



Too Good To Be Fiction

Six short stories from the
experience of J. D. Fox

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For Grandad Fox

Thanks for the stories



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THE OLD PRO

His name was Leston C. Fox. The C didn't stand for anything, he just put it in his name so the army would quit asking him for a middle initial. That's right, they were doing that all the way back to WWI. No one but the family knew his name was Leston anyway. Everyone called him Sandy. He was my father.

Sandy played a lot of baseball when he was growing up. He and his older brother, Henry, played for the "Spudders," a local semipro team of Wichita Falls, Texas. They must have been very good for a couple of country boys. The story that my uncle Roy told me many years later was that Sandy and Henry both had offers in the early twenties, to go to Chicago as major league pitchers, with the White Sox. The brothers were both pitching for the "Wichita Falls Spudders," when they got the offer to play in the big league. They were both left-handed pitchers, but my dad was also a switch hitter. If all this sounds too strange to be true, then you must understand something. Wichita Falls, Texas was a small town of

around twenty five-thousand people just a few miles south of the Red River and the southern border of Oklahoma. Just before and after World War I, Wichita Falls was in the chips. There were much oil and much money there. The city built a new baseball park downtown called "Spudder Park." The name "Spudder" came from a type of drilling rig used in the oil business. They had streetcars that went from the ballpark downtown all the way out to the Pavilion at Lake Wichita. On Sunday you could see a baseball game, or ride the streetcars to the lake and dance, or ride speedboats, or even get an airplane ride. The ballpark was a fine one, and it was always filled for the home team. Oil money brought the ball players in from the country and the ball players brought the scouts in from the Majors.

Henry said he couldn't go to Chicago, because he could play just on Sundays, because that was his only day off. Henry felt that his father couldn't run the farm without him. Perhaps he felt the Chicago offer just wasn't really going to happen. Sandy was all set to go to Chicago, but his girl friend at the time cried and pleaded with him not to go. He gave in to the girl's tears and pleadings and turned the Chicago offer down. Six months later she ran off with a Drummer.

He never recovered from his mistake. He dearly loved baseball, and he continued to play the game on a regular basis until about 1935. It was free, we could afford that, and he dearly loved the game.

After his arm left him, he became a catcher. When he was in his thirties and still going strong, the other players on his team were getting younger and younger. Two that I remember were, Jack Alexander and Hammett Vance. Jack ran a gasoline station in Burke. Jim was always a good friend of my dad. He even came to New Mexico to see Sandy many years later. Hammett became the sheriff of Wichita County, and stayed in office for several terms.irate voters removed him from office in the late '40's or early '50's. He tried to enforce a county ordinance against short shorts. Poor Hammett, as a young ball player, Sandy said he couldn't keep his mind on the ball game because of watching the girls. Jack, Hammett and Sandy played together for several years. Their game on Sunday afternoon was the highlight of my Dad's week.

Daddy spent very little time trying to teach me to pitch. It was obvious that as a pitcher, I wasn't going to make it, so he concentrated on batting practice. I'm sure my older sisters can testify to the periods of training that went on until my dad just didn't have the time anymore. Oddly, by the time I started to school the training was all over. Hard times were on us in the mid 1930's, and there was more for the breadwinner to do than play games with the baby boy.

Sandy's love of baseball never diminished as far as I could tell. Neither did the regret he had for not going

to the Majors when he had a chance. We often went to the ball park for a game when he had the time, and often we listened to the radio together. I never shared his enthusiasm for baseball, and I was always just a little ashamed that I couldn't love it as much as he did. I just could never get the steam up that he showed for the game. You see, it wasn't necessary for me to love the game that much, I loved my Dad enough to make up for it. If he enjoyed it, then I enjoyed being there while he had a good time. We often lay on the floor of the kitchen together and listened to the radio, and if it wasn't baseball, then the Lone Ranger would do.

We moved from Texas to Cedarvale, New Mexico in the summer of 1944. Sandy was forty six years old and not in good health. I was only fifteen that summer and had no idea of how sick he was. He was having trouble with his heart and stomach ulcers back in Texas. The move to the ranch in Cedarvale was supposedly for his health, and maybe it was. I know that I hadn't seen much of him since starting to school nine years before, and now we were together every day, so I was having the time of my young life. It made no difference that times were hard, we were having a great time playing like ranchers.

The following summer of 1945 it was noted that neither my father nor I had seen a baseball game in over a year. There had been no one around to play baseball with, but now there were a few service men beginning to return

from WWII, and Sandy was getting the itch for baseball. He would soon be forty-eight years old.

There was not much to do for fun on the high plains of New Mexico in the summer of 1945. There was no TV then, and if there had been we wouldn't have had one because there was no electricity. The only radios were powered by automobile batteries. Once in a while we would go to someone's place on Sunday afternoon to ride some wild horse or maybe even rope some calves. Well, it was high time to start something. Daddy was a great one for organizing a bunch of guys for a bear hunt, a lion hunt, or whatever. Whether there were any bears or lions around had nothing to do with it.

He decided to organize a Cedarvale baseball team! Cedarvale would have been a one horse town if there had been just one more horse. In '45 and '46 you couldn't buy uniforms, shoes, socks or anything else to outfit a team, but there was no stopping Sandy. He wanted to play baseball and he inspired enough people to make up a team in Cedarvale. He showed them how to take old khaki pants and blouse the legs with strips of auto inner tubes, so that they looked something like baseball pants. We took winter wool boot socks and wore them in low quarter shoes, so they looked like baseball socks. Just to show up for the game dressed in old clothes would not do, he insisted that we all looked like baseball players.

Remember now, these guys were mostly ranchers, farmers, old fellows, too old for the war. When I was fifteen, anyone too old for the draft had to be old. Dwight and I were the only young ones on the team. Dwight had just returned from the service. He was about six foot eight and weighed about two hundred seventy five pounds. He was awesome at the plate. I mean he looked awesome, we soon found that Dwight was the world's worst baseball player. Well, if he wasn't the worst, then he was the first runner up. He couldn't run, he couldn't catch, he couldn't throw, and as a batter he couldn't hit the ground with his bat. He was willing, however, and for the Cedarvale team, that was one of the two main requirements. The other one was to dress up like a baseball player.

The day of the game was a beautiful Sunday afternoon. Sandy, with the help of Asa, my mother's first-cousin, had sparked the interest in enough guys at Vaughn, New Mexico, to get up a team and play us for the Bean Valley Championship. Vaughn was Cedarvale's natural adversary. They would accept any challenge from Cedarvale at any time. They were a ready-made grudge town. If you had a blind horse, you tried to sell it to someone in Vaughn. If there was a fire in the mountains, it was probably started by some of those dad gum guys from Vaughn. If there was a bad chug-hole in the road, it must have been caused by some truck driver from Vaughn. The Bean Valley Championship was to be decided by the winner of a series. The series would be the best one out of one. It was

all going to happen on that Sunday afternoon.

