

Sight of Home

By Clifford Hui

Bill Garnett leaned forward and shouted to Allen, “There it is down there, Allen. See it out your window?”

Allen, who was seated in the next row, took the chewed pencil from his teeth, squinted out his window, and shouted back over the buzzing roar of the turboprop engines. “That speck of sand is Tern Island? How do the monk seals ever find it?”

“One of the mysteries of nature, I guess. See those other specks? Those are the other islands in the French Frigate Shoals. Tern is the only one big enough for an airstrip.”

Allen pressed his face to the window and nodded. He leaned back and turned to Bill. “Is it true that these monk seals are the only species of earless seals that inhabits the tropics?”

“That’s right. And there are fewer and fewer of them. Not a good sign. You and I are to take the first stab at figuring out what the problem is. Their sister species in the Mediterranean has been on the verge of going extinct for a long time.”

Allen grimaced.

Bill continued. “But it looks like they may be coming back. Maybe we can help their Pacific cousins come back, too.”

The plane banked to the right and started its approach. Bill put away his Agatha Christie novel and other loose items to get ready for the landing. Allen chewed on his pencil again and finished the last page in the chapter on diving physiology before he stashed his book in his carry-on bag.

Bill had brought along the basic paraphernalia for field records plus equipment to take tissue and other samples from dead seals for his toxicology and parasite analyses. He also brought along Allen Noyce, who was doing a summer internship following his sophomore year at college. The supply plane from Honolulu was dropping them off in the afternoon along with supplies for the two resident-employees on the island, Jerome Skinner and Ed Maynard.

The two came out to meet Bill and Allen as they climbed from the aircraft. Ed extended a beefy palm. A wide grin spread across his round face. "Hey, Billy," he said. "Haven't seen you in a while. We heard you were coming, but we still couldn't talk any dancing girls into coming here to party with us."

Bill chuckled and grabbed Ed's hand. "You look as healthy as ever." Bill tapped a finger on Ed's expansive belly.

"No need to change when you're perfect." They grinned at each other.

Bill shook hands with Jerome. "Hey, Jerome. How ya doin'?"

Jerome bent his lean frame forward and smiled through his dark beard. "Fine. Good to see you, Bill. You should come out here more often. Get away from all that city noise and clutter." He nodded toward Allen. "Who's your sidekick?"

Bill introduced Allen. They chatted a bit about the flight and the weather while they loaded their bags and supplies onto the little flatbed truck. With Ed and Bill sitting on the bed, they headed to the lone building on the island. It was what the government calls a temporary building, but it sat on a concrete slab foundation and had a steel frame and walls. It looked like a warehouse with windows, and was built to withstand the storms that occasionally blew through. One end of it housed generators and other equipment, the other, people and operations.

Bill and Allen got separate, but small, rooms reserved for visitors. Bill tossed his personal gear on the bed and looked for an outlet for his nightlight. Finding one, he plugged in his light and tested it. Then he joined Allen for a walk to survey the beaches and the monk seals.

They waved to Ed as they started down the airstrip. Ed smiled to himself as he watched the pair walk side by side. Bill, a few inches over six feet, no longer carried the lean frame of his youth. His reddish brown hair curled down his neck and accentuated his receding hairline. Allen was a few inches short of six feet and wore his thick black hair cut close. He was bowlegged. They both wore shorts and T-shirts, and in the bright sunlight their arms and legs, coated by sunblock, seemed almost luminous. Allen's T-shirt was a plain faded green. Bill's was beige with

Writing Raw

All work appearing below is copyrighted by the author.

a picture of a bearded man and the words, "Fidel's Cigar Bar. We'll smuggle your butts in." Bill's limp had not improved over the years.

The men stopped frequently as Bill pointed out various details about the seals scattered along the beach. With short fore-flippers, folded rear flippers, and no external ears, they looked like fat sausages covered with soft beige velvet. They basked in the sun, some watching the two intruders, others sleeping. Even with their frequent stops and slow pace, Bill and Allen's survey trip took hardly more than an hour.

That evening while Ed tossed some thawed steaks on the barbecue, Bill walked out of his room with two bottles of wine. "Ed, Jerome, I brought you some Christmas presents. I thought you might like to have something different for your taste buds."

Ed inspected the two bottles. "Whooooee! Jerome, he brought the good stuff. This wine is in bottles with corks instead of that stuff in cardboard boxes we usually have." Everyone laughed.

After dinner, they sat around finishing off the wine and smoking some cigars that Bill also brought. Ed, relaxed and cheery, leaned toward Allen and said, "You know, pay attention to what Billy tells you. It will be more valuable than you expect." Then he sat back and, in a louder voice, proclaimed, "That guy saved my ass once." He pointed at Bill.

Allen's eyes got big. "Really? What happened?"

"Well, we had just gotten back to Pearl from a collecting cruise. It was late and raining. I was driving us from the dock to our offices to get our cars, and I crashed the truck. My head hit the steering wheel" Ed struck his forehead with the heel of his palm for emphasis "and I was dazed, but Billy over there was okay. He smelled gas leaking, and pulled me out of the truck just before it exploded in a big ball of fire just like in the movies. Actually, he saved our data first, and then pulled me out of the truck."

Bill chuckled. "I know what's important. I just threw my briefcase with our notebooks in it out the window."

