

ML.105.The Military Hardware Snatchers

The story of the USMA Mule Operation (Memory Lane 102) reminded me of two more 'collection' missions undertaken when I was 301st AREF Wing Vice Commander and then Commander.

Seems there was a US ARMY Korean vintage tank located at the front of an American Legion/VFW in downtown Columbus. An ARMY Reserve two star Gen who had been a tanker in Korea and awarded the DSC came to me with a plan to 'rescue' this tank which was not receiving the appropriate treatment and was a rather shaggy display of the military,

In any case, he came to me with a plan to extricate said tank from its deteriorating condition, advising he had influence with the local Ohio Army Guard transportation squadron who had the equipment to lift the tank onto a flatbed and deliver it to the Base.

Agreeing with him and offering my support for the Guards weekend unit activity, I departed Rickenbacker for March AFB and an unauthorized, then new arthroscopic surgery on my knee. I went without advising my Boss, another great leader with whom I previously had served in the 55th flying RB's.

On a Saturday afternoon while I was gone, an Ohio ARMY Guard flatbed appeared at the front gate at Rickenbacker with a tank on a flatbed and being a military vehicle was immediately waved through, proceeding to the flight line where it deposited said tank.

Monday morning Dick Kiefer, my boss, sitting in his office, received a call from the Major in Public Affairs advising him Channel Six was at the front gate to film a piece on the tank. Unbeknownst to my Boss or anyone else, the Legion or VFW who discovered their tank missing called the Columbus Police who put out a call on radio to anyone having knowledge of the missing tank to please call in.



Well, a young airman who was stationed at Rickenbacker and who had seen the tank on the flight line did so, which brings us to the telephone call to my Boss who responded to PA, "What tank?" "Sir, the one parked on the ramp next to the flight line."

Kiefer calmly responded, "I'll be right there," got in his blue staff car with the beacon mounted on the roof and proceeded, without lighting the beacon, to the flight line where the TV crew had already set up their camera. The PA Major asked the WINGCO to stand in front of the tank for the interview which followed. "Sir, what can you tell us about the tank?" "Well," he said, "as you know, we plan to have our annual Open House here later this month and this will be part of that effort to demonstrate to the public some of our military capabilities," "Thank you, sir", the camera guy said and then asked, "What will happen to the tank afterward?" Kiefer very calmly and confidently said, "Well, we intend to return it to its original location," having no clue where that might be. "Thank you, sir" replied the interviewer, ending the interview, and the Wing CO returned to his office.

Three days later, when I returned and entered my office next to his, I heard "Reg, would you come in for a minute?" "Of course," I said, and approached his desk. He never got up, never raised his voice, simply looked up at me and said "Next time you decide to appropriate a tank would you at least have the courtesy to let me know? Thank you and welcome back." He put his head back down and addressed the paperwork on his desk. Leadership, in my opinion is not made, it's a gift. Another lesson.

Finally, when I was Wing King and participating with the CAF in airshows and promoting patriotism and history, I received a call from some folks I knew over in Indiana. Apparently, there was a WW II 'Doodle Bug' (German ram jet) on display in front of – yes – another VFW or Legion Post evaluated as not receiving the appropriate care and I was asked if they, those calling, would bring it to Rickenbacker could I arrange transport to CAF HQ in Harlingen, TX? "Of course," I said, and immediately called one of our tenants, the 302nd AFRES C-123 outfit (same as the Mule caper) for whom we had done several favors, such as hiding their unaccounted supplies/excess parts, etc. in one of our hangars for their anticipated and previously announced IG inspections.

The Doodle Bug arrived, the C-123 taxied to the hangar where it was stored, it was loaded aboard, and away it went to Harlingen, depositing same on the CAF ramp with many questions who, what, why, etc., to which the crew responded "all we know is we were told to deliver it here."

Well the fit hit the shan again and the news media promoted the missing 'Bug,' to which CAF fessed up, having no knowledge of the details of its arrival other than it was on their ramp. Returned, as was the tank, and nothing further heard. Would this then qualify as another 'collection' mission learned during our previous experience in the 55th???

- B/G Reg Urschler

