

COLLEAGUES, BIG DADDY, AND THREE MARINES – A MEMOIR

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Things were going along just fine at the OMA reunion at College Park back in November of last year. To sling lies with old colleagues -- Overseas Programs instructors, staff, Stateside supporters – from the 70's, 80's, 90's when I was one of them, was, well, to slide back into lovely, resuscitated memories. And it felt damn good. Until the “formal” intros began. Each member stood, or sat, and told the rest of us what had become of their world since Mother Maryland Overseas flashed in the rearview mirror. Sounds like a bad C&W song, doesn't it? No matter, these are good men and women, so a lot of good had transpired in their lives since they had put those very lives on the line to “educate” soldiers, sailors and marines in a hundred Bumfuck, Egypt – and be educated themselves in the process. Words like “retirement,” “grandchildren,” “beachfront home,” and, remarkably, “teaching” now were mouthed again and again. Yes, a few still “taught” but not the way all of us had done “back then.” Now teaching is “AI,” “Distance Learning,” “platforms,” “Zoom” and sitting on your bottom in front of a computer screen and “touching” your “students” half a world away. . . . And that world is a changed one, not the one we knew “back then.”

My gob was truly smacked, then, just before it was my turn to stand and try not to embarrass myself before the others. . . . At that point I suddenly realized that we all, each of us, old Overseas Marylanders, really *are* extinct . . . and I found myself saying that we were like plesiosaurs, waiting for the comet to hit. I was wrong, I realize now . . . the comet has *already* hit. *Have Lecture Notes, Will Travel* has disappeared from our screens never to appear again, even in re-runs. We are anachronisms now. *Then* we were teachers: bringing academic objectivity and dedication to free speech and free inquiry in military classrooms, all the while fostering a back-and-forth, face-to-face learning experience with independent adult students, many of whom had lived lives that were more full and *real* than our own. And all the while we and those students often ate the same lousy c-rats and mess hall *dreck*, slept and went to class in the same tents and Quonset huts, caught the same crap from the brass, lived out of duffel bags and base Pack-and-Wrap, and . . . you know the drill. Now, if we were reincarnated as “teachers” in this the third decade of the 21st century, we likely would “blossom” in fully wired, comfortable cubicles and carrels, or, more probably, home basement “offices” rather than in unheated Quonsets along some Korean or East German DMZ. But no matter where our teaching nexus was, we would have to confront the deadly tenets zealously proffered and protected by the Inquisition of modern academia: “trigger warnings,” “Critical Race Theory,” “Social Justice,” “Diversity,” “Equity,” “Inclusion,” “Conformity,” “White Privilege” and the rest of the Modern Decalogue, all the while virtue signaling madly as if all our academic appointments, positions, and tenure depended on embracing them . . . and they would. . .

Today, UMUC Overseas Programs could never exist, and not just because the American military's mission and demands have changed.

Ironically, in the days immediately before OMA reunion, I had just begun reading Rick Bragg's biography of Jerry Lee Lewis who had died at the end of October. In Bragg's volume, or perhaps in one of the many obits I had read, the writer had said that Jerry Lee and his "colleagues" who initially destroyed, then rebuilt and reconfigured, modern music and thus society -- Elvis, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, Roy Orbison -- were "legends" and they didn't even know it. Now, in thinking about Jerry Lee, the reunion and all those Overseas friends and colleagues I have so ineptly tried to laud, I have just made the connection: For seventeen years I walked with, taught with, LEGENDS who were not aware of the impact they were making on generations of young Americans now no longer young. They too rebuilt, reshaped a social order that a World War and Depression had torched.

I say this in the context of the OMA reunion and all the physical trappings of the UMUC (sorry, but in this instance "UMGC" sticks in my throat and not in my mind) conference center and headquarters where the reunion was held. UMUC was a single, rather spartan building when I was interviewed and eventually appointed in 1978 (in a further irony, nine years later my office where I recruited faculty was just down the hall from where I nervously was interviewed by Julian Jones). Now . . . UMUC is unrecognizable, a veritable Versailles semi-furnished and echoing. The main building has been enlarged and completely refurbished; much more modern art now is slathered on the walls; uncomfortable and expensive overstuffed chairs and settees squat in many public spaces; new landscaping spangles the open areas visible through the huge windows; the restaurant has been greatly expanded and moved to adjoin the lobby. It is strangely comforting to note, however, that in the latter the food is still grossly overpriced and still tastes like hell.

