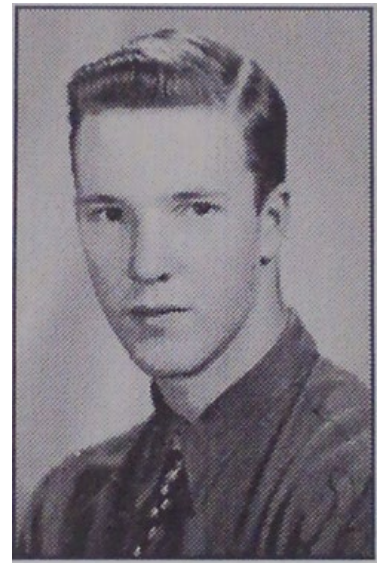


John M. Hazeltine

27 September 1946 – 27 September 1948
South Pacific, Mare Island (United States)
Corporal, USMC
2nd Lieutenant, Air Force (Reserve)

“I’m just not a military man, by nature.”

An interview with John Hazeltine
by Chris Hazeltine, Sonoran Trails Middle School VHP Advisor



Introduction:

At 90 years old, John Hazeltine is still an old cowboy in mind and still a vivid storyteller at heart. A third-generation Arizonan, John has a sense-memory of history and time that few possess. He remembers quite a lot! As a Marine, while his service was brief, his time in the Corps was still filled with stories that I remember hearing when I was young.

This is my father’s story.

In Prescott [Arizona], before you joined the service, what were you doing? What were the things that you were doing as a teenager?

I never was a teenager. I left home when I was fourteen and went to work on the ranch on the first of May the usual time for the spring round-up to start. I worked as a... just a regular cowboy, during the round-up; worked as a horse-breaker for two or three months, then worked the fall round-up, which end about the first of October. I then went back to my parents' home in Prescott, and went to school, starting a month late, having ended the semester a month early. The round-up usually started at the first of May, which was, of course, a month before school usually lets out. So, I had a rather short, seven month educational period; five months to work and no vacation.

What ranch were you working with?

Well... the one that I most closely identify with was the V-Bar-V Cattle Company, which was owned by Bruce and Fritzie Brockett. He, at one time, was a state senator. He was also president of the Arizona Cattle Growers Association and a big-time rancher. Our ranch was about eight miles wide and forty miles long, running more or less east to west across the rim. Its altitude ranged from about 2000-feet at the river, up to 6000 feet at the first rim, then across 10 miles of cedar country to the fence which divided the winter and summer ranges. The round-up camp, Buckhorn, was at the fence. From Buckhorn, the range continued upward and east for about fifteen miles, and 2000 more feet, into increasingly thick ponderosa pine, past Mahan Park, and a few miles farther toward Long Valley.

I was the only semi-permanent employee for about half a year because they didn't need me in the winter. At round-up time, the boss would go into Flagstaff and, because there was a war on and there were no able-bodied men available, he would hire any four guys he could find, the only requirement would be that they were bi-laterally symmetrical and could sit on a horse, because whatever thinking had to be done, he or I would do.

Now, I was... I was only fifteen or sixteen, but I was still the only one who was a cowboy, and the other guys were just people... you would say *'go, get that bunch of cattle and bring 'em over here; to make them move, just yell and slap a rope or do something... just do what I tell you.'* And then, when the round-up was over, and the cattle were sold, I'd go back to Prescott and start school, being already a month late.

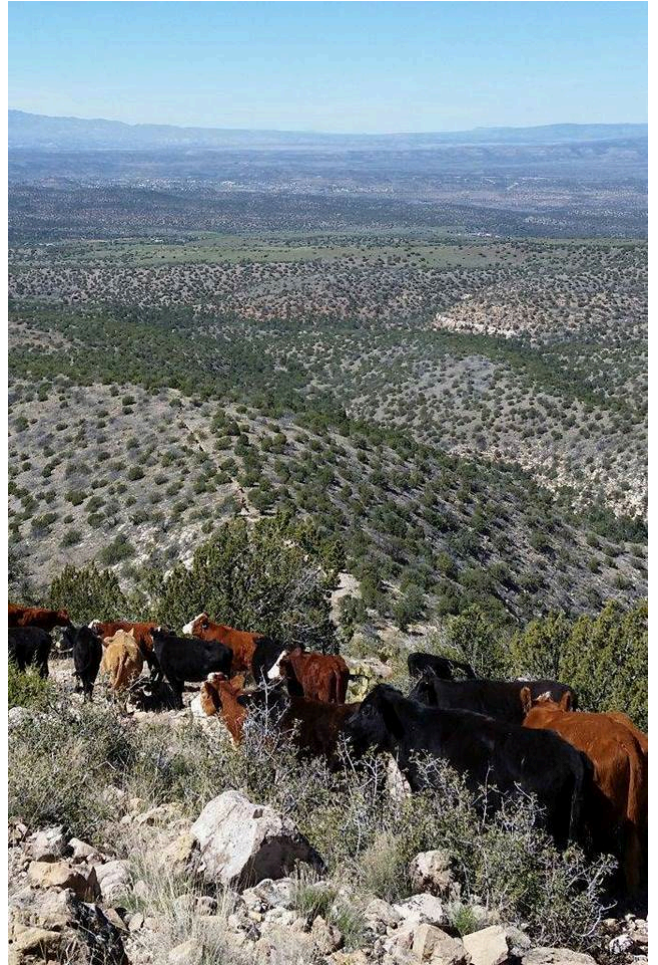
So, what made you decide to join the Marines?

Well, all my early teenage life, the draft had been in effect; I mean, it was just assumed, not necessarily properly, but it was generally assumed that any young man who is physically normal, was going to end up in the service. So, it wasn't a question of *if*, it was a question of *when*.

Well, not even a question of when... it was probably going to happen the minute you were out of school, because they weren't going to... they didn't want to interrupt your schooling, although in my case, I didn't have the same amount of schooling that other people had.