"Jeez. I think I'd be too freaked out to do anything useful," Allen joked.

“You just have to focus on what’s important,” Bill said. “And there’s more to the story. We were in a Navy truck because we were on a Navy project. And, believe it or not, they filed charges against Ed for torching the truck.”

“Really?” asked Allen.

“There was an investigation, and a lot more official inconveniences than there would have been for a mere accident.” Ed slowly shook his head as he listened. “The charges were later dropped but the whole idea was just to hassle us. As it turns out, the Navy officer who lodged the charges had it in for Ed because Ed had tried to hustle the guy’s wife at a party.”

“Hey, how was I supposed to know she was married? She wasn’t wearing a ring and she was hitting on me.”

Bill laughed. “Hitting on you? That’s very difficult to believe, very difficult. In fact, it’s impossible to believe. And that’s why that officer was gunning for you.”

“Well, that’s my story and I’m stickin’ to it.”

The three old friends continued to catch up and recounted old stories, drawing Allen into the conversation whenever they could. The paths of the three men had crossed many times over the years, weaving their lives into a common fabric that now included Allen, who absorbed every detail of every story and news item.

During a lull in the conversation Allen looked around and asked, “Any of you up for a few hands of cards? Maybe some five-card draw?”

Ed and Jerome looked at each other. Then Ed looked at Allen. “Are we gonna be playing with a college-trained card shark?”

“Not me,” Allen responded. “I just learned. We can play for match sticks.” He pulled out a deck and shuffled.

Ed and Jerome watched his hands closely, and then Ed said, “Sure, we’ll play a few hands. You deal.”

Allen looked over at Bill. “You in?”

Bill got up from his chair, stumped out his cigar. “I’m going to take a fresh air break,” he

Writing Raw

All work appearing below is copyrighted by the author.

said. "Poker's not my game." He stepped outside into the clear, tropical air, its purity tinted by an occasional faint wisp of diesel fumes from the generator. Bill Garnett had lived in the tropics once before. It was a long time ago, and life was different then.

Garnett, Morales, and Ousley quickly settled in to play a few quick hands of poker as the tropical air, its purity tinted by an occasional faint wisp of diesel fumes from the generator, warmed past their comfort level. Sitting under the shade tarp near the commo bunker, where all the radio communications for the battery took place, they relished the cool of the shade and played a few hands before heading back to their firing positions on the perimeter. They sat on ammo crates that had once contained a pair of artillery shells, and used a fourth crate for a table. Sometimes when they had played here, they heard the oscillating tone of the radio in the bunker as it locked the incoming signal for the teletype into its electronic code machine, but today was quiet.

"Morales," Garnett said as he picked up his cards, "you going back to LA when you get out?" He looked over at Morales, a slender man with fine, curly, almost kinky, black hair and skin the color of toffee. A heart tattoo with the word "Lupe" inside adorned his left forearm.

"You bet your fuckin' ass, man. I got Lupe waitin' there for me, an' when I get back she's gonna take good care of me. You know what I mean, man? Life will be good. Life anywhere outside of this man's army is good." He looked at his cards. "Gimme two." He put two cards down, and picked up the two that Ousley passed to him. He re-sorted the cards in his hand. "Two more weeks, man, and I'm out of this hellhole and back to the world. Two more weeks." He held up two fingers in front of their faces.

Garnett smiled at him. "I'll take two." He put down two cards as Ousley passed two to him. "Your replacement's due in tomorrow. You can take the next chopper outta here and put your feet up at a quiet base camp until you ship out. You don't want to get your ass shot just before you go home."

“You got that fuckin’ right.”

“Amen to that,” Ousley piped in. He was tall with serious eyes and skin like milk chocolate. “Dealer takes one.” He put a card down for himself and then replaced it with one from his hand. “Who-all’s still in?” They each put two more cigarettes on the table. Ousley looked over at Garnett. “How ‘bout you, Sarge? You headin’ home or are you gonna re-up?”

Garnett, his high forehead was topped by bright red hair, was studying his cards. He sat shirtless, his dog tags in their rubber frames dangling silently from his neck, just under the rusty v-shaped tan below his throat. A sharp nose claimed the center of his face. “Re-up? I ain’t that fuckin’ crazy. Just goin’ home to Mom’s home cookin’ for a while. Find a job, maybe go back to school. Who knows?” He looked Ousley in the eyes. “But I ain’t gonna re-up. You can bet the ranch on that.”

“I fold.” Morales put down his cards. He looked over at Garnett. “Is that home to Stockton, Sarge?”

“Yep. Unexciting, unbeautiful Stockton, California. But it’s home.” He re-sorted the cards in his hand. “I’ll raise.” He put down two more cigarettes.

Ousley put down a couple of cigarettes. “I’ll call.” He laid down his cards. “A pair of nines.”

“Damn. You got me.” Garnett tossed his cards onto the makeshift table.

Morales got up and stretched his arms. “I’m taking a piss before I go back to my hole.” He started to walk away.

“Hey, Morales. Take your pot. You ain’t home yet.”

Morales smiled sheepishly as Garnett handed his helmet to him. He nestled it down on his head as he walked off, letting the chinstraps dangle.

Garnett stood up. “That’s it for me.” He stretched and put his shirt back on. He and Ousley pushed the empty crates back against a berm with their feet as Ousley slid the cards into his shirt pocket.