But now it smells like money here . . . a new experience for UMUC in the past when it had to pay its own way, the red-haired stepchild of the University of Maryland System. UMUC has come a long way since the early-to-mid 1990's, for instance, when employees here did not even rate a yearly cost-of-living allowance. Back then it always seemed as though all of UMUC both stateside and overseas, was constantly fighting for its existence, fighting not to be subsumed by the System flagship UMCP or fending off challenges from the likes of City College of Chicago and Boston University overseas. So, no question UMUC had an *ad hoc* aura that always seemed never to dissipate. There is none of that here now. The current President of UMGHC actually found time to visit with the OMA group. He certainly is young as presidents go, handsome, dynamic, cheerful, outgoing, and looks "media friendly." In short, he is "the very model of a modern college president" as Gilbert and Sullivan might envision or as captured in the pages of a Kingsley Amis or Randall Jarrell novel. And this is not a negative at all, because he knows his job in the America of the 21st century. He says -- and likely does -- all the right things, and it is hard to imagine him offending anyone, either by accident or on purpose, for the UMGHC he leads, unlike UMUC, and especially the Overseas Programs, is in many ways indistinguishable from its contemporaries. If there is a strongly positive face to the "Woke" movement, it is his. This is his world, and he bestrides it like a colossus.

In contrast, Ray “Big Daddy” Ehrensberger WAS A TRUE BY GOD LEGEND. Look up his biography if you think I blow smoke. After World War II in response to the Berlin Airlift and the emerging Cold War he invented (not too strong a word) American Military Education. By cajolery, confrontation, threats, unauthorized decisions, *sub rosa* activities, *fait accompli* and strategically gifted bottles of Scotch, he put The University of Maryland classes on American military bases, first staring down the Soviets in Europe then on U.S bases standing against communist proxies in Asia. He had profiles in *TIME*, *The Washington Post*, etc. Ray was the real deal. I met him when I transferred from the Asian Division back to UMUC in College Park in 1987. Ray was Chancellor Emeritus then, having long since retired. He maintained an “office” in the UMUC center given to him in the hotel side of the building. There he had both a furnished room with bed and desk, and an adjoining room where he kept the mountains of correspondence, pictures, slides, and who the hell knows what else he had generated and gathered over the decades when he had changed the face of American higher education.

In the early ‘nineties I was able to immerse myself in Ray’s mammoth archive and talked with him often and at length about what I found. Over drinks from his “bar” – the ubiquitous thermos of manhattans for him, Heinekens for me -- he shared his experiences as “The Flying Dean,” running the European Division on site in the early days, navigating the politics back in College Park, recalling his impressions and memories of the characters he met and often became friends with. Can you imagine being bbf’s with both Albert Speer and Carol Channing? And if you knew Ray, you knew that many of these reminiscences were quadruple x-rated, ones that I WISH I could relate but cannot. Yet: let me hedge this just once and relate with some trepidation the following personal “Big Daddy” anecdote which bumps up against the dreaded “X Adult” rating. More than any other memory of my Maryland life it reveals the contrast between Ray Ehrensberger, UMUC, and history; and the current President, UMGC, and the 21st century.

What follows happened in 1992 or ‘93 when I coordinated teaching appointments for the Overseas Divisions. Ten minutes into our interview I had already decided to recommend that the attractive (in the year 2023, PC would force me to say “impressive”) young woman be hired for the Overseas Programs. Dressed in her “interview outfit” she was completely at ease, laughed brightly and at the right things, spoke absolutely confidently, and had all the right answers to questions seemingly before I asked them. She had taught many classes as a grad student at a very good state university and her senior major prof had said over the telephone that she was one of the five best students he had ever worked with. Also, she had backpacked in Europe before entering grad school and did not ask if she could bring her cat if she got the appointment. What sealed my decision, though, was at lunch when she ordered her burger “VERY rare . . . just sear it”: she was a Marylander . . . she just didn’t know it yet. Not surprisingly, we were both talking loudly and happily and having a helluva time when we stood in the Center foyer at the end of the interview while waiting for her taxi to the airport. Old-line Marylanders will remember that a large, nearly life-size painting of Ray with his “bwana” shirt and camera hung on the wall next to the elevators. That painting was a copy of a snapshot from (I think, if I remember correctly) a photo in a *TIME* magazine article on him from the mid-

