

1802 Bicentennial 2002

Rabble Rousers

1963 Mess Hall Rally

The OC that night was MAJ Rogers. He personally wrote me up for "the cadet most responsible for the activity" since I was head of the Rabble Rousers, and planned, and directed the strategic mission of "lifting the team and the corps" with Rocco McGurk, Joe Corey, John Rogers, Paul Rennie, Dick Plymale, George Jacunski, Harry Dermody, Bill Reynolds, John Lang, Mike Conley, Tom Anthony, and Al Caparoso. After all, at the time, I was the Brigade Asst. Activities Officer, serving under my mentor, MAJ J. R. Thurman.

Each stalwart member had a specific assignment...from Corey turning out all the mess hall lights with critically specific timing, ...to McGurk blasting out the fight song over the PA...to the John Rogers, Rennie and Jacunski team hauling in the reveille cannon through the front doors in the dark...to firing the cannon and inadvertently blowing out the stained glass windows...to the other Rabble Rousers extorting spontaneous frenzy throughout the mess hall, giving absolute permission, vigorous support, and direct commands to raise hell,...to McGurk appearing on the poop deck, tearing off and throwing his jacket over the railing, and launching a series of cheers that gained increasing momentum until a constant fever-pitched roar bellowed from the corpsas tables were stacked six high, with a crazed cadet climbing frantically to the top table in each company to lead additional cheers, ... and as butter pads, ice cream, and even, yes, metal water pitchers were being tossed freely about,... and knotted cloth napkins, soaked in water to enhance their projectile capability, were hurled into the chandeliers.

As I stood off to the side of the poop deck, in awe of this amazing process and such creativity and power, Maj. Rogers ordered me to "stop the rally" on four occasions. After each order, I took the microphone, and in impressive military fashion, made my request to my friends and associates in the corps, who immediately showered me with butter pads and ice cream globs, most of which missed me and hit the velvet curtains behind the poop deck ... to Maj. Rogers' increasing delight with such expressions of cadet passion and commitment.

It was truly an amazing experience to see how but a few meager, shy, artistic "rousers" could play such a part in unleashing incredible energy, impact, joy, and sharing.

The damage was a bit over \$11,000. I know. The Commandant gave me a line item damage assessment. I am forever grateful that my fellow cadets each pitched in the approx \$2.55 (withdrawn from our accounts the next month). Maj. Rogers said he would recommend minimum 6 months confinement for me. He advised he would seek more if my graduation date could be altered. I think he took "the rally" personally.

Fortunately, God, the Army team, and particularly, Dick Heydt, who kicked a field goal in the final minutes of the game to win 10 - 7, intervened.

After we won the game at Penn State, the Supe came over, asked if I was "in charge of" the rally in the mess hall, and said we could have a riot each week if victories were guaranteed. My formal hearing that next Monday with the Commandant was unique ... ending with laser clarity that I was now responsible for any negative actions any cadets took at any time, forever... and a slight smile.

While the tension was high during and immediately after the mess hall rally, calmer minds prevailed following our victory. Other than the Commandant's "stern" admonishment to me and his order to carry same back to all the other Rabble Rousers, no other punishments were administered. I do believe Joe Rogers spoke in our behalf regarding our cooperation in trying to stop the rally after it got out of hand and in extensively cleaning up afterwards. (Actually the

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cleanup was a two-hour process of camaraderie, extended laughter and good cheer ... the equivalent of an on-going series of "high fives" among the Rabble Rousers.)

It was the wildest experience of unleashed human energy I've ever witnessed.

I would add that at semester change, Maj. Thurman thanked me for my brigade services, adding that my gifts were better utilized being closer to the troops. I was reassigned to my cadet company (K-2), rejoining my best friend and roommate, Dick Plymale for an even more memorable senior spring semester.

I was and remain quite proud of our Rabble Rouser Team, their commitment to "a purpose" that transcended themselves, their stunning discipline and flawless execution... and the stellar success of the Oct 63 Mess Hall Rally/Riot.

Randy Kunkel

Randy...just to add a little spice to the story...let me add a few words from your humble and loyal First Captain (1964), who has a slightly different perspective...and one I will never forget. (I've told this story to several USMA classes over the last several years).

The cannon fired, the mess hall exploded, Randy and the guys did their thing...and I, sitting back in the Corps Squad area on the Basketball tables, saw it happen with eyes as big as water pails...and took off on a dead run to the poop deck to attempt to "regain control." Got to the top of the stairs at the poop deck, and Joe Rogers, with a wild-eyed, dazed look on his face, collared me and said, "Chilcoat, you better get this place under control, or else!" After several minutes, we got the place under control (sort of). The place looked like a bomb had exploded...floor completely wet, food everywhere, tables stacked 5 or 6 high, mess hall staff cowering in the kitchens, the OC completely helpless and hapless, etc. Within ten minutes, the mess hall OIC came in (forget his name...good guy)...ripped our lips off...told me to help get the place cleaned up!

As you recall, issuing instructions from the poop deck, we held the chain of command and the fourth class...worked an hour or so, in conjunction with the mess hall staff, got the place halfway cleaned up, and then left for the barracks. I met with the senior guys until midnight that night...we knew we were dead meat...we devised the plan (recovery and retribution) which ultimately was accepted (with minor modifications) by the Com and the Supe. Best deal we ever got as cadets!

