

Saturday evening. The eye of the Typhoon was crossing southern Luzon, but Cavite was still getting high winds and buckets of rain. In the shelter of the PatWing 10's Hangar on Sangley Point, players gathered around the improvised poker table.

"Ready to go?" Charles shuffled the cards and pushed the deck for someone to cut.

Usually the players were all from PatWing 10. Occasionally sailors from the hospital or the Navy Yard were invited. Army soldiers were never included in the games at Sangley Point.

This night, one of the sailors, Jimmy, brought along a friend from his hometown. A Marine. "Everyone, this is Lance Corporal Greenwood. Just call him 'Jack'. He's a Marine with the First Separate Marine Battalion on Cavite."

Jack shook hands, but as the evening progressed didn't engage in the ongoing banter during the game. He did periodically sip from a hip flask between games while Charles shuffled and dealt. He acted sober, but was losing money.

They stayed dry inside the hanger, but outside typhoon winds lashed the hanger with pelting rain. Charles checked his watch. It was midnight. He paused the game for a moment by removing and cleaning his glasses. "We have some winners and losers. The weather's not improving. Should we keep going or call it a night?" No one wanted to drop out, so he continued the game.

Soon thereafter, through a combination of bad bets and bad luck, the Marine lost everything but the small change in his pocket. He quietly got up and without a word walked out the door. Jimmy followed him out, and in a few minutes came back wiping the rain from his forehead. He looked worried.

"Jack thinks he's been cheated tonight," he said looking at Charles.

"How?"

"He doesn't know, but assumes that you were dealing him bad cards so your navy friends here could win."

"It was a fair game," Charles responded. "He can think what he wants, but he won't be in any more of my games."

“I have a feeling he didn’t go back to his barracks yet. Understand what I’m saying? Watch your six o’clock tonight.”

“Always do.” Charles was not overly muscled, but he was well-proportioned and an inch or two taller than most of the other men. His physicality and reputation for no-nonsense dealing dissuaded most players from challenging him during a game. Charles found that sometimes it took only a quiet stare to wordlessly deflect an accusation.

In most circumstances, he respected the chain of command, without assuming that higher rank always came with higher intelligence or better thinking. Lately, he found himself less inclined to back down from a disagreement if he was certain he was right, which was always the case.

The game broke up an hour later. Clutching their ponchos Charles, Joe, and another Squadron-101 man stood at the hangar door. It was going to be a wet run to the barracks. Charles told the other two, “Go ahead. I have to take care of some paperwork in the dispensary.”

Joe was suspicious, “Paperwork, I don’t think so. Want us to stay?”

“Nope. I’ll be fine.”

“Then be careful,” Joe warned, and the two ran into the dark night, ponchos flapping in the wind and rain.

*That Marine didn’t confront me before leaving. Was his silence itself a threat?* Once inside the dispensary Charles opened a locked cabinet, and withdrew his field medical kit. The bag contained supplies he would need in a field deployment. There were bandages, instruments, and medications, including single dose morphine syrettes. He moved aside his cache of quinine and Atabrine. From the bottom of the bag he withdrew only one item, a huge knife in a leather scabbard. He closed the bag and locked it back in the cabinet.

Sometimes confused with the native Filipino bolo, the Model 1904 Hospital Corps Knife that Charles held was a military design in use since the Great War. It was 17” long and 2 ½” wide, with a slight curve. The rounded tip was sharpened along its circumference. The thick 3/8” steel spine made it heavy, almost 3 pounds. This weight gave it added heft for cutting saplings or

small trees for splints or for constructing a liter or shelter. It was also useful as a machete for clearing brush or digging a trench latrine. He expected none of those tasks this night.

Charles ran his finger along the sharp blade and slipped it back inside the scabbard. He hooked the scabbard through the back of his belt and covered it with his poncho. After locking up, he paused outside the door and looked around. Seeing no one, he took a deep breath and dove into the rain, heading for his barracks.

It happened more or less as Charles expected, at a dark and isolated spot. The Marine from the poker game stepped into his path, wielding a knife with an enclosed grip and a stiletto blade. Charles recognized the standard-issue fighting knife with its 7-inch stiletto blade. Even with rain running down, he could see that the Marine was flushed and sweaty, and had likely finished off his hip flask. Nevertheless, his eyes were steady and he was not staggering. He had drunk enough to be dangerous. Darkness and blinding rain reduced their world to a ten-foot circle.

“Okay asshole. I’m not sure how you did it, but I know you threw cards to your buddies. I’m not robbing you, I just want back the thirty dollars I lost. Hand it over and I won’t take this any further,” Greenwood extended his free hand.

At first, they just stood in the storm and stared at each other. The heavy rain blew horizontally. A palm frond flew through the air striking Charles in the arm. Had there been less adrenaline flowing through his body he would have reacted to the pain, but at this moment he was hardly aware of it.

Forcing himself to stare at the Marine’s eyes rather than his knife, Charles spoke slowly and firmly, but loud enough to be heard over the wind.

“It seems to me you brought closer to twenty dollars, maybe not even that much. In either case I don’t have your money. You lost it to those other guys, including to your friend Jimmy. It was a fair game. There was no cheating. You were unlucky. On top of that you bet poorly.”

“Just stop talking,” the Marine raised both his voice and the knife, “and pull out that cash, now!”

Charles, who was left handed, held up his right hand, “Okay, just give me a second.” Reaching with his left hand as if he were reaching for his back pocket, he instead gripped the wood handle of the Hospital Corps Knife, extracting it from the scabbard in one smooth movement. “Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked the surprised Marine.

“I’ve never heard of a corpsman trained in hand to hand,” the Marine gave a short laugh.

He looked fierce enough, but Charles knew that he had caught the Marine off guard. He had waited to confront Charles when they were alone, hidden in the darkness and storm. He was not sure what to do with this armed, confident-sounding corpsman.

Charles switched to his matter-of-fact voice, “You’ve got barely 7 inches of blade there. It’ll take a lot of luck to drop me with a single cut or poke. At some point before I go down, I’m going to get at least one good swing into you. With this thing, one is all it’s going to take. I might be bleeding, but you’ll be dead.”

Jack Greenwood stared at Charles for what seemed a long time. He backed up a few steps, turned, and walked into the darkness. The wind carried his parting words, “This isn’t over.”

Charles willed his muscles to relax and his pulse to slow. It took three tries to put the knife back in the scabbard. *My hands are shaking. I never thought of dad being scared when he stood up to Frank with the pitchforks in the stable. Maybe he was. I was damn sure scared tonight.*