We had a backstop made out of hand cut pine poles and chicken wire. The poles were brought down from the mountains, and the chicken-wire was probably donated by McCloud's General store. There were no bleachers or seats so everyone parked their cars in a semi circle behind home plate. Women and small children could sit inside or on the hood and fenders, their choice, indoors or outdoors. Seats for spectators were never provided, if the town was one horse or less. It would have been a waste of money if they had the money, besides if you watched from your car then you could honk the car horn to cheer on the home team. I don't recall what we did for a scoreboard; I think someone just remembered it.

My dad played catcher, and I played left field. Dwight played right field and Asa was the umpire. Having Asa as the umpire was better than having Babe Ruth at the bat. Well, the Babe would have pulled in a bigger crowd, I guess, but since no one paid, that wouldn't have made any difference anyway. The players were very carefully placed in their positions, even though the coach had not the best opportunity to test them for their individual skills.

Sandy, besides playing catcher, was also the coach, general manager, and PR man. He played catcher because he could still squat down, and there was no one else that could. I played left field, because I was the heavy hitter,

and you always save your heavy hitter from too much of the exercise that goes on in the infield. Dwight played right field because nothing ever happened there unless a lefthander got a hit or a right-hander swung too slowly on a fast ball. Vaughn had no lefthander, and we didn't have a pitcher that could throw a fastball. We knew if a ball was hit into right field, it would be an automatic double, because Dwight couldn't run to catch it. Even if it hit in his glove he would drop it, and after that he couldn't hit the infield with his throw in, so we might just as well concede a double.

The first inning revealed to the coach a few weaknesses in his team. The team's weaknesses were overlooked by the spectators, because almost everyone on the team was kin to each other including the spectators. As a baseball team, we couldn't have sold peanuts at a real ball game. We couldn't have made the third team at a doubleheader. In an exhibition game, back home, we would have had to buy tickets to get in. That's the nicest way I can put it. If it hadn't been for Asa as the umpire, we wouldn't have had a chance. I said earlier that Dwight couldn't hit, it was worse than that. By the fourth inning, everyone but the pitcher and the catcher on the visitor team laid down on the ground when Dwight came up to bat. He would strike at anything that was thrown.

Once we had a man on first that was testing the pitcher, the runner made a false start for second base and the

pitcher threw to first base, and Dwight swung at it. Asa called it a ball. I'm telling you, our giant made bad look good!

My dad was getting desperate, so he put himself in as pitcher. That meant that if the new catcher squatted down, then Asa was going to have to help him up. It was the bottom of the eighth inning, with two outs and two men on. We were dragging behind by a score of 10 to 8, when two things happened that is still talked about today. The prospect for the home team was about to improve drastically. The Cedarvale Sluggers were going to have a chance. Sandy hit what would have been an easy home run in a baseball park, because it would have been over the fence. Since there was no fence, he had to run it out.

If he hadn't been so old, it would have been easy for him to beat the ball around the bases. He was looking good as he rounded first. The car horns were deafening, but he was noticeably losing steam before he reached second. The cheers and car horns carried him to third, but before he had reached the halfway mark to home, we watched in dismay as the ball hit the catcher's mitt! The horns stopped and the cheers stopped and the crowd became very quiet. They couldn't believe the old pro would allow himself to get caught in such a trap. Surely, Sandy would do something. It was all too obvious that whatever he did to save the run would have to be a miracle. The runner suddenly seemed to stumble, and grabbed his chest.

We could see that something was dreadfully wrong. The crowd took a single breath. There was pain and anguish on the runner's face, but he was still heading for the home plate. Why didn't he turn back to third? Why didn't he stop? "Give it up Sandy. It's not worth it."

It looked like, for all the world, that he wasn't even going to be able to walk to the plate. The catcher stood between my Dad and the plate with a stance of a guard that was ready to turn back the mightiest of foes. With legs spread wide and braced, he had the smile of victory already assured. He held the ball in his outstretched hand as if to save my Dad those last few steps of agony. Too late, the fans of the home team realized that they had erred in encouraging him on. They should have let him rest on third base, after all, his hit brought in two runs and his son was coming up to bat next and would surely have brought him in from third. It looked like he not only wouldn't make the score, but he might collapse and die before he could stop, and he would not stop!

It was now clear to all that he was going to run it out. The last two steps to the outstretched ball, was pure drama. He dragged the toes of his shoes through the dirt, and clutched at his chest to ease the pain that the fans couldn't see but knew was there. Three inches from the ball he weakly raised his head. Vaughn's man of the hour smiled and said, "Give it up old man." Sandy smiled back at the catcher, and in an instant too fast to see, he fell to the

ground and tagged home plate between the catcher's legs. The umpire screamed, "SAFE." The roar of the crowd stirred up the dust, the cows didn't give milk for two days, the hens didn't lay for a week, the catcher wanted to fight. The outfield blamed the infield, the infield blamed the catcher, and their coach blamed everybody. It was a riot. Eventually they settled down so we could finish the inning. The old pro had his day.

I was next at bat and got a home run, ho hum, no one seemed to notice. It would be a while before they recovered from what Sandy had just pulled. They might recover, but they would never forget. After me, it was Dwight's turn at the bat. The fielders were still so shook up by two home runs in a row that they forgot to lie down. When Dwight swung at a ball there were two things that you could count on happening. One was that he always swung at the same place regardless where the ball was, the other was that he swung with such force that the Wafffff from the swing would blow off the umpire's cap. The power in his swing would have knocked a freight train off the tracks. One of the old guys mumbled that the only way that boy will ever get a hit would be if the pitcher hit his bat.

That's exactly what happened. On the third strike, the third ball thrown, the pitcher hit Dwight, square on the bat. The ball started out bat-high, and took the pitcher off the mound. It looked at first, like it was going to go straight and level for a mile, but you could tell that

when it went by the outfielders, it was starting to gain altitude. When it went out of sight over McCloud's bean warehouse, it was still going up. I don't know how far it went, or if it ever came down. It could have been a world record, but who knows, we never found the ball. The laws of physics say that it must have come down somewhere, but you can't prove it by me.

Regardless, all the fight had gone out of the boys from Vaughn, and their turn at bat in the top of the ninth was a waste of time. They took a drubbing from the Cedarvale Sluggers that day, and as the saying goes, they went home with their tails between their legs. The Home Team celebrated until almost dark. That's as long as you could celebrate anything in the country, because you have to go home and do the chores before dark, regardless.

Later that night, by the light of a coal-oil lamp, I was helping my dad to doctor his right hip and thigh. The skin was gone. A piece the size of a football would not have covered it. It was painful and there was no way he could sit that it didn't hurt. He looked at me and said with his great grin, "You know what James? It was worth it and I'd do it again if I got the chance."

Ten years later, I had a chance to duplicate my dad's trick in a baseball game. I was on active duty with the Army, but I didn't have any sons playing. They were watching, but too small to remember. Too bad for them, because

they didn't have a chance to experience the thrill that I had with my Dad. There are certain moments that come once in a lifetime and cannot be duplicated.



