

Fighters Never Quit

MALCOLM JAMESON

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Title: Fighters Never Quit

Date of first publication: 1942

Author: Malcolm Jameson (1891-1945)

Date first posted: Sep. 29, 2022

Date last updated: Sep. 29, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220968

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines

[Source: Unknown Worlds, August 1, 1942]

FIGHTERS NEVER QUIT

By Malcolm Jameson

The dead can't die—so far as we know, but there may well be yet other realms, and battles still to be fought. And if the invisible dead can see the living—

Chief Bos'n Jockens was exceedingly annoyed. And as the moments slipped into the seconds, and the seconds into minutes, he became more annoyed. Chagrin was what he felt chiefly, polluted with dismay and disgust. For he was rapidly becoming convinced that he was up to his neck in a situation that simply couldn't happen—not to *anybody*, and least of all him! The bitter pill, that the good chief bos'n had to swallow was this: he had become a ghost! And Jockens was one of those feet-on-the-ground people who absolutely did not believe in ghosts. His orations on the subject were well

remembered in every W.O. mess in the fleet. Hence his extreme mortification.

It all came about when that big Jap battleship came barging out of the mist and let go with all she had at the already hard-pressed *El Paso*. Five sixteen shells at close range can do plenty to a light cruiser, even if the light cruiser had not already been amply riddled. The *El Paso's* reaction was the simple and obvious one—she shuddered as the lethal lumps of steel tore through her sides, then blew up with a terrific bang. What five tons of hurtling H.E. might not have completed, her own magazines did. Within five seconds all that was left of the gallant cruiser and her crew was a towering mushroom of smoke and a drizzle of splinters and fragments.

Jockens remembered that explosion vaguely, but the force of it had been too vast and so instantly applied as to give no time for sensation. He only knew that he had been hurled upward and that, without his feeling it in the least, his limbs had been ripped off him to disappear in a blast of flame. After that came a brief period when all that remained of him was a sort of disembodied consciousness hovering over a patch of flotsam in the water. Then things began to change subtly.

A couple of feet below him floated the splintered loom of an oar. Sloshing about in the water a yard away was a gruesome object which the late chief bos'n studied with a deep and morbid interest. It was horrible, that thing, being only a torn and blackened portion of a human torso to which the neck and head were still attached. But, although it floated

face down, he knew from a vivid scar on the back of the neck and a conspicuous mole on the shoulder that what he was viewing was a bit of his own mortal remains. It was that discovery that had convinced him he was dead—certainly a discovery in no way shocking, since few on the *El Paso* had expected any other outcome since their harried flight from the battle of the Banda Sea began. Jockens, in common with many of his kind, was necessarily a fatalist. What was to be would be, and he accepted the present fact with a mental shrug. But dying properly while doing his job was one thing, and the disconcerting transformation that followed it was another. Jockens most emphatically did not yearn to be a ghost and forevermore haunt the empty ocean over the spot where his ship had sunk.

Yet that was unmistakably what was about to happen. He was becoming aware of taking visible, if not tangible, shape. He now perceived that he was sitting astride that broken oar, clad in immaculate whites and wearing the ribbons of all his many badges and medals. It was a tenuous and nebulous body he was acquiring, to be sure, but yet a faithful copy of his old one. What disturbed him most was the fact that though he steadily became more and more solid to the eye, he could still see the pale shaft of the oar beneath him even though he had to stare down through his phantom abdomen to see the whole of it. And worse, the oar rose and fell as easily as if it bore no burden. On the heels of that discovery he observed a parallel phenomenon. As he himself grew in apparent solidity, the things he knew to be real grew fainter. The water which bathed his legs took on a misty, iridescent quality and he saw that it did not wet him at all. The fragment of real body paled to a blob of cloudy stuff and

eventually disappeared as does a blown-out candle flame, and with it the slender apparition of the oar. In ghostland, it was beginning to be evident, things of the spirit wore the aspect of reality, while the concrete became illusions.

