They Were Expendable

By W. L. White

Fighting in Glare of Searchlight, No. 32 Heads for Its Prey and Hails 7,000-ton Jap Cruiser's Landing Party on Bataan. Submarines Bring Cheering News from Australia. Food Scarce. Fighters Drill Men for Flight. Blockade-Runner Brings in Fresh Fish and Vegetables. Men and Women, Expendables—Doomed to Die Fighting Japs.

CHAPTER 10

"I was staying that night with Chandler at Corregidor hospital," said Kelly to Lieutenant Bulkeley, "and we knew you'd had good hunting when we saw you come chugging up to the dock next morning with that broom tied to your masthead and your forward torpedo tubes empty. After that there was a little lull. I was supposed to report to the doctor every other day to have my fingers dressed, and I'd go late in the afternoon and have a date with Peggy. Sometimes we'd walk down to the navy communications center at Monkey Point to pick up the radio news and gossip—often we'd just sit on the sea wall and watch the moon on the water. Sometimes wondering what would become of us. Often it would be a foursome, or we would sit there with Stevens, the nurse whose boyfriend was an artillery captain over on Bataan. She'd always watch the gun flashes, which were getting closer now as the Japs were pushing our boys farther and farther down the peninsula. Stevens would always worry for fear every flash was a Jap field piece firing at her captain. But we'd tell her we knew by the color that it was her captain firing at the Japs.

"Early in February they started sending submarines up from Australia, and our boats would always meet them outside the mine fields and bring them in—Bulkeley getting aboard to ride as pilot. The subs had news. They said America was building a big Australian base — that supplies were rolling down there. The submarine Trout would bring in ammunition for Army's three-inch guns on Bataan and take out gold which had been brought over to Corregidor from Manila before it fell. The unloading, of course, would all be at night, and then Bulkeley would take them out and show them deep water, where they could submerge and hide from Jap bombers during the day. Quezon went out on one submarine to Cebu, and a week later High Commissioner Sayre left on a submarine. It seemed like a good many prominent people were leaving Corregidor. And the Army had been pushed back to what we knew were its last and strongest defense positions on Bataan. None of it looked too good.

"Of our original six boats, two had already been lost. DeLong's ex-ore Subic Bay, and the 33 boat while I was in the hospital—she'd been going full speed ahead investigating what looked at night like the feather of a Japanese submarine's periscope, only it turned out to be a wave breaking over a little submerged and unchartered coral reef.

"We came close to losing the 32 boat about that time," said Bulkeley. "DeLong and I were riding her the night of Feb. 8, patrolling up the west coast of Bataan as usual. A little before 9 o'clock we saw gun blasts on up ahead of us in the neighborhood of Bagac Bay, so we put on what speed we could to find out who was shooting at what. Incidentally, the speed wasn't much. Because the 32 boat had had an explosion while they were cleaning the carburetors wax out of her strainers and tanks, so that now she was held together with braces and wires, and running on only two engines. But pretty soon we sighted a ship dead - ahead about three miles away. It was maneuvering to put her in the path of the moonlight on the water so I could make out what she was. But now she seemed to put on speed, heading up in the direction of Subic Bay—maybe, if she had seen us, to get under the protection of the Jap shore batteries there.

"Why had she been firing near Bagac Bay? We learned that later. She was a 7,000-ton Jap cruiser covering a Jap landing party with her guns. We didn't know we'd broken up this party at the time. Following her, we seemed to be gaining because she had apparently slowed down, maybe thinking she had lost us. We were closing on her fast now, when suddenly a huge big searchlight came on, holding us directly in its beam, and a few second later two six-inch shells came screaming over, landing just ahead of us with a terrific explosion and waterspout. Her search light blinding us and we could only head directly into it, firing the starboard torpedo at that light at about 4,000 yards' range. There was another flash of six-inch guns from the cruiser, and this salvo dropped much closer to us—hardly 200 yards ahead. A third two-gun salvo landed just astern of us, and then we let her have the port torpedo, figuring the range at a little over 3,000 yards.

