



A REQUIEM FOR A FRIEND

Why, When a man has all of the opportunities in the world does he let them slip from his grasp, allow them to fall by the wayside and then deny, to others and to himself that the opportunities ever existed?

The majority of Merchant Seamen are responsible and conscientious individuals. Most are proud of their profession and work hard to advance into positions offering better than average incomes than comparable employment ashore. Then there are those who like the regimen of the sea life, and dislike the complications of competing against everybody ashore.

Thomas Womack fit in this latter mold. He was raised in an environment of wealth, education, and every opportunity that the good life had to offer, but wound up a broken, bitter individual. According to him, his family never took the time from their so called busy schedules to try and understand his needs or wants, nor gave the impression they even wanted to.

Party time, all the time. That was his motto. Work hard and play hard, that was his standard. I couldn't keep up the pace he set and many times left him at a bar after his pleas of, "Just this one more and then we'll leave". I finally gave up trying to stop him from suddenly getting up from the bar, at least once a week, grabbing a cab and going God only knows where, and not returning to the Marine

Engineering School in time for morning roll-call.

On my return to the states I sat for my mate's license, but because of very limited sight in my right eye, (caused by a boyhood accident, while trying to load Captain Noble's gift cannon with gun powder). I couldn't pass the Coast Guard vision requirements for Deck Officers. The ATS recommended and offered to send me to a Marine Engineering school in New Orleans, Louisiana if I would sign another one-year contract.

Womack and I were section leaders, and were expected to set an example for proper conduct. We were Basic instructors for two squads of 48 new Engineering enrollees at the US Army Bomber Base at Lake Pontchartrain, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Our specific duties included morning wake up, keeping the barracks orderly, marching the men to chow and then to classes, maintaining a duty roster, and recommending liberty passes. We were both familiar with the routine of these assignments because we both wound up in the hospital just before final exams of the previous class of ninety day wonders, and were asked to start the classes over again. As the Army transitioned to Diesel engines from steam.

Womack was a machinist-mate in the Navy, until shrapnel wounds to his shoulder and back forced him out on a disability discharge. Thus began his downward spiral into booze and resentment of his fate and life in general. No one was aware of his personal problems but me and some of our senior officers. They noticed our friendly relationship and suggested I kind of keep an eye out for him. They even overlooked some of his tardy arrivals by allowing him to report for sick call.

Booze has many ways of affecting people. For some it may relax them, for others it may give confidence to do things they wouldn't do sober. To Womack it meant seeking out the biggest bruiser, usually a Navy man, and goading him into an argument by challenging him about almost anything, but especially on his knowledge of the Navy. The sailors at Algiers Naval Station, across the river, were well aware of Womack and tried to avoid contact with him at the bars in the French Quarter or down on Front Street.

His only reference to me regarding his family or home-life was that they were glad to be rid of him. He never wrote a letter, and, to my knowledge, he never received one. He did mention that his father married a much younger woman after his mother died and that they did extensive traveling, and that he (Womack) wound up in one military academy after another from which he would

always try to run away. On one escape, while his parents were in Hawaii, he forced their early return home. A bitter confrontation resulted and irretrievable words were spoken. Womack walked out never to go back.

He joined the Navy at sixteen in 1941, was injured in 1943 and, still recovering from his wounds, joined the Army Transport Service. Their only physical requirement as mentioned before was to have at least one good eye, leg, or arm....and not necessarily in that order.

To this day I don't know why I took the abuse he dished out when drinking. Several times I tried to intercede to keep him from taking on the whole bar, only to get into the middle of a brawl myself, or have him fight his way through me to get at some guy twice his size.

I should mention that I wasn't any angel. A few drinks, a good looking woman, and I was happy. At the time in New Orleans if you were tall enough to put your money on the bar you were old enough to drink. To Womack, if a woman went into these bars, that meant she was willing and able, and he would proposition them all.

When he was drunk he was the crudest and cruelest person I'd ever met, but yet there was some redeeming quality about him that to this day I can't fully explain. Maybe the similarities in our backgrounds (the broken home and going out on our own at an early age) whatever, it made me to want to be his friend. It must have been reciprocal, because he would always attempt to include me in his activities.