50's). She and I didn't initially pay attention to the elevator door opening when Ray emerged, bent, shuffling silently, and navigating gingerly the slick floor. As he came near us, though, he suddenly roared in that old voice suffused with an infinitude of manhattans and living, a rusty klaxon blasting piercingly as far as Takoma Park: "Ralph! Getting' any PUSSY lately?" And he shuffled past, never looking up. . . .

Well, the young woman and I both froze . . . brittle, rictus, syllables broken in the middle Finally I mustered something on the order of "I think . . . if you'll give me a chance . . . I can explain what just happened. . . ." Her shocked, "what-the-hell?" look gradually vanished as I pointed to Ray's portrait hanging next to us as proof who had just effed me up . . . And then I frantically told her who he was, blurting what he had done in life, his importance to American education history, his break-the-crockery-and-the-hell-with-it persona, that he was purposely embarrassing me as a joke, etc. and etc. Soon she started laughing, and only then did I know she wouldn't file a harassment complaint with Ben Massey, the then-current UMUC President. I resolved then to make doubly damn sure she was going to receive an Overseas Programs teaching job if she wanted it.

By the time her taxi arrived and I had given her a wave and a promise to call as soon as I got the Overseas Director's thumbs-up verifying the position offer, Ray had returned to his "office." For the very first time, I did not knock. He was sitting at his desk, his trademark sly grin etched ear-to-ear. "RAY! YOU! SON! OF! A! BITCH!" I stood there; he sat there . . . eyeing each other. Then we simultaneously broke the loud silence . . . laughing and carrying on like two fools. Walking back to my office I thought that I was now a Friend of his, even if only a very minor one. . . .

A moment such as this, being the target of Ray's indelible, unforgettable joke, I now realize in trying to capture the threads of this memoir, is another window into well . . . who I am. It was another point on the learning curve of my life, courtesy of Mother Maryland and my experience overseas. Reminiscing with colleagues at the OMA gathering last November, there were Stories! Stories! Stories! But it was only as I now recall them, some of them my own, that I suddenly made the connection once more with three Marines I had as students on Okinawa in the fall of 1979.

Gate 2 and BC Streets in Koza, just outside the huge Kadena Air Base on Oki, had lost much of the luster they had during the Vietnam War era when Kadena was one of the major jumping off points for those assigned to 'Nam. In those years any Southeast Asian city or base hosting huge clusters of American military personnel -- either assigned there; on R&R, pass, shore leave, or liberty; transiting to 'Nam; or gratefully climbing inside the "freedom bird" escaping back to the States, to Home -- had what is euphemistically termed an "entertainment district." To the troops, sailors, and marines it was simply "The Ville." Their actual names, though, are a modern incarnation/ variation of Homer's catalog of warrior islands from a much earlier war: BC Street on Oki, of course; Bugis in Singapore; King's Cross in Sydney; Sukhumvit in Bangkok; Itaewon in Seoul; and Olongapo in the PI, the most legendary and dissolute of all.

Still, as “late” as 1979 you could night crawl among the bars and cribs of BC Street: “Girls” of all ages and variants; “music” blasting from bar fronts into the street; Orion beer bottled and spilled; entertainment “acts” that moved according to a definite advertised schedule. You could always plan your evening around when “The Snake Lady” (yes, *that!* and *there!*, and right at your table for a few extra dollars, or yen at an outrageous exchange rate) would entertain at your usual watering-hole. The “Five-Cut Banana Show” (don’t ask; use your imagination, but it won’t survive undamaged) was a special favorite, especially among American women, their responses ranging from chagrin to admiration. And, when the entertainment and the evening had slithered away, a bleary stop at Charlie’s Tacos was a necessity to take the edge off just enough to fumble and find your i.d. in front of the grinning security policeman at Gate 2. The closest stateside analogue to the BC Street experience was perhaps Bourbon Street, but our colleagues at Tulane, for example, could only sample the thin gruel of “touristy” New Orleans. BC Street, on the other hand, was the real deal, a sort of bedraggled “jewel in the crown” of Decadence, far away from contemporary American Tenderloins and Boweries and Harlems, mere shadows of their former glories. . . .

