

VICTIM

BY JAMES J. COLLINS

If you should be unlucky enough to get hurt in the Big Apple, think twice about your options. Several Swedes would rather walk to the nearest hospital or hitch a ride with a serial killer rather than call for a city ambulance. They have had a first class encounter with the service that you get in New York City. It all happened in the following manner; it is a story worth telling.

As Mike Donovan stood in the cold dawn, pouring the coffee from the pot, the thought suddenly struck him. In this job, you never get to finish a cup of coffee. Drinking it black, and strong, a habit he acquired in the Marine Corps, Mike cupped both of his hands around the steaming mug, trying to extract every bit of heat from it, for it was a bitter cold morning. The streets of New York were still quiet while the sun, as though overcome by the luxury of night, was slowly trying to rise. Mike was used to being up at this time in the morning. For the past six years in the Marines, this was reveille. He had extended in the Corps waiting for some action, but it had not occurred, and the Marine Corps in peacetime can be dull. Mike opted to come back to New York and join either the Police force or the Fire Department. If nothing else, in New York City there is always some excitement.

Mike and his friend Tommy, 'Back Door', O'Toole, had passed the tests for both departments, and had decided to go for the police. Now they waited for the next Academy class. In the meantime, they had to take a job, and the opportunity to drive an ambulance for Bellevue appeared. They grabbed it, for it meant they could work together. Not many people wanted this job. It was not a long-term career path but as an interim position; it served a need; required no previous experience, and offered an opportunity for excitement and action. It was as good a compromise as could be expected.

Donovan stood five foot ten, and weighed two hundred and twenty five pounds. There was no fat on this frame for the Marines had hardened him. He worked out regularly,

exercised and kept in trim; he was muscular, solid and quick, a tough combination. When you looked at him, your first impression was that he was a wrestler or a professional athlete. Your second impression was that your first was understated. His head appeared as if chiseled out of stone; square lantern jaw, a vertical straight line to the face, dark hair cropped in a short Marine type haircut while he watched you out of piercing blue eyes. The effect was that you were viewing a block of granite mounted on top of a larger block of granite. The lower block of granite was more like a monument. No neck, large sloping shoulders, muscular arms, and a tapered waist that, like an arrow, pointed down to enormous muscular legs, which supported the load balanced above.

Mike stood in the hallway of the emergency entrance, sipping his coffee while talking to Donna the nurse on duty. Suddenly the red light on the wall started to flash accompanied with an annoying. . . BEEP. . . BEEP. . . BEEP. . . Donna picked up the phone and miraculously the annoying sound stopped as if strangled. She listened intently for a couple of seconds, turned to Mike and said, "Dock forty two, Hudson river. There's a problem on a ship. You better get going."

Mike threw his half-filled cup of coffee into the trash, and looking at Donna, he commented, "I just realized I never get to finish a cup of coffee around this place." Then he turned and rushed down the hallway; slammed through the swinging doors. "Let's go Tommy. Something goin' on over on dock forty two."

'B.D.' sailed his half-filled coffee cup out into the street; climbed into the driver's side of the ambulance; hit the flashing lights and hit the sirens as Mike vaulted into the passenger side. Wheels squealed, and the ambulance shot out into the roadway. Luckily, the roads were empty at that time for 'B.D.' felt that the siren was warning enough; the same signal informed the neighborhood that some place there was a problem but help was on the way.

Tommy O'Toole was Mike's inseparable companion. Built on a lighter frame though taller, 'Back Door' (often shortened to 'Back' or 'B.D.') gained his nickname in the streets from his association with Mike. Both liked to fight; Mike would wade into a group of antagonists with Tommy acting as his wingman covering his back, to prevent Mike from being overwhelmed from behind. If 'Back' got in trouble the wrath of Mike was felt by anyone who accosted his friend. It was a symbiotic relationship; each one needed the other and each one defended the other.

Quiet and reserved, Tommy was an unassuming person who did not stand out in a crowd. 'Back Door' was always overlooked or dismissed as a non-threatening person who could be handled by any one. A number learned to their dismay while they recovered in intensive care that he was not one to be trifled with. Back to back, the pair of them was deadly. Where Mike was strong, 'B.D.' was quick. Like a cobra he was a blur in action; he carried a six-inch switchblade that made him lethal. It was rarely used on a one on one relationship, but when the odds changed or the antagonists were armed, he counter attacked and changed weapons; a knife in his hands was like fighting a snake. It flicked; it flashed; it drew blood; another victim was out of the action. None was killed but many were kept busy attending to slash wounds on arms or faces. A lot of exotic, German style, dueling scars are still sported by the participants of these frays. Though both had been in many scrapes, they usually left before the law arrived so their records were clean.

