

Whatever It Takes

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G. Gibson Carey IV

On a memorable June day in 1955, I was both graduated from Princeton University and commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army, courtesy of the wonderful ROTC program which had kept me in college for four years, and out of Korea. After an artillery training stint at Ft Sill, Oklahoma, I found myself at Ft Bragg, North Carolina, attached to the XVIII Airborne Corps Artillery. And then, for reasons I never learned, I found myself posted to a quite unusual assignment.

Ft Bragg was then - and I suppose still is - something of a show place for the Army. It is the Army's largest post, it is the proud home of the Airborne, and it is fairly close to Washington. For all of these reasons, it attracts a steady flow of important visitors, ranging from congressmen on a junket to an endless procession of statesmen and military dignitaries from all over the world.

One of the problems they have in Washington is what to do with the never-ending stream of nabobs who come to the U.S. on State Visits: so, after a ritual how-de-do at the Defense Department or State Department, they are bundled off to somewhere like Ft Bragg for three or four days... and someone has to take care of them once they are there. Out of the clear blue sky, I found myself assigned to the Commanding General's office as a sort of junior aide-de-camp, specifically to care for these VIPs and Brass Hats.

At first, I was not pleased with this assignment, but I pretty quickly figured out that it was a good gig. I was newly married, and home had its attractions for me: especially, no troop duty, no maneuvers or bivouacs and no cold, lonely nights in the field. Most of the visitors were very nice people, and quite grateful for the attention they received. Some were extremely interesting men. A few were pompous jerks, but they were the exception. And I also developed a pleasant working relationship with the Commanding General, Paul Adams, who was a godlike figure in that small world, and whose wife would sometimes call on me to fill in when there was an unanticipated vacancy at her duplicate bridge club.

One difficulty was my uniform. I had a good supply of fatigues, of course, but the nature of my work meant that most days I had to wear the formal uniform - pinks and greens. I only had one set of these - the one they gave me when I joined the ROTC at Princeton - and I certainly did not intend to buy a second. So, whenever I had an open evening, my bride and I would scurry off to nearby Fayetteville for the one hour dry cleaner and a bite to eat. I took very good care to stay out of the rain in my pinks and greens. Somehow, I made it through my two years in the Army with just the one uniform, but it was a near thing.

One day I was unexpectedly summoned to the Commanding General's office. This was not a customary event. Something was up. I found General Adams huddling with Major Miller, his Secretary General Staff, behind a closed door. He scowled at me in a ferocious way and said, "Carey, this is big. This time it's a head of state." That was big: such a thing was unheard of.

"President Sukarno of Indonesia is coming for a week. He's bringing his two wives, his Chief of Staff, three general officers in all, their wives, and their own household staff to do their meals - God knows how many total." I was staggered. A very practical issue leapt foremost to my mind.

"But General, where are we going to put all those people?"

"Well," he said, "Major Miller and I are working on that. We have a total of four general officers living on the post, in comfortable quarters: I figure we're going to move them - and their families - all out into motels in Fayetteville and give their quarters to the visitors. I want you to go around and break the news to them." I paled visibly: this was not going to be fun.

"Even General Trapnell, sir?" I quavered. General Trapnell had two stars and commanded the 82nd Airborne Division, a man of supreme respect.

General Adams snorted. "Well, maybe not Trapnell - but Goddamit Carey, you don't seem to get the Goddamned picture. This is a Goddamned big deal. It is very, very important that this visit go well. And it won't hurt my career (he was about due for his third star) to have President Sukarno say something nice about Ft Bragg when he gets back to Washington. We're pulling out all the stops. We're going to have the entire 82nd Division on full dress review. We're going to have the 504th Regiment do a full airborne drop for him. We're going to have Corps Artillery do a Time on Target for him (the most incredible display of firepower the army can muster). And you, Carey, are going to be in charge of keeping all those Goddamned camp followers of his happy while they're here. Let me be clear, Carey: Whatever It Takes. Got it?"

I gulped. "Got it, sir."

"But wait, there's more - and this goes no further, Carey. President Sukarno is going to be out of sight for the first three days he's here. He's going to be over in the Army hospital getting his dick whittled on for his syphilis. His Chief of Staff will cover for him. And you will stick like glue to the Chief of Staff."

And so it came to pass. The military planning was simply incredible. Over ten thousand soldiers and C119 airplanes beyond count were involved. The domestic logistics were sticky, too. The evicted brigadier generals were predictably outraged. Their wives seethed with fury (one moaned, "My four children and I are being thrown out of our home for some Goddamned syphed-up Gook?" - so that cat was out of the bag). But President Sukarno arrived at neighboring Pope Air Force Base with full state honors, he slipped out of view for a few days, and the charade had begun.

Each morning, my first call was on the quarters of Sukarno's Chief of Staff, to make sure that everybody was happy. And generally, they were a very happy bunch. Imagine my concern, if you can, on the third morning to see that all was clearly not well. Suddenly, they were not happy. Long faces everywhere. I asked what the problem was.

