

# NEXT TIME I SEND DAMN FOOL I GO MYSELF



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

**D**o you have a dictionary handy? You do? Good. Pull it down from the shelf and look up the word eccentric. Don't be surprised if you find a photograph of Louis Cukela right alongside.

Cukela [pronounced coo-KAY-la] was the living embodiment of the word, the prime meridian from which any and all things eccentric are measured, a man who could leave observers shaking their heads in bewilderment at the same time they were doubled over in laughter. If there ever was a man who did things his way, even if that way might have seemed odd, a man blunt as a bullet and direct as an avalanche, that man was Louis Cukela. And he always ... *always* ... had the last word.

Wait a minute, wait a minute. Who was this Cukela character, some kind of nut? OK, let's back up and start from the beginning. Louis Cukela was born in the town of Spalato, known today as Split, in Croatia in 1888. Maybe that was a hint of things to come, because Croatia, along with Serbia, Slovenia and Bosnia, all those feuding, fussing and fighting places known as the Balkans, was part of what was then known as Austria-Hungary. That was where in 1914 everything boiled over and erupted into the First World War, which didn't mean all that much to Louis Cukela.

He packed up and went to America in 1913. There was a tour as a cavalry trooper in the U.S. Army that ended in 1916, but Cukela didn't stay a civilian for long. In January 1917, just a few months before

the United States entered World War I, he enlisted in the Marine Corps, and in time, found himself a member of the 66th Company, 1st Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment.

In France in 1918, Cukela fought in every battle of the Marine Brigade, from Belleau Wood to the Meuse River Crossing. Along the way he collected a commission as a second lieutenant, as well as the Medal of Honor and four Silver Star Citations. From the French, there was the Legion d'Honneur, the Medaille Militaire (the first award of this prestigious decoration to a Marine officer) and the Croix de Guerre 1914-18 with two palms and one silver star. Italy decorated him with the Croce al Merito di Guerra, while Yugoslavia weighed in with the Commander's Cross of the Royal Order of the Crown of Yugoslavia.

The only award for mangling the English language was unofficial. Cukela won that hands down when he tore a careless subordinate a new one, ending with the line that became famous: "Next time I send damn fool I go myself."

Next time I send damn fool I go myself. Those nine words swept through General John J. Pershing's American Expeditionary Forces like Epsom salts through a goose. *YANK*, the AEF newspaper, drew a series of cartoons around them. They found their way into State-side magazines. The bumbler in the ranks could expect to hear them from his squad leader. It was rumored that GEN Pershing himself resorted to them when his patience was sorely tried. And they established

Louis Cukela as a world-class eccentric.

Next time I send damn fool I go myself. Try them yourself the next time some goof-off fouls things up. See how good it feels. Kind of takes the strain off the liver.

For Louis Cukela, though, that was just the start. There were always new challenges, and there were always inventive ways of overcoming them. And always there was the last word.

Take the case of the School Solution. That was in the 1930s when Cukela, then a captain, attended the Army's Infantry School at Fort Benning, Ga. At the finish of one particular practical application problem in infantry tactics, Cukela was called upon to present his solution to the situation.

"I attack," was Cukela's response.

That, according to the instructor, was not the proper course of action given the situation. Examining all the aspects of the situation in detail, the instructor went on to explain that the proper course of action, the School Solution, was to withdraw to more defensible terrain and establish a hasty defense.

"I am Cukela. I attack," Cukela retorted. Then, tapping the ribbon of the Medal of Honor above his left breast pocket, he fired the last word. "How you think I get this?"

Fort Benning may have been the Army's school for infantry officers, but that didn't rule out the school including classes in equestrianism—horseback riding. Officers on horseback were a leftover from the Army's days of chasing Geronimo

across Arizona, but every officer student at Fort Benning put in a certain amount of hours on top of a horse. It took Louis Cukela to come up with a unique method of getting a horse's attention.

Riding a horse might have seemed like duck soup for an old cavalry trooper. The truth was, though, Cukela didn't like horses, didn't like them the least little bit. On the other hand, if the antics of one particular horse can be taken to mean anything, horses didn't care all that much for Cukela either.

Anyone watching might have suspected that fact on the day Cukela's mount took off on him at a gallop. Despite every command of bridle and bit, the horse lit out for the horizon with Cukela bouncing up and down in the saddle like a rubber ball on top of a water fountain. None of the methods that had been taught persuaded the horse to even slow down, much less stop. The horse was headed for the Chattahoochee River and Alabama.

Tossing aside the accepted means of controlling a horse, Cukela sawed on the reins and shouted, "Stop, horse!" The horse kept right on going.

