

DOWN THE BARREL



- Roy Mark, 13 June 2011

During my four years in the U.S. Marine Corps, I shot many weapons. M-1 and M-14 rifles along with the .45 caliber M-1911A1 pistol were the weapons I used most. I also had the opportunity to shoot the 106mm recoilless rifle, the Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR), the M-60 machine gun, and to fire a flame thrower. Each time I fired those weapons, I was looking down the barrel from the safe end to the business end. Only once during my time in the Corps, including a short stint in Vietnam did I find myself looking down the barrel from the “O.S.” side, - “O.S.” being short for, “Oh S**t”!

After finishing boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina and infantry training at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, I was assigned to the First Anti-Tank Battalion of the First Marine Division. First A-T's were located at Camp Horno area of Camp Pendleton in California. The base was named for the Spanish word meaning, “oven”, -Camp Horno lived up to its Spanish meaning each summer. Soon after arriving at Camp Horno, I was shipped off to Radio-Telegraph Operators Course in San Diego. After completing the course, I returned to Camp Horno in January of 1964 and was assigned to the Communications Platoon of Headquarters and Service Company. The commanding officer of Comm Platoon was a first lieutenant and the senior non-commissioned officer was a master sergeant. Both of their names have long since left my “brain housing group”, as we jarheads referred to our heads.



On 4 August of 1964 the master sergeant assigned me and two other Comm Marines to monitor a network setup by one of the infantry regiments on Camp Pendleton. The two other Marines were Privates First Class James Riley and Bill Biggins. I was a Lance Corporal by then so I was put in charge of the detail until the net was shut down which was expected to be about 18:00 (6:00 pm for you non-military types). Riley, Biggins and I were friends and we often spent our free time together around Oceanside or San Clemente near the base. Working together with these two was a pleasure.

We checked out one of our radio equipped Jeeps from the battalion motor-pool



and drove it to the top of a nearby hill where we set up, knowing the increased elevation would improve reception. The top of the hill was about a thousand yards from the Comm Platoon's radio shack, so it would be easy for us to check from time to time. We then tuned the radios to the proper frequencies, and left the Jeep with its motor running and began monitoring the network traffic from the radio shack.

When 18:00 came and went without the net being terminated, we became concerned, but since our orders were to monitor the net until it was terminated, there was nothing to do but continuing our vigil. By 21:00 (add three hours to 6:00 pm) the net had still not been terminated and I knew something was not right. The Comm Platoon C.O. and Master Sergeant lived off base and I had no contact information for them, so I called the Horno base Officer of the Day (O.D.). The O.D. was from a different battalion and didn't know anything specific about our situation, but did tell me that President Johnson had just completed a speech to the American people and that it concerned a military attack upon U.S. forces in the Gulf of Tonkin near North Vietnam. He supposed that was why our net had not been terminated. He told me, "Carry on" and I of course replied, "Aye aye Sir".

It was now obvious that we would be monitoring the net all night. We checked the gas situation at the Jeep and realized we might not have enough to last the night. Fortunately I knew that there was normally a tanker truck parked in the motor-pool so if gasoline became critical we could always make a run to the motor-pool for more gas. We continued checking the gasoline situation throughout the night; by 03:00 it was obvious we would run out of gas before daylight. I decided we had to get more gasoline and soon.

I made the trip to the top of the hill and retrieved the gasoline jerrycan from the Jeep. As I was making my way from the Jeep to the motor-pool, I became concerned about the guard I knew would be on patrol. Having stood guard duty myself, I knew that he would be armed with his M-14 rifle and live rounds. I didn't know how he would react, but I knew if I was on guard duty, I would not take kindly to someone taking gasoline from a tanker at three o'clock in the morning. I steadied my nerves by reminding myself that Horno was a big area and there would be only one guard on duty; the chances of him and I being at the same place at the same time were slim. Besides, I personally knew about 25% of all the personnel in the battalion and was at least familiar with many more.

I made it to the motor-pool and located the tanker truck. I was just finishing filling the jerrycan when I heard, "HALT!" I looked up and was staring up the barrel of a fully loaded M-14. The trigger finger belonged not to one of my friends on the base or even a casual acquaintance, but to a complete stranger. The guard was a private and appeared to be fresh out of boot camp. I don't remember my exact words, but I do remember trying to calm him, *and* his trigger finger. With his M-14 still in the horizontal position, I told him who I was and explained the situation. He finally lowered his rifle and told me I could proceed.

We continued monitoring the net until the Master Sergeant arrived the next morning. The net was terminated soon afterward.

Bill Biggins was transferred soon afterward to one of the infantry regiments on Pendleton. In March of 1965 I was transferred to the Marine Communications Detachment onboard the USS Mount McKinley. Riley remained in First A-T's and was deployed to Vietnam along with the entire First Marine Division. In July of 1966, on board Mount McKinley in Da Nang harbor, I used the Marine Corps' radio-relay equipment to contact First A-T's near Da Nang and spoke briefly with Riley. Later I received a letter from Bill. He was at Hue, in South Vietnam with his regiment.

That incident at Horno was the only time in my four years in the Corps that I found myself on the business end of a loaded weapon, not so for Biggins and Riley. We three survived the Corps and Vietnam. Life is unpredictable and that's what makes it interesting; I wouldn't have it any other way.

Copyright © 2011 by Roy Mark

All rights reserved. No part of this story may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission.

E-Mail: Barrel@roy-mark.com