

Global War at the Trolley Diner

By Allen J. Tillery

The university bus stopped at the corner of Highland Road and Chimes Street. The driver opened the door and a boy carrying a small overnight bag stepped down onto the street. The driver closed the door and the bus proceeded through the university gates down Highland Road into the campus.

He was quite young, maybe 20 years old. His crew cut, his bearing and his deep tan marked him as one returning from long hours in the open air and a tropical sun.

The boy placed his bag on the curb and looked around as if looking for familiar places that he had once known. He observed the campus gates through which he had departed three years before heading for the United States Marine Corps. After 30 months in the Corps, 20 of which had been spent in the Pacific helping Admirals Nimitz and Halsey seek our revenge for Pearl Harbor, he was again back to LSU to continue his aborted quest for knowledge.

He looked up and down Chimes Street, the main drag through Tiger Town—the two theaters, the pool hall, bookstores and assorted food emporiums that daily opened their doors to the thousands of students

who, as captive customers, assured their success.

The boy looked to his right back toward the city searching for the diner where he had worked as a waiter three years before. The weather was cold and damp, and lights were beginning to shine in the store windows. It would soon be dark.

He turned and began to walk a familiar path that he had often trod on cold nights such as this. Suddenly, he realized that the corner he had known so well was dark. As he drew closer, he could barely make out the words “The Trolley Diner” on the faded and unpainted sign. The building was vacant. It was dark and unkempt and dismal, so unlike the gay lighted cafe that he had left three years before.

The Trolley Diner was just what its name proclaimed. It was an old trolley car

carefully placed on the lot facing Highland Road. It had been refurbished and appeared to be a new, recently painted conveyance minus the electrical wires required to propel it across the town.

A long serving counter ran the length of the car with stools placed at intervals to accommodate the diners. Two small buildings had been erected across the rear that housed the kitchen and a small storeroom. It was a quaint and appealing structure. A precursor of Disney World before Mickey and Minnie deserted the funny pages for the theme park.

The sign in front proudly and redundantly proclaimed that it was “The Trolley Diner.”

The Trolley was a student’s paradise. It was home cooking—blue plate specials, sandwiches and all for 35 cents. It was



Photo by Hans Vivek on Unsplash

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Mom's cooking in a warm and friendly atmosphere. Where else could one dine in a trolley car without paying the motorman a dime?

Mr. and Mrs. Sullivan were the owners and proprietors of the business. Mr. Sully ran the front operation and handled the money. Mrs. Sully and two assistants ran the kitchen. Student waiters took the orders and dispensed the food.

Mr. Sully was a kind man who could always produce a five-dollar bill for a student whose check from home was late or who was just plain broke.

Mrs. Sully had a sharp tongue but could always add an extra slice of roast beef or add an extra piece of meatloaf to a waiter's lunch if he appeared to be undernourished.

The boy's brother, Jim, who had joined the Corps a year before he did, had worked at the diner while at the university. When the boy arrived at LSU in the fall of '42, he went to see Mr. Sully and, with Jim's recommendation, was hired to work at the diner. He worked one shift each day and received his meals in lieu of a salary. It was a fair exchange.

The students who took their meals at the Trolley were regulars. They were mostly students on a limited budget and who considered a plate of meatloaf, mashed potatoes and green beans a culinary delight at 35 cents a crack. They all knew each other and had similar problems and experiences, all of which they brought to the Trolley at meal times: grades, term papers, good and bad professors, girl and boy problems and, lately, the War and its consequences.

The boy stood for a while, looking at the old trolley car. It was quiet now, dusty and dirty and in need of repair. He sat down on an old iron bench in the front yard, a relic of better days when suntanned bare-legged coeds sat there anxiously awaiting the arrival of a boy.

It was dark now. The streetlights were on, and the neon sign from Baker's Cafe across the street cast flickering shadows across the windows of the old trolley car.

He sat motionless, quietly thinking of friends and times past. A faint light seemed to shine through the dirty windows. He nodded. The trip from home on the Trailways Bus had been tiring. He closed his eyes again. Faintly, he could hear the rattle of pots and pans—of glasses being filled with water and the soft laughter of boys and girls. He nodded again. He could see waiters moving about as the light grew brighter. The sounds became real. He listened intently, unable or maybe not wanting to distinguish between fact and illusion.

The door opened and a young boy walked into the diner. "I'm late Mr. Sully. That English test was long and tough. Hand me an apron and I'll catch up."

The older man handed the boy an apron, and as the boy turned away, he said, "Have you heard from Jim lately?"

"Not much, Mr. Sully, my mother had a letter two weeks ago. He can't tell us where he is. The Raiders left Guadalcanal about a month ago. She thinks that he may be in the fighting on Bougainville. She has a big map, Mr. Sully, and she tries to follow him around the Pacific by reading the papers and listening to the news on the radio."

"How is she doing?"

"O.K., I guess, Mr. Sully. She tries not to worry, but I know that some nights she doesn't sleep. She knows that the Marine Raiders don't get the easy ones. We all worry about her."

The boy moved away to take an order. "Two number ones—meatloaf for liver on one, and hold the gravy on the other."

Someone put a nickel in the jukebox and the soft tones of Ginny Simms filled the diner:

There will be blue birds over the white cliffs of Dover tomorrow just you wait and see.

There will be love and laughter and peace ever after tomorrow when the world is free.

"Hey, Mr. Sully, I got a v-mail from

Old Martin. Says he is driving a tank for General Patton in North Africa."

