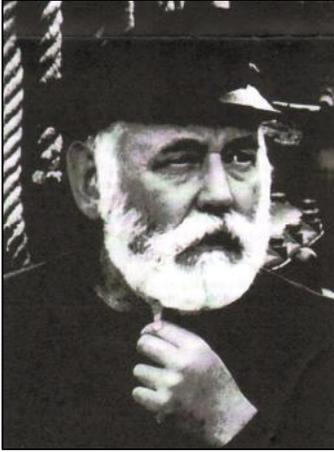


THE OLD CAPTAIN AND THE SEA

Story by John F. Hall

In 1952, Earnest Hemingway wrote his final novel, "The Old Man and the Sea." This fictional book won Hemingway a Pulitzer Prize. He called the fictional man in his novel,



"Santiago." Unlike my favorite Kentucky writer, Jesse Stuart, who created 4,000 fictitious characters and gave them names, I never knew the name of the Old Captain on that rusting cargo ship. He never wore a name tag. His crew always called him "Sir" or "Captain." I thought about describing him in words, but one of my readers might accuse me of just describing Santa Claus. I saw a photograph taken by Agneta Muha that is about as true a picture of how the Old Captain looked. His face, the parts that were not hidden by his white beard, White mustache, and white sideburns, shows a man that has weathered many storms. His eyes were piercing and the way he carried himself, no one was going to give him any lip. He was the law on the high seas. I watched as he

leisurely took his time smoking a cigarette. Even when the cigarette went out, he would just hold it between his index finger and his thumb. He did not wear any rings so I guess he was just married to the sea. He took a liking to me the first day our security team reported to his Merchant Marine cargo ship. The first words that he spoke, in a clear commanding voice were, "Who among you can operate a movie projector?" I don't remember why I was ordered to go take the movie projector course when I was a paratrooper in B Company of the 327th Infantry. It was a three-day course and you had to pass a test. I raised my hand and told the Old Captain that I had a projectionist license. I pulled it out of my wallet and showed it to him. This was about the only time that I ever saw him smile. He said, "Good! You will be showing movies every night to my crew and to the rest of your security detail."

In this story I also write about the word "trust." These four words are on the coins and dollar bills used in today's commerce. The phrase "In God We Trust" first appeared on U.S. Coins in 1864. This motto was placed on United States coins largely because of the religious sentiment existing during the American Civil War. M.R. Watkinson, a Pennsylvania clergyman, encouraged the placement of "In God We Trust" on coins at the war's onset in order to help the North's cause. Such language, Watkinson wrote, would "place us openly under divine protection." In the 19th century, when the coins were redesigned, the phrase was removed. On July 30, 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower required that "In God We Trust" appear on all American currency. This is a story about trusting Jesus Christ when all seems lost.

In Proverbs, Chapter 3, Verses 5-6 are these words, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, on your intelligence rely not. In all your ways be mindful of Him and He will make straight your paths." There is a lot of wisdom in those two verses. The first word, trust, reminds me of the story in the Bible when Jesus was asleep in the boat with his disciples. A furious storm suddenly came out of nowhere on the Sea of Galilee and slammed into

that boat. Actually, the Sea of Galilee is a lake. It is also called Lake Tiberius. It is the lowest freshwater lake on earth and is about 686 feet below sea level. For the past five years Israel has experienced its worst drought in nearly a century. That has reduced the flow of water of the Jordan River and other streams that feed into the Sea of Galilee. This is leading to increased salinity from subterranean saltwater streams as the result of less freshwater pressure. The Sea of Galilee is located in the hills of Northern Israel. The sea's location makes it subject to sudden and violent storms as the wind comes over the eastern mountains and suddenly drops down into the Sea of Galilee. This sudden movement of wind causes big violent waves to form that can easily capsize a wooden fishing boat.

In a previous story, "The Storm," I wrote a few facts about Fort Campbell's Clarksville Base and the Security Platoon. This story provides additional history about that facility; a surprise encounter by the Security Platoon's former Commander, and an incredible number of times that I was extraordinarily lucky or the recipient of some Divine Interventions. The military began construction on Clarksville Base in 1947. Like all other National Storage Sites, Clarksville Base was built within an existing military installation. The Army gave about 2,600 acres of its maneuvering grounds at Fort Campbell for the base. At one point in time, a third of the United States' nuclear stockpile was stored at Clarksville Base. The Russians considered the base a critical part of the United States' infrastructure and placed it on the list of the first ten sites to be destroyed in the event of a nuclear war. Clarksville base functioned as a storage facility and subsequently as a modification facility until progress in weapons technology made it obsolete. Operations at Clarksville Base ended in 1965, and control of the facility was turned over to the Army in 1969. In 1965, Paula and I were married at South Chapel on Fort Campbell, which was about two miles from Clarksville Base.