“That Morales sure don’t like the army, does he?”

“Nope. But he’s a good man to have in a fight. He saved my ass a couple of times.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It was before we got assigned to perimeter duty. One time we got caught in a small ambush and a grenade landed between us. He kicked it away and knocked me down at the same time. We both got a couple chips of shrapnel, but they were small, and the medic took care of us.” Ousley raised his eyebrows. Garnett continued. “Morales didn’t have to knock me down. He could have just ducked, and he would have been okay, but he saved my slow-moving ass instead and caught some steel for his effort.” Ousley didn’t say anything, just nodded.

Garnett glanced at him as he strapped on his web belt with its two canteens, first-aid pack, and bayonet. “Another time when we were on patrol he saw a booby trap I was about to walk into. Something about the way the branches were arranged, or he got a glimpse of the trip wire or something. But he yanked me back before I tripped anything.” Garnett buttoned his shirt over his pink skin.

“Morales does sound like a good man in a fight.”

“He doesn’t like the army, but he’s good at the field part.” Garnett looked up at Ousley. “How about you? Headin’ back to mom’s home cookin’ in Georgia? You been here only a month. How long you got left in Nam, anyway?”

“I got over ten months, Sarge.” He paused and pursed his lips. “I ain’t worried ’bout goin’ back to Mama’s cookin’. She died. That’s when I signed up.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

Ousley put his helmet on his head, and connected the chinstraps. “The army’s not a bad place if nobody’s shootin’ at you. Three hots and a cot, regular paycheck and all that. I might re-up if I can get duty someplace where there ain’t no shootin’.” He looked away. “There ain’t much for me back home.” He picked up his rifle and hung it on his shoulder.

Garnett didn’t say anything as they stepped out from under the tarp and walked back toward the perimeter together, their rifles slung over their shoulders. The red laterite soil, like

wet cement when they were digging through it to set up the firebase a couple of months ago, was now like dried cement. Its dust gave a dried-blood tint to almost everything.

The ninety or so men in the infantry company with Garnett, Ousley and Morales formed the security contingent for Bravo Battery at its forward fire support base. Their mission was to protect the base, dug in on the top of a low hill, from a ground assault. The six 105mm howitzers had a clear field of fire in any direction and provided artillery support for units operating in the jungle below up to six miles away. A wall of sandbags protected each gun, and walls and berms made of sandbags and dirt-filled old ammo crates provided protection for other parts of the firebase.

Although the guns had had a few fire missions at night, most of them occurred in the day, supporting infantry operations. On this day, everything was quiet.

Garnett and the rest of his company put up the defensive perimeter after the bulldozers had scraped the hilltop clean of all vegetation. They ringed the defensive perimeter with coils of razor wire set back twenty yards from the tree line. The razor wire would impede the movement of anyone approaching the perimeter, slowing an attack, and they would be exposed in the barren landscape. The defenders also placed claymore antipersonnel mines at the heads of gullies and behind hillocks, natural avenues for attackers. The mines, one pound of plastic explosive and a zillion pellets, sat ready to blast greetings to attackers. To provide the earliest possible warning of an attack, two observers were at each of several observation posts around the clock, equipped with binoculars for daytime watching and starlight night scopes for nighttime.

The men of Garnett's company defended the firebase from a ring of firing positions. Each position consisted of a two-man hole surrounded by low sandbagged walls and covered with a sandbagged roof. Shooting ports at the front corners directed their fields of fire at an angle to the perimeter so the front of the position was a solid wall. The entrance was at the rear. This design shielded the men from fire coming from directly in front. Also, their own fields of fire, along with those from other firing positions, formed crossfire zones throughout the

defensive perimeter. Attackers would pay a heavy price.

After breakfast the next morning, Bill and Allen went to work. “Allen, today we’ll be counting seals, using their size to guesstimate their age class, and determine their sex. If we see any dead ones, if they’re not too decomposed, we’ll do an abbreviated postmortem exam.” Bill handed a camera to Allen. “Take lots of pictures.” He also handed him some binoculars. “We’ll use these to determine their sex if we can get a look at their genital area. We don’t want to get so close that we cause them to go back into the water.”

“Good idea.” Then he asked, “What’s the difference between an abbreviated postmortem and a non-abbreviated one?”

“A full postmortem exam includes analysis of tissues for a full range of contaminants and toxins. To do that the tissues need to be preserved in super-cold temperatures until they get to the analytical equipment. We don’t have that super-cold capability. So we’ll save tissues for analyses that don’t require that much cold.” Allen nodded. They placed all their equipment into a wheelbarrow and headed down the beach.

They walked along the beach counting seals, estimating size, determining sex, and noting the locations of the dead ones. After the survey, they came back to the dead ones, juvenile sized. They still looked clean and their odor wasn’t very strong.

The first one was a female. Bill first measured its nose-to-tail length and noted any external abnormalities. He then made two parallel cuts from the shoulder to the hip on the front of the animal. He cut across the bottom at the hips and positioned himself to the side of the seal. Allen was taking pictures. From the side, Bill peeled back the skin, fat, and muscle, exposing the internal organs up to the bottom of the ribs.

