

Colonel Barber—a true officer and gentleman

Have you ever read those published columns on proper etiquette?

Every so often a reader writes in and asks "What is the proper response when a fainting, floundering fly is found in your bowl of hot steaming soup at an elegant private dinner?"

Miss Manners and Emily Post usually write:

a) Don't gag or bring up.
b) Don't coarsely announce to all and sundry "There's a dead fly in my soup."

c) Discreetly ladle the offending fly into a spoonful of the soup and swish! Down the hatch.

Would you take that kind of advice?

I wouldn't, but I know a man that did. He is alive, hale and hearty right here in Georgetown.

Let me tell you about the day I dropped a bulging bowl of hot, burning, smelly pipe tobacco in my colonel's lemon sauce and lived to tell this tale.

He acted like an officer and a gentleman. A true aristocrat. If he swallowed that firing squad lemon sauce he never batted his baton.

He never threatened me with a court martial, the awkward squad or cut off my personal line of credit with him. At the time of my erratic behaviour I think I owed him two and six, English currency.

Col. John R. Barber was the epitome of what Miss Manners and Emily had said in their reply.

Gallantry was expected here. After all it was wartime England. John R. did it in front of his troops.

Witnesses to this act of gallantry were Bill Collier, Jack Watson, Geir Hayes, my brother Steve, cousin Joe, Bill Young, Scoop Spence, Chas Boyle, Ed Hill, Fred Tost, K.D. Barber, Paul Barber, Jim Collier and last but not least, Martin and McPhail.

They were but a few of our company. In military parlance we were Charlie company - an outstanding body of men.

The day I risked the wrath of my superior officer was a beautiful English summer day in a green meadow beside a country lane. It was ver hot. The locals said it was the hottest summer in years. It was 1941.

According to the syllabus (we always went according to the syllabus) we were to the amazement of some exactly where we were supposed to be. At the half way point of our fourteen mile route march in full battle dress.

The cooks has arrived and set up their field kitchen.

The hot meal was served from stainless steel cow boxes side by side on an angle ironed frame about sixteen inches high so that a streak of fiery flame from the oversized blow torch at the end of the frame could shoot under the box bottoms and warm the food.

I don't know to this day why they were called cow boxes.

The name was probably an idea of Army Intelligence.

The stainless steel cow boxes of that route march remind me of todays blue boxes in shape and context. They both contain garbage.

Other ranks like me were fed first, then the officers.

Some of us felt this procedure was a throwback to the days of winetasters for kings and queens.

When the winetaster showed no signs of poison, the feast for kings and queens commenced with a whisper to "enjoy" ringing in their ears.

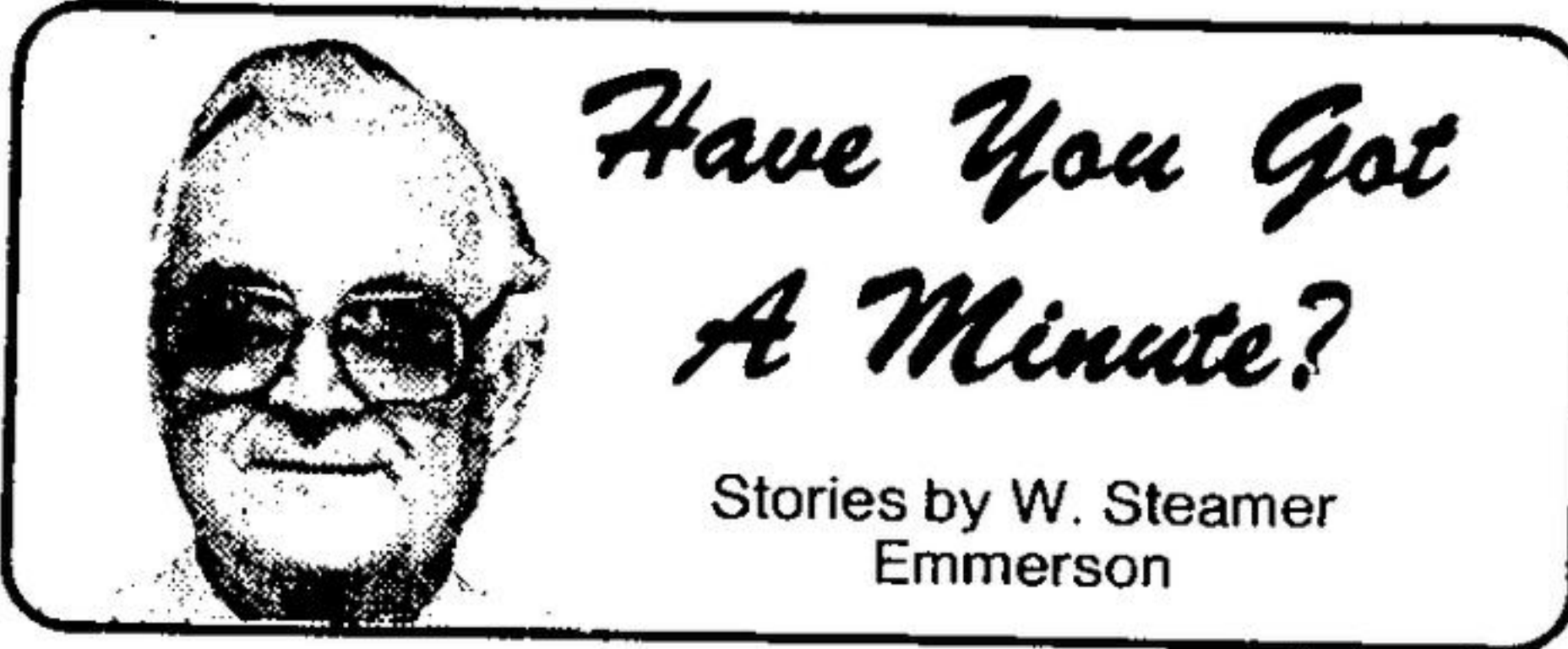
When our survival was certain, after a meal I can't remember ever whispering "enjoy" into any officers ear.

