

Parris Island, 1954 "

"UB Rifle Grenades"

...and a Shot on the Wrong Target at 200-yards

By Dick Culver



The picture at the left is Culver at the Snapping In Range at Parris Island following Rifle Qualification circa Aug. 1954. The 232 Chalked on the Helmet Liner indicated qualifying score on the Range (220 or better got you an expert badge). I was later told that I was the "high man" for something or another (month, day, year?), I was too happy to give a rat's rectum)! The 232 actually included a miss on my first shot! Someone told me as I went up on the line to fire for record that my Drill Instructor (Sergeant Scott) had just bet \$20 that I was going to be the high man on the range that day. Now \$20 is chicken feed in this day and time, but don't forget in those days a Private was drawing about \$78 for a whole month – to us, \$20 was over 25% of a month's pay. I had visions of Sergeant Scott accosting me in the final pay line if I screwed up. He would not have, as he was a hell of a fine NCO and a great Drill Instructor),

but the point I'm trying to make is that a \$20 bet seemed like a small fortune to bet on my lack of demonstrated shooting abilities under pressure. With my heart in my throat hoping I would not bankrupt (or much worse, *disappoint* Sergeant Scott), I got what appeared to be a good six o'clock hold on the target when it came out of the butts. I took up the slack, squeezed the trigger (nobody had thought of using the word "press" at that time), and the shot broke right where I thought it should have – well sort of anyway... It seems that in my apprehensive mode I had fired on the target to my left getting a perfect 5 (but allowing some unfeeling oaf in the butts to wave "Maggies Drawers" in front of my target (Maggies Drawers is a red flag waved (usually gleefully) in front of some idiot's target who has either gotten a total miss, or in this case, shot on the wrong target!). By now of course my posterior was so puckered that you couldn't have driven a straight pin up the appropriate orifice with a ten-pound sledge hammer! I didn't know whether to use my next shot to end it all (saving my possible ultimate disgrace) or gut it out.

Nervous and shaking like the proverbial hound passing peach seeds, I figured anything other than finishing the course would have been pure cowardice. As Odin will sometimes do, he took care of young (fledgling) Marines, idiots and puppy dogs. As you can tell from the picture I still made expert by a fairly comfortable margin, Sergeant Scott won his bet and I got my “pitchur took”. They made me close my bolt on the snapping-in range just for the photographer (made me nervous as the usual penalty for having your bolt closed behind any down range activity unless directed by the instructor resulted in a “head¹ scrubbing” detail while contemplating the strange new lumps on your head)!

Some of you old timers will notice the “stenciled²” Pfc. Chevron on my sleeve. That was compliments of my having joined the Reserves while in High School (my Mammy threatened kid’acide’ if I didn’t get a High School Diploma). My Dad (another old time Marine who had run away at 15 and joined the Corps in 1918) understood, but he was one of the reasons my Mammy relented, as my Dad was the CO of the local Marine Reserve Unit. It would be 7-months before I graduated so I spent all my spare time memorizing the *Marine’s Handbook* (1939 Edition, a bit different than the Guide Book, but the same idea) – I practiced the manual of arms until I could make the damned rifle and sling pop between positions, and knew the General Orders by Heart. I could tear down any weapon in the armory and knew the name of every part. I knew Close Order Drill, and could run Fire Team Tactics in my sleep! I learned to spit shine shoes, and of course being the “brown-nosing” lil’ whelp I was, I kept my Pappy’s shoes polished with a glistening shine.

All that considered however, whenever the Old Man needed a “bad example” I got called out in front of the troops to demonstrate how screwed up I was (actually my Daddy was doing me a favor to indicate that no one not even *his* kid got any preferential treatment). I busted my fanny to do things right, and at the end of the obligatory 6-months time I made the exalted rank of Pfc. along with several others. When Summer came around, and I had a diploma in hand, and finally departed for Parris Island. What I *WISH* some one had told me however, was that I would have been a lot smarter buying a couple of extra Dungaree Jackets (we still called ‘em dungarees in those days) without my ostentatious display of my exalted rank! Heh, heh, heh... Needless to say, I paid for my mistake in spades (in harassment that is).

