



Semper Fi

November 10th was the 230th birthday of the United States Marine Corps. I always reminisce on this day and was reminded, in conversation with an old flying buddy, of a significant event from years ago.

A group of us checked into Pensacola Naval Air Station in November 1968 to start one of the great adventures of our lives, flight training. We were 2nd Lieutenants in the Marine Corps fresh out of Quantico, earning the princely sum of \$350 per month with a \$100 raise coming when we started flying. The Marine Corps – where every day is a holiday, every meal a feast and every paycheck a fortune! We were rich! And we couldn't wait to get started on this great challenge with some of the wildest, craziest, funniest, most competitive, passionate and patriotic guys on earth, all of us fighter jock wannabes. Many of these people who subscribe to the theory that growing old is mandatory, growing up is not, are still close friends who call each other every year on these people who subscribe to the theory that growing old is mandatory, growing up is not, are still close friends who call each other every year on November 10th. And then there was the town of Pensacola – right on the Gulf of Mexico with the prettiest beaches and water in the world...and girls to match! All of us were bachelors and we truly believed we had died and gone to heaven!

We started ground school which kept us busy all day and at night we “worked” even harder in places like Rosie O’Gradys, Trader Johns, The Oyster Bar, and others too numerous to mention. About two weeks after checking in, six of us received an “invitation” to pay a “social call” on the Colonel in charge of MAD, Marine Aviation Detachment, for the obligatory “welcome aboard, fly safe, study hard and represent the Marine Corps with honor” lecture. So, on a warm sunny afternoon, the six of us, with shiny brass, shoes, and faces, appeared before this big muscular, red-haired senior officer who had more military decorations on his uniform than a leopard has spots. He was very outgoing and friendly and immediately put us at ease. We sat in comfortable chairs in his office as he thrilled us with his war stories. After delivering the two minute “keep your nose clean” lecture, he turned his attention to us. He asked where each of us was from. Impossible to remember what each one said, but we were from all over the country – Idaho, Pennsylvania, Missouri, and Kansas. My response was South Carolina. The colonel said “That’s interesting, my son just finished the Citadel and is now writing a book on some small island off the coast of South Carolina”. My immediate thought was “big freaking deal”. Nothing concerned me less than this little tidbit of useless information as we were ready to get out of there and head to the beach. As we were leaving I glanced at his name tag to make sure of his name. I shook his hand, saluted, and said, “Nice to meet you Colonel Conroy, Sir”.

It didn't dawn on me until a couple of years later that we had been in the presence of Colonel Don Conroy, the Great Santini, one of the most famous Marine Corps fighter pilots, and that his son, Pat Conroy, would become one of the most highly acclaimed authors in America, writing such classics as

“The Great Santini”, “Lords of Discipline”, “Prince of Tides”, and “Beach Music”.

Colonel Conroy died a few years ago and was buried in Beaufort, South Carolina where Robert Duvall played the Great Santini in the movie by the same name. Several of my friends are in the bar scene (typical!). Pat Conroy wrote the eulogy for his Dad. It is a classic worth reading with some leadership questions at the end. Hope you enjoy it and look forward to your response.

Eulogy For a Fighter Pilot

COLONEL DON CONROY'S EULOGY, by his son Pat Conroy

The children of fighter pilots tell different stories than other kids do. None of our fathers can write a will or sell a life insurance policy or fill out a prescription or administer a flu shot or explain what a poet meant. We tell of fathers who land on aircraft carriers at pitch-black night with the wind howling out of the China Sea. Our fathers wiped out aircraft batteries in the Philippines and set Japanese soldiers on fire when they made the mistake of trying to overwhelm our troops on the ground.

Your Dads ran the barber shops and worked at the post office and delivered the packages on time and sold the cars, while our Dads were blowing up fuel depots near Seoul, were providing extraordinarily courageous close air support to the beleaguered Marines at the Chosin Reservoir, and who once turned the Naktong River red with blood of a retreating North Korean battalion. We tell of men who made widows of the wives of our nations' enemies and who made orphans out of all their children.

You don't like war or violence? Or napalm? Or rockets? Or cannons or death rained down from the sky? Then let's talk about your fathers, not ours. When we talk about the aviators who raised us and the Marines who loved us, we can look you in the eye and say "you would not like to have been America's enemies when our fathers passed overhead". We were raised by the men who made the United States of America the safest country on earth in the bloodiest century in all recorded history. Our fathers made sacred those strange, singing names of battlefields across the Pacific: Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, the Chosin Reservoir, Khe Sanh and a thousand more. We grew up attending the funerals of Marines slain in these battles. Your fathers made communities like Beaufort decent and prosperous and functional; our fathers made the world safe for democracy.

We have gathered here today to celebrate the amazing and storied life of Col. Donald Conroy who modestly called himself by his nom de guerre, The Great Santini. There should be no sorrow at this funeral because The Great Santini lived life at full throttle, moved always in the fast lanes, gunned every engine, teetered on every edge, seized every moment and shook it like a terrier shaking a rat. He did not know what moderation was or where you'd go to look for it.

