

The 23rd Leaves its Mark

Harry Hirsch



Having misinterpreted the Commandant's directive to not deface a certain Yard structure as instead a challenge, J.J. Hogan enlisted a small but intrepid force from within the 23rd Company. The mission was to demonstrate the proper execution of a high-altitude, night time boarding operation while delivering a critically needed communication to the brigade of midshipmen.

The details of this audacious operation were classified "Highly Sensitive" for many years until one of the participants unmasked some of his gallant co-conspirators in a Class of 1963 publication. Apparently, to avoid some possible belated consequences of their courageous action, before the specifics of the operation could be divulged, all of the assault group had to have retired or otherwise been separated from the service. Not to mention that the Commandant was probably in no position after all those years to unleash his pent-up wrath.

Hogan's band of volunteers, who immediately responded without equivocation to the call, were Sherwood Zimmerman and Steve Leisge, reinforced as needed by Mike Krause, Dick Ortwein and Niles Iannone. Brave men all, who risked life, limb and even perhaps expulsion for this critical mission.

The following is a "first persons" account of the escapade.

It all began when Hogan, Zimmerman and Leisge, while returning from playing intramural football on Hospital Point stopped by the laundry boiler room. There they encountered an older attendant and asked him "if you were going to break into this building at night and gain access to the smokestack, how would you do it"? He replied, "I would never advise anyone to do it, but if I were going to do it, here's what I would do." He then led them up the fire escape to the roof and

pointed out a window with its hinges on the outside. "See, if you back out the pins from the hinges, you can lift out the locked windows and access the ladder that takes you to the base of the smokestack." After thanking the old-timer, they returned to Bancroft Hall to lay plans for the assault. The first task was to organize a trip to town for the procurement of the necessary tools to remove the bolts from the hinges and spray paint for the vital communication to be broadcast to the brigade.

Mission commencement time was set for 0200 (2 AM) at which time the team dressed in night-combat black would with maximum stealth exit Bancroft Hall. Mission execution date was yet-to-be-determined based upon prevailing circumstances.

No contingency was left unaddressed. As it happened, the team wisely first reconnoitered the target approach path, during which they encountered Jimmylegs (security personnel) patrolling the area. They performed a perfect military tuck and roll into a convenient ditch to avoid being discovered, afterward returning to base to adjust the tactical plan.

On this initial foray Leisge observed "I think we were all nervous as none of us had ever snuck out of the Hall at night." One might speculate that other than perhaps their leader, it was the first time that the team had experienced the normal adrenalin high before going into battle.

Despite a "dark and stormy night", Hogan's hooligans did not abort but pressed on totally committed to the accomplishment of the mission. After again avoiding the Jimmylegs by hiding in the drainage ditch, everything went pretty much according to plan.

Leader Hogan had of course assessed the capabilities of each member of his team. For example, he knew of Leisge's fear of heights and utilized this knowledge in support of the time-critical mission by ordering him to climb to the top of the smokestack and begin the painting of the message. He correctly deduced that no one would paint faster than a man with a fear of heights, especially hanging on to the ladder with one hand while the stack was swaying several feet back and forth in the wind. This experience may well have contributed to Leisge's later career as a highly decorated Air Force pilot, i.e., get the job done and get back to terra firma.

The lower portion of the message was painted by others on the team with such precision that the spacing of the letters was near perfect. The team descended and returned undetected to Bancroft Hall.

"Mission Accomplishedclip_image001.jpg."

The following morning at formation in Tecumseh Court prior to marching to classes a window rattling cheer went up from the brigade. The message on the smokestack was clearly visible.

"63' SEZ BEAT ARMY"

At noon formation everyone who had participated in the mission was ordered to take one step forward. Much to the chagrin of the powers-to-be, in a resounding gesture of solidarity, several of the 23rd Company second classmen stepped back leaving the entire remainder of the company one step forward!

The faculty itself was so impressed with the daring deed that an elderly Spanish professor offered a 4.0 grade for the day to anyone that painted the smokestack. No one in the class needed that 4.0 more than J.J. but he did not succumb to the temptation. He sought no glory for himself, a trait he would display, although deserved on many an occasion throughout his career.

The team's elation was short-lived when the next morning it was discovered that the message had been changed to "62 SEZ" from "63 SEZ". "This could not stand." The fearless

leader again took charge and directed how the dastardly act by the Class of '62 would be rectified. Three giant sized jars of 100% Pure Petroleum Jelly were purchased in town.



As if once wasn't daring enough, the next night the raid on the stack was repeated and the "2" changed back to a "3". Mike Krause recalls

vividly how terrified he was "climbing up the narrow rungs carrying Vaseline". To preclude anyone from attempting another change to the message, the rungs of the ladder were slathered with petroleum jelly. Thoughtfully, in the interest of safety a sign was painted at the base of the stack's ladder advising that climbing it might be hazardous to one's health.

The cowardly act of the Class of '62 was thus successfully corrected and the smokestack remained untouched throughout the rest of the football season. As you now know, the heroic participants were never apprehended nor officially recognized for their courageous feat and vital role in the ensuing defeat of Army 17 to 12.

So, with appropriate embellishments for posterity, this is how the 19th/23rd Company, Class of 1963, literally "left its mark" at the U.S. Naval Academy.