And our classrooms were only a five minute walk away. In 1979 Maryland early evening and night classes on Kadena were held in a cluster of temporary portable classrooms that belonged to Kadena Middle School, busy at all hours as the brand- new middle school was under construction elsewhere on the sprawling base. Since there were *many* other American bases of all the services on Oki, we could have teaching assignments all over the island. During my two stints on Oki, for instance, in addition to Kadena, at various times I also taught two classes at Torii Station (Army) and an early Friday night/mid-Saturday morning at Camp Hansen (Marines). At that time over forty years ago, Hansen was, as an education officer assigned there told me, “where Civilization goes to die.” It was a training facility that looked like the clustered ragged Marine tents and singed tunnel entrances on Iwo Jima in photographs snapped while the outcome was still very much in doubt. The Hansen Marines were in constant live-fire field exercises; lived in semi-open wooden-floored tents with screened, open walls to catch malaria-monsters and what little breaths of wind escaped the jungle; and raised absolutely apocalyptic hell on weekends in Kin “Ville” outside Gate 3. The “Ville” there made a BC Street Saturday night look like a Confirmation ceremony with little girls in their white dresses. I had never seen any “entertainment district” where the SP’s sometimes patrolled in groups of three or four instead of in twos.

So: Grim Hansen brings me to my first little Marine. Why “little”? Bob Francescone, -- a keen observer of all things military and Asian, one of the great “vets” of the Asian Division, an anthropologist who took his classes and a few “ready-for-anything” colleagues on “sleepovers” in dark, deadly beachside caves on Ie Shima, a sniper-shot mere yards from where Ernie Pyle raised his head to look for the last time – noted once that Marines tended not to be muscular super heroes but were little men, small and wiry with an attitude. And yet my little Marine bastard, “tough as a lighter knot,” showed a flash of sensitivity, “humanness” if you will, that

showed me that my role as teacher incorporated elements that I never imagined until that evening.

My little Marine came in twenty minutes late for the first night of class. His BDU's were flooded in sweat, and he had bicycle garters stretched and tied neatly just above his tucked boots, just to be doubly sure. Averting his gaze, he had to bump clumsily through the already seated students to the last desk on the far wall where he promptly fell asleep, his head and desk tilted back, his mouth open. He slept through the break. He never moved until he was awakened by everyone noisily leaving at the end of class, never looking up from the floor as he blended into the loud gaggle of students hitting the door. He was just a kid, a Private E-2, a maggot, the absolute sub-basement in the Marine food chain. This scene replayed itself the next meeting. Finally, at the break in the third night I had had enough. I nudged his boot with my foot and he sat upright, startled, at attention. I told him that his late entrances were disrupting the class, falling noisily asleep was disrespectful, yada, yada, yada. . . . I can still see him nervously twisting his tongue over his lips, vainly trying to drill up some moisture. When he could string together a response he said that he had permission to attend an off-duty college class off Hansen only after his last formation of the day and with his Gunnery Sgt's okay each time. After passing inspection and signing out, he then had to bike down from Hansen, a substantial task given the considerable distance between it and Kadena, the awful traffic on the main highway, and the steaming tropical heat. Thus his late arrival . . . then: "Sir, are you going to kick me out of the class?" I told him no, that I would call his Top or write him a note asking if he could leave his unit and the base early on class evenings, that we could save a desk for him near the door so that the disturbance of his entry was minimized, that we would work something out, etc. Then my little Marine, still a little boy, said something on a long, relieved breath that I have carried with me down all these days when I have felt "biggity," felt that I am really good at what I do and that I am making a difference in the world and the world knows it: "Whewwww . . . Thank you, Sir . . . This is the only place on this island I can go into that's air-conditioned and where nobody yells at me. . . ."

