

## Hockaday Walker and Gil (Suicide) Holmes

A letter from a friend of mine asked me if I had ever heard about Hockaday Walker, a somewhat eccentric Marine who was famous (or perhaps infamous) when I was a shiny new Lieutenant. I had to go back into my memory banks. Here's what I answered back...

"My Gawd, it'd been forever since I'd thought about "Herr Walker" and his mentor "Suicide Holmes"! You definitely knew the lad as his dueling scar wasn't as well known as some of the rest of his antics. Walker, as you say, was rumored to be from an extremely wealthy family, (i.e. the Hiram Walker Distilleries), but alas 'twarnt so. His father was a wholesale grocer, and while the family wasn't destitute, neither were they the heirs to the whiskey fortune. It was simply that Hockaday had nothing else to spend his money on but the Marine Corps. Here's what I've been able to put together over the years. Here are his statistics as I knew them":

**Name:** Edward H. (for Hockaday, a family name he cordially hated!) Walker IV.

**Education:**

Music (Classical Music as I understand it) some of his education having taken place in Europe, hence the German Dueling Scar (Walker was an incurable romantic).

**Passion:**

The United States Marine Corps (he loved the discipline and self discipline necessary to be what he considered the perfect Officer of Marines – after all they didn't have the "Hussars" over here as you pointed out)!

**The Story (as best I was able to unravel it):**

As I stated above, Walker was the true romantic, a Teutonic Knight born in the wrong century, and quite possibly on the wrong continent. Rumor control had it that after he had gotten his dueling wound (reminds me somewhat of Kerry plotting his future course in the world), he actually would pull it apart when it was healing and pour salt into it to make it more visible for future generations.

Upon graduating from school, he applied for and was accepted to USMC OCS (about 1956 as I recall) he was sent to Quantico. Seems he wasn't in the best of shape and had some initial problems with the obstacle course. He spent every spare moment running and rerunning the course until he got into decent shape. At this point in time however he had not yet crossed the Rubicon. He was gungy of course, but not really totally unhinged. Upon finishing up Basic School, all Lieutenants were (at least in those days) asked to pick their top three choices of MOSs to which they would like to be assigned. Walker would have picked Infantry, Infantry, and Infantry, but they informed him that he **had** to select three different MOSs. Walker picked Infantry, Artillery, and Armor. As luck would have it since he had a fairly high GCT, they picked him for the Artillery. Hockaday was heartbroken, and left no ear unbent expressing his displeasure.

He was sent to the Rock (as many were in those days, this was prior to the transplacement scheme), and the tour was for 18-months. He left no opportunity unturned in telling his superiors how unhappy he was being in the Artillery. Now Artillerymen are a proud bunch themselves, and take some small offense at this "upstart" bad mouthing their particular military endeavors. Finally, they had enough and decided to transfer this miscreant to the

Infantry just to shut him up. One particularly evil character had heard of this (fellow) *madman*, Gil (Suicide) Holmes who had an infantry company with one of the infantry battalions on the Rock. The stories that were told about Holmes were really quite off the wall, though not without some basic truths in them. They figured if they could get Lt. Walker transferred to Holmes' company, they'd get their revenge. ...And so it was done. However they had not realized that there would be unintended consequences to their nefarious plan... Holmes and Walker jelled and formed a homogeneous and barely sub-critical mass – the Corps would never be quite the same. Those characters were like two peas in a pod, and the outraged Artillerymen had not succeeded in *punishing* Walker, but rather had fulfilled his wildest dreams and fantasies. A bond was formed (Walker and Holmes) that was legendary in the Corps in those days, and would be talked about even unto the year 2005 (ahem...).

Holmes having been on Okinawa longer than Walker, was transferred back to SDT (Schools Demonstration Troops) Quantico at the end of his tour. Walker followed him to Quantico and was once again assigned as Holmes' XO. Walker not to be outdone by Holmes, would take his platoon out for runs at high port with their M1s, while he would carry a BAR while running with them (I've watched the evolution, so this is not hearsay). To his credit, I never heard a single troop bad-mouth Hockaday, as whatever he asked them to do, he also did, usually with some sort of "one-upmanship" quirk involved (like carrying the BAR at high port). For whatever else he was, Hockaday was a damn fine troop leader.