For some reason and I can't think what it was... before the round-ups started, that particular year, it was probably, oh, the last week in August, and I ran into two friends, that I had gone all through school with John Howerton and John Pearson... interesting enough, all three of our names were John [he laughs]. And, all three of us were in pretty much the same position: that we had not been drafted. But there was no question that we were going to be.

So, for no reason at all, that I can think of, we decided... well, if we're going to have to go do something, let's work the top end, you know, instead of just being another dog-face... let's be a Marine.



A long view of the V-Bar-V spread. This was typical terrain that John experienced while driving cattle as a working cowboy.

Photo courtesy of the Arizona Beef Blog & University of Arizona



1955. John posing with a horse he had just wrangled after it threw its rider and ran away Native Phoenixians will be interested to know that John is standing at the “corner” Camelback and Scottsdale Road, very close to where the Scottsdale Fashion Square Mall will stand, years from now.

In Prescott, there was a place you could sign up to be recruited. You were given a date to be down at the train depot, in my case, on the 27th of September. And, we were packed into a standard Pullman chair car, which was part of the train. Heading off to San Diego, we had two armed guards at one end of the chair car, and two other armed guards at the other end of the chair car, and the eighty of us in-between, none of us being allowed out of that chair car until we got to San Diego.

Interesting thing happened was that, as we were coming up that long, slow grade in California, the train had to slow down to about four-miles an hour, because of some track work that was being hastily repaired up, and the guards would let us get out and run along-side the track... because we'd been sitting for hours... so we'd be four, five at a time, trotting along beside the railroad track, to get a little exercise, and then get back on, and three or four more would go. And then we ended up, the next day, in San Diego, and buses hauled us to the Marine Corps depot.

Tell me about boot camp.

Well... it was different. Different than anything most of us are accustomed to. In the Marine Corps, you did what you were told, as you were told, when you were told, whether you liked the

idea or not. Just short of being told when to breathe. And, none of us, you know, in the first few days, was accustom to having every single thing we did monitored by somebody, and directed by somebody. And, so the change from going from eighty high-school boys, who were used to just drifting around, doing their thing, to Marine recruits doing what they were told... now, I wouldn't say it was traumatic, but it certainly was a change.

How'd you handle that?

You didn't have a choice. You either handled it well or something bad was gonna happen to you. It lasted ten weeks, and it started at six in the morning and ended, precisely, at ten o'clock at night. And in-between that six in the morning and ten at night, you did exactly what you were told, when, and how you were told. And, to a degree that civilians couldn't appreciate. You don't realize how much freedom you normally have...when to blow your nose or smoke a cigarette; well, when you're in boot camp, you don't have any freedoms.

It's just a great deal more intense. I mean, Marines take pride in being the top service of all services, and to get that way, you're gonna have to do everything you do better than anybody else, *'and this is where we start, buddy. Right now!'*

After boot camp, what happened?

Well, first, was I spent a little time in the Fleet Marine Force, on the Honda Knot, a transport...a large, Swedish transport ship. And we had a very horrible job of cruising the South Pacific and picking up bodies of servicemen where they had been buried, and bringing them home to their families to be buried somewhere else. I always thought was the most horrible idea that every existed, but somebody in authority thought it was important.



10 October 1947. The USAT Honda Knot passes under the Golden Gate Bridge, bearing the remains of 3028 American World War II dead.

Flickr Images.

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: On 16 May 1946, Congress enacted Public Law 383: *"An Act to provide for the evacuation and return of the remains of certain persons who died and are buried outside the continental limits of the United States"* (Public Law 383, Seventy-ninth Congress). This act, unique to the United States (as no other ally during this time repatriated their war dead), was established for the repatriation of dead servicemen from 3 September 1939 – 30 June 1946. The Army paid an average cost of \$564.50 for each remains. At a cost of over \$200,000,000 (more than 1 billion dollars in today's terms), the Army was able to repatriate over 56% of WWII casualties. The Honda Knot was the first ship to arrive in Oakland, CA from Honolulu, Hawai'i.]

I was only involved with the operation for a couple of months. It seemed to me that if ... if I was a civilian and my husband or my father or my brother or someone had been shot on Guadalcanal, and had been buried with appropriate services on Guadalcanal, I believe I would have left him on Guadalcanal. Why people wanted to have those bodies brought home... astonishes me. I can remember the tail-end of it, when we docked in San Francisco, was then the Marines that were involved in the transport, all stood at honor-guard, and hundreds and hundreds of families showed up to get caskets, that they had been informed would be brought back.

The whole thing... why anybody would do that is a mystery to me, but I wasn't in charge.



5000 mourners wait at San Francisco's Marina Green to pay tribute to the war dead. The USAT Honda Knot is seen in the background.
Photo courtesy of O
hm Sweet Ohm

What happened afterwards?

After... after the brief tour with the [Honda Knot], I was simply assigned to the United States Naval Retraining Command, not having the faintest idea what it was or what I did. And so I showed up and I realized... I was a prison guard.

In the service, when you did bad things, you paid a price for it. All the way from a general court martial down, into the Marine Corps, a Captain's Mast... different levels of authority. And... somebody, as it turned out probably mistakenly, thought it's a shame that when we have to put sailors into prison and give them a DD or a BCD.

I'll tell you, the reason for having a Navy in the United States is to haul Marines around. There are some sailors who probably don't buy that, but that's the fact of life.

The Navy is a small branch of the Marine Corps.

And somebody decided, what a shame it is that when a Marine or a sailor breaks the rules and is court-martialed, and is sent to a, quote, "prison," unquote, that he will serve his time, whatever

that time is, and at the end, be greeted either by DD or a BCD. Dishonorable discharge or a Bad Conduct Discharge. Dumped back out into society, and there goes a sailor or Marine.

And, so somebody thought, now wouldn't it be a good idea if we could take that prison time, and... I don't know whether you call it – re-educate, educate, transform – these prisoners into productive servicemen and put them back into service. And that's why you never said 'prisoner,' you never said that term.

