

CHAPTER VIII - CHEATED BY THE NAVY



Charles (3rd from left sitting) with fellow Airmen

Brooding over my misfortune, my initial love for the Navy quickly turned to bitterness. I submitted a formal request to the Bureau of Naval Personnel in Washington D.C. to cancel my orders to Aviation Structural Mechanic School and send me to sea so I could strike for Boatswains Mate. I knew that my request to the Bureau would take time. I also knew that if I actually started attending class, my chances for approval would diminish. In a ploy to gain more time, I requested assignment to the mess hall instead of starting school. Since the Training Command routinely assigned a percentage of the incoming students to mess hall duty, granting my request wasn't a problem. I would be allowed to work in the mess hall for 10 weeks before I had to start school.

This assignment turned out to be the "softest" job I ever had, in the Navy. The first week was a tough one. For starters, I had to get up at 4 AM to help get things ready for breakfast. To make sure that I would get up in time, I had to put my name in a call book. Part of the night watches duties' was to wake people up at the time requested in the call book. As luck would have it, the mess hall assignment clerk's bunk was right under mine. The night watch mistakenly woke the clerk, instead of me, on a few of occasions. The clerk would point to me and then try to get back to sleep. Rather than take a chance on any further disturbances, he offered me the job of being the mess hall's night painter. I couldn't begin painting until two hours after the evening scrub down. This delay was necessary since it is not advisable to paint over a moist surface. I would then have to stop and clean up by midnight in order for the paint to have enough time to dry before the mess cooks started serving early breakfast. As an added bonus to this soft and easy job, the "night cook" would always prepare us a nice juicy steak as a midnight snack.

THE LEGAL / DISCIPLINE OFFICER ALWAYS WINS

I completed my ten week mess hall assignment, and there was still no action on my request for sea duty. I sent a second request to the Bureau and asked the local command for a ten weeks extension of my mess hall assignment. My request for an extension was denied, and I was ordered to join the class starting the following Monday. If everything had went as scheduled, I would have graduated from Aviation Structural Mechanic School in 16 weeks, but things didn't turn out that way. During the 4th week of classes, I lost my Military ID Card. When I applied for a replacement, the clerk told me that I would have to see the Legal/Discipline Officer before he could issue me a replacement. The Legal/Discipline Officer asked me what happened and I told him, just as I had told the clerk, I had lost my Military ID Card and I needed a replacement. The Legal/Discipline Officer authorized a replacement but he also awarded me ten hours of

extra duty as punishment for losing government property. I wasn't exactly happy with my punishment, but for the moment I figured it was fair. While I was waiting for my instructions on when and where to report for my assigned extra duty, another sailor, told me that he had just had an audience with the same Legal/Discipline officer and didn't receive any punishment at all. Our circumstances were the same except he had lied by claiming that his ID card had been stolen and I had truthfully reported mine as being lost. I went stomping back into the Legal/Discipline Officers office and complained. I told him that the only difference between the two of us was that I had told the truth, and the other sailor was lying through his teeth. I told him that he wasn't punishing me for losing my ID card. He was really punishing me for telling the truth. I told him that the other sailor and I deserved equal treatment. If the other sailor wasn't going to do extra duty, then I wasn't either.

The Legal/Discipline Officer informed me that my assignment of extra duty was a direct order and if I didn't comply, I would be charged with direct disobedience of an order. Once a week, over the next three weeks, he called me into his office and asked me how much extra duty I had worked off. Each time I told him that I hadn't worked off any and that I wasn't going to work off any either. He finally got tired of calling and me in and charged me with 3 counts of direct disobedience of orders. The Base Commanding Officer approved the charges and awarded me a Summary Court Martial.

A summary court is presided over by a junior commissioned officer. In theory, this lone officer is supposed to be impartial. He is required by Military Law to act as both the defense counsel and the prosecuting attorney as well. This is pure hog wash, of course. No junior officer is going to risk his career by going against his Commander's wishes.

