

THE WAR HEROES



The Solar Star Leaped Half Out of the Water in a Blinding Holocaust of Yellow Flame

By James Warner Bellah

ILLUSTRATED BY ANTON OTTO FISCHER

OLD ships are like old servants and old fire horses—they go on from master to master, sinking lower and lower in the scale of usefulness, becoming sadder and sadder at heart, until finally they break down forever and slip into nameless graves or lie by helplessly waiting for the final blow that will finish them. The Mary Powell, once the fastest, proudest steamer on the Hudson, lies rotting in Rondout Creek at Kingston. Barney Barnato's yacht turned up at Three Rivers some six years ago, trying bravely to pull pulp-wood barges up and down the St. Lawrence. One of the Chicago class—a battleship of the Great White Fleet days—is tied up in the Hwangpu near Shanghai, trying to ignore the sad fact that the Pittsburgh and Hawkins are really protecting the Foreign Quarter.

Of old ships was the Solar Star. Paint and tar and concrete covered the fact that she had started life as the Cardiff in the halcyon days of Robert Doble and Son. But in her old heart she knew and remembered. She knew, too, that she had been the General Kearny—Union Seaboard—the Kasegawa Maru—D. K. K.—and for three brief months, until she sank to her boat decks in Puritan Bay, the Herbert Smedley—Green Diamond. In 1917 she became a highly important commodity—an available bottom—worth her weight in gold. Up she came from the sand. Painters swarmed over her once again. Engineers scraped and hammered and patched her insides, and off she started once again, as the Solar Star.

Like ships, masters were also scarce and a ticket was in truth a ticket. A man named Huntley, for instance, had

been watch quartermaster and one of the nine survivors of the Victoria. After the inquiry, a man named Palmer turned up with a second mate's ticket in the East. A tramp owner took him on and lost his shirt in pidgin freight on the Tongku run. After that, Palmer came into the Indian Ocean, with an eye to working back to the Atlantic. For several years he played carefully and got his first officer's berth with the Choate-Seymour flag. People had forgotten the Victoria and had never heard of the tramp owner. In 1910, when the C. S.-Indian and Straits Settlements Navigation merger went through, Palmer got the Elizabeth, 6000 tons. Thereafter, in 1914, when the Fleetwing was launched, he jumped to the Norwich, London to Calcutta, and sat down to his first captain's dinner. Eight months later the Norwich was torpedoed three hours from Gibraltar and sank in twenty minutes. Thereafter Palmer played rovers, and played well. When he took the Solar Star, he took it because it was a Joseph Christiansen boat and a berth there meant the big line after the war.

Bull Logan, Rory the Duke, and the Kid came up the Solar Star's gangway in Brooklyn with their bags on their shoulders and their white caps cocked over skeptical left eyes.

Bull sniffed. "Wal," he said, "she must be a boat. She's in the water, an' as near as I c'n see, she ain't part of the jetty."

"Mebbe she's broke loose temporarily and they ain't nailed her back onto it yet."

"Well, step easy anyways," said the Kid. "You don't wanta push a hoof through the deck and break an ankle while you're seein' no world through no porthole."

"Yeah, an' don't make no loud noise. They might hear us at the Yard and assign us to another tailor's dummy en-sign, lessen they think Bull can't run this gun crew alone."

The chief mate came down the ladder and led them forward to what passed for a glory hole.

"You'll bunk in here," he said.

"Sorry," said Bull, "we ain't got no vertical hammocks; they's twelve of us."

"Well, there's another place aft, but the gun's on the foc'sle head."

"Leave us look at the other place."

Rory threw down his bag and gave his trousers a hitch. He squinted at the Kid. "We thanked you already, but turn around while I give you another hop in the pants."

"What for? Ain't you got the royal suit to sleep in?"

"I ain't talkin' about no night shirts. I'm talkin' about this here hooker. We was comfortable on the Carmencita anyways, until you sink us a Heinie boat an' get us so famous we're transferred to a tubful of dynamite. One more trick outa you and they'll have us rowin' a raft acrost to France for bravery."

"Say," said the Kid, "I'll have youse two guys President and Secretary of the Navy before I quit. I ain't even started yet." (Continued on Page 201)

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"Yeah? Well, you can stop me when I get me to be an admiral. Office work makes my head ache. Get outa them blues an' grab yourself up topside an' uncover that pea shooter. Bull an' me aims to do some inspectin' after we check the chow aboard."

