**Milovic**

Not long after I earned my pilot's wings and reported to my first squadron I was sent to the Marine Corps' Cold Weather Training Base in Bridgeport, California for what was known as Escape, Evasion, and Survival School. True to the Base’s name, the temperature--it being the second week in November--ranged from a daytime high of 13 degrees and nighttime low of two. Along with two other aviators and a platoon of tough young Force Recon troops (at that time the elite among the elite) I was to learn what it was like to be captured and incarcerated by people who were only mildly interested in what I knew, but deeply committed to reprogramming the way I thought.

The course was ‘interesting,’ I had been assured by old salts who were steadfast in their refusal to provide more detail. This forced me to conjure up my ‘best of boot camp’ scenarios in preparation for what I expected to be your basic military ‘Cram ten minutes worth of information into five days of classes’ training agenda.

The 0800 welcome aboard meeting had no sooner gotten underway than it appeared my expectations had fallen something short of the mark.

"Good morning, Marines," the deeply-scarred major with a camouflage-khaki (green-side-out) eye-patch greeted us. "Welcome to the People's Republic of Dong Po." He paused while the words had a chance to rattle around for a while. "If you check behind you," he smiled with a hint of malevolence I came to recognize later as genuine, "you'll notice you've been captured." We all turned to find the back wall lined with Chi-Com-uniformed soldiers cradling a variety of weaponry easily identifiable as "theirs" as opposed to "ours."

"Remain seated, please," he said sharply to regain our attention. “As you know, the Commandant is extremely interested in how you respond to your training here at Bridgeport,” he continued quietly. “So we’ll be doing a fitness report on each one of you.” After a few more introductory remarks he paused for a bit before saying with a large smile, "Let me introduce comrade Milovic, your camp commander."

Milovic wound his way ominously through the three rows of "captives" stopping to peer intently into each face as he made his circuitous way to the front of the room. If his teeth held bloody remains of a human baby and his knuckles dragged the ground, he could not have provided a more menacing spectacle. My habitual rallying boast from boot camp, "They might kill you but they can't eat you," seemed particularly hollow at the moment and I knew though that all bets were off, nothing good was going to come from this encounter.

"You have been tried and found guilty," he began with surprising passion. "You are nothing but a group of criminals sent by your murderous bosses to work your foul misdeeds on people who have done nothing to hurt you."

Without seeming to look, he reached out suddenly, grabbing a young Marine by the throat, jerking him not merely from his seat, but off the ground where his struggles became both futile and comical. With every instant, Milovic's rage grew until I knew for a fact that the boy's life hung on a slender thread.

"So much for this 'no physical abuse' bullshit the Corps talked about in the wake of a drowning episode in boot camp," I told myself with a new clarity of vision. And as if to punctuate this realization, Milovic spun his victim through 180 degrees of arc, slamming him headfirst into the blackboard which in turn came loose from its moorings and crashed on top of the crumpled body.

"Outside!" he screamed. "Get Out! Get Out of My Sight You Capitalist Swine!" The venom continued to explode from the mouth of a fiend who up until a quarter-hour before had been a prime spit-and-polish example of America's elite fighting branch.

But I heard not a word of it. Instead, I found myself scrambling over two rows of hastily-abandoned chairs that stood between me and what lay beyond the doorway. The fate of the young Marine, until a minute before a matter of great priority, made no difference now. Head down and follow the herd.

Outside, as it turned out, was better only to the extent that Milovic was still inside. As we emerged into the frigid air -- the November air-temperature there at 9,000 feet rarely rose above the teens -- each of us in turn was shoved and sent sprawling down a short but steep incline where we were again manhandled into a rough sort of formation. When the last of our group was in place, a new leader took charge.

"Please take off everything but your shorts," he said to our astonishment. And then, because we balked at the suggestion, "Do it NOW, pigs!" We did with speed and dexterity that would have done honor to a first-class brothel. A little later we received the additional guidance, "boots and socks, too." That accomplished, he suggested that because of the cold we might like to warm ourselves by doing 50 pushups. We liked.

"Before we can welcome you to the People's Republic of Dong Po you must wash away all the capitalistic filth you're covered with," he announced as if offering us the chance to drink from the Holy Grail. Shouldering an ax, he marched through our ranks to a shallow depression and took a mighty swing, breaking the ice covering of a small pond. "Step forward, please," he invited. "Don't be bashful." Surprisingly the water wasn't too bad but when the cold air had a chance to go through me, I found my already deflated desire to resist all but totally extinguished.