Walker always kept his head shaved (he told me that it would save time in combat in the event of a head wound), had no steady girl friends (the old "if the Corps wanted me to have a wife, they'd have issued me one" argument), and owned no car since he considered a car to be an unnecessary encumbrance in the event of an immediate mobilization!

During this time frame (specifically 1958), Walker went with SDT to Perry, and since Holmes had been transferred, was at some sort of loose ends. He was looking for a mission. Walker remained at SDT for quite a spell, and aside from the stories that leaked out, apparently did a good job, but was viewed with some small suspicion by his contemporaries as you might imagine.

I had graduated from Basic School and was initially assigned to OCS as a platoon commander, but my shooting past caught up with me. I was assigned to the Rifle Range Detachment as a range officer, but mainly to shoot on the Quantico Rifle Team. While I love to shoot, I too was outraged, I wanted to go out to the FMF. ...I always considered myself a Marine who knew how to shoot, rather than a "range-rat" who was occasionally pried off of the range to go back to a line company... A subtle but distinct difference! I must have been as objectionable to the Rifle Range Detachment CO as Walker was with the Artillery on Okinawa. I wanted off of the range, and I wanted off NOW!

In the meantime, I met Hockaday on a more personal basis (up till then he was simply a legend of small proportion, but well known throughout the Corps). One of my first discoveries was that he liked to "direct" classical music emanating from his hi-fi (we didn't have stereos in those days), by standing in front of the mirror and using his swagger stick! – no kidding!

Entering his room was an experience in of itself. He had nothing of what could be called a personal nature (except for his hi-fi). The deck was lined with Marine Corps footlockers with many pairs of spitshined boots and shoes sitting on them, as if for some sort of inspection. The boots had all had their eyelets (jack-laces) gold plated and that sparkled in the light of the overhead bulb. His closets were filled to overflowing with extra sets of dungarees (all herringbone of course), Dress Blues, Dress Whites, several sets of Mess and Evening Dress,

and innumerable sets of starched and pressed khaki uniforms. He would go down to the “Used Uniform Shop” across the tracks and buy old sets of greens that were particularly salty, and have Tom Pochacco (the guy who owned the Cleaners) cut them down to fit him (Tom was a hell of a good tailor). He bought all the old emblems in the second hand uniform shop that were still in existence, and took delight in using the old black emblems that had been designed for the old high collared greens and placing them on the lapels of the more modern day uniforms. He got away with most of this because we were in an era of uniform changeover if you will recall, and some small amount of “era-slop-over” was allowed – not to say he “pushed it a bit” or anything, but nobody said too much.

We lived in the old “Cinder City” BOQ across the tracks (and through the underpass) and not too long a walk from town. Every Saturday morning Hockaday would put on a fresh set of dress blues and walk to town. He would then station himself on the corner next to the Rexall Drug Store and stand there until noon, saluting all the young lads who came by in uniform (lots of guys still went on liberty in uniform in those days as you’ll remember - most especially the youngsters going through OCS or PLC). Hockaday spent his whole Saturday Morning saluting and correcting the salutes of those who did not do an acceptable job of rendering the appropriate military salutation. At exactly noon (he’d check his watch), he’d turn and walk back to the BOQ. He would then take off his Blues (don’t forget, he hadn’t even sat down in them yet!), roll them up, get dressed in Greens and take his Blues back to town to give to Tom Pochacco in the cleaners. He would then stand on the corner for another two hours saluting, and then repair to the “Sportsman” watering hole across the street, have one beer, and return to the BOQ to work on lesson plans or direct classical music... And this was a weekly occurrence, not something that happened just once in a while! Dedicated? No question! Strange? Uh Huh, most assuredly! Again, we lived right next door to one another, and spoke daily. He was likable, but definitely weird!

