

THE US AMBASSADOR TO CULEBRITA

If a straight line were drawn connecting San Juan, Puerto Rico and the lush Virgin Island of St. Thomas, it would be about 70 nautical miles long and bisected by Culebrita, a tiny, uninhabited spec of an island.

Culebrita's shape, seen from an airborne view, would resemble the letter Y with a thick stem and two arms extending to the northeast and northwest. The distance from the base of the Y to the end of either arm would not be even a mile.

In the crotch of the arms stretching all the way from the tip of one to the tip of the other there was a pristine, white sand beach so soft that I sank to my ankles with each step feeling like the only one ever to have had the pleasure. The beach on this remote and serene little island provided access to the warm, glass clear azure water of the Caribbean.

It was a most unlikely place for an international incident.

A rough, rutted, path led steeply from the beach some 300 feet up to a red brick lighthouse next to a helicopter landing pad in the approximate center and highest point of the island. The lighthouse served as the occasional duty station for a US Navy air controller with food and other essentials brought in as necessary to the landing pad by Navy helicopters.

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The lighthouse contained a small kitchen and bathroom, but a large room containing a bed, desk and chair took up most of the space. On the desk there was a large speaker and radio/telephone. The desk and chair looked directly out an enormous, plate glass window providing an unobstructed view of the beach below and the endless sky and water beyond.

But most important, this high spot allowed the controller to see a small dot of land some 200 yards off the left arm of the Y. This circular plot of land was about 50 yards in diameter, with a lighted 10 foot high pole in the center surrounded by concentric circles marked in white lime at three foot intervals. It was a target.

This island, the target and the lighthouse were a small part of the US Navy's Atlantic Fleet Weapons Range headquartered at Roosevelt Roads on the Eastern tip of Puerto Rico. The island was my duty station for two weeks surrounding Easter in 1966.

In one of the few lucky moments in my Naval career, I had been transferred temporarily from the aircraft carrier Wasp (in port in Boston in frigid January) to the Weapons Range in the sunny Caribbean. Given escalation of our involvement in Viet Nam, the weapons range, and my target, were busy offering training opportunities for aircraft carriers, their jets and pilots on their way to the action. As the senior air controller aboard the Wasp, my services were far more in demand at the Weapons Range than they were on a carrier resting in port.

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Shortly after reporting to the Range headquarters in Roosevelt Roads, I heard about Culebrita. For the men who were stationed at and lived with their families on the luxurious main base, Culebrita was anything but beautiful. Air controllers were sent there for week-long tours that they saw as seven days in solitary confinement. They welcomed me as someone who would relieve them of that hated duty.

Each day at 1100, 1430 and 1900 flights of two to four Navy jets from the various carriers operating in the area would call on my radio frequency to request permission to attack my target, dropping practice bombs like large firecrackers in training competitions to see which pilot could drop closest to the pole.

While it was lonely, it was remarkably easy duty. After just two years in the Navy, I had my own command albeit with no one to command. Between exercises, I hiked around the island, swam often, read continuously and became very aware of the unparalleled pleasure of living nearly naked. Skin. The uniform of the day.

I had only to be ready thrice daily for the call from the senior pilot, "Cellwood. Cellwood. (My callsign.) This is Phantom Leader. Request permission to drop on your target. Over." To which I would respond routinely, "Phantom Leader, this is Cellwood. Permission granted. Over."

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I would then hear “Roger,” and sit back to watch the air show happening right out my window.

The first Friday of my tour on Culebrita happened to fall on Good Friday, a day that many Puerto Ricans took as a vacation day to commence the long Easter week-end. On that morning I was alarmed to discover how attractive my island was to fun-loving vacationers as a stopping off point on their way from San Juan to St. Thomas.

Pleasure boats, many of them, were starting their holiday week-end with a euphoric visit to my beautiful beach for what appeared to be picnics and swimming in the cove formed by the arms of my island’s Y. Several of the yachts were mooring very near my target. Civilians were diving in the water and generally frolicking within a few yards of it.

It was nearing time for my 1100 flight, an incoming group of four F-4 Phantom jets from the USS Enterprise. As I awaited the call I watched nervously as the cove below me became ever more populated with pleasure craft.

