
Phillip Francis Ward

THE YANK - MY FRIEND

My sister's shake woke me from my siesta. "There is an American sailor in the shop" she explained, who is drunk and doesn't know his way back to his ship. Some soldiers chased him into here, and would not leave him alone until I told them I had rang the M.P.'s.

They are still watching from across the street at Billy Beer's shop.

What about taking him back to the wharf?"

Sleepy and annoyed, I answered, "a bloody Yank! and what happened to the M.P.'s?"

My sister looked at me disapprovingly. "Cut that out, and I did not call the M.P.'s" The fence she continued, with the authority sisters have to younger brothers, "between our place and the Oddfellows, has a loose sheet of iron which can swivel upwards. Take him through there to the back of the Oddfellows, go down to the sea rocks, then along to the wharf." Not arguing, I put on an old shirt and trousers and left to do what I was told.

Unsteadily and half carrying the Yank, I took him through the fence to the Hotel. Here he seemed to gain some sense of his surroundings and insisted he had some bottles to pick up. "Did he have any Mr Mulcahy?" I asked the Barman. "Who are you?" replied Joe, loath to deal with someone possibly taking advantage of a drunk.

"I'm Phil Ward's son. I thought you were with the Air Force in England!" That's my twin brother. I'm taking the Yank back to the wharf. Some soldiers chased him into our shop." Remembering me, Joe said "Oh you're the one who wants to be a farmer." "Yes," I responded "but I'm in the Air Force now." "Here have a beer" said Joe, pulling a schooner and pushing it across to me. The Japs made a mess of Darwin and Broome didn't they" he commented assuming I knew all about it. "We had some Dutch survivors stopping here."

Joe grabbed my glass to fill it up again. "No thanks Joe," I declined, "I haven't any money on me." "I'll pay" slurred the Yank, slapping a handful of change on the bar, "and give me a whiskey." "The drinks are on me" growled Joe, handing the Yank a beer, "yeah he has a parcel here. He had a barney with some soldiers and ran out."

Downing my beer and refusing more, we left. The Yank not having touched his beer, and clutching his parcel as though it was gold.

Slowly we made our way down to the rocks and then along to the Esplanade. There were few people about and here we halted. The two quick beers had gone to my head and I still felt tied. The Yank was a proper cot-case. His face was greenish-grey and he became violently ill, vomiting a continuous spray of vile liquid. I felt a twinge of sympathy for him. When the Yank ceased vomiting we sat on the warm sand, sheltered from the wind by the rocks. Not speaking, we soaked in the sun and the peace of our surroundings for almost an hour, the Yank becoming relatively sober and his face regaining a healthy colour.

Somehow we lost our aura of mutual hostility and I took my first real look at my companion. He would have been about four inches shorter than me, around five foot three inches high. Farming had made me fairly solid, but along side the Yank I was slim. He gave the impression of being as broad as he was tall and he did not have a gut. For a submariner he was rather brown and I judged his age seventeen or so. He was dressed in bluish work trousers and shirt; not shore going gear.

I ventured to ask how long he had been in the Navy, and how it came about he was on subs. With pride he told me he had joined the Navy three years ago when he was sixteen, and had volunteered for the submarines. This put him near me in age but much longer a serviceman.

He asked what I was doing and somewhat deflated I told him I was in the Air Force. I did not tell him that only after I had been called up for the Army, did I join the Air Force. I had no illusions about War, King or Country. My Father who had journeyed from Broome in 1916 to join the Army, refused to sign my papers for the Air Force. (I was underage for the Air Force) It was my Irish mother who signed. The Japs of course had changed my outlook.

Strangely now, but understandably also of the reticence and awkwardness of youth, we did not exchange names, where we came from or much more of anything. I did gather that after a whip-around, he had been nominated by his ship-mates to buy bottles. I visualised him first trying at hotels near the wharf, then uptown and not succeeding until he reached the Oddfellows. In the process buying a couple of drinks at each hotel in between, which would explain how he had got himself into such a state?

As the Yank still seemed bushed, I still had the task of getting him to the wharf. We continued, now more amiable, our desultory walk towards the city beach, Arthur's Head and the wharf. This circuit to the wharf was broken when we blocked by barbed wire and other defences. Until then, it had not sunk in that my home town was on a war footing. Changing our path, we passed by the Customs Stores, headed up Cliff Street, into the main street - High Street and walked straight onto three Australian soldiers. A double shock as I had forgotten all about them, and that they were the main reason I was taking the Yank back to the wharf.

Surrounding us, they said gleefully, "We have been looking for you Yank!" and to me "Who are you and what are you doing with the Yank kid?" "I'm taking him back to his sub," was my abrupt reply.

"Well we are going to teach the Yank a lesson in manners, so nick off" was their rejoinder. "No!" I insisted, "I am going to make sure he gets back safely to his sub." "What are you a Yank lover? Hop it" they menaced, "or you will cop the same as him." "Brave buggers aren't you, three against one," was my smart-arse reply, which brought an immediate response of an attempt to king-hit me. Street wise, I ducked and his fist hit the verandah post behind me, bringing forth a howl of pain and foul words. "Quick hide your bottles in the shop doorway" I instructed the Yank, "and let's scoot." We took off. We didn't get far before they caught up.