United States Naval Retraining Command was the name of this institution. And, theoretically, that's what it was. It was on Mare Island, which is an island out in San Francisco bay. The island was kinda triangular, with the point on the south. And, surrounded, I would say, 90% by ocean, or by ocean water, bay water, whatever you want to call it. The other 10% was a series of swamps, just like the Everglades. 10% land and 90% water. From a standpoint of an island, could you actually have walked off that island, if you had done it right? And I think the answer is no, because even if you started to walk between some of those lagoons, you'd have ended up... you would have come to an end, and you'd have to go back, start all over, again. There was a



1948. Birds-eye view of Mare Island. Circled is the location of the U.S. Naval Retraining Command.
Alamy Images

little chunk across the very northern end that was swampy stuff, where the rest of it was open to the San Francisco Bay.

And then Vallejo was the city that was across... Mare Island strait was the hunk of water between us and the city, and it was a city of ...oh, I don't know, wouldn't have any idea, but in today's

terms probably it would be 35-40 thousand. And strictly a service city, I mean Georgia Street was the main street, with nothing but bars and whorehouses.

On that island, there were three major functions. There was the Owens Naval Hospital, which is the Navy's biggest hospital, and the one in which the quadruple amputees ended up, and where prosthetics were developed for them. That kind of thing. There was a gigantic submarine repair and service depot, biggest on the west coast. And there were the 400 Marines at the Marine depot and the retraining command.

The retraining command with about twelve-hundred inmates; two-hundred Marines, more or less; a thousand sailors, more or less.

We had two Marine detachments on the island -- us, for the retraining command, and then a detachment, even bigger than us, a little bit, probably had 300, that were the policemen, so to speak, of the islands... stood on the fence to keep bad guys out, check cars in and out, and speed limits... do what policemen would have done, if it had been a civilian facility, which it wasn't.

Neither associated with the others. There was great hostility between the Marine Barracks, as they were called, and Retraining, as we were called. We'd play games, softball games, you know, that kinda stuff. We had games between us, but there was no interrelationship between the personnel in one and the personnel in the other.

And so, there were two Marine detachments on the island, one of about three hundred, and those guys were, what you could call, the military policemen for the entire island. And the other detachment was at the retraining command, and we ran this thing, which was a prison in fact, despite the fact that it was never referred to as such.

Really?

It was not a prison in terms you think of a civilian prison. It was a football-shaped area, with one-half of that surface being twelve-foot high chain-link fence with wire... with barbed-wire on top. And the other half being an almost vertical cliff that ran from as low as about five or six feet high, up toward the middle, which is about fifty-feet high, down the row to the other end, and had nine guard posts around it. And just outside the northern most edge of that compound, was where our barracks was. And the barracks was one of the... anybody that'd been in the service knows what they are... an H-shaped, two-story building, which would house probably three-hundred people, with bunks.



Northwest view of the Naval Retraining Command, otherwise known as building 84, or "Old 84."
Library of Congress Images.



Southwest view of the Naval Retraining Command, otherwise known as building 84, or "Old 84."
Library of Congress Images.

And the bar of the "H" in the middle, was sort of administrative offices, and then both first and second floors, on the ends, were... one end, in this case, was Navy. And the other end Marine Corps.

Except for solitary confinement, we had no single-cells. It was open. Theoretically, guys were being taught things, I guess, maybe auto-mechanics... you know... carpentry. There were some chances to learn a trade. It's hard to say what they were being taught, because the education process was certainly not very obvious if there was really any education going on. And, our prisoners were mostly... their offense had

to do with desertion, overly absent without authority, drunkenness, disorderly physical confrontations, I don't think... we didn't have anybody who was a murderer. We, who were working with the prisoners, circulated in the prison, regularly, and without fear of being attacked.

Because the kind of convicts, and they *were* convicts; they'd been convicted by court marshals. Most of them were for things that wouldn't endanger you. I would say, 50% of them, had to do with over-leave, you know... desertion. And the other 50% was everything else you could think of. And, I don't know... I wouldn't have the faintest idea what the typical sentence was. You know, whether it was a year or two years or five years...

They were there and then they just weren't there, anymore. You had no idea. Had they gone back to duty? Had this actually worked, somehow? You know, 'cause the idea was to send less and less of them out into society as dishonorably discharged, and more of them back to service, to do the job they had signed up to do in the first place. I don't know whether it worked or not, because the minute the guy was gone, he might have been gone two-weeks before you knew he was gone, and you had no idea where he went.

The guys that you got used to seeing, would disappear, and you don't know whether they DD'd out or BCD'd out, or went back to service, or got shot. They just weren't there anymore.

And in the meantime, others showed up.

Yeah. The bus'd come from... oh, there's a big kind of a holding up in Wisconsin or Minnesota, up there somewhere. I know that regularly, say about every two months, a bus would show up

full, you know, we had maybe five guards on-board and twenty... victims. And they became new members of our tong.

And the reason for having the Marine Corps there was to serve as prison guards, stand watch, haul prisoners around, called a chaser – an armed guard who would escort one or more prisoners – if they had to go do a doctor's appointment on... ashore, anything like that. Theoretically, it took a watch, which was one eight-hour chunk of time. Took nine guards for the nine positions, took a corporal of the guard, above him a sergeant of the guard, above him an officer-of-the-day... so you had twelve guys on a watch.

And it took three watches a day. Eight hours each. And, theoretically, you stood guard one day, you were off guard two days, and then stood guard the third day. So, it took batches of about fifteen guys to make up a watch, and you had three of them in service at the time, so right off the bat, you had a hundred and fifty, and I think... I think there probably were two-hundred-and-fifty Marines at that station when I showed up. And the duty was so horrible, if there was any way you could transfer out, you would, and nobody in his right mind would transfer in, so anybody that came in new was simply assigned there. I don't suppose anybody had any idea why they were assigned there.

Our corps shrank from, when I first got there, probably close to two-fifty down to maybe a hundred and seventy-five, or something; and went from one day on duty and two days off, to sometimes two days on duty and one day off.

What was the duty like?

There were nine posts around the outside of the prison, our barracks was within twenty feet of the fence, just outside it, on the south side, and our administrative building was part of the northern wall, so in-between was the rest of the wire, and that kind of stuff.