Donald Conroy is the only person I have ever known whose self-esteem was absolutely unassailable. There was not one thing about himself that my father did not like, nor was there one thing about himself that he would change. He simply adored the man he was and walked with perfect confidence through every encounter in his life. Dad wished everyone could be just like him. His stubbornness was an art form. The Great Santini did what he did, when he wanted to do it, and woe to the man who got in his way. Once I introduced my father before he gave a speech to an Atlanta audience. I said at the end of the introduction, "My father decided to go into the Marine Corps on the day he discovered his IQ was the temperature of this room". My father rose to the podium, stared down at the audience, and said without skipping a beat, "My God, it's hot in here! It must be at least 180 degrees".

Here is how my father appeared to me as a boy. He came from a race of giants and demi-gods from a mythical land known as Chicago. He married the most beautiful girl ever to come crawling out of the poor and lowborn south, and there were times when I thought we were being raised by Zeus and Athena. After Happy Hour my father would drive his car home at a hundred miles an hour to see his wife and seven children. He would get out of his car, a strapping flight jacketed matinee idol, and walk toward his house, his knuckles dragging along the ground, his shoes stepping on and killing small animals in his slouching amble toward the home place.

My sister, Carol, stationed at the door, would call out, "Godzilla's home!" and we seven children would

scamper toward the door to watch his entry. The door would be flung open and the strongest Marine aviator on earth would shout, "Stand by for a fighter pilot!" He would then line his seven kids up against the wall and say,

"Who's the greatest of them all?" "You are, O Great Santini, you are." "Who knows all, sees all, and hears all?" "You do, O Great Santini, you do."

We were not in the middle of a normal childhood, yet none of us were sure since it was the only childhood we would ever have. For all we knew other men were coming home and shouting to their families, "Stand by for a pharmacist," or "Stand by for a chiropractor".

In the old, bewildered world of children we knew we were in the presence of a fabulous, overwhelming personality; but had no idea we were being raised by a genius of his own myth-making. My mother always told me that my father had reminded her of Rhett Butler on the day they met and everyone who ever knew our mother conjured up the lovely, coquettish image of Scarlet O'Hara.

Let me give you my father the warrior in full battle array. The Great Santini is catapulted off the deck of the aircraft carrier, Sicily. His Black Sheep squadron is the first to reach the Korean Theater and American ground troops had been getting torn up by North Korean regulars. Let me do it in his voice: "We didn't even have a map of Korea. Not zip. We just headed toward the sound of artillery firing along the Naktong River. They told us to keep the North Koreans on their side of the Naktong. Air power hadn't been a factor until we got there that day. I radioed to Bill Lundin. I was his wingman. 'There they are. Let's go get'em.' So we did."

I was interviewing Dad so I asked, "how do you know you got them?" "Easy," The Great Santini said. "They were running - it's a good sign when you see the enemy running. There was another good sign."

"What was that, Dad?" "They were on fire."

This is the world in which my father lived deeply. I had no knowledge of it as a child. When I was writing the book *The Great Santini*, they told me at Headquarters Marines that Don Conroy was at one time one of the most decorated aviators in the Marine Corps. I did not know he had won a single medal. When his children gathered together to write his obituary, not one of us knew of any medal he had won, but he had won a slew of them.

When he flew back toward the carrier that day, he received a call from an Army Colonel on the ground who had witnessed the route of the North Koreans across the river. "Could you go pass over the troops fifty miles south of here? They've been catching hell for a week or more. It'd do them good to know you flyboys are around." He flew those fifty miles and came over a mountain and saw a thousand troops lumbered down in foxholes. He and Bill Lundin went in low so these troops could read the insignias and know the American aviators had entered the fray. My father said, "Thousands of guys came screaming out of their foxholes, son. It sounded like a world series game. I got goose pimples in the cockpit. Get goose pimples telling it forty-eight years later. I dipped my wings, waved to the guys. The roar they let out. I hear it now. I hear it now."

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, my mother took me out to the air station where we watched Dad's squadron scramble on the runway on their bases at Roosevelt Road and Guantanamo. In the car as we watched the A-4's take off, my mother began to say the rosary. "You praying for Dad and his men, Mom?" I asked her. "No, son. I'm praying for the repose of the souls of the Cuban pilots they're going to kill."

Later I would ask my father what his squadron's mission was during the Missile Crisis. "To clear the air of MIGS over Cuba," he said. "You think you could've done it?" The Great Santini answered, "There wouldn't have been a bluebird flying over that island, son."

Now let us turn to the literary of *The Great Santini*. Some of you may have heard that I had some

serious reservations about my father's child-rearing practices. When *The Great Santini* came out, the book roared through my family like a nuclear device. My father hated it; my grandparents hated it; my aunts and uncles hated it; my cousins who adore my father thought I was a psychopath for writing it; and rumor has it that my mother gave it to the judge in her divorce case and said, "It's all there. Everything you need to know."

