Tampa's Longest Day

Hampton Dunn
Tampa has just gone through another quadrennial Mayoralty election. This one was a mild, patty-cake affair, compared with many we had back in the pre-World War II days.

The hottest election of 'em all occurred on Tuesday, Sept. 3, 1935, following a turbulent Labor Day weekend and during one of the city's most violent tropical storms.

And a "hot" election in that era meant just that - "hot" votes, fraudulent registrations, stolen ballot boxes, cannon manned by National Guard troops, reckless display of machine guns, sawed-off shotguns and a whole arsenal
of weapons by an army of special City Police and special Sheriff’s deputies.

**Showdown Clash**

This was the showdown clash between two political factions. The two camps were headed by old pros—then incumbent Robert E. Lee Chancey and Ex-Mayor D. B. McKay. There had been a "warmup" contest four years before, and tensions and bad feelings had continued to build up as the battle for power raged onward.

Election Day 1935-44 years ago—brought an eyeball to eyeball confrontation of the City and County adversaries. And it was a day in which there was a display of naked, brute force. All of which gave Tampa a bad name throughout the nation.

It was the infamous day in history when this city hit rock bottom. There was very little good about those "good old days."

Besides the Mayoralty candidates, the two top characters in the day's events were Hillsborough County Sheriff Will C. Spencer and Police Chief R. G. Tittsworth.

**Troops Turned Out**

And Gov. David Sholtz and State Adjutant General Vivian Collins ordered out the National Guard to keep order. Col. Homer W. Hesterly was Commanding Officer of the 116th Field Artillery, with headquarters in Tampa.

(By the way: When it was all over and the smoke of battle had cleared and the winds of the storm had calmed and the National Guard troops went back to being civilians, it was determined that Mayor Chancey had been reelected by a margin of 4,241 votes.

(The mess triggered a cleanup movement by the good citizens of the community.)

Here, for the first time, is published the official narrative of the day's happenings, as recorded by Colonel Hesterly in his report to General Collins. He wrote the report in the same calm, cool and firm way, in which he directed the troops during that crisis. The report was made available to me by today's State Adjutant General, Maj.-Gen. K. C. Bullard, whose headquarters is in St. Augustine. General Bullard is a former Tampan and served as Hillsborough County Tax Collector prior to his appointment to the Florida National Guard's highest position. He's an alumnus of the 16th FA.

**Colonel Hesterly's Report**

On with the story:

HEADQUARTERS
STATE ARSENAL, SAINT AUGUSTINE, FLORIDA.

1. The following report covering the activities of troops called into active state duty by letter of the Adjutant General, Florida, dated September 3, 1935, later confirmed by paragraphs 1 and 2, Special Orders No. 209, AGO. Florida, September 5, 1935, is submitted:

2. Threatened disorders in connection with the municipal election of the city of Tampa caused considerable alarm among citizens and officials, resulting in the sheriff of Hillsborough County calling on the Governor for the assistance of the National Guard. The need for troops was announced by the sheriff several days in advance of the election and the Adjutant General reached Tampa the evening of 31 Aug. '35, to observe the situation and report to the Governor as to the true state of affairs.

3. Threats of disorder, inter-factional strife, fraudulent election practices, ballot box stuffing, stealing and switching; dissatisfaction on the part of many citizens with the activities of the election officials; rumored importation of hundreds of outside gunmen as special officers, and many other more subtle influences portended a trying day for September 3, election day. The Adjutant General conferred with many officials, candidates, and citizens, besides the Governor's office; and, on September 2nd, the order was issued for the mobilization of the Tampa units of the National Guard to be held in readiness at the Armory in Benjamin Field for use in emergency, especially to quell disorders.
4. The Guard was called to aid the "civil authority", and a very interesting and, at times, confusing situation arose in this connection. There appeared to be, (and formal legal opinion of attorneys conflicted on the point), two overlapping bodies in power. The "Election Board" of the City of Tampa is a duly constituted body empowered by a special act of the state legislature to conduct municipal elections and said act attempted to give full power to act, including the policing of the elections. This police power in fact, if not at law, overlaps the power of the sheriff, the superior constitutional officer of the county to enforce the law and maintain order. The election board called on the city police department under the chief of police, to furnish the "police power" of the board. This apparent overlapping of authority to police the polls was the root of the trouble, which resulted in the calling of the Guard. This report takes no part of or interest in the under-lying causes of this condition, nor the other conditions which affected the participation of the Guard in the operations of the day. The remarks immediately following are purely expository and are set forth for the information of the Guard and for its assistance in possible subsequent similar developments. Further, these facts are generally known to the townspeople who are prone to shut their eyes to the conditions, and hence the remarks herein are merely expression of what is common knowledge and not the expression of any partisan party. The Guard must oftentimes step into a situation where the real issue is beclouded by conditions, and this makes its position the most difficult and its activities fraught with greater possibility of subsequent adverse publicity and criticism- oftentimes by the ones it is faithfully undertaking to serve.