“Wow,” said Allen. He jumped to the foot end of the seal and bent over the exposed organs with his camera. Suddenly he straightened up “Aaagh!” and staggered off to the side, coughing and gasping. “Oh my god! That stench is lethal.” He took a few steps and took some

deep breaths between coughs. His eyes watered. "Why ... why didn't you tell me about that?"

"I didn't know you were going to put your face in it. Why didn't you tell me about that? Apparently you didn't notice that I stayed off to the side when I opened her."

They paused a few moments while Allen recovered and the stench dissipated a little. Then, using an instrument that looked like a pair of two-handed stainless steel bolt cutters, Bill made two parallel cuts through the ribs and peeled back the front of the rib cage, exposing the lungs and heart. He measured the thickness of the subcutaneous fat and then examined the internal organs starting at the top.

Now Bill picked up the scissors that had a spoon-like structure at the tip of the lower blade. They are designed to allow rapid cutting along tube-like structures without snagging the blade. He inserted the scissors into the windpipe and cut along its length and into the branches into the lungs.

Allen, holding the postmortem data sheet on a clipboard in one hand and a pencil in the other, asked, "What are you doing?"

"Checking for parasitic worms. Find that spot on the sheet and put a zero in it."

Allen marked the form as Bill removed the lungs from the body, tossing them on the sand. They glistened in the sun. Bill then cut the major arteries and veins to the heart and pulled the heart from the body. He examined the outside closely.

"What are you doing now?"

"Just checking for scars that would indicate a heart attack."

"Heart attack? Have you seen many of those before?"

"Some, but very few." Then Bill inserted the scissors into each major blood vessel and cut into each of the heart's four chambers, exposing the interior walls.

"Looking for more worms?"

"Yeah. Mark down zero." He tossed the heart down by the lungs. It landed on the lungs with a "cump" sound.

Bill then cut open the stomach.

“Are those eels?”

“Yep. We should save these. Get a jar big enough so these will only half fill it. After I put them in, fill the space with formaldehyde and shake the jar.”

Bill dropped the empty stomach down by the heart and lungs. “Schlump.” He cut out about a cubic inch of the liver to be used to determine exposure to heavy metals. Allen held out a chemically clean jar while Bill dropped the sample in. Bill then found the entry of the bile duct into the small intestine just below the connection with the stomach and cut into the duct up to the liver. “Looking for flukes,” he said. Nothing. He looked up at Allen. “Flukes are parasitic flatworms. They require a mollusk as an intermediate host.”

“Oh.”

Bill removed the liver, tossing it on the sand with the other organs. “Smeck.” He followed the same procedure for the pancreatic duct. Nothing. Starting at the rectal end, he cut open the last six feet of the large intestine looking for lesions, polyps, worms, or any other abnormalities. Clean. The guts joined the growing pile of offal on the beach. “Schlisp.” He weighed the adrenal glands and saved them in preservative. He cut out the ovaries. “We’ll save these to check for ovulation scars.” Allen put them in a jar of preservative.

As he worked, Bill pointed out as many details as he could, including what features to photograph. He told him what to write on the postmortem form and sample labels. Allen asked a lot of questions.

As they dissected the second seal, Allen asked a lot fewer questions. The second seal had testes. Allen weighed them, but, because weight is the best indicator of reproductive status, didn’t save them.

When they were finished with each animal, they threw the excised organs into the ocean. Although the carcass then weighed much less than its initial two hundred fifty pounds or so, it still required a focused effort by the two of them to drag it into the ocean to wash away with the tide.

After they had finished tossing the organs of the second seal into the ocean, Bill looked

over at Allen while they both stretched their arms and backs. “You know, both of these seals had fresh eels of the same species in their stomachs when they died. Eels are pretty slimy. If the slime on this species is highly toxic to monk seals, the seals would be dead before the eels got digested.”

Allen’s eyes brightened. “That’s exactly what we’ve seen.”

“After lunch, we’ll go eeling. We can’t test for eel toxicity without some fresh eels. Let’s get this carcass off the beach and go eat. I’m hungry.” They dragged the seal carcass into the water.

Back in the kitchen area Bill built a lunch of instant noodles and topped it off with a banana. Allen put together a sandwich, chips, apple, a cup of yogurt, and cookies. They ate with little conversation. After an impromptu burping contest, they headed back outside.

They borrowed Ed and Jerome’s boat. Jerome made sure the motor was in good working order and then gas tank was full while Bill and Allen tossed in buckets, dip nets, life vests, some drinking water, and Bill’s pack of field data-recording gear. Then Bill pulled some binoculars from his pack and proceeded to look toward the seals and the ocean between them and the dock.

“What’re you doing?” Allen asked.

“Just checking for anything that might be helpful.” Bill scanned the area intently for a moment and then put down the binoculars.

“Anything?”

“Nothing obvious.” He put the binoculars back in his pack.

As Garnett told Ousley walked back toward their section of the perimeter, Garnett scanned the tree line beyond. He stopped walking and stared hard at one spot.

“See something?”

“I thought I saw something move, but it could be the wind. I’m going to check the

observation post before heading back.” Ousley nodded.

