served during the Banana Wars, and had taken a job with the Federal Bureau of Prisons, on a whim taking the (then) new Civil Service Exam and doing well on the thing (although he only admitted to a 6th Grade Education). Needless to say, the pay for even a prison guard was far above a Marine NCO of the day and time.

Due to some of his construction experience between an occasional enlistment (not to mention one stint of training the Mexican Banditos in the use of the Lewis Machine Gun down along the border), he decided to try his hand at something else. Went to work at Atlanta, was transferred to Alderson, WV (Martha Stewart's future digs) to help construct the place and then went to help put the Federal Pen at Petersburg, Va together (all of this construction portion was done while also acting as "custodial officer") and he made Lieutenant at Petersburg after about 3-years working for the Prison Service.

They were opening up Alcatraz in 1933, and he was one of the first 5 Lieutenants from the entire Prison Service selected to open the place up under federal (versus Military) supervision. He hauled his new bride out there and low and behold, it turns out that I was given the dubious honor of being the first kid born on the Island several years later (under federal instead of military control). Thus my first few years were spent with the likes of Machine Gun Kelly, Alvin Karpis, Doc Barker and Al Capone (actually Alcatraz

was a rather small prison, usually having less than 500 inmates, and about half of the island was devoted to housing for the families of the guard force)... He made Captain, was sent up to West Va to build a new camp and a number of new roads through the national forests (using convict labor of course), and his "powder monkey" was a gent stuck with only one truck to haul his newly blasted rock to the road site. His powder man was a gent named George Dempster, who built several extra beds for the truck and used a crane to change truck beds that were pre-loaded with rock, awaiting the front end to return from dumping the last load. He used his idea a few years later to come up with what we came to call the "Dempster-Dumpster" (we always called it a Dempsy-Dumpster, but it was simply a mis-pronunciation). George Dempster of course retired to Atlanta some years later as a multi-millionaire!

My Dad was again promoted to what was then called an "Associate Warden" (they used to call 'em Deputy Warden) and sent down to Tallahassee, Florida, when the Japs made the mistake of bombing his battleship (the old U.S.S. Oklahoma). He made an excuse to go to D.C. to the Bureau of Prisons, and came back in a Marine Corps Uniform, much to my Mother's dismay (he didn't mention his plans when he left).

At any rate, I sorta' grew up in the Marine Corps with a father whose first love was the eagle, globe and anchor. He came home after the war to become the Warden of several federal penitentiaries, but stayed in the Marine Reserve including Korea. He didn't totally retire until about 1963 (remember he started in 1918) as I recall, and was my first CO in the Marine Corps Reserve (my mother insisted that I finish High School, although I did run off when I was 14 when the Korean War started (Summer of 1950) and the entire Marine Corps was in an administrative nightmare. Since my Dad had done the same thing in WWI at 15, it only took him about two weeks to find my fanny, and drag me home by the ear (although with a thinly disguised smile on his face!). When he got me back, he took me down to the Marine Recruiter (with whom he was well acquainted) and said something to the effect "You see him? He ain't old enough yet, but when he turns 17, I'll personally drag him down for use as you see fit".

He was as good as his word, but my Momma did insist that I only go in the reserves until I got a piece of paper that said I had finished high school. Since my Dad was the CO of the local Reserve Unit, she demurred and allowed me to start learning my trade on a once a week basis, and all the studying I could get in on the available manuals. I hit Parris Island in the summer of 1954 and never looked back... My dad (6th Grade Education or not - I always figured he might have been exaggerating a bit as he spoke like a college professor and wrote very well indeed, although much of it I suspect was self taught), finally retired as a Lt. Col. and never lost his love for the Corps.

I guess my point to this diatribe is that I understand Pat Conroy's dedication to his Daddy's Memory, and many's the day I wished I had sat my Dad down with a pad and tape recorder - what a story it would have made! I suppose he was more understated than the character Bull Meechem, but no less in love with the Corps. My mother was a registered nurse and a Virginia youngster with some considerable education he met, wooed and married when he was a Lieutenant at Petersburg before departing for the Rock. Except for his deployments, they never left each other's side, and were married over 50-years. I suppose she provided the "couth" for his adventurous nature.

I personally wouldn't have traded a minute of it, and still correspond with my recruiter who eventually retired as a Marine Gunner... I had a love affair with the Corps I owe to my Dad (and my Mother's forbearance) that I have never lost. I suppose I have continued looking for it my entire life even following retirement, heading for the Sand Dunes to "train" (using the word loosely) the Royal Saudi Marines (I lost any reticence about educating the potential enemy, after I witnessed their ingrown incompetence [like an ingrown toenail] and simply enjoyed the company of a number of like minded Marines who were still not "shet" of the adventurous mode (I can understand my Dad training the Mexican Banditos with Lewis Gun in retrospect - who would have ever thought the United States would have lost its backbone to keep its borders safe?! Dear Allah!

My only bitch with Pat's writing is that even with all of his Dad's influence, he essentially turned out to be a writer (however talented) with distinctly left-wing tendencies. Even with an education at the Citadel, he has espoused a Country that I was not raised in, nor would I have liked to be... He is not universally admired or liked by his Citadel Classmates, although somewhere underneath all of his socialist veneer, I think there may (or must) be some part of his Daddy yearning to get out... I can only hope!

Semper Fi,

Dick Culver