"Now we were empty, and the problem was to dodge that blinding searchlight. Before we veered off to the east, we tried to douse it with spray of 50-caliber bullets but they did no good. We could hardly see where our tracers went for the glare. We could see now she was chasing us, firing salvoes in pairs from her four six-inch guns, when suddenly there was a dull boom, and we could see debris and wreckage sailing up through the searchlight's beam. There was a pause in her firing—no doubt about it, one of our torpedoes had struck home, probably the second one. We knew she was crippled because she had slowed down—that light which was trying to hold us in its glare was getting farther and farther away, and about 10:30 we lost it by making a hard turn to the right. Presently it went out. It came on again once or twice on the horizon, feeling for us over the waves, but never found us.

"The next day the Army told us we'd broken up a 7,000-ton cruiser's landing party on Bataan near the village of Moron, which was then in no man's land, and said that their planes reported the Japs had had to beach her 75 miles up the coast. Still later the planes reported the Japs were breaking her up for scrap. But we brought the 32 boat back safe to the base at Sisiman Cove. Our headquarters there was a reformed goat slaughter-house, about 100 feet long and 30 feet wide, with a concrete floor. We'd scrubbed it out with creosote. It still smelled some, but was habitable. We also acquired a tender—an old harbor tug called the Trabajador—and put her in charge of DeLong, who'd lost his ship."

"Then we all sat around envying him," said Kelly, "because here he was, living like an admiral—a cabin, a wardroom, a real galley (not just a hot plate, which was all we had on the MTB's), and even a mess boy who could bake pie. It was big-ship life, and Bulkeley and I used to find some excuse to go every night and eat his dessert and drink coffee. DeLong liked it so much he later decided to stay on Bataan rather than leave with the rest of us.

"Our plan for making a run for China when our gas was almost gone still stood, and Bulkeley had got hold of some landing-force gear which we knew might be useful on the Chinese coast if we missed connections with our Chungking friends and had to fight our way through the Japs. So we began drilling our men in landing-force procedure.

"This got them very curious. They knew our gas was running out, and we had almost no more torpedoes except the ones which were in the boats. So we told them we were thinking of going south to join the Moros if Bataan fell, and it satisfied them for a while. We let only two other persons in on the secret—Clark Lee and Nat Floyd, newspaper correspondents who had been authorized by the Admiral to make the trip with us.

"The food situation was getting tough. Our breakfast was always hot cakes made without eggs—just flour and water, and baking powder—and the syrup was sugar and water. We hadn't seen butter since the war started. Then for dinner, it was always canned salmon and rice, and you don't know how tired you can get of canned salmon until you eat it regularly for a few months. We welcomed any change.

"On our boat we got so tired of salmon we ate a tomcat," said Bulkeley. "It had been bothering us at night, and one of the men plugged it with a .45. We boiled it to get all the good out of it, and it wasn't bad. All dark meats—reminded you a little of duck. Of course we didn't have to eat it—if you didn't like tomcat, there was always plenty of canned salmon.

"The one high spot in our diet was the Canopus," said Kelly. "She was an old sub tender, so slow she'd been abandoned, but she had a fine machine shop. She was tied up at the dock and already had been hit twice by bombs, so they worked on her at night and abandoned her by day. But among her stores were barrels and barrels of ice cream mix and a freezer. And her skipper would let anyone in the Navy who came aboard eat all the ice cream he wanted as long as those barrels lasted—they held out until the week we left. So the skipper here, who is very fond of ice cream, used to go over every night and fill up.

"But what we wanted most of all was fresh meat and vegetables, and along about the second week in February the first blockade-runner arrived. We piloted her in at night—rendezvous 25 miles out—and as daylight came, our mouths watered as we saw her cargo, strings of bananas piled high on her decks, and below, fresh meat and fruit for Corregidor. That afternoon I went over to see Peggy, and they were all busy slicing steaks and candling eggs. By yelling, screaming, and haggling, I got enough fresh meat to serve our crews two meals that week. She was a welcome little ship, that blockade-runner—made two more trips before the Japs sank her.