*The Country Mailman,
Dorance Reed, Willard, New Mexico, 1944*

A JOKE ON THE MAILMAN

If you lived in the country in the 1940s, the high point of the day, six days a week, was the mail. People made their plans around the time they knew it would be in their mailbox or at the post office. If you had to go to town on an errand, you wouldn't think of coming back before A mail time. Mail was our connection to the outside world in the mid 40s.

We had radio, sometimes, if the batteries were charged up. But it was the mail we looked for every day but Sunday. Our fathers, brothers, cousins or friends who were away and in the war made the daily mail very important.

Dorance carried the mail. I never knew much about him, except that he was pleasant, with a friendly smile, but sort of the serious type, and always in a hurry to get on with the mail. I can remember that he was punctual. Perhaps that's just a part of carrying the mail. You must be punctual. It was a bad day when Dorance was late, and the snow had to be pretty deep if he didn't make his run.

His mail run was from Willard, through Cedarvale, to Corona, and the same route on his return. The Santa Fe railroad ran through Willard and the Southern Pacific ran through Corona. The railroads joined and ran together through Vaughn. That was fine for Vaughn, but it didn't help Cedarvale much. So Dorance would bring the mail from the Santa Fe drop in Willard through Cedarvale on his way to Corona. Then, after picking up the Southern Pacific mail in Corona, he would make his second delivery to Cedarvale in the same day on his return to Willard. He even stuffed some mailboxes on the way. Yes sir, Dorance was a busy and a dedicated man.

The older folks told me that in the early part of the century, there was a railroad that ran through Cedarvale. Long before my time the railroad had been removed. Why, I don't know, but it left a roadbed that was a great temptation for the politicians to use for a promised "new and improved road to Willard." The old rail bed was perfect, okay, but not for cars to run down, because the wooden cross-ties, when removed, left a permanent "washboard" that no road grader could ever completely hide.

When they removed the rails and ties they left a good many spikes, and hapless drivers continued to find them until they paved the road many years later. The road between Willard and Cedarvale was mighty bad. The chug holes, the washboard, and the spikes made every trip an

adventure. It was a memorable occasion if you could make it without a flat. The road over the mountain to Corona was much better. It didn't have the spikes.

That was it. Monday through Saturday, Dorance brought the mail to Cedarvale and you could depend on it happening. He had a black '39 Chevy sedan, and a '37 Chevy coupe. It must have been that the '37 Chevy was his favorite, because he drove it most of the time. But perhaps the '39 was the family car and he didn't drive that except in an emergency. The mailman had to have a back up car, because he had to deliver the mail no matter what. Thirty-six inches of snow was considered an excuse for missing a delivery, but not much else. "Well, my car was broke down, I just couldn't make it." That wasn't good enough to satisfy either the Federal Government or all those folks on his route who were depending on him for news.

Now because of his serious nature, Dorance was the perfect subject for Sandy's, my dad's, idea of a little morning entertainment. I knew it was my dad's idea, because he had pulled it before back in Texas, but now he had my Mother's cousin, Asa, as an accomplice, and no one liked a practical joke more than Asa. Sandy had the idea, and Asa drew the crowd. The bigger the crowd, the bigger the laugh, and even in Cedarvale, it was no trick for Asa to get a few cronies to show up for what Sandy had planned for the mailman.

It was close to ten in the morning when Dorance pulled up in front of McCloud's store to drop off the Willard mail.

"Hi, boys, how's it going?"

"Fine, Dorance. You doing okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, just fine. It's sure a fine day, ain't it?"

"Yeah, it's a fine one, okay."

The half dozen men sitting on the porch of McCloud's store seemed perfectly normal just like there was nothing at all going on, and no one did more than look up and smile as Dorance passed inside. They were just waiting for their mail, as usual. The whittling and spitting was not interrupted. There was no use for everyone to jump up and go inside, because McCloud had to sort it first.

While Dorance was inside not a word was said, but Sandy and Asa exchanged winks.

Dorance passed the same group as he left the store. No one said anything except Sandy.

"Hey Dorance, how's that '37 Chevy running for you?"

"Well, just fine, Sandy. Why do you ask?"

Sandy ran the only garage in Cedarvale, and everyone knew that he was the most experienced mechanic that part of the country had ever seen. So when he asked about how your car was running, it was like a doctor becoming interested in something growing on your anatomy. You thought it was normal until the doctor got interested. After the doctor's show of interest, you would be sure there must be something wrong. Dorance took the bait.

My Dad let out some line. "You never broke an axle in that thing?"

"Well no, Sandy, I never have!"

"Boy, that's great Dorance. Them '37 Chevies are great cars, 'cept for the axle. Yep, that's real lucky. Well, just watch out for them chug holes and you'll probably be all right. See you later Dorance."

Dorance had definitely swallowed the bait, the hook, the line, and the sinker. His stride was shortened, and as he got in the little coupe he closed the door with somewhat more of a gentle touch. As his dust cloud began to disappear in the distance and when he was clearly out of sight, the porch of McCloud's store erupted in laughter.

"Did you see him looking at the back end of that Chevy when he went around it? Looked like he expected it to fall on the ground while he was lookin'."

“Ha, ha, ha.”

“Yesserie, you sure got him hooked, Sandy. He’ll take an extra thirty minutes trying to get to Corona without hitting a chug hole.”

Sandy and Asa didn’t say a word, just winked, and started in to get the mail. They knew it would be at least an hour and a half before Dorance could make it back from Corona, so they might just as well relax while they waited for the second act.

It was after one o’clock when the gang on the porch of McCloud’s store saw the ‘37 Chevy bringing a dust cloud from the east. The greetings were practically the same as before as Dorance carried the government bag into the store.

Quicker than you might think, Sandy reached under the porch and brought out a small jack and handle. In a flash he had placed it under the right rear axle of the Chevy and quickly ‘twisted the jack handle to raise the right rear tire of the coupe until it was no more than an eighth of an inch off the ground. Then with one motion he pulled out the jack handle, throw it under the porch and was back in his place with his legs crossed and whittling on a pecan, when Dorance emerged once more from within the store.

"See you later, Dorance, Take it easy," was the general comment as the mailman got in and started up the Chevy.

"Nn,yeng, enyeng, nnyeng, nnyeng, nnyeng, nnyeng," the Chevy's rear end sang as Dorance release the clutch, but the car didn't move.

"Thlunk, er, nnyeng, nnyeng, nnyeng, nnyeng," the Chevy sang out again as we heard him shift into reverse and try again. Then again. "Thlunk, er, nnyeng, nnyeng, nnyeng, nnyeng."

It was time for Sandy to say something. He had to appear not too interested or the joke would be over. The magnitude of the joke would depend on how long Sandy could carry it before Dorance knew he had been had.

"What's the problem, Dorance?"

"Well, I don't know Sandy. She just won't move."

"Try it in reverse Dorance," Sandy said, knowing that he had already tried it in reverse, but saying it made it look like he hadn't been paying attention.

"I already did, Sandy, and she just won't move."

