



Give It Your Best Shot

He was a cute kid. He had an olive complexion and dark eyes that glowed with excitement anytime the pilots came around. And he was very industrious, building quite a successful business shining Marine Corps shoes. We would put them outside our BOQ room at night with a quarter inside one of the shoes. The shoes would disappear soon thereafter and magically reappear the next morning with the most incredible “spit-shine” you have ever seen, forever putting to rest that little fairy-tale that Marines shined their own shoes and were the world’s best at it. Nobody could shine shoes like Kenji. His other service included retrieving hot dogs and cokes from the “gedunk,” – Marine speak for the snack bar that his mother ran out of a little building behind our hangar. “You buy, I’ll fly” was his signature call. The guys would give him a few extra yen and he provided a great service for a bunch of lazy fighter pilots who preferred not to be bothered in the middle of a hot ace-deuce game to walk all of 50 yards to get lunch.

Like a lot of the Japanese who worked on board the base in Iwakuni, Japan, just a few miles from Hiroshima, Kenji spoke halting English but had mastered the unique and often colorful slang expressions of fighter aviation. One of his favorites was “give it your best shot.” If you told him you were getting ready to go fly he would say “give it your best shot.” If you were going jogging it was “give it your best shot.” I suspect he knew what it meant, and he had the capacity of saying it with a special blend of enthusiasm and sincerity. And for some unknown reason his favorite airplane was tail number 31.

Although all of our planes looked pretty much the same, jet fighters are like people in that each one actually has its own “personality.” Each one flies a little differently, so after flying them for awhile, pilots would get attached to their favorites. But it was very unusual for someone who didn’t fly them or work on them to become attached. Kenji loved to stand in front of the hangar and pump his fists when that big old F-4 Phantom, tail number 31, afterburners blazing and shaking the ground like a thousand-decibel earthquake, went roaring down the runway. I know he was yelling at the top of his lungs, **“GIVE IT YOUR BEST SHOT!”**

And, oh, how his “Mama” loved her little boy. It was perfectly obvious, too, that the affection flowed both ways. She was, as most Japanese are, courteous to a fault, kind and efficient – not to mention she ran a “five-star” gedunk. I can still taste the hot dogs with chili and onions, the burgers with cheese and fresh tomato and lettuce, and occasionally the greatest hot-off-the-grill teriyaki chicken on the planet.

One morning I opened the door to retrieve my shoes and, as usual, they were there, but with one difference – they had not been shined. Although this was unusual, I thought maybe Kenji was sick, or working on a school project that prevented him from doing his “duties.” I slapped some shoe polish on real quick, hit ‘em with a brush, and jumped on my bike for the short ride over to the squadron, figuring I would stop by Mama’s and get my normal “breakfast of champions,” a gut grenade jelly donut and coke, a great way to start the day! The snack bar was locked up tight, so I proceeded to the squadron to hear the grumbling of all the pilots who had been denied *their* “breakfast of champions.”

Nobody knew why the snack bar was closed or the whereabouts of the family that ran it. A couple of days later, rumor control had it that the boy was seriously ill. Several of our pilots had become pretty attached to the family and decided they would find out where they lived and go see them. I had to fly the day they went, so I figured, depending on what they found out, I would go later.

The account of their visit was not good news. In the small home, Mama was sitting in an easy chair with Kenji smothered in her arms. He was listless, his voice almost inaudible, eyes half-closed, his olive complexion almost white. He managed a half smile when the pilots walked in but didn't speak. They visited with the parents, making uncomfortable small talk. As they were leaving they went over and hugged the boy, whose spirits were visibly raised by the visit. One of the pilots said, "You have to hurry up and get well and come back to shine my shoes – I've gotten in trouble twice because they didn't measure up." Another said, "Hurry back. We're all starving because we don't have you to get our lunch." Another said, "I'm heading back to the base for a three o'clock takeoff in tail number 31. If you listen real close you might be able to hear us." Kenji looked him in the eye, mustered what little strength was left in his frail little body and whispered, "Give it your best shot."

Kenji died two days later. The word was that he died from a rare blood disorder passed down from his dad who, as a young boy, grew up near Hiroshima. When the atomic bomb hit, he contracted something deadly from the fallout. Go figure the irony in all of that.

Mama came back to work a couple weeks later. For sure the food was still cooked fresh with her usual attentiveness. She remained kind and courteous. But it was never the same. No more "you buy, I'll fly." No more "give it your best shot." No more excitement about a simple takeoff for tail number 31.

My leadership challenge to all of us in the next week is to "give it your best shot" ... in your relationships, your family, your exercise program, your business, your classroom – in whatever endeavors are important. We are lucky. We live in the greatest country on earth, and we are obviously healthy enough to be writing and reading this article. We owe it to those we lead to do our best. If we give it our best shot, who knows? It just might be contagious.

I encourage your response to these thoughts. farlgroup@aol.com

Have a great day!

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