

Murray LeMay

## PLATFORM PERFORMANCE

SO VAST WAS THE EXPANSE OF OCEAN OVER which the night battle raged that only those plotting or directing operations on a fleetwide basis were fully aware of the immensity of the struggle. Of the ferocity of the engagement there could be no doubt. Each sixty-degree sector of visible ocean was host to at least one blazing hulk whose flames, drafted a thousand feet into the night sky, flickeringly illuminated a farrago of human and material flotsam bobbing on the surface of a slightly ruffled sea.

Mostly, however, the men who were dying in these tropical waters were conscious of neither the fitful light nor the thunderous sounds. Shock and terror possessed their minds, pain racked their bodies, and their physical movements were minimal and purely reflexive. Certainly this was so with one swimmer, a young naval officer who was nearing the limit of his endurance.

His name was Michel. He was quite naked, and his body, made luminous by phosphorescent organisms in the water, glowed as though painted with silvery, radio-active pigment. Successively, he would tread water, float on his back, roll over and swim sidestroke. Each movement he made sent currents of pain through his injured chest, each pause he permitted himself vitiated his desire to postpone the inevitable. Already his tired mind had divested death of its terrors and endowed the sea with feminine attributes. She was a seductress, warm, soft, enveloping. Her object was indissoluble union, her conditions complete surrender. He was about to resign himself to these terms when his body brushed against an indiscernible but ponderous metal object. The contact infused his mind with hope, his body with energy. With great effort he managed to haul himself out of the water and on to the surface of this asylum. Once safe he succumbed to a paroxysm of vomiting. When the spasm passed he fell into a heavy sleep and was not awakened by the widely spaced arrivals of three swimmers who, like himself, had the good fortune to encounter this raft-like object.

The first man to join Michel looked more like a martyr snatched from the

flames than a casualty from a major naval engagement. In some fantastic manner the conflagration the man had survived had done little damage to his head other than singeing his carefully trimmed red beard. But from the shoulders down the man's body had suffered third degree burns to which patches of carbonized clothing still adhered.

The next person to gain sanctuary was a mere youth—probably a survivor from an enemy ship, for his features were pronouncedly Asiatic. Like Michel, he had jettisoned his clothing. His injury was grave, his loss of blood prodigious: a missile of some sort had sliced away a portion of his thigh—the wound still bled.

The last man to haul himself aboard was a big-framed seaman from the ship on which Michel had served. His name was Storey. The explosions that had destroyed his ship and nearly all its complement had left him unscathed. He had taken to the water fully clothed and wearing a life preserver of advanced design.

When Storey boarded the raft a slim band of orange-coloured light was wedging its way between sea and sky. He perceived that the float, which measured seven feet by fourteen feet and had about eight inches of freeboard, had once been a storage tank for a liquid of some kind. After satisfying himself that the raft-like object was in no immediate danger of sinking, he regrouped the casualties to give himself a clear area at one end of the raft. He then made a pillow out of his life preserver and alternately napped and stood watch. While he was standing his third watch, a swimmer, his back toward the raft, passed within three yards of the float. Apparently the castaway was quite unaware of his nearness to safety, for he vanished into the semi-darkness as eerily as he had appeared from the brightening east. This was perhaps the best thing the unfortunate man could have done, for Storey had drawn a knife and was making threatening gestures in his direction. Not until the upper limb of the sun rose above the horizon did Storey sheathe his blade.

Once clear of the horizon, the equatorial sun seemed to rocket into the sky. No trace remained of the heavy clouds that had formed in the area during the later part of the battle. The glassy sea was devoid of ships, the cloudless sky of planes. It was as if man had fled and nature had ceased to breathe. The raft became a skillet for the frying of three men and the discomfiture of the fourth.

Needled by the sun's fierceness, the injured men began to stir uneasily. The bearded sailor, obviously an able seaman from an ally's ship, was the first to react to this added agony. His groans, which had been growing louder, longer, and more frequent, now gave way to snatches of prayer, portions of which were intelligible.

"God ease my pain!" the man cried. And then, a little later: "Water, dear God, water!"

Visibly annoyed by the seaman's piteous plea, Storey got on his feet and frowned down on the three men whose voiced sufferings had somewhat relieved the tedium of his long vigil.

Michel, whom he recognized as one of the officers of his late ship, had not stirred. He lay on his back, his eyes closed, his head toward the sun, his breathing laboured. Similarly, although his brown, bloodshot eyes were open and he was gazing at Storey much the same as a sick St. Bernard looks at an adored master, the burned seaman had retained his position. The little straw-coloured man at the far end of the raft lay face downward in what had once been a pool of blood but now was a black, tarry substance flecked with crystals that sparkled in the sun.

