



MEMORIAL DAY IN THE YUHA

by Tim McCreery

It was cold and windy for May, and the Yuha Desert seemed even more deserted than usual. I pulled into camp about 4 PM. I was delighted to see that Gordie was already there, and that he had a nice fire going. He has been like a father to me since I lost my own, and we have been camping partners for the past 20 years. Our wives do not find the area inviting, so this time it was just the two of us. Perhaps our greatest bond over the years has been our mutual love and respect for the desert, and our common ability to draw peace and inspiration from it.

I parked in my usual spot, then joined him at the fire. After shaking hands and a little catching up, I went about the pleasant business of setting up my camp. That quickly accomplished, I took in the panorama with the satisfaction of someone who has just accomplished something great.

My eyes were drawn to Signal Mountain, or “Cerro Impossible” as it was known to the Spanish in the 18th century. It lies some 12 miles to the southeast of the Yuha Basin, mostly across the modern border with Mexico. The evening shadows had reduced it to a featureless black hulk, but to the De Anza Expedition of 1774 it had been a beacon of hope.

I remembered reading about the party's frustrating search for water, and its panic upon learning that the Yuma and Cajuenche Indian guides had refused to travel into the territory of the enemy Kamia (Kumeyaay) to lead them to water. However, they assured De Anza that if he set a course toward the mountain, he would find the abundant wells of Santa Rosa in an additional day's journey north from it.

It took De Anza nearly 3 weeks. He encountered many hardships, including deep and blowing sands. He reported that this "impossible hill" seemed to recede into the distance, and to sometimes disappear altogether. He eventually found the wells down in the basin, and they were every bit as abundant as the guides had described. This reliable water supply became a vital link on the overland trail that would eventually lead to the Spanish settlement at San Francisco. Later pioneers would also find welcome relief here. Today, the site is known as Yuha Well, even though nature and time have hidden its bounty underground.

Over the years I had also read about the ancient Indian legends surrounding the area, especially those concerning Signal Mountain. Centuries before the arrival of the Spanish, it was said to have been an island in a great inland sea. Its peak was used as a platform for making "smoke talk," or sending smoke signals far and wide. One legend tells of the burial of a young Cocopah chief and an immense treasure somewhere on the crown of the mountain.

Intrigued by all of these stories, I had taken a hike near the mountain several years earlier. I noticed on that trip that the crown of the mountain resembled a sleeping boy facing up to the stars, and wondered if he could be the young chief in the legend.

Why I thought of that image now, on this trip, I do not know. But, I had become quite accustomed to the desert's power to alter perception, and thought no more about it.

Later that evening, while I cooked supper, Gordie tended to the fire. I watched from my tailgate as he unfolded a tattered American flag and carefully placed it in the fire. Over the course of the next half hour he did the same with five others. The procedure for each was identical. He would remove each flag from the commissary box, carefully unfold it, then grasping it by its grommets, slowly accordion-fold it into the center of the fire. There was an initial burst of flame, then a thick billow of black smoke. When the last wisp of smoke had risen up into the night, the surreal ritual was repeated.

I was extremely curious, but I decided to eat where I was rather than to break the spell at the fire ring. The irony was haunting; it was Memorial Day.

After washing my dishes, I went to the fire ring and sat down. I waited several minutes before I asked what the protocol was for burning flags. Gordie related that he knew of none, other than it is to be done safely and respectfully.

"Where'd you get them all?" I asked.

"Here and there. I get most of them from the guys at the lodge."

"What were you thinking about when you burned them?" I asked.

"The 6 men I helped bury at sea." came the quick reply.

"Unto Almighty God, we commend the souls of our shipmates departed and commit their bodies to the deep."

For those who may be unfamiliar with the area, Mt. Signal is a rugged mountain, sitting on the desert floor. A great deal of the mountain is in Mexico.

“I can’t remember my own name sometimes, but those words stay with me. I remember that morning like it was yesterday.”

“The sail maker had made canvass body bags. When we slid them off the pallets, they fell into the sea and sank because they were weighted down. The flags stayed on the pallets — six of them. We folded them and saved them for the relatives.”

What I had witnessed now made sense. I asked him how his shipmates had died.

