

Goats Galore

By Frank Koubek

Do you remember when goats replaced gas powered lawnmowers in the WOL 300 Explosives Area? It all began in the early 1960's when a newly arrived Public Works Officer got the bright idea that a herd of goats would be more efficient and cost effective in keeping the foliage trimmed around the many small buildings dotting the Explosives R&D area and the surrounding hilly, woody terrain. I was directly affected by the bright idea since, at the time, I was involved in operating a high temperature materials testing facility in Building 339. We tested candidate experimental materials for missile rocket engines, nose-tips, and heat shields. These devices consisted of a hydrogen-oxygen rocket motor, an oxy-acetylene burner system (which eventually became a standardized ASTM test), and an arc image furnace which featured a pair of surplus Army electric arc searchlights. The presence of goats around our building and testing facilities would prove to be a nuisance and a safety hazard as it did to others in the 300 area. More about this later.

Unfortunately for us, our Public Works Officer was able to obtain approval for the goats and he brought about 24 goats on board. It must have been hilarious for the Supply Department to make such an unusual procurement. I also learned that the Personnel Department was challenged when Public Works requested them to hire a "Goat Herder," and provide an appropriate job description. Probably the only goat herder in the Navy's history!! But, the best is yet to come.

When the goats arrived at WOL, they were turned loose in the 300 area to chew their way to stardom and possibly rival the famous Naval Academy's goat mascot (Bill) as they ate their way to fame and fortune. But, alas, that was not to be! The goats turned out to be a great nuisance and hardly cost effective. They found the expensive landscape shrubs planted around some of the buildings to be a lot more tasty than eating the grass, weeds, and brush---an expensive diet indeed! In addition, since many of the buildings in the 300 area were not air conditioned (at least in those days), personnel left the doors propped open on warm days for cooling and ventilation—an open invitation to the goats to wander into the buildings and leave their "calling cards" on the floors as they rummaged through the buildings. More than once, our technicians and engineers had to shoo them out and clean up after them. We also had to bear the expense of erecting a 6 foot high chain link fence around the back side of the building to keep the goats from damaging instruments and equipment. I also feared that the rocket motor exhaust might eventually produce a roasted goat, and I might be charged with the destruction of government property! Amazingly, none of the goats were hurt in the explosives test area. I often wondered how the goat herder (GS-?) was able to keep track of their whereabouts.

At any rate, I believe the goats remained for 2 to 3 years and each day, at about 4 pm, the goat herder, with his shepherd staff, could be seen leading his herd up the hilly road past our building to some area where they were liveried for the night. Perhaps they came out when he summoned them at the end of the day because they knew he was going to feed them a "real meal?" After a while, the herd began to grow in numbers! It seems that there was at least one Billy in the herd even though the purchase request specified all Nannys.

At any rate, the saga of the WOL goats ended on a happy note when the Public works Officer moved on to a new assignment in the Navy. This was one of the few times, I, and perhaps others in the 300 area, were glad to see someone move on. (Another time perhaps was the temporary acting WOL CO who attempted to do away with the golf course, barber shop and WOLEA store in the arcade; but he retired before he could achieve his goal.)

So, it happened with the goats—they just miraculously disappeared not too long after were assigned a new Public Works Officer. Thus, there were no more ifs and/or BUTTS (pun intended) as to where it would all end with the goats. Some lucky farmer in the area probably got a bargain buying surplus Navy goats! For me a city slicker from east Baltimore, I thought they were cute little critters even though they were a d__d nuisance!

What are your recollections of the WOL goat herd? Perhaps you have some interesting “TAILS” to tell---particularly if you worked in the 300 area in the early 1960"s. Please submit them to the LEAF editor. (Editor Note: see one that follows in Oral History Feedback.)