



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass

Mighty Pen Project Anthology & Archive

Mighty Pen Project

2020

Not on My Watch

Kathleen Harrison

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive

© The Author(s)

Downloaded from

https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive/126

This 1981-2000 Marines is brought to you for free and open access by the Mighty Pen Project at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mighty Pen Project Anthology & Archive by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.

Not on My Watch Kathleen Harrison

The line boarding the Pan Am flight to Panama City is taking forever. I am already frustrated because our layover in Miami is so short that I won't be able to leave the airport. Some passengers must have expired passports because people are being pulled out of the line. My mind wanders to the assignment in Panama, where I will be working with the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). I was selected for this assignment for my Spanish language skills, but I have no idea what to expect. This is a brand-new billet, so I have the opportunity to shape this exciting assignment. I enjoy learning about new cultures. I have heard the DEA agents are sometimes cowboys, meaning they can be reckless by ignoring regulations and potential risks. It sounds like some marines I've worked with. I come back to the present in time to hand my boarding pass to the attendant.

The attendant doesn't take my boarding pass. "Will you step over here, please?"

"What's the problem?"

"All military personnel are being removed from this flight."

"But I have my luggage on this flight. I need to get my luggage off this flight."

"Ms. Harrison, we cannot let you on this flight. Your bags will be held at Torrijos airport baggage hold area in Panama City, so they will be safe."

An air force security policeman steps up. "We are taking everyone to Homestead Air Base to get you on a military flight to Panama."

An air force major asks, "What happened?"

"We received a US Southern Command (SouthCom) message that security measures are increased and no military or government personnel are permitted to land in Panama City."

The next four days are total chaos as we have no idea when we will fly to Panama. We are assigned to barracks with two people per room. The rooms are basic quarters with very few

Not on My Watch Kathleen Harrison

amenities. There is nothing near us, so we get shuttled to the dining facility and exchange. I buy some extra clothes and hope I don't have to wear them. I wash my clothes in the sink and hang them in the shower to dry. I cannot believe this is happening. We are supposed to be an organized and prepared military. No one at this base seems to know anything and I can't get through to my unit in Panama. Finally on the fifth day, October 4, 1989, we board a cargo plane to Panama. Thankfully it is a short flight; the seats are not made for comfort. As I deplane, the Panamanian misty water wall hits me full force. In a matter of moments, I am drenched.

There is no one there to greet me so I leave the terminal, taking the shuttle from Howard Air Base to the Fort Clayton Army Base to check in. I convince the admin officer at Ft. Clayton to take me to get my bags at the airport since I need my uniforms. The forty-five-minute ride to the Torrijos airport seems like ten minutes as I absorb this new country's atmosphere. I enter the baggage claim area and find my bags lying in the open area unattended. My heart sinks as I spy my two bags have been ransacked. On closer inspection, I realize all the bags have been plundered. Welcome to Panama.

All the military and government employees have been moved onto the military bases due to the increased security threat. Several service members have been robbed and harassed by the Dignity Battalion. These are paramilitary militia units that General Manuel Noreiga (the de facto leader of Panama) created to augment the Panamanian Defense Forces. They wear red shirts with camouflage pants and are essentially a group of thugs. We refer to them as the "Dingbats." I am sharing a two-bedroom apartment with a nurse as an unwitting interloper. She is not happy about this and makes sure I feel her indignity. I barely have enough room to turn around in "my" bedroom with all her stuff in there. What hellhole have I entered?

Not on My Watch Kathleen Harrison

October is the height of the wet season here in this hot, humid tropical garden spot. Humidity can reach 100% and it rains every afternoon. I wonder why I bother to take a shower as I drip with sweat just waiting for the shuttle, a five-mile ride between my new home at Ft. Clayton and my office at Quarry Heights. We make several stops along the way which makes the trip ridiculously long. The Panamanian mañana attitude makes the shuttle even more interesting as you never know exactly if and when it will arrive. I finally reach my destination. There is little orientation needed as Quarry Heights is very small. My office is inside a bombproof tunnel 200 feet under Ancon Hill. The entrance has a gate where the security guard checks requisite security badges. The tunnel has a series of inclines leading to the upper level of this secured area. I will spend my tour in a windowless underground passage. My adventure so far is nothing close to what I expected.