It was pretty hard to fault my military performance (hell, I’d been practicing for it since I was 6-years old). I was allowed to wear my bracelet on the range as I considered it to be my lucky charm, and although I didn’t know it, I think Sergeant Scott was shading his bet! I had “*R. O. Culver, Jr 1349887³ USMC*” engraved on the top of it! As I said before, I don’t know if Sergeant Scott was shading his bet on “qual-day⁴”, or looking the other way when some idiot showed up at Parris Island with a bracelet with his serial number already engraved on it! “Gungy” doesn’t quite cover my attitude when I crossed the causeway⁵!

This was before the day of mandatory ITR and they were still teaching weapons and tactics at Parris Island, including maneuvers at Elliot’s Beach, with a run all the way back to the Range. My first C-Rat Meal was “Sausage Paddies w/Gravy⁶” dated 1943, dear Allah! And these guys are complaining about MREs?

When we were in the class on Hand and Rifle Grenades, I noticed that the instructor had forgotten” to mention the “VB Rifle Grenade” covered rather extensively in my Daddy’s copy of the “*Marine’s Handbook*” of 1939 (an interesting tome that had virtually all of the instruction in the form of questions and answers). The Handbook had been published, as I recall, by the

Naval Institute, but I'd have to go back and check. At any rate, the "VB⁷ Rifle Grenade" was a grenade (and cup-like launcher that fastened on the muzzle of the rifle) designed and fashioned by the "Frogs" in "The Great War"... Seems that the United States had either modified some of the French Grenade Launchers or copied 'em. At any rate, it was still in the Marine's Handbook in 1939. Not having a copy of the "Guide Book for Marines" I simply studied the covers off the old one. If you see one, they have a Red Cover, about the same general size as the Guide Book, but were printed in Gold on the front, but alas, the gold usually wore off – or maybe I was over-using it? Hummm...

Needless to say, the young "Rifle Grenade Instructor" had never heard of a "VB Rifle Grenade", and I sure thought some idiot was "sniping⁸" him (or had been put up to it by one of his buddies to screw things up). Just before the instructor had me "flayed alive" an old Master Sergeant under the roof of the outdoor classroom had been leaning against one of the poles that acted as support. About the time I figured that "Thor's Hammer" was coming down, I saw something that could have been a small smile on the face of the old time Master Sergeant.

"Hey Kid," he sez, "Get your @\$@ over here!"

"Yes Sir," I responded, rapidly beating feet out of the enraged NCO's reach.

"Where in Hell did you learn about the "VB Rifle Grenade"?" he asked.

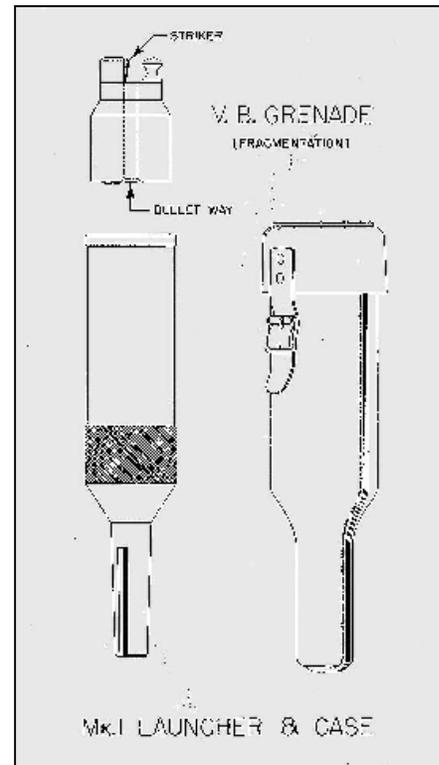
"Why, out of my Dad's *Marine's Handbook*" sir," I replied.

With something that could have been a grin, he said "The Marine's Handbook? – that thing's been out of print for years, where'in'ell did you get that?"

