

# Last Call

By Doug Harrell

A sliver of light sliced the dimness as a man in military uniform entered, squinting.

At the bar, a man in a red Phillies cap turned. “Welcome back from the front! Did you sink any enemy subs?”

Military-man delivered a snappy salute, then took off his cap and joined his friend. “We fired on one with the twelve-inch gun from Battery 519 but didn’t sink it. Good thing, too, since it was a Navy sub in town for the big celebration. In any event, we were unlikely to inflict damage other than hearing loss with a one-sixteenth charge and no shell.”

“I bet the kids loved it. This’ll be a Fourth of July they’ll never forget,” said Phillies-cap.

“Oh boy did they—kids of all ages. We had a vet in one tour group who served at Fort Miles during the war. He must’ve been a hundred years old and was wearing his old Army duds. I felt like a faker standing next to him in this Halloween get-up.”

“I bet he’s got stories.”

“Don’t you know it. He said the Germans sank ships here in ’42, before the coastal blackout. The first was a Norwegian tanker only six weeks after Pearl Harbor. A week later they got a cargo ship. Rescued sailors were being brought to Lewes, and the Army Air Corp was flying B-25 sub-hunters out of Dover. Oh, yeah, and he told us the first time they test-fired the big sixteen-inch gun, the concussion broke every window in town. After that, they always gave the town advance notice to open their windows.”

“To celebrate not sinking one of ours or breaking any windows, let me buy you a cold one.” Phillie-cap waved to the bartender. “Kyle, give us a Yuengling for my friend here and put a new head on my Dogfish.”

Kyle drew the beers, but his thoughts were eight miles down the road in Rehoboth. After a few days to cool off, he wasn’t so sure anymore. He set the beers in front of the two men.

“How was the turnout?” asked Phillie-cap.

“It gets better every year, and this was the best yet. So much of the fort has been restored and is accessible to the public now. We took kids up the fire control tower to spot the sub, and over to the battery to fire on it. We even took them to the mine control room to throw a switch we told them would activate the minefield that used to run across the floor of the bay from Lewes to Cape May.”

“That can’t be too interesting to a kid.”

“Oh, but it is. We tell them a Nazi sub has been spotted trying to sneak through. When they flip the switch, we play a recording of an explosion and yell ‘You got him!’ I think they enjoy that most of all.”

Phillie-cap pointed at his watch, and both men quaffed down the last of their beers. They paid and walked out, leaving Kyle alone with his thoughts.

Kyle had been tending bar at Pilots’ Pub for a few days. The tips were lousy, but Kyle was a lousy bartender. He had needed a place to stay when he left Megan, and his friend Zach had fixed him up with a bedroom upstairs at the Pub in exchange for covering slow times—like the evening shift on the Fourth of July.

In his first few days, Kyle hadn’t looked around much. Pilots’ Pub felt like it had been there when the British bombarded the town in 1813, and it probably had. The walls were dark wood paneling, and the lights were low. Most bars on water have big glass windows, but Pilots’ had none despite its location backing up to the canal.

The somber atmosphere matched Kyle’s mood. He didn’t like his

day job, and he didn’t want to marry Megan even if she was having his baby. Kyle didn’t know what his life plan was, but he knew what it was not—at least not at twenty-four. He had always pictured himself in a big city like New York, downtown in a high-rise condo, the city lights twinkling below him as he sipped a beer on the balcony. He would be going to clubs, going to games, going everywhere—not hanging around at sea level in the town where he grew up.

All this made perfect sense a few days ago when he walked out the door and started driving. Reality hit when he realized he had no place to go. Shame arrived when he had to go back to pick up clothes and a few other things. He loved Megan. Certainly, he cared about her needs, but what about *his* life? Didn’t it matter what he wanted?

He walked over to the old pictures on the walls. There were photos of pilots of various eras waving as they were ferried out to ships and a sepia print of the old, original pilot station. One entire wall was devoted to World War II. Kyle saw photos of the big pillboxes built into the dunes, their enormous guns projecting outward toward the camera. There were also photos of local Lewes boys smiling broadly as they prepared to ship out, many never to return. Pilots’ Pub was working its magic on Kyle. It was a different kind of place—a place steeped in history. It made him feel part of something bigger.