Not deviating too much from this story, in 1965, my former unit, B Company, 1st Regiment, 327th Infantry was the first unit in the 101st Airborne Division to be deployed to Vietnam. Only three of my former comrades in the third platoon made it home from Vietnam. The supreme sacrifice that they made is not forgotten. Their names are listed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, along with the names of the other 58,282 patriots killed in that war, to include the names of eight women. Again, I believe that some Divine Intervention kept me out of that war.

In my first story about the cargo ship, a great amount of information was not disclosed. The team was called into the Security Platoon's Orderly Room and briefed on the upcoming security mission. My Secret security clearance had just been approved. So this would be my first mission. I was an expert marksman with the M-1 rifle. It was just odd to me to be issued a Thompson sub-machine gun and a .38 caliber pistol. It is a two-hour drive from Fort Campbell to Milan, Tennessee. We arrived at the Milan Army Ammunition Plant. Its mission was to load, assemble, and pack reliable medium-to-large caliber ammunition. Today, the plant no longer produces ammunition. It is closed and is now a commercial distribution center. We unloaded our three military station wagons. The extra drivers drove them back to Fort Campbell. We put our weapons and duffle bags in the caboose. Our NCO leader signed for the two boxcars. The Marines never talked to

us. Our NCO double checked the extra heavy duty locks on the boxcar doors. We had authority to use lethal force against anyone attempting to get inside those two boxcars.

It is about 2,200 miles by car from Milan to San Francisco. This would be a normal, casual trip by car. Trains, due to adding and removing boxcars, takes about a week. We were assigned times to sit in the cupola in the caboose to monitor the two boxcars. Whenever the train stopped, we would grab our Thompson sub-machine guns and form a perimeter around the two boxcars. It had a 30 round magazine that fired .45-caliber rounds. In a previous story about the caboose, I wrote that I was cooking some food on the stove inside the caboose. The engineer coupled an additional boxcar so hard that it knocked me of my feet and it sent the food flying everywhere. After living in the caboose for a week, we were glad when it pulled into the Naval base and we were relieved of our security mission by the base Marines.

Our orders called for us to fly from San Francisco back to Nashville, Tennessee. The Vietnam War was heating up at that time in history. The Marines' had greater priorities than guarding a cargo ship loaded down with 500-pound bombs and classified weapons. They requested the Army to guard the cargo all the way to Pusan, South Korea. Our security team had nearly depleted the money that we individually budgeted for the one-week mission. So we stayed in the Marine barracks and ate our food in their Mess Hall. I was just a Specialist 4th Class (promotable). In the Marines, that rank is equal to being an NCO, so I enjoyed that recognition. It took about a week for the cargo ship to be loaded.

After spending a week with the Marines, new orders arrived and we were ordered to report to the Captain of the cargo ship. He told our NCO leader to store our weapons in the ship's arms rooms. He wanted to know who could operate a movie projector and that was my official duty during the voyage from California to South Korea. I watched as our ship crossed under the Golden Gate Bridge. That night was the first time that I showed movies to the ship's crew and to the members of the security team. Sometimes they wanted to see more than one movie. The sea was calm that night. After I finished showing movies, I would rewind the reel, put the film back into its container, close the screen, put the projector back in its case and return the items back into the secure room where they were stored. The distance from San Francisco to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii is 3,606 miles. The cargo ship's average speed is 18 miles per hour. Running 24 hours a day, it took eight days to arrive at Pearl Harbor. The Captain called the Security team together. He told us that he would have a small boat take us to Waikiki beach. We had three days of shore leave. He said that on the third day, he would have the small boat return and pick us up. If we were not there on the third day, he said he would leave us.

I was just about out of money and staying at a hotel was out of the question. I also did not want to miss the boat going back to the ship. I decided to sleep on the beach, the section that belonged to the Army. It had restrooms and showers. One night, the Military Police were making their rounds. I was asleep and they woke me up and wanted to know what I was doing. I showed them my orders and my military identification card. I told them what happened and that I had no money to stay in a hotel. They just shook their heads and told me to be careful. I might have eaten one meal a day during that three-day shore

leave. You might call it a poor man's diet. On the second day, a fellow security team member rented a scooter. He saw me and asked if I wanted to ride with him up to Diamond Head. I said sure. Besides being the youngest member of the security team, I was also the one with the least amount of money.

Right on schedule, the small boat from the cargo ship came to the beach to pick up the security team. I was really happy to get back to the ship. It had the best cooks and they took good care of me. I was starving. It is 4,443 miles from Pearl Harbor to Pusan, Korea. It would normally take ten days to arrive at that port. A few days after our ship departed Hawaii, I was sound asleep in a naval hammock. This is a canvas connected to metal poles. I was on the bottom hammock and three other hammocks were mounted above me. All of a sudden, I was thrown out of my hammock and onto the metal floor. The floor was always hot as it was directly above the engine room. I looked around. Upland the rest of the security platoon was no where in sight. Because I showed several movies to the crew and to the team the previous night. The Captain let me sleep in an extra hour or two. It takes 32 to 64 crewmen to operate a Merchant Marine cargo ship. To the best of my memory, I felt the ship had less than the minimum number of crewman based on the audience that watched the movies. This may have been the reason why the Captain was so pleased that I was licensed to operate the movie projector. For economic reasons, perhaps, he was short of personnel and I was a free asset to provide entertainment to his crew.