UNJUST COURT MARTIAL

My Court Martial was held in the office of a young Lieutenant. The young Lieutenant introduced himself and asked me to sit down. He then asked me if I knew the purpose of a Summary Court Martial. I told him that I did. He then said, "In case you do not understand the purpose of a Summary Court Martial, it is so that I can punish you more than the Commanding Officer is allowed to under the Uniform Code of Military Justice." That statement really took the wind out of my sails. The Captains power to punish is awesome. From the young Lieutenant's statement it was obvious that I had already been found guilty, and he was going to really sock it to me. I was found guilty of three counts of disobeying lawful orders and sentenced me to nine days confinement at hard labor. He then surprised me by saying that the brig was full and I would serve my time in the (PAL) Prisoner at Large barracks.

The PAL barracks wasn't all that bad. All I had to do was to be in my bunk for hourly bed check at night and be present for roll call at four times during the day. Even so, it was a punishment that I felt was undeserving. I couldn't help but think that if I was to be punished, it should be for something deserving of punishment. With this thought in mind, I deliberately broke restriction and went "over the hill," or AWOL, which the abbreviation for away without leave or away without liberty.

UNAUTHORIZED VISIT TO ARKANSAS

The Demmitt's and the Critcher's were living near Quitman, Arkansas during those days. Quitman was only about a half-day's hitchhike away from Memphis, and I enjoyed being around my many cousins living there. Neither Uncle Emmitt Demmitt nor Uncle Joe Critcher was worth

much as humans by my reckoning. Uncle Emmet was a charming story teller. He was also an alcoholic and a pedophile. What little money that came into the house was usually spent on tobacco and ingredients for making home brew. Years earlier I had a personal glimpse of his sexual sickness. I was somewhere around six years old, and my brother Bill was about eight. Our cousins, Mary was around five and Virginia was about four. It was a hot sweltering day and Uncle Emmet decided to take the four of us over to Branson's pond to go swimming. Branson's Pond was in a secluded area about a mile from Grandma Ragains' house. I have no idea why the four of us were ever left alone with Emmet in the first place. Either people didn't know or they chose to ignore the evilness of this man.

When we arrived at the pond Emmet, separated us into pairs. He took Bill and Mary to an area sheltered by bushes on one side of the pond and Virginia and me to a similar area on the other side. He then made us get naked and tried to teach us how to have intercourse. Virginia and I never got the hang of it and I'm sure that Bill and Mary never either. It was years later that I finally figured out what he was trying to get us to do. When I finally figured what kind of man Emmitt was I was disgusted almost to the point of mental illness. I seriously considered buying a shotgun and blowing his head off. My heart broke knowing that my aunt and cousins had to live with such an evil person. The more I thought about the more I realized that I couldn't take another persons life.

He was caught and tried twice for committing a similar offense in 1954. This offense involved his son, Earl Daniel and a neighbor girl. The first trial ended in a hung jury. In the second trial, Emmet pleaded guilty to the reduced charge of assault with intent to commit rape in exchange for a five year suspended sentence.

Uncle Joe wasn't a pervert like Emmet but he wasn't worth much anyway. Joe wasted what little money he had on hard liquor, women and tobacco. Aunt Dorothy defended Joe and insisted that he was a good provider. It was obvious that he wasn't and it broke my heart seeing my aunts and cousins so impoverished. Emmett and Joe brought in enough money for things like tobacco, whiskey and maybe a little flour, but that was about it. When I went AWOL, I left with about two months back pay. My cousin Mary and I took this money into Quitman and we spent it all on food and necessities for my two impoverished aunts and cousins.

Of all my cousins in Quitman, I felt closest to Mary, Virginia and Sue. They were teenagers and were nearest to my age. Linda, Margaret, JoEllen and Betty were all little girls. I loved them all like sisters. Earl Daniel was about 12, Bobby Ray was only 3 and Tommy was a couple of months short of being two. I had just turned 19 that Friday and on Monday the 24th, Jerry, another cousin, chose to enter this world. It was a wonderful joyous occasion. Aunt Dorothy was at Aunt Katherine's house for the delivery. All my cousins and me were chased out of the house where we waited for my newest cousin to arrive. I felt honored that he chose to be born almost on my birthday. My newest cousin was named Jerry. Jerry was followed by Donna Kay in 1954, Jackie Lee in 1957, the twins, Martha and Kathy in 1959, and Dewayne in 1963. Jackie Lee went into politics and was eventually elected Senator Pro tempore for the State of Arkansas.