This last statement was made as the mailman dismounted from his favorite car, and with great concern went around

the back of the coupe. With intense regard he looked at the wheels, the bumper, the trunk lid, and down the right side. He was as serious as death as he came back around the rear of his car.

“Dorance, why don’t you. get in and try it again, and this time let me listen to it, to see what I can tell.”

“Yeah, sure let me try it again.”

“Nnyeng, nnyeng, nnyeng, nnyeng,” the Chevy once more sang to the crowd.

Dorance was back out on the ground, and with pain and anguish written on his face said “What do you think it is, Sandy? Do you think it’s the axle?”

Everyone present, including Dorance, knew a major component was almost impossible to get in the mid 1940s, and if that was his problem, then he probably would be broke down in Cedarvale for a month at least.

Enough was enough, so Sandy said, “Well, no, I don’t think so, Dorance. It sounds to me like you got a wheel off the ground!”

The questioning look on Dorance’s face was too much for the crowd on the porch, and they all broke into laughter. Broke into laughter does not do the scene justice. They

rolled on and off the porch. Dorance bent over and looked under the Chevy and finally saw the jack under the axle, but it was too late. The good ole boys had done it again.

A few minutes later, Dorance was laughing with his friends.

THE HAUNTED DOOR

I had been on active duty with the U.S. Army for about six months and I was finally assigned to the job that I had been called up from civilian life to do. The Berlin Crisis of 1962 was the reason that our President used to make me a government employee once again. A Texas National Guard Division had been federalized, and they were allowed to call reservists, like myself, up to fill the Guard vacancies. As a civilian, you may not know that Guard strengths are often low in peace time, and when they are called into active duty, sometimes even just for summer camp they are allowed to fill their ranks with reservists.

It was my luck to have a Critical MOS (Military Occupational Specialty), or job title of Artillery Communications Officer. I was an artillery CommO, a job that carries a Top Secret security clearance. I reported for active duty at the Fort Polk, Louisiana Repple Depple (Replacement Depot), they assigned me to the 3rd Rocket Howitzer Battalion of the 132 Artillery from San Angelo, Texas. I made my way up to North Fort Polk, and made my report to Lt. Colonel

Schertz, the Battalion Commander, and he said,

“Lieutenant, I see in your 201 file, that you have surveying experience as a civilian. Is that true?”

“Yes sir, sort of, that is, I had surveying in college, and I’ve done a little fill-in type work with a survey party in staking well locations for an oil company. That’s about all.”

“Well, Lieutenant, I’m making you Battalion Survey Officer, so report to Captain Howarton, you’ll also be the Executive Officer of Headquarters Battery.”

Oh no, he had assigned me to be the number two man in Headquarters Battery. What a crummy job. It was a First Lieutenant’s slot, but I had gone beyond that in my military career, and I wasn’t anxious to step back. The Reserve had promoted me to Captain, but due to paperwork, I didn’t get my confirmation until after I had been called into Federal Service, therefore I was frozen at my old rank for at least another year of active duty.

What rotten luck, and now a Battalion Commander answered my question of why he had called me up to fill a Critical MOS slot, which carried a Major’s rank, then placed me in a lower job of Survey Officer.

“Because I need a Survey Officer more than I need a CommO, that’s why.”

Well that was six months ago, and now I am finally assigned as Battalion CommO. I was still a First Lieutenant, but I was out of the number two slot over at Headquarters Battery, right? Wrong. The CO made me keep the number two slot with Captain Howarton. It was not according to regulations, but then when you're a reservist assigned to a National Guard Division, you shouldn't expect everything to be according to regulations.

Well, I could make it. I could get along, because I always had. It would just be a little adjustment. My first adjustment was going to have to be Captain Zielkie. Zielkie was the S2, or Battalion Intelligence Officer. When there is no enemy shooting at you, then the S2 is probably the most useless slot on the Battalion staff. He is right in there with peacetime Photo Interpreters on the Division Artillery Staff. Zielkie was a National Guard Captain, I was a reserve 1st Lt, and I had to share an office with him.

Zielkie took his job seriously, however and even though he had no intelligence reports to provide the CO, he made up for that with zealous activity in his second responsibility, that of Security Chief. The S2's job description included responsibility for getting all security clearances, and managing all security material. For this second function, the Army had provided the Battalion Headquarters building with a walk-in safe.

No one else had a walk-in safe. The CO didn't have a

walk-in safe, but Zielkie had a walk-in safe. The problem was that I, the CommO, had inherited a swivel chair that leaned back from the previous CommO. Zielkie, didn't have a swivel chair that leaned back. He didn't have a swivel chair at all. It wasn't right that a First Lieutenant had a swivel chair, and a Captain did not. It was not the Army way. Zielkie knew his rights, but the facade of his rank and power was tissue paper thin and he hesitated to openly pull rank for fear his pretense of power might, somehow collapse. Therefore, his strategy was always subterfuge.

The chair was mine because the exiting CommO made a point of giving it to me in front of Zielkie, and all the enlisted men. Zielkie, therefore couldn't just take it, he had to resort to some sort of stratagem that he would not have to defend in the daylight.

His plan was simple. With Zielkie it would have to be. The office that he and I shared was on the rear of the Battalion Headquarters building, and it had a back door that was on a direct route from my other office over at Battery Headquarters. Zielkie would lock the screen door when I left my CommO job to go over to do work at my other job at the Battery.

When I returned, I couldn't get through the screen door, because it was locked, and Zielkie had commanded to all the enlisted men that they must not unlock it, you know, for security purposes. That meant all in the room were

alerted to my return, and Zielkie would have time to take my chair that he had been using in my absence, and hide it in his walk-in safe.

I had to walk the long way around the building and come in through the front door, and by that time Zielkie would be back in his chair, and my chair would be locked in the safe. Yes, I know that sounds like silly child's play, but then you have to remember the times.

It wasn't long before the enlisted men clued me in on what Zielkie was doing, and my devious mind went into action. I would rather be left out of such silly games, but I had learned long before that when children first step out of line, then you better bring them back quick, because later it will be much tougher. Zielkie was acting like a child so he needed to be taught a lesson.

We were living in BOQ's (Bachelor Officer Quarters) that had been built in a hurry for WWII, and then two wars later, they had been painted once since that time. You could see grass growing through the cracks between the floor and the wall in my room. Each officer had been assigned a room according to his rank, and given a GI lock to fit the hasp on his door. That's right the door was locked just like you would put a lock on the chicken house if you had a chicken house. Higher ranks got the choice rooms near the front door. I was in the back room next to the day room.

Zielkie had the habit of leaving his lock hanging open in the hasp when he went to the latrine for a shower each evening. I just put my lock in it's place and took Zielkie's lock for my own. When the freshly showered Captain returned to his room, all looked normal. He dressed, and went to town with the boys, after locking his door of course. He returned at some late hour and after a few drinks, I'm sure, to find that his key wouldn't open the lock on his door. The report I got was that he tried for an hour, then quit, and slept in his civilian clothes on the floor of the day room for the remainder of the night. Our day room had no fruniture.