I awaited the call the next morning with heavy heart...knew the Com and the Supe would give me a good rip...expected to go from First Captain to Last Private (had been there, done that, and gotten the T-shirt)! Interestingly, I was not called over to the Com's office until about 1100 hours the next AM. In four years, I had never been called out of class for business with the Tactical Department (remember, class time was sacred ground). Well, about 1100, in Engineering, the cadet OD knocks on the classroom door, enters, reports to the P, and says, "Sir, the Com would like to see Mr. Chilcoat...NOW!" The section room burst into a great cheer ...and off I went to the Com's office.

Bottom line: General Davison was terrific...asked me what happened (I told him)...asked me what we proposed to do about it (I told him)...and asked me if it was worth it (I told him we lit the fuze that would set a bomb to blow up Penn State...and THE REST IS HISTORY!!!!!!).

What a great moment!

Dick Chilcoat

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As OC the night of the great/infamous Penn State rally/riot, my recollection of the evening's activities remains vivid, not unlike one's first combat experience. For me the tale of the rally starts with the previous Mess Hall rally when my classmate and fellow Tac, Major Ed Partain, halted a rally in its formative stages to the displeasure of the corps and concern by the Tac Department that we were putting a damper on spirit. Prior to the Penn State rally, I was told by the Second Regimental Commander, Colonel Arch Hamblen, to let the rally go unless it looked as if someone might be in danger of injury.

When the cannon fired, the situation deteriorated rapidly with missiles in the air and Mess Hall tables being stacked in front of the poop deck. When the tables were stacked three high with cadets climbing on top, I ordered the nearest cadet to get the situation under control. As I recall, the PA set did not function, and I suspected that the rabble rousers had sabotaged it. I then sent for First Captain, Dick Chilcoat. When he arrived, I told him that he and his chain of command had to stop the rally immediately before someone got hurt. After what seemed like an eternity, the rally ended, but not until tables were stacked five or six high with a cadet on top at poop deck level.

When Dick Chilcoat reported back to me, I told him that he and his class were responsible for the rally and the ensuing mess and that they would clean up the Mess Hall because it had to be ready for breakfast. I also told him to call me when it was ready for inspection. At that point, I returned to the OC's office and called Colonel Hamblen about the rally and told him what actions were being taken to return the Mess Hall to an "acceptable" condition. Later in the evening, I believe about 11 p.m., Dick Chilcoat called, and after inspecting the Mess Hall, I released the First Captain and his cleanup crew, which to the best of my knowledge, consisted of the chain of command and members of the second class.

Early the next morning Colonel Hamblen called to say that the Com wanted to see us. I told Colonel Hamblen that I would bet the subject will be Mess Hall rallies. He said, "How perceptive of you."

Upon entering the Com's office, Brigadier General Mike Davison said, "Tell me about last night." I recounted the activities of the evening and said, "I obviously let the rally go too far before trying to stop it." He said, "There's enough blame to go around, and I learned something too. From now on the rabble rousers are going to fully brief me on any and all proposed rallies."

My role as OC at the Penn State rally is my contribution to the lore of West Point spirit and a lifetime memory of the great rally for members of the classes of 64, 65, 66 and 67. I have many fond memoirs of being a Tac, but if the rally is not one, it certainly is the most memorable!

Joe Rogers, '51

There have been similar incidents since 1963 but none to equal it.

The stories of the Mess Hall Riot brought back some wonderful memories. I was happy to see that other classes are in wonder that it could ever have happened. But I would like to carry the story a little further. About 15 years ago, my family was gathered around the dining room table for the evening meal. As was the routine, the eldest of my four sons, Frank, liked to keep the conversation lively by getting his old man fired up. So he announced to all that he had been in a food fight at school that day.

Fully expecting a burst of anger from me, he was surprised when I asked him how many people were involved. He said there were about 5, including his brother (number 2 son). I politely and quietly told him I did not want to hear about any puny exchange of food in the school cafeteria and that a 5 person food fight was not a food fight. The follow on question was, of course, "Were you ever in a food fight, Dad?" Yes. How many people? Two thousand seven hundred people. At

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this point, the look on the faces of four boys was of intense disbelief. Their "perfect" father had participated in a food fight.

So I related the story as I remembered it, from the suppression of all "spontaneous" rallies up to the firing of the cannon in the mess hall. And the famous cry of Rocco McGurk, "Let's have a rally!!" Have you ever held all of your children's undivided attention for more than five minutes? It was wonderful to see the amazement in their eyes. It was one-up-manship that I knew they would not beat. And I never heard about another food fight in the cafeteria again.

Next day, number 2 son, James, brings in a neighborhood friend and begs me to tell the mess hall riot story again. I did and probably embellished it. And so it went.

On a family visit to West Point some years later, I pointed out all the key features of the mess hall: the poop deck, the tables, the chandeliers, napkins, and especially the portraits of past superintendents. There was real astonishment that tables were stacked as high as they were.

The real highlight was when number 3 son, Mike was introduced to Rocco McGurk. Rocco's daughter was in his class in grade school and I had the opportunity to introduce him. Mike looked up at him as if meeting a celebrity. This was the man that started the biggest food fight in history. It was great. So I thank the Rabble Rousers, the Classes of '64, '65, '66, and '67 for providing me the story to maintain good order and discipline AND suppress food fights in the school cafeteria.