My second little Marine had been my student the previous term. Also a Private E-2, he initially wanted to write his argument/persuasion paper as a letter to his girlfriend convincing her to marry him after he landed back home on The Freedom Bird. Unfortunately, he eventually dropped the topic in favor of something like capital punishment, or abortion, or legalization of marijuana, or the existence of God . . . you know, something completely unimportant, a mote, an irritant in the eye of Real Life. He was one those sweet young men – kids, really – that until recently the farming Midwest was so full of: open, generous, beguilingly naïve, naturally and openly patriotic . . . so much so that even standing next to him you felt strangely embarrassed, yet envious of his "goodness."

This term he was taking an American history survey class from "Dr. X". We all know, or have known, a "Dr. X." His very presence teaching in the Asian Division gave the lie to the accusation that the Overseas Programs were simply an extension of the military, that academic freedom

was dead there, buried at sea or having wistful taps, a lament, blown over it just before “last call” at the O’Club. His very first in-your-face words the first night of class were always that he was a dedicated Marxist, committed to presenting history and economics and politics through this pitiless lens in his personal and professorial march toward truth. Of course, Dr. X was easy to parody, the essence of irony. Darkly and greasily bearded, loud, reeking of New Yawk, corpulent, insistent and bulging in his ever-present, expensive three-piece tweed suit (in tropical Okinawa, no less, and appallingly yet hilariously clueless), he was in his element when he could provoke consternation among his uniformly(!) clean-cut and respectful students, his “proles.” Thus it was when at the break on the first night of Dr. X’s class, my little marine caused no little consternation, touching off a huge disturbance among the students talking, smoking in the dim light outside the cluster of portable classrooms. He was noisily and uncharacteristically upset, gesticulating, raising his thin voice . . . until he was finally calmed by a hands-on Marine warrant officer, his supervisor, his “boss” who was also a student in Dr. X’s class. Later, when asked what the little marine’s problem was, his bemused boss said that the clearly upset young man, when he was calmed down enough to speak clearly, blurted out “Sir! That Dr. X! They said in boot camp we should kill guys like that!”

My third marine that term in Kadena was most assuredly not “little.” Rather, he was almost a parody of the prototype marine in the eye of the public. He was perhaps six-four, with splayed nose and mouth, buzz-cut hair, giant shoulders, a narrow waist, and sleeves rolled neatly above his huge biceps (“guns” in modern parlance). Loud, with a roaring baritone “Hoo Hah!” resounding indiscriminately for the benefit of his marine buddies seated in the back of the classroom, he was a genetic dead-end, an example of what we called dumb, muscle-bound football jocks back in college in the ‘60’s . . . he was a “meathead.” And of course in my ENGL 101 class he parked himself with ruffles and flourishes in the seat directly in front of my desk and small lectern. Seated next to him, in contrast, was his tiny, overwhelmed wife, a slightly hunched over, impassive young woman with an unblinking, blank look. Given the opportunity to shine, to draw attention to herself, she likely would have been considered attractive, quite lovely, in fact. That she was part-Asian (Okinawan?) perhaps explained her silent obsequiousness, that and simply being obliterated by her explosion of a husband.

That third class meeting of the term the students were required to submit their first papers, a personal narration relating an event that had helped to shape their lives in some major way, for good or bad. They were to include concrete details to back up their assertions and to order/organize their papers using any time elements of their choosing (suspense, *in medias res*, etc.). Their assigned purpose in writing the paper was to make the reader vicariously share what they, the writers, had experienced. Well, at the break, after each student had dropped his paper into the neat pile on my desk, I happened to flip open the one on top, the one quietly placed by my third marine’s little wife. I was transfixed. I often asked individual students to read their papers aloud to the class -- the interesting papers, the ones that best illustrated the main points of the assignment -- after I had read them all, assigned grades, and returned the set. This particular personal narration paper was different. So, as the class returned from

break I silently pulled her aside and asked if she would read her paper to the class. I could see the initial flash of panic in her eyes as she shook her head no. Touching her elbow, I pressed her, asking if she would let me read it aloud. She never looked up, nodding a scarcely noticeable yes, and pulled away into her seat. Once the class had settled in, and down, I announced that I had permission to read their classmate's paper aloud to them. The brief synopsis here is my rendering; the concluding words are the young woman's own, as I have remembered them so often during the past forty-something years.