I slowly got dressed and made it to a side door. I almost froze in horror. Waves 50 to 60 feet tall were crashing into the ship. I could just see myself being fish food to the sharks. It was a hard go to make it to the bridge. I looked at a life boat and realized, even if it could be lowered, it would throw everyone out and capsize when it was hit with a 60-foot wave. If I was thrown overboard into the frigid, angry sea, hypothermia would drain the life out of me in a short period of time. I must have been white with fear when I was able to walk into the bridge. The old Captain was behind the helm (ship's steering wheel). He told me to sit down and grab something to hang onto. He calmly said that he had been through worst storms than this. It was typhoon Bess with winds up to 175 miles an hour. I looked at this Captain as he fought hard to keep the the ship heading into the waves and to keep it from turning sideways He had an air of confidence and he knew how to outwit Mother Nature. I eventually dozed off, more from fatigue than fear.

I must have been dreaming and thinking about Christ's disciples when they found themselves in a similar situation on the Sea of Galilee. The wind came down the mountains and onto the sea with great velocity. It caused great waves and threatened to rip off the sails and capsize their boat. Jesus was asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat. The disciples rushed to wake Him up. They were in fear for their lives. Here was the Creator of the universe with His disciples in a wooden boat. They did not trust Christ with all their heart. They viewed Christ as a teacher and not as the Savior of the world. In Matthew, Chapter 8, Verse 26 are these words, He said to them, "Why are you terrified, O you of little faith?" Christ rebuked the winds and the waves. On that cargo ship, during that typhoon, long ago, all I could pray was, "Christ, please save me."

When I woke up, the sea was calm. The Captain told me to come over to the helm. There was a very large self standing compass with a glass face about the size of a pizza. He pointed out the azimuth that he wanted me to maintain. Then he said that he was going down to the galley for some coffee. I looked around the bridge. Behind me were signal flags rolled up neatly and stored just below the bridge ceiling. The radio room was near the bridge. It was small and the radio man had gone down to the galley for breakfast. If I did not have a picture taken of me behind the helm, I don't believe anyone would believe this story. Kris Kristofferson wrote the song, "Why Me." I like four lines in the song, "Lord help me Jesus, I've wasted it so. Help me Jesus I know what I am. Now that I know that I needed you so. Help me Jesus, my soul's in your hand."

We made it safely into the Pusan Harbor. Our NCO leader had the Marines sign for the cargo. We were instructed to fly to Seoul, Korea to get a flight back to the states. We boarded an old WWII DC-9 twin engine prop plane for the trip to Seoul. Halfway through the flight, the plane developed a problem with one of its engines. It was able to limp into Seoul. We were instructed to report to the Military Police Headquarters. To our surprise, the officer in charge over all the Military Police in Seoul was the Commander of the 101st Military Police Company and our former detachment Commander. His command time was up as we were on the train going to California. He was promoted to Major and sent to Korea. He was surprised to see us and he wanted to know what we were doing in Seoul. We told him about the change of orders and the fact that we were all almost broke. He smiled and said that he would take care of us. He put us in the barracks, let us eat in his Mess Hall and was able to get us an emergency partial pay. I was amazed that after traveling 10,249 miles, our former detachment Commander was still taking care of us.

Our team was given tickets to fly back to the states. We flew to Japan and had to stay for six hours in the plane while it was refueled and had some kind of maintenance problem. We then flew to Travis Air Force base in California. From there we were scheduled to fly to Saint Louis, Missouri. While over Arizona, the plane went through a down drift air pocket. The plane dropped about 3,000 feet before the pilot was able to pull it out of its dive. A snow storm closed the airport in Saint Louis and our plane was diverted to Cleveland, Ohio. We got on a local hop and halfway to Nashville, the plane started to ice up on its wings. Thankfully, we made it to Nashville, Tennessee.

Life is full of memories. I put the memories into stories and mail them to Jade, Skyler, Lexie, Trish, Mike and Audrey. They are granddaughters and friends that enjoy how I craft my words. During a six-month period, I escaped death six times. From making a night parachute jump out of a helicopter and crashing into some trees; from transferring to the Security Platoon, from the 327th Infantry, before that unit was decimated in Vietnam; from surviving a typhoon in the East China Sea, and from narrowly avoiding three potential airplane crashes, Christ has spared the life of this unworthy soul. His ways are not our ways, but in some small way, I try to give Him the honor and the glory, as my soul is truly in His merciful hands.

John F. Hall

*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at:
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