Kyle turned and saw a thirtyish man sitting at the bar dressed in an old river pilot’s uniform like in the pictures. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t hear you come in. What can I get you?”

The man gave a start, “Oh. Howdy, bub. All hail the king!”

“Come again?”

“What hay wagon did you fall off? Pull me a King Gambrinus.”

“Sorry, I know we don’t have it on draft. Let me check.”

Kyle looked in the cooler, but the man objected, “I don’t want no bottled sunshine. Gimme a draft of somethin’ local.”

“Dogfish Head is brewed right here in Milton,” Kyle said.

“Milton! Gimme one of those.” Kyle pulled it and set it at the man’s elbow. Shaking his head, the man said, “No King. I’ve seen a lot of changes, and I’ve been against every damn one of ’em!” Then he smiled. “Sorry, bub, it’s been a rough war for me. Manny Wiltbank at your service.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Kyle. You’re dressed like a river pilot. Are you part of the festivities this evening?”

“Festivities. That’s an interestin’ way to put it. Nope. I done my bit.” Manny rubbed his chin. “I ain’t never seen you before. When’d you start?”

“It’s complicated. I don’t really work here. I’m just hanging out while I figure out what to do with my life.”

“That’s a twist—the barkeep spillin’ *his* guts.”

“Sorry, you’re right—”

“No, go ahead. It’d be nice to hear somebody else’s troubles for a change. Your girl walk out on you?”

“More like I left her,” said Kyle.

“You don’t seem too gassed about it.”

“To tell you the truth, I miss her already. I’m just not ready to settle down yet and be a father.”

Manny huffed. “Go tell it to the Marines. Your girlfriend is pregnant and that’s your cue to set sail and find yourself?”

“It doesn’t sound too good when you say it like that.”

“No, it don’t. You ain’t the first palooka whose short arm jumped the startin’ gun. What I don’t get is how you’re standin’ here. Ain’t her daddy got a shotgun?”

“If he did, I’d be married or dead—pretty much the same thing.”

“Not on your life! Pour yourself some borrowed brass and sit your rabbit-ass down and I’ll tell you the difference.”

Kyle was peeved, but if he was going to be abused there was no point in being thirsty, so he pulled himself a beer.

“So, in ’44, I get sent out to bring a Norwegian tanker upriver to Sun Oil at Marcus Hook. It’d come across in the latest convoy.”

“1944? Oh, I get it.” Kyle realized that Manny was lecturing him in character.

After a stern look, Manny continued. “Norwegian ships weren’t uncommon in those days. When the Nazis occupied Norway, most were at sea, so they just docked at Allied ports and started runnin’ war supplies. A lot of ’em made port here on the river.”

“Makes sense.”

“So, they run me out to the ship, and I go up the ladder. Right away I get this queer feelin’. Somethin’ ain’t jake, but I can’t put my finger on it. I try talkin’ to the crew, but they don’t speak English. On the bridge I meet the captain. He gives me command of the ship and I get her underway. Funny to think—outside of the U-boats, sailin’ all the way across the Atlantic ain’t nearly as tricky as sailin’ up the Delaware River. Sure, you got storms and all, but on the river we have currents, and shoals, and tides to deal with. Anyway, I run ’er up to what I used to call the startin’ line and radioed the password to shut off the mines. Then I start jabberin’ like I always do when I’m on the river.”

“Where is this going? I thought this was about me havin’ to ‘man up’ and all that crap.”

“Don’t blow your wig. I’m gettin’ to it. When I’m on the river, I talk whether anybody can understand me or not just to pass the time, and as we’re headin’ up, I’m just bumpin’ my gums hopin’ some of the chumps on the bridge might chime in and say somethin’. But only the captain talks, and even he don’t say much. I’m comin’ to a tricky stretch near Pea Patch Island and I’m tellin’ him how we was originally the lower three counties of Pennsylvania, but we’re Delaware now and not Maryland ’cause the Dutch had started a colony called Zwaanendael that got wiped out, when all the sudden he snaps, ‘Please stop talking about this Zwaanendael.’ Only when

he said ‘Zwaanendael,’ he pronounces it *Tswaanendael*. You hear the difference? Tse-waanendael, not Ze-waanendael.”