"Lieutenant, we know that everyone is trying so hard to give us everything we need, and we are grateful. But it is the food. We cannot find our favorite food. We have sent our steward to your commissary every day and even to your supermarkets in town, but he comes back empty-handed. The Chief of Staff means to speak to President Sukarno about it as soon as he rejoins us."

"But what food do you want?" I asked. "Tell me, and I will do whatever it takes to find it for you."

"Lieutenant, our steward has looked in stores everywhere, but he can find no dog."

DOG! They want a dog for dinner? Oh, my God! This was a problem. Especially for me: a dog-lover raised in a bird dog-loving family. What ever to do? But I remembered the General's stern order: "Carey, Whatever it takes." Well, you gotta do whatcha gotta do.....

So I commandeered a staff car and driver, (lieutenants can do that if they are known to be on the commanding general's staff) and into Fayetteville I went, straight to the dog pound run by the county SPCA. It seemed the most expedient solution to a very real problem.

I went from kennel to kennel looking for a dog that met my rather well thought-out criteria. First, he had to be a big dog: I didn't want to go through this trauma more than once. Big, plump and roly-poly with plenty for leftovers. Second, not too old, and therefore likely to be juicy and tender. Third, not even remotely cute, and therefore unlikely to find a home through adoption. I was accompanied by a fluttery lady volunteer who eagerly pointed out the charms of each candidate: this did not make the selection process any easier.

But at long last I found one that looked as though he would do. He was clearly a dog of the street, still in his youth and with spring in his step, almost the size of a Labrador, overweight, and a mix of many breeds including a lot of Husky. He had a broken tail, a torn ear, and a sullen, discouraged look on his face suggesting that life up until now had not been an easy business and he did not expect it to get much better. How right he was.

So I signed a sheaf of papers promising to give him a good home, sat through an interminable briefing on good canine nutrition (what irony there!), and paid for a rabies shot (I wondered about his edibility with the serum coursing in his veins, but pressed on in my grim mission). I distinctly recall that at the bottom of the page of the adoption papers were printed, in cutesy pastel letters, the cheerful words "At last, somebody loves me."

I led him out to the staff car on a makeshift leash made from a length of clothesline, trying my level best not to bond with him, and drove straight to the butchering section of the Ft Bragg commissary. This was presided over by a rough and grizzled old sergeant... a veteran of many wars and much butchering: he might well have fed the troops their steaks before they went up San Juan hill. He saw me coming through the door with my companion on a rope and clearly wondered what this was all about.

"Sergeant," I said, coming straight to the point, "Butcher me up this dog."

"WHAT?," he exclaimed. I repeated my order. And he flatly refused. "I am not gonna do it, Lieutenant. What the hell kind of a person do you think I am?" The dog took no interest in this debate (more fool, he) but sat by and scratched an ear.

So I fell back on higher authority. "Sergeant," I said, "You don't seem to get it. General Adams says to butcher this dog."

"Well, I ain't gonna to do it, Lieutenant. Have you got that?"

I was stymied. "Sergeant," I said, "This is gross dereliction of duty and failure to obey a direct command."

"Well, you and the general can both go and f--- yourselves, Lieutenant. And you can tell him I said so. Because there ain't a court martial anywhere in this country that will convict me on this one." Somehow, I knew that he was right. I had no idea what to do.

But the stern command "Whatever it takes" was ringing in my ear. Perhaps money would help: it so often does. So I went back to my office, dog in tow, and dipped into the General's petty cash that was kept for Happy Hour at the Officers' Club. And back into Fayetteville I went, working my way down Bragg Boulevard from one butcher shop to the next, upping the ante with each rejection.

On my fourth try I found a butcher who was clearly down on his luck and who would do the job for thirty dollars - a not inconsiderable sum in 1956. So I handed over the clothesline leash to him and fled his shop, with never a goodbye to my four legged friend. Two hours later I returned, and there was a neat stack of packages, wrapped in white butchers' paper and tied up with string. I suppose it was the dog - I never really knew, or asked. I paid the man and hurried back to Ft Bragg.

Well, they were simply delighted. The Indonesian Chief of Staff's head steward grabbed the packages and ran for the kitchen. And the next morning, on my ritual early visit, there were smiles all around, and profuse thanks. The rest of President Sukarno's visit went without event. He emerged inconspicuously from the Army Hospital, comported himself with great dignity at all the festivities and displays that had been laid on for him, and in the fullness of time was off to the next spot on his visit to the States. I never told the General (who eventually got his third star and went on to command the Third Army) about my canine misadventures: he was a dog lover too.

Tonight, I recall Virginius Hall's charming paper of several years ago, "A Dog's Dinner." Now, I have given you "A Dog For Dinner." And I ask you, where will it all end?