I am assigned as a twelve-hour shift watch stander. The on-off, day-night shift changes are brutal, and I often feel not quite right. Apparently one has to be a watch stander as a rite of passage before moving to the actual assignment. The goal of the watch shift is to keep the J2 (Director of Intelligence), army Brig. Gen. Schneider, apprised of significant events in the SouthCom area of responsibility. Brig. Gen. Schneider's goal is to berate you and make you look stupid as you present your brief. It doesn't matter if it is the brief or you as a person.

Schneider quips, "Are you allowed to wear pink nail polish with your uniform?"

"Yes, sir. Nail polish color must harmonize with the marine dress cover scarlet capcord. Harmonize means to go together in a pleasing way. This color pleases me, therefore abiding with the marine corps regulation. Furthermore, my hot pink watch harmonizes with my nail color and is also in regulation."

Not on My Watch Kathleen Harrison

The J2 is not pleased with this response because he did not embarrass me, and he has no idea what our regulations are. Unfortunately for him, I am right regarding marine corps regulations. This does not deter him. He tries to trip me up with pointed questions about my briefing, which I deftly answer. I imagine our senior marine, Col. Braaten, will be receiving a visit from the J2 very soon.

I am the senior marine in the J2 as a captain, so I am responsible for the well-being of my fellow marines here. I have already spoken to these marines and know all too well about the negative treatment by the J2. I have no idea why the J2 is so snarky toward us marines, but I remind each one that we must maintain our decorum despite our treatment. I decide to talk to Col. Braaten myself after witnessing this continual harassment by the J2. Apparently this is not the first time Col. Braaten has been made aware of the situation. He asks me to keep him in the loop. He doesn't say much specifically, but I have the impression he is gathering evidence to validate the continual abuse by the J2. I am not sure what will happen, but Col. Braaten assures me I have his support.

The tensions in Pamana are beginning to escalate. Additional off-limits establishments are added to the current list. There are increased incidents of dingbat intimidations. The tensions with the J2 marines toward the J2 continue to escalate as well. The one occasion many are looking forward to is the Marine Corps Birthday Ball on Friday, November 10. It is one of the social events of the season. Our annual gala on the birth of the marine corps details our history and traditions, showing the marine corps past, present, and future. The J2 marines ask me if we have to invite the J2 considering this is a marine celebration for friends. Fortunately, I am not making the marine corps a career, so I am not worried about any fallout from such an audacious request.

Not on My Watch Kathleen Harrison

Col. Braaten greets me warmly. “How are things going, Kathleen?”

“Well, sir, I am here about the Marine Corps Birthday Ball. Since it is a celebration with our friends, the marines of the J2 do not want to invite the J2. I know the protocol may mandate it, but we are requesting this regardless.”

“I have your back. You do not have to invite the J2.”

I gleefully inform the marines that their request has been approved and there are high fives and whooping all around. A few days later, the J2’s executive assistant, Major Smith, calls me on the intercom.

“Kathleen, the J2 hasn’t received his Marine Corps Ball invitation.”

“I know, sir. He is not going to receive one this year.”

“What do you mean?”

“The J2 is glaringly apparent about his perspective regarding marines. Since this is a celebration for friends of marines, the J2 does not need to attend.”

“Well, we’ll see about that!”

I should be anxious about an exchange like this with a senior officer, but I am relieved. We all need a break from the increasing uneasiness of the political environment in Panama as well as the J2. Even if this is a short-lived victory, it is well worth the current positive morale. I have no idea what transpires next, but the J2 does not attend the Marine Corps birthday ball. We drink, dance, and regale one another with sea stories. Everyone who attends has a great time.

The days after the ball promise to be tense ones. I am concerned about the continued maltreatment of my marines, so I will check in with them often. The shift is a little anxious as I review my morning brief for the J2. It was a relatively quiet twelve hours, so my presentation will be short. I assure them that the best action is to be professional regardless of what transpires.

Not on My Watch Kathleen Harrison

The J2 arrives and takes his regular position at the front of the briefing area. He doesn't have his normal scowl this morning. I greet him as per our custom and begin my presentation. I touch on the activities of the various countries in our area of responsibility. I explain what potential activities we anticipate over the coming week.

“Sir, that concludes my brief. Do you have any questions?”

“No questions. That was a good brief, thank you.”

We all stand at attention and the J2 leaves the room. The shock on everyone's face is actually comical. I ask my boss if I heard the J2 correctly; what transpired feels surreal. She jokes that the J2 must have taken some happy pills this morning. It feels like a cloud is lifting in the tunnel. In relatively short order, an amazing thing happens. Each marine reports that the J2 starts treating them much better; no more “Stump the Chump.”