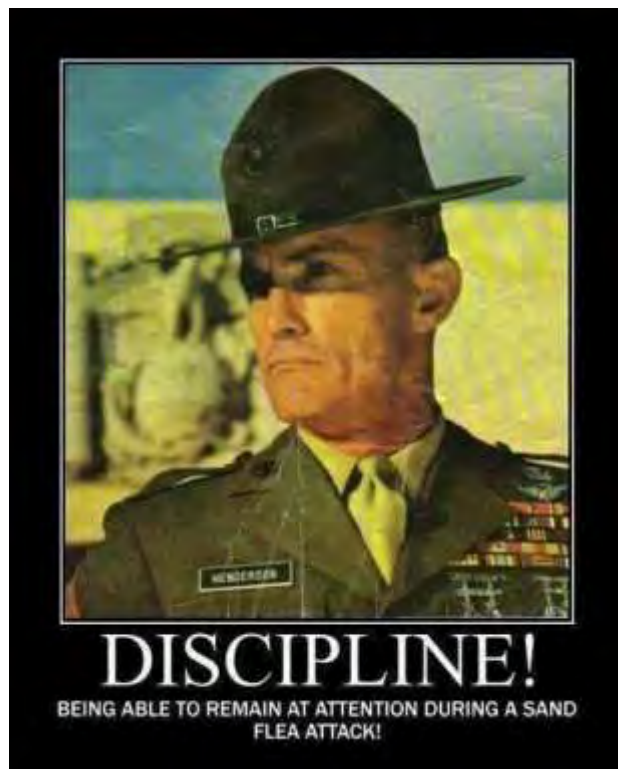


## Personal problems are a dime a dozen - It Don't Mean Nuthin

Michael Downey  
May 14, 2020



It was mid-March, 1976 and I was packing a rifle for Bravo Company, First Battalion, 2nd Marines at Camp Lejeune North Carolina. The sun was shining, the birds were singing but I was feeling lower than a whale turd at the bottom of the ocean. The night before, I had gotten a letter from home. My dog died, hit by a car, my best friend had sold my pride and joy, a 1972 cherry red Chevy Camaro. My girl had run off with a longhaired, peace loving college professor with the unlikely name of Jody. Life sucked!

By noon chow, I decided to go see the First Sergeant. Maybe I could wrangle some emergency leave. The First Shirt was John R. Barnes, sixteen years in the Corps with various postings throughout the Fleet Marine Force including two tours in the 'Nam. Ramrod straight, with piercing blue eyes and a salt and pepper crew cut; he was the epitome of a marine's marine. He ran his company with an iron fist and generally brokered no bullshit from a rear rank boot like me. I figured I'd take my best shot. After all, what could he do, shave my head and

send me to Vietnam?

I was surprised that Top was basically sympathetic to my tale of woe. After listening patiently for almost three minutes as to why I thought it was in the best interest of the Corps, the Naval Service and the United States of America to send me home on three days of emergency leave, he made his decision.

He said, "Devil Dog, what you got here is what's known as a personal problem." Then he continued, "In all my years in this lash-up, if I've learned one thing, it's this. There are three ways to do things; the right way, the wrong way and the Marine Corps way. "Round here we do things the Marine Corps way."

Not sure where he was going, I tried to jump in with another reason why emergency leave was the only way to solve this problem. Now, with a voice that began to take on the timber of the parade deck, Top began to wax philosophic, "Personal problems are a dime a dozen. Everybody's got 'em. The thing you got to remind yourself is; it don't mean nuthin."

I was dumb struck. What did it mean? It don't mean nuthin? Was this really the solution to my problem? The notion that I was in dire need of emergency leave continued to throb in my brain. But wait a minute, it felt like this was a moment of enlightenment destined to change my life. The light in the company office was so bright, but alas, it was fleeting and began to slip away. I really wanted those three days.

Magnanimously, the First Sergeant explained, "this is what I'm gonna do for you. I'm gonna write out a TS chit and you are going to take it up to Battalion and tell your tale to the chaplain."

Now a chit was a piece of paper used by the First Sergeant to efficiently run the company. Whatever you got into your head you wanted to do, you needed the proper chit to do it. If you wanted to go to dispersing to clear up a back pay problem, you needed a chit. If you wanted to go on sick call during duty hours, you needed a chit. If you wanted to go to special services to check out some soft-ball equipment, you needed a chit. You get the idea. A TS chit, that is *tough shit*, was rare because it gave you permission to see the chaplain and tell him your tough shit story. The chaplain had the power to do a lot of things like, handing out emergency leave, emergency funds, and counseling.