It was Milovic's turn to retake center stage, only now he seemed totally changed. Almost jovially he moved to a small rise and greeted us cheerfully as if the earlier encounter had never taken place.

"Comrades," he said, pausing dramatically to let the distinction sink in. "Now that you are cleansed of your capitalistic filth we will begin a grand adventure." I dared hope that my initial belief that they couldn't eat me was still true. "First let us count off beginning with you, comrade," Milovic instructed, pointing to the far end of the line inhabited by the most junior troops. By the time it got to me the count was "37" and only the platoon commander -- the senior officer present -- remained. "From now on you'll answer to your number not your name," Milovic explained. "Comrade One is now your leader. If you have anything to say to me or any of the camp personnel, you will forward it through him." He allowed time for the import of the inversion of the Marines' time-honored and inviolate chain-of-command to sink in. "Does everyone understand this?" Number 38—the platoon commander--stepped forward to protest but before the first words were out of his mouth he was caught from behind by two guards and forced to his knees.

"I am not surprised at such behavior, comrades," Milovic continued mildly. "Perhaps Comrade 38 still has dirt in his ears. Another bath will help," he suggested to the guards who propelled their quarry to the pool. I stepped forward and managed to blurt out that I was now in command when I too was tackled and dragged without ceremony to the pond.

"Let them enjoy the water until the new chain of command is fully appreciated," Milovic suggested, making it clear that he was willing to play the game as long as necessary. No one else stepped forward. "Good," he said, motioning his deputy to pick up a package and follow him to Comrade One's end of the line.

"Comrade One, you have the honor of raising the camp flag," he announced ceremoniously, taking the package and offering it with a gesture in the direction of the flagpole. Comrade One stood straight and rigid as stone in refusal. With the slightest suggestion of a shrug, Milovic handed the package back to his aide and delivered a short, vicious blow to the left side of the youngster's face. Even at the 30 paces that separated us, I heard the crunch that comes only with the breaking of bone. The boy dropped without sound and Milovic stepped quickly to Comrade Two before he had time to fully grasp the situation.

"Raise the flag, Comrade," he said in a flat voice, Without waiting for resistance, Milovic smacked his fist into his victim's solar plexus and then swatted him on the head driving him to the ground. He turned to his aide to retrieve the package and handed it to Comrade Three who accepted it without protest and in short order the American ensign fluttered over the People's Republic of Dong Po in all its star-spangled glory.

"Think carefully about what you have witnessed, comrades," Milovic enjoined the group now reduced to 36 with the removal of the hapless numbers One and Two. "Comrade Three, lead your troops to the People's Compound."

Thereafter we were treated to a broad range of master/slave lessons designed to reinforce in each of us the realization that he who holds the gun holds all the cards. So compelling was the illusion—for that’s what it truly was--within an hour of our involvement, we recognized with absolute clarity what we thought or felt meant diddly squat to our captors. We were nothing to them. No, we were even less…groveling excuses for humans who had been pampered from birth to believe that as Americans we were entitled to fairness, respect…perhaps even subservience from people who mere minutes before had been beneath our cultural radar.

During the next 36 hours—it doesn’t seem like so much when compared to the years some of our former POWs were forced to endure—we were treated to a variety of ‘tortures’ designed to ferret out our weaknesses and play on our innermost fears.

Of all the physical assaults, the one I found to be most irresistible was water-boarding where I was strapped head down on a 30 degree inclined plank while a guard poured a stream of water onto my upturned face. Fifty-five years later I still can recall the terror of the situation, though in truth the practice did no actual damage.

The response to water boarding is universal so there’s nothing significant to be learned there, but it was our character weaknesses in which Milovic and his associates were interested, and they had mine exposed in fewer than five minutes of trying. When they hauled me into the interrogation room, I figured that short of beating me senseless there was little they could do to me, after all, I was too smart. And that was the lever.

It began with Milovic’s suggestion that we go ‘non-tactical’ for a moment, and before I realized it we were deep in conversation, well beyond the confines of what was to be non-tactical. When it dawned on me what had just happened and I shut up, Milovic smiled at me, saying something to the effect of, “Ok, Mr. Hotshot Marine Aviator, there’s your Achilles Heel and you damn well better find a way to manage it.”

My combat days are over and I never had to put his lessons to work for real, but Milovic’s analysis of me and my most fatal flaw is sadly as true today as it was on that frozen, windswept mountain top nearly 60 years ago. Makes me wonder how I would have fared had I been shot down and captured in Vietnam.