Kyle did, and he didn’t care. He was cradling his chin with his elbows on the bar looking bored.

“Well, I heard that right away. Now I don’t know Norwegian from Navaho, but I sure have heard a lot of it. Before the war, I ran Germans, too, and they’re the only ones I ever heard pronounce a “Z” like that. I start puttin’ things together. He’s the only one talkin’—it’s like everyone else is mute. I ask myself, ‘What’s a German doin’ commandin’ a ship of Norwegians who ain’t speakin’ no Norwegian up the Delaware River?’ ‘Nothin’ good,’ I answer myself. So real casual like, I’m reachin’ for the radio when I feel a muzzle pressed against in my ribs. ‘It will not be necessary to use the radio,’ he tells me.”

That perked Kyle up. “Damn! What’d he do?”

Manny frowned. “You mean what did *I* do?”

“Oh, right, what did *you* do?” Kyle asked, playing along.

“Well, right away, I don’t do nothin’. I gotta think. Now that the cat’s outta the bag, the captain starts barkin’ orders. Meanwhile, along the shore, towns are shootin’ off fireworks, lightin’ up the sky—kinda like ‘rockets’ red glare,’ and by the flashes I can see the crew is pullin’ guns and stuff outta crates. I’m in a tough spot. Maybe if I do what they want, they’ll let me go. But I know what they’re after—our refineries. Socony-Vacuum over in Paulsboro is makin’ the new crackin’ catalyst, and Sun in Marcus Hook is makin’ the high-octane aviation fuel. That’s the juice that won the Battle of Britain, and that’s givin’ our flyboys the edge in the skies over France.”

“Jesus!” said Kyle. “A whole ship of German commandos! I can’t believe I never heard about this. What did you do?”

“At first, I don’t know what to do. There’s no way I’m gonna overpower four guys on the bridge with a gun in my ribs, but then I get thinkin’ about the war, and all the boys over there countin’ on us

to keep ’em supplied. I realize those Krauts ain’t never gonna get that tub up to Marcus Hook without me. They’d get to the moon and back easier. I’m thinkin’ I can drift outta the channel and run her aground before they catch on.”

“We’re comin’ up to Pea Patch Island on our port side usin’ the Finn’s Point light, and I command for a course change to port. Now the channel there runs close to the island, and I’m easin’ her over a little too far. It’s givin’ me a funny feelin’ to do it, I won’t lie. Meanwhile, the captain is gettin’ suspicious. Turns out he knows about rivers, and he sees I’m a few degrees off linin’ up the New Castle front and rear range lights. There are flood lights on over at Fort Mott on the Jersey side, so I point to the gun emplacements. No way for him to know they were built to keep the Spanish off the river in ’98.”

“I don’t know how much time I got before he starts tellin’ the wheelhouse to correct course, so I ring the engine room to increase speed five knots. Now Fritzie knows somethin’s up, and he’s tryin’ to push me off the controls when the ship runs aground hard and everybody’s knocked over but me. I feel a hard punch in my ribs, but I’m still standin’. The punch is a shot from Fritzie’s pistol, but he just wings me. While they’re sprawled about, I make tracks over the side so fast you’d think I’m Jesse Owens.”

“Hittin’ the water from that height knocks the wind outta me, but I snap to and start swimmin’ toward Pea Patch. Them Krauts open fire, but it’s dark and they can’t see nothin’. Problem is, I’m hit worse’n I thought. I can’t hardly move my right arm, and I’m bein’ pulled downriver with the current faster than I’m movin’ across it. I must be bleedin’ pretty good ’cause I’m gettin’ weak. I know if I don’t get to the island before I’m swept past, there’s no way I’m gonna make it to the riverbank. I give it all I got with my left arm, flappin’ like a crazed killdeer, ’til I’m so tapped out it’s all I can do to tread water. There I am with water up to my chin, cryin’ as I watch the silhouette of Fort

Delaware recede into the distance.”