At this point however, things began to take a different turn, and one that would not bode well for our hero. One of the senior Colonels at Quantico got picked for Brigadier General and was looking for an Aide (actually, Brigadier General’s aides are usually called “Administrative Assistants” – you don’t get to be a full blown aide until **your** general makes his second star – or so it was in that time frame). Walker’s reputation for extreme dedication to duty preceded him and the Brigadier sent for Hockaday for an interview. On the basis of their talk, Walker was selected and reported to the General’s office ready for duty.

One of Walker’s initial tasks as the General’s “Administrative Assistant” was to attend him during a reception (in this instance the uniform of the day for the reception had been officially designated to be civilian clothes). Hockaday of course showed up in Dress Blues. The General took one look, and asked Walker if he didn’t have any civilian clothes? Walker’s reply was something to the effect “of course not General, why would I want any civilian clothes when I have Marine Corps Uniforms?” The General’s reply? “**Buy** some!”

The second question was, “do you always keep your head shaved?” Walker’s answer, “why yes sir, it’s more sanitary and the shaved head makes it easier to dress a head wound in combat.” The General’s answer? “**Grow some hair!**”

Walker went to the PX and bought a very conservative mild plaid sport coat and a pair of light gray trousers. All this was worn with USMC shoes of course. Hockaday quit shaving his head all over, and simply shaved it on the sides and used about triple-ought clippers on top... He had essentially darkened the top of his head. Actually, the general came to like ol’ Hockaday, and when Ed’s tour was over, Ed asked for an assignment to airborne school (in

those days if you didn't step on your crank, you got your pick of duty assignments when your tour as an Aide [or Administrative Assistant] was completed). I lost track of Hockaday for a piece, and the next time I saw him, both the 1<sup>st</sup> Force Recon and 2<sup>nd</sup> Force Recon Companies descended on the *Pickle Meadows Cold Weather Training Facility* simultaneously (about January of '61). We had a good reunion and compared the two outfits and generally caught up on old times. I would not see him again until 1967 when he was a temporary Major serving as the CO of 1<sup>st</sup> Force in DaNang. ...But his shenanigans in the meantime, again became the things of legend!

While he was still stationed at Quantico, he finally succumbed to car ownership (horrors)! If you will remember, General Twining (**Merrill B.** Twining that is, (and just incidentally a Distinguished Pistol Shot, and brother of **Nathan B.** Twining of the Air Force), had a rather large and highly polished black limousine (I think it was a Buick) sporting a red plate with a Bronze (it could have been nickel, I disremember) Marine Corps Emblem on it. The Emblem was surrounded with three small silver stars indicating his rank. Hockaday couldn't resist, and bought Twining's old black "General Mobile"... He replaced the small silver stars with 3 small silver Marine Corps Emblems. The MPs then captured his fanny and made him take the emblems off, accusing him of impersonating a general! Heh, heh, heh... In the meantime, Hockaday and "his" (Brigadier) General were destined to meet again, next time at Guantanamo Bay during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

For whatever reason, Hockaday didn't last too long at 2<sup>nd</sup> Force (rumor control had it that he was trying to square THEM away! – needless to say that went over like the proverbial lead football, and they found something else for him to do)...

It may have been the Cuban Missile Crisis, but for whatever reason, after Walker exited recon, he was called by the same Brigadier General he had attended at Quantico, asking for him to go to Guantanamo again as his aide. Rumors abounded that Walker had set up the General's jeep with a .30 Browning M1919A4 on the hood (appropriately sandbagged of course). As I understand it, the General ate this stuff up, and I can only guess he (much as Walker) had never quite grown out of the romantic phase. Cuba fizzled out of course, and this time Hockaday talked his way into going to the Advisory Group in Korea. This should have been the perfect set up for our hero, but he had a fatal flaw – it turns out he was the original "blue-nose"!

