

Camp Leatherneck

John S. Nolan
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Early June, 2011

The phone in my upstairs office rang. Something about that ring said “another UMUC Adventure”. The voice on the other end of the line said, “We have 15,000 Marines waiting for classes at a place in Afghanistan called Camp Leatherneck- would you like to be the first instructor in?” Well, I’ve had a few Marine students before, both at UMUC and previously, and they were always first class, so I said, “Sure, but I’m already supposed to be teaching at Alconbury this summer.” “That’s no problem, Leatherneck is going to be a six week session that does not start until mid-July, and your Alconbury class is a 50/50 hybrid. You can do the entire first half of the term at Alconbury face to face and then finish the second half online from Leatherneck. We want to start with a bang there, so we are doing a six-week term with FOUR classes on the schedule.” The opportunity to rack up four classes in six weeks was too much to resist, and besides, I’d be helping out the Marines. How could I say no? Little did I imagine how much confusion I would cause for payroll that term, who simply could not process the idea that I was teaching in both the UK **and** Afghanistan *in the same term!*

Early July

But that confusion was a minor annoyance compared to what came next. It did not start well. I had to fly out to Grafenwoehr for a short training refresher first (mainly to get turned upside down in a Humvee AGAIN). Well that was easy, there was a flight from Stansted to Nuernberg on Air Berlin I had used a lot of times in the past. So I booked the flight (not paying a lot of attention I confess) and drove the six hours to Stansted, north of London, arriving with PLENTY of time to spare- only to find that Air Berlin had recently moved all of its flights to GATWICK- you know, that other airport on the SOUTH side of London- only about 90 miles away! Note to self “Always remember to check which airport you fly out of”. Frantic drive, desperate parking of the car in insanely expensive VIP parking, mad dash through Gatwick, only to find the gate had closed about ten minutes before. Beg, plead, no dice- but there was another flight early the next morning. So I spent the night at Gatwick, found a cheaper place to leave the car and caught the red eye (literally in my case by now) out to Nuernberg.

Miraculously, I arrived in Graf for the training only around an hour late, but not in time to avoid being subjected to obligatory head-shaking “tut-tutting” from the NCO in charge. These silly professors! I was issued gear, and had a little reassuring delight when the helmet I was given had “Ray Fox” written inside! Ray was an old friend, so this was good karma, though I could not believe we had the same size head. “Do they reserve substandard equipment just for UMUC

professors?" I wondered. Now running on pure adrenaline having barely slept for going on 36 hours, I duly learned to probe for mines (again), dress battlefield wounds (again) and got turned upside down in a vehicle (yet again), though I was surprised to see the Humvee had been replaced by an MRAP (apparently, that was thanks to Senator Joe Biden). Now ready for a war zone again, I caught a brief night's sleep someplace, flew back to Gatwick on the red eye (again), drove to Alconbury (not far from Stansted of course) and taught the last "Live" session of my hybrid there.

Thursday, July 14

Bastille day and I was finally on my way! On the military transport plane from Kandahar out to Leatherneck, I sat next to a contractor, and struck up conversation. As luck would have it, he turned out to be a former adjunct faculty member I had managed from a distance, Zennen Christiansen, who had taught Philosophy for us in the Netherlands, and now worked for a contracting company called Orange and Black (or something like that). That was a stroke of remarkable good fortune, since when we got off the plane on a desolate airfield several kilometers of desert away from the main base of Leatherneck, there was no one expecting a UMUC professor. So Zennen kindly offered me a lift to the main headquarters.

After enquiring there about who was in charge of education, I was presented to a Marine Major who greeted me with inspiring words "What the hell are you doing here? Why did they send you now? We are nowhere near ready to offer classes here yet. We don't even have an Education Center." As it transpired, this Major had risen from the enlisted ranks to reach his now elevated position, and was extremely sceptical about the need for Marines to get a college education- after all, look where he had gotten without one! And doing it in a field situation like this? Ridiculous, just a distraction from the mission. So naturally, they had put this guy in charge of coordinating education! He clearly thought I was just a nuisance, and after feeding me and finding me a bunk, he eagerly deposited me in the office of a young gunnery Sergeant. Best stroke of luck I ever had.

As it turned out, this Gunny was working on his MA online with UMUC, and enthusiastic about getting things going. Of course in the Marines if you want to get something done, find a Gunny. He said to come back in the morning and he would see what he could do to help.