The cow boxes on the frame contained mystery meat, potatoes, a veggie, gravy, tea, pudding and the last box contained the lemon sauce.

It was always a pleasure to receive parcels containing cigarettes, cigars, pipe tobacco, candy, shaving cream, money, from friends, employers and organizations.

One organization mailed me all these things plus an "S" shaped curved Sherlock Holmes pipe.

I have hated pipes ever since. After our noon meal we usually



changed our sweaty smelly woolen socks to a clean pair from our pack.

I had just changed, packed and lit my Sherlock Holmes pipe for the first time.

Sgt. Bill Collier ordered some of us to get up and serve the officers.

Once a week in those early army days our cook served a pudding for dessert with a thick lemon sauce.

Now I know some of you are already saying to yourself "that damn Steamer got the cow box with the lemon sauce."

Go to the head of the class, and by George who was the first in line?

You guessed it. None other than Col. John R. Barber.

At that time he was our company commander, and a good one. Just as he asked me for lots of that lemon sauce the darned Sherlock Holmes pipe flipped over in my mouth as I tried to answer respectfully "Yes Sir."

To help it from falling completely in the sauce I bit the stem when the pipe was upside down and I watched my military career careen with a blazing bowl of Old Imperial pipe tobacco into the lemon sauce.

Lordy, Lordy that huge bowl of aromatic tobacco wasn't going to do a damn thing for that lemon sauce.

To this day I don't know and I never asked if he actually saw the

incident because it happened so quickly but believe you me I stirred that lemon sauce like Betty Crocker with a new electric mixer.

You would think in a nasty situation like this I would have apologized immediately.

I didn't.
The only thing I could think of was "What if John R. call in all our loans?"

He was our Johnny Cash machine, our colonel, our instant teller.

We all owed him money. Every night we negotiated loans in his blocked out quarters, at the back door of the officers mess. Each of us had touched him for two and six, half crowns to go to the pub, and if we were going on leave we were talking folding money.

Sometimes if John was busy proposing a toast to His Majesty in the mess he would turn over the cash box to his right hand man, Ron Edwards, Danny's dad.

To the best of my knowledge he never wrote down in a book who owed what.

He trusted us. We trusted him. Now you can understand why I was so reluctant to blurt out "Sorry about that old chap."

Big money was at stake here. Maybe four or five pounds when you added up everyone's indebtedness to John R.

If he hadn't been a gentleman I could have spent my military career in a latrine with a mop and pail.

The old army song said it all:
You'll get no promotion,
This side of the ocean,
So cheer up my lads,
Bless 'em all.

About 20 years ago John invited me as his guest to a mess dinner where His Excellency The Right Honorable Lt. Governor Ross MacDonald was the guest of honor.

Black tie and miniatures were to be worn.

It was a wonderful evening of warmth and laughter with cherished war-time buddies.

Col. John R. Barber was at his delightful and humorous best that special evening.

I know his influence was considered when the menu was offered for his approval.

The hors d'oeuvres, entrees and wines were well chosen.

I was afraid to ask why we didn't have pudding and lemon sauce for dessert.

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