Apparently it was an unaccompanied tour at the time, and many of his fellow advisors were "ranching" with the local young lovelies. Now while a little feminine companionship is always welcome, it seems that many of these guys were happily(?) married. Unfaithful Marine Officers? Horrors! Walker was outraged and wrote a "tell-all" letter back to his favorite General, spilling the beans and making the Advisory Group look like an episode from Payton Place. This turned out to be an exceptionally bad move, as the General showed this thing all around Headquarters Marine Corps. Now that Walker (or at least the General) had made his accusations public knowledge, a great hue and cry came from Headquarters and a major official investigation was kicked off in Korea to ascertain the facts of the case!

Big problem, Walker *KNEW* this stuff was going on, but he didn't have a shred of real proof, just suspicions. The senior officers of course linked arms and circled the wagons. No proof? Obviously Walker was guilty of making false (and unsubstantiated) charges! The Senior officer (of the group of "accusees") demanded a court martial of the upstart Captain to clear their names. Walker was found guilty and dropped a substantial bunch of numbers on the seniority list! At this point, Hockaday's career was for all intents and purposes "kaput"...

When the Corps was terribly short of experienced officer in about the 1967 time-frame, many of the old timers who would never have been promoted in the normal course of things were given “temporary promotions” to the next higher rank to fill billet vacancies. Walker fell into this bracket and was assigned as the CO of the 1<sup>st</sup> Force Recon Company in Da Nang. I made a trip down to see him when he was there, but he didn’t seem to be the same old Hockaday... The handwriting was on the wall. For those who already had their 20 in, when the temporary promotions came rolling down, were allowed to retire at the highest rank held if they served at least one satisfactory year in the higher grade. While Walker apparently did an OK job, he simply didn’t have the total time in to make him eligible for retirement, and had to revert to Captain and eventually exit the service when he was passed over on the normal promotion list.

Kinda’ sad in retrospect! It wasn’t that Walker was a bad Marine, in actual fact he was a fine Marine, but he just never allowed the ordinary guy feel comfortable in his “august” presence! He was just too good for his own damn good, and (personally) quasi-glorified in making the average guy feel ashamed of himself for not living up to the “Walker vision of Excellence”...

In a different day and age, Hockaday might have made General, but not in the touchy-feely outfit that we have allowed ourselves to become. He simply took himself way too seriously and sometimes his sense of humor wasn’t terribly highly developed. I often had to explain my somewhat sarcastic jokes to him lest he think *I* wasn’t taking the Corps seriously enough.

It’s truly sad that we no longer have room for the Hockaday Walkers in the Corps, I think we are poorer for it. If he just had been able to look at the World in a realistic fashion and laughed occasionally! Sigh...

As I told you earlier, the last time I heard, Hockaday had become an Episcopal Minister... I think he gravitated to the cloth for the discipline and hard work it can (self) impose on a dedicated man!

I miss him... He simply needed a keeper!

P.S. In my opinion, when he became the CO of 1<sup>st</sup> Force, he had essentially gotten himself promoted into a billet that precluded his performing heroic deeds that he needed to pull his fanny out of the fire. Being the CO of a Force Reconnaissance Unit in Combat is essentially an administrative job. You send recon teams and patrols out in “injun country” but usually man the CP while the kids are out doing the work. If you want to excel for King and Country in Recon, you have to be a recon team leader or perhaps a platoon commander. That was the final straw that broke his back. As a Captain in charge of a 14-man detached bunch of Division Recon bandits, I got to do things that no normal Captain in Recon gets to do, but that’s another story altogether... I also had a Division Recon Company for awhile, and thought I was gonna’ die of boredom. While I had lots of time in Recon, when the stuff hit the fan, being a Rifle Company Commander was the ultimate adrenaline rush!

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### **Gil (Suicide) Holmes...**

Much of Holmes’ exploits are less well chronicled, but the rumors abound. The reason I mention him is that he was Walker’s mentor in extreme Marine Corps antics.

