



Ready

Once Upon a Time ... Once a Grunt, Always a Grunt

BY RICH CHANICK, '75

In the fall of 1974, the Air Force Academy was preparing to play Army in what would turn out to be an average year in football. Fortunately, our commandant was Hoyt S. Vandenberg, a 1951 grad from Foxhole Tech, so there was a possibility for mischief in the air. As luck would have it, the firstclassmen of 31st squadron just happened to be in the market for mischief, so this was potentially a match made in heaven. Enter Otto Dieffenbach III, proud member of 31st squadron class of '75 and, an apprentice at a lock shop prior to entering the Academy. This was a combination of experience, opportunity (and probably boredom) that could not be passed up, so a plan was hatched for the entire class of '75 in the squadron to leave after Taps, pick all of the locks to the commandant's office, leave a big poster saying "Once a Grunt, Always a Grunt," move all of his furniture to the terrazzo between the Wright brothers and reassemble the office (with working phone)—all without being caught. This was clearly a job for seniors—not freshmen. Simple, right?

Fortunately, we had a little time before the event because there were signs to make, and for the first time since I was a cadet we locked our doors ... so Otto could go from room to room in the dorm practicing picking locks. When the Sunday night of Army

week arrived, an advance team went out just after the library doors were locked and Otto "pre-picked" the library doors. Our scouting had indicated that even though there were more locks to go through in the library, by going "the long way" and then over to the comm's office we would actually bypass a majority of the security. If the advance team succeeded with the first locked door, the main group would next encounter the comm's lock. The only unexpected glitch as the evening began was that the security police were occasionally driving a jeep around the terrazzo to guard against any raucous behavior. This was not a giant problem, but we did figure that

it probably doubled our chances of being caught.

When the advance team reported back to the squadron that all of the library locks were open and everything was a go, we prepared to leave. In the end, all of us but three went. The squadron commander and the ops officer decided they did not want to go. I guess that's why they had the jobs in the first place. The third person really wanted to go, but we wouldn't let him. He was on most types of probation, and if we got caught we would be stuck doing tours and confinements. We were afraid he would find himself with airman stripes guarding an alert B-52 someplace cold. He was certainly there in spirit. (A quick sidelight: Yes, he did squeak through to graduate and went on to have probably the most distinguished military career of anybody in the squadron!)

The actual raid could not have been more perfect. Compared with the teamwork exercises we had to do in Jacks Valley, this was a piece of cake. All of the doors were open, and once we got to the commandant's office, it took less than a minute to open the last door into the inner sanctum. Of note was the Form-10 on the commandant's desk addressing "whoever was reading it" for being out after taps. At first we panicked, thinking that somehow he knew we were coming, but after we thought about it, I guess he was just prepared in case somebody was coming. The desk and couches had to go down the steps because the freight elevators were locked, but we were young and full of adrenaline. Prior to leaving the office, we took a picture to remind ourselves we had really done it and left—locking all of the doors of course.

The last and clearly most dangerous phase of the mission was to set up the office between the Wright brothers. We were organized so that each of us had a specific job in setting up the office. I still remember one of my classmates (an EE major, of course) stringing wire for the phone. Nothing feels more exposed than being on the terrazzo at about 3 a.m. carrying the commandant's office. The entire set up took less than three minutes. We hereby officially apologize to the graveyard shift airman on security police patrol who had to call in and explain to his supervisor how the commandant's office just "appeared." When we all landed in the SAR with no "hits or losses," it was all we could do to keep the laughing and whooping down. None of us could sleep.

The next day the commandant sat at his desk on the terrazzo for a few hours and made calls on his working phone in what I believe



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... always a grunt?

Seems Brig. Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg Jr., commandant of cadets who is a 1951 graduate of West Point, would rather switch than . . . well, whatever.

Perhaps what follows will explain what we mean.

One of the first Comm Line inquiries he received went something like this:

QUESTION: "General, I've heard a rumor that 'once a grunt, always a grunt.' I wonder if you would care to comment on that?"

REPLY: Yes! I'll comment.

BEAT ARMY!

Hoyt S. Vandenberg
HOYT S. VANDENBERG, JR., Brig Gen, USAF

Fighter Pilot

was a terrific show of sportsmanship. Our AOC said that the word he was getting was that it was a "very professional job" given the number of locks that had to be negotiated. He told us that there were a lot of questions that he had but he knew that they would all be "improper questions." In the end, all of us agreed that his current level of knowledge was probably the best for all and he left laughing.

The base paper took pictures of the office on the terrazzo, and all of us just held on to our "Once a Grunt" picture until we thought the statute of limitations had expired. Years later Otto sent the picture to General Vandenberg and once again he expressed his pleasure with the whole event.

As the class of '75 approaches our 30-year Reunion this September, I would not list the raid as our greatest accomplishment at the Academy, but I would not put it at the bottom either. The camaraderie and sense of shared moments are at the very bedrock of the Academy experience. I hope that the spirit of good clean fun and relying on each other will always be part of that education.

I will always be proud to have been part of Vandenberg's Raiders. ✓

To submit your "Once Upon a Time" story, please e-mail it to editor@usafa.org.



Phil Kendall Pulling Guard Duty