Over Ousley’s shoulder Garnett caught a glimpse of Morales walking toward his position on the perimeter. Then there was a pale blue flash and a loud “bang.” Grey smoke and dirt leaped from the ground behind Morales. Morales spun around and fell on his back, his helmet landing a few feet away with a fresh rip in its cover fabric. Garnett and Ousley flattened on the ground. Two loud bangs behind the gun emplacements. Shouts of “incoming!” More bangs. A pause in the shelling. Scurrying for cover. Ousley ran to his firing position. Garnett ran to Morales.

When Garnett got to Morales, Morales seemed very calm. “What the fuck are you doing, Morales?” he shouted. “What the fuck are you doing? You’re going home in two weeks!”

“Well, fuck me. I caught one, Sarge. At least it don’t hurt much.” He smiled a wan smile.

“Oh, shit.” Garnett then called over his shoulder for a medic. On his knees and bent over Morales, Garnett ripped open the front of Morales’ shirt and looked at his chest. It was smooth and uninjured. He reached around Morales’ shoulder to pull him up enough to look at his back. His shirt had a rip in it and was soaking wet. Bright red blood oozed out from a gash in his lower back. He closed his eyes momentarily, as though trying to wish the wound away. “Shit.”

Morales coughed and winced. “Guess I’m goin’ back to the world two weeks early, eh, Sarge?”

“Yeah. You’ll be in a hospital, but you’ll be outta this place.”

A medic dropped his bag down and started digging through it for bandages and medications. “I got ‘im, Sarge.” More mortar shells dropped in, more distant. Then one exploded on the sandbags of a nearby gun emplacement. Garnett and the medic hunkered down as pieces of shrapnel and dirt showered down on them and Morales.

Garnett looked at the medic and then at Morales. “Damn this war. Damn it. Damn it.” He picked up his rifle, his hand smearing Morales’ blood on the grip, and ran in a low crouch to his firing position.

Garnett dropped into the entryway at the rear of the firing hole that he shared with

Johnson. "Any targets yet?" He wiped the tears from his eyes with his sleeve, and peered out of his firing port.

"Nothing. No movement at the tree line."

Garnett stuck his head out of the entryway and looked toward the observation post in his sector. He saw two pairs of binoculars scanning the tree line but no hand signals. "Damn! Where are those fuckers?"

Two more mortar shells hit close to the observation post, causing the observers to duck behind their sandbags. The smoking trails of a half-dozen rocket-propelled grenades, commonly referred to as RPGs, streaked from the tree line towards Garnett's sector, exploding against sandbags there and at the artillery emplacements behind it. A wave of soldiers with gray helmets charged from the tree line towards the perimeter.

Everyone in Garnett's sector started shooting, the rapid chatter of their M-16 rifles erupting from every firing position almost simultaneously. Joining them was the throatier sound of the M-60 machine gun firing from its bunker that had a wider sweep of the perimeter. The attackers fell. Some were shot but most just dropped down, and crawled toward the razor wire. They had tools to lift it up and crawled under it. Once the attackers were on the ground, another storm of bullets and RPGs came from the tree line. When most of the attackers were through the razor wire and started shooting their rifles, a second, larger wave of attackers emerged from the tree line. They rushed the razor wire and easily crawled under it now that it was raised.

Johnson loaded another magazine into his rifle and yelled over to Garnett, "Who are these fuckers, Sarge? I've never seen VC wear helmets before. And they look organized."

"NVA, Johnson. North Vietnamese Army. This is a regular trained army, not guerillas like the VC. This is gonna be nasty."

"Shit."

Writing Raw

All work appearing below is copyrighted by the author.

“We should be back in a couple of hours, Jerome,” Bill said. “We’re just heading a few hundred yards offshore to catch some eels and whatever else looks meal-size to a monk seal. Thaw something big for dinner.” He grinned at Jerome.

They pushed off from the small dock and pointed their boat toward the other end of the island where most of the seals were. The open boat slipped quietly over the glassy surface. Beneath them the shallow bottom was covered with coral. The abundance of sea life told them that collecting eels and fish would be easy. When they got near the end of the island they stopped the motor and went to work. Bent over opposite sides of the boat with their dip nets, they began bringing up samples at a slow but steady rate. After they collected for a while in one spot, it seemed to be temporarily fished out or the fish were scared away so they moved to another spot nearby. They were just about finished when they noticed it was more difficult to see through the water, and the air was cool.

Allen looked around. “Hey, Bill. Where’d all this fog come from? I can’t see the island.”

“Oh, shit.” Bill scanned the horizon in all directions, but there was only fog. He pursed his lips. “I shoulda checked the horizon,” he mumbled. “Damn. I shoulda checked the horizon.”

Allen’s eyes got big. He jerked his head around, looking in every direction. “Which way is the island, Bill? I think it’s that way. C’mon, let’s start the motor, and get going.”

Bill raised his hand in a gesture to stop as he kept trying to look through the fog. “Now just slow down a minute, and think about this. We have to stay focused on what’s important. And what’s important is getting back alive, not as carcasses that have been picked over by the gulls for a couple of months.”

Allen’s fidgeting slowed.

“There’s probably about a ninety-degree angle that if we stay within, we’ll hit the island. However, if we head anywhere within the other 270 degrees, we’ll be heading out to sea. We’ve been turning this boat around quite a bit here, and I have no idea where that ninety-degree angle is. If we just start going somewhere, the odds are not good that we’ll hit the island.”

Allen's expression became more thoughtful. He stopped fidgeting. "So we should just sit out here?"

