

Engine Trouble



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After more than a week in the cold South Korean wilderness without a shower, we smelled like hot ass and cabbage. But our mood was elevated as we were heading back to base camp and looking forward to showers, food, and a night on the town. Upon our return the first order of business was to clean and prepare our gear for any future mission. Knowing that a good time awaited us in town motivated everyone to work efficiently and quickly.

Once we had finished cleaning and staging the gear, I reported to the Senior Enlisted Marine, nicknamed “Top,” and requested permission for all of the troops to go to town. He had no objections, but the Lieutenant spoke up and said none of us were allowed to leave camp. I reminded the Lieutenant that we had a successful week-long exercise, with no showers, nothing but MREs to eat, and that all the gear had been cleaned and readied for any future assignments, but it didn’t change his mind. Needless to say I was frustrated, and I had to tell the other Marines that we were restricted to camp. Nobody wants to be the one to deliver bad news to a bunch of Marines looking forward to a night on the town. True to form, they were in a foul mood afterwards, with plenty of expletives and unprintable things about the Lieutenant’s mother.

After breaking the news to the troops, I went to my tent to relax and reflect on what I believed to be a failure of leadership to take care of Marines. Moments later a Marine stuck his head in the hooch and told me to report back to Top. Thinking that he had convinced the Lieutenant to let us go to town, I hustled to his area, but when I appeared in front of him he looked at me and stated, “The Lieutenant wants you to drive him to town.”

That was the bad thing about being one of the few guys who carried a M151 jeep license: I was the taxi driver.

“Are you shittin’ me, Top?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“He’s not letting us go, but he expects me to take his ass to town?”

“Yep.”

“O-K! I’ll drive him to town,” I said in a snarky, but quiet voice. Top didn’t say anything, but his expression acknowledged my frustration.

While I warmed up the jeep and waited for the Lieutenant, I thought about my dilemma and the trip to town. It was winter in South Korea, colder than a witch’s tit in a brass bra on a frosty November morning kind of cold, and the roads were slippery with sheets of ice here and there. The M151 jeep used generic tires and had a narrow wheelbase, so it could be flipped easily. Great care was necessary in this environment.

After a few minutes the Lieutenant arrived with another officer. *What a bunch of bullshit*, I thought to myself. I informed my two passengers about the trip to town, the potential hazards we might encounter, and they acknowledged my safety brief. Then we set out.

These jeeps didn't use keys to start the ignition, just an on/off switch and a manual transmission. Just outside the gate of base camp, and still fuming at what I perceived as a lack of leadership, I discreetly reached up and turned the on/off switch to off—the engine died. I looked at the Lieutenant with false irritation.

“Shit!”

“What?” he asked with a look of surprise.

“The cold has screwed up the engine. But, no worries, I'll get you to town,” I replied.

He just looked at me wide-eyed. I pretended to ponder for a second and then stated, “Ok, Sir. Here's what we have to do. You and the Lieutenant (his friend) need to hop out and push the jeep. Once we have some speed, I'll pop the clutch and that will turn the engine over. When the engine's running, I'll stop and wait for you and the Lieutenant to catch up. Then we'll be on our way to town.”

“Excellent, Corporal,” he exclaimed as he and his buddy exited the jeep.

They pushed outside in the South Korean cold while I steered from inside the less cold American jeep. As we rolled down the road, I popped the clutch and the jeep sputtered, but the engine didn't turn over. And it wouldn't turn over as long as I kept the starter in the off position. I quietly chuckled to myself.

“Try again, Sir!” I shouted from inside the jeep.

They pushed and pushed, grunted and groaned. We built up some speed and I popped the clutch – and it started. I took the liberty to travel down the hill a little bit and waited for the two Lieutenants to catch up. They were breathing heavy and they had worked up a good

sweat from their efforts. We drove down the hill and started up the other side, when I flipped the starter off again. The jeep sputtered to a stop.

“Damn!” I belted as I looked at the Lieutenant. Without a word he and his buddy were in motion. Like a NASCAR pit crew they jumped out, positioned themselves behind the jeep and waited for my signal.

“Ready?”

“Ready!” they replied.

“Go!”

And they pushed. Streams of freezing vapor spewed out of their gaping mouths. We moved slowly at first. After all, they were pushing uphill. After a few seconds the engine started. I rolled ahead of them for a distance, stopped, and the Lieutenants running behind the jeep eventually caught up and hopped in. The passengers tried to warm up, blowing on their hands and smacking their arms on their legs. Off we went.

I did this for quite some time, repeatedly shutting off the engine while the Lieutenants repeatedly pushed the jeep. After some time and many miles, I finally arrived at the drop-off point with two exhausted, very sweaty, and starving Lieutenants. I felt it my duty to my fellow enlisted Marines that the officers work for their hot showers and presumably delicious, hot meals. I left the officers and headed back to camp. As previously ordered, when I arrived back at camp I reported to Top.

“Did you get them to town?” he asked.

“Yes, Top,” I replied. He paused. I smirked.

“And...?”

And I relayed the story to him. He laughed so hard he turned red. I thought he was going to piss himself.

“Serves that asshole right,” he said under his breath. I pretended not to hear.

“Have a good night,” Top said, as tears of side-splitting joy streamed down his face.

“Roger that,” I said as I left Top’s tent. I could still hear him laughing out loud as I walked across the compound.