There was almost instant verification of that observation from all about. On every hand his shipmates were popping into visibility, swimming along in the faint and ethereal ocean. They seemed to have a common goal. He turned his eyes that way and saw what it was. The *El Paso*, too, had been reconstituted in the spirit, and was even then steaming slowly along, picking up its men. Jockens rolled over on his side and began swimming for it with steady, even strokes. He was a little disappointed to find that the art of levitation—which the silly ghost believers had always attributed to ghosts—was not his, but perhaps that would come later. Yet swimming in the fictitious ocean served quite well, and he shortly found himself grasping at the lower rung of a Jacob's ladder someone had lowered over the side.

Harkey, the radio gunner, gave him a hand as he crawled over the bead molding and onto the quarterdeck.

"Hi, spook," he greeted, grinning from ear to ear. "How do you like it?"

"Don't rub it in," growled Jockens. It was only last night in that former world that Jockens had completely demolished every argument his superstitious messmate had advanced in favor of a sort of in-between state of after life. But under the present circumstances nothing occurred to him to say.

Jockens looked about the decks in astonishment. Things were as trim and shipshape as the day they had been commissioned, except that the spud locker, empty for a week, now bulged with spuds, and more spud crates were stacked on the deck beside it. So all the spuds they had eaten had come back as well! And in a moment similar discoveries were being made elsewhere in the ship. The gunner said his magazines were stuffed to capacity with powder and shell. The engineer reported full bunkers and replenished lubricating oil drums.

"Muster the crew," ordered the skipper, who had been taking the situation in without comment.

There were only five absentees—sea-lawyers all and chronic gripers, men whose heart had never been in the war.

"The first rule of ghosthood, it appears," remarked the commander ironically, "is that consciously or subconsciously, you who want very badly to carry on, do. I commend all present for that."

Just then there was a surprising diversion. A youthful seaman—the ship's inveterate cut-up—had stolen out of ranks and was clambering up the ladder to the maintop. He stopped a yard short of the pinnacle and shouted to those below.

"Hey, we're immortal now. Watch what we can get away with!"

With that he let go both hands and dived straight for the deck below. There was the gasp conditioned by long habit. Then the hurtling body struck the steel carapace of a gun housing with a sickening thud, only to slide off onto the deck where it lay motionless, a broken thing. It was all too clear that the neck and arms were broken and that the body was a corpse. Men ran up, but at once were forced to stand back in an awed semi-circle. For a flicker of green flame played over the crumpled figure a moment; there was a quick blaze and then the body was no more. There was simply nothing there!

"Hm-m-m," murmured the surgeon, who had been the first to arrive. "Add Rule 2. A ghost can be killed, if ghostly means are employed. You men had better watch your step."

A hundred pairs of eyes were turned speculatively on the chaplain, but that officer did not see fit to speak. Perhaps the gnawing thought in his own mind as well as that of his silent questioners was, "After the first stage of ghosthood, what? And how many stages? And—"

The general alarm was ringing, and the men broke from their spell and dashed for their battle stations. Very, very faint, but plainly recognizable, the Jap battlewagon and two of its attendant cruisers were approaching. No doubt they wanted to cruise through the floating wreckage in expectation of picking up a prisoner or so, or other information. On the *El Paso* ranges were being taken and ammunition brought up. Battle orders rang out—the big fellow was to be the target.

"Commence firing!"

The cruiser heeled to the recoil of her broadside, and the control officers watched eagerly for the behavior of their salvo. What they saw was disappointing. The shells must have gone squarely through the oncoming ship, for mountains of white water sprang up just beyond. But it was as if the projectiles had merely passed through a wall of mist. The battleship did not notice. It came steadily on, and the phantoms on board the *El Paso* saw that its turrets had been secured. As far as it was concerned, the battle was over. There was only empty sea on which bits of debris floated.

The battleship came on, slowed, then passed squarely through the flimsy illusion that stood for the sunken cruiser. It was evident that neither could feel the other or have any material effect, and it was equally evident that while the ghosts could see the living Japs faintly, the Japs could not see them at all.