Storey, recalling that he had positioned the three men in hospital-ward fashion, stepped across Michel and the seaman, reached down, and turned the little man face up.

Two black eyes stared apprehensively at the sailor, whose facial expression underwent a swift transition from suspicion to disgust.

"You enemy?" he snarled.

A trace of comprehension and a gleam of hope stole into the youth's eyes. He nodded his head and screwed his face into a toothy grin.

His smile was short-lived. Any illusion he may have had of his questioner's intent withered when the sailor cursed him and vanished altogether when the big man lunged at him.

"You're going to pay for this, you little rat—you—you're going to get what's coming to the rest of your tribe!" screamed the big man as he clamped his huge hands around the young man's throat and began banging his head against the wetted deck. Weak though he was, the castaway managed to grasp the sailor's wrists. Goaded by this feeble resistance, Storey went berserk. His profanity became torrential, his movements frenetic. Suddenly, just as he was about to finish the man off, he was rocked by a blow on his temple. Dazed more by the unexpectedness and sting of the thwack than by its force, Storey let his nearly dead victim crumble to the deck and turned to deal with this new development.

He did not have far to look. An accusatory finger was pointing at him. Behind this finger an arm from which hung long ribbons of charred flesh, behind the arm a face, a flaming, red-bearded, patriarchal face. The burned sailor, the man Storey had written off, had struggled to his knees. The life his flesh had lost his eyes

had gained: they blazed with an ambivalent mixture of evangelic fervour and imperious indignation.

"Have care, sailor!" he croaked. "Helpless brother—child of God. He's dying — I — you too. Don't kill — pray — pra — ah — ah . . ."

The recriminatory finger wavered, the tattered arm fell. Slowly, ever so slowly, as if in rhythm to a cosmic concerto, the casualty sank down beside and put an arm around the man whose cause he had pleaded.

Sensing that he now had a protector, the youth uttered a sob of gratitude and clasped the hand of his benefactor.

Storey, as though nauseated by an indecent exhibit, went through the motion of spitting into the sea. He then turned his back on the pair and clumped to the other end of the raft, taking special pains en route to step heavily on Michel's outstretched hand. This bit of sadism terminated the officer's blackout; ten minutes passed, however, before the dazed man began to realize where he was and why. When, finally, he began to speak, his dry mouth, swollen tongue, puffed and cracked lips made his initial remarks unintelligible. At last, in exasperation, he beckoned to Storey to come close. Making no attempt to disguise his aversion to the gestured command, the sailor lumbered over to Michel, knelt down, and brought his head close to the officer's lips.

"You Storey?" the officer mumbled.

"That's right."

"Good man! Any sign of rescue?"

"Rescue! You serious? Those guys are so bent on making port and getting decorated there won't be a ship in these parts for the next two weeks."

The officer, affecting not to hear Storey's gloomy prediction, pointed at the bearded sailor and the tawny little man whose wound, reopened by the mauling, was again bleeding and asked, "What ship are our friends from?"

"One's either an Aussie or a Limey, the other's a Nip," replied Storey scornfully. Then, lacing the contempt in his voice with a jiggerful of suspicion, he asked "What's wrong with you anyway?"

"I don't know," replied the officer wonderingly. "All I know is that I can't lift my back off this deck and my ribs feel pulverized. Lend me a hand, Storey, I want to sit up."

So immediate and brusque was Storey's response to Michel's request that the officer, his face contorted by pain, emitted a scream of agony that brought a smile to Storey's face. His smile turned into a laugh, then into a guffaw, when Michel

tried to maintain a sitting position without scorching the palms of his hands on the sun-baked deck.

Unclad, bereft of all symbols of authority, the officer still retained an aura of command. He shot a censorious glance at his subordinate and that gentleman's coarse laughter came to a twittering end.

Angry at himself for his conditioned reaction to an officer's frown, Storey turned his back to Michel and retired to his private preserve where he made a long and fruitless survey of the forsaken sea and empty sky, then knelt and measured the raft's freeboard. All at once he emitted a stream of oaths, leapt to his feet, and strode toward Michel.

"We've sunk four inches!" he yelled.

"In what time?"

"Six, maybe seven hours," replied Storey.

"H'm," said Michel, "that'll give us another five hours at least. Our boys'll find us before then."

"Unless were practical we'll be in a shark's belly by the time the sun's over the yardarm," protested Storey.

"What do you mean — practical?"

"I'll show you what I mean," said the sailor, making his way to the far end of the raft and pointing meaningfully at the entwined, uneasily stirring figures.

