

Story by Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret) • Illustrations by Dave Rydberg

You can't rightly understand Buster Crenshaw unless you first get a grip on the fact that Buster is more than just a little bit weird. If you look for rational explanations to his antics, you would do better trying to teach the manual of arms to orangutans. Buster Crenshaw is simply one of those strange people who are put here on Earth for the sole purpose of driving the rest of us nuts.

Probably the first person to tumble to the possibility that the amiable Floridian with the unruly mop of straw-colored hair was a few items shy of having a full seabag was Wade Bryant. That was in the fall of 1948, when Buster and Wade were stationed at Marine Barracks, Naval Operating Base, Norfolk, Va.

Buster had been on leave down home in Boca Raton when he gave in to the spur-of-the-moment urge to have a pet. The pet that struck Buster's fancy was a foot-long baby alligator that he paid two bucks for at Jungle Billy Nemo's Reptile Ranch, just outside Fort Lauderdale. Buster didn't have anything in particular in mind for the alligator when he bought it. It just seemed like a good idea at the time.

The alligator made the trip back to Norfolk in the trunk of Buster's rattletrap 1937 Hudson Terraplane, taking no particular harm from a diet of Moon Pies and RC Colas that Buster bought at a succession of greasy spoon, roadside diners along the way. All things considered, the alligator held up pretty well. Even so, the temperature in Tidewater, Va., in November is a whole lot less than alligators are used to. By the time Buster checked in with the duty noncommissioned officer minutes shy of the witching hour of midnight, the alligator was about as sluggish as 50-weight motor oil in Alaska.

As it turned out, that was pretty fortunate for Wade Bryant. Sitting on his bunk in the darkened squadbay with the half-frozen alligator under his arm, Buster pondered over the best place to thaw out his new pet. After a bit of thought, he decided that Wade Bryant's empty bunk would do just fine. Buster slipped the alligator under the covers and went off to take a shower.

Less than an hour later, Buster lay sound asleep with the cov-

ers pulled up to his nose. Wade Bryant, returning from a very rewarding evening with a bouncy, red-haired WAVE [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service] quietly hung his clothes in his wall locker and crawled into the rack. Still cold and torpid, the alligator hardly snapped and bit at all.

Big bites or little bites, an alligator is an alligator. Big alligator or little alligator, an alligator for a bed partner can set a man to acrobatics that aren't usually seen outside of a circus tent.

With a hair-raising "Hee-YAAAAH!" Wade Bryant came up out of that bunk like a hound dog that sat down in a pile of hot ashes. He catapulted straight up, hung there for a second or two and came down running. Blundering into wall lockers, stumbling over locker boxes and knocking over a GI can in the dark, Wade made three complete circuits of the squadbay, all the while bellowing at the top of his lungs: "Hee-YAAAAH! Hee-YAAAAH! Hee-YAAAAH! Hee-YAAAAH!"

Wade was gasping for breath and downright wild-eyed by the end of the third lap when he skidded to a stop at his own wall locker, flung open the door and snatched out his M1 rifle. He had finished firing the rifle range at Dam Neck, the last firing detail of the year, that morning. As shooters sometimes do, Wade had brought a few loose rounds back with him. Well, maybe more than a few. Maybe a full eight-round clip of .30-caliber ball ammunition.

Pillow feathers, wads of mattress stuffing and bits and pieces of alligator flew in all directions. The full-throated BLAM, BLAM, BLAM of an M1 rifle in the close confines of a squadbay jerked men out of a sound sleep and sent them scattering for cover wherever it could be found. It sent Harry Carroll completely out of a window before he remembered the first step was a long one. The squadbay was on the second deck. Harry landed with a thud on the neatly manicured lawn below.

Wade Bryant landed in front of the commanding officer of Marine Barracks promptly at 0800 Monday. Maybe the colonel had a little sympathy for Wade's claim of being the injured party in the whole fracas. I always figured the alligator would have argued that point. But it didn't save Wade from being on restric-

tion for the next 30 days. It was a sight longer than that before Wade Bryant spoke to Buster Crenshaw except to say, "Get away from me, you damn lunatic."

Fate can be a funny thing. Sometimes, for no reason at all, it can keep throwing the same two people together time after time for years, the way it did with Wade Bryant and Buster Crenshaw. If that was the case, Wade Bryant just didn't see much of anything at all funny in it. As far as he was concerned, his continual encounters with a mental case the likes of Buster Crenshaw were nothing less than unjust persecution. A man should have to put up with just so much.