And with nine posts around it, you had to always be in a position, on watch, where you could see both flanking guards. The guards on the fence carried 45-caliber, 1911A Colt sidearms and the guards on the cliff carried Remington 12-gauge riot guns, loaded with 9-pellet, double-charged shells. It was really shitty when the fog came in, really thick fog. They'd double-guard. One time we had a triple guard, had everybody that was on the guard, on duty at the same time, which put us not more than ten-feet apart, cause that's as far as you could see. And it was all done standing up. There were no seats or anything. You stood on watch. I can remember that fog thing... and that would be only at night... I can remember that happening maybe a couple times that we had two watches on at the same time; one we had all three, but not very often did it happen, because that meant that a guy who'd been standing up for four hours, now got to stand up for another four. And the guys who were supposed to have just gone to bed, were back out. The guys who were gonna be coming out, later, had to come out. And the guys that were out, were out. So you had all three watches on duty at the same time, until the fog lifted. And then whoever stayed was the one who'd be on the next watch, and everybody else went back to bed. You know, you can just take so much of that.

Generally speaking, I would say that unless somebody makes an effort to make it otherwise, military life is more boredom than anything else. You know, you are there to take care of

emergencies, and if you do your job right, there aren't gonna be too many. Really nothing else happens.

I think at the retraining command... the reason that assignment was hated so badly, was, first of all, you're spending... you're spending your life controlling prisoners, which is not really something people would choose to do. And secondly, you're out on an island. Thirdly, the duty was so bad that your staff is dwindling as quickly as they can get out, and nobody in his right mind would wanna come... you have to be assigned to a job. Our 250 complement probably had shrunk down to around 175, which now meant you weren't... it wasn't one a day on, two days off; it was two days on and one day off.

And that's the day. Month after month after month. Standing there, supervising prisoners. When you're off, there is nothing but sitting there on a bunk, reading a book.

If you had liberty, you could go ashore. Ordinarily, you went into Vallejo, which was the town across the strait that you got to by ferry boat. And did what people do in service towns: go to cat houses or get drunk or both. Or, if you had some money...and of course a private's pay was fifty-one dollars a month. So, you weren't going to do anything very wild. If you wanted... there's nothing to stop you from going to San Francisco except for the fact that it costs money to get there, and you had no money when you got there.

So, even that added to the boredom.

Yes. It didn't offer anything.

So you were like a prisoner, as well.

Just about. And the only...the only thing you have that is not going to be predetermined almost down to the minute when you're watch, is off-duty. And then you're gonna be out on the grinder [drill field] drilling or you're gonna be... I remember at least twice we went to the rifle range. There's two of them up in Northern California... wonderful fun because... particularly if you're...

...Good at it?

...'cause you've got 500s... you've got wonderful rifles, and short range, long range, and all kinds of stuff... so you spend three weeks on the rifle range, and that's a break from the other crap that goes on. I loved the rifle range; in fact, interestingly enough, on pre-qual day, I equalled the range record. But on qualification day, I did alright, but not a new record.

You said, 'except for solitary confinement,' you had no single-cells. So, you had solitary confinement?

It was for the really, really bad guys, if you had one. It was a cell, probably, ten-feet wide and fifteen-feet long, and it had a, sort of a urinal-thing in the corner. Solid wall, solid wall, solid wall, and chain-link wall, where you could see in. And nothing, not a single anything inside there. Not a piece of equipment, furniture...

No bed?

Not anything. So, when you really had a really bad guy, you put him in there. And the guard sat at a desk, right outside. When bedtime came, two Marines would show up with a bunk and mattress, slide it in, with the guard still on guard, slide it in for him to sleep on.

And, in the morning, out it would go, and he'd be back on the floor. Nothing to read, nothing to... just sit there. Now, seldom did we have anybody in there because the reputation of being in solitary was bad enough, nobody wanted to take a chance on it.

But this guy... he'd been in there couple times before, and I was unfortunately the guard on duty, at the desk. And so, probably six-o'clock in the morning, the lights come on, and he's lying there with his feet toward me, and his hands behind his head, and I said, '*Okay, get up time for us babies.*' And he just laid there. And I said, '*Up time!*' And he just laid there. And so, I took off my side-arm and I put it in the desk, and I pick up my stick, and I open the door, stepped in... grilled door, it's all grilled so I can see everything... pull the thing back, and I said, '*If I were you, I'd get up.*' He just laid there, so I broke his leg. With my stick.

And I called the paramedics, '*I've got a prisoner in here that has a broken leg, that ran into my nightstick...*' and so they came, hauled him off to the hospital.

What I should have done, probably, would been to have called... gotten several other Marines to be there... and I don't know what they would have done...I mean, there was no question, what he had in mind, *I'm not gonna do anything you say*. Now whether it would have been different if there had been three or four of us...I don't know. But, it was starting to irritate me.

And to be clear, none of you were MPs, correct?

No, no, no, no, no.

None of you had had any kind of law enforcement, criminal, or guard training?

No training. Absolutely none.

How long were you stationed at Mare Island?

For eighteen months. Thereabouts; I don't know, exactly. Nothing really changed. I mean, the duty, which was hideous duty, got worse and worse and worse. If you could get out, you got out. Even if you had to sign up for another year, two years... you got out.

One of the sad things was this. Most people don't know or remember anything about the Bataan Death March that happened in World War II, but included among the seventy-thousand people who made that march, half of whom died in the process, there were some sailors and some Marines.

When we recaptured the Philippines, they were rescued. Since the war was almost over, I would imagine most of the Marines were delighted to be offered a discharge and get out. Some of them, however, decided to go ahead and re-enlist. And the brass, thinking that it would be a really cushy duty, assigned several of them to the retraining command.

They were all sergeants, and all were drunks. All badly – disoriented or detached – from life as a real thing; from having been beaten and starved and tortured. You know... the things that happened to them while they were prisoners of war in Bataan.

So, what somebody thought would be nice, since being stationed at this – *not prison* but retraining command – was supposed to be a cushy job, they'd give a couple of these survivors, in sort of thanks for their fortitude, what turned out to be terribly unpleasant jobs.

