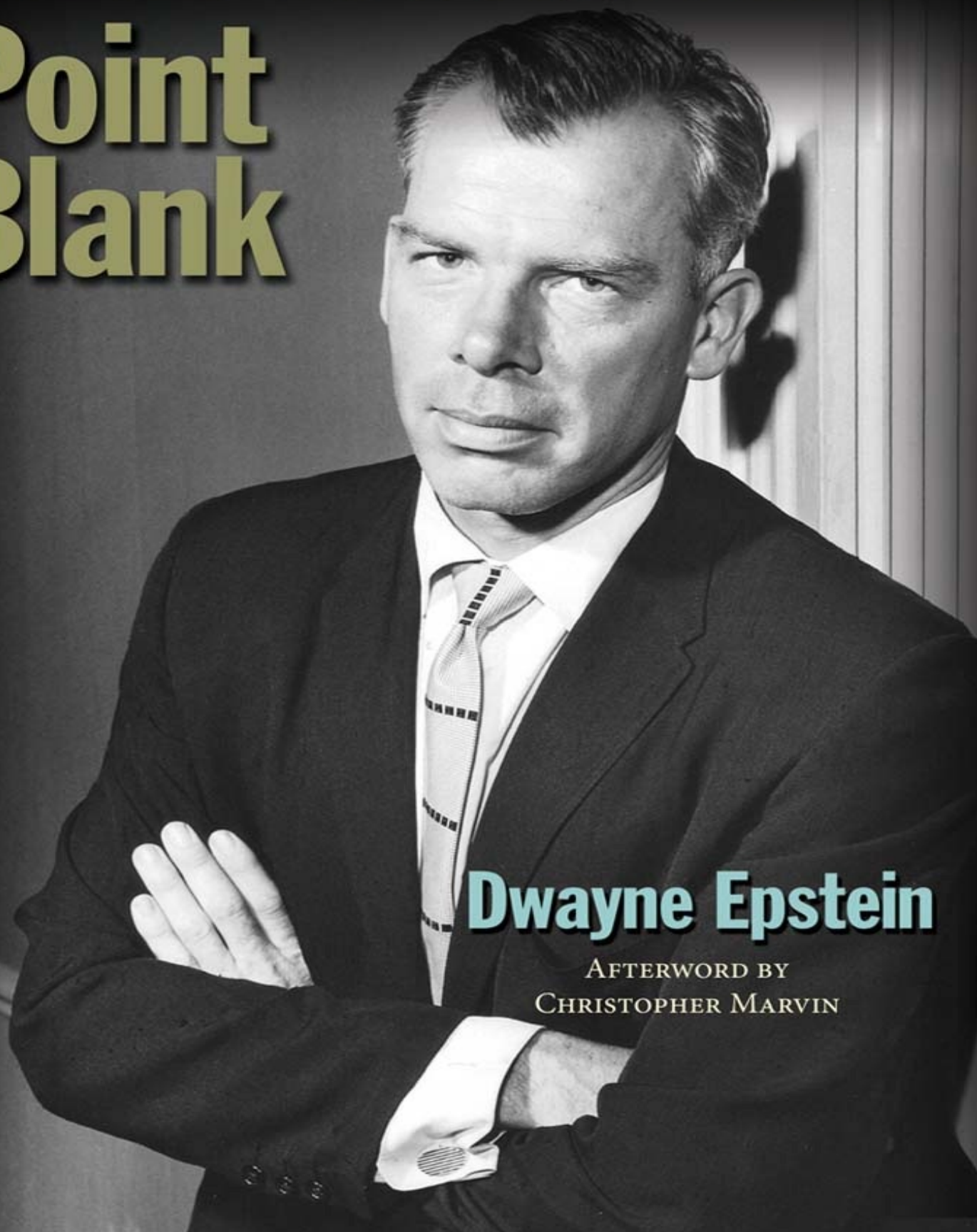


# LEE MARVIN

## Point Blank



**Dwayne Epstein**

AFTERWORD BY  
CHRISTOPHER MARVIN

**Lee Marvin**

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**Point Blank**

**DWAYNE EPSTEIN**



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*To My Parents*

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*Morris Epstein*  
1927-2005

*Royce Epstein*  
1930-2008

*And*  
*Claudia Leslie Marvin*  
1958-2012  
*In Loving memory*

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“You plan the wars you masters of men plan the wars and point the way and we will point the  
gun.”

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from *Johnny Got His Gun*  
by Dalton Trumbo



*Lee Marvin as he is best remembered, in the World War II classic, The Dirty Dozen. Of his own time in the war, he said, "I concluded it's every man for himself... The most useless word in the world is h-e-l-p."*

## Marvin Matters

**A**PRIL 5, 1950, on a windy New York night, twenty-six-year-old Lee Marvin did the unthinkable. For young actors in the 1950s hoping to be the next Marlon Brando or Marilyn Monroe, their Mecca was the Actor's Studio in Manhattan, which taught the so-called Stanislavsky Method, pioneered by the renowned acting coach Lee Strasberg and the equally venerated director Elia Kazan. It was fate on that Thursday night that Lee Marvin, who was auditing the class, would do a scene to be critiqued by Strasberg. Marvin had prepared a monologue based on the Hemingway short story "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," in which a man dying of a gangrenous leg wound looks back on the disappointments in his life.

When Marvin had finished his piece, Strasberg led the students in deconstructing all that he decreed was wrong with Marvin's performance. He stated coldly that the scene failed since the actor never conveyed the pain of gangrene to the audience. But Lee Marvin, a former combat Marine, informed Strasberg that it was he, the teacher, who was mistaken. Marvin, having seen the effects of gangrene up close while fighting in the jungles of the Pacific, explained to Strasberg in the presence of his disciples that in the terminal stage of this condition there is no pain. The small theater fell into stony silence which was suddenly shattered when Strasberg, furious at being corrected by a student, told the young actor to get out and never come back. Marvin had no problem with that, bellowing "fuck you!" as he turned on his heels, never to return.