If that was what Wade thought, fate and Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps didn't much care. Like it or not, Wade found himself serving with Buster again in the spring of 1968. By that time Wade and Buster had become commissioned officers, made instant second lieutenants two years before when the Marine Corps had grown by more than 100,000 men to meet the needs of the Vietnam War. In May of 1968 First Lieutenant Wade Bryant and 1stLt Buster Crenshaw were assigned as advisors to the Republic of Vietnam Marine Corps. For Wade, it was his third tour of duty in Vietnam. Buster was on his second trip in-country in two years.

Vietnam was getting kind of tense in early May of 1968. Memories of the communist Tet Offensive that had set Vietnam aflame from one end to the other back in January were still fresh in mind. Tet had been a military disaster for the communists, the Viet Cong guerrillas in particular having suffered horrendous casualties. Still, no one on the American and South Vietnamese side was anxious for a replay. But now there was mounting evidence that the North Vietnamese, who were feeding more and more men into the fighting, had some new unpleasantness in mind.

The South Vietnamese in particular were sensitive to any threat to Saigon and had deployed a number of their elite units—Marines, Airborne, Rangers—to the capital region. The two Marine battalions that Wade and Buster served as advisors to had taken up positions at the VNMC Training Center at Tu Duc to block any communist advance on Saigon along the Bien Hoa highway.

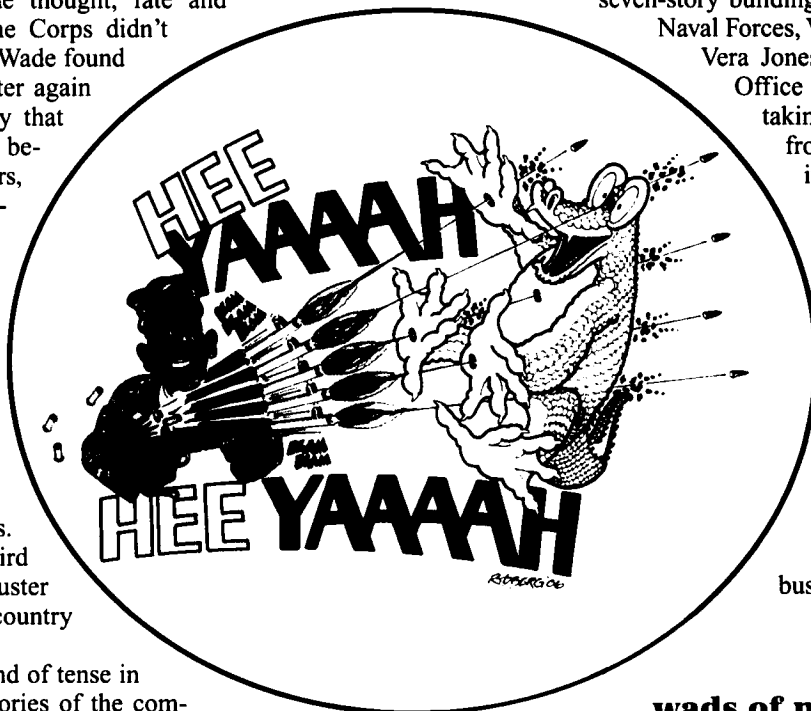
Practically all of the 85,000 Marines serving in Vietnam were members of the III Marine Amphibious Force up in Vietnam's five northern provinces. Advisors (Marines assigned to Headquarters, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, the Rung Sat Special Zone) and spook outfits such as SOG, CICV and PHOENIX belonged to the Marine Corps Personnel Office, Naval Forces, Vietnam in Saigon.

With their battalions normally on the move all over the country, it wasn't likely Wade and Buster would be this close to Saigon anytime soon again. Maybe now, before anything started, would be a good time to make a run into Saigon and take care of a few pay and administrative matters. While they were there they could swing by the big Army PX in Cholon and stock up

on things that would come in handy out in the bush, things like razor blades, shaving cream, soap and beer.

This was all Buster's idea, which was all the reason Wade needed to be uneasy about it. Still, his wedding anniversary was coming up, and the Cholon PX would be a good place to buy his wife the set of pearls she had always wanted. Making sure to bring along several extra magazines for his .45 and a handful of single-ought buckshot shells for the Winchester Model 97 riot gun he favored, Wade clambered into the passenger seat of Buster's jeep for the 45-minute ride into Saigon.

Buster's plan called first for a stop downtown at the seven-story building that housed the offices of Naval Forces, Vietnam, and where Captain Vera Jones' Marine Corps Personnel Office did such a first-rate job of taking care of Marines scattered from the Delta to the Demilitarized Zone. From there it would be a straight shot out Tran Hung Dao to do their shopping at Cholon. That taken care of, it would be an easy ride up Plantation Road to the Navy-Marine Corps Disbursing Office to complete the triangle before returning to Tu Duc. All in all, a pleasant day in the outdoors. Along toward noon, their business at the Marine Corps



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Personnel Office and Cholon taken care of, Wade and Buster headed up Plantation Road enjoying the sunshine and the scenery. Tucked inside the jacket of his Vietnamese-issue tiger-stripe utilities, Wade carried a beautiful set of matched pearls (necklace, earrings and ring) that had cost more than he had hoped for but less than he feared. All things considered, Wade was sure his wife would like them.