What changed my father's mind was when Hollywood entered the picture and wanted to make a movie of it. This is when my father said, "What a shame John Wayne is dead. Now there was a man. Only he could've gotten my incredible virility across to the American people." Orion Pictures did me a favor and sent my father a telegram; "Dear Col. Conroy: We have selected the actor to play you in the coming film. He wants to come to Atlanta to interview you. His name is Truman Capote."

But my father took well to Hollywood and its Byzantine, unspeakable ways. When his movie came out, he began reading *Variety* on a daily basis. He called the movie a classic the first month of its existence. He claimed that he had a place in the history of film. In February of the following year, he burst into my apartment in Atlanta, as excited as I have ever seen him, and screamed, "Son, you and I were nominated for Academy Awards last night. Your mother didn't get squat".

Ladies and gentlemen, you are attending the funeral of the most famous Marine that ever lived. Dad's life had grandeur, majesty and sweep. We were all caught in the middle of living lives much paler and less daring than *The Great Santini's*. His was a high stepping, damn the torpedoes kind of life, and the stick was always set at high throttle. There is not another Marine alive who has not heard of *The Great Santini*. There's not a fighter pilot alive who does not lift his glass whenever Don Conroy's name is mentioned and give the fighter pilot toast: "Hurrah for the next man to die".

One day last summer, my father asked me to drive him over to Beaufort National Cemetery. He wanted to make sure there were no administrative foul-ups about his plot. I could think of more pleasurable ways to spend the afternoon, but Dad brought new eloquence to the word stubborn. We went into the office and a pretty black woman said that everything was squared away. My father said, "It'll be the second time I've been buried in this cemetery." The woman and I both looked strangely at Dad. Then he explained, "You ever catch the flick "*The Great Santini*? That was me they planted at the end of the movie."

All of you will be part of a very special event today. You will be witnessing the actual burial that has already been filmed in fictional setting. This has never happened in world history. You will be present in a scene that was acted out in film in 1979. You will be in the same town and the same cemetery. Only *The Great Santini* himself will be different.

In his last weeks my father told me, "I was always your best subject, son. Your career took a nose dive after *The Great Santini* came out". He had become so media savvy that during his last illness he told me not to schedule his funeral on the same day as the *Seinfeld* Farewell. The Colonel thought it would hold down the crowd. The Colonel's death was front-page news across the country. CNN announced his passing on the evening news all around the world.

Don Conroy was a simple man and an American hero. His wit was remarkable; his intelligence frightening; and his sophistication next to none. He was a man's man and I would bet he hadn't spent a thousand dollars in his whole life on his wardrobe. He lived out his whole retirement in a two room efficiency in the Darlington Apartment in Atlanta. He claimed he never spent over a dollar on any piece of furniture he owned. You would believe him if you saw the furniture. Dad bought a season ticket for himself to Six Flags Over Georgia and would often go there alone to enjoy the rides and hear the children squeal with pleasure. He was a beer drinker who thought wine was for Frenchmen or effete social climbers like his children.

Ah! His children. Here is how God gets a Marine Corps fighter pilot. He sends him seven squirrely, mealy-mouth children who march in peace demonstrations, wear Birkenstocks, flirt with vegetarianism, invite cross-dressers to dinner and vote for candidates that Dad would line up and shoot. If my father

knew how many tears his children had shed since his death, he would be mortally ashamed of us all and begin yelling that he should've been tougher on us all, knocked us into better shape – that he certainly didn't mean to raise a passel of kids so weak and tacky they would cry at his death. Don Conroy was the best uncle I ever saw, the best brother, the best grandfather, the best friend, and my God, what a father.

After my mother divorced him and The Great Santini was published, Don Conroy had the best second act I ever saw. He never was simply a father. This was The Great Santini. It is time to leave you, Dad. From Carol and Mike and Kathy and Jim and Tim and especially from Tom. Your kids wanted to especially thank Katy and Bobby and Willie Harvey who cared for you heroically.

Let us leave you and say good-bye, Dad, with the passwords that bind all Marines and their wives and their children forever. The Corps was always the most important thing.

Semper Fi, Dad
Semper Fi, O Great Santini.

Leadership Questions

Generally, does one parent have more influence on a son? If so, which one?

Generally, does one parent have more influence on a daughter? If so, which one?

Can you explain how someone can be a great leader in the professional side of their life and not exhibit the same qualities in

the personal side – or vice versa?

Can you be, in the truest sense of the word, a leader if you fall

short in personal or business leadership?

Can you be considered a leader if you don't have people reporting to you?

Thank you for the response to last month's Leadership Challenge "Chariots of Fire". Click on the link to read the synopsis of responses. [Response to October 2005 Leadership Challenge](#).

I encourage your response to these thoughts. farlgroup@aol.com

Have a great day!

Please forward this on or send us the e-mail addresses of co-workers, friends or family members who might enjoy a monthly leadership thought.