

Washateria Tycoon

by Charles Benyunes

Hi, Maybe it is time for a little something light in our 55th newsletter.

I hold no claim to military fame. I can claim to have cornered the washateria market at Ramey AFB about 50 years ago. Some details are fuzzy but the story is basically true.

When we moved from Barksdale to Ramey, our billets were in a long wooden building, typical of the type in which chickens are mass-produced today. A suite with private bath at each end, regular rooms along the center portion and a communal bath and shower in the middle – those were our quarters. Bill Lowman and Tiger Tagan (and maybe Bill Blanchard?) shared a suite at one end. I shared the other suite with an air rescue pilot. “Enrico” Manzo was somewhere in between and kept us entertained with his early morning operatic arias. How he could wake up so happy, I'll never understand.

There was no washer, dryer or refrigerator in the BOQ area and, thus, the opportunity to turn a negative into a positive - or should I say a profit? – presented itself.

On a flight to Barksdale with AC Pappy Cole, Willie Lowman and I got to talking about our situation. His primary interest was in cold beer; mine was in clean drawers – particularly after some of those practice GCA landings at the 3,000-foot runway just above a cliff at GITMO that scared the living you-know-what out of me.

In Shreveport we went to a junkyard. I found a turn-of-the-century wringer type washer and Willie found a 19-ought-5 model wooden icebox. Don't know what he paid for his icebox but I plunked down \$35.00 for the washer – delivered to the flight line. Can't recall the type of aircraft, but we managed to get both items aboard and up, up and away we went.

Willie set up and started the fridge in his suite and though a bit noisy, it did work and the saloon opened for business. With requirements for water, a drain and electricity, the washateria operation was a bit more complicated. The only place I could find for it was in the communal shower which was an open bay type about 15 feet wide with three or four shower heads. I set it up in one corner and was prepared for the birth of the Ramey washateria, electric shock hazard and all. Or maybe we rolled it in and out?

As word got around, that our building had a washer, and more outsiders showed up. Soon people were standing in line – even some from off base. When the first load of baby diapers showed up, I had to draw the line. Something had to be done to control the situation. I formed the “Wash Your Own Club” with a \$1.00 initiation fee. I posted a list of members with a warning that use of the washer was limited to MEMBERS ONLY and for others to see me if they wanted to join my exclusive organization.

You will never believe how many people wanted to sign up – even tech reps. I would go away for a few days and on return, people would be lined up chomping at the bit to join. Since I had no way to expand the laundry facility, and my objective was clean drawers, not profit, I had to settle for the status quo and close the membership.

But the venture did not end there. Over much strong resistance from the billeting officer, and on the basis that he owed it to his BOQ patrons, I sold him the washer for \$35.00, recovering my investment, before I sailed off into the sunset. (*Charlie, aren't we Air Force folks supposed to fly off into the wild blue yonder? Ed.*) Willie Lowman never told me the fate of the fridge.

There were a few, even one female, who would sneak in late at night, do a load or two and sneak out. I could hear the noisy machine and I knew who they were but gave them the benefit of the doubt, thinking they would see me later and sign up. They

didn't. And I haven't calculated what a buck at 6% interest for 50 years would come to. But if I ever see any of them again (and they know who they are) I expect them to fess up and buy old Charlie a drink.