

Devil Cults, Charlie Manson, Halloween ...and the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School

By Dick Culver

While watching a documentary on the idiot box the other night, a program came on featuring some of the most infamous of our modern day murderers. While I'm sure that I could have found something else, pure boredom or perhaps apathy prevented me from surfing the current offerings on the satellite dish. I was doing a bit of reading, and while half listening to the narration, a picture of Charlie Manson suddenly appeared on the screen. Aside from being one of the most evil *looking* miscreants I can recall, he was a *truly* depraved, demented soul.



After the facts had filtered down over the course of several years, I do remember that he had been taught to play the guitar by no less a resident of the Federal Prison System than Alvin Karpis (former prisoner on Alcatraz while I was there, and a one time member of the Barker-Karpis Mob). Again, I remember that Charlie Manson was a “resident” of the Federal Prison at Petersburg, Virginia when my Dad was the warden there in 1951, although he was simply one of many others doing time. Having put in a few days with several of the principals in the unfolding scenario, I continued to watch with a small amount of interest.

As I reminisced a bit, I recalled that initially there was serious speculation that the entire Tate-LaBianca_murders were the work of some sort of Devil Cult or the work of Satanists. The LAPD and the LA County Sheriff's office apparently made a project out of refusing to cooperate with one another, and the entire law enforcement arm wrestling contest almost became a horrific three ring circus. The true facts of the case, as later revealed, were almost beyond normal comprehension, so “off the wall” scenarios were proffered to explain multiple, extremely violent and bloody murders that could not possibly come from the mind of a simple criminal. They were, of course, correct, as Charlie Manson was no everyday criminal, and in my opinion he was most certainly not sane.

When the murders occurred I was stationed on the East Coast, and while of great interest because of the notoriety of the victims, minute details were not forthcoming. Time rolled on, and by July of 1970 I was transferred to Monterey, California to attend the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. Charlie and his minions were now in the “Dock” (using British”ese”), being tried for their crimes. Again, the details were still dribbling in. It was not out of the question that Charlie was some sort of Devil Cult figure, having his minions follow him in his worship of Satan, or worse. The entire West Coast in general, and Los Angeles in particular, was hanging on every new turn in the case. During the initial investigations of the crimes, the possibilities of mayhem to everyday families began to haunt the local citizens. Some Police Officers in the Los Angeles area actually rounded up their families and sent them to higher ground until the fact of the case could be ascertained¹.

The true facts were more horrific than even what the most creative speculator could have dredged out of a highly fertile imagination. With the mindset of the “new generation”, young converts began to flock to the Manson influence without any overt recruitment. Hangers-on and wannabees flocked to the cause uninvited. This clown was a truly dangerous individual. One of the Manson Family girls had an attorney that was perceived as not doing a good job. One of these newly converted “Mansonites” actually took the attorney out and threw him over a cliff! The judge was both verbally and physically threatened by Manson, thus starting a shackling routine for Charlie in the courtroom. To a certain extent, Manson was having much more influence than the “douche-bag” should have had, and no doubt more than he ever imagined possible. Needless to say, he was luxuriating in his new found limelight.

Tensions ran high, and the entire West Coast (if not the rest of the country) waited with baited breath. The local papers were having a ball in circulation, based for the most part upon pure speculation.

Setting the Academic Stage

In the Postgraduate School, our academics had started in mid-August, and it was my first time back in the halls of academic pursuits in over 12 years. Needless to say, I was overwhelmed. While I had a BS in Physics from the Virginia Military Institute, I had effectively flushed any interest in pursuing further education when I had walked away with a diploma, and more importantly a Commission in the United States Marine Corps. I was definitely ready to head back to the Corps on a full time basis. When I exited VMI with a brand new commission in the Corps, I was finished with an exile not unlike Alcatraz, with close order drills, parades and learning the whys and wherefores of the 105mm Howitzer (I opted to take Artillery to polish my mortar and map reading skills), and I went away whistling the Marine Corps Hymn.

To me, the Virginia Military Institute had been a means to an end; but alas, my past caught up with me. The Marine Corps had decided I was a qualified “quota filler” based on my previous academic qualifications, and I settled down to another academic grind.

When I arrived at the Postgraduate School, it had been over a decade since I had cracked anything more challenging than a military manual. What a comeuppance! Back to the books - and it wasn't fun, even the second time around (damn that clown who bet me that I was too stupid to make it as a Physics Major!).

Those assigned to Monterey to get a Masters Degree in Management only had a one year course and could graduate without even turning out (in?) a thesis. Those of us still attempting to prove we *weren't* too stupid to make it in Physics had a two and a half year grind, topped off with a comprehensive thesis. We had very few hours to ourselves, while the Management weenies developed a case of “duffers' elbow”...

To make matters worse, I was a single parent with a 9-year old rugrat to take care of. I would fix breakfast, send him off to school, grab my own books and head for the classroom. The afternoons were usually taken up by labs, and I would arrive home just in time to catch the young'un coming back from the local base school. I would then fix supper, make sure the squirt got his homework done, do my own (usually burning the midnight oil), and collapse in the rack awaiting another thrilling day of the same. The only bright spots were the weekends, since there were no classes on Saturdays. Friday night allowed you time to take off your pack. Entertainment for myself and the “kidlet” consisted of making a bowl of popcorn or

getting some “Munch and Crunch” and watching “Creature Features” on TV (this is the one where the host would rise up out of a coffin wearing a business suit and a pair of black horn-rimmed glasses). Great fun, and it allowed you to get your mind off the academics for an evening.