Armed with my TS chit I took off for Battalion Headquarters. After producing my chit for the inspection of three different pogue-bait types, I was ushered into the presence of Lt. Commander Forthright. The Marine Corps relies on the Navy for support services like doctors, medical corpsmen, and chaplains so Forthright was a naval officer with the air of an absent minded professor on weekend maneuvers. Standing in front of his desk at parade rest, I explained again the problem and what the best solution was. The Sky Pilot leaned back in his swivel chair and took a good six minutes to load, tamp down, and light a pipe to his satisfaction. Then, he proceeded to hold forth on my problem and its possible solutions.

He concluded, "You're in the Marine Corps now, not back on the block ditty-bopping with your ass-hole buddies. Around here we do things the Marine Corps way. What you got is a personal problem. If you let your personal problems get in the way of doing your job you won't be any good to the Corps. I suggest you keep in mind that it don't mean nothing."

Again, those words, the light of the ages flooded into my mind. I was at peace for the first time in days and the subtlety of my life unrolled before me. I felt detached from and at the same time connected to all things. All thoughts of the three days leave were gone in an instant. I contemplated the mysteries of life.

The chaplain broke into my moment of nirvana letting me know, "The best thing for you to do is to take your young ass back down to the company area and start acting like a Marine."

Left, right, Aye Aye sir, about face, and I was gone.

The rest of the afternoon went by with me knowing that I was in an altered state. My squad was surveying the platoon's 782 gear. We piled web gear, pouches and field packs on the floor and examined each piece for defects and wear that would make it 'un-serviceable' and in need of being exchanged.

Corporal Nicks advised us, "You all better quit lolly-gagging and get that gear over to supply before they haul ass for the day."

As I went through the motions, my mind was otherwise occupied. Wow, the transcendence of it! 'It don't mean nuthun' means nothing means anything. At the same time, because of the double negative, it also means everything means everything. How could that even be?

All through evening chow and later at the slop-chute I tried to puzzle it out. I asked around if anyone knew anything about it. Mostly I got blank stares and sometimes a, "what the fuck you been smoking?" Finally I hit up Dawson. Dawson was a thirty six year old buck private with a sleeve full of hash marks. He had worn out more sea-bags than I had socks. Rumor had it that he and the First Sergeant enlisted together on the buddy plan. He was certifiable. Whatever had happened to him in South East Asia made him different than the rest of us. Dawson was in his customary spot in a corner nursing a pitcher of beer until he was ready to stagger back to the barracks.

When I asked him, he gave me a long look that turned into a crooked grin. Yeah, he was familiar with the expression.

"Back in 68-69 it seemed that everyone was saying it."

He told me that so many bad things happened, the only way to go on was to say it don't mean nuthun.

"Guys that tried to figure out what the significance of everything was, usually went around the bend. If the guy next to you was hit by a random round and you dodged the bullet, it's better to say it don't mean nuthun. If a round falls short and kills or maims ten guys, hey, it don't mean nuthun. If a brown-bar 2nd Lt. orders a platoon to cross a paddy that everyone knows is mined, it don't mean nuthun. If a 6x6 truck rolls off a bridge and lands on three kids playing, well, it don't mean nuthun. Of course it means everything to those who are killed, mangled and scared by the chances of war. To the others that have to stand up and keep going, its better if it don't mean a thing. It was a way to deal with the chaos of war."

The light of the moment passed in time but the concept stayed with me and I thought about it many times. In the natural world there is no meaning as we humans construe it. Everything just is. The lion doesn't consider the significance of the gazelle that wanders past, it just eats it. A tsunami has no thought for the good or evil of the population it washes away. A flower never contemplates the meaning of spring, it just blooms. All meaning is a concept that derives from humans. Only our kind considers good and evil, chance or significance.

Our species awoke into a world of meaningless chaos regulated only by the laws of nature and began to observe and assign meaning to things. It was a survival device. Today's societies and cultures are built on layers of meaning but at the core, they are all created by humans trying to bring order out of seeming chaos. As our knowledge increases, we let go of concepts and meanings that are outdated or we hang on to them and they become magic and superstitions. We do have the ability to cling to meaningful things and the ability to let them go when we have to. It doesn't mean a thing and it means everything, are one and the same. It's all up to me. The First Sergeant, the chaplain and Dawson all had something meaningful to say but in the end, only I could understand. It don't mean nuthin.

*This story is in my book of short stories; This Too Shall Pass and Other Stories.*