"It's the lesser of the two bad options." Bill took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It looks like we're here until the fog lifts or a storm comes." He looked carefully out at the fog. It was getting denser fast, and the sun, more than halfway to the horizon, had turned into a pale glowing disc that was quickly becoming dimmer.

"A storm? A storm is going to help us?"

"It'll blow the fog out. But storms don't happen very often. The fog will lift first."

Allen's eyes darted back and forth. He rubbed his upper arms as though he were cold, his speech nervous and quick. "Wait for the fog to lift? We could be here for days. We could drift out of sight of the island. We could run out of water. We could starve. How come this boat doesn't have a compass? I didn't volunteer to be lost at sea."

Bill looked at Allen with an expression that combined patience and annoyance. "Did you bring plenty of sunblock?"

The fog was close around them now, its thick whiteness erasing the horizon. Light was no longer from the intense tropical sun, but from a soft glare all around them. They were free to move, but unable to know where they were going. They were closed in a room the size of their boat.

Allen looked hard into the fog, in every direction. "We have to do something. We can't just sit here. Can those guys on the island rescue us?"

"They don't know where we are, and we can't tell them. Besides, they don't have the equipment to find us in the fog. But they're probably alerting the Coast Guard to our situation right now, so they can start a search as soon as the fog lifts." Bill looked around at the fog and then reached into his pack. He pulled out his Agatha Christie murder mystery, packed a few life vests behind him to make himself comfortable, and pulled his baseball cap down to reduce the glare from the glowing fog. He then settled back to do some reading.

When Allen cracked his knuckles, Bill looked up from his book, an annoyed expression

Writing Raw

All work appearing below is copyrighted by the author.

creeping across his face. "Allen, change the water in the collecting buckets. Keep our specimens alive a little longer. Allen got busy and Bill went back to his reading.

Night came. The fog thickened and became too thick to see the stars. It was pitch black. They formed lumpy beds out of the life vests and stretched out. Small waves slid past, rocking their boat in a gentle sway and a slow rhythm. In a few moments Bill and Allen relaxed. Subdued snoring sounds blended with the sloshing and soft slapping sounds of the waves against the boat. It was peaceful. One wave, however, slapped the boat differently than the others. It made a sound that was a soft, but distinct "bang."

Bill's breathing became rapid. In his sleep he mumbled, "Incoming ... incoming ... get down ... down ... help Morales ... help Morales ... N V A." Bill was quiet for a moment, but his head moved from side to side. He sat up. "Incoming! Incoming!" His eyes shot open. "Any targets, Johnson? ... Where are those fuckers? ..." He stared into the darkness.

"Bill, Bill, what's happening?" The boat rocked as Allen sat up and moved closer to Bill. "What's happening? Are you okay?"

"Where's the em sixty? ... I don't hear the M60. ... Too many R P G's. ... Too many. ... Get down..."

"Bill, wake up. It's okay. Everything is okay." Allen gently shook Bill's shoulder.

"Medic ... Help Morales ..."

"Bill, it's me, Allen. Wake up. Wake up." Allen shook Bill's shoulder again, harder this time.

Bill blinked. He took a couple of deep breaths and his panting slowed to merely rapid breathing. His hands patted the inside of the boat. "My rifle. Where's my rifle? ..."

"We don't have any rifles. We're catching eels. Remember? Bill, are you awake? It's me, Allen."

Bill licked his lips. "Wh ... where are we?"

"We're on a small boat drifting in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Are you okay?"

There was a long pause as though Bill were thinking. "Yeah ... yeah. I'm okay." He

rubbed his face with his hands.

“Are you sure? You sounded pretty freaked. You were saying something about ‘incoming’ and ‘em sixty’ and ‘Morales.’ What was that about?”

“Just a bad dream.”

“That sounded a lot worse than a bad dream. That sounded dreadful.”

“I’m okay. I’m okay. Leave it. Just leave it.” Bill took a couple more deep breaths.

“Sure. Okay. But do you ...”

Bill’s response was louder now. “Just leave it.”

Allen didn’t say anything and moved back to where he was before. They were both quiet for a few minutes. The boat rocked slowly. Bill’s hands patted the sides of the boat, the seat, life vests, his backpack, as though he were trying to remind himself which world he was in.

In an unusually loud voice Allen asked, “Bill, you don’t happen to have anything to eat in that pack of yours, do you? I’m really hungry.”

Bill paused. He took a deep breath. “Um, I’ll check.” Bill rummaged through his pack, and came up with a couple of granola bars. “Here. Try this. It’s all I’ve got.” He tapped one on the seat so Allen knew where to reach for it in the dark. There were the sounds of wrappers tearing and of granola crunching.

After eating, Allen asked, “How did you get in the marine mammal business, anyway?” He changed his posture, causing the boat to rock just a little.

Bill shifted his own weight, and the boat rocked a bit more. “Me? Oh, serendipity. I started out as a toxicologist studying mammals. One day a friend of mine who I met through Ed called me up to ask me to join him on a project about sea lions. He’s a microbiologist, and he thought the two of us could put together some good studies. It sounded interesting to me, and we wrote a bunch of proposals. The rest, as they say, is history.”

“For someone like me, just starting out but wanting to study marine mammals as a career, what classes do you think I should take?”