"O. K. by me."

During the next three days what Ordnance didn't put aboard the Solar Star in the way of home, sweet home, wasn't worth mentioning. Into her for'ard hold they packed row on row of four-point-seven and five-point-nine shells, all brand-new and slimy with green grease. Into her after hold they stacked box after box of rifle and M. G. ammunition. In the cracks between they packed Mills grenades, fourteen-pound Cooper bombs, Stokes mortar and seventy-five millimeter shells and Very pistol cartridges until it looked like the first five minutes of a comedy reel.

For three days more, the gun detachment sat by dejectedly and watched the cargo mount slowly to deck level, watched the hatches closed and the tarpaulins snugged and clewed down over them. Then, still flying her ominous red ammunition flag, the Solar Star moved slowly out to a lonely anchorage off Tompkinsville. All the way out, Bull and Rory stared at the Kid without saying a word. The Kid grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he said, "I guess we got everything but parachutes to come down in."

"Yeah," said Bull, "I guess you're the berries. Anyways, I know who does all the work this trip, an' we'll only be taking about ten or twelve days to get acrost too. To start with, you can get after them recoil cylinders—drain 'em and fill 'em properly. Ain't you never seen a new gun before?"

Two days later the Solar Star lugged out of the harbor on the tail of a convoy, with a lone destroyer far behind her to pick up the pieces and a proud cruiser ahead that completely ignored the whole business.

At sundown Captain Palmer sent for Bull and had him up on the bridge.

"Listen, Logan; we'll get this much settled. We don't fight this ship. Got it? If you can get off a round or two while we're lowering the boats, all well and good. Otherwise we go anyway."

"You mean we blow at the first sign of trouble?"

"Yes. We go so fast we'll be home by the time a fish hits the Solar Star."

"Whyn't you tell 'em that before they sent us aboard?"

"I'm working for my owners. I know this game. You haven't got a dog's chance even if you have got a gun—especially on a munition ship."

"Yeah?" said Bull. "What kinda dog?"

"You heard me," said Palmer. "I've been sunk twice and I know what I'm talking about. Suit yourselves. I aim to keep healthy."

"Yeah?" said Bull. "O. K. Give us an issue of rafts then an' we'll see who gets home first."

"We understand each other?"

"If the rafts float, mebbe we do."

Bull went into conference with Rory. "It's this way, Duke: Our innocence has been seduced. This is a thousand-to-one shot, see? And no parlaying bets. The Old Man may have the right dope, or he may be playin' politics with his owners, or he may be just plum yellow. Anyways, we gotta earn our pay."

"Sure," said Rory. "Le's get us a long lanyard—about a mile long—and pull it from the small boat."

"I'd like to, but the point is that it won't look right in a report. We gotta let go a slug or two from the deck. Leastwise as long as the Old Man's aboard we gotta be firin', don't we?"

"Sure, I got it. Le's leave the Kid stand perpetual gun watch. He got us into this. Then we can shove off with the rest."

"Nope, we might as well do it ourselves. We'd have to stand by anyways, an' the exercise 'll keep us warm."

Rory looked at the tarpaulin hatches. "I ain't aimin' to do no freezing this cruise, no matter what happens."

"Well," said Bull, "stack them rafts port and starboard at the break in the rail."

"Sure," said Rory. "Hey, Kid! Skate aft and rustle four rafts and stack 'em port an' starboard at the break in the rail."

"O. K. by me."

It is a matter of record that the Solar Star, by dint of forced drafts and an engineer named MacDonald, kept the convoy

in sight for three full days. On the fourth day, however, the genii who rule the North Atlantic dropped a curtain of wet black fog that completely cut her out of the picture. For eight hours Sparks kept her in touch with the convoy ahead and the destroyer aft. Then the destroyer notified her blandly that it was turning back, wished her luck, and tore out of her antiquated wave length.

"Which reminds me," said Bull, when the news spread around, "I bought me two chancies on a gold watch they was raffling off at Dinty's—I ought to of given 'em to some of the boys ashore."

"Yeah," said Rory, "you ought to of. I ain't even botherin' about holes in my socks no more." He looked at the tarpaulined hatches with a fishy eye. "This here Navy don't seem to like us much, Bull."