My thoughts were interrupted by my crackling speaker as the senior pilot of the incoming group keyed the mike in his aircraft. “Screeeeech. Cellwood. Cellwood. This is Phantom leader, over.”

Here we go, I thought.

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“Phantom Leader, this is Cellwood. Read you loud and clear, over.”

“Roger, Cellwood, I have your target dead ahead at 3 miles. Request permission to drop. Over.”

Phantom Leader’s voice brought vague ideas of what could happen into starkly real possibilities. I saw terrible scenes. A drop just off the target doing serious damage. Injured civilians, yachts on fire.

I saw court martials. Mine. The ends of careers. I had only one choice.

“Phantom Leader, this is Cellwood. Negative. Negative. My target is closed down due to pleasure boat traffic in the area. Repeat. My target is closed. Do you read. Over.”

“Ah Cellwood. Read you loud and clear,” Phantom Leader drawled in that calm voice pilots always seem to have even in the worst of circumstances. “We’ll just pass over and have a look.”

With concern growing, I looked for the jets out my window, but heard them first. The ear splitting roar of an F-4 is unmistakable. Then I saw them over my target at about a thousand feet elevation.

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Moments later Phantom Leader called again and said with relaxed arrogance, “Ah, Cellwood, I think we can handle this situation.”

In the Navy there is an ongoing, but friendly rivalry between pilots—particularly jet pilots—and the shipborne Navy, known as blackshoes. We blackshoes referred to the jet pilots as “jet jockeys” and “zoomies.” To us they were imperious, egocentric and more than a little crazy.

If we walked into an officer’s club, anywhere, and heard unexpected commotion, we could be sure it came from a table full of Zoomies downing Tequila shots. For Navy jet pilots this was a required ritual, licking their hands just below the outside of their index finger, pouring salt on it, then licking the salt, throwing down the shot of tequila, biting into a lemon slice and with a great finishing flourish, screaming and pounding the chest. Obnoxious.

Even so, beneath all that, we blackshoes did have deep respect for these highly trained, courageous pilots who were willing to land their temperamental weapons of war on the rolling, pitching, yawing postage stamp that was an aircraft carrier flight deck—a flight deck manned by enlisted men, some of who were counting the days until they were freed from the Navy.

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Despite my respect, though, the possibility of leaving this situation in the hands of a jet jockey was beyond countenance.

With mustered confidence and more hope than resolve I keyed my mike.

“Phantom Leader this is Cellwood. I repeat. You do not have access to my target. My target is closed. Over.”

Long pause.

Finally, “Ahh, Cellwood, what’s your rank? Over.” I knew this was a losing proposition. The lead pilot in a group of F-4’s would most likely be a commander at least and probably career Navy.

“Phantom Leader I am a Lieutenant Junior Grade, over.” And here only to avoid the Draft, I might have admitted.

“Cellwood, I am SOPA in this situation. I’ll take over.”

Now it was my turn to pause. I searched for options. I had few.

“Phantom leader, request an order that you have the con. Over.”

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I thought I heard a chuckle, then, “I have the con Cellwood.”

With that official passing of command I was hopefully free of responsibility but even more terrified about the potential results, and now—or even before, really—I could do little else but watch.

Not only are F-4's loud, they look like agents of evil with long snouts that droop down almost as if they could scoop up and swallow their prey whole. They look like animate beasts.

And four of them approached at a few hundred feet over the beach passing uncomfortably close to the tourists.

I tried to watch calmly, but I was squirming at my desk. Then I noticed that the vacationers on their yachts and on the beach, instead of being afraid, were waving and cheering as the F-4's passed low over them as if the purpose of the jets was to entertain them on Good Friday.

“Screech! Anything happening down there Cellwood?”

“This is Cellwood. Negative Phantom Leader. In fact they seem to be enjoying the show. They were waving and cheering. None of them are departing the area. Over.”

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Another long pause.

“Roger, Cellwood. Ahh, we’re gonna make another pass.”

This time they came in alarmingly low. They passed below the level of my window. I was actually looking down on them as they nearly removed some of the higher masts on the boats.

Finally, there was action. Several people scrambled off the beach, climbed into their boats and moved out to safer waters, but at least half of the boats, perhaps out of stubbornness or maybe misunderstanding, remained.

I passed that information on to Phantom Leader and thought I detected a touch of annoyance in his less measured response. How could a group of Puerto Rican tourists have the gall to stand in the way of Navy jet pilots?

