

Dispatch 3.0 Ladies Night in Manland 7-14-10

Hey folks! It is really starting to scorch out here. I switched to the night shift to avoid the heat and try to catch these ninjas planting bombs. It's kind of nice to manage my own schedule based on what I want to do with air. It is nights full of boredom and frustration, but at least the nights are cool enough that coffee is not an absurd choice. I crash out as soon as the sun starts coming up (0430!!!) and sleep as long as the air conditioners hold up. They quit sometime around noon, leaving me awake and cranky and soaked in sweat. The showers were down for a couple weeks, but they are back up just in time; the ladies showed up.

If I can get through this without sounding misogynist, it will be a miracle. Look at where I am, for godsakes!

Truthfully, it was disconcerting. It seems contrary to the very essence of Manland and the tenants of infantry to have females around. I served the past two deployments with females in the squadron, and never saw much turmoil caused by the fairer sex. According to the sea stories, I have been lucky to be in a mature, respectful unit. I can't say I'm happy to be surrounded with all men, all the time, but it makes politics a lot easier. It also makes language more foul and behavior more cretanous. It is similar to Boy Scouts; boys need to be cavemen for a while. There is very little delicate regard for feelings. After all, there is plenty of time to be civilized in the civilized world.

So, on the hours leading up to the female convoy arrival, we showered, did laundry and perhaps cleaned up a bit. The Battalion Executive Officer was traveling with the convoy and it was bluffed off prepping for his arrival... but we all knew it was for the ladies. Frank, the Company Commander, did all but kill the fatted lamb. He ordered 3 "flats" of chicken. The cook broke out the finest trays of beef burgundy and Mexican style corn. Gunny D actually put pants on. I might have trimmed my mustache.

Female Engagement Teams are the military's attempt to break cultural barriers for security's sake. You have heard of the burkas and jealous treatment of Pashto women. It is all true. It is not a good idea to look a female, even when fully robed. The FET is used during those delicate times, like searches and medical visits when having female Marines just makes sense.

There were also two journalists in tow. Two French, female journalists. If there was ever an antithesis to a grunt... I had to warn Spud.

"Spud, there will be women journalists from France here. For the love of God, don't talk to them."

"Yes, sir."

"They will get you to spill all your secrets by using their womanly charms. You will be helpless! Don't say anything to them. Especially don't talk about Rules of Engagement, current operations, Mr. Stanley McCrystal, don't-ask-don't-tell, vehicle survivability, aircraft capability, dwell time, comm issues, future operations, our tactics or Taliban tactics. You got that?"

"Yes, sir." Spud has one emotion- deadpan.

“Spud, I will fire you and send you back to headquarters if you talk to them. You will be sitting at the Help Desk until your spine rots if you so much as nod in their direction.”

“Yes, sir.” Deadpan.

“But we have a couple metric shit-tons of chicken, so you can eat until you are fat and stupid. You happy about that?”

“Yes, sir.” A little more deadpan.

“Spud, you are going home early. I am promoting you to Sergeant, and arranging for you to ride in a Cobra gunship so thou can smite thine enemies. Happy about that?”

“Yes, sir.” Enthusiastically deadpan.

The frozen slabs arrived a little late. The convoy was late too. It turned out to be just like the 4th of July celebrated in the wee hours of the 5th of July several weeks ago, Marines were happy to sacrifice sleep for the flesh of the most noble yardbird. The chicken and women arrived at the same time, and the cook fires flamed with JP-8 like the triumphant funeral pyres of Troy.

I, of course, was stuck inside the command center; my aircraft checked on. I contemplated stepping out of the dank, secret room with my headphones on and radio strapped to my chest, saying things like “Cleared hot!” and “Tally my position?” I stayed in my cage, like a timid roommate in a raucous frat-house. I did get the aircraft to take a look at Manland. The fires were blazing hot-spots on the thermal image and stick figures danced around like savages.

“Is this your pos?” The aircraft said, “...looks like you are on fire.” He checked off and I ventured out. Marines were everywhere. Some were hovered over the white-hot fires of charcoal and chicken grease. Gunny D was frying up homemade French fries with a FET member he knew. The other Marines were clustered about in groups like they were at a junior-high dance.

Our artillery representative has very little to do. He has become an expert baker and amateur electrician. He also has an unpronounceable, highly Teutonic name. It starts with Reg... then turns into an endless string of guttural clucks and hard consonants. Reghrerghrghrgrgh liberated some wood pallets from the burn pile to fashion a respectable patio furniture set. Teutonic or no, he does good work. The XO, Frank, and our two French guests were reclining in uncomfortable style.

“GEICO! Good to see you.” The XO spotted me and beckoned. “Meet our guests.”

I tripped over someone’s rifle on my way to shake hands. I murmured something polite to them all. The ladies were my age and attractive. My 3 years of French 101 in high school completely failed me, and I forgot how to say bon jour. The XO tried to talk me up. “He is a helicopter pilot.”

“Ah, ze...je ne sais pas.... Aye-patch?” Her eyes brightened.

“Apache, no. The Army has that. Remember the big, leaky thing you came in on? He fly's that.”

“Oh... That drops bombs, no?”

“No.” I confessed. “We just haul things.”

“Geico here can call in air strikes though...”

“How... nice.”

I felt ultra-awkward. I could think of nothing to ask them about. I felt there was nothing I could volunteer about my life in Manland that was not uber-classified or horribly inappropriate. Frank was playing it cool, like the Latino James Bond he is.

Things were not going well with the FET ladies either. Gunny D had shown them the showers when they first arrived. “Eww.” He showed them to their private, isolated quarters. “Why is it so hot?” He was bewildered; too shocked to be angry at the affront to all of his anger-based activity in the past week.

The chicken was overcooked then devoured. Resident cats sprang from the shadows for the scraps. The place was deserted by 0330. I finished my late shift as the sun was coming up. When I woke, no one was around. The ladies had all left me and I returned to my somber command post, not sure if the night before was a dream. Was it? The malaria pills are almost as fun as having malaria.

Bill the sage: Bill appeared mysteriously. “The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.”

“What? Are you quoting Master and Commander?”

Bill is a Fleet Support Representative (FSR). FSR is a nice way of saying “overpaid, fat contractor”. I could not hate on him too much, since I aspire to be just like him in about a year. He was sent to Manland to work on the surveillance cameras. He did good work, but began to overstay his welcome. He was gregarious to the point of being a blowhard. He never slept. He just worked and drank coffee and watched movies and smoked, harassing anyone happening by the smoke pit.

By contract, FSRs have 30 seconds to tell you how long they served in the military, starting the moment you get introduced. Most don't waste any time. “Joe Schmo. Don't call me ‘sir’: 17 years enlisted in the Navy, son, been around the block a few times, seen some things. You wouldn't know. It was a different era.” And so on. It took Bill a full 30 seconds to admit he was ‘15 years. Army’.

Bill said something inappropriate about Wookies, and went about his business, which was watching a bootleg copy of The A-Team. I watched it with him and have to admit that Russian subtitles really enhance the movie experience.

The next afternoon, he was gone, just like my future journalist wives. Now all I have left are the Usual Suspects of Lieutenants and transient Staff NCOs. Regherhererrghr bakes and builds his respectable eco-patio furniture catalogue. Frank stays up late at night, obsessing about the enemy. Gunny yells, and the clock keeps ticking. 25% down. 75% to go.