What happened next was that a whole hell of a lot of things happened all at once. Afterward, Wade swore by all he held holy that Buster had known all along that the 272d NVA Regiment was dug into the old French military cemetery beside BOQ [Bachelor Officer's Quarters] 1, ready to shoot at anything that moved on Plantation Road.

Without warning, holes appeared in the windshield and things making angry hornet sounds zipped past Wade's ears. Buster stood on the brakes and slid the jeep to a stop as both front tires blew out and bullets sprang off the radiator.

Wade and Buster couldn't have gotten out of that jeep any faster if it had been equipped with ejection seats. As they made a pell-mell dash for the ditch beside the road, an RPG [rocket-propelled grenade] struck the jeep, sliced through the engine block like an acetylene torch cutting through putty, and blew the

the ditch was to move directly into the line of fire of both sides. Staying out of the line of fire meant being half-submerged in a festering soup of decaying garbage, moldering bits and pieces of rags, a stray dead rat or two, circling squadrons of flies, and grayish-green things Wade tried to keep from thinking about. Every now and again, just to keep things from getting dull, an RPG that was fired from the cemetery struck the wall above them and showered them with hot masonry shards.

Wade didn't care for the situation one damn bit. He already had collected two Purple Hearts in Korea and had no desire to add a third, especially not the kind that would be presented to his wife with the condolences of a grateful nation. It was about time to start looking for a way out of there, and Wade said as much to Buster.

Buster was busy laughing. Sitting chest deep in scum-covered stagnant water and half the microbes in all of Vietnam, Buster Crenshaw was cackling insanely, tears running down his cheeks. Every now and then he would stop laughing long enough to bawl, "Don't shoot. I'm a French photographer!" at the top of his lungs. Then he would go off into gales of helpless laughter again.

The reference to French photographers was



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jeep into a fireball as the gas tank exploded.

Clutching his riot gun in one hand and keeping a firm grip on the pearls with the other, Wade hightailed it for the ditch, bullets kicking up chunks of asphalt all around him, Buster hot on his heels. Together they dived headfirst into the ditch, some NVA [North Vietnamese Army] machine-gunner sending a stream of green tracers to clip the sod inches above them. They landed with a splash in the garbage-littered water that half-filled the ditch, spluttering and woofing like a pair of beached whales and covered from head to foot with half of the household refuse in Gia Dinh province.

On the other side of the ditch was a low masonry wall. On the other side of the wall was a battalion of ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] paratroopers enthusiastically blazing away at the NVA in the cemetery across the road. Smack dab in the middle were Wade Bryant and Buster Crenshaw. To get out of



culled from Tet, when a pair of French newsmen in Hue City had saved themselves from summary execution at the hands of their NVA captors by identifying themselves as French photographers. Afterward, they had been wined and dined by the NVA and eventually set free with a great story and lots of neat pictures of NVA soldiers that in time appeared in *Life* magazine.

Just then, though, crouched in an open sewer with enough projectiles flying through the air to completely ruin a man's health record, Wade couldn't see anything funny in the subject of French photographers. Buster kept right on shouting, "Don't shoot. I'm a French photographer!" and laughing his fool head off.

Right then and there Wade knew he had been right 20 years earlier in Norfolk. Buster Crenshaw was a raving maniac. All

Buster had to say to that was, "Don't shoot. I'm a French photographer!"

It was more than an hour before the NVA broke off the fight and withdrew, leaving Wade and Buster to clamber up out of the garbage. Once things got sorted out, they managed to get in touch with Tu Duc and a jeep was sent to pick them up. First, though, Wade insisted on stopping at 3d Field Hospital, where he and Buster were shot full of every antibiotic known to medical science. The full-colonel doctor of the Army Medical Corps who treated them was certain they both would be back carrying diseases previously unknown and would one day find their way into medical textbooks.

Their separate battalions each went its own way by that summer, and Wade Bryant hardly saw Buster Crenshaw again until February of 1969 when he boarded a Continental Airlines Boeing 707 at Tan Son Nhut airport for the trip back to The World. Wade had barely gotten settled into a nice aisle seat back aft opposite the stewardesses' station when Buster Crenshaw filed aboard. Buster was carrying an AWOL bag in one hand and a suspiciously bottle-shaped parcel in the other.

Wade slid down in his seat and pulled a blanket over his head. "Get away from me, you damn lunatic," he growled as he reached for the bottle-shaped parcel.

