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You Gotta Go to School for That?

Beau Geste at the Reference Desk

by Jerry Seay (College of Charleston) <seayt@cofc.edu>

In a world short of good human beings, many library reference departments have used creative ways to fulfill the ever-growing need for warm bodies at reference service points. This void is especially striking during the height of the semester when papers are due, the reference desk is swamped, and procrastinating students abound.

Certainly there are those libraries who hire students, part timers, and even striking UPS employees to fill this void. Our reference department, however, has developed our own special in-house system to deal with this crisis in people power. We are assisted on the reference desk by what we affectionately call "volunteers." Actually these "volunteers" are poor technical services librarians and other assorted library staff members who have been informed by High Command that part of their duty (the 5% of miscellaneous duties on all job descriptions) is to serve the public by "volunteering" at least one hour a week on the reference desk. With a sense of duty and honor these volunteer troops venture into the world of the reference desk with not a little bit of intense apprehension.

Their apprehension is well founded. After many days and weeks of being besieged at the desk by desperate students, even the old salts on the reference staff tend to develop a siege mentality. For the beleaguered volunteers at the reference desk, the experience can be positively harrowing, not unlike one's first taste of combat.

Recently, after a slight respite during such a siege, a certain Margot, a recent volunteer to our elite ranks, expressed the feelings of many a reference desk staffer when she observed a fresh mob of students making their way toward the reference desk.

"Oh my god," she said in a hushed voice. "Here they come again."

When I heard this (inasmuch as I was standing beside her myself awaiting the onslaught) a vivid thought came to me. The book stacks around me dissolved into desert sand dunes and the reference desk became a stone fortress. I was Gary Cooper in *Beau Geste* and my comrades and I were French Foreign Legionnaires, outnumbered and low on supplies, as the Berber hordes swarmed toward us in countless waves.

"They really mean business this time," said a low voice behind me. It was Bill Finley. Bill, a crusty librarian of many a reference campaign, was no stranger to this kind of madness. Taking the sight of thousands of screaming patrons approaching his position in stride Bill just sighed. "Hope I see you folks on the other side of this one," he said simply. "I'll cover you from here."

He then took up a position on the wall behind Margot and me.

"What do we do now?" Margot gasped at me. The roar of approaching patrons was becoming deafening now as they advanced, beating on their book bags.

I just stared into the approaching masses. I had seen this tragic ritual unfold all too often before. These were not just regular patrons. No. These were the infamous *procrastinator students*. They rarely came within sight of the library, much less the reference desk. But, at least once a semester, during the height of paper season, they gathered by the thousands at the library hoping, perhaps by osmosis, to absorb the knowledge they needed to write their papers. As the due date for their papers got ever closer the procrastinators became more and more restless. It started out as scattered raids on individual librarians on patrol in the stacks. But, it eventually built up to full-fledged assaults on the reference desk itself. Now, as the due date for their papers came within 24 hours, their fury had reached a crescendo pitch. All hell was about to break loose.

"Margot," I stammered, "take up a defensive position on the north wall. I'll try to hold them off here. If we can hold out till the next shift change we may have a chance!"

"How do I hold them off?" Margot yelled.

The students were coming into range, a horde of locusts about to engulf us. "Chose your target carefully," I said. "When a question comes at you, just give the best answer you can. Aim high, and don't linger. Good luck!"

The first wave hit our ramparts like a crashing freight train. In a confused, loud chorus the questions flew. "Can I have some criticism on Dickens? How do I use Westlaw? I need to find something on the Internet. Ya'll don't have anything on Mark Twain? How come all the books on World War II are gone? Why is it so hot in here? How do I cite anything? Do you know where Katina Strauch is hiding? What was the gross national product of Lithuania in 1938?"

We returned with volley fire answer after answer. Still they came on, swarming around the desk and cutting us off from any possible escape.

"Looks like we're surrounded," yelled Bill over the din after quickly dispatching a patron with a particularly gruesome thesis question. Ironically Bill was not scheduled for the desk for this hour. He had just stopped by to check his schedule when the onslaught came. Now he was trapped here like a rat like the rest of us. I briefly pondered the irony of life before the sound of patrons clamoring over the walls brought my atten-

tion back to grim reality.

A student was in my face asking about poetry criticism. I shot her a clean answer about indexes. She fell away from the desk. Two more patrons took her place. Too close for an off-the-cuff answer, I had to deal with them hand to hand. I grabbed a thesaurus and a dictionary in each hand and thrust it toward them. They reeled back from the desk, stunned by the rapidity in which their information needs had been met.

I glanced up at Margot as she helplessly fell back from her position. Three students had asked her three difficult questions in succession and she had run out of answers. Weary and out of ammo, she was retreating.

Only quick thinking I knew could save the day and plug the gap. If patrons broke through here, we were finished.

"Charles Main," the student kept shrieking. "I can't find anything written about Charles Main! My professor says that there are lots of stuff on him. But, there is absolutely nothing about him in this whole library?"

I stepped forward to confront the advancing student. Digging deep into my reference interview skills pouch, I reloaded and fixed bayonet. "What *exactly* did your professor say about him?"

Exasperated by my apparent inability to answer him right off, the student shot back, "Oh I don't know. It's just that she keeps referring to him by his nickname. She keeps calling him Charlie."

I stepped into the gap. "Charlie?" I asked. "Charlie Main?" Then suddenly in the midst of the surging patrons, deafening din, and swirling smoke the answer came to me as clear as the polished finish on a shiny new book truck. I took careful aim at the student and fired. "*Charlemagne*," I said. "You mean *Charlemagne*!"

"Oh," said the student sheepishly. "I guess so."

Direct hit. I then proceeded to finish off this student with a short explanation of the online catalog. He and his cohorts fell back from the desk in disarray but better informed. Having been reprieved for a few minutes, Margot came forward and retook her position on the wall. The gap was plugged.

For the rest of that hour the battle raged. Wave after wave of desperate questions was met with the determined fire of answers from the reference desk. At times, low on ammo, we covered ourselves with the only answer we had: "Say, have you tried the *County Library*?" Finally, as if in answer to the prayers of the beleaguered desk defenders, the questions subsided and the patrons

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Cecily Johns of the University of California, Santa Barbara, talked about using vendor-provided MARC records in a "fastcat" operation. The **Fastcat** unit in Acquisitions handles **Blackwell's** "MARC with books" service for a 90% match for their domestic approval books. The vendor supplies fully upgraded MARC records and an additional table of contents service — thus cataloging and processing of these titles is completed in Acquisitions, at the point of receipt. UCSB also loads **MARCIVE** records for documents.

According to Johns, advantages of this service are as follows:

- the goals are met, in that books get to the shelves faster, the records include more complete bibliographic information, books with full copy are handled by staff at lower levels, and there has been a considerable reduction of steps needed in the process;
- processing has been streamlined in Ac-

quisitions with the addition of the **Fastcat** unit;

- upgrading of CIP has been eliminated, with the savings of one FTE staff position;
- the process has been speeded up by about two months; and
- the quality of cataloging records has not suffered.

Disadvantages can be perceived in the following areas:

- a delay of about one week does occur in receipt of the approval books;
- some duplication does occur (about 0.5%);
- some spine labels are incorrect;
- initial staff resistance to the plan, which has diminished by now;
- some training and coordination issues have surfaced which caused a redesign of the workflow.

Last, **Karen Wilhoit**, of **Wright State University** fame spoke of the current situation at her institution, two years after they outsourced all cataloging in 1995. After

eliminating the whole Catalog department, they contracted with **OCLC TechPro** for original cataloging, including item creation, with **PromptCat** for their **Yankee** approval program, and with **Autographics** for their government documents MARC records. Prior to outsourcing, they had estimated their in-house cataloging costs at about \$17 per title, versus about \$5 per title with TechPro.

Wilhoit mentioned that all this resulted in enormous savings in staff costs and in much more streamlined processing, which gets books to the stacks within a week and the bibliographic records in the catalog at the same time. Thus Technical Services at Wright State is moving to PromptCat for most of their receipts, while fine-tuning their TechPro contract. Wilhoit saw no problems with the quality of incoming records, 65% of which are DLC and 25% member copy. The disadvantages she mentioned had to do with the drastic staffing cuts which left her department with little flexibility to deal with new developments, and/or special projects.

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ceased their assault on our bastion of knowledge. We were exhausted. But we had survived.

I shook my head and looked around. The endless miles of sand and dunes reformed into book shelves and carpet. The stone fortress became the paper-cluttered wooden reference desk. I noticed that Bill was looking at me funny.

"Are you all right," he said cautiously. "You look a bit glassy eyed."

I rubbed my eyes and peered into the stacks. "Yea, I'll make it. Just thinking that it's quiet out there ... too quiet."

"Huh?" said Bill.

"Oh, nothing. Just thinking."

Bill scratched his head. "Well, better you than me. I'm not on the desk today. I just came here to check my schedule and ..."

"Oh my god," said Margot.

"What?" blurted Bill and I as we turned to the now bloodied "volunteer."

Margot had a pained look in her eyes as she stared out across the library. "Oh my god," she said slowly. "Here they come again."

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and identified my favorites. I invite you to send me <ferguson@columbia.edu> your suggestions on any other alternatives that occur to you, or ideas on which of the listed alternatives you think should be adopted. I will collect them and feature them in a future column. I fear that unless we develop more innovative solutions to the STM journal pricing problem, we will have a lot in common with the frog in the warming water. By the time we discover it isn't a Jacuzzi tub, it will be too late.

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