

Ninety Saddles For Kengtu

By EDMUND G. LOVE

It was as unorthodox an engagement as any ever fought by the United States Navy—one of the finest cavalry charges ever launched at sea

MY NAME is Sam McHale. On April 6, 1944, I assumed command of a naval weather detachment unofficially known as Argos Six. At the time, I was less than a year out of the University of Nebraska. The only job I had ever had in my life was as a checker in the Omaha . stockyards, which wasn't much help to a seafaring man. The Navy had tried to remedy this by giving ensign. me ninety days' training in the Naval ROTC at the University of Michigan before commissioning me an ensign. Then, evidently skeptical, they had piled on a sixty-day education in meteorology at the Naval Observatory in Washington, D.C., before turning me loose on Argos Six. The lack of a salty background didn't seem to make much difference to the ten enlisted men in the detachment. To begin with, seven of them were no further advanced than I was, being sailors only by virtue of their uniform, boot training and considerable time at various specialists' schools. Two of the others, Chief Radioman Stanley Adams and Radioman First Class Horace Jones, had spent most of their combined twenty-five years of service in radio rooms, either ashore or afloat, and an anchor was something academic, to be translated into Morse code. As a for Casimir Czernowski, Boatswain's Mate Third Class—to him an ensign of my caliber was humorous object. A huge, good-natured man, with big handle-bar mustaches, Czernowski had once forfeited a chief's rating in favor of San Diego beer. He had been either at sea or to sea for eleven years.

I don't suppose the Navy itself really cared how much I knew about the sea, either, for Argos Six was scheduled for duty in the Gobi Desert. The important thing seemed to be that I could either read a barometer correctly or see that others did so. Someone had to see to it that weather information was properly recorded and transmitted to the right place at the right time, and I was considered responsible enough to entrust with the mission. At the same time, I was considered unimportant enough to lose in the desert for six months without any fear of losing the war. All of us were to be isolated above the China wall for that period in a camp that had been in existence since 1942. Our only contact with the outside world was to be through our powerful radios. Once a month we would be supplied by air drop. If we weren't, we were to be consoled by the fact that there was an extensive dump at the camp site with enough materials in it to keep us going indefinitely.

As I look back on it now, it seems to me I had no more than finished reading the roll of the detachment for the first time when we were placed aboard a plane and flown to China, eventually ending up at a small air base in the extreme northern part of the country. There a

four-striper greeted us good-naturedly and explained that this was the headquarters base, known as Top Argos. From here would come our supplies. To this point we would transmit our weather data four times a day. We also learned that we weren't as important as we thought we were. There were nine other detachments, just like ours, somewhere out in the desert. Then, two at a time, we climbed into a helicopter and were flown north to Chengwan Oasis, along with a lot of batteries, radio tubes, and other instruments too delicate to be dropped.

I relieved my predecessor at Chengwan on April 21st. I was quite surprised. at the conditions at the camp, having been brought up on movies which always seemed to picture deserts as one big wind- rippled sand dune after another. Oases, in the same medium, always had pleasant groves of date palms rising beside a spring. Chengwan was nothing like that. It was merely a large grassy area, four miles wide and ten miles long, with a stream that emerged from the ground and ducked back in again. There were a few stunted trees that seemed to have no function at all as they had no dates on them and no foliage for shade. The surrounding desert was hard-baked, clean-swept, yellowish-red earth, devoid of vegetation. We hadn't been at Chengwan two days when we learned the reason for these physical aspects. There was a strong, determined wind that blew back and forth across Inner Mongolia most of the time. Each time it passed your way it drove sand through your clenched teeth, wedged sand through your closed eyelids and deposited substantial amounts of sand between the covers of your bed. It never dropped any sand on the desert where sand belonged and never allowed any leaves to stay on trees. The temperature at Chengwan was always unpleasant. On days when the wind blew, we all had to wear pea jackets. If the wind didn't blow, we had the feeling we were living on an electric hot plate. At night, no matter what the wind did, the weather was bitter cold.

FOR the first two months we were at Chengwan it wouldn't have made any difference whether we were members of the United States Navy or the Women's Club of Pawnee City, Nebraska. We were bored to death. Each hour, on the hour, we checked meteorological instruments and recorded the data. Three men were on duty in the pyramidal headquarters tent all the time, monitoring the radio, making up reports for transmittal, or repairing equipment. On a nice day the rest of us would be outside, working on the camp chores or our personal well-being. On a bad day we might be asleep in one of the three squad tents that served as our living quarters or we might spend our time in the recreational tent. We ate Army C rations three times a day, and we gathered around the radio each evening to hear the news broadcast from Chungking. After dark we'd write letters that we couldn't mail. And before we went to bed we'd count the days till October 20th, the day we were to be relieved.