"I don't understand," said the officer icily.

"These men are goners," argued Storey. "They've had it. Dumping them will add a good two hours to our floating time — we'll need it."

"You're mad, Storey!"

"You got a better idea?"

"Listen, Storey, and get this straight: I'm not submitting ideas, I'm giving orders. Order number one is for you to go overboard and track down our leaks."

The sailor did not move. In a silence accentuated rather than lessened by the popping of blistered paint and the raucous cries of white, pink-footed gulls, the two men appraised each other. Psychological superseded chronological time.

The impasse ended by Michel attempting to get on his feet. The result was disastrous: he blanked out and fell face downward on the deck. When he regained consciousness he and the sailor had the float to themselves.

With great difficulty and without help from Storey, the officer levered himself into a sitting position. He did not seem to appreciate immediately the significance of the changed situation. His gaze kept shifting between Storey and the place

where the maimed men had lain. Each cycle of evaluation rinsed some of the bewilderment out of his eyes. When he finally focussed attention exclusively on his subordinate, the officer's expression was judicial.

"That was murder, Storey."

"Begging your pardon, sir," said the sailor in mock humility, "that was euthanasia. If there's a hereafter, they'll be singing my praises for helping them over the hard part of the voyage."

A look of transient surprise crossed the officer's face.

"It seems I'm talking to an educated murderer. Ah yes, now I recall: the personnel history file did make some reference to your involvement in a sticky incident at a university — I had forgotten."

"I don't like that term — murderer."

"That's what it's going to be, Storey, unless the court-martial sees it differently."

Once again Time changed its form, became an electrical thing pumping anti-polar charges into two men dielectrically separated by three feet of space. Up and up the pressures went. Suddenly Storey blew, blew high, blew wide:

"You make me sick — you and every little squirt of a brass-buttoned officer in this rule-ridden navy. I'm fed up to the teeth with orders and regulations — with personnel records that contain every picayune thing an ordinary guy does and not one solitary word of the rackets the brass get away with. And remember this, Mister: the men who made this country didn't consult a book of regulations or some snot-nosed kid of an officer before they fired their Winchesters. They cleaned out the varmint, then staked their claims. My old man's old man used to brag how he and some neighbours stomped out a band of redskins. His chaw of tobacco would tumble into his beard if he could see me taking lip from a schoolboy!"

His blister of fear and aggression now lanced and drained, the sailor appeared to lose some of his truculence in the long interval between the end of his tirade and the start of Michel's quiet reply:

"You're an anarchist, Storey. Your talk's in line with your recent actions. We've had a bit too much of both. I'm repeating an order: get overboard and trace down those leaks."

"Anarchy, hell!" snapped Storey. "Because a guy doesn't jump through a hoop every time you hold it up he's a mutineer, an anarchist. Just how would I fix those leaks — stick my fingers in them, maybe?"

The officer bit his lower lip and stared at a line of rivets in the deck. Beads

of blood dropped from his chin to his chest. A long sigh escaped him. Finally he raised his head and looked less censoriously at his subordinate.

"I'm beginning to thing the heat's done things to you, Storey. It's possible the court may see it that way too."

"You're softening on that court-martial gunk?" queried the sailor in a voice of which the petulance could not quite conceal an undercurrent of concern.

"I haven't changed my mind, and I won't," replied Michel gravely. "However, you can rest assured of a fair hearing."

A crafty look came into Storey's face, and he asked, "What's your price, guy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Listen, fellow, and listen good: my tongue's hanging out for a drink, so's yours. Right now would you give a year's pay for a quart of water?"

"I'm afraid I'd give it for a mouthful."

"Now that's talking," said Storey. "Me, I'd trade the country and everyone in it for a gallon of slime-covered water from a ditch by a privy. When the chips are down, all that hooey that's been written and preached to keep guys in line so's they can be herded around like a flock of sheep turns out to be what it was to begin with — gas."

"What's all this adding up to, Storey?"

"That's a good question," replied the sailor. "Here's the answer: I'm damned if I'm going to let you drag me before any court-martial. Sure, they'll acquit me; it's guys like me who do the messy jobs that win wars, and they know it. But after they delivered their pompous acquittal, they'd see to it that nasty little poison-pen notes went into the files, notes that follow a guy from one damn organization to another — just like that college you were talking about. Now comes the proposal: if any write-ups are going to be made, they'd better be good. Do you get it?"

"I get the inference."

"Are you buying?"