THIS TIME THEY LOCK ME UP

I was now broke but satisfied that my aunts and cousins would have enough food for a while. I actually felt good about my unauthorized vacation from the Navy. I felt the satisfaction

of being guilty of an offense that deserved punishment. I was ready to return to the base and face the music. Room was found for me in the brig this time.

While I was serving the nine days from my first court martial, another court martial was convened, and another twenty one days was added to my sentence. Most of my hard labor consisted of cutting weeds in a large drainage ditch that ran the length of the Air Station. It was early spring and the weather was nice. If anything, I enjoyed the arduous physical workout each day.

After we came back from work detail, boredom set in. I soon discovered an escape from reality thanks to a high narrow window that dominated an otherwise naked wall. Watching the outside world through this thin ventilating slit became an obsession with me. I was almost a head taller than any other prisoner and this extra height gave me a bonus glimpse denied the shorter inmates. Looking out of my window, I paused for a moment, staring at the narrow veneer of white gravel surrounding the prison yard.

My gaze then shifted to the tall hurricane security fence. Then, leaping past the tangled mass of swirling barbed wire, my eyes darted past several weather worn barracks; they finally rested at the front entrance of the main administration building. The administration building was an impressive structure in contrast to the drab barracks. Its inspection white exterior seemed to radiate beneath a blanket of crisp red Spanish tile. Its two stories of squeaky clean windows looked out over a lush, well manicured lawn.

Two massive anchors, taken from some long forgotten war ship, adorned the front corners of the lawn. These ancient relics had been white washed to compliment a low lying, anchor chain link fence that enclosed the entire area, except for a circular driveway that served the buildings main entrance. An inner circle, formed by the driveway, contained a polished concrete pedestal and flag pole for displaying the American flag. A moment of sadness overtook me as I remembered that, as a prisoner, I no longer had the privilege of saluting our flag. During moments when military regulations call for a salute, a prisoner is required to remove his hat and place his hand over his heart.

I was almost ready to abandon my look out when a tall gangly sailor emerged from the building. He was followed by a short, stiff backed marine. The marine wore a yellow arm band marked S.P. and had a 45 caliber pistol strapped to his side. The brig was getting a new prisoner.

“We’re getting a new boarder,” I informed the other prisoners, “Man; he’s a tall one, too.” I always took special notice of tall people. I really enjoyed the advantages of being tall, but sometimes it bothered me. I stood slightly over or slightly less than six foot six. I usually stood a bit taller in the mornings after a good night’s sleep and shorter after a day’s activity. I enjoyed my height but there were times that I felt like a living Ichabod Crane. My extra tallness called attention to the clumsiness that came from growing too fast. It made me feel uncomfortably self conscious. I knew the muffled snickers and hurtful chuckles that tormented me at times were mostly in my imagination.

I continued my watch, studying the new prisoner until he had almost reached the entrance to the brig compound. I then shifted my presence to the mesh wire partition that separated the cell block from the central guard station. As the Marine marched the new prisoner into the guard station, it occurred to me that observing this new prisoner had become an obsession to me. Not only was he tall, like me but we also looked a lot alike. It was almost like looking into a mirror.

A chill swept over me. I felt as if I was experiencing an out-of-body experience watching the reenactment of my own incarceration.

This was so alike, yet so different. Watching this new prisoner being locked up seemed tragic somehow. It was nothing like the way I had felt when I was first incarcerated. I was in the brig mostly because I was being me. I had gone AWOL and partied until my money ran out. Now the party was over and I was paying for it by doing time. What else was there to do? For me, just living, was doing time.

I tried to snap out of it and shake my brazen stare. The likeness was fascinatingly hypnotic. Captivated by this ghostly mirror, I continued my watch as my double was escorted to the prison barber's chair. This chair was an old mechanical relic, predating the modern hydraulic jobs. Its attendant, the brig barber, was a short, stocky prisoner, who obviously wasn't enjoying his job. He pushed the chair lever to the down position and jacked the chair to its lowest setting. Most of the other prisoners appreciated the barber's distaste for cutting hair. Prison barber is not a job that is sought after. The barber selectee doesn't even have to have talent for the position. By custom, the job goes to the very first guy, who is interned, after the release of the old brig barber.