Whereas young non-conforming actors were begging just to get into The Actor's Studio, Lee Marvin walked out. Although Marvin had shown Strasberg to be the Emperor with no clothes, this school of modern acting still remained Strasberg's empire. Banished from the realm, and unwilling to conform to Strasberg's idea of a naturalistic—yet basically still European—method, Lee Marvin continued to toil at the Hollywood dream factories for over a decade before he was finally able to make his mark as a film star. He accomplished this by believing steadfastly that his time would come via a less refined but even more realistic concept based on this incontrovertible truth: Man is a violent animal, and the American male the most brutal of them all.

As noble as America had always tried to be in attempting to rise above this tendency, the fact is that this trait towards aggression had existed since the nation's inception. Benjamin Franklin had said as much in defending the colonies' right to exist autonomously. England's legal concept of a duty to retreat to the wall when confronted by violence was changed in America to standing one's ground in similar circumstances.

It is a peculiarly American point of view that has affected the nation's collective consciousness and culture. Author Richard Maxwell Brown stated succinctly in his book, *No Duty to Retreat: Violence and Values in American History*,<sup>1</sup> "...the metaphorical and symbolic impact of the transition from duty to retreat to standing one's ground is obvious and is crucial to the American identity. In the realms of both peace and war, it is not in the nature of America to approve retreat. Standing one's ground is an attitude that has deeply permeated our foreign relations and our military habits as well as the peaceful pursuits of daily life."

American films rarely reflected this violent nature as it truly existed, choosing instead to justify it with nobility and bravado. Lee Marvin, a veteran of some of the bloodiest battles of WWII, knew this better than most, stating some years later in a *Playboy* interview (January, 1969), "In a typical Job



Wayne fight in a barroom... tables and bottles go along with mirrors and bartenders, and you end up with that little trickle of blood down your cheek and you're both pals and wasn't it a hell of a wonderful fight. That's fooling around with violence. It's phony; it's almost a character..."

The curtain had slipped from this facade following World War II, when war-weary audiences no longer accepted "the hero in the white hat" mythology. The true American character had peeked through on occasion in such action-oriented film genres as westerns, gangster films and war films, despite the puritanical restrictions set forth by production codes and societal standards of decency. While there was still an abundance of vacuous entertainment during the 1950s, a much darker tone was creeping like an uninvited guest into American popular culture, and staying long after the party was over.

A new breed of postwar male screen icons, beginning with Marlon Brando and rippling out to include the likes of exhibitionist Burt Lancaster, overly-sensitive Montgomery Clift, and apathetic Robert Mitchum, forced the stalwarts of the old guard to give their performances a previously unknown edge. Consider Tyrone Power in *Nightmare Alley* or James Stewart's later westerns and Hitchcock films. Even John Wayne, the champion of American virtue, portrayed such sadistic and psychotic characters as Tom Dunson in *Red River* and Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*. Now, it seemed, movie villains of the era were required to be even more loathsome than ever.

Enter Lee Marvin. Middle-aged and not movie-star handsome, the most unlikely of film superstars, he would go on to forge a unique screen persona. He had his own "method" based purely on instinct and personal experience. Serving his apprenticeship by portraying countless villainous demons, he once told fellow grotesque character actor Strother Martin, "You know, as character actors we play all kinds of sex psychos, nuts, creeps, perverts and weirdoes. And we laugh it off saying what the hell it's just a character. But deep down inside, it's you, baby."<sup>2</sup>

By the mid-1960s, the studio fiefdoms had crumbled and the production code eventually morphed into a controversial rating system. By then, Lee Marvin had become an iconic figure with silver hair, granite features, and a voice to match, and his films were revered by audiences half his age. The year 1968 proved to be a turbulent time in the country and, by extension, the world. Assassinations, the Vietnam War, rioting in the streets and violence in general permeated the nation's consciousness. Popular film, which had once been a haven from such ills, was suddenly being perceived as part of the problem. As a progenitor of this distressing phenomenon, Marvin, when asked by Richard Lewis in the aforementioned *Playboy* interview whether there was a connection between real and celluloid violence, responded, "Only in the sense that if the violence in a film is theatrically realistic, it's more of a deterrent to the audience committing violence themselves. Better on the screen than off. If you make it realistic enough, it becomes so revolting, that no viewer would want any part of it. But most violence on the screen looks so easy and so harmless that it's like an invitation to try it. I say make it so brutal that a man thinks twice before he does anything like that."

It was a philosophy derived from his own personal experience, resulting in brutality heretofore unseen in American films. His characters did not feel the need to be gentlemanly or apologetic concerning the extreme acts they perpetrated. This new concept of violence was Lee Marvin's pioneering contribution to American cinema. It had no name or title, but if it were given one, it would have to be as stark as the method and its creator himself: point blank.

Dwayne Epstein  
November, 2011

<sup>1</sup> Brown, Richard Maxwell, *No Duty To Retreat: Violence and Values in American History*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1999, p 6.

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<sup>2</sup> “You know, as character actors...”: Shipman, David, *Movie Talk*. NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1989 p.140.

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**Lee Marvin**  
**Point Blank**

**BOOT  
CAMP**



*Six-year-old Lee (left) and older brother, Robert. Lee is holding the family dog named, ironically enough Whiskey.*

# The Guilty Puritan

IT WAS INEVITABLE that the name Lee Marvin would become inextricably linked with the theme of violence and its culture. During his belated ascent to stardom in 1967, Marvin was a popular media subject for interviews, in which this topic was always on the agenda. In fact, it was his predisposition to aggressive behavior that informed one of his earliest memories. In response to a question put to him by “Tonight Show” host Johnny Carson about his childhood, Marvin said: “I remember fighting with my brother. He’d hit me with a leash and I’d hit him with a stick, so we’d fight.”