6. Be the underlying factors what they may: the election board, armed by the chief of police and his force, augmented by about 1154 special police imported into the city for the day, were interested in seeing that the conduct of the election was in accordance with the dictates of the election board, and they were obviously supporting one group of candidates. The sheriff's department, on the other hand, with an estimated five hundred special deputies likewise deputized for the day, was supporting the other interests, and hence was opposed to the city police force. Ostensibly, the sheriff’s men were to prevent irregularities in the election, which, it was claimed, the underlings of the election officials were interested in perpetrating in favor of their candidate. This appeared to be essentially the situation, and this is the problem the Guard confronted. Doubtless affidavits in any number could be secured, defending both sides. However, conflicting the factors, the Guard had its work cut out for it.

7. So the order read "called out in aid of the civil authority": this is, of course, the sheriff. The sheriff’s office was accusing the election officials of every degree and brand of irregularity and undertook to take steps to stop or prevent these irregularities. The Guard was called on to perform many duties which are not within the province of the Guard under existing orders; and careful consideration of the many and varied demands made on the military, was given, to determine just how far the force of the State could be utilized. Generally the Guard furnished the force while the sheriff’s deputies armed with warrants made arrests under the muzzles of the rifles and pistols of the military. The Guard declined to make arrests, take or hold prisoners, enter polling places, handle election paraphernalia, to vote in uniform, to police polling places (the duty of the election officials), or, of
course, to take orders from any but proper military sources or from the sheriff direct. It is interesting to note that throughout the day a constant stream of demands, some right fantastic, came pouring into military headquarters, compliance with which would have been impossible in some cases, and in others would have been entirely unsound from a tactical standpoint and which would have reduced the effectiveness of the armed forces to the vanishing point.

8. The Adjutant General issued general instructions while the details of operation were, properly, left entirely up to the troops commander, and it can be stated that the troops commander received the fullest support from the Adjutant General.

9. It is obvious from the foregoing that the military establishment were confronted with a very unusual situation. There was no mob, no rioting body, no threatened invasion, no anarchistic demonstration. Strange as it may seem, the National Guard found itself supporting one political body against another, both ostensibly properly constituted and duly empowered each to perform the same job, but on opposite sides of the political fence. Its job included preserving order, and this involved protecting the public from irresponsibles enlisted in either or both factions; it involved supporting the sheriff in making raids on establishments where persons were on whom warrants for arrest had been issued; and this included a number of precincts where the precinct officials at the tables were put under arrest. In some instances, petty officials of the city were involved. On top of that, the military found later in the day that it would have to decline to assist in certain operations which, it was felt, fell without the jurisdiction of National Guard activity under its general instruction.

10. It became apparent that there was a very conflicting situation. It should be stated that the actual conduct of the election was in no sense within the scope of the military operations. What went on around the polls under authority of the election board and their properly appointed officials, was not the business of the Guard, and only when called on by the sheriff to support his men in some operation, raid, or arrest, did the Guard take a hand itself. Many false rumors about guardsmen "taking ballot boxes" and "entering polling places with machine guns", etc., were circulated. Orders on this class of activities were clearcut and definite and well observed.

OPERATIONS.