“Friendly Fire!” He said wryly and deliberately. “We were on the Alabama, good ole BB-60. Most of us were original crew from when she was commissioned out of Norfolk in August of ‘42. Anyway, we had a squadron of Betties on us down in the Carolines. That’s when it happened.”

“What are Betties?” I asked.

“Bombers, Japanese bombers. We were part of the Bunker Hill group. We were there to protect the carriers while they launched air attacks against land targets. One night they decided to hit us.”

“On a battleship,” he continued, “there are “Directors” who control the firing of the guns. They sit up above in towers. Well, one of them directing the 5-inch guns got excited, and before anybody knew anything #9 had fired directly into #5 as I remember it.”

“Good Lord!” I exclaimed. “How could that happen?” “Aren’t the mounts set up so they can’t fire into the ship or each other?”

“They are, but there is a manual override to give the guns more room to track if need be, or, say another mount gets blown away all together, the next one has to cover a wider area. The gun captain in the mount has to receive an order to do it, because his crew has a limited view of what is going on.”

“Did the Director give the order?”

“He sure did! I was down in the Secondary Battery Plotting Room, and I heard the whole thing. He ordered “Kick it out! Kick it out!” That means hit the override switch down on the deck of the mount. God almighty what a mess! I don’t think they ever knew what hit them. I hope not anyway.”

“We survived the attack, put out the fires, and got the wounded below decks. We had burial detail the next morning.”

“We had a burial at sea one time,” I said, glad to have something to contribute. “I was on the Wadsworth down in the Philippines in ‘83. She is one of those gas turbine guided missile frigates. Anyway, we had the cremains of a retired officer who had recently died. His ship had gone down in the Battle of Leyte Gulf in 1944. The story was that all hands but him had been lost. His last request was to be buried with his shipmates when his time came.”

“We broke off from our battle group one afternoon and tried to find the exact spot his ship went down. It was the darndest thing; we went dead in the water so the ashes wouldn’t fly all over everywhere. After the chaplain said his piece, and the Gunner’s Mates gave the salute, he poured the little box of ashes over the side. Not only did none

of them fly up, it was as if they were drawn right down into the sea by old Neptune himself. It was weird. It was stone still out there — no wind, no sound. We knew we had done the right thing, but we wanted to get out of there quick.”

“It was a little different for us,” Gordie responded a moment later. “We couldn’t even reduce engine speed. We were still in a battle zone, so we had to do it on the fly.”

“What happened to the fire Director after the accident?” I asked.

“Nothing as far as I know. I think there was an investigation of some kind, but I don’t think anything ever came of it.”

“What did the rest of the crew think?” I asked. “Didn’t they hold him responsible for the deaths?”

“Well, it’s different during wartime. Sure, everyone knew he was responsible for the accident, but death is all around you anyway. It’s just dangerous, period. A ship is a dangerous place to be. You don’t really have a lot of time to sit around and try to figure everything out. We were just glad to be alive ourselves. Besides, there were probably other times when his actions saved the whole ship. I guess there have always been friendly fire casualties; that’s just part of war. It’s bad for morale to dwell on it. They died in the service of their country, and that’s all that matters.

I burn a flag and say a special little prayer for each of them.”

For several minutes we both stared silently into the dying fire. All that remained of the last flag was a grommet sitting on end in the coals. It looked like a tiny porthole to hell.

I stood up and turned to warm my backside. In the distance I could make out the shape of Signal Mountain. This time it looked like a great black ghost ship. In my mind I could see the sleeping boy, but this time he wasn’t sleeping, he was dead. I turned back around so I wouldn’t see him anymore. In the other direction I could just make out the dark outlined peaks of the Inkopahs. As they came into focus they turned into silhouettes of other sleeping boys — endless rows of headstone faces with stone eyelids closed. So many boys! So many wars! “They’re all here,” I thought.

We let the fire burn down to a soft orange glow. I took a last uneasy look at Signal Mountain, then turned in. I did not sleep.

Sunrise brought a warm calm to the desert. The sleeping boys looked peaceful in the morning light as if content to have become one with the country they died for. Look for them when you visit the Yuha. They are always there, not just on Memorial Day.

May 1999

Dedicated to the memory of my Father, Marvin “Bud” McCreery. I feel like you are always with me, but there waiting when I come to the desert.