My towering twin slid uneasily into the barber's chair. He nervously slumped as far into the chair as possible to compensate for the barber's shortness. The scene suddenly struck me as funny. This great big, tall, skinny, freak of a man, slumping down, almost sitting on his backbone, knees stuck out like wooden coat hangers, arms dangling limp at his side, like the arms of a giant under stuffed raggedy doll, and for what? The easy answer is so that he could get his hair cut by a poor little guy who hated cutting hair in the first place. It was both funny and tragic. Seeing the "me" in this other person helped me grow up a little. My mirror image and I soon became fast friends. His name was Mathews. He had been convicted of desertion by a General Court Martial and was being held in the Memphis brig pending appeal and transportation to a Federal Prison.

CIGARETTE ALLOTMENT

The worst part of confinement for smokers was that prisoners were only allowed four cigarettes a day. What made this especially bad was most of the security guards had an attitude problem. Almost all of the guards were Marines who had been seriously wounded in combat over in Korea. Rightly or wrongly, they felt that most of the inmates were in the brig because they were trying to avoid going to Korea. This wasn't true of all the prisoners. At least it wasn't true in my case. I was in the brig mainly because I felt the Navy had not been truthful to me and had treated me unfairly. In any case, their resentment toward us took the form of pure hatred. One of their favorite ways of tormenting us was with our cigarette allotment. Four times a day one of the guards would line up the prisoners, by the numbers, and issue us each one cigarette. He would then strike a match and hold it for a few of us to light our cigarettes. Those of us with lit cigarettes would use them to light the remaining cigarettes. As soon as the last cigarette was lit, the guard would step into our cage. Regulations require that any time a guard entered an area, all prisoners, in the area had to come to attention. They had to remain at attention until the guard announced, "at ease" or left the area. The guard usually remained in the area until he heard a few "ouches" caused by lit cigarettes burning fingers.

We found subtle ways of getting even. My best friend, while in the brig, was my look-alike buddy, Mathews. His muster, or roll call, number was fifty-four and my number was

twenty-three. All inmates had muster numbers. We were numbered from 1 to 60. At the entrance to the brig, there was a large board hanging on the wall that had these numbers on it. Next to each number there was the last name of the prisoner that the number represented. Any time a prisoner entered or left the brig, he had to step up to a white painted line, stand at attention and shout out his number. In addition to our both being tall and skinny, we both had dark brown hair and hazel colored eyes. The only difference in us was Mathews had been busted down to an Airman Recruit, at his court martial, and they left me as an Airman Apprentice at mine. Even that difference wasn't obvious since prisoners weren't allowed to wear stripes, while serving time in the brig.

It wasn't long before Mathews and I started having fun with the guards over their inability to tell us apart. It all started with one of the guards chewing me out for some minor infraction that I had committed. While doing so he mistakenly called me Mathews. When he finally finished his verbal reprimand I yelled back at him, "I'm not Mathews, Sir. I'm Sterling, Sir". A short time later, he saw fit to chew me out again, but this time he got it right and called me Sterling. There was some uncertainty in his voice so I decided to have some fun with it. This time I yelled back, "I'm not Sterling, Sir, I'm Mathews. Sir." He eyed me suspiciously, and shouted, "Mathews, What's your number on that board?" Without hesitation, I shouted right back at him, "Fifty four on that board, Sir". Mathews wasn't about to let me have all the fun. From then on every time either of us was yelled at, we would yell back that we were the other person.

Upon my release, the Legal/Discipline Officer called me into his office. He made a little joke about me still having ten hours of extra duty to work off and then apologized for his part in the whole affair. Then he asked me if it had been worth it. All I could say was, "Yes, Sir, it was worth it."

BACK IN SCHOOL AGAIN

Upon my release from the brig, I was ordered back to AM School. I reported to the school office for assignment, and was placed in the same curriculum week that I was in when I went over the hill. Once again I was back in the school that I had grown to hate and light years away from becoming a Boatswain Mate. I decided to pester them to death with request chits. Each day I would fill out a request chit asking that I be dropped from the school. Each time my request was denied and with each denial my bitterness grew. Finally, I could stand it no longer. I went AWOL, vowing to leave the Navy forever. By making this statement I had turned a simple unauthorized absence into desertion.