"Yeah, that's a fact. Makes a guy wonder what he done with his last hitch's pay."

"Yeah," said Rory. "I wisht I'd kinda kep' up with my billiard playin'. A guy kin make money at that. Looka Willie Hoppe. I mighta been outa the Navy long ago if I'd only worked at it like I oughta."

"They was a dame onet in Portsmouth who had a farm her old gent left her up in Vermont. She was kinda sweet on me." Bull spat overboard and rubbed his chin reflectively. "A guy don't always think of the future like he oughta."

"Nope, that's a fac'. They was a fella on a pig boat down to Coca Sola. Useta study about how to be a traffic manager outa books they sent him from some school. I guess they's somethin' in that all right. He gotta diploma and a lotta stuff from the school. I guess he'd been pretty well fixed up by now, only they was an explosion in the battery room. I don't know what they done with the diploma."

"Them pig boats is tough."

"Yeah, I never could see 'em myself. I like air and room—an' the chow ain't too good on 'em either."

"Wal," said Bull, "I hope that lousy destroyer rams the Mayflower in the next Presidential Review anyways. Ef I knew she'd do that I'd feel better."

"Yeah, so'd I."

Sometime before dawn the next morning, Bull mustered the crew on the foc'sle head

and served them a slug of coffee. Palmer and his two mates were on the bridge waiting nervously for the gray light to break on the ragged horizon ahead. The Kid and Rory stood on each side of the gun while the passers crouched and shivered in the darkness around them.

Another fifteen or twenty minutes. The light spread faintly, like a gray pallor on the cheeks of a fresh corpse. Slowly the rim of water etched itself against the opalescent fog ahead and the ghost light of cold dawn crept across the oily sea in a faint leprous smear that seemed to stain and chill the laboring Solar Star. There was no convoy in the small radius the fog had left.

"Wal," said Bull, "that's that. On your toes now, swabs. Here's the time it generally comes—an' when she do, she do."

Behind him, on the tiny bridge, Palmer and the two ship's officers swept the narrowed horizon with their glasses. The silence was broken only by the occasional whipping swish of tobacco juice.

"An' I says to her," said Kid suddenly, "I says: 'Take the fifty thousand dollars and get your divorce in Paris.'" He stretched languidly. "But I'm a son of a gun if she don't go an' buy po'ka-dot pajamas with the money."

"Shut up," said Rory. "You ain't home."

"O. K. by me." The Kid stretched again. His arms were bent at the elbows, with his fists pointing to the sky, when there came a faint whistling scream well forward in the rising fog. The top of a wave ripped into soapy spray off the port quarter and two hundred yards beyond it a white column of water splashed up slantwise and slapped down again. Everyone was on his feet in a second. The engine-room bell clanged furiously and the bow swung sharply around to starboard.

"We got company!" yelled the Kid.

Bull leaped to the starboard rail. "Off there, Duke!" He yelled: "Can't see her, but I got the direction! High angle!" He looked up at the bridge.

"There they go, the buzzards!"

Stokers were pouring out of the engine-room vent and tumbling headlong onto the boat deck. Palmer was still on the bridge, waving frantically and shouting at the foc'sle head. Meanwhile the Solar Star's crew was lowering away the two boats.

"Let her have three rounds blind, Duke!" Bill screamed. "That's your direction!"

The gun came around and pointed. The Kid stood taut, with his hand on the lanyard while the muzzle came up.

"Fire, Kid!"

The lanyard jerked. There was a yellow flash, a roar, and a buckling crash of torn steel. Like a torpedo from its tube, the gun jammed back onto its recoil cylinders, sheared through everything in its way, left the carriage completely and dove overside, carrying a raft of splintered deck timbers and most of the port rail.

The Kid stared blankly at the hot, twisted mount and rubbed his thumb against the raw flesh where the lanyard knot had burned across the palm of his hand.

"Well, I'm damned!" yelled Rory.

"I'll be a —"

"Outa action, I guess," said the Kid.

"You guess?" roared Bull. "You know —" Then suddenly he stopped. "Say," he said, "you was the swab who drained them recoil cylinders."

"That's right," said the Kid. "I guess I forgot to refill 'em."

The nose of the Solar Star came up into the slight wind and fell off again with a dull slap. Her helm was free. White-faced and trembling, the men were standing by the rafts waiting to jettison them. Then suddenly panic took them.