Zielkie, had to go to work the next morning in his civilian clothes, which drew the attention of the CO. It was a double embarrassment, because the CO had to tell him to call the Post Engineers and have them come over and replace the lock.

"I don't know what the problem is with you Zielkie, but use your head for a change. Now get on it, and get back over in proper uniform. You understand that?"

"Oh yes sir, I do, and I don't know what the problem is, but I'll get right on it."

Zielkie called the Engineers and just before noon they showed up and met the frustrated Captain at his room.

“Is this the lock that won’t work Captain.”

“Yes, that’s it. I don’t know what’s wrong with it because it was working alright when I left, and it wouldn’t work when I got back. I had to sleep on the floor, right there back in the day room, all night. I couldn’t even change into my uniform.”

“Yes sir, I understand, but could you give me your key? I’d like to try the lock myself.”

Zielkie gave the man his key. The man placed the key in the lock, and it opened with an easy twist of the key. Zielkie was dumfounded. Neither the Engineer nor the Captain knew that I had changed the locks back, and Zielkie’s lock was back on his door.

I will confess to carrying this on for almost a week. The S2 didn’t go to town every night, but just as sure as he did, then when he returned, his key would not fit the lock on his door. Zielkie didn’t want to tell anyone what trouble he was having, but everyone knew that he had trouble, and the CO was getting tired of Zielkie’s erratic behavior.

The Post Engineers had become less than prompt answering his calls for help, because every time they came over the key and lock combination worked fine. They even yielded to Zielkie’s pleadings and changed his old lock for

a new one. Of course the new one failed to open when it's new owner returned from town just like the old one did.

Timing is super important in pulling off a scam like the one just described, so after a week of misery for the S2, I made my second move..

"Hey Zilch, I understand you've been having a problem with your door lock."

"Yeah, Fox, that's right. Its driving me crazy."

"Well, Zilch, I've heard the big boys talking about your door lock and what a mystery it is, and I think I know what the problem is."

"What, you know what the problem is with my lock, really?"

"Well, yes, Zilch, I do. You know that I have a special sense about such so called mysteries, and other matters of the great unknown."

The Captain took the bait. He knew about my Hypnosis background, as did everyone else. I had been putting on shows on the post, and giving the Battalion Surgeon help at the Aid Station, so my reputation for Woo Woo stuff was well known.

I could see Zielkie was hooked, so I continued,

"You see Zilch, the problem is, not the lock, but the door. It doesn't make any difference what lock you put on that door, its going to foul up because the door has a spell on it."

"A SPELL ON IT! YOU MEAN MY DOOR HAS A SPELL ON IT?"

His eyes were large and his eyebrows went up and down as he spoke, but his voice was a whisper. He didn't want anyone to hear what he had just said.

"That's right Zilch, I'm surprised you didn't notice. That spell is so strong you can feel it before you even get into the building, but then I guess you don't know about such things, do you?"

"No, I don't, but what can I do? Will I have to move out of my room? I would hate to have to move, because I really like that first room near the front door."

Zielkie had done a little arm-twisting to get the first room next to the front door, and now this new prospect of maybe having to move was a tough blow.

"No, Zilch, moving wouldn't do any good. The spell would just go with you anyway."

“Oh no, well what can I do?”

That was what I had been waiting for, and I made my next move.

“Zilch, I tell you what. You get my chair out of your safe, put it back at my desk, and never touch it again, and I’ll remove the spell for you.”

“You can do that?”

“Certainly, Zilch, who do you think put the spell on the door in the first place?”

He never asked how I knew that my chair was inside his locked safe. I guess if I could put a hex on his door then I could see in his safe.

“Okay Fox, its a deal, and I’m sorry. Don’t worry about your chair, I’ll get it out right now. It was the Sergeant that did it anyway, but when he comes in I’ll make him leave it alone from now on, okay?”

“Alright Zilch, and quit locking that screen door every time I have to go over to the Battery.”

“Oh yeah, don’t worry, and if that Sergeant locks it, I’ll make him quit. Now can we go over and get my door

open? I didn't tell anyone, but I saved out this uniform last night, and I've been sleeping in the Day Room on the floor, because I never knew when that door was going to act up. Can we go over there now?"

"No, we don't have to go over there. I can do it from here. HOKUS - POKUS, FIDDELDY - OKUS! There, that ought to do it, now go try your door, and just remember Zilch, don't mess with me after this, or I might get mad, you hear?"

He heard alright, and I never had to worry about my chair or the screen door after that. Zielkie never figured it out, and one of the reasons was that he couldn't talk about it with anyone. They would have told him he was crazy. Well, I knew he wasn't crazy... just a little spooky, that's all.

Two months later, my luck changed for the better, and I was transferred to Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. The Guard Division was due to be released from active duty in a couple of months, and Zielkie felt that he would never see me again. He took his job as being responsible for security matters seriously, so my leaving presented a problem to him. I had a Top Secret security clearance, and that meant that I had to be debriefed by the S2 regarding all Battalion= security codes before I could leave the post.

Zielkie didn't want to mess with me, but he had to do something. So, with pain and trepidation in his voice

one afternoon just before I was clearing the post he approached me.

“Uh Lt. Fox, uh I, uh, guess you know that I uh, have to debrief you before you leave the post, don’t you?”

“Well yes, I know about that Zielkie, but you see there is a problem.”

“What problem, what do you mean?”

He never expected that I knew about a problem. What could it be?

“Well Zilch, you can’t debrief me, because you never did brief me, see?”

A long and thoughtful pause was followed by a,

“Oh yeah, I see what you mean.”



PERCEPTION OR REALITY

I was a Second Lieutenant in the Texas National Guard, and it looked like we might be going to war just any day. The 36th Infantry Division, a National Guard unit from Texas was almost wiped out during the Italian campaign of WWII. My hometown of Wichita Falls, Texas had a unit that was called into service prior to WWII, and they were manning fortified positions on Corregidor and Bataan on December 7, 1941. When you are in the military and there is a war on, then no one is safe for sure, but there are some places that are perceived to be safer than others. For some, the National Guard was considered to be a safe haven.

The Guard had recruited me from a college surveying class in 1947 when the 49th Armored Division was being organized. There wasn't a draft at that time, but I had enlisted, because of some feeling that I was needed and it was my patriotic duty. That was my perception. It may not have been reality, but it was my perception, and there is a time in a man's life when perception is more important than reality.

Our nation was involved in a Police Action in Korea and there were young men dying once more on foreign shores. It had been less than ten years since the beginning of World War II. I wasn't even a teenager when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, but it seemed like a lifetime. That was perception also.

With the reinstatement of the draft by President Truman in the spring of 1948, the ranks of the Texas National Guard had swollen with many who hoped that they would miss the draft. Many thought that all members of the National Guard were there to escape the Draft, and thereby miss the Army duty that went with being drafted.