The 27th of June was an especially dirty day. The sand had been blowing through the oasis all day, and all of us had adopted our bad-weather behavior. No one went outside unless he was on duty and had to read the instruments. Chief Adams was in the headquarters tent in the late afternoon, along with Walter Landers, the enlisted meteorologist, and Paul Hubley, a yeoman. The other yeoman, Bob Fox, was asleep in his tent. All the rest of us were in the recreational tent. I was sitting under the Coleman lantern, my chair leaning back against the center pole. I had my legs crossed and propped up on one of the two long tables with which the tent was equipped. I was about halfway through *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, which had been included in the last monthly air drop. On the other side of the pole, Horace Jones was sitting, hunched over in his chair, reading a comic book. Abe Goldman, our medical corpsman, was sitting on the other side of the table, trying to compose a letter to his wife. Czernowski and Al Otis, the storekeeper, were playing pinochle with the two radio technicians, Sabatello and Reagan, on the other table. No one had been outside since the last instrument check, fifty minutes before.

No ONE paid any attention when the entrance flap of the tent was raised and someone entered. I caught the movement out of the corner of my eye, but I thought it was one of the men from headquarters who had come in with a question. I waited until I finished the paragraph I was reading before I looked up. My immediate reaction was to freeze, because the man standing there was a stranger, a very unusual and menacing stranger, it seemed to me. To begin with, he had brought a horse into the tent with him. Both he and the horse were short and shaggy. The man stood a little over five feet tall and seemed to be almost as big around as he was high. His face was Oriental in cast, round and solemn, and was adorned by a stringy beard that hung from his lower lip. His head was covered by a peaked fur cap, and the rest of his body was wrapped in a long, well-worn, coarse fur coat. Criss-crossed on his chest were two bando-leers of ammunition for the long rifle he held in his left hand. He was looking the tent and its occupants over with a calculating eye. I managed to get my feet untangled and on the ground, then struggled to my feet and held out my hand. "My name's McHale," I told him, "Sam McHale. Ensign, United States Navy."

"Me Kengtu," he said, without blinking. "You missionary?"

"No," I said, "Navy." I made motions like rowing a boat, then grabbed Jones's hat and held it up. "Navy," I said again.

He looked blank. "No missionary?"

I shook my head. "No," I said. ,

"Use grass?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Better if missionary, but if no use grass, welcome my country anyway." He turned, mounted his horse, and rode out into the storm. All the others in the tent, who had been

sitting with their mouths open, made a dive for the entrance to look outside. There was a long procession of people and animals trudging through the camp. Here and there an armed and mounted outrider moved restlessly up and down the line.

“Jeez,” Czernowski said. “I’ll bet this is something the Navy didn’t figure on.”

“See them rifles?” Horace Jones said.

“And us with nothin’ but barometers to defend ourselves with.”

“They don’t seem to be bothering anything,” I finally said. “Guess the thing to do is sit tight. The man said we were welcome if we didn’t use any grass.”

“Hear that, you guys?” Horace Jones said. “Just don’t none of you eat any grass.”

When I reported the presence of the Mongolians to Top Argos, I was simply advised not to worry about it. The four-striper was reassuring. I guessed that this had happened before, so I made up my mind to ignore the whole thing. The Mongolians themselves seemed determined to stay off in another part of the oasis. Sometimes it seemed as though they were concerned about not bothering us. Every once in a while an animal would stray down into our camp site. As soon as it was discovered, one of the little men would come down on a horse and drive it back to the nomad settlement, bowing apologetically to me as he rode off. These little evidences of thoughtfulness deserved similar treatment, I thought. Every blade of grass seemed to be important to the tribe, and our camp site encompassed a lot of grazing area which had been voluntarily placed out of bounds by the regard for our privacy shown by Kengtu’s people. I finally walked up to the other camp and told the little chieftain that he was more than welcome to bring the animals down into our part of the oasis to feed. He accepted my offer without expression; then, a few days later, he invited us to a ceremonial feast as a gesture of thanks. The barbecued mutton served at that affair was the first taste of anything but C rations we had enjoyed in more than three months. One might say that it was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Everyone started doing things for the Mongolians so that we’d get invited to dinner again. Otis and Czernowski began breaking out salvaged tents from the dump. The canvas was used to make the nomads’ huts more livable. Abe Goldman asked permission to hold a daily sick call in the nomads’ camp area. Walter Landers, who was tall and skinny and scholarly, gave up reading from the big thick scientific volumes that he requested in the air drop each month, and organized something that he called the Boy Scouts of Mongolia. He held meetings every week and gave learned lectures on the radio sets, shaving equipment, phonograph, books and clouds. He used big words that had even Jones and Czernowski baffled and talked in the precise, correct manner of a college professor. To anyone but the Mongolian children he would have been a total loss but the fact that he could make music come out of a black box was wonderful. The little boys and girls would gladly have sat all day watching him lather his face. Reagan accidentally discovered that the Mongolians considered C rations