They weren't prison guards... prison administrators, let's call them that. Just a horrible thing even to think about. Well, somebody thought it would be a ...sort of a gift... they wouldn't have to worry about spit-and-polish and that kind of stuff.

They had given Sergeant Andy Edwards, known as Eddy, a job there. The reason I knew about him was that he was the Armourer for our (shrinking from 250 down to 175) Marines, and I was his assistant. And so, I dealt with him part of the time; when I was not on the guard, I was working with him. And, his solution to a most deadly kind of life there was booze.

So, he's a prisoner, held in a prison, and then given a prison job, thinking that that would be...

I can't imagine a worse decision. I can't imagine a worse decision. But, you know, even the Marine Corps makes bad decisions, and that certainly was one of them. And, the net effect was that he pretty much just doped off when he was on duty, and, I don't know, since he wasn't on the guard and didn't have to stay sober... see, if you were one of the people on the guard, at least one day out of every three, maybe two days out of every three, you were gonna be... you had to be there 'cause you were on duty...

... and you're doing something, such as it is.

But as an administrator, making sure the rifles were all clean or whatever his job was supposed to be... he had no life at all, except lolling around. As the Armourer, he had really no responsibilities. What's he gonna do, clean everybody's rifle once a day? You know, that sort of thing. I guess he had liberty every night, if he wanted to go ashore. I don't know that he went ashore, and then came back drunk *every time*, but almost every time.

One affair that bothered me, not because of what cost me or did to me or did for me or anything else, but the concept of it. The Marine Corps made a big deal about "Marines for Marines." You took care of each other.

Okay.

Okay. I was standing guard, on the fence, at the post, that was only about twenty-feet from the front door of our headquarters... our barracks. And Andy came home blind drunk, as always, and stumbled up and sat down on the front steps, which put him sitting no more than fifteen-feet from me where I was standing guard at the gate.

And he said, 'You know, I feel like busting up some stuff, government stuff!'

And I said, 'Now Andy, that's, that's not really an awful good idea.'

He said, 'That's what I'm gonna do, I'm gonna sit here and rest for a minute, I'm gonna find some government stuff and bust it up.'

And I said, 'Why don't you... you're only twenty-five feet, thirty-feet from your bed, why don't you just go in, go to bed.' And he just sat there. And so I said, 'Here, let me...'

He said, 'I don't know if I can get up.'

And I said, 'Well then, let me help you to your bed.'

So I... *deserted* my post, and helped him up the steps, down the hall, to the first office – his bedroom – which was no more than ten-feet from my post. Flopped him down on the bed, came back, and found the Officer of the Day, standing at my post.

He asked me where I had been, what I had been doing, and I told him exactly...

A couple days after that, I stood before what was called a Captain's Mast, which was a disciplinary action, below the major levels, and was busted from Corporal back to Private, First Class. So, I had to take off all the double-stripes on my uniforms, and put single-stripes back on, and, you know, that's really all that it amounted to. By the time I got discharged, I was back to being a Corporal, again.

So, really...what bothered me far more than anything else was that a Marine helping a Marine, who was being treated especially because of his service to the country, would get his ass in a crack, with another Marine officer. Was this Marines for Marines? I'm taking care of Sergeant Edwards, and because I'm gone ninety-seconds, I'm gonna lose a stripe. Because of you, who are also a Marine. So, that just one of those things... you know, if you play by the rules, that's exactly what the rules were.

And it seemed like you were playing by the rules.

Well, I was bending them, I was bending them, the 'we take care of each other' way.

What happened afterward?

You know, it's interesting. I think somebody in the Marine administration kinda felt that I'd been shit on, because interestingly enough, after that incident, after I was busted, I was taken off the guard and put on 'situational duties.'

Which is... means what?

Oh, making a little, wooden fence around our front yard with a lawn. All kinds of little things that were... some of them actually were fun. I think I got given some nice things to do, by somebody, and I have no idea why, but I do know that I came off, not immediately after thereafter, but some time thereafter, off the guard watch.

And you think it was as a result, without verifying it...?

I can't think of any reason why they did that. I really enjoyed the last few months, because it wasn't me and the prisoners all the time. And it was kinda hard to keep thinking... you never got to where you knew all twelve-hundred of them, but a lot of those guys had been there... they were there... I know the retraining command had been in operation only a couple of months before I got there. Not very long. Maybe at the most, six months. It was a brand new thing. Nobody knew anything about it. And it was obvious nobody knew anything about it. How much longer after I was gone, did it last, I don't know because, as I say, I don't think we were kept in the dark on purpose. But I know that none of us duty Marines had any idea... were some of these guys, our guests, going back to active duty? Or were they all rode out on DDs or BCDs... we never knew...are we having any... making any change?

I have no idea whether that process was ever, to any degree, successful, or not... it just happened.

What unusual memories do you have during your time at the Retraining Command?

Weird thing. The Marine Corps was famous for operating by its own rules and regulations, absolutely. No deviation. And, one of the rules was that you will never take a prisoner – and I'm referring to our inmates as prisoners – ashore to do a job, to paint something for somebody that needs to be painted, or get his teeth cleaned, or something, with less than two guards.

Okay. So, two-to-one.

Two-to-one. If you're gonna take a work body ashore, let's say three guys, you'll have maybe eight, nine guys. But they will be in multiples. That establishes that rule.

We had a prisoner, whose name was Liljenberg, who was a farm boy from Minnesota, and who had been drafted, and who was reputed to have been a wonderful farmer, but he was not militarily inclined, because he went AWOL from Navy boot-camp. Six weeks of service, and he's AWOL.

Well, where did the Navy go to look for him? Back to the farm.

He just went home?

Yeah. And so, now where he had maybe a year's service, three weeks active time, the rest of it all AWOL. And so, they sent him to us, to the United States Naval Retraining Command.

And, he became the only prisoner who ever escaped from us.