A few that joined our unit were not only exempt from the draft, but some were not even medically fit for active duty with the military. Never mind asking how did they get by the medical exams, because the fact is they did. The exceptions were known, but not noted. Patriots or slackers, fit or unfit, they were all in together. Before the Korean War was over, I had become an officer, and it became my duty to make sure that all in our unit towed the attendance mark.

Many who joined the guard felt like it was not like the real military, and they didn't really have to abide by the rules. They came to meetings on a regular basis in the beginning, but after a while they attended only if it

was convenient. Soon enough, some just quit coming altogether. The legislature foresaw that possibility, and with the natural passage of time, laws were passed to provide punishment for those that were negligent in their duty to the Guard.

As part of my responsibility to enforce the rules, I would first try to persuade the transgressor to do right, and failing in that, call the Sheriff and have him thrown in the county jail. I was a bad guy in those days.

In the course of my enforcement duties, every Wednesday night I got a list from the First Sergeant right after roll-call, showing those that were absent without leave (AWOL). Of course, they might be late, but being late was not an excuse, especially for those that found themselves chronically in that condition. Some of those fellows had a real sense of humor, and some had no sense at all. I soon learned who had mothers and grandmothers that were always ill. I soon learned all those that had bosses that kept the worker late on A Drill Night, and I soon learned who was always lying about their condition. Have you ever noticed that when a person makes a lame excuse, it usually involves his mother or grandmother, but never his father or grandfather?

"Pvt. Smith. This is Lieutenant Fox. I see you didn't make it to drill tonight. What's the matter?"

"Uh, oh Lieutenant, I got sick this afternoon on the job, and the boss sent me home. He said to go to bed and stay there until in the morning. You know, so I'd be fit to work tomorrow. So, that's what I did, see, and I'm in bed right now."

"Well, that's too bad Pvt. Smith. Do you need anything?"

"Oh, no sir, not a thing. I just need to get my rest, I guess. Gosh, I don't know what could be wrong with me."

"Have you seen a Doctor, Pvt.? Smith?"

"Uh, no sir, see the boss said a lot of the guys were coming down with it, and all I needed to do was get plenty of rest. Yes sir, that's just what he said, and that's just what I did."

"Okay, Pvt. Smith, I can tell you are pretty bad off, so I'm going to send Sgt. Dennis and a couple of his friends over to visit you, and maybe cheer you up."

"Oh, no, Lieutenant, you don't need to do that, not Sgt. Dennis!"

"Yeah, the more I think of it, the more I like the idea. Sgt. Dennis will be over in about fifteen minutes to cheer you up."

“Oh, no, not Sgt. Dennis. I tell you what Lieutenant, I’m feeling a lot better just since we started talking on the phone. You know, I’ve been resting all afternoon, and I think I’m feeling good enough to just come on down for Drill. I could be there in less than fifteen minutes. Would that be okay?”

“Yes, Pvt. Smith, that will be okay this time, but when you get here, be sure and report to me first thing so I can call off Sgt. Dennis, that is, so I can notify the Greeting Team.”

The Greeting Team was a name that I thought up for the two or three Sergeants that went out to check on the absentees. No, they didn’t mishandle anyone physically, but sometimes they did mess with the minds of the chronic absentees.

One night during the early spring, I was checking on a man that was well past the age for the draft. I looked at his record to see if he had done this before, and couldn’t believe my eyes. He was old, really old. He was almost thirty years old when WW II started, and he had been in the Guard before then. His 201 file (personnel file) read like an adventure story, and suddenly, I felt sorry for even reading about him. He had medals, and several of them. Who was I to be giving this man more problems? He had plenty before I was a teenager.

The record showed that he had no phone, and his address

was on the north side of Wichita Falls. I could send the A Greeting Team out to that address, or I could just wait to see what happened. As in all military units there is always a chain of authority, and I was one of the bottom links in that chain. If I didn't take some action, then I would have to explain to someone that would then have to explain to someone else until the report reached the top link in the chain. That's the Army way.

Before I could put the thing off, the Pvt. finally arrived. He was almost an hour late, and the meeting only lasted two hours.

"Pvt. Jones, you are very late. Can you explain yourself?"

Pvt. Jones was past forty years old and the lines in his face could have made him easily mistaken for fifty. He was rather short, no more than five-six. He had a stocky frame, but it was bent with years of misery that I would never know. His countenance was tired, but not humble. There was something about him that let me know this man had retained his pride after many tribulations.

"Yes, sir, I can. I usually ride with Pvt. Dulling, but he didn't call me or anything so I had to walk. It just took me this long to get here."

"Pvt. Jones, do you live at the address in your 201 file?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Well, Pvt., that's got to be more than ten miles. Did you walk the whole way?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

"But Pvt., why didn't you call me? I could have sent someone out in a Jeep to pick you up. You didn't have to walk all that way."

"Well, I didn't have a phone, and besides walking don't hurt so much anymore, not like in '42."

"In '42, did you do a lot of walking in '42."

"Yes, sir, I walked for several days in front of a Jap bayonet. I was in the Bataan Death March."

I lost my breath for a moment.

"You were in the Bataan Death March?"

"Yes, sir, I was, and I made it through the whole thing. I was lucky I guess."

"Lucky?"

"Yes, sir, I was a little short guy, and those Jap guards

didn't pay me much attention. Seemed like they sure didn't like the tall guys. The tall guys took most of the rough stuff. Yeah, I was sure lucky."

The man in front of me was confessing to having survived WW II in a Japanese prison camp under conditions unimaginable by most civilized people. He had suffered atrocity, starvation, injustice, near death, and watched his best friends die. He had recently rejoined the Texas National Guard, so he could get some retirement. He didn't know that he couldn't get retirement, because he was already on a government disability. Yeah, the recruiters let him in. They needed the numbers, and besides, he wanted to join. He had no home, no family, and could only find work as a day laborer. This was the same man that told me he was lucky.

There are those that philosophize that there is no reality, only perception. Well, professor, was Pvt. Jones really lucky? In my humble opinion, reality is what happens, perception is just the way we see it, but there is a time in in man's life when perception can be more important than reality.



THE CAJUN BEAUTY



Retha was her name and she was a sight for the eyes. Her dark eyes, dark hair, and Cajun skin were enough to classify her as a beauty, but she had the shape and personality to make it all work. She was the number one girl behind the counter at General Aviation in MSY (New Orleans) for years, and she was a “get it done” type. She could talk to a weak signaled pilot in an incoming aircraft while making out a fuel ticket and taking a catering order from two other pilots at the same time and do a good job on all.

Yes, Retha was an unusually attractive woman, one of a kind, but she had one serious failing. She would believe anything that a pilot told her. At first, I thought it was an act, you know, maybe she was just pretending to believe all the wild stories that pilots would tell in the course of a day. Because, the flight crews were customers and bought fuel by the thousands of gallons. Maybe the game was to make sure they were happy with their stop at General Aviation for service. It was difficult for me to tell if Retha believed

it all or just pretended. I'm still not sure how much she believed, for sure, but there is considerable evidence that she believed most of them.

