

THE STORY OF PFC CHARLES WILLIAM TATUM

PFC Charles William Tatum, after arriving back in the States was assigned to the Oak Knoll Naval Hospital located in Hayward, California about 65 miles from my home town of Stockton, California.

I say assigned, but I guess what I should say is admitted or committed; I'm not sure which. While I'm pleased to be back in the States I don't like what's happening to me medically. The ward I'm in isn't for the physically wounded. The Marines that are interned here are in what we called the "Psycho Ward." We are undergoing "Psychiatric Evaluation" as the Navy doctor explained to me when I asked why I was in the hospital.

I'm in perfect physical condition. I feel perfectly normal. "I think I'm normal," I tell the wacky doc. "I'm ready to go back to duty somewhere." I did tell the Navy that I would like seagoing or to pursue my strong machine interest. I would take the Marine Air Corps if they would let me. This all fell on deaf ears.

I'm getting pissed that the doc is talking about my being discharged from the United States Marine Corps. I tell him "no way, that I am more than ok, that I want duty somewhere." Now that I am stateside, I confess I didn't beg them to go back overseas the next day. I figured that there were plenty of jobs for an Iwo Jima survivor in this

man's Marine Corps. The harder I tried to convince the docs that I was mentally ok, the more convinced they were that I was off my rocker for wanting to stay in the Marines.

I guess the real reason I was made at the Navy docs was that I saw my dream of becoming an officer in the United States Marine Corps going down the drain. I have never told anyone until this writing of my dream to become a Marine officer. I truly loved the Marine Corps and intended to make the Marines my career. I was aware there were programs where qualified Marines with combat experience could be sent to officers' training school.

I got the bad news on June 14, 1945. The orders read:

"PFC Charles William Tatum, USMCR is to proceed to the Mare Island Naval Yard for a discharge under honorable conditions."

I was officially discharged in July 1945. I suppose I should have been happy. After all there were a million guys in the armed services that would have swapped placed with me in a minute and never shed a tear. But I felt like my own family had kicked me out of the house. I knew that was too old to cry, so my thoughts turned to anger. I had been a good Marine. I felt I had done my share on The Rock. But, the specter of Iwo Jima was touching my life again. The words Iwo Jima were poison on my lips.

This isn't fair, I thought. But wars never are. The Marine Corps was part of my plans for the future. My complaint about the turn my life had taken was softened by the realization that a lot of people's plans for the future had been interrupted by the war. I thought of all the Marines that were never coming home for their futures. Besides there was a big old world out there for those with the courage to hit it head on. Hop on the old merry-go-round and grab for the brass ring! I vowed never to own a gun or shoot anything again in my life.

In August 1945 the United States zapped the Japs with the big mushroom clouds that dissolved two Japanese cities and the Japanese desire to continue the war. Victory in Japan was a real day for celebration in Stockton for anyone that had a Marine's uniform on.

So it was on to plan number two. Plan number two consisted of Charles William Tatum, civilian, becoming a racing car driver. My number three idol was a famous racing driver by the name of Wilbur Shaw, the Indianapolis winner. (My number one idol was Gunnery Sergeant John Basilone, and my second idol was Sergeant Raymond Wendell, my old section leader.)

As a very young boy I had read Popular Mechanics and one day I discovered a picture of Wilbur Shaw and his Maserati racing car. I spent hours studying that photo of his sleek and complex racing car. The caption said that the double overhead cam engine had 24 spark plugs. I dreamed of being the driver of this kind of racing car some day, or at least becoming a mechanic for Wilbur Shaw. So what if the

Marines didn't want me. I would devote my life to becoming an Indianapolis race driver! I would win fame and fortune at the wheel of a super fast racing car. I didn't have the foggiest idea of how this was to be accomplished.

My \$210 mustering out pay didn't last long. I spent half of it for a diamond engagement ring. The girl I left at home was still waiting when I returned and our marriage upset my plans to become a racing car driver. I worked as a fireman at a local Army Supply Depot for a few years. I hadn't given up my dream of becoming a racing driver.

Then I received a letter from the United States Marine Corps informing me that the President of the United States was awarding me the Bronze Star and Purple Heart medals. I went to San Francisco to receive these honors, at a full dress formation. This was a proud moment in my life. My new wife and my dear mother were in the audience. My mother was very proud of her son. I was very proud to have been a United States Marine and I am still proud.

I was still dreaming of becoming a racing driver when the arrival of my first child, Nancy almost derailed my dream completely. I joined the United States Marine Corps Reserve Am Track Group, but my past caught up with me a week before the Korean Police Action broke out and I was discharged from the Reserves just a few days before they shipped out for Korea.

The salary the government pays firemen was just barely enough to buy a car, a washing machine and pay for food, doctor bills, etc. I couldn't complain because I did have a good job. What the hell, I was living the American Dream. We bought our dream house under the G.I. Bill's loan provisions. The our second child, Pam was born.

Life was really great, except for one thing. The marriage didn't take. We had messed up a good friendship by getting married. The divorce decree said "irreconcilable differences." Some say it was my ambition to become a racing driver that split us up. There is more to this part of my story, but why bore readers with personal troubles. The divorce went off without a hitch, except for one small thing: it nearly broke my heart and almost drove me out of my mind!