The young woman and her little brother had survived a series of orphanages and foster homes, some almost good, most bad, all soul-killing. Although she did not say this directly, the incidents she "objectively" related in her paper said it for her. Here, she was about twelve years old and her brother five or six years younger. Not surprisingly, she came across as very protective of her little brother, most of her coping skills developed in sticking up for him. Then one day came the Christmas party in their then-current orphanage, a large, unusually well-endowed institution for a change. The sponsors and visitors were noisy, filling the huge auditorium. The children sat in rows in front of the stage and individually came up when their names were called to receive their gifts from the hands of the matron and open them to the ooh's and aah's from the crowd. The young girl was very excited because with all the dislocation in their lives, she and her brother had never received a single, "special" Christmas gift chosen for each of them because they too, contrary to all that had happened in their lives so far, were "special" indeed. So she surprised herself and cried inwardly, happily, when her little brother's name was called, and the huge, well-dressed audience clapped loudly when he zoomed and flourished the toy airplane noisily above his head. Then her name was called, and shaking, she climbed the steps to the stage where the matron placed the giant, gaily wrapped box in her hands. She could barely get her arms around it, and her hands trembled as she pulled the beautiful bow and the silvery paper away . . . to finally disclose . . . a giant box of . . . kotex.

Then, matter-of-factly, with quiet finality: "Ever since that day I have never believed in the goodness of the world."

The students in the class sat stunned into silence. For long seconds. Then someone let escape a whispered, "Jesus Christ." Finally, I think only I heard what sounded for all the world like a botched garroting. . . . In front of me my third marine, my meathead, was strangling, powerless and immovable, broken and inarticulate as Ozymandias, his eyes frantic and empty at the same time, staring into nothingness and the sudden awareness of "somewhere he had never travelled beyond his experience."

By this time classmates were clustering around the young woman, sympathizing, empathizing, murmuring, in unexpected shock at her and *their* own humanness, while she only stared straight ahead through the whiteboard on the wall behind me, at something light-years and eons away. . . . Then she gently and without looking, moved her small hand to her paralyzed

husband's bare, giant forearm and rubbed it slowly as his face shriveled, dead and desiccated as a raisin.

Over the years having taught classic American memoirs such as Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City*, William Alexander Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee*, *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, Hemingway's *A Movable Feast*, and Twain's *Autobiography*, among others, I was cowed at the prospect of writing my own memoir of UMUC's Overseas Programs. So I thought my only hope of avoiding embarrassment was to follow some major requirements of the "good" memoir in the attempt to honor those people and events I had chosen to memorialize. And make no mistake: what I have written is both an imperfect remembrance and an unsullied memorial to some of the people and events I knew during the best years of my life. Those requirements of the good memoir are, in part, to present insights into experienced events and one's responses to them; to speak personally and in one's own voice; and to relate details specifically and concretely. A "good" memoir, then, reveals at least as much about the person who lived the events as about the events themselves.

Even though many of those who appear here are very much still alive, the UMUC Overseas Programs of which they were the lifeblood are no longer stirring, having disappeared through the depredations of technology, current events, and social fashion. It is only through history and remembrance that they live still, but all things considered, that is not the worst way to still be hanging around. After all, *we can still learn from the past*. And as Faulkner wrote, "The past is not dead. It's not even past." Accordingly, I think most of us OS vets would agree that as we taught back then, so we learned, and those lessons are still shining and not shopworn. I hope, then, that this memoir is not perceived as darkly elegiac. The world is just different now. In my memory, though my Overseas friends and colleagues still inspire me, Big Daddy's earthiness cuts through my pretensions, my marines make me daily re-evaluate my assessments of who I *really* am. I do know this without question: After having been a teacher with the Overseas Programs over forty years ago, I could never muster the stomach or the courage to even consider being a teacher today. But I take solace in the knowledge that I was lucky enough to be a part of a unique and noble endeavor . . . After all, the first Overseas Program instructor, the first travelling lecturer with a knapsack of tattered notes, was Chaucer's "clerk of Oxenford" who rode that horseback pilgrimage to Canterbury . . . "and gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche."