

CUTTHROATS

ROBERT C. DICK



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CUTTHROATS

THE ADVENTURES OF A
SHERMAN TANK DRIVER
IN THE PACIFIC

Robert C. Dick



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This book is dedicated to all who fought the good fight
and won it.

It is also dedicated to those on the home front who
supported us in every possible way . . . who worked,
who waited, and prayed for our safe return.
Our victory was theirs, too.

There is nothing quite so exhilarating as being shot at and missed.

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

I've been shot at and missed. And I've been shot at and hit. Of the two, I much prefer the former over the latter.

—ANON.

Acknowledgments

There are so many people who have helped me in the writing of this book that I wonder how in this world I'll be able to list them all. Their assistance, suggestions, and expertise, and in many cases simply their friendship, has made the difference. This book is much better than it might have been without them.

In no particular order, here are a few.

My former crew members, who include Henry Fisher, assistant driver/bow gunner (and one-time fearless jungle fighter); Roy Greenup, loader; Jim Anderson, gunner; and O. W. French, my tank commander of #60. Others not in tank #60 include Eldon "Couch" Davenport, another fearless jungle fighter, tank #58. Tank #55 Commander Edward Metz (who calls me his "crazy hero," I don't know why). Ed was the single most "calming effect" I ran across during those hectic days. Officers I must mention are Ross Garner, A. A. Todd, and Carl Schluter. Also high on my list is my former infantry platoon leader Pat Phillips. These men stand out in my memory not only for their leadership, but for their concern for their men.

Don Dencker, historian of the 96th Infantry Division (the "Deadeyes"), and author of the great book *Love Company*, a narrative account of his World War II experiences as an infantryman in L Company 382nd regiment, helped me in more than one instance. We agree that our paths must have crossed many times during our tank/infantry assaults on Leyte and Okinawa. Our mutual admiration continues to this day.

Comrades who I served with but who have passed on are just too numerous to list here, but are with me still.

Luck was with me the day I was browsing the Internet and came across a mailing list of Sherman tank aficionados. The list name is G104 and is managed by Hanno Spoelstra of the Netherlands. Hanno is the guiding light of our group, which has members worldwide. A few of them are: Ken Hall, of Hall Graphics in London, Ray Merriman, and Russ Morgan (who has promised me he'd let me drive his M5 if I ever get down to his neck of the woods). And especially Geoff Winnington-Ball, Captain Canadian Armor UP who has helped more than he realizes, I'm sure. Geoff is one of those guys who so filled with enthusiasm he sort of picks you up and carries you along. His push in the early stages of my writing, when I hit a snag once in a while, always got me rolling again. Thank you, Geoff.

I can't leave this list without telling you about Joe DeMarco, of Baltimore, Maryland. Joe has helped me in so many different ways I am tempted to list him as coauthor. I stand amazed thinking back on his research in the National Archives, which has turned up facts and figures about facets of my old outfit. He has been researching World War II manufacturers of Shermans, and has verified his huge listing with individual serial numbers. His expertise is often sought by members of our G104 group. Another of Joe's pursuits is locating existing Shermans, especially those in the United States. Whenever I came across some sort of puzzling Sherman technicality, or perhaps something I couldn't find words or phrases to describe, Joe always came through. In the process we became great friends.

and I treasure our association more than words can describe. The term *right-hand man* is applied 100 percent to Joe. Thank you, buddy.

Ron Doering, my editor and good friend. He held my hand throughout the process of what he calls “making a good book better.” His comments, suggestions, and requests were all right on. I can honestly say that every e-mail he sent to me, over the months we worked on the manuscript, was on the mark and in most cases made a significant difference. A simple “thank you” falls far short of saying what I want to, but . . . thank you, Ron. Truly, I couldn’t have done it without you.

Fleetwood Robbins, Ron’s sidekick, made the difference in almost every page of the manuscript. Not only because of his keen eye when it came to “helping” my terrible grammar, but because his suggestions were often responsible for finding just the right word or phrase.

My final, but certainly not least, acknowledgment is to my dear wife, Linda May. She was and is my jewel. Her initial encouragement to write this book started with a simple “Why don’t you write some of these things down?” to the point where I felt that if I didn’t write, she’d kill me. That’s not really true . . . but close. In more ways than I can say, Linda inspired me to write. She was always ready to listen, read, and criticize where it was needed. My wife, best girl, best friend, she’s been my reason for everything. Including this book.

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Author's Note

The reader might wonder how I was able to recall, in such detail, events that took place almost six years ago. When those events concerned my very existence, the impression that registered in my memory was there for keeps. As long ago as it all was, I found it was easy to recall. Exact words are sometimes difficult to remember, but I must say that in almost every instance, I remember vividly what was said, who said it, and what was going on at the time. We were, don't forget, experiencing combat for the first time, and I challenge anyone to talk with a World War II combat vet and not come away with that same feeling, the marvel of detailed memory of events.

That is, if they do talk about it at all, and a lot of them won't. If you have relatives or friends who are vets, please encourage them to talk with you about what happened to them, and what occurred around them. We are living history, and time is almost at an end for those of us who are still around.

The transition from civilian life to full-time soldiering was not the abrupt and oftentimes unbelievable change that most inductees underwent. Because of my National Guard service, I had close to three years training with an infantry outfit that was run strictly by the book. By the time our unit was mobilized into federal service, we were already prepared for military life. This is not to say that we were better soldiers. We just had a toe in the water before they did, and it was not long before we were all in the same pond together, doing what we could to stay afloat.

Looking back, it is an absolute wonder to me that any of us in my tank survived the vicious fighting on Okinawa. The enemy we faced was prepared to fight to the end, and did so. The cost in human life to both sides, was unbelievable. During the (approximately) eighty-three days of fighting experienced, more than twelve thousand American fighting men were killed, which includes army, navy, Marines, and air force. Within that same period, over 110,000 Japanese soldiers, sailors, and airmen were killed.

This book tells only about my personal experiences and, I am certain, relates to events that were common to most of my fellow tankers. I remember a conversation between a couple of the guys about those wonderful Sherman tanks of ours: "One thing about it, these things have a lot of armor between us and 'them.'" His buddy's reply echoed all of our thoughts on the matter. "Yeah, there's lotsa armor all right, but they are such hellish big-ass targets!" And they were. I think that every weapon the Japanese had was, at one time or another, used against our tanks. In one instance a Japanese officer using his sword, tried to hack off a machine gun barrel, but of course failed. We were constantly under fire by everything from satchel charges and mortars to 47mm antitank guns and heavy artillery. To say nothing of land mines. On several occasions, aerial bombs were buried with the detonators covered by mud and leaves.

I saw what real heroes are. There can never be enough said about the courage of the American soldier. And that's especially true of the infantryman. It was an honor to support those men of the 96th "Deadeye" Infantry Division in combat, and I salute them.

A word now about the Japanese soldiers we fought against on Okinawa. They were courageous

fighters and they must have been aware that their situation was hopeless. But they made us pay for every inch of ground we took. Their weapons were, for the most part, inferior to ours (their 47mm antitank gun was an exception), and they did not have replacement troops to fill depleted ranks. They used every trick in the book and came up short in all of them but one, courage. To see a lone Japanese soldier carrying a mine and running toward a 30-ton Sherman tank removes any doubt one might have about their bravery.

I worked on this book for over a year, but that space of time was devoted mostly to typing and revising. The raw content has been floating around inside my old memory ever since the events you read about here first occurred. I have honestly tried to bring you into my world, and for the most part I think I've been able to do that. The things, dear reader, that are not here for you to experience are the smells, the smell of dead humans—bloated, maggot-filled corpses. The stench of sulfur from our guns, the sharp concussion when high explosives landed nearby. And, finally, the gut-wrenching apprehension, the anxiety that lies in the pit of your stomach so long that it becomes a normal feeling one you carry with you as you would a hidden birthmark. No one sees it, but we all know it and no one talks about it. The wonder of it all is that we continued to function as we had been trained to do. We followed orders, and even though we sometimes wondered about their logic, we did the best we could. Before Leyte, none of us had heard a gun fired in anger, nor had we fired one. Okinawa was our proving ground. As that old saying goes, “I wouldn't want to have to do it all over again . . . but I'm glad now that I was there.”

—Robert C. Dick
Southern Oregon

Prologue

This story is about me and how I got involved in the World War II military mix that took me by the hand and pulled me kicking and screaming from late 1938 through September 1945. I suppose that the single most important thing I learned was just how totally, completely frightened a person can get and still function. And not have a heart attack in the process!

Looking back to those years, I am amused at the brashness of my youth. Barely seventeen years old, standing six-foot-two and a skinny 155 pounds, with brown hair combed in no particular direction, a style, mussed up beyond help, coupled with ordinary blue eyes, I must have looked like just about every other tall, skinny teenage kid in Southern California. It's a wonder the personnel officer would even consider signing me up.

But he did, and there I was, in my innocence, looking for adventure, and, as you'll see, finding it by the bucketful . . . in surplus lots . . . and more.

I enlisted in K Company, 160th Regiment, of the 40th Infantry Division, California National Guard on October 10, 1938. The minimum age for enlistees at that time was eighteen, but because of my height I probably looked a bit older than I was and had no problems convincing anyone that, at seventeen, I was fully qualified recruit material, a "mature man" of eighteen. Ahem.

In my enthusiasm, I managed to talk my best friend, Joe Mason, into enlisting with me. We were students at El Monte High School at the time, and we'd been involved in all the usual adventures of teenage guys of that period. We both were on the high school wrestling team, and while I did so-so, Joe managed to shine. He was around five-foot-ten, built like a fireplug, with brown hair, brown eyes, and a fairly heavy beard, for a high schooler. His mustache was a thing of envy for the rest of us. And he was a genuinely nice guy.

When we enlisted in the California National Guard, we managed to stay together in the same squad. Matter of fact, we stayed together until I left the outfit. But that didn't happen for a while down the road. We joined the infantry, mainly because we were told that we'd be taught to fire a rifle and handle what we aimed at. And, I thought the uniforms were great. I learned also that we would get paid for attending the weekly drills at the armory at Exposition Park, in southeast Los Angeles. To make matters even better, there was a summer tour at Camp Merriam near San Luis Obispo.

During one of our summer training sessions, 1940 I think it was, we were ordered to Washington State for two weeks. We were told that these maneuvers would test our units as well as those of the Regular Army troops stationed at Fort Lewis, Washington. We were to be the offensive forces, with the Regular Army defending. Referees were attached to both sides, and the whole exercise, we were told, was to ascertain our degree of combat readiness. Or lack thereof.

The exercise started at midnight, and we took off on foot from Centralia, Washington, headed for the army. As luck would have it, it rained. Not only that night, but every day and night of the entire exercise! I was a platoon sergeant by then, and one night the CO requested that I send a sma

reconnaissance patrol out to see just exactly where the “enemy” was in our area, judge its strength and all those good things. I told him that I’d take the patrol myself and would limit its size to a four man unit. I left Sergeant Mason in charge, collected three of my men, briefed them as to the mission and we took off in the dead of night. And, yes, it was still raining. Hard.

We had gone through the woods for about half an hour when my scout signaled for us to stop and motioned me to come on up front. When I got there I saw the problem . . . a narrow stream, maybe fifteen feet wide, was in our path, and the water was flowing very fast. So much so, I was reluctant to try crossing it. We weren’t sure of the area, and I had no idea how far we might have to go to find a bridge. If we did find one, the chances of it being unguarded were fairly remote.

So, I decided to give it a try. We had only our personal weapons, having left packs and even helmets at the rear. I dropped back and informed the patrol that I would try the crossing, and if all went well we could get the rest of them across. One of the men told me he couldn’t swim. I told him that the water was rushing too fast to even consider swimming. If I couldn’t get across, we’d have to figure out something else.

With my patrol huddled near the bank, watching me, I held my rifle away from my body in case I was knocked down by the current and took a small, tentative step into the stream. As soon as I did, I wanted to turn around, walk past the patrol, and return to my platoon. And, never, ever talk about the situation again.

What I found when I made that first step was that this wasn’t a stream. It was a small, narrow backcountry asphalt road! The water rushing down it, at a hundred miles an hour it seemed, was only two or three inches deep! I took another step and was certain that, from the patrol’s vantage point, I probably looked like I was, at last, walking on water! I had spent months trying to convince them that I was entirely capable of that, and now they had proof! Somewhat sheepishly, I returned and told them what the dreaded “river” really was. We all got a laugh out of it, and I made sure that they all understood that I had been ready to face the unknown danger, alone, on this “dark and stormy night.” Most important, I also swore them to secrecy.

We finished our patrol and I reported to the captain back at the bivouac area. We had discovered an artillery outfit up ahead, and I gave him an estimate of the situation. Later I realized I had neglected to mention our river crossing. Ah, well, some things are best forgotten.

It was an interesting two weeks and, according to the referees, we, the offensive forces, had won the war. Not bad for a bunch of National Guardsmen.

Our division was mobilized into federal service on March 3, 1941, and we were informed that the length of this “emergency period” would be for six months. However, my three-year enlistment was coming to an end in October, so I decided to leave the army then and join the Royal Canadian Air Force as the Canadians were at war, and at this point the United States was still uncommitted.

My dad was a private pilot, and I thought there was nothing in the world better than cruising around in the sky. So I contacted the RCAF recruiting office in Vancouver, B.C. In a short while they sent me an application form, but I saw that the maximum acceptable height was six-foot-one. I filled it out and

returned it with the note that I was six-foot-two-inches tall. The application was returned with the height restrictions crossed out. I was requested to sign and return it and informed that a class would be starting soon. Before I could take any steps toward getting out of the U.S. Army and into the Canadian armed forces, an official order came down from the United States War Department. All enlistments were frozen "for the duration of the emergency plus six months." That order went into effect on October 1, just nine days before I was to be free! My days of flying for the Canadians were over before they began.

My extended stay in the army did not get off to a good start when about this time I made a real stupid mistake that resulted in me and Joe being demoted from sergeants to corporals in the blink of an eye.

Joe had just gotten engaged and wanted to go to Los Angeles to see his girl. We were told that weekend passes for that area were all out, but we could have a weekend pass for San Luis Obispo. San Luis is about two hundred miles from Los Angeles, where we really wanted to go. I talked Joe into getting the weekend pass, and we went straight to L.A.

Naturally, on our way back to camp late Sunday night we blew a tire on Joe's old car and could find nothing open. We finally got the thing repaired and were hours late getting back. You might say we were officially AWOL, absent without leave. We came dragging into camp at midmorning. The entire company was already out on the field, and the first sergeant told us where we could find them. We would also find the captain there. The next day we were busted to corporals. I asked for and was assigned to the weapons platoon in charge of a light machine gun squad. Joe stayed in the rifle platoon as a squad leader, and we both settled down to try getting back what we should have never lost . . . our sergeants' stripes.

After that little episode, we stayed on the straight and narrow as far as passes went. Joe's car was pretty shabby, and we didn't want to risk making that long trip in it again, so we "bought" a ride in another guy's car by chipping in on the gas bill. It so happened that the fellow we were to ride with the next weekend turned out to be a sergeant I'd had a little scuffle with several months before, and I was pretty sure we'd get turned down as soon as he saw me. As it turned out, he was a pretty nice guy, and by the time our round trip was completed we were good friends. Sadly, he later joined the paratroopers and was killed during a combat operation in Europe.

During the last part of November 1941, we were placed on a twenty-minute alert. Passes were halted. We knew something was up, but didn't know what. If we wanted to go to the PX (post exchange), we had to go in groups, ready to return to the company, a few hundred yards away, at a moment's notice. It was all very hush-hush, and everyone sort of walked around "on eggshells" waiting for we knew not what.

Just as mysteriously, the alert was lifted and passes were available once again. Joe and I headed south to El Monte for what was to be the last of our weekend passes for a long, long time. It was December 6, 1941.

PART ONE

War, and Things Start to Warm Up

On December 7, 1941, I was home on a weekend leave. My grandfather knocked on the door of the bathroom where I was, in the midst of shaving, and announced, "You're in for it now, boy!"

I asked, "In for what?"

"The Japs bombed Pearl Harbor....It's on the radio and I just now heard it."

I thought it was some obscure U.S. Navy base in the Pacific. Of course, not long after that, everyone in the free world knew where and what Pearl Harbor was. I collected Joe and we drove back to camp immediately. On the way north toward San Luis Obispo we saw convoy after convoy of army troops heading south. Fortunately, our outfit was still in camp, and we got back just in time. My first assignment was nothing like what I had thought war would be. Our company was loaded onto trucks and driven to the rail lines close to camp. We were placed inside a boxcar and away we went, not having a clue where. "Where," for my machine gun squad, turned out to be just a few miles north, Camp Roberts, a large army basic training station. So large, in fact, it consisted of two separate camps. The main camp, and the second one, North Roberts.

The train stopped midway between the two camps, just short of a bridge, and my four-man squad was ordered off, along with our tent; the machine gun, and all its paraphernalia; four folding GI cots; a small gasoline-fueled cooking stove; a shovel; four barracks bags; and several other miscellaneous bits of gear and equipment that we soldiers always seemed to accumulate above and beyond our issued stuff. Thinking back on it, we must have looked like a potential yard sale getting set up.

Lt. Pat Phillips walked me up forward to the railroad bridge that spanned a wide but shallow river running between the two camps. "Your squad is to set up the machine gun here at the south end of the bridge and allow no one to pass across it other than railroad workers or other soldiers. No civilians. You will have the gun manned during the hours of darkness. That is from sundown to dawn. It'll not be necessary to man it during daylight hours."

"Do you think the Japs will attack us here, Lieutenant?"

"Corporal, just how in the hell would I know that?"

"Well, I guess somebody figures they might, otherwise we wouldn't be set up here, would we? If someone tries to cross at night, do we shoot 'em, or what?"

He just looked at me, turned, and started back to where the train was stopped. It was a steam locomotive, and I loved the sounds that came from it, the creaks, grunts, and groans, the hissing steam. How I wished it would stick around for a few days so we all could just sit and listen to it. Trying to look sharp, I hurried after him and asked about food, mail, and supplies.

“Don’t worry about anything like that. I’ll have a weapons carrier up here tomorrow with everything you guys will need. Any other questions?”

I wrote down the telephone number of his CP and tried to think of questions that I knew would come up as soon as he left. Phillips and I had known each other for several years and got along very well. We first met when he was a sergeant. I liked him and I respected him. He had a great sense of humor, too.

We returned back to where the train was waiting, and I saw that a bunch of the guys had hopped on and gotten the tent up and staked down. Another twenty minutes and the four of us were standing alongside the tracks, watching the train disappear northward. I wanted to say, “Choo, choo,” but I didn’t.

I got my gunner and we went for a walk up to the edge of the bridge, looking for a spot to place the gun. We found the perfect one just at the edge of the bridge, overlooking the entire “target area.” It was a wonderful place for our gun. The fact that it had no cover or concealment didn’t bother us for the simple reason we didn’t think about it...dumb, dumb.

PFC Hubert White, my gunner, was a tall, lanky Kentuckian with a rare sense of humor and a ready smile. He had blond hair that seemed to be always mussed up, blue eyes, and a nice drawl that, I guess, was what folks from his state sounded like. He was the first person I had ever met from Kentucky, so I didn’t know for sure. But it was nice to listen to.

It was early December, and the cold rains began. We rigged up cover at the gun position, using shelter halves from our individual packs, and while it wasn’t like home, it kept us fairly dry. Not completely, but somewhat. The rail line was on an embankment about ten or twelve feet above the surrounding ground. Our big tent was down at that lower level, below, out of the wind as much as possible. But, we found out later, it was low enough to flood the dirt/mud floor with three or four inches of water if the rain lasted very long.

True to his word, Phillips returned the next day in a weapons carrier and left us with some rations and, best of all, mail. He told me he didn’t know how long this routine would go on, but he’d see that we got rotated “once in awhile” back to the platoon CP for showers, new supplies, things like that.

One day, after we’d been there about a week, a Camp Roberts weapon carrier drove into our area. The passenger turned out to be a mess sergeant, an old-timer, a regular army guy, and he had gotten reports that we were guarding the bridge. He asked me, “What are you guys doing for chow?”

“Not much, Sergeant. They give us some rations, and we have a small field stove, but none of us has much of a cook.”

“Well, how would you like me and my cook here to come by in the mornings and cook breakfast for you guys?” We were all inside the tent, sitting on army cots when he said that, and I think we’d have lifted him to our shoulders and paraded him around if we’d had the room. To this day I’m not sure what prompted his good-natured offer. Perhaps he just wanted to get off the post for a bit, or maybe our situation brought about some sympathy. Whatever it was, a wonderful thing happened. Especially

in light of the terrible cooking each of us had managed to turn out.

The next morning he showed up with one of his cooks, as promised. This was after his own cooks and bakers back at camp had completed the morning's breakfast detail. We got fried eggs, bacon, and coffee. On the second or third day Hubert said he felt like eating a dozen eggs. I said I bet I could, too. And, we did. Ate a dozen each... with bacon and thick slices of buttered bread, and a cup of hot coffee. It was wonderful!

Our routine for guarding the bridge was two on the gun from sundown until midnight, then the second two men relieved us to guard until dawn. The gun, tripod, and ammo would then be taken down and placed inside our tent until sundown, at which time the whole schedule was repeated. This suited us very well. We all slept throughout the day. After a great breakfast, that is.

One morning, just after our mess sergeant friend had left, I heard a jeep drive into our area. We had laced the front of the tent fly so it was open at the lower end, about a foot above the water-and-mud floor.

I figured it was Lieutenant Phillips, as he was about due for his regular visit. We heard splashes as he approached, and then he tried to unlace the tent fly. That's when I yelled out, "Get down on your hands and knees and crawl in like we do."

During the pause in the activity outside, we heard some muttered curses. I knew Pat was a good sport, so I didn't worry about it. We waited, and pretty soon an officer's black-and-gold-brass overseas cap appeared. Then his shoulders. Resting on each shoulder tab was a silver eagle! It was a full colonel, a guy just one step away from being a general...on his hands and knees...in the mud, and looking for all the world like a wounded bear. He filled the only door opening, otherwise I swear I would have taken off. I yelled, "Ah... ten...shun!" And as he got up on his feet, we were all standing, rigid as statues, eyes front...or in my case, quivering.

He looked around, and I became aware of just how crappy our little hovel must have looked to him. We were all in GI shorts and undershirts. He yelled, "Who in the hell is in charge of this... the dump?"

"I, ah, I am, sir," I said. I was near fainting.

"And just who the hell are you?"

I gave him the standard GI answer. "Dick, Robert C., Corporal, sir."

"Well, corporal, where in the hell are your guards? You're supposed to be guarding the railroad bridge, aren't you?"

"Ah... yes sir, but we guard it only during the hours of darkness, sir, that is."

"I see. Well, that's all changed now. You *will* post guards on it twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week."

“Sir, begging the colonel’s pardon, but my orders are to guard it during the hours of darkness only sir.”

“Uh-huh. Well, Corporal, you now have new orders, or didn’t you understand what I just told you?”

The four of us were still standing at attention, the colonel never having given us an “At ease” order.

“Yes, sir, I understand what you said, but I can only take orders from my commanding officer.”

“And, who is your commanding officer, Corporal?” responded the colonel most sarcastically.

“Well, sir...he’s Lieutenant Phillips...um...Pat Phillips... Second Lieutenant Phillips, that is. Sir.”

“Okay, and where is this commanding officer? I want very much to talk to him. Meantime, you might as well prepare to resume guard duty twenty-four hours a day. You’ll hear from me very soon. Corporal.”

I gave him Pat’s phone number, which he proceeded to copy down into a small pocket notebook. He then got down on his hands and knees and gave us a view of his majestic butt as he squished through the mud on the way out. As soon as we heard his jeep engine start, we all relaxed, sat down on our cots, and everyone looked at me. I had just refused a full colonel’s orders. Oh, my God!

I knew then just how an accused person must feel when the foreman says, “Guilty!”

I dressed as fast as I could and was up on the highway in nothing flat. I hailed an army jeep and got a ride to the main entrance of Camp Roberts. I walked inside and saw that the provost marshal had an office right there. I went in and explained that I was in charge of the railroad bridge guard detail and had to phone my CO right away. The sergeant on duty showed me a phone I could use, and I dialed Pat’s number. It rang a couple of times and I heard him say, “Lieutenant Phillips speaking.”

I said, “Pat, we’re in a world of shit....I mean that really, really deep stuff.”

A pause, and then, “Is that you, Corporal Dick?”

I said, “You know it’s me.... This is no time to be funny. I just had a visit from a full-bird colonel and he’s as mad... you’ll see...I mean he’s reeeeeeally pissed off. He’ll be contacting you any minute now.”

Phillips asked me what I had done this time, and I gave him a full accounting of the situation including the “get down on your hands and knees” thing. There was another pause, and I heard him making some noises that I couldn’t identify. First I thought he might be coughing, but he was either laughing or crying.

After he came back on the line, he told me to go back to the tent, keep our regular routine, and not to worry about anything. We said our good-byes, and I added a “Good luck” in there, too.

I thought I was okay after that, but it was just wishful thinking. When I started to walk out of the

main gate, the guard there demanded to see my pass. I told him I didn't have a pass... that I'd just come in to use the phone and borrow a cup of sugar, but he wasn't buying that. After a spell of some very nasty army words, glaring, foot stomping, and the usual threats, I simply walked out, crossed the highway, and bummed a ride back to the bridge.

We never saw the colonel again, but within the next day or so we observed some soldiers from the north camp setting up a guard post at their end of the bridge. I walked over and talked with them, but all they knew was they had received orders to guard the bridge. Twenty-four hours a day!

We were moved from the Camp Roberts bridge a few weeks later and dropped off at yet another railroad installation. This one was right on the central California coast, guarding Sudden Tunnel. We were taken to it via the boxcar method and, as usual, dropped off with our old tent, machine gun, and my same little group: four of us, counting myself. This time, however, we had company...a full complement of rail workers, and a Chinese cook named Hoo.

We pitched our tent on the east side of the rails, with an embankment rising above us for a few hundred feet. A few feet away ran the rails, and across the rails was another set of them. Sitting on the second set was a cook's car, a dining car, and two coaches that housed the workers. I'd guess there were around twenty-five or thirty. Their daily routine was simple. They'd be fed breakfast in the morning, get on their little handcars, and head out to do repair work somewhere. They would take a packed lunch the cook gave them, to be eaten at midday on the job. Late afternoon saw them return for an early dinner in the dining car.

We had our daily rations supplied by our own cook back at platoon CP, and they hadn't improved at all. One day I walked over and had a chat with Hoo (no, I didn't go into an Abbott and Costello routine, although sometimes I felt like the whole thing was not real). The upshot was that Hoo would feed us breakfast and dinner in trade for our rations.

And, we would have to do the dishes.

