

# **FROM BARS TO STARS**



Active Duty with Murphy's Law

by

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US ARMY ELECTRONICS COMMAND

THE WEeping BEECHES

At one side of the Fort Monmouth parade ground is a brick and concrete reviewing stand which is also a memorial to the Signal Corps personnel who died during World War I. At the end of the parade ground is a helicopter pad. When coming in to land at the chopper pad one has a good view of the area, including the memorial grand stand.

Shortly after I assumed command COL DeVan and I were in a chopper approaching the landing pad on a path which took us the length of the parade ground, moderately large trees flanking the memorial were the sorriest looking trees I had seen in a long, long time. Their branches were drooping and they looked as though they were dying.

I told COL DeVan to have them removed and replaced with a pair of trees which would have dignity and reflect care and respect for the memorial.

COL DeVan replied, "I don't think you want to do that, General."

I replied, "Why not? Those trees look terrible. They are an eyesore."

COL DeVan then informed me they were probably the most expensive trees on the post. They were "weeping beeches", a breed of tree selected specifically for that location to portray the everlasting sadness at the loss of those warriors of WWI.

I told him he was right...they were indeed sad looking trees. He was also right in that if I had had those trees removed there would have been a storm of protests from sentimentalists and tree-loving environmentalists. Under the circumstances I dropped the subject, although my personal view was (and is) that those trees detract from the setting.

(This was an excellent example of a situation in which a staff could allow a commander to get in trouble by agreeing with him. COL DeVan could have said "Yes, Sir." and changed the trees, and I would have had problems as a result. However, COL DeVan knew I encouraged my staff to speak up when they believed something was going awry. I did not want a supporting staff of "yes" men. He therefore diplomatically questioned my proposed action, and I was glad he did so.)

THE "MOUNTAIN VIEW"

In the summer of 1971 COL DeVan, my deputy for post operations, came to me with an unusual request. An enlisted man had just reported for duty as a student at the Signal School (one of the tenant activities on Fort Monmouth). He owned his own private railroad car and requested permission to bring it on post and live in it instead of living in barracks.

I was informed that the Commandant of the Signal School had no objection, and that there was an existing rail spur available on which the car could be placed without interfering with post operations in any way. I was also told

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that there were numerous Army Regulations governing mobile homes, house trailers and other activities on a military establishment, but there was no regulation concerning the proposed use of railroad cars.

After discussing the matter with COL DeVan a bit I decided that if no regulation existed it was up to me to make the decision. COL DeVan had no objection to having the car on the post, so I gave my approval subject to the understanding that the soldier must pay all costs associated with providing utilities to the car and the car must not become an eyesore.

In due course, and with modest fanfare, the car was moved into position on the post, at a location conveniently near the post exchange and commissary.

The car was a Pullman car named the "MOUNTAIN VIEW". It was one of six such cars built specifically for use as the tail-end car of the Pennsylvania RR luxury train, the Broadway Limited, which ran between New York and Chicago. The soldier's father was President of a railroad somewhere in the northwest, and he had bought the MOUNTAIN VIEW for his son.

The soldier and a classmate from the Signal School moved into the car and set of housekeeping. Every holiday and weekend they were busy working on the car, patching rust spots, repainting, etc. The car may have been moved to Fort Monmouth under a waiver of some sort because, as I recall subsequent events, the air brakes were not working. The owner worked out a deal with the Monmouth and Long Branch RR whereby for a very nominal fee the railroad accepted the air brake system cylinder and controls from the MOUNTAIN VIEW and gave the soldier newly rebuilt like items, so the car was ready to move again.

A few months later, after the owner and his "roommate" had the car thoroughly cleaned, painted, polished, etc. he invited me to visit him and see the car. The MOUNTAIN VIEW had two standard railroad double bedrooms (upper and lower berths) plus a master bedroom with a larger bed, an upper berth, and an associated private toilet and shower. There was a public toilet, an attendant's sleeping compartment, a tiny buffet kitchen, a bar, and a large lounge at the back end. The lounge, complete with easy chairs, was divided into two sections by etched glass panels flanking the center aisle. The back end was boat-tailed, i.e. the sides curved inward to meet at a small door in the center of the end.

Later the owner invited me to come back with Mary Jane, and served us refreshments in the lounge. Everything considered, it was a pretty spiffy way for a young soldier to live.

The owner and his classmate lived in the car for the entire two years they were students at the school. When they left the owner invited me to ride in the car with him as far as Pennsylvania Station in New York. We had all sorts of guests, including local mayors and several officials of local railroads. Refreshments were served and it was a grand party all the way to New York.