Mr. Sully smiled, "Can't imagine Martin driving a tank. His dad wouldn't let him drive that new pick-up that he bought just before Martin shipped out."

"Hell, Mr. Sully, you can't bend a fender on a Sherman tank. He said that he ran into Rob Mathis in London. Rob is in an A.A. outfit. Told Old Martin that he could knock down an M.E. 109 from 15,000 feet. Some stuff! Without glasses he couldn't hit a bull in the ass with a bass fiddle!"

A customer stopped at the cash register to pay his check. Mr. Sullivan handed him his change saying, "Tom, last week I received a note from Morgan Ledet, your old roommate. He sent me two 10-dollar bills to repay a small loan that I gave him last summer. It was in a dirty little brown envelope. Said he was somewhere in New Guinea with MacArthur. Couldn't say where. Can you imagine him doing that with all he has to worry about? It was good to know that he was O.K."

The door opened, and a girl walked in and sat down. She put her books on the counter and just stared at the wall. Mr. Sullivan handed her a glass of water. "Hi, Marcie! Haven't seen you all week."

"I went home for a few days, Mr. Sully."

"Good! How are things in Monroe?"

"Just fine, Mr. Sully."

"Did you see Myra Ann, Marcie? How's the new baby?"

"The baby is fine, Mr. Sully. She is four months old and getting cuter every day."

"How is Herbert, Marcie? Has Myra Ann heard from him lately?"

The girl did not answer. She stared at the wall. Then slowly turning she whispered, "Herbie is gone, Mr. Sully."

"What do you mean, Marcie? Where did he go?"

"He is dead, Mr. Sully. Herbie is dead."

"My God, Marcie. Not Herbie!"

Suddenly, the diner was quiet. The news passed swiftly down the counter. The

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laughter subsided and everyone turned to look at the girl.

“How Marcie? Why Marcie?”

Almost as if she were delivering the evening news, Marcie turned to look at the other diners, hesitating to speak as if the news remained a secret it might not be true.

She finally spoke in soft but measured tones, “Myra Ann got a telegram from the Navy two weeks ago. Then, yesterday she received a letter from a pilot on the Enterprise. She made a copy for me. She knew that all of you would want to know.”

She opened her purse and pulled out a single sheet and read:

I was Herbie’s wingman. We left the carrier before dawn and arrived over the Marshalls as the sun came up. We made two runs over Kwajalein Island. Herbie and I dropped our bombs on a Japanese airfield and as we pulled away from the island to head home a Japanese Zero [a Japanese fighter aircraft] came out of the sun and sliced into our formation. He hit Herbie’s plane with both of his guns. Herbie fell out of formation and started to smoke. I followed him down and his plane exploded when it hit the water. I flew over the spot several times but could see no survivors. I’m so sorry, Myra Ann, we just didn’t see the Jap. He came right out of the sun. The Admiral sent a sub out but they could not find anything. That is all that I can say. May God bless you and the baby.

Lt. Peter Sturgis

No one spoke. The diners were quiet. Their food grew cold as they sat in silence. Ginny Simms was singing,

Little Johnny will go to sleep in his own little bed once more.

The girl sobbed softly, “He never even saw his baby, Mr. Sully. Herbie never even saw his daughter.”

Suddenly, a tall slender boy at the end of the counter stood up and banged his fist on the counter, and in a loud and furious voice shouted, “God damn those Japanese bastards. When I get out there, I am going to kill every one of those Japanese sons of bitches that I can find!”

Strong words from a generation that had a national apoplectic fit when Rhett said to Scarlett, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn!”

All along the counter, not a soul winced at such excessive bravado. They all knew that the tall boy would leave for Pensacola next week for naval flight training. If he learned to fly a fighter plane off a carrier as a navy flier behind four 50-caliber machine guns, he just might carry out that threat.

A university bus came to a screeching halt at the corner across from the diner. The boy on the iron bench looked up, jolted from his reverie by the noise. He knew that he had been resting for a bit—thinking, dreaming. The old trolley car was still there, dark and foreboding. It is easy to imagine what one desires—to dream if the wish is there.

The boy picked up his bag and walked up Highland Road. He never looked back.

As he walked through the campus gates, the bells of the Campanile tolled the hour of seven as if to welcome the return of a native son. He thought that he might try to find Old Martin or Marcie and Myra Ann. Maybe look them up. He had their home addresses somewhere in his seabag at home. But he knew in his heart that he would never do it.

His was a new world. He had survived. The university and all that it had to offer was there before him. He had no time for the past.

And yet, as he grew older, as the

boy became a man, the years passed one by one, and in his private moments, he thought of the old trolley—of Martin, Marcie and Myra Ann and her baby. Mostly, his thoughts were of Herbie, whose life ended in a single blinding moment when a Japanese Zero came out of the sun high above a long-forgotten island in the Pacific. He wondered if anyone ever remembered Herbie. Myra Ann perhaps. He wondered if anyone ever recalled that one awful night when he and Myra Ann and their baby were the center of the universe for their friends at the Trolley Diner.

The boy, now a man in the autumn of his life, concluded that one night was not sufficient. Herbie deserved more. With these few words, the boy felt that somehow, he had made up for all of the years in which Herbie and Myra Ann and their baby were forgotten. ■

Allen J. Tillery (1925-2017) was a Louisiana Lawyer, author, banker, and community leader. He served as a Japanese interpreter in the U.S. Marine Corps in WWII and wrote of his experiences in his book, “Well and Smartly Done” (CreateSpace, 2017).