For Lee Marvin, this tendency towards violence would start early. He even recalled the first day of kindergarten as one filled with unchecked emotion and rage. “You’ve just been deposited here, right?” he would sarcastically state years later. “Boy, Mommy and Daddy are gone, and here’s the big world, and it’s working on you. And I remember I guess at one point I had to go to the john or something—it was probably down the hall—and when I came back some kid was sitting in my chair. And all I can remember is tremendous anger. I don’t know whether I punched that kid, or if he punched me, or if I got into a fight. But I do remember my anger...”

The roots of physical aggression were genetically set in place long before his very existence. In his paternal antecedents can also be traced among his ancestry, and the characteristic of the violence-prone man would go on to wield a powerful influence over his life and work. The first of his paternal ancestors to come to America from England was Puritan civic leader Matthew Marvin, who went on to lead Connecticut’s militia in the 1600s. But, when the farmers wanted to relax after a hard week in the fields, they would drift en masse to the local pub for some ale instead of going to church on Sunday morning. Brandishing his musket, in rode martinet Matthew Marvin and his militia to physically force the transgressors out of the pubs.

On his mother’s side there was a distant relation to Revolutionary War general and first President of the United States, George Washington. His mother took such great pride in the lineage that when Lee was sweltering in the jungle islands of the Pacific during WWII, she attempted to rouse her son’s spirit by writing, “Maybe blood is thicker than water, and maybe some of the qualities, both good and bad, come down to us through the generations. In this case, I get a little more of George than you, being one generation closer.”

In truth, he had strong feelings about his heritage, as his publicist Paul Wasserman once recalled, “I think he was a guilty puritan. Also, if memory serves, his ancestors were in the Revolutionary War. He was always saying, ‘It’s my country. We fought for it, we Marvins.’ You know, shit like that.” Yet, it wasn’t so much those ancestors working menial jobs in the fields or factories whom the actor revered, but the valiant ones who fought and often died for glory in nearly every war and skirmish in American history.

The Marvin family first settled in New York after the Revolution when General Seth Marvin moved into the Hudson Valley. The following century, in the War Between the States, both the northern and southern sides of his ancestry suffered terrible losses, and as Marvin himself put it, “During the Civil War we were pretty well shot up and the family is very depleted.” With such impressive names as George Washington and even Robert E. Lee in his ancestry, Lee himself would often joke that he was “the charcoal gray not quite black sheep of the family.”

The actor's maternal great, great grandfather William 'Uncle Billy' McCann became a local hero of sorts in the town of Elmira, New York and was the catalyst of an event that seems right out of a Lee Marvin movie. McCann, who lived well into his eighties, had been the County Under Sheriff in the Chemung County Seat of Elmira. According to *The New York Times*, "In 1863, while Sheriff McCann was in charge of the county bastille, a jail escape was planned by Leroy Channing Shearer, a soldier who was held for the killing of two comrades at the Elmira Prison Barracks. McCann, single-handed, fought a score of convicts. Shearer alone escaped after McCann had been left for dead [but survived]"

But, of his many illustrious and colorful ancestors, none proved to be more symbolic of Lee Marvin's legacy than his great uncle, Arctic explorer Ross Gilmore Marvin. Ross was born January 28, 1880, in Elmira, and was the youngest of Edward and Mary Marvin's six children. His father had been elected "Overseer of the Poor," but died when the boy was only six years old. His mother and older siblings raised Ross and, though small, he made a name for himself due to his determination to take part in school activities and sports.

Early on in his life, Marvin had exhibited a maverick spirit that seemed to foreshadow his great nephew's own outlook on life. Decades after his death, the *Elmira Star Gazette* wrote glowingly of Ross. "Marvin fought his way into everything. The places hardest to acquire were the places he sought. The things hardest to do, whether the road presented work or danger, were the things he wanted to do. He was that way from a boy."

That legendary perseverance would propel him through Cornell University where he graduated with a degree in civil engineering, as well as a stint on a training steamship for the New York Nautical School conducting scientific experiments in oceans around the world. The same month of his graduation from Cornell in June 1905, in search of further adventure, Ross contacted Commander Robert Peary in the hope of joining the legendary explorer in his sixth attempt to reach the North Pole.

Peary wrote him back, stating, "I may say that your application is one of two or three which have impressed me very favorably, and though the time is limited, I trust that it may be practicable, in the event that, after personal interviews, my choice should fall on you, that you may be able to arrange your affairs so as to accompany the expedition. I assume that you are familiar with the program of the expedition and my plan of campaign in general." After hearing a short while later of his acceptance to the expedition, Ross Marvin quickly got his affairs in order and spent the next two years in the largely unexplored territory on earth in the employ of Commander Peary.

In contrast, Ross's older brother Henry had a much less adventurous existence. He and his wife Elizabeth, struggled to get by, but were plagued by bad luck. Their son Edward had died six days after being born on January 28, 1895, but a second child fared much better. Lee Marvin's father, Lamont Waltham Marvin was born December 19, 1896, also in Elmira, New York.

Monte, as he was known throughout his life, had a childhood marked by sadness. His father was rather sickly and, on a doctor's advice, moved his young family to Denver for his health where he obtained a job working for Wells Fargo. In spite of this, thirty-five year-old Henry Marvin's health continued to deteriorate at an alarming rate, and three years later, he was hospitalized. As Lee recalled his father telling him, eight year-old Monte, "Went out to Denver to see his father, who was dying in the hospital. It was Valentine's Day, and they wouldn't let him see him because he was already dead. My father slipped the card he had under the door. He never saw him again."