"Well, I'm going!" A raft slid off and sailed through the air like a great gray doughnut. It struck the water with a flat splash and almost immediately four men dove overside.

Bull, his fists flaying like pistons, leaped across the deck. "You lousy rats!" And to get away from him, someone kicked off the second raft and the five other men tumbled overside after it. Bull stood at the

break in the rail shaking his huge fist. "All right, you yellow-bellied skunks! You'll break rocks for this!" Rory looked at the Kid. The Kid looked at Rory.

The Solar Star's port boat was in the water now, with the last of her crew swarming down the ropes. Palmer, one hand on a davit, waved frantically for them.

"Ain't no use, Bull, I guess," said Rory. "We're outa action an' Palmer's goin' home. Le's go."

"The hell I will," said Bull. "Go ahead if you wanta."

"Listen," said Rory. "You gotta lotta sense, but you lost it. Le's go."

"No!"

Rory reached out and grabbed the Kid's hand at arm's length. Together they ran at the break in the rail. Their clasped fists struck Bull in the stomach, doubled him across their arms and carried him overside kicking. He came up sputtering and they pulled him onto a raft. He dashed the spume from his eyes and glowered.

"A fine bunch of swabs!"

That was the last thing he said until Palmer gathered up the gun crew and piled them into his boat. For a few minutes everyone who could get a hand on an oar rowed furiously away from the abandoned Solar Star. She seemed to have some headway herself, or perhaps the breeze, carrying her thin plume of funnel smoke aft, gave the illusion. Presently there was almost a mile of open water between them, spotted only by the other boat, but nothing happened.

Finally MacDonald, the engineer, raised his head and looked at the captain. "I thought you said there was a U-boat after us."

"They fired at us," Palmer said.

"Aye. How many times?"

"Once; then Logan's gun blew up."

"Humph," said MacDonald. "See anything?"

Palmer looked at him. "No."

"So we lose our jobs over nothing; just because somebody gets an idea to abandon ship?"

"Well," said Palmer, "if Logan hadn't've started to fire, I'd never thought —"

"You lie!" said Bull.

"You better keep a civil tongue there for'ard."

"Is that so? I ain't workin' for your owners."

Palmer bit his lips. "No, you ain't, but you're in my boat, and I guess it ain't goin' to look too well for you fellows when I tell 'em you never fired a proper shot—but your gun dismounted on the first recoil. I guess somebody'll have to do some explaining why there weren't no glycerin in them recoil cylinders."

Rory slapped his wet knee. "I got it! I thought so at the time. That wasn't no small caliber shell, that was a big one, and it wasn't meant for us. It's a ricochet. That convoy cruiser popped her off at something in the fog ahead."

"That don't make any difference about you fellows losin' your gun."

"Yeah?" said Bull. "What about you abandoning your hooker in a yellow panic before anything happens? How'll that go with your owners, eh?"

"An' we losing our jobs, too," said MacDonald sullenly.

Palmer looked doubtfully at the distant Solar Star.

"Well," he said finally, "I guess we got a good excuse with your gun blowing off the carriage. That leaves us helpless, don't it? An' I noticed you fellows left about the same time we did, and anyways I didn't have any say. The crew just went."

"You seen three gobs on that foc'sle when you was in the boat," said Rory—"me an' Bull and the Kid here. We was the last to leave an' I guess we can make the world believe that. That makes your name Woodrow Wilson, I suppose? A hell of a skipper you are if you can't keep your own crew aboard."

"Come on," said MacDonald. "Ther-er isn't any use o' staying her-re arguin'. Might's well be aboar-rd as her-re."

Patterson looked doubtfully at the other boat and then at the Solar Star.

There she was, apparently steaming slowly on her course as if the mere matter of a crew was of no account whatsoever to a ship of her years and experience. She who had been the old Cardiff and the General Kearney—her Kasegawa Maru days were a blot on her 'scutcheon; she was Clyde-built and Anglo-Saxon to the core—and the Herbert Smedley. Her bow luffed up proudly into the rolling head seas that were melting the distant fog blankets. As the Cardiff she had once carried a prince regent. She seemed to remember it for a moment with that proud lift of her bow—to remember it and to ignore completely the two life-boats that had abandoned her. Then she appeared to droop as she fell off into the trough. She was tired and old and worn. She was a ghost ship, long since dead, come back again to haunt her old course. Her rightful place was Puritan Bay—pity it hadn't been deep enough for her to sleep in forever.