Tom flew a Saberliner for a major construction company and his copilot was just called "Shorty." They had been flying into MSY (New Orleans) on a regular basis, about once a week for some time. Retha, in her smiling and personable way, asked Tom on a certain trip,

"Hey Tom, where is Shorty, I haven't seen him in a while?"

Without hesitation, Tom said, "Oh, he's not out of the hospital, yet Retha. He's not due to be released for a couple more weeks yet."

Tom was making up the lie as he talked. He knew that Shorty had been crewing another aircraft for a few weeks, and then was going to take a vacation, so he wouldn't be back with Tom on the Saberliner for at least two weeks.

Retha showed her usual high level of interest whether real or feigned.

"Hospital, Shorty is in the Hospital, what happened?"

"Oh, you didn't know about the hospital deal? Well, Shorty heard about all those experiments they were running at the Medical Center in Houston with growth hormones so

he signed up as a guinea pig.”

“Medical Center, experiment, growth hormones, no, I hadn’t heard anything. What’s happening?”

“Well, Retha, let me tell you, you wouldn’t even recognize Shorty. He has grown six inches in the last few weeks and he’s decided to stay for a couple more inches. He thinks he’ll look the best if he stops at about 6 foot 2.”

“Shorty, 6 foot 2, I can’t believe it, why that’s wonderful!”

Tom was really getting into the story as Retha showed more interest. It’s possible that Tom was enjoying the story as much as anyone else. Of course, all the other pilots in the room were helping with the story whether they knew Shorty or not. Several told about their visits to see Shorty in the Hospital. One pilot from New York even helped with the story, and he didn’t know anyone in the room. Well, we pilots need to stick by each other, you know.

Tom carried on.

“Yeah, the doctors are real pleased with the way the experiments are going. They been talking about writing Shorty up in the AMA journal, maybe even getting Shorty to go on a tour.”

Tom was getting ready for some more revelations, but his passengers showed up, and he had to leave before Retha could finish with her questions. She wanted more and detailed information, like the name of the hospital and doctors. She also wanted phone numbers, but Tom had to leave suddenly and Retha's questions were not answered. Of course all the other pilots couldn't seem to remember anything once Tom had left.

No one thought much more about it for a couple of weeks, and then Shorty and Tom were back on the New Orleans run. Shorty walked into the lobby of General Aviation without a thought. No one had let him in on the story.

"Hi Retha, how's it going?"

Retha looked at Shorty as if she were looking at the guest of honor at a funeral that had just walked in. With eyes open wide and amazement written across her face, she said,

"Shorty what's the matter with you?"

"What are you talkin' about Retha?"

"Well, I mean, you, you're so short!"

Now Shorty, just as amazed, replied,

“What’s the matter with you Retha? I’ve always been short!”

What none of us knew, until later, was that Retha’s mother was dating a man that was only a littler more than three feet tall. Retha and her mother had spent the last two weeks calling Houston, trying to find the doctor or hospital where they could send the boyfriend for treatments.

A FINE DAY ON THE BEACH
OR
HEROES ARE MADE, NOT BORN

It didn't look that far, maybe a quarter of a mile, and I had never ever seen a ship wreck before. Sure why not, I had a snorkel so I could swim with my head under water and just take it easy. After all, I had a Life Saving merit badge from the Boy Scouts, and had worked as a life guard while in college... sure that wouldn't be too hard. Never mind that I was in my mid to late forties, and not a teenager anymore.

I had my homemade underwater camera, so we could take some pictures. Yeah, that's a great idea.

"Hey Greg, what do you say we swim out to that ole ship wreck and see what it looks like up close?"

"Where?"

"Right out there, see, just to the right of our ship but closer in. You know, we saw it off to our left this morning when the launch was bringing us here."

"Oh yeah, I see it. Yeah that ought to be fun. Are you ready to go?"

"No Greg, first we're going to eat lunch, the launch just brought us the sandwiches and Kool-Aid. After that we'll rest for an hour, then we'll swim out to the wreck, okay?"

"Well, Dad, me and Billy will go ahead and we'll see you out there."

"Greg, I think you ought to eat first then rest."

"You go ahead Dad we'll meet you out there later."

When your son is old enough to be married and have a couple of kids, then you are wasting your time with advice. Besides, Greg was a Fire Fighter for the Houston Fire Department, and knew he could do just about anything he set his mind to. With age there should come wisdom, but sometimes that wisdom comes from surviving a difficult lesson.

You need to know that we had been swimming all morning in the some of the most beautiful conditions you could imagine. The water was temperate and so clear you could easily see the bottom thirty feet below. There were schools of fish to see or spear and we had done some of both. We were equipped with a snorkel, flippers,

facemask, and either a spear, or a camera.

I had made an underwater camera buying a cheap little 127 camera and putting it inside a zip-lock bag. It was waterproof and took acceptable pictures, and those real underwater cameras could cost an arm and a leg. In fact this day we were using the second camera, because Greg had lost the first one we made. I can't blame him, really, because when I saw the shark up close, I would have dropped the camera myself. You ask, if I am afraid of sharks, then why am I swimming around in the ocean with them. Well, I guess it is sort of that old "out of sight" sort of thing. So, if you don't see them then it must be alright... right? The one we saw coming our way was probably only three or four feet long, and he maybe meant no harm to us, but then I had seen enough "Sea Hunt" episodes on TV to not want to play with probably and maybe or with the odds against his mood.

There was a coral reef that lay on the north side of the island, and we were told there were lobsters there and, if we speared any, the ship's cook would prepare them for our supper. That morning we were mostly on the south side of island, and had seen a lot of fish, not for spearing, but just beautiful schools of fish. The lobsters could wait until later. I was getting in the mood to explore the ship wreck.

I took my sandwich and Kool-Aid, and Greg wandered off with his new friend. It was my intention to rest after

eating so as not to have cramps on my way to the wreck. There was no such thing as a lifeguard present. It was everyman for himself. It never occurred to me that I would need one. Famous last words.

After a little nap, I awoke and looked out across the water, and there was Greg and his friend, waving from the wreck, or was it. Well, it was hard to tell from that distance, but it looked like them waving. The little stinkers, they just couldn't wait for me, and were already having a good time without me. So, on with flippers, mask and snorkel, and wade out into the surf-less ocean. Being basically a land lubber, no surf didn't mean anything to me at the time, but as I think of it now, shouldn't it mean something? What I think now is that it should have told me that there was a very swift current moving parallel with the coast of the little island, so that there was no wave action toward the shore. Well, maybe not, but this is all after thought. Maybe some of you sea-going types can correct me. Of course it won't do me much good now, because now I know better than to attempt what I was about to get into.