Monte and his now heartsick mother took the train back to New York where they stayed with relatives until they could figure out their circumstances. A single mother at the turn of the century had

few options when it came to raising a child, and her own failing health was only making matters worse. ~~Henry's siblings were willing to help out, including younger brother Ross, who, having just returned from Peary's unsuccessful attempt to reach the Pole in 1906, and upon hearing of his nephew's plight, petitioned the court to adopt Monte as his legal ward.~~

Monte idolized his uncle and with good reason. Uncle Ross had been described in both local and national newspapers as one of Peary's most trusted aides. His cool-headedness during the expedition's perilous retreat after a failed attempt to reach the Pole during an Arctic storm made headlines, and garnered him a teaching position of meteorology at his alma mater, Cornell. Ross relished his nephew's attention, in return filling the boy's head with amazing stories of the frozen North, and lavishing him with gifts of exotic animal pelts.

In 1908, Peary was ready to try for the Pole one more time, and so too was Ross Marvin. While Ross petitioned Cornell for a leave of absence, Monte was sent to Brooklyn in the care of his mother's sister and brother-in-law, Elizabeth and Thomas Wynn. When Ross met up with fifty-two year-old Commander Peary, he was informed that the crew and assistants had all been chosen. However, Peary decided to include Marvin in the 1908 expedition's bulging ranks, later writing, "Quiet in manner, wiry in build, clear of eye, with an atmosphere of earnestness about him, Ross G. Marvin had been an invaluable member of the expedition."

On July 6th Monte, accompanied by his aunt and uncle, bid farewell to Ross on Peary's specially built ship, the *Roosevelt*, as it prepared to leave New York harbor. Ross made Monte and his aunt and uncle promise that no matter the outcome of the voyage, his beloved nephew would go to school and finish college. Monte and his relatives said their good-byes and watched from the dock as the schooner sailed out of sight on its way to Greenland and into the history books.

The *Roosevelt* made several stops on its way, picking up supplies and crew until finally all the players were in place: Robert E. Peary (Commander); Robert A. Bartlett (Ship Master); John W. Goodson (Medical Officer); Matthew Henson (Assistant); Ross G. Marvin (Secretary/Assistant); Donald MacMillan (Assistant); George Borup (Assistant), along with 15 ship crew members, 49 Eskimos (20 men, 17 women and 10 children), and 246 dogs. This would become one of the most debated and controversial expeditions in human exploration.

Much has been written over the years concerning the expedition and the individuals involved, especially the rivalry between Peary and former colleague Dr. Frederick Cook, Peary's questionable relationship with the indigenous people of the region, and African-American Matthew Henson's role in the race to the Pole. Largely forgotten amid these debates, however, is the vital part that Ross Marvin played on this expedition.

Never in question was Peary's unique method of travel across the frozen wasteland. He created a system of support teams that spread out on their dog-driven sleds, took readings, and doubled back to the ship as other teams advanced ahead of them. Peary and Henson would lead the first two support groups, with Marvin and then Bartlett behind them, each accompanied by two Eskimos. Marvin's Eskimos were two young male cousins named Kudluktoo and Inukitsoq, the latter nicknamed "Harrigan" by the crew for his ability to learn and repeat a popular song of the time.

After wintering on Ellesmere Island, the *Roosevelt* went up to Cape Columbia at the northern end of the island. Peary and Henson set out from there on the morning of March 1, 1909. They were accompanied by or met up with various advance teams along the way. By March 25th, Peary instructed Marvin and his team to work their way back to the ship. Six days later, Peary and other members of the expedition had arrived at the farthest point in the Arctic any man had reached, about 150 miles from the North Pole. What happened afterwards has been a point of contention for more than a century since



Peary and Henson both claimed to have reached the Pole on April 6th. But, without having had the proper documentation as proof, and with possible miscalculations involved in their navigation, they were never able to confirm their exact location.

By the time Peary arrived at Cape Columbia on April 25 with the news, the celebration was short-lived. Captain Bartlett informed Peary that Kudluktoo and Harrigan had returned, but without Ross Marvin. When questioned, the two young men sadly recounted how, on April 10th, they had spread out as Marvin instructed but when he alone came to an area of thin ice, Marvin fell through, and the two Eskimos were too far away to reach him in time. By the time they got to the thin ice, they saw Ross Marvin sink face down and disappear into the current of the icy water. A makeshift marker was left near the site where twenty-nine year-old Ross was believed to have drowned. But, the body was never recovered.

Back in America, the many newspapers of the day wrote daily headlines of Peary's telegraphed progress as the world waited anxiously for any word they could get. Historically, the only thing comparable in recent memory would be the Space Race of the 1960s.

In Brooklyn, thirteen year-old Monte Marvin was more anxious than most; to compound matters, he was being interviewed several times by major dailies concerning his uncle. One journalist even accompanied him that morning on his regular routine to read the local paper. Along the way, several local kids taunted him that his uncle had died. He ran home without the paper and fell on his back crying, while the reporter chronicled the tale of Monte sobbing to his Aunt Elizabeth about the tragic news he had just learned.

The news of Ross Marvin's untimely death,—the only fatality of the expedition—although reported was quickly overshadowed by the controversy surrounding Peary's claim of victory. Dr. Cook made a similar claim, but stated he had reached the Pole earlier than Peary. The controversy continues to this day as to which, or for that matter, if indeed, either expedition had actually ever made it to the North Pole.

None of those facts mattered to the family and friends of Professor Ross Marvin, however. Young Monte was inconsolable and the family publicly acknowledged the difficulty in attempting to break the news to Ross Marvin's aged mother. Cornell honored their martyred alum with a memorial and several additional plans of remembrance. Until his death in 1920, Peary continued to praise his fallen comrade by writing of Marvin in his memoir: "He who had never shrunk from loneliness in the performance of his duty had at last met death alone."

Monte's maternal aunt and uncle, Elizabeth and Thomas Wynn, made sure their nephew stayed in school as Ross had requested. According to Monte's first son, and Lee's older brother Robert, "Uncle was a big bookie with ties to Tammany Hall. They were Catholics so my father took the name Thomas. So his name was Thomas Lamont Waltham Marvin. He later dropped the Thomas." By the time Monte had turned seventeen, his mother had succumbed to cancer, leaving him a virtual orphan in the care of the Wynns. He was attending NYU as a business major when the United States entered World War I. Ross Marvin's wish that his nephew finish college was dashed when Monte volunteered for active service and left for the Front in May, 1917. He attended Officers Candidate School and went to Europe as a 1st Lieutenant in the Army Corps of Engineers.