Turning off the highway into the cavernous opening that was the entrance to pier 42, the ambulance never slackened its speed. The guard at the entrance waved them on; it was obvious that he was expecting them. As they flashed by him, his arms were semaphoring the direction they were supposed to follow. They wheeled down the central dock area crowded with cargo nets and long shore men; a path way had been cleared, and the ambulance rushed up the center; met another designated signaler who waved them off to a corridor. Now they were on the dockside racing to a ship tied up to the pier where officers were standing at the gangplank while crewmembers lined the decks. At least forty or fifty men were there waiting and watching.

They pulled up and slammed on the brakes. A long shore man ran up to the side of the ambulance and pointing to the ship exclaimed, "She's a Swedish tanker; just tied up to the dock. There's some guy in real trouble below decks- some kind of accident. Nobody on board speaks English, just a few words. Took us a hell of a long time to figure out what they were trying to tell us, but apparently the guy is burned. The officer with the hat is in charge and he'll take you below."

"O K Tommy, let's go. Get the stretcher and the first aid box and I'll try to find out what this is all about."

'B.D.' rushed to the back of the ambulance, yanked open the rear door, pulled out the stretcher and handed to Mike the massive red cross marked first aid kit. Mike who picked it

up like it weighed nothing, rushed to the gangplank where the assembled trio was frantically waving their arms. All were pointing up the gangplank, and alternately talking rapidly or shouting in what must have been Swedish. One of them grabbed Tommy's arm and tried to drag him up the steep ramp.

"Hey Mike, what are these guys trying to tell us?"

"Beats the hell out of me. I sure wish one of them could speak English. That long shore man disappeared but he seemed to be able to understand them. Our best bet is to just follow them and find out what it's all about."

The three Swedish officers led them up on the deck through a rounded metal hatch way with a large wheel that secured the door and a lever instead of a door knob; down a vertical ladder through a maze of corridors and hatch ways, and finally down another longer ladder. By now, they figured they had to be deep in the bowels of the ship; all they could see was grey painted pipes with water dripping, dim light bulbs flickering like candles; the whine of machinery, which droned in their ears; while the smell of sea water and diesel fumes coupled with the motion of the deck nauseated them.

As they entered the last hatchway, they saw the victim. He was spread eagle on the deck like a large white starfish; totally wrapped in gauze, tape and plaster, covered from head to toe, with only openings for his eyes, nose and mouth. With his rigid arms standing straight out from his shoulders, he looked like he had been crucified. Moans came from the small opening in the white mummy while the remains of a first aid kit- severely depleted- lay strewn around the compartment.

"Christ, will you look at this, "exclaimed 'B.D.', "What the hell happened to him?"

"I don't know," said Mike, "Obviously somebody has been trying to help this guy but he must be burned pretty badly." He turned to the Swede while pointing to the prone figure and shrugging his shoulders and turning his palms upward in the universal body language of a question, asked, "What happened to this guy?"

The Swede, who was obviously an officer pointed to some recently repaired piping and said, "Steeeeeem."

"Holy shit, he must have got caught with a blast of steam when that line let loose. This guy could be burned over ninety percent of his body," exclaimed Mike. "It's a wonder he's alive. I wonder what they've been giving him?"

'B.D.' reached down to pick up a discarded syringe that was rolling back and forth in the corner. "It's a morphine syringe. They must have been giving him shots to keep the pain down while they brought him into port. Now we had better get him over to Bellevue quick. We should call ahead but we'll have to wait till we get back to the ambulance."

"OK let's do it."

With that, they carefully loaded him on the stretcher and started through the doorway. The first opening was a problem. Because of his spread eagle position, he wouldn't fit. They had to take the victim off the stretcher and with the help of four or five Swedes they had to work him through the doorway like a puzzle; one arm, the head, one leg, the other leg, and finally the other arm; put him back on the stretcher and carry him as far as the next obstruction. Though they all tried to be gentle, the moans and the cries in Swedish from the mummy were disconcerting. When they reached a ladder; he came off the stretcher; ropes appeared from nowhere; sailors looped them around his torso and under his arms, while other hands pushed pulled and lifted the protesting man up the vertical wall; then he was placed back on the stretcher until the next obstacle. Finally, they reached the upper deck and stepped out into daylight.

Suddenly the gangplank that was so easily scaled while coming aboard was a challenge. In reality, it was a metal stairway attached to the side of the ship with a couple of intermediate platforms and an inadequate three-foot loose chain railing.

"Mike we're going to have to try to hold the stretcher level while we back him down. Who's going to go first?"

"I'm in front now so we'll keep it that way. I'll take the low end and keep my hands extended overhead. You hold the other end and keep it low. That should do the trick. My only concern is those platforms. We're going to need one of the Swedes to let us know when we arrive at one so we don't stumble."