Here's what I know (or have heard) of Holmes. Holmes was commissioned as a S/NCO about 1949, and made the Korean fracas. Holmes fellow SNCOs who were commissioned about the same time looked upon him as a quasi-kook. He had requested permission when he made S/Sgt. to be allowed to live in the barracks with the troops. It is said that the area around (and under) his rack had been "holystoned" to the extent that it turned totally white. Once commissioned he made a concerted effort to draw attention to himself. I don't think he had ever spent a penny on personal things, but when he left for Korea, Tom Pochacco (the same tailor/cleaner in Quantico) told me that Holmes stored 32-sets of officer's greens with him until he returned (to put this in perspective, even in the early 1950s a set of Officer's greens went for something over \$100 per set (a BUNCH of money when a newly minted 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant drew \$222.22 per month!).

I first heard of Holmes at Quantico in 1955 when he was stationed at SDT... It was rumored that Holmes "broke starch" (don't forget "trops" [tropical worsted uniforms] weren't that common in those days, and most people wore starched cotton khaki) five (5) times a day so he would look sharp for the troops!

He went out and bought himself a brand new Cadillac convertible (don't forget, he had nothing else to spend his money on), took his new vehicle down and had it painted Marine Corps Green, and had his convertible top made out of USMC Camouflage Shelter Halves! Needless to say, he attracted a LOT of attention.

Holmes too was filling a billet in the wrong time era... He still insisted that his Marines request his (Holmes') permission to get married, but in fact he was (much like Hockaday), i.e., well liked by his troops.

I first ran into him (in person) at the Division Matches at Camp Lejeune in 1959. He had a Company in ITR, but would take off during the day to shoot, and then go out and spend his nights in the field with the troops. He sure didn't look like I had expected him to look, he was about 5' 9" tall, and weighed in about 160 (just a guess). He didn't keep his head cut quite as short as Walker's but it seemed to be more uniform in length (if that makes sense). He wore a pair of issue GI glasses and looked almost like some sort of "military nerd"... all he needed was the obligatory white tape around the nose-piece on his GI frames.

I don't know what Holmes did during Vietnam, but I know he got passed over enough times that he was required to revert to SNCO. He was assigned to FMF Lant Hq. and for whatever reason fell madly in love with one of the local bar maids. Holmes, like something out of a John W. Thomason novel, marched into the skipper's office, cover in hand to request permission to marry the lovely young bar maid (as I understand it, this hadn't been required since before WWII, but Holmes was also a man out of his time),

He eventually retired, and according to legend, met his end in a classically romantic gesture, worthy of a hero out of a pre-20<sup>th</sup> century adventure tale. The story goes, that he was on the street in Washington D.C. and witnessed a mugging of a young couple. Rather than simply "not" get involved as most moderns do, "Suicide" rushed in where angels fear to tread. The perpetrator of the dastardly deed (a minority who was unfortunate enough not to have had proper potty training – or maybe he was from a dysfunctional family?) turned and did for our hero with some sort of handgun that he had been using as a revenue enhancement tool.

Unfortunately, I cannot supply any happy ending for this incident, as only Holmes' demise at the hands of this miscreant was reported.

My only observation is that I think Gil would have liked to have gone out trying to do the right thing and be a hero in the only way he knew!

And so I end my tale, of two romantics caught in a time that no longer has room for heroes or guys who want to do the right thing; win one for the Gipper, or charge one more machine-gun nest like John Basilone...

Alas, the World is poorer without them...

Semper Fi,

## **Dick**

As a side note, both Walker and Holmes had requested (at least in the late 1950s) permission to be buried on the grounds of the Iwo Jima Memorial in Washington D.C. Many thought that it was simply a gimmick to appear super-gungy. While there is no way in this far off time to verify such, having known the infamous pair, I would bet every penny I have, (not much admittedly), that they were most sincere in their requests. I would like to know what a "talking doctor" would have as an analysis for their seeming fixation? Perhaps Cervantes was not so far off the mark with Don Quixote? May the World always have one more windmill –