

The Big Blow

by [Peter Glassman](#) (July 2024)



Dandelion Meadow, Cuno Amiet (1903)

Lieutenant (JG) Harold Bender was proud of his Navy status as a Mustang. Although a Mustang might immediately be brought to

mind as a swift pony-size horse, by the late 1960s, the word Mustang became a popular car. However, in the military, a Mustang has a very specific definition. Naval Officer Bender had joined the Navy at age 19 and rose through the ranks from Seaman to Chief Petty Officer. After 23 years he received a Bachelor of Arts degree, which qualified him for an Officer Commission. Thus, at the age of 42, he was one of few career Navy men with the entry Officer grade of Ensign. Any Navy seaman thus rising from the ranks is referred to as a Mustang. Bender's promotion to LT(JG) made him eligible for command assignments at small Navy land installations.

Since Bender had experience in Security and Shore Patrol, he was assigned as Chief of Security at Queens Naval Hospital—one of the largest Naval Hospitals of the Vietnam War Era. Unmarried and with no living family, the Navy became his life. His bible became the Navy Book of Regulations. LT(JG) Harold Bender became a fanatic to run his life and the lives of all Naval Personnel under his aegis.

Bender had no permanent assigned staff. He recruited his security staff from the recovering wounded warriors awaiting reassignment back to regular active duty. This included all branches of the service. Naval patients wore the Shore Patrol (SP) armbands. Army and Marines wore the Military Police (MP) designators. Bender had no Officers in his cadre. All were current ambulatory Vietnam War returnees. Captain Gerald Foaming, Commanding Officer of Queens Naval Hospital, was the only power above him. Fortunately, for Bender, the CO was also a rule book addict and Captain Foaming's only dictum to Bender was to avoid any action that would impact promotion to Admiral.

Bender sat back in his squeaking desk chair facing his highest-ranking MP, Marine Sergeant Gregory Gorkum. Bender looked at the two photos facing him on his desk. One was him

as a young sailor and the other in his formal white dress uniform with its black and gold shoulder rank of LT(JG).

“Gorkum, we’re seeing too many prostitutes sneaking on base. If this continues, by Navy law we have to notify the NY State Police. That means Washington gets word of a problem existing at the hospital compound and the CO will come down on us to ruin our careers.” He leaned forward with his chair complaining in a prolonged squeal, “I want you to recruit a dozen more well-patients from the minimum care unit. Appoint them as guards to prevent any more whores from gaining access to our grounds.”

Gorkum had regained his pre-combat musculature and looked formidable in his Marine forest green uniform. “Will do, Sir.” Gorkum folded his arms. “I think I have some activities we could do that would reflect on this command in a very positive light, Sir”

Bender and his chair squeaked backward, “And what may that be?”

Gorkum handed him a folder, “First, to minimize vehicular accidents, we could enforce the 25 MPH speed limit with a radar gun. It will also provide a larger military presence to discourage the prostitutes.”

Bender brightened, “Of course, that’s marvelous and within my budget. The CO will be pleased.” He paused and rubbed his chin, “What’s the second thing, Sergeant?”

Gorkum waited for him to open the folder, “The second thing is about the complaints visitors and high-ranking retirees are making about the Officers’ living quarters. We do have a regulation that grooming of all lawns is inspected every Saturday, Sir. The grass is growing tall and unsightly. We just need to enforce the rule. We can even provide the personnel living there with the lawnmowers used during weekdays for the hospital grounds.”

Bender brightened, "Marvelous Gorkum, let's implement your ... our ... plans right now. Distribute your notices about the new traffic enforcement and also that we'll begin grass inspections starting this Saturday."

The speed limit on the grounds of Queens Naval Hospital was previously never enforced. Now violators received a citation warning that any future speeding would result in a \$25 fine and a three-week ban from the Hospital compound. At first, no one took Bender's SPs and MPs seriously, despite numerous radar warning road signs. In one event, occurring three weeks after initial traffic postings, Bender received a summons to appear before the CO, the feared Captain Gerald Foaming.