Chief Bos'n Jockens watched the show from his station on the fo'c's'le, and the more he saw the greater did his disgust with his new status grow. It was all very well to be reconstituted in what seemed to be flesh and on a convincing phantom of a ship that was well-fueled, well-armed and well-provisioned. But where did it get them?

There had been a discouraging silence from the bridge ever since that one futile salvo had fallen. The commander had checked fire and waited. Now he was watching the passing victors. Suddenly he sighted something, and a fresh clamor of orders rang out.

"On the machine guns, there! Look aft on that second Jap cruiser—see those solid-looking figures. Let 'em have it!"

The second cruiser was one they had exchanged a few shots with and scored a hit or so before the arrival of the heavy stuff. On the after deck a broadside gun had been dismantled, but not destroyed, as its filmy haziness attested. Alongside it, however, were ranged a score of very material-appearing Japs. The conclusion was inevitable—they must be the ghosts of the dead gun crew.

The machine guns chattered, the smoky tracers leading fairly to their mark. The Japs, still bewildered at the new state of existence which they did not understand, began disappearing by twos and threes in little puffs of dazzling green fire. A wild cheer went up from the decks of the erstwhile *El Paso*. Not a single watcher but comprehended the significance of what was being revealed. They could not kill living Japs, but they could send dead ones another leg on the road to Hell!

The same thought had swept the bridge, for as the last of the enemy gun crew flickered out into the unknown second stage of the hereafter, the rudder had been put hard over and the engine telegraphs moved to "Flank Speed." The sailors of the *El Paso* knew without waiting for the orders that would follow what to do. They broke out torpedoes and loaded their tubes. Fresh charges rang home to their seats in the guns. Twenty miles away—over the horizon—there must be the shades of the four Jap destroyers they had just sunk when the battleship came up and made them run for it.

It was less than an hour before they picked them up. The destroyers were heading dismally for their homeland, indicating that the Japanese psychology did not comprehend the possibilities or responsibilities of ghosthood.

"Ha!" snorted Jockens, seeing their state of unreadiness. "Now it's our turn to do a sneak attack."

The attack went home. The second version of the morning's battle was short, and to the attackers doubly sweet. They watched with satisfaction as the phantom foes blew up and sank in quick succession. Five miles farther on they came upon a windfall—a bomber they must have shot down and not known about. It still rested on the waves and its crew was trying to make a take-off. A few bursts of ack-ack disposed of it, leaving once more an empty ocean.

"Now what?" asked the navigator.

"Back to the Macassar Straits and Bali," snapped the captain. "I am not exactly sure what we gain by this, but it's fun—and it smells like progress."

The ship straightened out on a southerly course, but not for long. Late in the day came the lookout's cry, "Sail-ho!" Three pairs of binoculars and a long glass came to bear on the object. It was plainly visible, though miles away; and therefore clearly another phantom. But it was no gray-hulled warship of any modern navy. Beautiful in the low slanting rays of the setting sun, she flaunted many square yards of

snowy canvas, complete with studding sails, top royals and skysails. The commander rang down for more blowers on. He wanted to reach the distant clipper before the coming night blotted her out.

The cruiser made it, just at the edge of dusk, and as her screws churned the water astern to rid her of her way, it could also be seen that the clipper flew the Stars and Stripes, though of a design strange to modern eyes. It bore only half the number of stars displayed on the ensign at the *El Paso's* gaff. The friendly phantom ship was obviously a Yankee of the old China trade, fully a century old, and the smart seamanship with which she backed her sails and got the quarter-boat away was further evidence of it. A few seconds later the boat was being rowed with swift, sure strokes toward the cruiser. A tall, gaunt man whose face was framed by whiskers, but whose chin and upper lip were clean shaven, sat in the stern sheets, tending the tiller.

"Boat ahoy!" hailed the cruiser.