Womack's stint in the Navy plus the years in the military academies taught him how to manipulate the system. He believed rules were like a rubber band, he knew just how far they could be stretched before breaking. He was blunt, honest and fiercely loyal to all of his friends, especially the men in his section. They thought Womack was the best section leader on the base. But anytime a person crossed him or lit his short fuse, he would turn "down and dirty."

When on a binge, I could tell when he was getting loaded. His one topic always was centered on his service in the Navy. Always proud, claiming it to be his only accomplishment in life. And it was taken away from him, this time through no fault of his own, but by a strange, and unexplained accident aboard his ship during gunnery drills. He described to me that a shell exploded while being loaded in the breech of a gun, killing and wounding several crew members. He wasn't part of the gun crew, and was at another location on the ship when the accident happened. Why did that shrapnel have to seek him out, and since it did,

why didn't it kill him then and there, instead of just screwing up his life?

Thinking back, I really believe he wanted to commit suicide to protest what he thought was life's lousy scheme of things, but couldn't think of a way to do it dramatically.

The base was unable to make contact with his parents. Going through his personal belongings with the Base Commander we found a woman's name and telephone number, a sister whom he had never mentioned. I had the distasteful obligation to inform his sister of the circumstances leading to his death. Oddly enough she hadn't been in contact with the father for years, as she was sent to live with her aunt at the time of their mother's death.

It was necessary that a next of kin make arrangements for the disposition of the remains. Money was not a factor. Womack hadn't cashed the last six months of his disability checks. Being a gambler in a gamblers paradise, he did quite well for himself at the tables across and up the river from Algiers.

Womack's sister was a sweetheart of a lady who had given her brother up for dead long ago. When she came to New Orleans she wanted me to introduce her to his friends and the men in his section. She even wanted to visit his haunts just to get a feel for the life that her troubled brother had led.

His remains were cremated and she was to take them home with her, but before leaving she insisted I take her to the place of the tragedy.

This bar was nothing fancy, just like any of the many other bars in the French Quarter and only a couple of blocks from Jackson Square. We entered about four in the afternoon and maybe five people were sitting at the bar. Womack's sister sat down at a table and I went to the bar to order and pick up the drinks. Someone from down the bar asked if I knew the guy who blew his brains out. He said he recognized my uniform as being the same as the dead guy's. I said I knew the guy and started towards the table with the drinks; he followed me.

"Come to think of it, I've seen the two of you in here several times. My name's Art. I'm the day bartender and I'm just getting off." Looking at Womack's sister, he continued, "Mind if I sit for a moment?" Looking back at me, he said. "I've seen and heard of some wild things in my life, but after listening to the accounts of what happened that night, that would have been the wildest ever....yes sir." Art paused and then he began telling us the entire episode. He had taken all the eye witness accounts from his bar customers, put it together, and told us an unbelievable tale of a wild-man gone berserk.

"Three Marines were sitting at that table over there," he pointed towards the

two doors going to the courtyard in the rear. "Your buddy was coming back from the john and pushed the door open, striking one of the Marines and a few words were said. Now nobody tells the same story from that point on. I think that your buddy tried to take all three of them on at the same time, and a brawl started. Someone dropped a gun on the floor and your buddy picked it up. Then he started threatening everybody, yelling that he was no friggin draft dodger. Max, the owner of the bar was right in the middle trying to stop it. Your friend with the gun was trying to get everybody to line up at that wall over there. In a flash he flipped out the cylinder, punched out the rounds, then inserted one back in, pulled the hammer back, and dared the bravest one to charge him and take his one bullet. Then, calling them cowards, he yelled for them to come on....all of 'em. Then he said he'd even make the odds greater and spun the cylinder, put the gun to his temple, and offered to bet a hundred dollars that he could beat the odds playing Russian roulette. He pulled the trigger."

Now we knew what happened....but....why?

Within a month I was on a ship going back to Manila. One evening I took out a small box Womack's sister had given me, making me promise I would dispose of his ashes as far from land as possible.

MAY HE FINALLY REST IN PEACE.