Foaming, dressed in his usual whites adorned with campaign ribbons, touched his thin mustache fondly as he sat back and glared at his Security Chief.

"Stand at attention, LT (JG) Bender," the CO shouted. He waved several letter-sized papers in the air. "Do you recognize these documents?" He urged Bender forward. "Read to me out loud who the citations are made out to."

Bender took a deep breath after wiping beaded sweat from his upper lip and answered with a soft voice, "Mrs. Gerald Foaming."

"Louder LT (JG) Bender ... louder."

Bender almost shouted, "Mrs. Gerald Foaming, Sir ... Mrs. Gerald Foaming."

Foaming swallowed two gulps from his USN-labelled coffee cup. "And who do you think this person is?"

"Your wife, Sir."

Foaming tented his hands. "Now read the consequences she has

to adhere to.”

Bender felt like he was swallowing his tongue with the answer, “She is banned from this base, Sir.”

“Bender, even I, as CO of this Hospital, and as her husband, cannot allow this to happen. If word reaches DC, I’ll have a blot on my record, and Queens Naval Hospital will begin to be flooded with civilian complaints, most via their Congressmen.” Foaming gulped more brown water from his coffee cup. “Just think about it, Bender. Queens Naval has 2100 patients, mostly wounded warriors who risked life and limb for their country and you ... Yes ... You ... deprive them from seeing their loved ones.” Foaming stood up.

Bender could feel sweat running downward from his armpits, “What do you suggest, Sir?”

“Suggest? Suggest, Bender? Not suggest, but order. I order you to issue only warning citations without mention of penalty. Just use the word—safety. If I get one complaint or hear of one more non-regulation incident by your security force, you will be out of here dodging bullets in Vietnam.”

After Bender’s brusque dismissal, Sergeant Gorkum sat across from the Security Leader in his windowless Office, “I have to say, Sir, the safety warning citations are working.”

“Gorkum, I must provide a show of authority on this base. Fortunately, the CO didn’t make any written note of the radar penalty complaints. What do you think?”

The burly Marine folded his hands, “Well, Sir, we’re still going after the military personnel living on the Hospital Grounds.”

Bender drummed the fingers of his right hand on his desk blotter and suddenly slammed a fist down with a loud report,

“Yes, I understand that situation has no response to our notices. Let me double-check on the regs for landscaping.”

Gorkum immediately extended the Queens Naval Hospital regulations manual.

Bender smiled, “Being proactive, eh? That’s why I put you in charge of the enlisted wounded guys.”

Gorkum returned the smile.

Bender smirked, “Leave more notices at every base home along with your measurements.”

LCDR Nelson Fellows was the Chief Internal Medicine Resident and the Medical Officer in charge of Officer Housing at Queens Naval Hospital. He and his family lived in the outermost unit of the row of Married Doctors’ dwellings. His wife Nora presented him with the flyer announcing a mandate for manicuring their lawns as she fed their high-chair-bound toddler.

“Nel, it says that the grass in our development will be checked every Saturday. Every lawn must measure no higher than two inches according to current Queens Naval Hospital regulations. Failure to conform will be subject to a two-week confinement to the Hospital grounds.”

Fellows frowned, “Bender strikes again. Don’t worry dear, the CO scratched the radar speed traps threats and he’ll ignore Bender’s craziness.”

She gave a negative nod, “I don’t know, Bender’s fanatical. He’s even put a tent up providing six lawnmowers for us to comply.” Her eyes widened, “My God! We have 24 housing units here.”

“There’s another regulation that MDs and their families will

manicure their lawns as their free time sees fit. Or we could pay the civilian groundskeepers. There are no penalties.”

Nora squinted at the directive, “The fine print says this ‘notice supersedes all pre-existing groundskeeping directives’.”

The next day, Fellows met with the other Doctors at their site. “I sent a note to the CO suggesting that we go back to the old rules. We’re getting two shipments of wounded warriors every day. The wounded patients are more important than the growth of our grass.”