delicious, so we actually gave a banquet ourselves, serving it out of tin cans. Of course, subsequent invitations to dine at Kengtu's camp did not always turn out as well as that first feast. The Mongolians considered any animal a meal, and on a few occasions we were served roast dog. All of us managed to stuff it down.

By the time the trouble began, the Mongolians had become our good friends. The trouble arose from the first B-29 raids on the Japanese homeland. They were flown from Chinese bases in June and the enemy reacted to them like hornets whose nest has been prodded by a stick. The war on the Asiatic mainland had been conducted in a somewhat leisurely fashion for several years, but it was now speeded up. Japanese field armies began spreading out over China in drives designed to eliminate the B-29 bases. It was inevitable that other operations of our armed forces in the area would be caught in the sweep.

EARLY in August, Chief Adams came hurrying out of the headquarters tent to tell me that Top Argos himself wanted me on the radio.

"Mac," he said to me, "we think the Japs have a direction finder on our stations. We're going to switch to emergency broadcast schedule Baker at midnight. In the meantime, keep a sharp lookout for enemy planes."

"Sounds bad," I said.

"It is bad," he said. "Argos Three reported a spotter plane yesterday morning. It circled all day. This morning the station reported horsemen approaching at 0900. We haven't been able to raise them since. Now, about an hour ago, Argos Nine has a spotter."

I promised I'd keep my eyes open.

Two days later Argos Nine went silent after reporting briefly that it was under attack by Japanese cavalry. Less than a week later, both Argos Five and Argos Ten reported spotter planes. On the afternoon of August 12th our whole detachment was ordered to stand by for an important voice broadcast from Top Argos. I think we were all hoping, as we assembled, that the Navy was going to give up and evacuate us.

"I know what all you men are thinking, so I want to tell you right now that the operation on which you are engaged will not be abandoned. The submarine, surface, and air warfare that we are now conducting in the enemy's home waters and in his own air would not be one tenth as successful if we didn't have accurate weather information. The data which you are collecting enables us to predict accurately what the weather will be tomorrow in Japan and in the China Sea. As long as there is one detachment still in the desert, we will continue. I think you can see why you have to stick it out. Sure, I'd like to send up a battalion of Marines to help you, but I can't. Now, you fellows all have a few weapons. I know as well as you do that they probably aren't enough. In order to give you a chance to defend yourselves, I have secured the promise of the Chief of Naval Operations that you can have anything within

reason to help. We have two planes standing by in the States. Of course you can't have a six-teen-inch gun, but you can have weapons. I want each detachment to look over its place with an eye to defense. Tomorrow morning let me know what' you can use."

WE WENT over every foot of the campsite and several hundred yards beyond, trying to imagine where we'd put machine guns, antitank guns, and a lot of other guns that probably hadn't even been invented yet. When 'we'd finished late that night, we all sat around in the recreation tent to decide what we'd ask for. We had just about decided on ten machine guns when Horace Jones came up with his idea.

"I been thinkin' about this thing," he said, "and I think we ought to fight fire with fire. If the Japs use cavalry, why can't we? We got a whole lot of it right here in the oasis."

"You mean these Mongolians with the Shetland ponies?" Sabatello said, holding his fingers up to pinch his nose.

"Look, Sabatello," Jones said, "my old man was in the U.S. Cavalry for thirty years and I grew up at Fort Bliss, Texas. I know a cavalryman when I see one and these guys are cavalrymen."

"If I may be permitted to say so, Sabatello," Landers said, "you ought to read about Genghis Khan sometime."

"Who is Genghis Khan?" Sabatello asked.

"He was, not is. He was a Mongolian and he conquered just about all the known world from the quarter-deck of one of these ponies you hold your nose about," Landers said.

"Look," I said, "let's not argue. The idea is a good one, but it has one flaw. I don't think these nomads would want to fight for us. They're friendly, but not that friendly."

"I been thinkin' about that, too, Skipper. I never saw a horseman yet that wouldn't do just about anything for a saddle," Jones said. "Maybe they'd fight Japs for a handful of saddles."

"It would take months to get saddles for all of them," I said.