PROJECT "RAILFAN"

About three months after visiting the MOUNTAIN VIEW I was exposed to the

shoddy conditions of some of the NCO barracks on post. Lack of funds and years of deferred maintenance had resulted in some pretty sad housing. The thought occurred to me that if a Specialist-5 could live in high style in an old railroad car I might be able to do something equally beneficial for some of my senior NCOs.

Fort Monmouth is located in a resort area, where prices of rental housing are outlandish, and certainly beyond the financial capabilities of most military enlisted men. We had numerous senior enlisted men who were married, for whom there were no quarters available on post, and who could not afford the high price of off-post rentals. Perforce they left their families elsewhere and lived in bachelor enlisted quarters (BEQ) on post.

I knew that after the PENN CENTRAL RR had gone bankrupt there were vast numbers of passenger cars being sold for scrap, so I decided to explore the possibilities of acquiring some of those cars and converting them to bachelor quarters for some of the very senior "acting bachelor" NCOs.

A few enquiries put me in contact with a Mr. Brunner, the man in charge of all passenger equipment for the PENN CENTRAL RR. I went to Philadelphia and discussed my idea with him and Mr. Brunner indicated there were hundreds of cars to be sold. Some were already available, others were actually owned by various banks and their disposition depended upon bank actions.

Mr. Brunner suggested I select stainless steel cars, for three reasons: 1) they looked nicer, 2) they required less maintenance, and 3) they were more difficult and more costly to scrap, hence they would be more readily available and cheaper. Mr. Brunner discussed my concept with the person in charge of the financial end of such sales, and I was told stainless steel cars could be purchased for about \$1,000 each.

With that as a basis I returned to Fort Monmouth and began a study of where we might put such cars. By great good fortune we had an existing rail spur beside two warehouses, each of which had a platform at car floor height. The spur was no longer used, since all materials came in by truck. Both warehouses were on the same side of the track, and between them was a small operating steam generating plant...ideally located and adequate in size for heating a small number of passenger cars.

Further analysis showed that an existing electric power line ran close to the site, and could easily be extended to serve the cars. Similarly, water and sewage lines were conveniently close and susceptible of extension.

With heat, lights, water and sewage readily accessible my next concern was to price out a project. As CG I had authority to expend not more than \$25,000 on locally approved projects. My initial thought was to buy 10 cars, which would leave \$15,000 to cover the costs of site preparation and car modification.

I discussed the project with COL DeVan, and he suggested we could get most of the work done by a reserve engineer battalion on their weekend and summer camp training exercises. While we must account for their time, we need not count the value of it against the project costs. I already knew we could use mate-

rials obtained from military salvage yards without costs charged against the project, so things were looking up.

Mr. Brunner escorted me on trips to several locations where there were cars immediately available, and after looking at dozens of different configurations I concluded that the older style coaches, with a large men's toilet/lounge at one end and a large women's toilet/lounge at the other end, would be the most suitable. Coach seats were easy to remove, and when that had been done the resulting single large room (about 9' wide by 55' long) would be easy to work with.

The design concept was to divide the car into two apartments by placing a wall across the center. The large lounge at each end would be converted to a toilet and shower room. Some lounges had two toilet cubicles, and in those cars one of the toilet cubicles would be converted to a shower. Lounges which had only one toilet cubicle would have a stall shower installed in the lounge area. Thus each apartment would have a private toilet and shower.

Baseboard steam heating radiators ran along both sides of the cars, with a separate thermostat for each side. To provide independent heat controls for each apartment the baseboard heater would be cut at the center and the two halves at each end would be joined by piping through the center partition, creating a U-shaped piping system in each end with its own thermostat.

Ceiling light fixtures would be retained, but converted to 110-volt operation. Circuit breaker panels would be installed for each apartment, and electrical conduit would be surface-mounted along each side wall beneath the window sills, with duplex outlets at appropriate points. One window air conditioner would be installed in each apartment.

All toilet fixtures had to be replaced, since railroad style toilets had no trap to prevent backflow of noxious odors and gases from the sewage system. They just dumped onto the ground.

The project was going to require a great deal of work by the reserve engineer battalion. They would have to extend steam, water and sewage lines and make appropriate connections to each car. Although the Post Engineer would make the electrical tie-in to the existing feeder (and the cost thereof would be charged against the project) the reserve unit would install the poles and transformers, string the wires and make drops to the cars.

I scoured several property disposal yards to see what was available, succeeded in acquiring a lot of electrical wire and cable, numerous transformers, thousands of feet of water, steam and sewer pipe (and fittings), a good number of good toilets, and all sorts of items useful for the project.

A cost analysis conducted by COL DeVan in conjunction with the Post Engineer indicated we could complete the project within my \$25,000 ceiling. COL DeVan therefore prepared the project documentation while I set about purchasing the cars.