11. The tactical employment of troops can be definitely classified in several phases as the day developed:

1. Day before election. Mobilization at 8:30 P.M. 2 Sept. '35.
2. Prior to 9:00 A.M. Command held in readiness at Armory 3 Sept. '35.
3. 9:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M. Reconnaissance and patrols. 3 Sept. '35.
4. 2:00 P.M. 3 Sept. to 2:30 A.M. 4 Sept. '35.
   a. Strategical dispositions of force and
   b. Support of sheriff's deputies in raids and arrests.

MOBILIZATION.

12. The order for mobilization was broadcast from Station WDAE at 6:00 P.M. and repeated at subsequent times. The customary telephone system of spreading word was used
as well. By 8:30, the hour of mobilization, approximately 60 percent of the command was on the field in uniform. By midnight approximately 90 percent were present for duty. The strength for duty on September 3, election day, for the post was as follows:

### Strength Report, September 3, 1935

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### ELECTION DAY OPERATIONS

13. An intelligence section in civilian clothes began operation as soon as the order for mobilization was given, and continued to gather information and report it to the troops commander until the troops were dismissed. Prior to 9:00 A.M. Force in readiness:

a. Contrary to the special formations planned for regular riot duty the batteries were held intact, and were formed into squads within the battery in accordance with the riot duty formations, consisting of:
   - Rifle squad,
   - Strong arm squad,
   - Machine gun squad (1 section)
   each in command of an officer, the captain commanding.

b. Gas detail from all batteries armed with special equipment from state arsenal, was assembled into on gas squad under a lieutenant. This detail was held at the Armory throughout the day ready for emergency service in any part of the city.

c. Equipment consisted of three gas guns with gas shells, gas grenades, gas masks, pistols.

d. Regimental staff formed into observation patrols ready to move out on reconnaissance as soon as need for troops should be in prospect. The order "in readiness" required holding troops at the Armory.

e. One officer, properly selected for coolheadedness and understanding of law, was placed in the sheriff's office as coordinator between the sheriff's office and troops headquarters with special duties of securing from the sheriff his instructions; and, for the protection of the Guard, he secured, when deemed advisable, signed orders covering the demands of the sheriff.

14. 9:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M., September 3:

During the forenoon and through noon, and after the order to take active part in the support of the sheriff was received, the dispositions were made with a view of establishing contact patrols of negligible force and of officers of sufficient experience to prevent unwarranted, alarming reports and preclude too hasty action in participating in the anticipated disturbance. The regimental executive was assigned a portion of the city, the regimental plans and training officer a portion, and the battalion commander with a small force was dispatched to certain critical points, such as particularly unruly precincts. These patrols reported by phone at thirty minute intervals, giving Headquarters and the Regimental Commander a clear picture of the situation and the sentiment as the election wore on.

This set-up afforded several important accomplishments:

a. Regimental Headquarters was constantly advised of the situation
throughout the city as every polling place was covered.
b. The presence of officers at the precincts, in succession, had a very quieting effect. It did not stop the irregularities of the election organizations but it dampened the ardor of the irregulars, some of whom were underworld characters and ex-lawbreakers under arms on both sides.
c. It afforded an excellent opportunity to develop clearly a plan of action when the troops were compelled to take more definite action.

16. During this period, the sheriff made no particular demands calling for participation of the troops in any workable tactical plan. He did insist on having the troops parcelled out by details to each precinct, 29 of them-"to stop repeating and prevent officials from stuffing ballot boxes" and perform the duties of deputies. This the commanding officer steadfastly declined to do. The correctness of his decision in denying this subdivision of his force was justified in tactics, and particularly, in subsequent developments. It is felt important to stress the insistence which the sheriff used in demanding this division of force, and the responsibility the commanding officer necessarily took upon himself in declining the request of his proper source of orders, the sheriff. The commander of troops necessarily assumes that responsibility; he takes the position that the sheriff could request him to support the deputies, but the method to be used is for the troops commander to decide.

The troops participating in this phase was important, though not conspicuous.

