

LIGHTNING AND QUICKSAND

By James Collins.

Several life-threatening events have tested me from when I was young. Two memorable ones occurred without warning but they have left an indelible print on my mind. Both happened in October

The first of these occurred in the Highbridge section of the Bronx, when I was 13. We lived on the top floor of a five-story apartment house immediately under a flat roof that held numerous small steel girders configured to allow the occupants to set up clothes lines on the roof to dry their clothes. This day in October, there was a driving rain and I was sitting in an upholstered chair in the living room studying my lessons. As the rain increased, the showers turned into a thunderstorm. This often happened in early October and was normally of no consequence. Today was different. The heavy rain caused puddles to form on the roof and some water seeped through the tarpaper. The thin girders now sat in an inch of water. A single strike of lightning hit a girder, went through the pool of water, contacted the ceiling wires in our apartment, and hit a wall switch a foot over and a foot to the left of my head. The switch exploded, driving the six-inch metal box across the room and lodged it in the plaster wall 14 feet away. Burn tracks remained in the plaster ceiling where the wires vaporized. I suffered no burns, but I could not hear out of my left ear for three days. This was a lucky happenstance.

The next memorable episode occurred about 20 years later. My neighbor Frank and I planned to duck hunt on the Muscoot River in Westchester, New York on small game opening day in October. Years earlier, I survived a riptide that took me out to sea and vowed I would never go near river or lake again without wearing a lifejacket. I was burdened down in the following manner. I had the life jacket on under camouflage clothing and a sweater. I was wearing full-length waders which came up to my chest and went over my shoulders with suspenders. There was a tightly cinched belt under my armpits to keep the top of the waders closed. I had a razor-sharp hunting knife to allow me to cut myself out of the waders if I fell into deep water otherwise water would fill the waders which became a form fitting body bag. I wore a knapsack containing four boxes of shells a thermos of coffee and lunch. I also carried six large duck decoys each with a 10-foot rope leader and a 2-pound circular anchor. A 12 gauge semiautomatic shotgun was in my hands and I had on a broad brimmed camouflage hat.

We walked on the bank of a tributary of the river heading to an open area where we would deploy our decoys and attract some ducks. Frank, told me to avoid any sandy areas that had a different color from the rest. He elaborated no more than that. I agreed and promptly forgot. The ground felt firm and we were moving rapidly on a sandy surface with varying colors. Without warning, I dropped about 3 feet. Now I was in water up to my waist and as I thrashed about, I settled down further. Frank yelled, "Quicksand! Stop moving, you'll only get sucked down further."

I threw my gun as far as I could, to lose 10 pounds of weight. I pulled the decoys off my shoulder and threw them and their anchors off to the side. Then I unhooked the knapsack and shed another 15 pounds. By then the water was up to my elbows just below the entrance to the waders.

Frank dropped everything he was carrying and was trying to find a long pole to assist getting me out of the quicksand. Immediately near the river on this bank, there was nothing he could use. We both thought of the decoys with the ropes attached about the same time. Frank tossed the decoys to me one at a time, while he held onto the anchors. Since the decoys could float, I had no trouble reaching them. With four decoy ropes a lot of effort and many curse words, Frank managed to pull me out of the quicksand. The biggest problem was breaking the vacuum between the waders and the sandy water. When the vacuum broke, a sound I will never forget occurred simultaneously with the quicksand, releasing me. This was another lucky day in my life. If Frank had not been with me, or if I did not wear the life jacket, all I they would have found on that riverbank was my broad brimmed hat.

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