"STOP, HORSE!" Louder this time. No response from the horse except to gallop faster.

"STOP, HORSE!" People in downtown Columbus stopped and listened, wondering what all the commotion was. The horse shifted into a higher gear.

Enough was enough. Cukela balled up

his fist and slammed it down squarely on top of the horse's head. The horse staggered and stumbled to a halt, tossing its head and staring about with out-of-focus eyes.

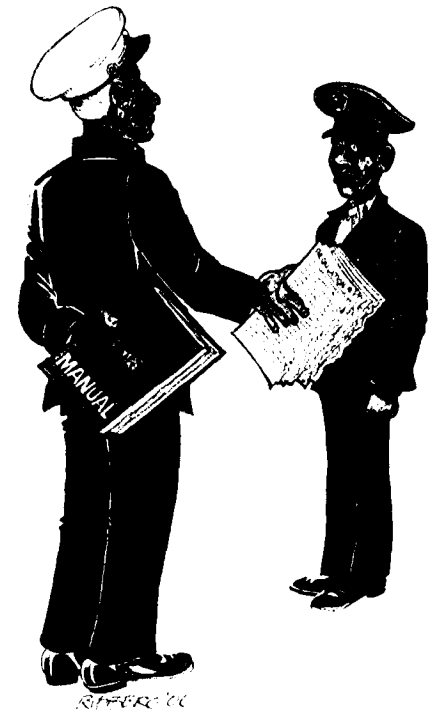
Cukela leaped from the saddle, snatched the bridle and yanked the horse's head down to eye level. "You listen good, horse," he growled. "I am Cukela. You are horse. I tell you stop, you stop. You not stop I give you hit break your head." Cukela turned on his heel and stalked off, leaving the stunned horse shaking its head. "Stupid horse," Cukela muttered.

Blunt as a bullet. Direct as an avalanche.

That may have been what the company commander in San Diego thought when Cukela appeared as a member of the Adjutant and Inspector's official party. The Adjutant and Inspector was the forerunner of today's Inspector General. Then as now, the Adjutant and Inspector represented the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and Marine Corps commands could expect to stand A&I Inspections on a regular basis.

That was what was taking place when Capt Cukela found a number of glaring irregularities in certain records, records not maintained in the manner stipulated by the Marine Corps Manual. Asking for the company's copy of the Marine Corps Manual, Cukela thumbed through it to the appropriate passages.

Then, ripping out the particular pages, Cukela handed them to the company com-



mander. "Here, you not needing these pages anymore. You have better way, hah?"

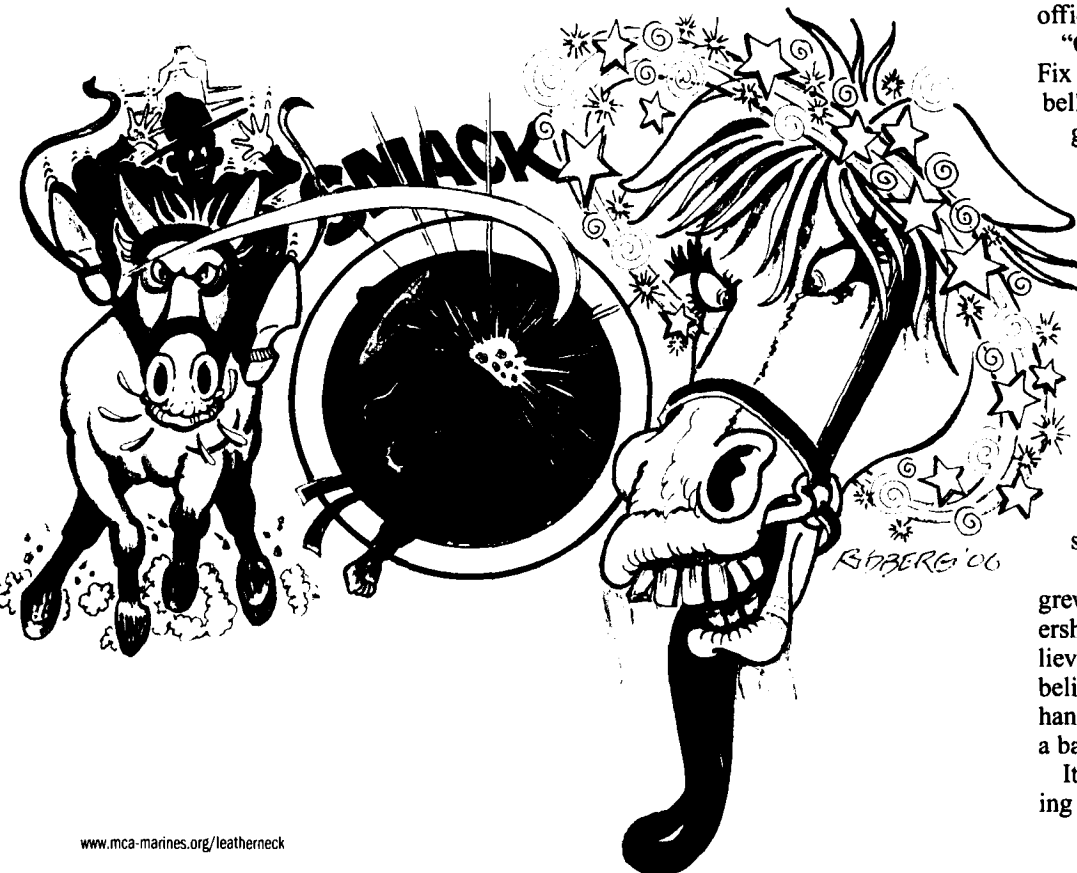
Have you ever, when you were firing the rifle range, been ordered to fix bayonets and charge? You might have if you had been a recruit at Parris Island in the late 1930s. That was when, during a particularly bad string of rapid fire, the range officer, Capt Cukela, snatched the microphone from his line noncommissioned officer.