I spent the next two years trying to put it all back together. It was a "*humpty-dumpty*" thing all the King's men and all the King's horses couldn't put together again. My struggles to provide for my family and become a racing driver proved to be more than difficult; it bordered on the impossible, but I refused to give up.

I hung around a lot of racing garages, changed a lot of tires, painted other driver's racing cars, towed other people's racing cars a million miles, repaired cars when other drivers broke their toys; I paid and paid my dues, but still no ride in a sleek racing car.

It's the chicken and the egg deal all over again. Without a reputation as a known racing driver there was no ride in someone's

racing car and when no one will allow you to drive their racing car, how in the hell do you become a full-fledged, experienced racing car driver?

My mechanical expertise improved as time went by and I gained a local reputation as a good racecar builder, but that didn't satisfy my dream of being behind the wheel of a racing car. The solution was to build my own car, but a serious lack of funds kept this plan on the back burner till I met Eddie Hudson.

Eddie and I shared the same dream in a fashion that dovetailed. He wanted to own a racing car and I wanted to drive one. This allowed both of us to share in the same dream. I was to build it and for building it I would get a shot at driving it. Now I will confess that I built up my reputation as a racing driver by a little white lie. I told Ed that I had driven in the Los Angeles area. I failed to tell him I was on the highway and not on the racing tracks. I refused to give up this dream. After all, it was only a little white lie. I think Eddie really knew the truth, though.

Good luck will overtake you if you don't give up. The third race I entered I won the main event! This launched a racing career that spanned more than a few years. My fame was local and confined to the Northern California area, although I spent one season racing out of the Chicago, Illinois area race tracks at Soldiers Field, Blue Island, and Rockford. I also raced some tracks in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and some in the state of Indiana.

But you can only race in the summertime and I blew all of my money in the summer and always had to go back to “real work” in the off-season. To make ends meet I worked as an auto mechanic, a truck painter, and as expediter for a local trucking company that had a contract for refurbishing U.S. Army equipment.

Then I got married for the second time to my wife, Evelyn. This time is took better than the first one; we’ve made it for 38 laps so far! It’s more of a tribute to her good nature after playing a dirty trick on her by marrying her to a racing car promoter, and an auto parts man.

The racing car that gained me nation-wide recognition as a racing car designer was named the Tatum Special. I did stunts for racing movies and became an actor with the local theater group. At this time I also became an inventor. I invented “The Traction Master”, an auto safety device that enjoyed a small measure of success. The Ford Motor Company used my device on the early Shelby Mustangs.

My second wife blessed me with two children: Chuck Jr. and Rhonda. The stark realization that three people were depending on me working every day required that I approach my life with a new seriousness. I had my 30th birthday, too, which helped to improve my seriousness, like getting a real job and hanging on to it. No more quitting every summer to follow the auto racing circuits.

My racing background proved to be an asset when I became an automobile salesman. What local fame I had garnered helped me to sell

cars to some of my old fans. I also have a lot of relatives in the Stockton area and that helped me launch my new career as a salesman.

To make ends meet for the next 32 years I owned and managed automobile dealerships, off and on, in the Stockton, California area. My training as an actor helped a lot when I became the television spokesman for the automobile agencies for which I worked. About this time Evelyn and I were blessed with two more children, Blake and Tracy (not at the same time).

I kept my hand in the design of racing cars with the design of The Crusader racing car (Formula Vee and a line of two-seat racing cars). I manufactured over 150 cars and took up racing again. (It gets in your blood!) I was the General Manager for the EMPI Company (Engineered Motor Products, Inc.), the world's largest manufacturer of racing and accessories for Volkswagens. I also managed a fiberglass manufacturing company in southern California that manufactured dune buggies. I designed the Tatum Sports Racing Car, a racecar that you could drive on the street, which made the cover of Hot Volkswagens Magazine.

I got sick and tired of the automobile business and decided a change of pace was necessary. So when an offer to go to Saudi Arabia to design and install an automobile agency came along I snapped it up! With this super adventure became friends with a student from Saudi Arabia. His family was a little on the rich side; seems like the old family oasis was sitting on a couple of million acre-feet of black gold. *“They*

were so rich they bought their camel a boy.” (Old Arabic joke.) They sent me all over the world, first class, all expenses paid. This lasted for over two years. Hated to see this job end, but I missed my family and returned to the States and re-entered the automobile business for three years.

The old wanderlust I have always been plagued with got the best of me so I started my own advertising company. I still have it. I took a part-time job working for the Association of Retired Citizens, doing public relations and am still doing this as of this writing. I started an automobile brokering service and still have that as well.

Then I designed a new Formula Vee racing car for my son Blake to drive. I just might take up racing again, so I can race with my son! My wife Evelyn says no, that I won't take up driving again, but what the hell I'm a year younger than Paul Newman!

I bought a computer and decided to become a writer. This fulfilled a promise that I once made to myself to write a book about what happened to the Marines of B Company, 1st Battalion of the 27th Marines on Iwo Jima 43 years ago. And that brings it up to date on what happened to PFC Charles William Tatum over the last forty-three years. I had promised myself to keep this section down to four pages, but as always I got carried away, as always when I get behind the keyboard of this writing machine.