We lived in Government Quarters that were technically aboard the base (post? campus?), but not close to the actual school (the old Del Monte Railroad Hotel bought by the Navy following WWII). The housing sat up on a hill mass, unprotected by a gate, but it did have the amenity of having a Base Operated School for the youngsters.

We were divided up into academic sections (by Academic Major, i.e. Ordnance Engineering, Chemistry, Management, Computer Science, etc.). The sections were reasonably small; some numbered no more than seven to ten kindred souls. “Section Entertainment,” if it can be so characterized, usually consisted of an occasional poker game on a Saturday night, with the wives palavering, a occasional section party or two, and attending the local Little League ball games. We were not exactly in a social whirlwind, if you catch the drift.

When it came to traditional holidays or occasions, we celebrated like the average citizen as even the PG School wasn't about to put the kibosh on the Marine Corps Birthday, Veteran's Day, Thanksgiving, or Christmas. Halloween, now, there was a whole 'nother smoke. The kids were shepherded around by the parents, and I usually had two TV Trays out on the front lawn. One tray held traditional Halloween goodies, and the other was occupied by a 5-quart Crock Pot full of Hot Buttered Rum hooked to the house by a long extension cord. I had an adequate supply of Styrofoam Cups to ladle the hooch to the parents accompanying the youngsters. Since no one was driving, I usually attracted a large crowd and it became a traditional occasion. I also noted a considerable number of repeat “trick-or-treaters” with accompanying parents, heh, heh, heh! Lots of fun, and again - it was a break.

Cut to October 1970

While most thinking individuals would not classify me as one with paranoid tendencies (not publicly at any rate), I have always been one to be prepared. I have always been what some unfeeling oafs would characterize as a “gun-nut” – I prefer to think of myself as a “gun-buff” or “firearms-aficionado” - but then guns in general, and military weaponry in particular are my stock and trade and are the implements I have always used to enforce the will of the our Country and our Corps upon the unenlightened.

As a result, prior to leaving Camp Lejeune, North Carolina (heading for California), I had acquired a “Tangent Sighted” 9mm Browning Hi-Power Pistol from a fighting Marine Aviator, Major Bob Matthews. While I'm not a great fan of the 9mm, the Browning Hi-Power was the only high capacity magazine semi-auto pistol of the time, holding 13-rounds in the magazine and one additional stuffed up the spout. The hi-capacity magazine semi-auto had one overriding advantage under some circumstances; it meant that in a bedroom situation, or a situation that would preclude carrying extra magazines, you could engage multiple targets without doing a “search and traverse” of the bedroom drawers or car pockets for extra ammunition.

The .40 caliber high capacity handguns have now rendered the 9mm Browning somewhat obsolete, but at the time it was the only game in town. I had my “Matthews acquired” *Browning Half-Power* (pun intended) stashed on the top shelf of the hall closet in

Monterey, next to the front door of my quarters, just in case – ya' just never know; sometimes even serving military types are a bit deranged (watash excluded of course).

The particular Friday night in question was in the latter part of October, and we had been hitting the books hard since the middle of August. I was enjoying “Creature Features” with the “kidlet” when the front door bell rang. Door bell at about 2100 on a Friday night? Very unusual to say the least. I hustled to the door, opened the closet door and stuck the Browning in the right hip pocket of my blue jeans. Upon opening the door, I was taken completely aback – there staring out of the darkness, illuminated by the small porch light of the house, were about seven individuals. Six of these clowns were wearing Devil costumes and one was dressed as an angel! Holy Catfish, Batman! Tales of the Satanists being responsible for the Tate-LaBianca_murders came instantly to mind. All I could think of is Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the SOBs are here to get me!

My right hand went instantly back to my right hip pocket of my blue jeans, and my thumb automatically disengaged the manual safety! The slightest perceived hostile movement on the part of any of those standing outside my door would have resulted in more bloodshed than the entire Tate-LaBianca fiasco. One thing I have found is that hesitation on the part of the “accosted” usually results in the victim being dead on arrival. I did NOT intend that Mrs. Culver’s little boy be done in by Satan’s minions. Even though I don’t trust the 9mm, head shots make up for lots of deficiencies in cartridge performance.

What kept me from becoming Manson’s replacement in the courtroom following his eventual conviction? Wellll... the little lady in the Angel’s costume looked at me in a most convincing way and said...

“Excuse me sir, do you have a Lieutenant Commander’s calling card, or a “sippy straw”?”

Dear Allah, these poor depraved individuals were simply members of an Academic Section Party celebrating Halloween a week early (you had to schedule your entertainment around your academic schedule, tests, exams, and term papers). These folks were obviously pushing the Halloween envelop a bit, and were engaged in a “Section Scavenger Hunt”, looking for calling cards and other equally mundane items to fulfill their mission! Only the question from the young lady prevented Culver from avenging Charlie’s murders in the Los Angeles Area!

I assured the young lady that unfortunately I didn’t have any of the items, but wished them well, smiled, closed the door, re-engaged the manual safety, stuck the Browning back on the shelf, and went back to “Creature Features”! If they had only known... Only the quick request from my “Angel” prevented me from standing there ankle deep in brass with some of the Navy’s finest minds laid out on my door step. I installed a front door “peep-hole” following that, and made some mental notes not to jump to conclusions - and perhaps substituting Yogi and Boo-Boo Bear cartoons for “Creature Features”?

Semper Fi,

ROC

End Notes:

¹ Gloria's father was a Detective Sergeant in the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department at the time of the Tate-LaBianca murders, and was assigned to the case. He and a number of others took their families up to their summer cabins located at Big Bear, California for over a month to keep them out of harm's way, while the details were being sorted out.