"Oh, no it wouldn't, either. I been watchin' them get rid of the cavalry ever since 1916 and I know right where they store the saddles when they get an out-fit all liquidated. I know the warehouse numbers, even. If they really want to have a going concern here, they can simply send out the saddles for us."

"You know," Landers said, "I think we ought to try it. Those saddles aren't doing anyone any good where they are."

Whatever it was that Top Argos expected us to ask for, it wasn't ninety cavalry saddles. He raised all kinds of objections, and each time I answered one I became more convinced that the plan was a good one. At the end, when Top Argos finally agreed to give us what we wanted, I reminded him that we couldn't wait very long and that there was a lot of red tape to be cut. He must have acted fast, because in less than two weeks we were notified that

the saddles were at the central base and would be dropped to us on August 29th. On that day, just before noon, a four-engined transport appeared and circled the oasis while crewmen shoved the saddles overboard into the desert. It took us a day of steady work to collect them and carry them back to our camp, where we lined them all up in a row. Then, for the next three days, we polished all the leather and shined the metal. Up until then I had carefully refrained from saying anything at all to Kengtū about our plan, as I wanted to be sure that our offer would be concrete and attractive enough to tempt him. When it was, I just walked up the oasis to the nomads' camp and had a talk with the little chieftain. I explained our situation and asked for his help, then told him about the saddles. He nodded solemnly, but said nothing. When I left him I didn't know whether he was receptive or hostile to the idea. I didn't learn until next morning, when he came riding into our camp with all his men. Without speaking, he dismounted and walked along the line of saddles, prodding this one and rubbing that one. When he had completed his inspection he walked over and faced me.

"We do," he said simply. Then he walked back to the saddles, carefully selected one, and carried it to his horse. One by one, the other Mongolians stepped up and claimed the saddles.

We named the group the First Mongolian Cavalry, United States Navy. I reported its formation to Top Argos and requested that Horace Jones be promoted to the rating of Chief Cavalryman's Mate because he was to have charge of training, such was, and tactical employment, in case we had as to use them. It I probably should have kept quiet about the whole thing because my report and Jones's promotion got me involved with headquarters in a long argument by radio. Some personnel clerk seemed to think that we had enlisted ninety men in the Navy and wanted the complete roster of the new unit. He also informed me very curtly that there was no such thing as a Chief Cavalryman's Mate in the Navy so I changed the rating to Chief Boatswain's Mate. That didn't work either, because there was only one chief authorized for our detachment.

THE organizing of the First Mongolian Cavalry, as it turned out, made unofficial allies of Mongolians all over the Gobi Desert. A rider came to the oasis early in September with word that a Japanese Cavalry squadron was heading for Argos Two. I called Top Argos, who sent helicopters to move the detachment even before the enemy spotter plane arrived. Unfortunately, Top Argos itself was the next victim of the enemy and there was nothing we could do about it. On September 19th, I received a call from headquarters which reported that a Japanese field army had driven to within one hundred miles of the central base. Three days later Top Argos informed us that the base was moving and that, until further notice, all radio transmission would be handled by Radio Chungking. Two attempts were made to anchor Top Argos somewhere in North China, but each new base was soon forced

out of business by advancing enemy soldiers. By the end of October all Navy weather operations were permanently based at the Chinese capital. This made little difference as far as radio communications were concerned, but it changed everything else for us.

In the first place, there wasn't a helicopter with sufficient range to negotiate the distance between Chungking and Chengwan, so our October 20th relief was impossible. Furthermore, resupply had to be conducted over a vastly extended route, infested by enemy interceptors. The November drop, scheduled for the 12th, was six days late. The December flight was made three weeks after it was supposed to have been, and the January plane was shot down. On February 20th, we received our last air drop. We were absolutely on our own from that moment on. We had nothing but the radio to remind us that there was an outside world. Even that became more unsatisfactory as time progressed. Sabatello and Reagan, the technicians, improvised when vital parts began giving out, but there simply wasn't anything they could do to keep the batteries alive longer than their normal span. I cut down reception and transmission as much as I could. The last news broadcast we heard was on May 7th. We kept on sending until July 27th, which was the day our batteries went dead. I found out later that Radio Chungking had picked up our last coherent signal on June 8th. We were carried as missing in action from then on.

As can be imagined, we weren't happy at having to stay in the desert beyond our relief date. Six of the men were married, Abe Goldman having reported us directly from his to Reagan's wife had been pregnant when honeymoon. we left the States and he never did find out how his wife came out. The boys used to kid him about how many children he'd have when he got home. The fact that the B-29's were hitting Japan regularly helped keep our morale up because we thought that our work was a big factor in making the raids possible. The biggest boost, however, came from the presence of our cavalry. Nothing had been said in the beginning about the duration of Kengtu's service. Somehow I always thought of it as a problem for my successor at the oasis. By the time it became evident that there wasn't going to be any next commander, I was too busy to worry about it. Early in December, Horace Jones, who had been riding with the Mongolians in the desert for four or five hours a day, came to me and reported that the nomads were preparing to move. The grass had run out. The next day, Kengtu came to see me.