When I went back to the PENN CENTRAL to buy 10 cars they told me the price

been increased to \$1,300 per car. That upset my plans, but there was nothing I could do about it except reduce the scope of the project. I arranged to purchase seven cars, each to be personally selected by me. The price included delivery to Fort Monmouth.

The reserves went to work on the utilities, and in due course the cars were delivered. They just fit nicely on the existing rail spur. One of the minor details which was so crucial to our plans was the orientation of each car. Modern rail passenger cars have vestibules at only one end. The end without a vestibule is called the "blind" end. If the cars were delivered to Fort Monmouth with the blind ends together there would be no way to access apartments in those ends of both cars. It was essential that all cars "face" the same direction. Thus each vestibule would serve one apartment at the end of the car with the vestibule, and the blind end apartment of the adjoining car.

Col DeVan got a detail to work removing the coach seats, after which the reserves filled the holes in the floor with cement. My aides and I worked on the details of installing the electrical conduit, wiring and duplex outlets.

The work required several months, most of them in wintry cold, rain and snow. As the project developed it occurred to me that the extensions of the electrical, water and sewer systems we were installing could, with little additional cost, accommodate seven more cars on a new rail spur alongside the existing track. The utilities would be running between the two tracks, and service to both ends would be relatively easy.

In those days the Army was having recruiting problems as well as financial problems, and the Army theme for the year was to stress "Innovative Alternatives". I decided to play on that theme and seek DA approval to expand my project to 14 cars and \$50,000. That was within the approval level of DA.

I got together a briefing package with lots of color slides, artists concepts, data about local housing costs, pictures of the existing WWII era BEQs, etc. I went to Washington and briefed the civilian Deputy Army Comptroller (who remembered me from my previous tour in that office) and other staff members, complete with "gestures and heartfelt emotion". At the end of the briefing the Army Comptroller approved expansion of the project to \$50,000, and said he would provide the funds!

(This expanded scope gave us a bit of cushion in our expenses because the incremental cost of expanding the utilities to serve seven more cars was considerably less than the cost of the initial utilities extensions.)

After my return to Fort Monmouth I set about purchasing an additional seven cars. I ran into two problems: 1) most of the cars I selected had not yet been released by the banks, and 2) the people who scrapped railroad cars had come up with better and cheaper ways of dealing with stainless steel, so such cars were thin on the ground. Eventually I had to settle for four stainless steel cars and three of painted regular steel.

The Post Engineer had appointed a Major on his staff as Project Officer for

RAILFAN. He set to work with the reserves to install the additional spur track. I located surplus with the reserves to install the additional spur plus associated ties, tie plates, spikes and the fish-plates and bolts used to connect rails together.

As the first car interior was being converted someone suggested the center partition be made deeper, to provide two closets, one opening into each apartment. This was done, and adopted for all succeeding cars. When all the renovations and painting had been completed wall-to-wall carpeting was installed and each apartment was equipped with standard issue furniture: a bed, chest of drawers, two lounge chairs, two end tables, a coffee table, and both floor and table lamps.

Applications for assignment to the apartments were accepted, and after the senior NCOs had a look at the apartments there was a deluge of applicants. They were allocated according to seniority and those on the waiting list monitored assignments assiduously to be sure there was no hanky-panky.

When all 14 cars had been converted we had 26 BEQ apartments, one end of one car had been converted to a laundrette, and one end of another car had been converted to a community lounge with TV, card tables, etc. The apartments were but a short walk from the post exchange and the commissary.

Although we made great use of materials obtained from property disposal yards there were many items we had to charge against the project, such as carpeting, electrical items, special twist drills to drill holes in stainless steel, paint, plumbing materials, air conditioners and the very expensive Post Engineer services. COL DeVan and I knew the project finances were likely to be subjected to close scrutiny, so he watched the accounting carefully. We had to watch expenses very carefully. The final project cost came out to be \$49,850.

Some measures used to stay within the fund ceiling were a bit creative. For instance, installation of electrical conduit on the surface of a wall requires a double offset bend at connections with junction and outlet boxes because the openings in those boxes are half an inch out from the wall. There are special conduit benders specifically designed to create the double bend to proper dimensions, but they cost a couple of hundred dollars. The Post Engineer did not have one we could use.

I had a cheery discussion with the Post Engineer and suggested that his electricians really could use one. He ought to buy one (with his operating funds), lend it to us for the duration of the project, and then his electricians would have it thereafter. The Post Engineer immediately saw the wisdom of my suggestion and purchased the conduit bender...which saved us a great deal of time and effort on the project.

These apartments continued to be in high demand because they were much larger than a standard BEQ room and provided individual showers and air conditioning.