Nobody has ever known how he did it, but they do know that, that when the local swimming pool closed down for the winter, and was really closed, kinda barred up, and then reopened for the spring, his prisoner clothes were found inside the swimming pool fence. So, somehow, he had gotten some civilian clothes, gotten in there, changed his clothes, left his prison clothes in there, and gotten off the island, and somehow had gone back to his farm. And, six month later, having returned to the farm, they picked him back up and sent him back to us.

And so, he had become embittered by this time, and was very difficult to handle, and this small, Naval prison in, somewhere northeast, wasn't equipped to handle him, so they sent him to us at the Retraining Command. And because we knew he was big trouble just waiting to happen, we transferred him to Treasure Island [Naval Station] that had a brig that, thought smaller than ours, had a set of high security cells.

Somewhere along the way, Liljenberg had been trained as a baker and was assigned to work in the galley on T.I. Within a day or two, he tried to escape from there by climbing out through one of the big hoods over the bake ovens. He was frustrated in this effort and, having worn out his welcome on T.I. they sent him back to us.

Our brass was not too happy to have Liljenberg back and concluded that the only solution to the problem was to transfer him to Terminal Island, which was for the Marine Corps and the Navy, the top of restricted prisons, near San Pedro, in southern California.

This is an actual prison, no fancy name. It's a brig.

No fancy name. Cells. They're in cells. This brig was the end of the line for naval prisoners, sort of a military Alcatraz. Unlike us, most of their guests were there for life.

And so the only remaining problem is that we've got to get him to San Pedro. And, I can't imagine why I got picked, but when we got into the train depot, it turned out there wasn't any other guards; there was just me. So, in spite of all these rules and regulations, all by my ownself, I was gonna chase Liljenberg five hundred miles to San Pedro.

Before the crack of dawn, we got onto the train in Oakland. And by this time, he'd become *very* difficult. So, we sat in the chair car, with him on the aisle row and me, because my weapon is on my right-side, even though I'm left-handed, it's on my right-side; I want my gun to be as far away from him as possible.

So, he's sitting on the aisle, and every time a girl... woman... of any size or shape would come by, he'd run his hand down their leg or something like that, and I'd jab him in the ribs with my elbow. And it got to the point where I was having no effect at all.

So, I put the leg-irons on him, and I put my foot between his feet, on the leg-iron. And so, every time he did a bad thing, I just stomped down on that leg-iron, which cut into his shins, 'cause they are just bare steel on his shins.

So, when we got to San Pedro, his shoes were full of blood, from the stomping... and he was still doing it! And so, I unloaded him on them, and they were surprised that there was only one guard, no one had ever heard of this before. So, they put him in their brig. This brig was surrounded by a double, circular fence. One outside; then another about fifteen feet inside of it. Inside the prison cell building itself, the prisoners had some privileges: they could go out and wash their clothes and hang it on a line, and stuff.

Well, he decided he was gonna escape from them, too. So... and now I'm reporting what I was told, I was not involved; I had long since gone back home. He apparently got a clothes-line pole, or something, and thought he could vault over one of these fences. So he took a run at it, and he made it enough... over the inside fence... he got caught in the wire, and got all ripped up, and everything, but he crashed to the ground between the rows of fences.

And at this point, one of the guards, who stood post between the fences, just cocked one in and blew him in half with a shotgun. That ended Liljenberg's escapes.

In his case, they had taken a very, very good, high production farmer, and make him into a rotten serviceman. And so everybody loses. He just got more and more irascible as time went on, as he became further... everything he wanted to do, was frustrated one way or another. And, I was told that he attempted an escape, made it part way out, and then some guard did the smart thing, just blew him in half with a shotgun.

So, you said you were at the Retraining Command for eighteen months. What happened after that?

Well, the Marine Corps was very big on encouraging its personnel, as they left the Corps, to get as much education as possible. And so I had made an application at the University of Arizona, with the semester starting on September 4th, and I was up for discharge on September 27th. So, the Marine Corps gave me a discharge that was called an 'at the convenience of the government' discharge. Which I think had a lot more to it than just getting me out three weeks early. I felt that it also meant that if they thought they needed me back, they had prior right.

Anyhow, I left San Francisco area on the 1st of September, and on the 4th of September, I was a freshman at University of Arizona

So, you were discharged from the Marines about '47, '48?

Eight.

Eight. And you went...?

Directly to Tucson.

And enrolled into school.

Yes.

You told me that when you were at U of A, you enlisted in the Air Force. Why?

That was about the time the Korean War was starting. And so, the need for bodies was building up, again. And, the University of Arizona had an ROTC. Two branches. One of them was Air Force; one of them was Army, um... supply. So, I opted for Air Force, hoping that it would keep me from being called back by the Marines.

That put me into the Air Force, as a reservist, I guess you'd call it. And so, for two years, I wore a uniform to school, two days a week, and I had Air Force classes, and I did extremely well. One of the two days each week was done out on the drill field. And, quite frankly, and with complete modesty, I was a hellva lot better drill instructor than *anybody* else. I was the only former Marine in the program. I was a Flight Commander and by the end of the semester, my bunch of feather merchants could do things on a drill field that the U of A had never seen before.

And so, when graduation date came along, all of these platoons of Air Force guys, who'd be practicing on what we'd call, the *Marines* call, the grinder... a drill field. Three platoons, and their platoon leader, came marching by the stands that had the university brass, and all they did was come marching by and smile.

We didn't. My platoon didn't do that. We did '*to the rear*' march, '*to the right flank*' march, '*to the left flank*' march, '*about*' march... *squad one, forward march, squad two forward*... we put on a show for them. And then... moved off.

Later, I got a lot of positive comments about our performance. Around a year after that, I got a telephone call from a major... in Chicago.

He said, 'A captain and I... Captain.... Smith... and I, are coming to Phoenix to take you to dinner.'

And I said, okay? I think.

And so, they showed up, and they said, "Now this is gonna dazzle you. Because you were the Distinguished Military Graduate, last year..."

I said, 'The *what*!?'

"You didn't know that?"

I said, 'No, I didn't know that. I was the *distinguished* military graduate?' Been nice if somebody had told me, but they didn't. I said, 'Well, hurray, hurray for me.'