"Grass gone. People move," he said. "Kengtu come back."

For three indescribably lonely days we had Chengwan completely to ourselves; then the ninety riders who made up the First Mongolian Cavalry reappeared. The tribe had moved about seventy-five miles north. For more than a month the Mongolians alternated between their new home and our oasis.

WITH the help of Chief Adams, a rotation system was worked out by means of which one third of the riders were absent each week. We couldn't do much to repay this loyalty, but Abe Goldman volunteered to ride to the new camp once every two weeks to hold his sick call and Walter Landers made the long trip on the alternate weeks to have his Boy Scout meeting. By this time, Kengtu and his men had come to represent even more important things to us than mere protection. Our ration dump was disappearing fast, and the riders began to furnish us food. Each time a group came back from up north they'd bring along an animal or two. In April I gave Horace Jones permission to take some of the men and go hunting. The party was gone two weeks and returned with three deer, two bears, and two wild pigs. There were two more hunting expeditions before we abandoned Chengwan.

Our usefulness ended the day our batteries went dead. I'd talked it over with the men several times; we all were agreed that once this day came we'd better try to get out of the desert. By a process of elimination, we had decided to try and reach Okinawa. Before we stopped receiving the news broadcasts, we had heard of a successful American landing there. Although it meant crossing the enemy's line of communication to his armies in China, it looked as though it might be feasible to get to the coast somewhere above Peiping, capture a small boat, and sail across the East China Sea. It seemed to me that there would be few, if any, large Japanese forces north of China proper. To make such an expedition, of course, we required horses. Early in July, I went to Kengtu and told him our plans, at the same time asking him to lend us the necessary mounts. He refused.

"Kengtu no lend horse," he said. "Kengtu been to water many times. Know way. Kengtu get saddles to protect Navy. Now Kengtu take Navy to water so no get hurt. Navy soft. Ride horse till hard, then Kengtu take."

That was the final word in the matter. The day the radios gave out, we began dismantling the camp, giving such things to the Mongolians as we thought they could use and caching the rest for future reclamation. While the dismantling process was going on, we spent increasingly long hours aboard the horses, getting toughened to the saddle.

We left Chengwan at dawn on the morning of July 30th. The eleven of us were accompanied by sixty-two members of the First Mongolian Cavalry. We had seven hundred miles to go. Rest periods were brief and infrequent. Kengtu seemed to know exactly how fast to go and how far he could push the tough little ponies. When we left Chengwan, the little leader set his course in a straight line and never deviated from it. Just before dark we came to an oasis. Most of us in Argos Six literally dropped from our mounts and went to sleep where we dropped. The night was short. Long before dawn we had been shaken awake and ordered to remount. As on the first day, we seemed to be following an unerring course. And, as on the first day, we rode to the limit of our endurance. Again we arrived at an oasis just before nightfall. The third day was the same, and so was the fourth, but on the

fourth night we reached an oasis on which was camped a large tribe of Mongolians. Before we dropped off to sleep, Kengtu announced that we would not travel the next day. I learned later that he was negotiating for fresh horses with our hosts. He worked out a deal whereby we traded in our ponies for new ones. On the way back to Chengwan he would return the borrowed ponies and take back his own. Another exchange of horses was made on the ninth day, just before we entered the mountains. As before, we stopped for the day with another tribe of nomads. After leaving this last resting place, we traveled only at night. Kengtu picked his way unerringly through the mountain passes, sometimes using the roads, sometimes splashing along through a stream for four or five hours. He always halted just before daylight in a sheltered place. While the majority of the men slept, half a dozen riders would range out along the route to be covered the next night, searching for Japanese sentries and trading for food in the villages.

We reached the coastal plain and crossed it on the night of August 30th, camping at dawn in a woods about three miles from the little port village of Sang- chien. I had only a battered old map I had torn from a National Geographic magazine, but by studying it I figured that we were a little less than a hundred miles north and east of Peiping. Up until that moment, incidentally, I hadn't seen a single Japanese soldier.