"But because of Peggy, my diet was a little better than the others. Since she was on Corregidor she was entitled, under their rationing system, to buy one item per day from the canteen—a package of gum, a candy bar maybe, from the little supply they had left.

"But Peggy pretended she never cared for them, and every time I came to see her she'd slip me a pocketful. She bought and saved them every day—just something to nibble while I was out on patrol, she explained.

"I began to feel funny about that break-through to China we were planning. Of course the Admiral had ordered it, and of course it was the way we could be most useful. But here were all these brave people on Bataan and the Rock, Peggy among them, realizing more clearly every day that they would never get out. Doomed, but bracing themselves to look fate in the face as it drew nearer, knowing that they were expendable like ammunition, and that it was part of the war plan that they should sell themselves as dearly as possible before they were killed or captured by the Japs. But a handful of us secretly knew that we, and only we among these many brave thousands, would see them home again, and soon.

"And the more I liked Peggy—she was a swell kid—the guiltier I felt. Furthermore, I knew if we ever left, it would have to be soon. Gas was getting dangerously low—barely enough to make the run for China. And so was our torpedo supply. We would have to leave with every tube full if we were to throw effective weight against Jap shipping on the China coast, and in addition to what we would need for this, we had only a few torpedoes left, enough for one good fight—and that was to come sooner than we knew."

Next chapter: Shelling swimmers and a tanker burned.

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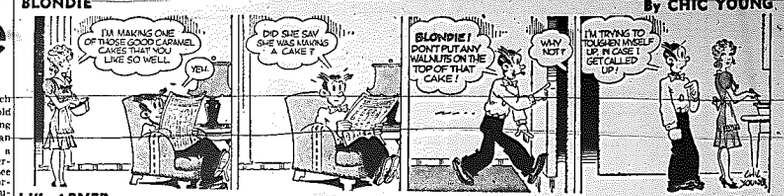

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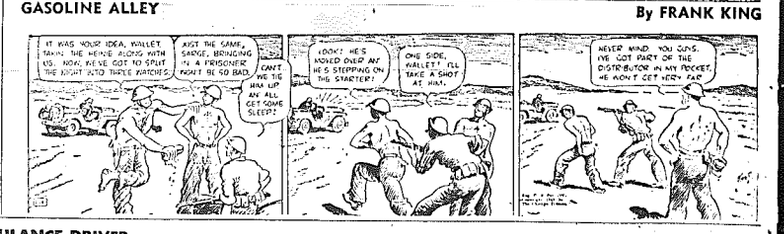
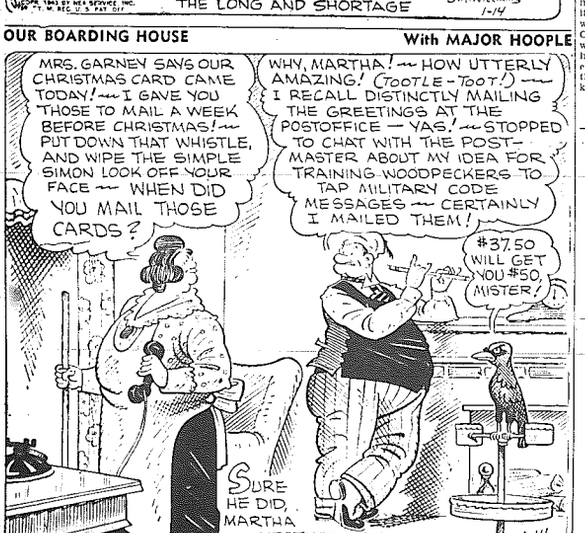


OUR BOARDING HOUSE With MAJOR HOOPLE



THE WOMAN AMBULANCE DRIVER BY BUD HILL