17. 2:00 P.M., September 3 to 12:30 A.M., September 4: During the afternoon and night, the principal activities of the troops took place. As a matter of fact, the entire force, except a small reserve, was out about the city throughout the afternoon and right through the worst of the hurricane. The operations in general consisted in:

a. Strategical and tactical dispositions.
b. Active support of raids and arrests by sheriff's deputies.
c. Guarding of polling places to prevent disorders and irregularities such as stealing, or switching, of ballot boxes.
It is notable that support was given the sheriff in effecting several raids in which warrants for the arrest of the precinct officials were served and the officials removed from the polling place; in three instances the deputies took the ballot boxes also as evidence. The election officials complained bitterly about the removal of the ballot boxes and in subsequent raids the troops were compelled to prevent the sheriff from taking the ballot boxes without a court order, which, after investigation, was decided by legal counsel to be necessary before the Guard could properly assist the sheriff in such an act. One of the most critical situations of the day occurred at one precinct where the deputies demanded the box as well as the arrest of the officials, and when it was refused, a very tense situation arose, near midnight, into which the Guard stepped to very good effect; the deputies got their officials and the election board retained their ballot box.

18. In any of the raids pulled resulting in the arrest of the officials, the Guard took no active part in the service of the warrants leaving that entirely for the deputies to do. The troops did not enter a polling place, take any prisoners, or interfere in any way with the legal procedure of the election. Without exception, they merely supplied the display of force under which the deputies performed their duties.

19. The manner of performing the raids was conventional. The troops would move into position surrounding the object of the raid; machine guns mounted on antiaircraft tripods were set up in trucks and were stationed at strategic points covering the windows and openings of the establishment. Foot troops, armed with rifle and bayonet and pistol and riot sticks, accompanied the deputies as closely as deemed necessary, to give them ample and certain protection. The deputies entered the places and made the arrests, after which the troops commander might detail an armed convoy to accompany the deputies and prisoners to the jail. The machine guns on antiaircraft tripods are not particularly well adapted to this service, in so far as the security of the gun squad is concerned, as snipers could very easily cripple the crew. The moral effect, however, was most excellent. The ability to sweep the surrounding area with fire in all directions, to cover windows and rooftops against snipers and too, the very daring of so mounting the guns, had a very salutary effect.

All raids involving arrests were conducted in essentially this manner.

20. The gas detachment was held at the armory in reserve for an emergency where it might be necessary to empty a building or break up a concerted disturbance between the henchmen of the two hostile factions. In the disturbance at midnight, above referred to, it appeared for some time as if the troops would have to force an entrance to the polling place, to assist the deputies in making arrests. In this case the gas detail was dispatched there to neutralize the force of some hundred-odd special police housed in the polling place for the purpose of repelling the attack of the deputies. Strict orders had been issued by the chief of police to allow no one to take the ballot box at any cost. The Guard succeeded in gaining the arrest of officials by the deputies, and at the same time preserved the box for the police, not having any authority from the court to take the box.

21. At about three o'clock in the afternoon of September 3, it had become evident there would be armed participation by the majority of the troops. This was
particularly true in light of the fact that we were to aid the sheriff in his raids and arrests. It was impossible to foretell what the reaction among the large force of special police might be. Hence it was decided to make a strategic move and threaten the "centers" of greatest tension and irregularity. These were on opposite sides of the city but on the same through street and scarcely more than a mile apart. However, it made a very nice disposition, together with the other battery being used in a succession of raids. A battery was detailed to each of these points with orders to make a show of force in the vicinity of these particular polling places; to report to the principal deputy on duty, assist him in any reasonable demands, locate immediately a telephone and contact troops headquarters, leaving on duty two men at the phone, and await developments and orders.

22. It developed that the presence of these two forces so advantageously disposed, also had a very dampening effect on the irregulars of the police department, and tended to calm the situation over a wide territory.

23. Threats of impending clashes in other sections and at troublesome precincts caused a further disposition of force to cover closely a wide territory. The two battery commanders were directed to dispatch a fourth of their batteries to two additional precincts, each in command of an officer with instructions to immediately report to headquarters by phone, establishing contact and detailing two men to remain at the phone (telephone men and, of course, a messenger); to report to the principal deputy and assist him in any reasonable mission, and keep in close telephone contact with his battery commander.