They said, "Because of that, we're gonna offer you a first-lieutenantcy, not the second lieutenant that you are now, a first-lieutenantcy, in the *regular* Air Force." Not the reserve.

And I said, 'Oh.' And I said, 'Well, I'm just proud as punch, and appreciate what I know is an extremely kind offer, but if I were to become a regular officer in the Air Force, I can't imagine who would suffer more, me or the Air Force. Because, I'm just not a military man, by nature. And, so, thank you, very much, but no thank you.'

And they said, "WHAT? Nobody had ever turned this down."

And I said, 'Well, mark this up as number one.' And so, I stayed in the reserve. And about... oh, two years in school, five years after that... about the fifth year after I was out of school, but still in reserve, I couldn't pass the physical, because of my hearing. So, I was given the medical discharge.

What you were studying in school, as a student.

The classes I took boiled down to being pre-vet. And I had made an application at one of the two really good vet schools in the country at that time: one was Colorado A&M and one was in Iowa. And, I'd been accepted to Colorado A&M, and Uncle Sam already had my college education paid for. I had thirty-six months paid education, plus seventy-five buck a month cash money. And I worked...I had a job – at least one job – every minute I was in school. When I got out of school, I graduated with \$22,000 in my checking account. In debt, not *one penny*. Exactly the opposite of what's happening, today.

What I really wanted to do was be a vet. But, the family pressure! I was the only male in my generation of my family's off-spring. In 1877, my family had founded a bank, which it still continued to run; the first bank in the territory of Arizona. And there was a great deal of pressure put on me to go to work for the bank. I couldn't think of any job I would like to do less than that. And as I think back on it, now, I know I could somehow have scrounged up enough money to have gotten through three years of vet school...

Right.

...my dad would have helped me out... I could have done it, one way or another, if there hadn't been so much pressure from this 'bank thing.'

And this was pressure from your dad, as well?

Well, some from him, but mostly from his brother, who was president of the bank. So, I ended up going to work for the bank, but not immediately.

I had a little farm, a chicken farm, for about five years...

In Prescott?

Yeah. A small farm. I think I had, maybe, five thousand, egg-laying chickens. And because I was a local, and everybody knew me, all the major markets bought my eggs. So, I had no problem getting rid of my product. But the pressure, this *bank* pressure, just... was constant. And so, ultimately, I gave up.

Did you work in Prescott, first?

I worked for the bank in Prescott... and I'll have to digress here.

In 1871, my grandfather came out from Cincinnati, I believe. And he and two associates founded the first bank in the territory of Arizona, which was called The Bank of Arizona. It was headquartered in Prescott, which was the territorial capitol. And, a thing, which we would now call a branch, but was then called an agency, opened up in Phoenix. And Phoenix, as we'd know, grew like a mushroom, and it wasn't very long until that agency was bigger than the Prescott

branch bank. Bigger than the main office. So, some of its employees and their associates made an offer to buy itself out from the old bank of Arizona.

Okay.

The 'bought' branch became First National Bank of Arizona. Well I had worked in the bank in Prescott and Cottonwood and Flagstaff. So now, we were part of the First National Bank of Arizona. They bought us. And, somebody said, "Okay, we're gonna transfer you to Phoenix." So, off I went...

Very much like the military...

Yes. Well, it was... it was, certainly a way to go up the ladder, faster, than sticking around in Prescott.

Did Sherman [Hazeltine] come down; did you work for him?

No, he never left Prescott.

Did the pressure continue?

No, no, because by this time, we merged... at the time of the merger between the old Bank of Arizona and First National Bank, was in 1956. They were just about ten-times the size of our family bank. So, we just became a small chunk.

It switched around. And so now you're the agency, in essence, for them.

Yeah. And I was transferred from Flagstaff... I was in Flagstaff at the time of the merger, which was in '56. I was transferred back to Prescott, and from Prescott, transferred to Phoenix, and from Phoenix, transferred to Tucson. I don't believe anybody would admit this, but it appeared that any time there was a real, rotten, stinking, mess somewhere... send John.

To fix it?

Yeah. Because everywhere I went, was a mess. Even the first few branches I managed, I went into because they were messes. Huge amounts of past-due loans and loan charge-offs and employee turn-over and that kinda stuff. So, that's how I got started.

You were the fix-it guy, in essence.

I don't think I realized it quite to that degree, at the time it was happening, but that's the way it turned out.

Can you describe what you mean by 'a mess?'

Okay. A very odd situation existed in Tucson. Far and away, the major bank was Southern Arizona Bank and Trust Company, and it was owned by TransAmerica Corporation, almost completely... I guess, probably completely. And they had acquired it from a guy who the United States ambassador to England... his name was Lewis Douglas... Ambassador Lewis Douglas. And the agreement was he would sell his ownership, which was almost a total of the bank, to TransAmerica Corporation, as long as they promised.....as long as he was alive, they didn't screw around with mergers and name-changes and one thing or another. There couldn't be an effective merger, 'cause part of the deal was, when they bought from 'One-Eyed' Pete, which is what we all called Lewis Douglas, the agreement was they wouldn't change anything.

So, for a period of time, in the city of Tucson, which had never before had a First National Bank of Arizona branch, now had a branch system of First National Bank of Arizona and Southern Arizona Bank Trust, both exclusively owned by the same company, competing with each other, with two different names, in the same city.

When Lewis Douglas died, they hadn't flapped the lid of the coffin down before a merger took place. And the Southern Arizona Bank and Trust Company, which was much, much larger in Tucson than we were, was absorbed by First National Bank.

Well, 'One-Eyed' Pete's son, Jimmy Douglas, was one of the most unpleasant, nasty people I have ever known. He cheated on his wife, openly. He was hated by his employees. And he hated this merger, because he had envisioned himself becoming president of Southern Arizona Bank and Trust Company on the demise of his father. Obviously, he wasn't gonna become the president, and he was dead-set against this merger, but there was nothing he could do about it.