I talked it over with my men, and they were all in favor of it. If we had been happy with our situation back at Roberts, we were delirious with this one! Breakfast was unimaginable. Hotcake eggs fried or scrambled, bacon and sausage, toast and biscuits, and so it went. Dinner was even better. Hoo was a wonderful cook, and every meal seemed just different enough from the last one that it was always a new, great eating experience. Those rail workers really tied into the food, too, and seemed to consume twice as much per man as any of us. They paid Hoo one dollar per day, per man, and everyone was happy, whereas Hoo soon saw less and less value in what we were offering in exchange. We lasted only a few days in the kitchen before Hoo ran us out with a very large butcher knife. We were not allowed back into his "kingdom." . . . Not that any of us wanted to wash pots and pans. In the meantime I picked up a reputation for taking good care of my men, foodwise, that is, even though it seemed to attract full colonels.

Sudden Tunnel got its name, I think, because it was located near a fairly sharp curve in the tracks. A train headed north would round the curve and there, about a hundred feet or so ahead, was the tunnel. Incidentally, on the other side of the rails from us was a cliff that dropped straight down to the Pacific Ocean, maybe a hundred feet at least.

Our routine here was identical to the one we had at the Camp Roberts bridge. We guarded the tunnel during the hours of darkness. I felt fairly secure from colonels here because the only way they could

get to us was either by parachute or rail.

One late afternoon, just before sundown, I heard someone moaning. It was PFC George Hill, and he was complaining of a pain in his abdomen. He told me that he thought it might just be gas, something he ate. I told the next detail to go ahead and get onto the gun. As time passed, Hill was hurting more and more. I checked him by probing his stomach and abdomen and finally came to the conclusion that he might have appendicitis. I walked up toward the tunnel and yelled for White to come on back to the tent and the other man to stay on the gun. When he got back, I told him to take three torpedoes and go back down the tracks, around the curve for a couple of hundred feet or so, and install them on the rails about six or eight feet apart. These things were railroad issue, and I had been informed that three of them going off was the signal for a train to immediately stop. Meanwhile, I got some ice from Hoo and packed it onto Hill's abdomen. He was running a pretty fair fever, which scared the hell out of me.

White returned and said that all we had to do now was wait. No kidding! After what seemed to me several hours, we heard a train coming. Because of the wind that blew off the ocean and the curve that shielded us from approaching trains, the noise of a train was seldom heard until it was almost on us. At the same time that we heard this train's engine, we also heard those torpedoes go off... *bang, bang, bang!* It came lurching around the curve, sparks flying from the steel wheels, passed us, and finally came to a halt just before it got to the tunnel entrance. I looked at it and saw that it was a passenger train. We had not seen anything go by except freight trains since we'd gotten here, so this was a big surprise. A second look told me that we had a troop train on our hands, which I figured was a good thing as surely they'd have a medic on board. I told White to get hold of a noncom or an officer and have Hill loaded aboard. By then I was genuinely afraid that Hill's condition had deteriorated to something extremely serious from the "something I ate" category.

About this time a figure loomed out of the darkness and there, standing in front of me, was a full colonel! Another one! The woods must be full of these guys, I thought. No, I couldn't believe this. I could only stare, and then snapped to attention, saluted, and waited for what I just knew would be commendation for a medal for saving Hill's life.

"Are you the asshole who stopped this train...?"

"Well, sir, yes, I guess I am... the one. That stopped the train, I mean."

Leaning closer to get a good look at me, he snarled, and I truly do mean snarled, "Corporal, are you out of your friggin' mind? Do you want to spend the rest of this century in jail? Don't you know that this is a troop train?"

"Ah, sir, I mean . . ." I was wondering if there was a special training center for full colonels that would teach them how to come close to exploding, without actually doing so. Before I could complete my sentence, he continued, "Soldier, it's against regulations.... You cannot just stop a troop train."

He made that statement to me while his troop train stood quietly, stopped, about twenty feet behind him. I didn't quite know how to call his attention to this basic fact, and while I pondered that, he reiterated, "You cannot stop a troop train, do you understand?"

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