Palmer grasped the tiller ropes and turned his boat toward her uncertainly. Suddenly the air seemed to bulge in his lungs and crack his ears. The Solar Star bloated like a bladder that is filled with air, then she leaped half out of the water in a blinding holocaust of yellow flame—leaped and melted into a cloud of torn plates, splinters and shreds of steel. Where she had been, a thick bellying cloud of white smoke, twice her size, rolled swiftly upward and outward across the waters with her funnel and one mast sticking crazily out of its top. A blasting concussion roared down over the small boat and knocked everybody in a heap along the bottom.

MacDonald clawed at his bleeding nose. "Welb," he said, "we aid't god jobs dow adywades."

Rory grinned at Palmer. "I guess we better call it quits after that. Our crew ain't gonna talk"—he looked slowly from face to face—"because they ain't hankerin' to have their mates know that they shoved off without orders, leaving me and Bull and the Kid behind. Ef you kin keep yours quiet on the same basis, I guess we c'n forget about the gun dismountin' and you abandonin' ship half an hour ahead of time."

Bull growled.

"You kin all go to hell!"

"I'm sorry about them recoil cylinders," said the Kid.

"Go back to Kansas," said Bull, "an' milk cows."

"No kiddin', I guess I better."

"Aw, shut up."

Rory pointed suddenly over the gunwale. "Here they come."

Two destroyers, with smoke fanning low behind them in corded billows, were cutting in toward the small boats from the distant fog curtains. They fanned out and circled frantically beyond the mat of wreckage that marked the spot where the Solar Star had been, their Y guns arching depth charges into the waters, port and starboard. Raised white circles of swirling foam marked the underwater explosions. Then presently one of the destroyers slithered over to them and lost headway.

A hoarse voice called through a megaphone: "Come in aft, you people! Make it snappy!"

They pulled in to the low gray side and clambered up onto the slippery, spray-washed after deck.

The gob who took Bull and Rory down to dry out and refit told them the story.

"You guys were sure lucky. It must've been the same sardine we had the fight with this morning. The cruiser got after her, but she got away. What happened?"

"What happened?" said Bull. "Our gun —"

"We don't know what happened." Rory gave him a sweet kick on the ankle. "We get a shot across our bows an' then we open fire ourselves an' then we just get away in time to keep ourselves healthy."

The Kid came down the ladder and peeled off his jumper.

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"Well," he said, "I guess we're the war heroes all right. You shoulda heard Palmer handing it to the Old Man. He says, 'Yes, sir, that's a fine Navy crew you fellows give us. When we seen the U-boat, they started to fire on it at once an' very nearly blew it out of the water, only the visibility was that poor we couldn't see much; an' when we thought she was gone, there she pops up again and plunks a couple a shells into us from such an angle we couldn't bring our gun to bear. So we has to abandon, which we does jus' before she sticks a fish into the Solar Star and blows her ballywest. No, sir. I been torpedoed three times, but I never seen such exceptional gunnery nor such coolness nor such downright guts in no gun crew in all my life. They was real heroes.' That's what he says," said the Kid.

"Listen, Bull," said Rory. "I guess Palmer ought to get him another chance with his owners, eh? I guess I'll make out the report for you to sign."

"You can all go to hell," said Bull. "I'm going to catch me some sleep."

Two months later, when they were back aboard the Carmencita, it came out in orders.

The Kid read it out loud to Bull and Rory: "For exceptional bravery in the line of duty while acting as gun crew on the ammunition ship Solar Star. The following men," and so on. The Kid read on until he came to Bull's name. Then he stopped.

"Leaping Moses," he said, "You ought to of got the Navy Cross!"

Bull stood up. "How they got that name?" he growled.

"Full out," said the Kid. "Forced draft."

"Ef you read it," roared Bull, "I'll break your neck!"

The Kid looked at him sorrowfully. "I sure am sorry I didn't fill them recoil cylinders; then we'd never of found out!"

Bull took a step forward.

"Wilfred," lisped the Kid. Bull swung on him, but he ducked.

"Marmaduke!" yelled the Kid, and dodged again.

"Saint Joseph"—he gasped for air—"Logan! Hit me now while I'm happy!"