Wade Bryant didn't know it, but there was more to come. In 1977, each wearing the gold oak leaves of a major, Wade and Buster were together again at Amphibious Warfare School at Quantico, Va., teaching tactics and amphibious operations.

In the summer of that year, much to his displeasure, Wade drew the duty of representing AWS at a command briefing for the members of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, DACOWITS. Wade thought of the ladies of DACOWITS as a meddlesome assemblage of dried-out, old harpies, working from a vast fund of ignorance in order to turn the Marine Corps that had been his life for 30 years into a day-care center.

Wade's opinion of women in the services in general was little more flattering than his views on DACOWITS in particular. Women in uniform, as Wade saw it, were a frivolity. Pregnant women in uniform were an absurdity. The purpose of armed forces was to fight wars, not breast-feed babies.

But Wade was a disciplined Marine. Briefing the ladies of DACOWITS wasn't the first disagreeable order he had ever carried out. He made his preparations carefully and rehearsed his material meticulously. When the scheduled day rolled around, he was completely prepared. But maybe he should have been a little more careful in controlling access to the tray of 35 mm slides that would accompany his presentation on the mission and function of Amphibious Warfare School.

If he had, what would have shown up on the screen right after he said, "Good afternoon, ladies," would have been a full color representation of the AWS crest. Instead, what he got was a screen full of a totally nude, statuesque blonde, with all the erotic implications the pose could convey. The gasps from the audience could be heard in the passageway outside.

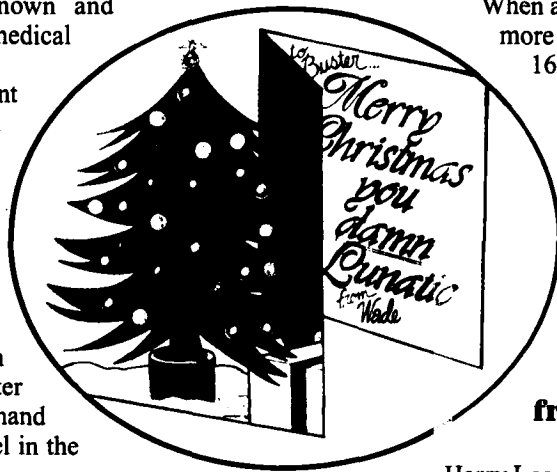
Horried, Wade flicked the switch to get the offending image off the screen. The blonde was replaced by a seedy-looking man wearing shoes, socks, a fedora and a raincoat. The man was holding the raincoat wide open and leering suggestively.

More gasps and screams from the audience. One lady fainted dead away, spilled out of her seat and landed face down in the aisle.

There was a mass intake of breath from the audience. Then a woman screamed.

Wade knew when he was beaten. He turned the slide projector off, thanked the members of the audience for their attention and beat a hasty retreat for the exit. Before the day was over, Wade had long talks with the commanding general, the director of AWS and the director of the Education Center.

When all that was finally behind him, Wade was more than ready for a spot of refreshment. At 1630, as he stood at the end of the bar at



"How did it go?"

Buster inquired in blank-faced innocence.

Wade's response was predictable. "Get away from me, you damn lunatic."

Harry Lee Hall, savoring one of Joe the Bartender's extra cold, extra dry martinis, Buster strolled in.

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Wade Bryant and Buster Crenshaw are retired now. Buster took a liking to Coastal Carolina and dropped the hook in Snead's Ferry hard by Camp Lejeune. The children are grown, and Buster and his wife live by themselves in their house on the Inland Waterway where Buster keeps his boat tied up. If Buster isn't out in his boat fishing, you can usually find him on the golf course at Camp Lejeune. His wife is the better golfer, but Buster has a lot of fun at it anyway.

Wade Bryant and his wife fell in love with Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. They live there now in Rockbridge County in a house that began life as a barn long before either of them were born. Over the years Wade has turned it into something out of *Better Homes and Gardens*, but he's always adding or improving something. Word of his talent at that sort of thing has gotten around, and every now and then Wade takes on some finished carpentry work or remodels a kitchen for somebody. He's careful not to let it become anything like a real job, though.

For a week or two each year, Wade and his wife travel to Onslow County and stay with the Crenshaws. Buster and his wife get up to Virginia during deer season. At Christmas there are gifts and cards. The card that arrives in Snead's Ferry bearing a Lexington postmark always carries the same greeting: MERRY CHRISTMAS, YOU DAMN LUNATIC.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor and frequent writer, has written a new book on interesting and amusing but true-life experiences in the Corps. "The Way It Was" will be published by Phillips Publications Inc. This story is an excerpt from the book, courtesy of the publisher.

Dave Rydberg, a Marine illustrator when last on active duty, lives in Florida and always comes through when we need a solid piece of artwork to make a good story even better.