His time in the war provided fodder for great storytelling years later. "As a matter of fact, he said he was out in Leavenworth," recalled his son Robert. "They opened up Officer's Candidate School, and he was surprised they took him in. So, he was commanding officer of I think an all black infantry. They did this work, reinforce the trenches and stuff like that. They didn't do any real fighting. But still, it

military life and it was very strict.”

Lee also recalled his father's experience retold to him about WWI: “My father was the classic puritan. Hold the emotions in check. Keep up appearances. Tight-assed. He had feelings but he'd never show them to you. I remember once he told me about a bunch of horses he saw in World War I. They were twisted and dead from mustard gas. He cried talking about them. He had feelings. It took something like that to bring them out.”

Hoping to make the army a career after the war, Monte left active duty in 1919 but remained in the weekend reserves until 1925, working as a clerk at a midtown Manhattan branch of the Bank of Montreal during the week. Monte's request for a promotion in the reserves was denied as the Army stated it could not financially afford to approve his request. It was during this time, that, if family history is to be believed, Monte had a life-changing experience. “He said it was in a building in New York City according to the story he told Robert's wife, Joan. “He was waiting for the elevator and this beautiful young woman walked off the elevator. He saw her and he fell in love with her but didn't know her name. It was love at first sight. “

He soon found out that the beautiful young woman was Courtenay Washington Davidge, the pride of northern Virginia. The oldest of William and Estelle Davidge's three children, Courtenay and her mother often called each other “sister” as was the southern custom. Her birth certificate states her father's occupation as lawyer, but according to Robert, he earned a living raising and selling horses to the military. Courtenay's siblings were close growing up but, as Robert points out, “William, Jr. [Willie] died in a car accident under mysterious circumstances. She never talked about it much.” Courtenay's sister Anne, born Feb. 14, 1898, “...had a problem. Her father had to bail her out of a situation where she had been made the caretaker of a trust fund in which she had borrowed money to drink with. So he bailed her out. I think my mother had a, not a phobia, but a mild fear of booze. Her brother had been quite a drinker and maybe her father, too.” It was a mild fear that, others noticed, diminished over the ensuing years.

As a young girl attending grade school in Washington, D.C., Courtenay entertained dreams of becoming a dancer. She graduated from Washington Business High School in 1915, and a few years later, sold war bonds during WWI. The closest she ever got to show business in her youth was designing the costumes for a musical version of the poem “Trees” in the early 1920s. She also loved the written word and continued to hone that craft through constant submissions to newspapers and magazines. Her masculine-sounding first name often got her work published, but when it came to getting into *The New York Times* training program, she was accepted, but only at half the pay a man would have received at that time.

It was while she was working at the *Times* to seek her fortune that she met Monte Marvin. “I didn't make my fortune,” she would later say, “but I found my husband.” After a brief courtship, Courtenay and Monte married September 3, 1921 in her parents' home in Washington, D.C. On their 20th anniversary she would later write Monte, “ I see you again, quite as you were then, so young, so serious and, I suppose, so frightened. I see you and me kneeling before Dr. Dudley who is no more. I see my father feeling for my elusive ring, and I hear plainly now words that were then just a sound. Now, think of those words seriously. How serious was that act, how long reaching, how very indelible the effect on our lives. And from that came two more lives.”

Such purple prose was typical of both her writing and personal style, which she utilized to the fullest in her correspondence to Monte. The young couple was truly in love during the heady early days of the jazz era. They lived simply in a sparsely decorated apartment, first in Washington after their marriage

and later New York. On a Father's Day in the early 1940s, she wrote Monte, "~~Since I can't send you a gift, let me send you a memory or two of you, as I shall always think of you, when I can push aside the~~ dark, stifling curtains of the moment and look backwards. First, recorded for the duration of this life the sound of your footsteps coming down the long hall in Mrs. Beegle's apartment, where we first lived. Perhaps it was five thirty or so, and I would be there, because I was then looking for a job and would go home early. That hall had a kind of polished linoleum covering and the footsteps had a kind of pat and yours had a special swift rhythm. Later on in life, the footsteps transformed themselves to the sound of a key in a door, the click, the opening, you and your greeting. The nightly return of the loved one."

In the same letter, she wrote Monte a reminder of the event of July 18, 1922, when she gave birth to their first child, Robert Davidge Marvin, born in D.C. and named in part for her legendary Confederate ancestor, Robert E. Lee: "A very hot Saturday afternoon in Columbia Maternity Hospital. I knew you would come, but not just when. The door opened, and you stood there, still for an instant, and then it seemed you flew and were kneeling beside my bed. But it was the eyes I still see; your young face, tanned and drawn, your eyes burning in anxiety and love and suffering, for Weensie had been born four or five days before. Though I could not turn or move, I can still remember that great desire to take you into the bed with me, only because you looked as if you had suffered. And then your face as you held Weensie with his little fattened head, and your deep, deep concern. Had everything been done for both of us?"

As flowery as they were, these letters were written as a way for Courtenay to get an emotional response from the usually reserved yet gentlemanly Monte. They were not necessarily physical affectionate with each other, but as Robert remembers, "Their gestures were different. Some of these guys are always pawing their wives, pulling them around. I didn't see much of that. My father could be a very warm and affectionate man, but he wasn't very demonstrative, the way you see some people are, guys who like to kiss all the wives and stuff." With a young family to support, the not quite thirty year-old Monte sought gainful employment wherever he could find it. Once his time in the army proved a dead end, he began looking for opportunities beyond his bank clerk job.