"I've already told you I intend to submit an unbiased report," replied Michel truly and then, as though closing a book at the end of a chapter which required reflection, turned his head and gazed thoughtfully toward the west. If he sensed that his answer was all that Storey required to relinquish his role of bargainer for that of judge and executioner his self-control was of a high order. The officer's gaze remained riveted on the western horizon; no flickering eyelid or twitching facial muscle betrayed his likely awareness that Storey was preparing an assault.

The end was quick and in a way clean: Storey threw a terrific right to Michel's

forehead. The impact of the blow drove the officer's head against the rivet-studded deck with such force that the hull emitted a drum-like sound. The sailor knelt on the officer's diaphragm, then pushed the unconscious (perhaps dead) man overboard, and then peered over the side and watched the sinking body dwindle in size and visibility until for one long moment it looked like a little celluloid doll lying on the green-carpeted flooring of an immense foyer.

Satisfied finally that never again would sun shine nor man look on the body of the person whose life he had abruptly, Storey got to his feet, dusted his trousers, and proceeded to measure the raft's freeboard. His cargo-jettisoning operations had paid off: the tank rode two inches higher. But another measurement taken half an hour later showed his situation as less roseate: the float had lost the buoyancy so laboriously acquired. It was sinking, sinking fast. When he had quite exhausted his repertoire of profanity, the sailor took off his uniform, made sure there were no sharks about, eased himself overboard and began belatedly to carry out the ignored orders of his late commander.

An awkward swimmer, Storey had great difficulty in keeping sufficiently below the surface to get a good view of the sides of the hull. An exploration of the bottom of the tank, seven feet below the surface, was beyond the limit of both his skill and his courage. He was about to abandon his fruitless survey when he noticed a stream of air bubbling from a pipe plug some ten inches underwater and diagonally down from the corner where the young Asiatic had lain. The air leak ceased immediately when Storey gave the plug a few turns.

Smiling the smile of a man well satisfied with his work, Storey hauled himself on to the deck and got into his clothes. He had finished dressing and was about to put on his life preserver when he heard the hum of distant aircraft. He shielded his eyes and gazed in the direction of the sound. Fifteen degrees above the southwest horizon there was a minute dot in the sky. The dot increased in size, the noise it made grew louder. Moments later an American plane, flying at an altitude of fifteen hundred feet, passed within a quarter mile of the raft. Apparently the pilot did not see the tiny platform and the wildly gesticulating figure, for the plane continued on course and soon vanished from sight. Crushed by disappointment, Storey threw to the deck and flung himself on the life preserver he had been using to flag the plane. Convulsive shudders racked his body. His hands and feet rained blows on the deck.

His despair was unwarranted. The men in the plane had seen the raft and had reported its position. Their flight plan, however, called for the execution of



certain maneuvers which they conscientiously completed, then reversed course and sped toward the raft and its crew of one. When the aircraft was within pistol range of the hull, the pilot gunned the motors and forced the plane into a steep climb. The backwash from two propellers made the raft bob like a cork on a ruffled pond. When the wild rocking motion abated, Storey got to his feet, waved excitedly at the now circling plane, tied on his life jacket, and began a waltz around the deck.

"I'm going to make it!" he exulted. "I'm going to drink a barrel of cold sweet water. I'll get my guts real wet and cool, then stoke up with a keg of corn likker. When the old sap's running again, I'll lay a thousand women. Yippee! You're in, Storey boy, you're in!"

After ten minutes of dancing with himself to the accompaniment of a litany of very earthy joys, Storey quieted down and began fussing with his appearance. He combed his hair with his fingers, dusted the encrusted salt off his uniform, and applied sea water to several bloodstains on his trousers. An expression of displeasure crossed his face when he happened to glance at the place where the bearded sailor and his young companion had left ineffaceable marks of their sufferings.

Suddenly the monotonous drone from the circling aircraft changed to a roar, and the plane darted toward the southwest. At a point where a projection of its course intersected the horizon, Storey discerned something that looked remarkably like the mast of a ship. When he was quite sure what he saw was not a mirage, he went to the gory end of the platform, reached down and loosened the pipe plug. The stream of air that shot into the water imparted a slow spinning motion to the hull.

His timing was excellent; when the rescue vessel, a battle-scarred destroyer, was within hailing distance the raft was awash, and Storey, standing rigidly at attention, was saluting the oncoming ship. Almost at the moment that the razor-like shadow of the destroyer's bow cut across his path of ocean, the sailor, now up to his waist in water yet still holding his salute, felt the raft drop away from his feet and begin its long glide to the bottom.

A rapturous expression overspread his face when, a minute or two later, his arm through and around a lowered sling, he suffered the ecstasy of being lifted from the sea to the accompaniment of tumultuous cheers and hoisted up and on to a platform that would carry him to the ports of his desire.