What happened from then on is a blur. I have impressions of blows being thrown at one another, dodging around verandah posts, being slammed and slamming others against shop windows. (fortunately boarded up either as an air raid precaution or the result of a brawl)

The Yank was their main target, and when I saw him in action, I was glad we were on the same side. He was great at fighting and very fit. It was a running fight along High Street (we were trying to run away) and seemingly lasted for hours, and probably at the most, might have been an hour. Through utter exhaustion and barely able to hold up our hands, let alone throw punches, we reached a stalemate of exchanging, vague obscene threats. A crowd of fifty or so, mostly civilians and many of these women, had gathered around and were becoming increasingly hostile to the soldiers, resenting the odds of three against two, that the soldiers were mature men compared to the Yank and I, and that we had received a battering at their hands.

Relief came suddenly and silently in the shape of a rotund policeman on his pushbike. Pushing in between, he ordered the soldiers – pointing up towards Monument Hill – to get going that way or he would call the M.P.'s. Pointing down to the Round House, he ordered the Yank and I to go that way or he would run us in, telling the soldiers and me, he knew who we were and where to find us if we did otherwise. Without any argument, we did what we were told. The Yank and I stopping at the shop doorway where he had stowed his bottles. The parcel had been picked up and then dropped, smashing every bottle. The Yank was angry and I was amazed at the paltriness of their action.

Once more we continued what had become a pilgrimage. Nightfall was upon us, there was no moon and the sky was overcast. The blackout in Fremantle was complete, and slowly, painfully, we stumbled along the dark streets, until at last we reached the main gate of the wharf. After the blackness of the night, the dim light at the gate shone like a searchlight. I recognised manning the gate Mr McShearer, who had come out of retirement from the Lighthouse Service to do his bit for the war. "What happened to you?" he asked and after our storey. Commented, "Brave buggers aren't they!" I did not have a wharf pass and the Yank did not have a leave pass, which meant he could not let us on the wharf. He might have let the Yank through until the Yank told me to take him further along and he would get over the fence. "Hell, no!" Mr Mack rebutted, alarmed. "That is dangerous. The Yanks shot a couple there last week. They are trigger happy and shoot first and ask questions," adding "I will get the Shore Patrol for you." This suggestion upset the Yank greatly. Seeing this, Mr Mack assured the Yank he knew a couple who were good blokes. He would find them and explain what had happened. He ordered us to sit down near the gate-house and wait. Telling his offsider not to let us leave.

We sat down. In the dim light we looked at each other and realised how wretched we were. My shirt was in tatters and the Yank was shirtless. He was bruised with big welts where boots or something had connected. Being fair-skinned, I had bled profusely and the blood made me look worse. Feelings and understanding flowed between us that we could not express. We sat silent, cold, shivering, sore and miserable in ourselves.

Those days' males did not hug one another. If we had done so, I am sure we would have both broke down and cried.

Mr Mack took a long time. Perhaps he had to go over to the North Wharf where the subs were berthed. He returned with two large navy men. "Jesus!" drawled one, "They sure did you guys over. Come sailor lets go." Concerned I asked "Could I come?" "No" was the sharp response, then more gently "Don't worry son, we will see him to his ship and make sure he doesn't get anymore trouble."

I watched as they moved off, one each side of the Yank and, with their side-arms and long baseball like batons, presenting the appearance that he was under arrest. The Yank half-turned to me and said "thanks." In a few steps they vanished into the night. For a while the light of their torches flashed oddly in the darkness, until that too was gone.

After the War, I asked my sister did she know what had happened to the Yank. She told me his sub had left Fremantle about a week later and never came back. At first, not understanding, I questioned, "Do you know where the sub went to?"

She said quietly, "It got sank!"

I felt then a deep feeling of personal loss and great sadness for the Yank. I still have that feeling.

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BORN FREMANTLE 1923

WHEN THE PETER SYLVESTER WAS SUNK

Searching the past, memory can realistically only give impressions of what happened. Often we never did have the whole story, nor were we in the way of the young (especially during periods like war) overly concerned, as life was meant to be lived.

We believed the Peter Sylvester, a Liberty ship, had been sunk by a Japanese sub which was still out there in the Indian Ocean, waiting to sink more ships. Survivors had been located far out on the ocean and the brief of 25 Squadron was to keep them under surveillance until they could be rescued, and to search in their vicinity for the sub.

This meant the Liberators were loaded to the hilt with fuel and bomb load and laboured to get airborne. One did not make it. Early one morning on take off, coming down on a dry salt lake between the railway line and the airstrip. Catching fire, not all the crew escaped. Gloom descended upon the Squadron and there were mutterings that the planes were overloaded and bound to crash. Morale amongst the aircrew plummeted and the whole Squadron was jittery.

Although 25 Squadron was an old Squadron in name, to all intents and purposes at Cunderdin it was a newly formed Squadron of Liberator bombers. To someone like myself enlisting towards the end of 1942, I knew nothing about its previous history and I believe this applied to the majority. Most of the Squadron were inexperienced and we were all still in a learning process.

This learning accelerated in the dramatic arrival straight from the States, of an American Test Pilot. He was an unobtrusive man, aged about 35 years, around 5'8", inclined to be tubby, dressed in Yankee tropical gear and in keeping with the man, displaying no rank or badges. Someone told us he held the rank of Colonel.

The Liberators were fully loaded and he took the pilots up for alarmist lessons. He literally flung the planes around the skies. For the next two weeks or so, Liberators were taking off and landing, engines being cut unexpectedly often leaving only one, or two engines, screaming low over the hangars and airfield, climbing and diving. It was fantastic flying. I had seen Peter Issacs in C. for Georgie put his Lancaster through similar stunts, but the lumbering Liberators were not in the same category of plane.

The muttering about overloading ceased and morale in the Squadron was never again a problem.

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* POST-WAR FEARS TO BE GERMAN

* POSSIBLY Q FOR QUEENIE

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