They were living in New York, and Monte was working in field sales for the Frank Seaman Agency when Courtenay next went into labor. As was the custom, the child was named for the same ancestor Robert, Robert E. Lee, and on February 19, 1924, in New York's Booth Memorial Hospital, Lee Marvin was born. The actor would later joke that his memory was so strong he could actually recall his birth, stating proudly, "I once tried to figure out the first time I felt guilt, and it goes so far back that I might have been an inch long at the time."

It was while working in field surveys that Monte and the rest of the world discovered the truth surrounding his Uncle Ross Marvin's fate. *The New York Times* ran an exclusive article by then noted Arctic explorer George Palmer Putnam. Putnam would later gain fame as a publisher and as promoter of his wife Amelia Earhart's exploits, but in September, 1926, he was the English translator of a remarkable confession recorded the previous year: Danish missionary Knud Rasmussen had heard the testimony of Kudluktoo, the Inuit he had converted to Christianity which, told sixteen years after the fact, revealed that as one of two Inuit guides, he and his cousin nicknamed "Harrigan" were responsible for Ross Marvin's death.

The confession was thoroughly checked out before it was made public. Harrigan was questioned separately following Kudluktoo's statement, and the story stood up even in minute detail. When Ross and his guides were attempting their trek back to the ship over the frozen waters, Harrigan had stayed behind briefly to untangle the dog lines. Marvin and Kudluktoo diverged on foot approximately a half mile apart in an effort to chart the route back. Harrigan caught up with Kudluktoo's trail, and together they had waited until Marvin could catch up with their trail. "He lost his temper," Kudluktoo stated

“He threw Harrigan’s things off the sled and said he could not stay with us.” This sudden rage on the part of the normally restrained Marvin frightened the cousins. Harrigan knew he would surely die if left without food or water; he followed from a distance as Marvin continued to rail against the Inuits, and Kudluktoo wept in fear. When Marvin stopped the sled to check the trail ahead on foot, Kudluktoo waved over to the nearby Harrigan.

“He yelled at me that I should bring him his rifle,” recalled the frightened Harrigan. “He had seen a seal in the open water. I brought him his rifle and went back again to the sled. I heard a shot a moment after and expected that Kudluktoo had shot the seal. But right away he came over to me and told me what happened, that there was no seal. He had shot Marvin in order to save my life... Marvin was shot just behind the ear and was killed instantly. We took the body out where the ice would cover him and wiped out all tracks.” Four days later they reached the ship and told the concocted tale of Ross Marvin’s drowning.

When *The New York Times* ran the confession on its front page, it was picked up around the world to instant repercussions. President Coolidge’s Secretary of State Frank Kellogg ordered an official investigation into possible criminal charges, but none were filed. It proved to be not only a case of self-defense, but had occurred in an area of the world in which no jurisdiction existed. At the time of the incident, it was literally no-man’s land until Denmark claimed the region a few years later.

Monte Marvin’s legal guardian and beloved uncle died as a result of the ultimate act of violence on the last uncharted area on earth. The devastating effect this had on Monte was incalculable. For the rest of his days he kept his most vulnerable emotions in check as a result of this primal act. In contrast, his son, a recognized international film icon, would spend his adult life exploring the emotional impact of violence, and its effect on the human experience.

The surviving family decided the “official” explanation would be the only accepted one and never told Ross’s then eighty-six year-old mother. In their minds, it would do no good to have her grieve again years after the tragedy in her weakened condition, nor did they believe the facts of the confession. They went against all that they held dear to think Ross had lost control of his faculties in the midst of his dilemma. Monte kept a meticulous scrapbook of the events as they unfolded but never mentioned it to his family. “If I didn’t know about it, which I didn’t” recalled Robert in 1995, “I can guarantee Lee didn’t know.”

Monte told his sons of his idolized Uncle’s brave sacrifice but not the truth of his demise. By all accounts he never spoke of it to anyone. Any anger, resentment, or disillusionment he may have felt over the murder of his uncle was channeled instead through the puritan ethic of silence, hard work, and discipline. Ironically, the recipient of such discipline was his often rebellious youngest son.

Whether it could be called a response to discipline or abuse, Lee’s reaction was swift and decisive: at the age of four he ran away from home. He had disappeared for two days before he was finally discovered hiding on a train bound for Baltimore. It proved to be the first of many such incidents perpetrated throughout his childhood, always ending with young Lee reluctantly returning to Manhattan and the brunt of his father’s wrath. The actor later said of his constant conflict with Monte, “I wasn’t having any too much discipline, even then. My father was tough. At least he thought so, and I guess I have a lot of his traits.”

A year later he was confronting a fellow student in kindergarten over the territorial rights of the wooden chair. From Matthew Marvin’s fiery pub raids, Ross Marvin’s ill-fated Arctic adventures and his father’s tightlipped discipline, Lee Marvin was on a collision course with confrontations that often led to pure physical violence. “I left kindergarten, and for the rest of my life I was never happy to go to school,” he later said. “Because it was *my* chair wasn’t it?”

## “Dogface” vs. St. Leo

THE STOCK MARKET CRASH in October 1929 that brought about the Great Depression of the 1930s had Lee Marvin's parents doing all they could to maintain a semblance of normalcy despite economic uncertainty. While other children were wondering where their next meal was coming from, Lee's 1929 letter to Santa told a different story. He dictated to his mother the following: “I am a good boy but sometimes I am bad. I am sorry that I am sometimes bad. I am 5 years old. I would like a soldier cast, a battleship, a cannon, a radio set, a war wagon, a soldier suit, a typewriter, a jack-in-the-box, a railroad station, a tricycle, a sand chute. Thank you for the toys.”

Because Courtenay worked fairly frequently writing freelance articles for women's magazines, they were able to afford toys for the kids, and all the comforts of home. As Robert recalled, “She had a job during the Depression. She stayed home at night pounding the typewriter from time to time when my father didn't have a job. At least it was what you would call a middle-class life. See, the word middle-class now is spread so far it doesn't mean anything. Well, neither one of them had a college education so they weren't professional, in that sense. Otherwise, they were people who got creative jobs. We had a comfortable childhood. We went to both public and private schools. We didn't have what you might call a Depression-era life. Sometimes you get that impression of people's past but in our case it was pretty comfortable.”