I explained that my Pappy had done time in "the Great War", the Banana Wars, WWII and was still in the Reserves – my Master Sergeant looked at me, smiled and said "Get back to your seat kid, and I wanna' see you after class..." I got a really good explanation on the merits of keeping your mouth shut, but I got the idea that the Master Sergeant was not totally displeased... "Hey Culver," he said as I left, "if we ever run into each other later and you need a job, come see me!" I grinned to myself and headed back to hull defilade⁹...

Semper Fi,

ROC



The Infamous VB Rifle Grenade and Launcher

*Illustration from
Clark Campbell's book
"The '03 Era"*

¹ "Head" is "Navy/Marine Corps -ese" for bathroom, including urinals, sinks, commodes, showers, etc.

² Following WWII, the Corps started the practice of stenciling your rank on your dungaree jacket. Prior to that, your name (and sometimes rank) were stenciled on your back between your shoulder blades. The stenciling eventually got out of hand due to reductions in rank due to various infractions. Uniformity was a problem due to the fact that not everyone had access to what they used to sell in the PX called a “MarKit” made to take care of everything from a Pfc. to a M/Sgt. If you were busted, you had to somehow cover up your earlier rank, and this took many forms, and it wasn’t always uniform. If you were commissioned, you were allowed to keep your old Dungaree Jackets but had to have a “herringbone material” patch sewn over your enlisted rank. Some of the more inventive would make sure the “patch” was large enough to cover M/Sgts. Chevrons if he had a vivid imagination, and who was about to cut the patch off to find out? Some of the saltier of the crew took full advantage of the situation of course, but most were reasonably honest. When the new 9 tiered rank structure came in, the stenciling idea had reached its logical end, and metal chevrons were issued to pin on your collar lapels. I still have some of my old jackets with the patches sewn on, Gawd, I must have had some pretty hefty chevrons/rockers, heh, heh, heh...

³ Prior to the early 1970s we were given individual serial numbers instead of the current Social Security Number. The earlier/lower your number, the saltier you were, and most left no opportunity unturned to compare serial numbers to garner some sort of perceived seniority.

⁴ Qual-day was a simple abbreviation for Qualification Day with the rifle. A common term in the Corps.

⁵ In those far off days, most traveled to Parris Island by train to Yamasee, SC, and then took a bus trip to “The Island” Yellow footprints were something that emerged in the future, Drill Instructors wore pistol belts with holsters with their cigarette packs stuffed in the orifice normally sporting the butt of a .45 Automatic. The now familiar Field Hat (Campaign Hats to the unwashed) were not to appear until after the debacle at Parris Island following the McKeon incident in 1956. Dungaree Covers (unstarched) were the normal uniform of the day, usually the saltier the better. My Senior DI, Sergeant Scott, (my Junior’s name was Bonnett, one tough character), had his dungaree jacket neatly “tucked” and cross-laced with some sort of black cord, almost like black parachute line. Individuality was the order of the day. It was a different Corp, but one hell of a great one none the less. The trappings may have changed over the years, but the Corps is eternal.

⁶ Decency prevents me from giving the description my buddy gave to the appearance of those sausage paddies with coagulated white gravy covering them – not the sort of thing to whet an appetite. Oh well, it sounded good when I glommed onto the can the evening before, expecting a veritable feast the following morning. We were not given any heat tabs, and I rather suspect that starting a fire on the beach to make the mess more palatable would have been highly frowned upon!

⁷ “VB” was an abbreviation of the French Designer/Manufacturer of the Grenade and Launcher, and stood for *Viven-Bessière*.

⁸ The term “snipe” in a class usually meant that some competing instructor, NCOIC or Officer-in-Charge would plant some clown in a class to ask embarrassing questions to see if the Instructor was “up” on the knowledge of his subject. Needless to say, such conduct was highly frowned on by the guys who ran the classes from day to day.

⁹ Hull defilade is a “tanker’s term” meaning to get the hull of your tank behind a hill mass or a building to prevent your assailant from having a clear shot at you. Used by infantry types to describe getting off the visual skyline and preventing undue attention (or in worst case scenario, a clear shot at your fanny by the enemy).