And so, to placate him, our management system said, *'If you're willing to move to Prescott....excuse me, to Phoenix... where this whole operation is run, we'll give you one of the major functions. And that's as close...'* now, they didn't say this, but implying, *'... and that's the closest you're ever gonna get to the top.'*

So, he did. When he moved to Phoenix, the major function of the bank given to him...was me. Because I was in charge of the cashier division, which ran practically everything.

I stuck it out for about a year, and was working very well because every week, we had a meeting... I had fourteen departments, in my division. Every week, all fourteen department heads and I would get together. I think, probably Wednesday morning, in a two-hour meeting, everybody would tell everybody what they were doing and we'd keep track of what was going on. Well... and Jimmy Douglas, our boss, never appeared at any one of these meetings.

Marylou and I went on vacation, to Hawai'i, and when we came back, Jimmy, almost rubbing his hands together and smiling with glee, said, *'I've made some changes, while you were gone. Now, we don't have fourteen departments reporting to you. We have, four. And the other ten guys, including you, will report to me.'*

And so, I talked to Marylou about that. And resigned. Gave thirty-days notice.

When did you start with Sawyer Aviation?

That same day, I went to Darryl Sawyer, who had, the year before, had owned, not the most profitable, probably, but the biggest Cessna dealership in the world, because he *loved* airplanes, and he was moving them through by the fist-full, not making any money, and practically losing money, but still... the biggest dealer. So, I went to Darryl, and I said, 'Now, I know what your financial situation is, would you be interested in having a partner?' And he said yes. So, Marylou and I became his partner.

I gave thirty-days notice, and went to work at Sawyer. While this is... nobody would approve of this as a management system because you shouldn't have one of the owners ferrying the airplanes. But if one of the owners is a *flying nut*, let him ferry the airplanes as well as doing his other job.

So, for a year or so, I ferried almost all of the planes... all Cessnas were built in, in or around, Wichita, and so I'd go back there. I'd take a big plane back, that we had sold to somebody, to have it serviced, maybe, some special service.

Or I'd fly back on commercial... I did it so often, that when I walked up to the door, the girls would recognize me and give me a whole row to myself – and a pillow and a blanket – because they knew I would be getting off in Texas, to take another flight over to Wichita. And, bring another plane back. One or two times a week, just as regular as clock-work, building up a ton of hours, and flying a million airplanes.

And Darryl Sawyer, my partner... he was one of the world's nicest guys, and certainly one of the worst business managers. Because he literally loved airplanes, he would go out on our hunk of the tie-down ramp, and just, almost, pet them. Wandering around, admiring them. And so, after about two years, things were in a really bad financial shape... the money that Marylou and I invested... and we're talking way over a hundred thousand bucks... had been spent before my first day on the job. All of it spent, paying past-due bills. Before I even got there. Which I was not aware of until later.

And so, anyhow, after about a year and a half, or so... two years, I said to Darryl, *'I have got this company to where it's now making a small profit. And, it'd be making more of a profit if you would quit buying airplanes from AirFlight (which was the distributor in Long Beach) 'and let us only handle the planes we need, not just the ones you want. So, I'm gonna give you this month, all of August, to decide whether you want me as a partner, or whether you want to own all the airplanes in the world.'*

And, at the end of the month, he said, "I want the airplanes." So, I left, and I went back to work for the bank.

Considering that you worked with airplanes, when did you learn to fly? Was it back when you were with the Air Force?

No. Uh, uh. No, in fact I was in the Air Force, supply. I wouldn't have been anywhere near an airplane.

I had *always* wanted to fly. I was lying on the beach of Tahiti, on a gorgeous vacation. And a plane flew over, flying between two of the islands, of which Tahiti is one. And I thought, if they can have an airplane out here, I – who have *always* wanted to fly – can learn how to fly. So, when the vacation was over, I came back and I went down to Sawyer Aviation, who also had a very large flight-school. I think it had fifteen flight instructors, each one of whom probably had eight or nine students, so a lot 'em. So I said, I wanna learn to fly. And, so I did.

And, Darryl said, *'You know, if you would buy that trainer you're flying, instead of having to pay fifteen dollars' or, I think it was probably about fifteen dollars an hour for it, 'you'd have nothing but gas cost, and I'll guarantee you that I'll buy it back from you, as trade-in on a better airplane, which I know you'll want by that time, a year from now.'*

So I said, 'Okay.' So I bought the little airplane.

The [Cessna] 152?

152. And, flew that around for about a year. And then I bought a [Cessna] 182...

And then, a guy from Playboy magazine said *'We've got a commercial to run for Cessna. And we want to take a picture of a guy and his Cessna. How 'bout you?'*

And I said,
'Wow! That'd be fine with me, yeah. I am, as you might expect, familiar with the Playboy magazine...'

And so, I went down... I got all dressed up, and with a tie and a coat and everything... and we pulled my plane out, my 182, and I kinda leaned against it and smiled, and the guy from Playboy took the picture, and the next month, it came out in the Playboy magazine.

And, a week or so after that, it came, in the mail, my copy of the picture he had taken.



A man and his plane. John proudly standing by his Cessna 182 at Sawyer Aviation in Phoenix, Arizona. This is the photo that was featured in Playboy Magazine for their Cessna advertising campaign.

Any final thoughts?

You know, my service wasn't all that different than civilianship, from the standpoint... I wasn't ducking hand grenades and that kinda stuff. It wasn't fearful. I would imagine, in a big, civilian penitentiary, I would imagine there's some degree of fear, on the part of the people who work there. Because there are so many bad guys, and they're so willing to do such bad things, and that when something... no little bad things happen. If it happens, it's gonna be a big, bad thing. I don't know how they feel. I never felt in personal jeopardy, even when I was wandering around inside the prison... er, the retraining command.

What I remember most about the Marine Corps was spurts of unpleasantness followed by long chunks of boredom. That's the way all, I guess most services are; but the Marine Corps generally, even though I've given two examples where they don't even play by their own rules, that's very unusual because their rules are usually inviolate. That's the way the game's gonna be played. There's virtually no freedom involved. You do what you're told, when you're told, how you're told.

In the end, though, I've made probably a lot more than my share of mistakes, and certainly some very major ones; but, I really have had an awful good life.