Robert recalled his father's work history somewhat differently: “He started off in the Bank of Montreal and I think a friend said, ‘Why don't you try sales?’ He had a very tough time for a while. Then he got a job with Eastman Kodak through the Frank Seaman Advertising Agency, one of the biggest in the world at the time. He made surveys about how to sell cameras and film. So, he went through all kinds of situations: coal mines, steel mills. He had a great deal of this sort of thing in his background. He wasn't a high-type executive in those years, where you sat in an office somewhere. He was a field guy... At the same time, my mother was working for magazines so she had an income. Between the two of them we were in pretty good shape.”

The Marvin family was very keen on keeping up appearances no matter what the finances dictated. Lee's first wife, Betty, knew the family's inner workings and stated, “Well, there was money but there was no wealth. I think of wealth, I think of a lot of money. They lived okay. They lived quite frugally. Monte, you know what he did during the Depression? He went door-to-door selling ‘Book Knowledge’ encyclopedias. People with financial means don't do that door-to-door.”

The family's seesaw finances also meant moving a lot throughout the greater New York area, from Jackson Heights in Queens, to Brooklyn, to Manhattan's Upper West Side. Through it all, an African American nanny named Erlene tended to Robert and Lee. Being from the South, such things were important to Courtenay, but as Betty points out, “Here's a little insight which I think was fascinating. It's like right out of Tennessee Williams or any Southern writer. When they were raised as children in New York City, Courtenay always had a Southern accent, with this little whisper. Monte, Robert and Lee always had such very fine English. Years later, Robert was in the army in a company from Brooklyn. That used to drive Courtenay crazy! His mother used to say, ‘Oh Robert, how could you speak that way?’ She'd go on and on and on about it. His mother was a complete snob. And those two guys, Robert and Lee, never had a chance with that mother.”

Betty also recalled seeing for herself what Courtenay's relationship with Lee was like. "Lee had the most difficult time with his mother," who, she stated, "was a real Virginia Southern lady. Oh, tough as nails. I don't think there was a maternal bone in her body. Erlene, the maid whom they adored, raised both Robert and Lee. Their father was a real doormat to Courtenay. She never let anyone forget for a second about her heritage being of the George Washington strain. She came to New York from Virginia not as a fashion journalist but, well, she wanted to be a journalist. She was always exaggerating what she was. She was really more with Helena Rubenstein. She was more into cosmetics, not clothing. There was that interesting talk about matriarchy. I was the first woman that ever crossed that threshold. Robert never married until after his mother died. Lee, according to himself, really hated her. He would just go crazy when she was around. He would. He kept away from her."

Another reason for Lee's animosity towards his mother arose from the importance she would place on the facade of gracious living, while all around him he could see the effects of the struggling economy. "I always envied the street kids," he said years later. "Even though we went to public schools, we weren't allowed to have orange-crate skateboards or to wear the little stocking hats with the two buttons. We couldn't have them, and so the fights followed. I went to a lot of schools in New York City until I couldn't go anymore."

From Lee's point of view, school was a waste of his time, time he would rather have spent hunting or fishing. When the family first summered in Woodstock, five-year-old Lee discovered his love of fishing by walking off with his father's rod and reel, that is, until the state police found him and brought him back. He later went fishing on Sheepshead Bay but often ended up giving the fish away on the subway. "My parents just didn't know how to deal with fresh game," he explained.

He also loved going to the movies, Errol Flynn's being particular favorites. But the all-time favorite film of the often truant young film fan was the 1931 antiwar classic, *All Quiet On the Western Front*. He claimed it was the second film he ever saw and he never got over it, identifying closely with the tough but fair sergeant who oversaw his young charges.

School was an obvious letdown by comparison. "I didn't like school," he later reasoned. "Everyday was a toss-up whether I'd go or skip." When he did go, the only things that held his interest were history and sports. When it came to grammar, spelling, math and other core curricula, his grades reflected his lack of interest. A teacher's note to his parents on his grade school report card read, "Please see that Lee gets to school on time."

Part of the problem went beyond his rebellious and non-conforming nature. Teachers at that time had no concept of either his Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) nor of his dyslexia. His first wife Betty witnessed it herself, and, when asked if her ex-husband was dyslexic, immediately replied: "Yes, and so was his son Christopher. Again, there was not the proper attention paid to Lee growing up, and I'm not blaming him because it was part of the times, but they were not sophisticated about dyslexia. I think Lee could have done anything if those problems had been worked out. He was a very slow reader. It's too bad because he had such a quest for knowledge. He used to say to me, 'Look at all the books around here.' It used to drive him crazy I was always reading."

Ironically, there were certain subjects and writers that held his interest, such as biographies of native American warrior Osceola, the Civil War and authors Bret Harte, Jack London, Herman Melville and others. "Oh yes, and he would recite Robert Service by heart," recalled Betty. "When he read someone he really loved, he would do that. He loved literature." His ability to memorize passages while struggling with the written word itself aided him greatly with scripts when he became an actor, but frustrated his childhood teachers who were for the most part unaware of this coping device to compensate for his condition. Although dyslexia was recognized by astute and sympathetic educators, it would still

several decades before it would actually be treated in schools.

~~Most of the time however, school proved too frustrating to hold his interest, which resulted~~ another habit that carried over into adulthood: running away. His adventure to Baltimore at the age four was just the beginning. To Betty, Lee's boyhood escapades became a regular part of their marriage. "It was a pattern," she recalled. "I believed that's how we really know people. Lee could say anything, but what he would do, from the time he was a little boy, he would run away. He would hide. While we were married, he wouldn't come home. He would call and say, 'I bet you don't know where I am.' That running away he did when he was at school. He was always truant and disappearing."