Bill rolled his eyes in the dark. He took a breath before he answered. “Well, if you’re not

already focused on a specialty like physiology, ecology, behavior, microbiology, and that kind of stuff, I think you should get a strong general mammal background. After all, marine mammals are mammals. You can't appreciate how special they are unless you understand mammals in general. In graduate school you can focus on the marine part."

"Hmmm. That sounds good." A "scratching" sound indicated Allen was rubbing the five-o'clock shadow on his cheek. "And do marine mammal internships in the summers?"

"Sounds like a good plan to me."

Allen smiled in the dark. "Great." He leaned back to get comfortable. Then he asked, "Why would monk seals eat toxic eels ... or toxic anything?"

"That's the big question. It must be a change in diet because a normal diet that was toxic would make them go extinct real fast ... instead of going extinct slowly like they seem to be doing now. So the real question is, 'Why are they changing their diet?' Maybe the prey items of their normal diet have gotten too scarce. Maybe human fishing efforts, pollution, or global warming has something to do with that. Maybe not. We're certainly going to need a lot more research projects to address that question."

The boat rocked as Allen shifted position. "I'm too tired to think about that now. I'm going to get some sleep."

"Yeah. Me, too."

They slept, but not well.

In the morning, the fog was still there. They drank the last of the water.

Allen's wiry frame looked leaner this morning. His dark hair was wet from the fog, and sticking to his head. There were bags under his eyes. His five-o'clock shadow was now beyond midnight, and he appeared haggard. His cheer from last night's conversation had disappeared. As he looked around at the fog, his brow grew more furrowed, and his stomach growled. His voice had an edge of agitation.

"We're gong to die out here, aren't we? We're going to die of thirst, aren't we? Or we'll run up on one of these reefs, rip the bottom out of this boat and sink, won't we?"

Bill stifled a sigh. "This is a Boston Whaler," he explained. "It has a double hull of fiberglass with closed-cell foam between the hulls. You can fill this boat with water, and it won't sink. You can cut it into a dozen pieces, and each one will float. Don't worry about the boat."

"Okay, okay. That's good to know." Allen's eyes darted back and forth, trying to pierce the fog in different directions. "But how long can we last without water? How long can we last without water?"

Bill responded in clear, measured words. "A long time. If things get desperate, but I don't think they will, we can put a foot or so of water in the boat and stretch out in it. We'll absorb enough water through our skin so that we won't need any drinking water. We'll be okay for water."

"Are you sure? I never heard of that. I'm thirsty."

"Don't talk so much. Talk makes you thirsty. And don't worry, we'll be fine. I think it's time to change the water in our collecting buckets." Bill reached for his Agatha Christie book.

The air began to warm, and its stillness increased the humid feel of the fog. Allen fanned himself with some data sheets. Bill read his book. Their boat rocked in a slow rhythm. Bill finished reading and smiled at the ending. He checked his watch. It was noon. He looked up. There was a patch of blue overhead with a tropical sun in it.

"Aha!" he said, a smile lighting up his face. He untied the safety line from one of the bucket handles and tied one end around his Agatha Christie book. He then dangled it over the boat's bench seat.

Allen watched intently. "What're you doing?"

Bill carefully watched the shadow from the rope. Without looking up, he said, "It's noon. The sun is almost directly overhead, but not exactly. We're north of the equator, and at this time of the year, the sun is as far south of the equator as it will be all year. It's mid-day so the sun should be due south, and the island should be, too. By hanging a weight from the line, the line should be vertical. And the shadow will be on the north side of the string." And then he muttered, "At least it should be." Bill looked at the shadow on the seat. He pointed. "That way,"

he said and started the motor. Holding the dangling book at arm's length so he could keep the shadow pointed at him, Bill turned the boat and headed toward the sun.

The attackers were crawling and shooting. In a few moments they would be close enough for a charge. Garnett heard a loud, round explosion as a claymore mine was triggered. As he loaded another magazine into his rifle, he noticed the M-60 was not firing. He stuck his head out of the entryway and looked toward the machine gun bunker. Its muzzle was not in its firing port, so the pause was not just for reloading. Garnett's face looked worried. Those heavy rounds were needed to cut through the tree line.

"Johnson, I'm going to check the M60," he called.

"You goin' out in this shit? You're crazy, man."

"Yeah. It's not my favorite part of the job." Garnett stood at the entry to their firing hole. He muttered to himself, "Stay focused. Stay focused." He took a deep breath and dove out onto the ground. He crawled on his belly using his elbows to pull and his feet to push. Bullets zinged past and kicked up dirt around him. Almost there. A pause in the shooting. Scrambled onto his feet. Ran in a crouch. A loud bang and his feet went out from under him.

Garnett was on his back, looking at the sky. He looked around to get his bearings. An RPG had hit near him. His right leg had a dull ache. When he turned over and tried to crawl it wouldn't move. He dragged himself along the ground toward the machine gun bunker, hearing the battle raging to his right. When he was almost to the bunker, he saw the muzzle reappear in the firing port, spitting bullets. Another claymore was triggered. The attackers were on their feet now, charging and shooting. Garnett turned around so he could shoot while still lying on his stomach. He switched his M-16 to full automatic and opened up, firing a short burst at each enemy soldier he could get in his sights. Rarely missing, most of his targets fell. But there were so many, and they kept coming.