My swimming was slow and interesting as I swam with my head under water, and watched the bottom below retreat. I must have been ten minutes or so when I looked up and couldn't see the wreck anymore! Where was it? Where did it go? Did it sink? As I swiveled around, there it was way off to my right. How could I have missed it? It was the current! To the land lubber's view the water is not

moving at all, but lying still like the water in a lake. It was like I was trying to swim across a swift running river, and in my lackadaisical slow swimming, I was being carried by the current further and further away from the wreck, the island, everything! Quickly, I started stroking hard for the wreck. Instead of swimming toward it, I had to aim well to the east of it. It was like crabbing against the drift angle to the wind in an airplane. My crab angle was approximately thirty degrees. That is a very healthy drift angle if you are in an airplane. A rough calculation meant that for every two strokes I made toward my destination, I was being carried one stroke away. Another way of looking at the problem was that the distance to swim was fifty percent further than the actual distance. If the drift angle had been another 15 degrees, then for each stroke forward I would be carried one stroke sideways, which meant it didn't matter how long I swam, I would never reach the wreck! Another way to look at it was, since I was half way there, then I would never every be able to swim back to the island. I would just be carried out further to sea!

All these calculations did not form in my head at once, but slowly as I continued to swim for the shipwreck. It was my intention to rest up once on the wreck for my return to the island. Slowly, I began to realize what a chunk I had bitten off.

How had those youngsters made it? Well, maybe they had been swimming with their head above the water and didn't

get swept away like I did. Well, maybe. The time seemed to pass slowly, surely, and finally I drew close enough to the shipwreck to see it was not at all what I expected. It was just a pile of rust that had all but disintegrated into the ocean. The metal hull was paper-thin and the ragged edges that were still standing were as sharp as a razor. There was nothing to stand on... there wasn't even anything to hold onto and there were no boys! For a moment of panic I thought perhaps they had been swept out to sea, and perhaps even now they were way to west and getting further from the wreck and the island... and all help...

My idea of resting there was worthless. There was nothing to hold onto except sharp rotting metal. I could tread water, but that meant that I was being carried further from the shore. My only choice was to start back for the island and get help. I was tired and needed the rest I had expected to get on the wreck, but there was no other choice.

Stroking back toward the beach it seemed like I was not getting any closer, but noting that I wasn't getting any further, however as my strokes began to slow, then my crab angle was growing to more towards forty-five degrees! By this time I had figured out that at forty-five of drift then I would never make it to shore. A shot of adrenalin gave me added strength and with my head under water, I began make stronger and faster strokes.

Then as I looked down and forward I saw two huge Manta Rays on a collision course with me. Before I was scared for the boys, scared for not reaching the beach, but now I was scared of those two monsters just in front of me. I came upright in the water with my head under to keep the Rays in sight. They slowly turned and passed off to my left! I've been told that Manta Rays are harmless, oh yeah? We studied them in Zoology and that harpoon on the end of their tail is nothing to fool with. I left the scene in a controlled motion so as not to splash or make a scene, and continued on toward the beach. My strength to continue stroking was ebbing faster than my approach to the island. It was about then that I saw the launch returning to the island. It wasn't close enough for me to hear it's motor so they surely wouldn't be able to hear me over the noise of their own noise. Perhaps they could hear me on the beach. It was still several hundred yards away, and if they heard me they could send the launch out to pick me up.

Help! Help! Hey out here! Nothing, they couldn't seem to hear me. Then a breeze from the beach told me why. I began to hear portions of the boom box blaring away on the beach. The youngsters were playing volleyball, and had the music turned up loud enough to drown out air raid sirens, if there had been and air raid and they had sirens. It was useless to waste my breath yelling, so I just kept swimming.

Wait, the launch is leaving the beach and it's headed my way. They heard me. They're coming to get me. I'm going to make it, and then we can go look for the boys! Too soon I saw the launch veer away from me... they weren't coming for me, they were returning to the ship. They didn't see me. My only hope was within me. I had to keep stroking, just keep stroking, can't give up and can't slow up, just keep stroking.

Time was moving like cold syrup. It wasn't time anyway, it was distance, but yes it was time also. Each minute I was in the water meant that the boys were be drifting further and further out to sea. Yes, time was just as important as distance, and as I may be gaining a little on distance, I was losing a little more on time.

I could see the people on the beach now, and hear the boom box blaring. Just keep stroking, stroking, how long can I do this? Then time and distance disappeared, it seemed that I had lost conscience, but of course I hadn't, or had I? Slowly, I realized my flippers were touching something. It was the bottom. It was sand. I was on the beach! I couldn't stand, so I crawled on my hands and knees to just past the water's edge and collapsed. As my strength began to return, I rolled over and the first thing I saw was my son Greg.

"Hey Dad, where you been. You missed all the excitement!"

"Excitement, what are you talking about?" I had nearly drowned in the ocean and he said I missed all the excitement.

"Hey didn't you see the launch from the ship? They had to come and take Billy out to the ship to the Doctor."

"Your friend Billy? What was the matter with him?"

"Well he had a pretty bad wound in his upper left thigh, you know." No, I didn't know, and I hate it when somebody is telling a story and they start in the middle and go to both ends.

"Greg, what are you talking about? I thought you and Billy were going to swim out to the shipwreck and meet me there."

"Oh no Dad, we got to thinking about it and decided it was too far, so we decided to get some lobsters instead. You know that coral reef is just about level with water and you can see those lobsters back up in the holes of the coral. Anyway, I had just got a nice one when Billy saw what he thought was a really big one, so yelled to his wife to bring his 'devil's fork.' You know the one he has been using, the one with two forks but with one fork broke off. Billy didn't bring it with him to start with because it was heavy and clumsy and he didn't think he could use it on the lobsters back up in those holes with that one fork broke off.

Anyway he yelled for Tillie, his wife to bring his harpoon. She was bringing it out across the top the reef, but she was barefooted and was slow. Billy kept yelling for her to hurry and she kept yelling that the coral was hurting her feet. So, finally, Billy just yelled at her to just throw it to him. She did, and you know she really stuck him! That one barbed fork went completely through his upper left thigh."

"Good grief Greg, you mean it went all the way through his leg?"

"Yeah, it really did, and there he was, screaming and bleeding like a stuck hog, and about to drown."

"What happened then? Did you get help?"

"No Dad they were too far away and making all that noise, and his wife was no help. She thought she had killed him. All she knew was that he was screaming and turning the ocean red."

"Well, what did you do?"

"I jerked it out."

"You jerked it out. You mean, you pulled it out barb and all?"

"It was the only thing I could do Dad. He couldn't keep his head above water, he was bleeding so bad, and you know we have seen sharks. So, I just did it."

"Good grief Greg you could have crippled him."

"Well, I know but I couldn't let him drown, and I couldn't get him out. It was the only thing I could do."

As a Houston Fire Fighter, Greg had completed his EMS course and served on the ambulance. I don't know the extent of his medical training, but I doubt if it included removing a barbed harpoon.

That's the reason the launch came from the ship. That's the reason it passed me by on the way back. It was to take Billy and Tillie back to ship for the real Doctor. As it turned out Billy had no permanent damage, but had a story to tell at coffee breaks for the next several years.

In my case of facing death... it was ho hum. Nobody saw it so maybe it didn't really happen. At least it didn't make the six o'clock news.

