

“Last Minutes of the Swerve,” p1

C. Joseph Socha, *Don't Call me Clarence* (excerpt)

We fueled up in Italy, and prepared to practice maneuvers for the invasion of Southern France. At the fuel pier, we saw a cute spaniel pup, scampering joyfully around and shimmying up and sliding over the oil-dirty fuel pipes. His belly was pitch black. One of our crew asked who owned the dog and offered to buy him. A carton of cigarettes made "Sparky" our mascot. It took firm, repeated scrubbing to get the oily grime off Sparky's belly.

What a joy it was to have the puppy on board. He was everywhere, yipping and snipping at ankles and struggling to get loose from those who tried to hold him on their laps. We were careful to keep the pup from the skipper's sight, but Sparky somehow climbed up the ladder to the bridge, eluding our quartermaster. Then we heard the skipper's angry shout, "Get somebody up her to clean up this mess." Helluva place to unload, Sparky. The quartermaster on the bridge claims he actually saw the skipper smile. And then Anzio.

We were assigned to sweep the channels for German mines. The job was never done. So sooner had we cleared an area when low-flying German planes, late in the day, dropped more.

On Sunday, July 9th, the sea, usually calm and rich blue, was pitching and grayish green. We were lying at anchor off Anzio before our daily sweeping. After breakfast, we sailed slowly along with the USS Sear which accompanied us. There was church music on our radio, the only hint that it was Sunday.

We seemed to move reluctantly this morning. Near noon, the sun popped out briefly and vanished as quickly as it appeared. I prepared chow for our mascots - an Italian terrier "Guinea" with pointed ears and nose, and white and black markings, and Sparky. I carried the pets' chow to them and they both sniffed it and walked away. No wonder. Everybody was feeding them. I stroked Sparky's disheveled coat and laughed at he looked up at me with his sad eyes. His belly was hard as a rock.

I was at the typewriter in the radio room to write a notice to the crew about excessive feeding of our mascots. This done, I walked toward the direction finder room located mid-ship where the dogs stayed. I had just reached the whaleboat near the direction finder room when a terrific explosion hit our ship at the fantail. The force of it thumped the bottom of my feet. Hundreds of objects rose into the air above the ship. I saw huge depressors, used in minesweeping, hurtling down toward me. Debris was falling all around.

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General quarters sounded. I rushed to get to my life jacket and our pups danced wildly at my feet. Two of our crew were leading a shipmate away from the explosion area. He was dazed, weak and covered with blood. I ran to my GQ post on the bridge and manned the headphones to establish communication with the ship's stations.

"Forward damage control. All closures made." I repeated the report to the navigator in charge on the bridge.

I called after damage control. No answer. Aft engine room and forward engine room answered. Gyro room. "Aye," came a quiet voice. This was Stoddard, one of the men we lost.

After damage control did not answer, I walked out to the port wing of the bridge and looked back. The fantail plates were buckled. I heard shouting and sounds of frantic activity.

The navigator shouted to me. "Check the depth charges. Have after damage control or get someone there."

I couldn't get aft damage control and called forward damage control to do it. Damage by depth charges would kill survivors in the water. A relief! "Bridge. All depth charges are set on safe. Two of them are missing." I relayed this to the navigator.

The ship began to list slowly to port and I was alone on the bridge. The navigator appeared and shouted, "Come on. Let's get out of here." The list was about 45 degrees and still rolling. I gave the abandon ship call over the phones and struggled to disengage them from my neck.

Books and articles were whizzing past me. My feet were losing traction on the deck. I yanked the phones off in a final effort and struggled up the steep-tilting deck to starboard and reached for the starboard door to chin myself onto the starboard wing. The ship lurched faster to port. I was beginning to doubt that I could get out of here. I chinned myself upward and managed to throw a leg on the bridge guardrail and pulled onto the side of the ship.

Above me our chief quartermaster was shouting to the men in the water. "That way. That way. Swim that way!" His desperate voice directed survivors to swim away from the suction that sinking ship would create. Our survivors were swimming in different directions away from the ship, some shouting and calling out to each other.

I looked up and saw our chief quartermaster standing up to my left continuing to shout to the swimmers. My pants slid further down on the hull and my jacket caught on a pip and I got busy untangling. My lifejacket strings were not tied yet, and I hurried to fix that. Finally, standing on the ship's keel, I jumped into the water. It was cool and my feet felt strangely ticklish as the sea squeezed into my shoes. I was underwater briefly and coming up when

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something splashed over me. It was our chief quartermaster who had slipped and tumbled in past me.

The lifejacket kept me floating but it was an effort to keep my face above the slap of the waves. I struggled to slip off my shoes. Then, about a hundred feet away from the ship, I looked back and saw the Swerve sinking aftward and the bow slowly rose. The bow rose straight up. Our focsle's three-inch gun pointed straight up. I heard tinkling of steel objects sliding on the deck. For a moment the Swerve seemed suspended, struggling not to go under. Then, with a sigh, it slowly slid beneath the water. I looked around and saw our survivors watching the last moments of the Swerve. Not a sound from anyone now. Then, gradually, the shouting and talk resumed.

We shared and cared for each other and this contributed to the remarkably low loss of life considering how fast the Swerve sank after being hit. We lost three, two killed instantly by the explosion while at their post on the ship's fantail, and one went down with the ship.

The shipmate I saw earlier helping a mate with a bloody face gave his lifejacket to someone who was unable to get his in time. Later he swam over a hundred feet to a cluster of sailors shouting encouragement. Our chief quartermaster who had been shouting directions to those in the water had been seen earlier looking in and out of flooding compartments, rescuing those who needed help. One injured mate sat on deck too terrified to move until another crewman yanked him up and threw him overboard. In this effort he sustained an injured back and was one of our hospitalized cases. Our engineering officer was seen swimming about helping those needing assistance and encouraging all he met. Our bosun warrant officer swam back to the ship as it was settling, to rescue a shipmate who was so frightened he could not let go of a line he clutched.

Even with a lifejacket on, it was tiring because you had to swim to keep your face out of the slapping waves. If you stopped swimming, your face slipped beneath and forced you to struggle up again.

The USS Seer, our sweep partner, came upon the scene. Their crew jumped in to help and brought us aboard. They removed our wet clothing, gave us blankets and some of their own clothes, and hot coffee. One offered a swig from a quart of whiskey. It felt good going down.

Danger was past now but I kept waiting to hear an explosion again, and kept looking around to be sure we were safe. Long after, I kept expecting a blast to come from somewhere around a corner.

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We compared notes on what had happened. The explosion had blown two huge depressors clear over the bridge onto the fo'c'sle. And one on the bridge. Depth charges weighed four hundred pounds! Our whaleboat along which I stood when the explosion occurred, was said to contain a twenty millimeter gun and magazine and a huge cement block of about one hundred pounds. Another mate claimed that when he looked below the after storage compartment, he saw nothing but the sea. The bottom was gone.

Official log entries on the Seer notes that the Swerve sank on twelve minutes after being hit, and only a minute and a half after she settled on her side. We lost three men and had ten hospital cases. Some saw our mascot, Sparky, sitting on the boat deck, whimpering and shivering. Neither of our pups survived.

We were taken to the Naval base in Naples and issued replacement clothing and gear. We sat around, lost, talking over and over the last minutes of the Swerve. There were moments of recurring shock, a feeling that at any moment, right around the corner, BAM! It would happen again.

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