Alas, the CO disagreed with the Doctors’ resistance to the grass coiffure. On every Plan of the Day announcement was a memo to MOW THE LAWNS.

Fellows, as spokesman for the housing MDs was met with an alternative. Captain Foaming held up the regulation manual, “LDCR Fellows, the hospital grounds are getting shaggy and reflect on my command presence. Unless you can come up with an idea that conforms to Bender’s MPs, we all, except me as CO, have to comply.”

Bender dispatched Gorkum and his MP staff with twelve-inch rulers and accompanied most of the Navy pickups to record infractions. Bender rang the bell on the Fellows housing unit. He puffed himself up as Mrs. Fellows answered.

“Mrs. Fellows, you and the other families have not addressed the lawn maintenance regulation. Unless the grass is cut to no taller than two inches, every family will be confined to this base. Not one unit has cut their grass.” He held up his ruler. “Look, I marked it in red. your measurement today is four inches.”

Nora felt her heart racing, “But my husband and all the others

are busy taking care of the Vietnam returnees.”

“I’ll give you all two weeks to comply. It will not fare well for your husband’s Navy career with this infraction written in his 2014 file.”

That evening Nora told Fellows the news. He hugged her and showed her the regulation manual. “I think I have a way out. I’ve talked to all the other guys and they agree with my plan.” He described the mission to reverse Bender’s lawn fever.

The next morning Fellows met with the other wives. He addressed the small assembly, “We need all the children to board that Navy bus I got for this morning.” He paused. “All children over the age of three get on the bus. I need as many mothers as possible to accompany us.”

One of Bender’s trucks stopped at the activity. SGT Gorkum approached Nora Fellows.

“Mrs. Fellows, what’s happening? Do you need assistance?”

“No, Sergeant, My husband has a leave day to take the children to Linden Boulevard Park. Most of the mothers are going with us.”

Gorkum watched the bus disappear from the sprawling hospital compound.

Two weeks later Fellows and Bender stood before the CO.

Foaming looked at the damning report given by LT (JG) Bender. He looked up at his two Officers. “I must say to both of you that you’ve worked with great zeal in your efforts to settle the groundskeeping situation. LT (JG) Bender, you are to be

commended for trying to find a way to improve the grooming of our campus. For that, I will overlook the distress incurred upon our involved medical staff.”

Foaming turned to Fellows, “LCDR Fellows, similarly, you and other families used a unique way to find a loophole in our regulations regarding the lawn mowing assignments.”

The CO turned back to Bender and continued, “Until the Vietnam War is over and we have ceased to have the hospital beds filled with wounded warriors, I suggest that you use some of your able-bodied recovering patients to help the civilian groundskeepers with the job. You are dismissed LT (JG) Bender.” He motioned to Fellows, “LCDR Fellows, please remain.

Fellows wanted to smile but contained his feelings. “Yes, Sir,”

Captain Foaming leaned back in his leather office chair, “Bender described what you did. How did you happen to come up with such a unique solution?”

Fellows took a deep breath, “Well, Sir, it was the children. I saw what they did to a few of the weeds growing along the edge of our housing boundaries. I researched what weed or plant doesn’t grow over two inches when mature. It also needed to be green with or without flowering.”

Captain Foaming let out a barrage of laughter, “That was brilliant, Fellows. You got those children to bring back puff-ball dandelions and blow their tops off on your housing grounds.”

Fellows smiled at his response to the event, “Yes, Sir, we had eighteen children each with two handfuls of white-topped stems of dandelions gone to seed. Each of the kids blew their stems bare and had fun doing it. Those floating seeds looked like a snowstorm of rescuing paratroopers. It took two weeks of twice-daily watering to get the settled seeds to the flowering

state. The dandelions replaced the grass.” He paused for a deep breath. “And since there is no regulation for dandelion height, there was no rule for maintaining them at all.”

Still smiling, Capt. Foaming gave him a salute for dismissal.

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