ON THE morning of August 31st I sent Kengtu and two of his men into the village, disguised as peasants. I wanted him to see what types of ships, if any, were moored in the port, where the Japanese garrison was located, and how the streets were laid out. When he returned, just before dark, he brought news that a junk was loading rice at the municipal wharf, which was beside the stream that emptied into the sea not far away. He also brought a crude map of the town: Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to find a single enemy soldier. He hadn't wanted to ask any questions, because his dialect might have drawn attention to him. I was worried about not knowing where the enemy were, but, with Kengtu's help, I drew up a plan which I hoped would draw any garrison as far away from the junk as possible. I assigned each of my men a specific duty and we got together such water and food as we thought we would need.

An hour after dark we left our temporary camp in two groups. Kengtu, with fifty-five of his men, was to circle the village on the inland side and come in from the opposite direction. My group, guided by one of the Mongolians who had been in the town, rode to the coastal road and followed it to the outer limits of the settlement. There we waited until we heard the large party. Kengtu's primary mission was to raise as much commotion as possible, firing into the air and shouting. As soon as the noise began, we started moving into town, following our guide as he ducked down a narrow side street. By the time we reached the end of this narrow thoroughfare our ponies were at a full gallop. We turned a corner to the left found ourselves

on the wharves, a few yards from our destination. The junk lay just ahead. One solitary street lamp flickered dimly just astern. Underneath it stood two Chinese, conversing, apparently oblivious of the tremendous noise across town. Both looked up as we rounded the corner, but they had time for nothing but surprise. The lead Mongolian simply galloped his horse up to them and gently brushed them back off the wharf and into the water. At almost the same ran time, my men dismounted and ran for the junk.

As I scrambled to the poop deck, I saw two crewmen emerge from the forecastle. Czernowski and Goldman both jumped down into the well of the vessel, however, and I saw the big boatswain grab one of the Chinese, lift him high overhead, carry him to the rail, and drop him overboard. The other crewman stopped and watched this performance, then turned and ran, clambering up to the wharf and disappearing in the darkness. Chief Adams and Otis had quickly reached the forward mooring line and now slipped it easily. The bow of the ship began to swing out into the current. Sabatello and Jones were having some trouble with the aft line, so I shouted to the others go back and help. It was while they were running aft that we heard the commotion from down the street. A moment later several horsemen came riding into the circle of light. One of them was Kengtu. At the end of a long rope he was dragging a cannon of the type commonly used in the Japanese army. It had big wooden wheels and a long steel trail. Four of the other horsemen were carrying cased shells for the gun. Kengtu seemed to sense that time was short. He could see the men struggling with the mooring line, so, evidently trying to save as much time as possible, he turned his horse and rode it right out onto the poop deck, dragging the cannon after him. The other horsemen followed. In that moment, when all five ponies were aboard, the aft line came loose. My four men jumped for the vessel's stern. Then we were adrift in the current in the darkness.

IN THE excitement of boarding and getting under way, I hadn't had much chance to get a really good look at the ship. I had noticed only that it was about eighty feet long, with one mast, which ran up through the forward deck. The sail was a large square one that hung down rigidly from the spar. The after, or poop deck, measured about thirty feet from the stern to the well. Ten of those feet were dominated by a huge wooden rudder sweep, which I now held. The well deck, perhaps three feet below the level of the forward and poop decks, was also about thirty feet across. It had an extremely low rail. I don't suppose it would have made much difference if I'd had a set of blueprints; I would have been no better off. I had nothing more than a theoretical knowledge of navigation, my battered old Geographic map, and a small pocket compass. If I'd been in command of a frigate of the line, I couldn't have done anything much different from what I did, which was to set a course of approximately 115 degrees and pray for an offshore wind. I can remember thinking, too, that I had another problem to solve. That was the unexpected presence of Kengtu and four Mongolian

horsemen. While the current was carrying us away from land, they had led their ponies down to the well deck and remounted. There they were, sitting and looking out into the blackness.

The ship reached open water about twenty minutes after it drifted away from the wharf. A few moments later the bellied out and we began to move. By morning, when I turned the rudder sweep over to Chief Adams, we were already out of sight of land.

The first day at sea was a busy one. I gave Czernowski the job of keeping the vessel ship shape and he turned everyone to scrubbing down decks at dawn with some old brushes he had found in the forecastle. Chief Adams took charge of the cannon, rolling it into position on the poop deck so that it aimed to starboard. By tearing up some of the planking on the forward deck, he was able to build a crude set of tracks for the wheels and trail. He also constructed a heavy recoil bumper along the port rail. The only people who didn't get in a good day's work that first day were the Mongolians, still sitting stolidly on horses in the well deck.