Phantom leader keyed his mike, “Aaah, Roger Cellwood. We’ll just make one more pass to deliver the message.”

I was almost afraid to wonder what the mind of an aggravated jet pilot might conjure in this situation.

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This time just two F-4's. They came in even lower—and slower. At the place where they were positioned just above most of the boats, they became like airborne synchronized rockets, turning their serpentine noses straight upward and exploding together vertically into the air. The roar was earsplitting, even inside my lighthouse. Flames spewed from their tails. The entire island shook. My lighthouse shook. It was horribly beautiful.

The message was successfully delivered. My playground looked like an anthill under attack. Bodies scattered from the beach and scrambled back into boats. Boats formed a hurried single line to fit through the island's narrow opening that led to the safety of open sea. They left as quickly as possible—all but one.

“Phantom Leader this is Cellwood. Civilians have departed the area. One straggler remains. Looks like he's not moving. Over.”

Phantom Leader was not pleased. The calm pilot voice was gone, replaced by that of an angry senior officer. “Cellwood, listen up. I'm ordering you to leave your post. Go down to the beach and tell the stupid sonuvabitch that if he doesn't get in his goddamn tub and clear the area, we'll blow it out of the water. He's trespassing on US Government property. Do you read, over.”

There was only one possible answer to his rhetorical question. “Roger, Phantom Leader.”

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I was momentarily struck by the situation's absurdity; the Navy's most lethal fighter jets confronted by Puerto Rican vacationers in luxury yachts and me watching the entire thing with practically no clothes on.

I grabbed my uniform, known in the Navy as "working khaki," climbed into it and struggled down the rock strewn path to the beach, the US Ambassador to Culebrita, trying to remember my Spanish as I went.

A well-muscled, middle-aged man in a bathing suit was waiting for me on the beach not far from his yacht, feet spread apart, arms folded on his chest, unsmiling and seemingly unfriendly. He waited for me to talk.

Hoping he spoke English, I tried to find a voice that was both firm and sympathetic. "I'll really sorry sir," I said as I approached him. "I know you must have been enjoying your stay at the beach, but you're standing on land owned by the US Navy's Atlantic Fleet Weapons Range."

I paused. Expressionless, he said nothing. Nor did he move.

"And that target right over there," I turned to my left and pointed at the target, "is about to have bombs dropped on it. For your own safety, you really have to clear the area immediately."

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There was no need for my Spanish. He spoke perfect English and Phantom Leader's annoyance was nothing compared to his outrage.

"I am not leaving," he seethed slowly. "I live here, and we put up with you dropping your bombs on us all year long. Why do you have to ruin our Easter Week-end? Why don't you go drop your bombs off Cape Cod?"

I was running out of time and hoped that pleading might work. "Look. I understand your point of view. I really do, but I just don't want anyone to get hurt here. I have to return to my post and I'm asking you to please, please be gone from here by the time I get back up there." I pointed up to the hill to my lighthouse.

With my mission not accomplished I turned and headed back up the hill— in retreat, honestly—hoping to avoid any further confrontation. After a few steps I heard, "I'm not leaving!" from behind me.

I ignored him; kept moving and turned back intermittently to see if he'd changed his mind.

By the time I had scrambled back to the lighthouse, he had returned to his yacht and was slowly moving out of harms way.

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With great relief I breathlessly called into my radio telephone, “Phantom leader, this is Cellwood. Target is about to be clear for dropping, over.”

“Ah roger, Cellwood.” The calm pilot voice was back. “But we’re out of time and headed back to Eastlant Leader. This is Phantom Leader. Out.”

It was done. A warm wave of relief washed over me. What threatened to be an international incident was over. No shots were fired or bombs dropped. No injuries. No fatalities. Disaster averted.

I never mentioned this event to my superiors. I often wondered, though, what might have happened as a result of all this? I am awarded with the ambassadorship to Culebrita? Phantom leader is court martialed?

As a formal apology to Puerto Rico, the US relinquishes Culebrita as part of the Atlantic Fleet Weapons Range and gifts it to Puerto Rico as a national park?

I wonder who even knows of that fateful Good Friday. Only this I know for certain. I am not the US ambassador to Culebrita, but I would take the post if offered.