“Why were you crying? Was it the pain?”

“I’m cryin’ because all I can think about is gettin’ back to my wife and little girl and what their lives will be like if I don’t make it.”

“Then what happened?”

“What do you think happened, numbskull? I drowned. What’s left of me is swept down river and washed out to sea, never to be found.”

“How do you know this? Was he a relative of yours?”

“You’re a funny guy, you know that.”

“What happened to the Germans?” asked Kyle.

“Who cares? You’re missin’ the point.”

“What’s the point?”

“Cogitate on it—you’ll think of somethin’.” Manny stood up. “Time for me to shove off and meet my gal. She’s been waitin’ on me long enough.”

Although he had been the butt of Manny’s sarcasm, Kyle wanted to give Manny a souvenir. “Hang on a sec.” He went into the back and grabbed a Pilots’ Pub logo mug, but when he came back, Manny was gone, leaving only his untouched beer.

Kyle looked at the clock—ten minutes to quitting time. There was nothing he needed to do, so he wandered over to the pictures. Further along the wall, he found a framed article about a Nazi attempt to sabotage the refinery in Marcus Hook. It read in part, “Inspection of the vessel revealed substantial quantities of plastic explosives, incendiary devices, and other commando paraphernalia. This incident serves as a potent reminder of the role all citizens must play to keep our coast safe.” At the bottom was a picture of a man named Helmanus Wiltbank with the caption, “Hero of the Bay.” The picture was yellowed and grainy, but the man looked a lot like Manny. Kyle figured Manny must be a grandson. That would explain how he knew so much about it.

After closing the bar, Kyle pulled on a baseball cap and went to King’s for an ice cream cone. As he strolled along Second Street a sudden breeze came up and blew his cap into St. Peter’s graveyard. He chased after it until it came to rest against a shiny gray tombstone behind a fresh grave. The name on the stone read

**EDITH PAYNTER WILTBANK**

December 5, 1921 – June 30, 2019

Kyle thought it must surely be a coincidence until he saw what was written below.

***Relict of Helmanus Wiltbank***

***Hero of the Bay***

May 20, 1907 – July 4, 1944

*Rest in Peace, God knows where*

Kyle gasped. Manny wasn’t *pretending* to be Helmanus Wiltbank. Manny *was* Helmanus Wiltbank. Kyle choked up at the thought of Manny dying on the river when all he wanted was to return to his wife and daughter. As of today, his beloved Edith had been waiting for him for seventy-five years.

Kyle pulled out his cell phone and called Megan. In a clumsy torrent of words, he apologized for being such an ass and begged her forgiveness. She was happy, if skeptical, and she had a right to be. But things were different now. *He* was different now.

A tear rolling down his cheek, Kyle laid his hand on the tombstone. “Thank you, Manny. Welcome home, buddy. Welcome home.”

DOUG HARRELL IS ALMOST A NATIVE OF DELAWARE, HAVING BEEN TRANSFERRED TO WILMINGTON BY DUPONT AT THE TENDER AGE OF FIVE. AFTER THIRTY-TWO YEARS IN THE PLASTICS INDUSTRY AND ACHIEVING THE MAGIC AGE OF FIFTY-NINE AND A HALF, HE CHUCKED IT IN LAST YEAR TO PURSUE HIS LIFELONG DREAM OF WRITING MYSTERIES. HIS STORY, "LAST CALL," HAD ITS GENESIS IN A CONVERSATION YEARS AGO ABOUT FORT MILES. DOUG WAS ON CAPE HENLOPEN BEACH WATCHING AN OLD WARSHIP BEING HAULED OUT TO SEA WHEN A NEARBY MAN RECOUNTED THAT HIS GERMAN UNCLE HAD SERVED ON A U-BOAT IN WWII. THEY HAD DONE RECONNAISSANCE AROUND CAPE HENLOPEN FOR AN ATTACK THAT WAS NEVER MOUNTED. THIS GOT HIM THINKING, "WHAT IF ...?"