The second day brought no important change in our basic situation. The breeze remained fresh, and, although the sea was somewhat rougher, we made good progress. Toward evening a plane, flying very high and very fast toward the south, passed almost directly overhead. I hadn't thought much about identification until that moment. There might be some trouble from American planes when we entered Okinawan waters. A junk was not exactly a friendly type of ship. We'd heard reports on the radio about suicide ships attacking the invasion fleet, and if those reports were true, our pilots might shoot first and ask questions afterward. We had no flags aboard, of course, and no paint. Sabetello eventually suggested that we all tear our undershirts into strips and nail them to the deck to form a word visible from the air. We had a long argument about the choice of a word, but that part of the argument wasn't solved until Czernowski came up with an idea in the middle of the night. He started to describe a dream he had just had about a nice cold can of beer. In the middle of a sentence he stopped and snapped his fingers.

"Cripes," he said, "I know a real American word that no Jap would ever think of. It's Schlitz. S-C-H-L-I-T-Z." The next morning we had a christening ceremony at which I named the ship the USS Schlitz.

ON THE third day, I shifted course a little more to the south and ran right smack dab into a south wind. Up to that time the only thing I knew about tacking was something I had read in Robert Louis Stevenson, but I got away with it without even Czernowski suspecting I was just guessing. By the time Czernowski shinnied up the mast at dawn of the fourth day for his usual look-see with the glasses, I had begun to feel like a real sailor. I didn't have much time to pat myself on the back.

"Sail ho!" I heard Czernowski yell.

"Off the starboard bow. Range 6000. Course approximately east-northeast."

I looked where he was pointing. "What do you make her out?" I shouted.

"She's a junk. Like this one."

"Any identification?" I asked him.

"No, sir," he said.

I motioned for him to come aft where I could talk to him. "What do you think she is?" I asked him.

"Jap."

"Why?"

"Nobody but a Jap would be found dead on one of those tubs in an open sea," he said.

"We're on one of those tubs in an open sea and we're not Japs," Horace Jones said from his position at the rudder sweep.

"At least we're not headed for Japan, and they are," Czernowski said. "Nobody'd head for Japan but Japs."

I looked at the other ship again. I figured it would cross our bow at 1500 yards.

"Get a gun crew together," I told Chief Adams. "We'll fire a round across her bow when we get within range, and see what happens."

We held course until we were less than a mile away. The other junk kept plugging away, too, as though it were determined to ignore us. I finally took over the rudder sweep from Jones and swung around to port.

"Fire when you're ready," I told Chief Adams.

I suppose I should have been prepared for what happened when the chief pulled the lanyard on the gun. There was a terrific explosion that knocked me completely off my feet and stunned me so that I did not know, for a moment, whether I was alive or dead. The whole poop deck was covered with a cloud of thick blue smoke. When I finally regained my senses, after a moment or so, I was still not entirely certain what had happened. As the smoke cleared and I was able to look around, however, I was sure of one thing. That one round we had fired had caused more damage than if a battleship had scored a direct hit on us with a sixteen-inch shell. The recoiling trail of the gun, instead of sliding along the track provided for it, had plowed into the deck planking and then gone back. The entire poop deck was in splinters. The recoil block, along the port rail, was smashed to bits, but it had held. Before I had a chance to assess any further damage, there was trouble in a new quarter. overhead. A shell came whistling I looked across the water in time to see a little puff of smoke rising above the other junk.

"Boy, did we bite off something!" Chief Adams said.

"Can you get that gun back in position again?" I asked him.

“Yes, sir,” he said.

“This time, aim at them. I guess I’d better zig and zag a little until you’re ready,” I told him.

“Let me know when you’re ready to fire.”

The enemy fired again. The shot was short, but close.

“We’re outgunned, Cap’n,” the chief said over his shoulder, as he worked the wheels of the weapon to get it back into position. “They have a high-velocity gun, with a recoil mechanism, and they can move it around easily.”

“Get a good bead,” I told him, swinging the ship to port to bring our starboard broadside to bear.

Our second round was fired at almost the same moment the enemy got off their third. The next second or two were the busiest I have ever experienced in my life. The recoil from our gun kicked it back across the poop deck, through the rail, and into the sea. It took the port rail and a large portion of the deck planking with it. The explosion of the discharge flipped me over the stern rail, where I hung onto the rudder sweep, trying to collect my wits. There was a huge cloud of smoke, as usual, and a jar that went through the whole ship. I knew that the jar came from our having been hit. I worked as fast as I could to climb back over the rail onto the poop deck to see what had actually happened. I was just in time to hear Chief Adams laugh aloud, something his efficiency usually didn’t allow him to do.

“I’ll be damned,” he said. “That isn’t what I aimed at”

I turned to look at the other junk. Its mast was hanging over the side. I looked back to the forward part of my own ship. Czernowski was bending far out over the bow.