Friday, July 15

When I came around in the morning, the Gunny had found us a place to make into an Ed Center! Two abandoned tents that had only recently been the Post office, but since the Post Office had just moved to a hard building, we could have the tents- one for the Ed Center office, one for our classroom.



Our Two tents!

Gunny suggested that since I had nothing else to do, I might like to take command of the conversion operation. It was a mammoth task- the tents were full of dirt, the AC didn't work, there was old junk in both of them and one had quite a few mysterious electronic boxes with lots of flashing lights and lots of wiring that looked rather important. I looked at the thermometer outside Gunny's office, which pegged out at 130 Fahrenheit all day, every day, thought of moving all that junk and doing all that sweeping, gulped and said "Sure", heart sinking. I had to have a little faith and remind myself of the movie quote- "If you build it, they will come." By the end of the day, I was a dirty, sweaty tired mess and little progress had been made. Just too much for one professor over fifty. Gunny came around, looked around, and said "I think I'll get you some help tomorrow morning."

Saturday, July 16

Things began to move! I arrived on site early, to find a Marine working party- five guys who had been assigned extra work over the weekend for minor disciplinary infractions who were now "my" troops!



I don't know what they were in trouble for, but they were great young men, and worked hard. Several of them later became my students, I think mostly out of the desire to get something out of all the hard work they put in! Dust flew, equipment hummed, old junk was removed, and mysterious, intricate wires and electronic gizmos all over the tent we had selected to be the ED Center office got organized, labelled and carefully walled off. By the end of the day, we were all beat, but progress had been made.



Even better, that evening our field rep, Tammy arrived. Tammy had done a short stint in the Marines herself, and even better, was an attractive young lady in a camp mainly populated by young men! She quickly went to work advertising classes and rounding up some more help. Things were looking up, and there was hope we might actually start classes Monday evening as scheduled!

July 17-Sunday

The day started with more clean-up, and then started moving fast. Gunny's crew had proved to be remarkable scavengers, and to our amazement, all kinds of stuff started turning up. First came desks for the office, which we decided to set up first so that Tammy could start registering students while we then finished the classroom. By the end of the day the office was working!



Even better, our ESO arrived that afternoon too, so we had that crucial person to approve Tuition Assistance applications (TA)- sort of. We now discovered a snag. Though the Army and Air Force students could have TA approved on the spot, and the contractors, who were paying, could now sign up, we discovered that for the Marines, who were the big audience we were there for, TA could only be approved at Quantico! Of course, it was Sunday- so there was nobody at the office in Quantico, or our HQ in Heidelberg to help facilitate the process. So we reluctantly, decided to move the start date to Tuesday, and prayed we could get enough Marines approved in one day (Monday) to make this happen.

Monday, July 18

The morning brought more miracles. Table and chairs for the classroom arrived, and Gunny's scavengers scored their greatest triumphs, producing a white board, a screen and even an overhead projector! The working party had to go back to their real job- being Marines- but now the community came into play. Tammy had gone around asking for volunteers, and now dozens of them- contractors and off duty folks from all services- descended on the classroom to assemble all this stuff and do a final clean-up. By midday, we were ready to go!



But we still needed students, so in the afternoon I transitioned over to Assistant Field rep. Fortunately I had some experience with this from my adventure in Diego Garcia. Now Tammy, our ESO and I all worked the phones, ably assisted by Stacey Tate at HQ. We had plenty of prospective students trying to sign up, but it seems each and every one had to be approved individually by Quantico, so we spent all afternoon and far into the night battling time zones and bureaucracy to get as many as possible signed up. In the end, because of the TA bottleneck, we still had almost as many from the Army, Air Force and Contractor ranks as we did Marines, but we got three of the four classes to go that night. Not bad, not bad at all.

Tuesday, July 19

Classes started, five days after my inauspicious arrival, one day late. The Major who didn't believe in education came by for the first time since he had left me with the Gunny on Thursday evening that day. I smiled at him and asked him if he still thought Leatherneck wasn't ready for education. He just shook his head and walked on. Thanks to an enthusiastic Gunny, his brilliant scavengers, a hard-working work party and a whole lot of volunteer help, education had come to Camp Leatherneck, and I could now start doing my stuff!