After deserting the Navy, I made my way back to my parent's home in Galveston, Texas. As fate would have it, Uncle Ira and Aunt Margaret arrived at my parent's home just a few hours ahead of me. They were on vacation from California. After our initial greeting, Uncle Ira grinned real big and said something like "Charles, it sure is nice that we are both on leave (vacation) at the same time." Immediately, Uncle Ira could tell by the look on my face that I wasn't on leave. He said knowingly, "You're not on leave, you're AWOL, aren't you?" I answered, "Yes.", and told him the problems that I was having with the Navy.

At this, Uncle Ira suggested that I go back. I stubbornly refused so Uncle Ira suggested we have a beer. After drinking a beer, once again, Uncle Ira suggested I go back and once again my refusal was met with an offer of another beer. Over the next few hours, I began to realize the error of my ways. Obviously, I was not going to out-drink Uncle Ira. It also became clear to me

that I could serve the Navy best by becoming what the Navy wanted. By working with the Navy, I could have a wonderful and rewarding career.

Uncle Ira drove me to the Navy Recruiter's office where I turned myself in. The recruiter placed me on technical arrest and gave me a ticket back to the Naval Air Technical Training Center in Memphis, Tennessee. There was almost a 24 hour wait before the next bus. Uncle Ira and I spent much of that time talking Navy and getting my head straight.

Returning to Memphis I was given another Court Martial and some more brig time. It amounted to a slap on the wrist compared to what I should have received. During the legal proceedings, I was encouraged to talk freely and I did. I told the Commanding Officer all about my Uncle Ira, and the counseling session we had. I told him about my dreams and disappointments. I also promised the Captain that, if he gave me another chance, I would serve the Navy honorably and make it a career. As a confessed deserter and a three time loser, I should have received several months in prison and a Dishonorable Discharge. Instead I was awarded a 24 day brig sentence and given another chance at Aviation Structural Mechanics School.

GRADUATION

Back in school, I was called in to see Lieutenant Pierce, the Officer in charge of AM School. Mr. Pierce had figured it correctly that I had been trying to get thrown out of AM School but wasn't aware of the fact that I had turned over a new leaf. He told me in so many words, that I would either graduate from AM School or I would remain a student there until I was discharged from the Navy. I assured him that I would buckle down and graduate from his school.

During the last week before graduation, interest picked up over class standings. Even though I had a terrible disciplinary record, I still managed to have a respectable grade point average in school. This was important because upon graduation, we received transfer orders to our next duty assignment. These were all "John Doe" orders to be issued out according to class standings. The Honor graduate would have the first choice of assignment, the number two man had second choice and so on until the last man, was stuck with the last remaining assignment.

The bottom pick was obviously going to go to the class clown, a guy named Dejenet or something like that. Several of the instructors were giving Dejenet a bad time about his low grade point average. One of them even went so far as to bet Dejenet a hundred bucks that his low grade point average would land him in Korea. When my turn came, I chose Naval Air Station, Port Leyote, French Morocco, North Africa. I didn't know a thing about it except it sounded exotic and intriguing. When Dejenet's turn came he was stuck with orders to Commander Naval Air Pacific. He didn't have a clue as to where in the Pacific. To Dejenet it looked like he was going to Korea for sure. Fearing the worse, Dejenet ask me if I would trade orders with him for a hundred dollars. I told that I would be happy too trade, but I had to have cash in hand first. Dejenet phoned his Mother who lived in Alameda, California, and his mother wired him the cash. The only reason I mentioned Alameda was because of the irony. There were a total of five sets of orders for Commander Naval Air Pacific. Three of them were for (VR-3) Air Transport Squadron Three at Alameda, California and the other two were for (VR-5) Air Transport Squadron Five at Moffett Field, California, just south of San Francisco. When Dejenet found out he had traded off the chance of being stationed less than twenty miles from his

home, he was heart sick. By this time, it was too late to change orders again. Dejenet was stuck with North Africa and I was headed for Moffett Field, California.