Some three or four months after completion of the project I was leaving the commissary when I was addressed by Sergeant First Class Stephenson. He introduced himself, said he was living in one of the RAILFAN apartments, and asked if I would consider it improper if he invited Mary Jane and me to dinner some evening in his apartment.

I told him it was a fine idea and we would be happy to come. A week or so later we received a formal invitation to dinner. It turned out to be hosted by both SFC Stephenson and Staff Sergeant Busch, who occupied the adjoining end of the adjacent car. When we arrived we were escorted to the latter's apartment for hors d'oeuvres and beverages. After half an hour or so of general conversation and an opportunity to examine the way the occupant had adapted the apartment to his own personal tastes we were escorted to SFC Stephenson's apartment, where dinner was to be served.

A small table was set with white linens, nice dishes and cutlery, appropriate water and wine glasses, and there was a single red rosebud at Mary Jane's place. SFC Stephenson explained that gesture.

When he first told his mother he had invited the CG to dinner in his quarters she was aghast. She told him firmly that his father had been a highly respected butler (in England), he came from a long and well reputed line of domestic servants, and it was far beyond his station to invite a general and his wife to dinner.

He told his mother the deed was done, we had accepted, and we were coming. His mother thereupon began giving him highly precise instructions as to how he should prepare the event and conduct himself. She specified white table linens, when and how things should be served, and...most emphatically...that there must be a single red rosebud at Mary Jane's place!

The dinner included freshly prepared cranberry sauce. SFC Stephenson had a sister married to an American soldier, and they were at that time stationed in Alaska. When she heard about the great event she got in the act and shipped her brother a package of fresh cranberries from Alaska.

SFC Stephenson had installed a refrigerator and a small electric stove in the former lounge area, where he prepared a delicious dinner for the four of us. The two sergeants were good company, and Mary Jane and I had a most enjoyable time.

After dessert we were escorted back to the first apartment, where the two sergeants presented me with a plaque attesting to their appreciation for my interest in the welfare of the NCOs. After some chit-chat Mary Jane and I departed.

That plaque and the sentiments expressed thereon are highly treasured by me. It was nice to know that my efforts were really appreciated.

#### MY SPEECH TO A MEDICAL SYMPOSIUM

With the feasibility of economic conversion of old railroad cars to BEQs well

established (at least in my mind) I was looking for a way to help junior married officers and enlisted men. The Chief of Staff of AMC suggested to me that the Army had 63 railway ambulance cars which were not being used, and were on the verge of being declared surplus. Could I make use of them?

He agreed to send one to Fort Monmouth so I could see what could be done with it. When it arrived I wondered how I had never previously been aware of their existence. The car had been built in 1952 and was in mint condition. It had a stainless steel kitchen with electric range, large refrigerator, double sink and lots of cabinet space. At the other end there were two toilets, a shower, two one-person roomettes, two triple-tier bunks and lots of storage lockers. In between was the main ward with four tiers of triple bunks along each wall. The lower bunk was convertible to a pair of facing double coach seats.

The bunks/seats in the ward were readily removable without damage to them or the car, which fit well with the proviso that whatever I did to the car, it had to be restorable to the ambulance car configuration quickly in case of need.

We removed the bunks and seats from the ward and installed a thin partition across the middle of the car with a door in the center. One room thus created became the bedroom, large enough for issue twin beds, two chests of drawers and a night table between the beds. The other room became a sitting room, furnished with an issue sofa, two lounge chairs, three end tables, a cocktail table, and both floor and table lamps. With very moderate expense, and in short order, the car was ready for use by a family with one or two children!

I had color photos and slides made of the converted car, then went to Washington and presented a briefing to request allocation of the remaining 62 cars. I found the existence of such cars was not very well known, and received many questions about them and their operation.

My request for the cars was disapproved for two reasons:

1) Congress keeps a very close hold on family housing in all its forms. By keeping on-post housing below requirements it forces military personnel to rent off-post housing, which is good for the local economy and good for the Congressman at reelection time. Congress did not like my intrusion into the family housing arena.

2) AMTRAK (the National Rail Passenger Corporation) wanted the cars for use in passenger service. When AMTRAK was created it inherited a fleet of obsolescent and poorly maintained cars from the bankrupt railroads. AMTRAK sorely needed an infusion of cars in good condition.

(AMTRAK got most of the cars, and promptly used most of them for baggage and crew dormitory cars. Only half a dozen were actually converted to buffet/lounge cars and used to carry passengers.)

In the process of preparing my request for allocation of the ambulance cars I became interested in the history of railway hospital or ambulance trains, and began to research it.

A few months later I received an interesting phone call from the Army Chief of