24. We now had these several units in the field in close communication:
   a. One battery assisting deputies in a succession of raids.
   b. Two batteries, less detachments, covering "centers" of unrest.
   c. Four platoon detachments stationed at as many precincts and in close communication with their battery commanders.
   d. Roving officer patrol observing and reporting on the territory not otherwise covered.
   e. A reserve and a gas squad at the Armory.
   f. Command post and message center at Headquarters (Armory).
   g. Liaison officer in the sheriff’s office.
   h. The Adjutant General at his hotel in touch with the State and leaders of both factions, with the press and public.

An organization chart as in force, is appended showing the dispositions and chain of command during the afternoon’s activities.

25. A most notable feature is the extreme mobility of the command with the trucks. The batteries used their own equipment, which was ample. The patrolling was done in headquarters station wagons. No effort was made to be secretive and boldness was the custom. In a very few minutes' time, a battery could be dispatched from one precinct to another and, while the officer in command was perfecting dispositions, a detail was contacting headquarters and a new phone number was noted on the diagrams at headquarters. It was understood that instantly a phone went out another would be resorted to. In this manner, a comparatively small force covered a wide territory to the discomfiture, it is safe to say, of the irregulars
who were causing such disturbance as went on.

26. During the tour of duty a complete message center was in operation at the Armory. With our own equipment the phone from the boxing arena was run into the headquarters; the instrument from the officer’s club was cut in on the regular phone as an extension; and the interphone system on the post made contact with the outside phone from Regimental Headquarters. The operations of the day were conducted in an improvised office on the ground floor where there was ample space for the organization to operate without disturbing the regular headquarters of the post. The message center made a record of all incoming and outgoing messages, particularly orders directing troop movements, and a chart was kept showing the precinct number, detachment, officer in command, and telephone number at all times. This was, of course, changed as the day wore on and orders were issued moving forces.

27. A map of the city was placed on a plane table and pins with appropriate tickets showed the dispositions at a glance.

One command telephone line was restricted to the use of the Executive in receiving orders from the sheriff’s office and in issuing orders and contacting the moving forces. This line had an extension from the message center with an instrument on the Executive’s desk so that he could hear all incoming messages and so the Sergeant Major could get without loss of time, outgoing messages and record them in the diary.

28. During the hours when it was in operation in the heat of the activity of the afternoon and early evening, the organization worked to perfection; and one would have thought it had been in operation indefinitely. Late in the day, however, the telephones began to fail, and in the midst of the storm the operations were transferred to Post Headquarters where a phone was still in operation. Fortunately, this phone held on until 11:00 P.M. where all phone communication went on. The midnight operation above noted was handled through couriers.

29. Coupled with the high mobility, the morale and spirit of the men was superb. Not only was the attendance phenomenal, but the willingness of the command, officer and man alike, to fare forth on this most uncomfortable mission, facing criticism and discomfort as well as the unabated fury of the tropical hurricane, not to mention some hazard before hundreds of unorganized and undisciplined gunmen was a display that the Florida National Guard may well be proud of and upon which the State of Florida may rest with full assurance of unquestioned and unflinching service from her soldiers, in any emergency.

30. It is noteworthy that, after the troops took active part in the operations of the day, not a report of disturbance was recorded. Credit must be given in this for the advent of the terrific storm, which very effectively cooled the ardor of the participants which, otherwise, might have led to hilarity and trouble; and for the fact that special police officers had been instructed that the orders of the military force were supreme.

31. Although there has been criticism from all sides, it seems to be generally conceded that the National Guard acquitted itself with distinction. To use the words of Governor Sholtz to the troop commander: "You men did a good job, you kept your feet on the ground, I am proud of your regiment".

(Signed) HOMER W. HESTERLY
Homer W. Hesterly,
Colonel, 116th Field Artillery,
Commanding.

A TRUE COPY

VIVIAN COLLINS, The Adjutant General, Florida.