Then Garnett was almost deafened by a huge roar coming from behind him. He

reflexively put his face in the dirt. That roar was quickly followed by another. Almost all the charging attackers lay dead or wounded. Garnett's chest resonated with two more huge roars, the shrubbery at the tree line shivering with each one. Garnett raised his head and looked behind him, red dirt clinging to his cheek. The howitzers had lowered their muzzles and fired beehive rounds directly at the attackers. Loaded with hundreds of tiny darts, they had a settling effect on the attackers. Those remaining alive withdrew, dragging their wounded and some of their dead with them. It suddenly was very quiet. A thin haze of gun smoke, like dirty gray fog, drifted over Garnett's sector of the perimeter.

Allen kneeled at the bow, peering into the fog as it swept past his face like giant wisps of cotton candy. After a few minutes of this white blindness, Allen shouted back to Bill, "Are you sure this is the right direction? Maybe we drifted too far during the night. What will we do if we miss the island?"

Bill shouted back, "We'll stay on this course for ten minutes. If nothing happens, we'll shut down and wait for rescue." He looked at his watch. "We have six more minutes." They motored on without speaking, their eyes trying to find something to focus on. They heard only the steady sound of the motor and the subdued splashes of the boat sliding over the water. Bill looked at his watch again and shouted, "Two more minutes." They continued on.

Allen almost pitched out of the boat when it ran onto the beach. As soon as he regained his balance, he shouted, "We made it!" Bill took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He closed his eyes for a moment.

The fog was thinner on the island, and Allen hopped out of the boat to figure out where on the island they landed. "Bill!" he shouted, "We're right where we worked up that last seal. The drag marks are still in the sand." He hopped back in the boat.

They pointed the boat back toward the dock and crept along the shore, staying close enough to see it. Occasionally the boat bottom scraped on the sand, reassurance that they

hadn't drifted back to sea.

Just as they were tying up the boat at the dock, Jerome walked up. "Glad to see you back. But I was kind of hoping to get an up-close look at how the Coast Guard conducted a search. Maybe next time."

Bill looked at Jerome, "Next time we're taking a compass and a radio."

Allen and Bill spent the remainder of the day labeling, sorting, and packing their samples and notes. They had a big dinner and went to bed early.

A little while later Garnett was lying on a stretcher, the right leg of his pants ripped open, and his leg bundled with four bulky one-size-fits-all bandages. He and four other wounded were waiting for the dust-off chopper. Ousley walked up.

"Looks like the war's over for you, Sarge."

"Yeah. Looks like it."

"How's Morales? Was he hurt bad?"

Garnett jerked his thumb toward two black body bags and three stretchers of wounded next to a soldier sitting against a berm with bandages on his arm. "He's over there."

Ousley squinted as he looked towards the body bags and stretchers. He smiled when he saw a slender hand give him a feeble wave.

The next morning the fog was gone, and the supply plane landed on schedule. While they were loading their gear and samples, Ed nudged Allen. "Did you learn a lot of good stuff hanging around Billy?"

"Oh, for sure. Lots." He paused, and thought a moment. Then he said, "But you know, the important stuff had nothing to do with monk seals."

"Yeah." Ed winked at Allen and, with a wry smile, said, "Didn't I tell you?"

Meanwhile, Bill and Jerome finished up some of the always-present paper work in the office. As Bill slid a couple of file folders into his briefcase, Jerome squeezed his shoulder with one hand, looked him in the eye, and asked, "How're you doin', Bill? I've been thinking about you and the nightmares. The last time we talked you said you were starting on some group sessions. Are they helpin' you come back?"

"Yeah." Bill nodded his head while gazing off into the distance as though he were reviewing things in his mind. "They are. I'm not quite back yet, but I'm within sight of home." He looked at Jerome. "Thanks for telling me about 'em. I went a lot of years just waiting for those nightmares to go away, but they never did. I found that when I get a visit, some light in my bedroom helps. When it's not pitch black at night, I can find my way back."

"Good. I'm glad those sessions are workin', too. Some things just don't go away by themselves even if you want 'em to."

"Yeah, that's for sure." Bill stuffed his data log into his briefcase. "I was at home with my folks, getting back into school, having a regular life. I was done with Nam, but Nam wasn't done with me." He snapped his briefcase closed. "It came back and wouldn't go away." He pursed his lips and shook his head slowly.

"Y'know, you sure got a lot accomplished while carryin' around that gorilla on your back. You're one tough sonovabitch, Bill."

Bill smiled a thank-you smile. "I'm not so tough. It's just that I learned that to get things done, I have to keep focused on what's important."

Three months later Bill completed toxicity tests on the eel slime. Allen was back at the university by then, so Bill sent him a note explaining that the slime was highly toxic. Bill made it a point to tell Allen that he looked forward to having him come back next summer, but he didn't mention that now he always kept a light within arm's reach.

Writing Raw

All work appearing below is copyrighted by the author.

The End

Clifford Hui bio: Clifford Hui is a retired research biologist and writes fiction when he's in the mood. When he's not writing, his mood revolves around his collection of aloha shirts, his garden, and his Mainsqueeze. He lives and writes in Concord, California. A sampling of his published work can be found at www.CliffordHuiStoriesEtc.com.