"Cease fire. Clear and lock your piece. Fix bayonets. Charge the butts!" Cukela bellowed. Fifty bewildered recruits went galumphing downrange with fixed bayonets while Cukela urged them on. "You can't shoot them; you go stab them."

The Golden Age of Cukela had to have been at Norfolk, Va. Retired just prior to the outbreak of WW II, then-Major Cukela was almost immediately recalled to active duty and assigned as Commanding Officer, Marine Barracks, Norfolk Naval Base. Long years after he left, Marines at Norfolk were still telling Cukela stories.

One particular story that lived on grew out of Cukela's penchant for leadership by walking around. He didn't believe in leading from behind a desk; he believed in getting out and seeing firsthand what was going on every day. Not a bad style, come to think of it.

It happened that as Cukela was ascending the ladder to the second deck of the





Maj Louis Cukela

barracks, two young Marines, new hands, were coming down. As they had been taught in boot camp, they stood aside at attention, allowing the major to pass. Instead, he stopped.

Skewering one of the Marines with a piercing gaze, he asked, "You know who I am?"

"No, sir," replied the puzzled Marine.

"Hmph," snorted Cukela. "Dumb. Don't know nothing."

Turning to the other Marine, Cukela asked the same question. "You know who I am?"

"Yes, sir," the Marine responded smartly. "You're Major Cukela."

"Hmph." Another snort. "Wise guy. Think you know everything." That last word again.

As to getting out and about, well, Cukela did that by bicycle. There was a war on. A lot of things were in short supply. There was rationing, and not the least of the commodities rationed was gasoline. As a means of conserving fuel, Cukela got about the base on a bicycle, a conveyance not without its perils.

Do you remember the old taunt when you were a kid playing sandlot baseball and muffed an easy ground ball: "Two hands for beginners"? Riding a bicycle was strictly a two-hands job for Cukela. Any attempt to guide a bicycle with only one hand was a surefire preliminary to Cukela and the bicycle both ending up in a heap.

As a result, there was a standing instruction that Maj Cukela was not to be saluted when he was on a bicycle. That was, of course, a challenge no Marine could resist. Marines were known to go out of their way to search out Cukela when he was mounted on his bicycle. Then it was a matter of rendering the proper courtesy, a hand salute.

For any officer, and for Cukela in particular, a salute was a courtesy that was to be returned. He never failed to do so. He never failed either, to go tumbling rump over teakettle to land in a heap, much to the secret delight of the Marine who had brought the whole mishap about. But it was Cukela as usual who always had the last word.

"How many times I got to tell you, don't salute when I'm on the bicycle?"

Louis Cukela, a real funny guy. But a mighty warrior and stand-up guy who always looked out for his Marines, and

who could always be counted on to be there when a Marine needed a helping hand.

*Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor and frequent writer, has written a new book on interesting, amusing but true-life experiences in the Corps. "The Way It Was" will be available from MCA bookstores and through our MCA Web site: <https://www.mca-marines.org/OnlineStore/> in December. This Cukela story is excerpted from the book, courtesy of Phillips Publications Inc. Leatherneck will present another humorous but true story from Maj Bevilacqua's book in a future issue.*

*Dave Rydberg, a Marine illustrator when 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.*