“Is that where we were hit?” I shouted at him. “How much damage do we got the damage do we have?”

“You got the damage back there, Cap’n,” he said. “All we got up here is a little hole above the water line.”

At that moment the enemy fired again. This time the shell landed close aboard, sending up a huge waterspout drenched everyone aboard.

“We’ve got the sail, but they’ve got the gun,” Chief Adams said. “We better do something quick.”

I looked at the chief. “We’ll board her,” I said, feeling a little like John Paul Jones. “Pass the word along. We’ve all got pistols so I want everyone to fire at their well deck as we come in. It’ll keep them away from that gun.” I glanced along the ship and saw the Mongolians, still sitting on their horses. “Jones, you go and tell Kengtut what we’re going to do. He might just as well do a little shooting for us. Czernowski, I don’t care how you do it, but I want these two junks lashed together the minute we make contact.

“Aye, aye, sir,” everyone said at once.

I decided that the thing I had to give my attention to for the moment was navigation. We were already upwind and I felt that if we came in from the port quarter they might not be able to get off another shot at us because it would mean firing across at least a part of their own poop deck. I had no opportunity to test the actual drift, so I had to guess as best I could and hope that I wouldn't have to come in more than once. All the time I was bringing the junk in close I could see my own men out of the corner of my eye. They were all firing their guns with their right hands, under Chief Adams' direction, while Czernowski was spotting the Japanese along the rail. The big boat-swain had everyone taking off dungaree belts between shots. These were evidently to be held ready in the left hand so that they could be looped over the other junk's rail when we came along side. Czernowski also had two or three pieces of heavy rope ready at hand in case the belts didn't hold. Meanwhile, Kengtu and his men had unslung their rifles and were also firing, from the backs of their horses.

I waited until the last possible moment, then swung the rudder sweep as quickly as I could. The bow swung slowly around and we slid toward the other vessel. The two junks met, broadside on, with a grinding jar. The impact sent everyone on both ships sprawling, including me. Because the jolt was expected, however, we recovered quickly. I could see Czernowski and the others, some still on their hands and knees, trying to loop the belts around the rails and buckle them. One or two of the men were already trying to loop and tie the ropes, too. The Japs had been lining the rail of their own junk as we approached. They were armed with clubs and knives, and now, as they recovered from the collision, they began beating and slashing at the hands of my men in an effort to prevent the lashing operation.

It was at this moment that Kengtu took charge of the battle. I'm still not quite sure whether he misunderstood what I wanted him to do, or whether he just wanted to get into the thick of things. Three of the ponies had been driven to their knees as the ships came together, but they recovered almost as quickly as the human beings. As they did so, Kengtu gave out with a war cry of some kind, shouted an order, and waved his rifle in the air. While the Japanese were still pretty badly disorganized and trying to get to the rail to beat us off, the Mongolians spurred their horses forward. What developed was a full-fledged cavalry charge. The ponies, five abreast, jumped ahead, cleared the rail with ease, and reared, their riders twirling their rifles like batons. The Japs scattered in all directions. Some ran forward, some crawled aft, and some just scrambled over to the other side of the ship and jumped overboard. Unfortunately, two of the Mongolians had gained such momentum that they kept on going and fell overboard, following the fugitive Japanese into the water.

That was the end of the battle. All that remained to be done was to haul the Mongolians and Japs out of the water. Unfortunately, we couldn't get the horses aboard and they were lost, the only casualties to befall Argos Six in its year and a half of existence.

There really wasn't much existence left for Argos Six after that, anyway. We found that the gun that had been firing at us was an anti-tank gun, unmistakably marked, in big yellow letters, USMC. When we questioned the prisoners about how they had come by it, they told us they had stolen it in Shanghai. When we asked them how come a United States Marine gun was in Shanghai, they told us that the Marines were there. In fact, they said, the whole U.S. Navy seemed to be there. The war had been over for more than two weeks. All these Japs were trying to do was get home. We talked the matter over and decided that if the Navy was in Shanghai and the Army was on Okinawa, we wanted to be in Shanghai. We'd had enough of C rations. So we rigged up a jury mast for the captured junk, solemnly christened it the USS Pabst, and started for Shanghai.

I was relieved of command of Argos Six on September 7th, 1945, after reporting aboard the flagship of the fleet, then anchored in the Yangtze River. The next day the admiral and I escorted Kengtu and his men and horses to Shanghai airport, saw them ride aboard a transport, and waved good-bye as they took off for an airport in North China. I am now a rancher in Montana, an occupation for which I was trained by riding a horse across the Gobi Desert while I was a member of the United States Navy.