By his own admission, Lee stated, "I've never been able to accept any kind of discipline. My father was supposed to be pretty tough, and I rebelled against him by running away from home when I was four years-old. In school I couldn't see any sense to reading, writing, and arithmetic. Sure, they kicked me out, but for trifles like continual daydreaming and smoking that wouldn't be grounds for expulsion nowadays."

His transgressions were an ongoing concern to his family. "I once kicked [radio show host] Uncle Don in the shins at a performance in Jackson Heights," he once admitted sheepishly. Such actions required Monte to step in and, on more than one occasion, it got physical. "My father rarely punched my brother, rarely in any physical sense," rationalized Robert. "I can think of an incident or two when we were little children that he might have given him some verbal heat, which he could do in pretty good fashion. If your father can't do that to you, then what the hell is left?"

Upon further reflection, Robert recalled a particular time when Monte administered more than verbal heat to ten-year-old Lee: "My brother owed some kid some money, five or ten cents. Apparently the kid came up and rang the apartment door. My father got wind of it. My father said, 'Okay, let's go out and straighten it out.' There was a gang of little kids, about eight to ten of them. My father said 'Okay, you're going to take each one of them in a fight,' which Lee did. Of course, he was small. I remember I was awfully upset."

Such unorthodox—and in Robert's opinion, upsetting—discipline did not have the desired lasting effect on Lee. If he felt strongly about something, even at that age, he held his ground no matter the repercussions. The New York City Public School System relented and expelled him, first from P.S. 66 in Queens and then P.S. 69 in Manhattan. Following his expulsion, Lee's parents had no choice but to enroll him in a private school. The first was an experimental school in upstate New York known as Manumit. Robert remembered it as a "Very liberal private boarding school. The kids had their own garden. I think in those days it was probably considered Communist."

Priding itself on its reputation for nurturing a child's individual character, the school was progressive for its day, with group teachers, role-playing classes, and an emphasis on the arts and agriculture. Lee would recall it fondly, stating, "It was an outgrowth of the Little Red Schoolhouse-type of progressive education. When the Spanish Civil War broke out, the instructors defected to fight with the Loyalists. The school was run by Stella Ballantine, a protégé of the old anarchist, Emma Goldman. Stella's husband, E.J. [Ballantine] was a noted Shakespearean actor. They got me into acting and I was always very proud of that relationship." Letters he wrote home at the time told a different story. "I am writing this letter at the point of a gun," he would often start and then conclude with, "The other day I killed a mole and am treating its skin. Some of the girls are ordering moleskin coats."

Teachers were required to write regular summations of each student's progress and make it as positive as possible. The summary for Lee's brief tenure for the Fall/Winter term of 1937 was composed by group teacher William Mann Fincke, and included the following:

*Lee is an exceedingly restless, extroverted, vital thirteen-year-old human male, but the Manumit environment appears to be big enough to take care of his restlessness. There are plenty of trees for him to get to the top of and he can build as many huts as he desires.*

*While Lee has arrived at the age at which he is well aware that girls exist, he has not yet, it seems arrived at the age where this awareness affects [sic] his washing and dressing habits.*

*From Lee's evidence of interest and stock of fairly accurate information, revealed in conversation about history, I am convinced that his difficulties with his history paper lay in his need for mastery of the simple tools of getting down the words.*

*...I have refrained from putting the screws on Lee in academic work pending getting completely next to him. This, I believe, I have gone a long way toward doing.*

*...In summarizing I should end on an optimistic note that Lee and we will be able, given time, to work out a solution of his problems and that his stay at Manumit will be on the whole a pleasant one. Occasionally I have had to speak sharply to him, chiefly to reassure him that there is present a friendly authority that does demand from him certain standards. Lee's attitude either when advised or when sharply corrected is marked by a total absence of vindictiveness and seemingly by a bona fide desire to come through.*

The school's friendly authority was sorely tested during Lee's short stay. He was caught smoking with several female students behind a shack and expelled. What upset him the most was the extra charges the self-proclaimed progressive principal heaped upon him. "We were smoking, that's all," Lee later stated. "But the principal was a dirty-minded man. He kicked me out of school and sent me home with a note for my father. It said I'd been having sexual intercourse with the girls. Hell, I didn't even have hair on my chest."

After the Manumit debacle, his parents tried a less progressive institution. The Oakwood Academy was a Quaker boarding school in Poughkeepsie, New York that Lee attended long enough to leave a indelible mark. In a letter to his brother he boasted, "Today we took four guys' pants down and put some Dr. Elles permanent wave set and mixed it with some scouring powder and poured it all over the wang. [One of them] practically bit my finger off!"

That particular incident remained undiscovered, but another one became one of the most legendary events of the actor's formative years. Waking up late one morning, Lee and his roommate scurried to organize their room in time for inspection. Lee put things away while the roommate swept. "He took the sweepings and dumped them out the window," the actor later recalled. "I said, 'That was a stupid goddamn thing to do. Now we'll have to go down there and clean'em up again.' He called me a son-of-a-bitch, and I said, 'Call me that again and I'll throw you out the window.' He called me it again, and I threw him out the window. So, they kicked me out of school."

The roommate wasn't hurt, but over the years Lee proudly inflated the details of the incident with each retelling, such as the height of the window. Here is Marvin's own take on the repercussions: "They asked me to go home and commune with God and see the injustice of all this shit..."

Since progressive and Quaker did not work out too well, Monte then decided to enroll his son into a military school, the Admiral Farragut Naval Academy in Toms River, New Jersey. Lee was required to wear an expensive uniform and take flak from the retired sixty-one year-old naval officer, which did not sit well with the young rebel. His version was, "My uniform cost eight hundred dollars. I lasted a month. The guy in charge was a rear admiral. He kept pulling rank on us kids. I couldn't stand it. I called him a son-of-a-bitch." Lee was on the train back home in less than two weeks.

Over the years the actor boasted of having been thrown out of fifteen schools and of simply being



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