For three minutes Mike and Tommy pantomimed what they wanted the big Swedish officer to do. Tommy stood behind Mike who held his hands overhead as if he had the stretcher while he backed down the ladder. As they approached the platform, Tommy pointed to the level section; put both of his hands squarely in Mike's back to signal him; Mike stopped. Then Tommy and Mike inched over to the next stairwell and Tommy tapped him a second time with both hands to indicate that the stairs started again. After two rehearsals, the

big Swede was busy laughing and gibbering in Swedish and nodding his head as if to test if it was still attached. All appeared ready.

A dozen set of hands helped load the moaning mummy on the stretcher while all his extremities jutted out like large white spines. As the little three-person cortege aligned themselves on the ladder; the entire crew rushed to the side of the ship to holler advice and encouragement unfortunately all in Swedish. Carefully, Mike backed down the ladder balancing his unusual cargo, which groaned from the shock of each step. All was going fine until disaster struck. The Swede must have been impressed with Mike's size and assumed that he really had to hit him to get his attention for he slammed him so hard at the first landing that he drove him face down onto the ladder. Mike tried to hold onto the stretcher but being underneath it, was unable. The moaning mummy went airborne. Looking like a white glider in a tailspin, he pin wheeled off to the side of the freighter; performed a series of spins; generated some loud screams; entered the water forty feet below, and disappeared from view. As an Olympic dive, it would only have earned a 'one'.

The place went crazy. Swedes were running all over the deck looking like a Chinese fire drill. Men were shouting orders in Swedish while life preservers sailed over the side like streamers at a parade. Nobody figured out the fact that, with his hands imprisoned in the casts and tape, the mummy couldn't reach any of the preservers. Noise reigned supreme, the area started to sound like a boiler factory; the ship's alarm joined in; men ran up and down metal ladders; a bullhorn was in use; while a loud ratcheting sound over powered the hollering as a team started to lower a lifeboat.

Mike had his hands full with the Swedish officer who was shaking him and alternately screaming in Swedish at him and the crew while pointing to the animated ripples between the ship and the dock, which had all the debris merrily bobbing on the oily water. Grabbing the officer's hands, Mike effectively immobilized him while yelling to Tommy to be heard over the bedlam. "Where did he go?"

"He went in just off to the right; just this side of the piling."

"Whose turn is it?"

"What do you mean 'whose turn'? You dropped him."

"I didn't drop him. This idiot knocked me down. Besides, I had to go in after the last jumper. Remember? At Hell Gate."

"Don't matter; you dropped him; you get him."

Just then, the mummy arrived back on the surface. It was a miraculous transformation. He had gone into the water hospital white and clean, but arrived brown and grey, covered with oil, grease, sewage, and dripping brown seaweed. He had also recovered his voice. Swedish is a very expressive language and though you may not know the idiom, you can certainly understand the oaths and curses. Water must have been filling up the center of the wrappings because he started to sink at the feet. Slowly his head and arms rose out of the water allowing his voice to reverberate off the side of the ship as his feet started to settle; this drew more life preservers. As one arm went down the other rose like the mast on some small vessel; the audience was transfixed.

Mike cleanly broke the surface of the water, entering feet first with one hand covering his genitals while the other covered his face. Marine training came in handy. As he came back to the surface, he turned, spotted the mummy and with a half dozen strong strokes reached the screaming man; again a rain of life preservers. While he held the victim up with one hand, he used the other arm to gather four preservers; a lifeboat splashed alongside and several sets of hands dragged the wet bundle into the boat; cheers were now heard.

While Mike and 'B.D.' loaded the bedraggled mummy into the ambulance, a flood of curses and invectives were coming out of the mouth hole while glares were evident in the eye holes. Something the victim said set off the crowd of Swedes who suddenly acted like they wanted their friend back and simultaneously wanted to do harm to the attendants; a bad decision. It was a short but brutal fight; four Swedes incurred broken ribs noses or minor concussions; the officer was still unconscious when wheeled into the emergency room, and two who tried to employ a bailing hook and a sheath knife were sporting dueling scars. Half a hundred stevedores joined the fray to separate the rest of the crew from the two stalwarts. Then the long shore men helped load the wounded into the ambulance and escorted the vehicle off the dock. It was an interesting and packed ambulance ride - one of the more interesting ones.

Luckily the ship had to sail so all charges were dropped because no crew men showed up at the hearing, but the Swedish ambassador filed a formal protest in Washington and the response of the State department really upset the mayor of New York. Unfortunately, because of this incident, Mike and 'B.D.' lost their appointment to New York's finest.

However, if you should ever fall into New York harbor and the Fire Department comes to your rescue, look around at the rescue team; I give you fair warning, don't object too strenuously if they want to take you to a hospital for observation, especially if the two firemen are named Mike and Tommy.

THE END