"The *Bethesda*, one hundred and two years and five months out of Boston," came the response, clear but husky, from a voice that must have had far more than that number of years of experience in bellowing orders through a speaking trumpet into the teeth of a gale. "Ezra Sitwell, master. We want gunpowder, rum and vittles, if we can git 'em."

"Come alongside," replied the voice from the cruiser, and a moment later was giving orders for rigging cargo lights and dropping a ladder over the side. It was Jockens who attended

personally to the last item and who was present when the grizzled skipper of a century ago climbed aboard.

Captain Sitwell solemnly saluted; then shook hands all around.

"Howdy, cappen," he said. "Glad to fall in with you. Newcomer to these parts, eh? We heard tell there was a new war on, and that soon we'd be having plenty of company. It gits mighty dull hereabouts some years, what with nothing but typhoons to depend on for recruits and provisions. 'Twas a hundred years ago come September that we wuz caught the same way—typhoon took our sticks out and threw us up on the shore of Shikoku. Fight we tried to, but we were half drowned, and the murdering heathen beachcombers came at us with their wicked knives. I've haunted their coast ever since, picking up fishing boats mostly. But black powder and honest round shot are hard to come by these days, and lately we've had to depend on our cutlasses and sheath knives."

"We'll try to help," said the commander of the *El Paso*. Yet he made no move to order up the supplies asked for, partly because he had little of either and partly because he wanted to know more of this ghostly existence that had fallen to their lot. "Tell me," he asked, "don't ghosts ever die?"

"Nope. Only by violence, and that from ghosts or ghostly stuff."

Captain Sitwell chuckled. "The sea can't hurt us, because it ain't real. Neither are the rocks and shoals—"

"But old age, disease—"

Sitwell shook his head. "Ghosts stay the same age. 'Bout disease—four-five years ago I fell in with a foundered yacht—had a modern doctor on board—had plenty of whiskey on board—we talked all night. He told me about microbes and why they don't bother us. Ornery critters they were, he said, too little and ornery to have souls. So they don't bother us."

The commander noted the inquiring look that followed the simple explanation, and knew he must do something about the request at hand.

"What's your armament?"

"Carronades, muskets and pistols."

The commander shook his head. He had a few hundred pounds of black powder for his saluting battery, but no other ammunition suitable for ancient ordnance. Nor did he have any rum on board. He offered a dozen modern rifles and four one-pounder boat guns with ammunition to match, but the skipper of the sailing ship looked dubious.

"Nope," he said, "I've tried those newfangled things before. We'd best stick to cutlasses and knives, I reckon."

"I believe we can fix him up, commander," volunteered Jockens.

A moment later men were scouring the storerooms of the ship. Presently they were coming up, bringing the results of their search. All the black powder there was, two kegs of rivets and two more of assorted nuts—which would be useful for grape shot for Sitwell's carronades. There was some other miscellaneous scrap iron, a few sheets of gasket lead, and eight bags of sugar. The *Bethesda*, being manned by the old-fashioned, self-sufficient breed of sailors, could undoubtedly cast her own bullets and make her own rum. To that store of necessities, the cruiser added onions, spuds and eggs, things not easily come by among the salvage of the Eastern Seas.

"Many thanks, cappen," said Sitwell, beaming. "I'll do all right now. By the way, a couple of weeks ago I spoke a brother clipper down by Tai Wan. He says a lot of you fellows have shown up in the South China Sea and around Java. Says they made a big killing and have cleaned out everything. Last he saw of them, they were going on to India for fresh pickings there. Says they even hunted down a cruiser that's been plaguing us old fellows for twenty years or more—a German ship called the *Emden*. I sure hated that fellow, but all I could ever do was run from him. He wasn't so fast lately, 'cause he was a coal-burner and coal's getting almost as scarce as black powder."

Captain Sitwell said no more. Nor did the frowning captain of the *El Paso*. That last news was not too encouraging. If the sunken Asiatic Fleet had gotten on the job as quickly as they seemed to have, there was nothing left for his own ship to do. The months ahead looked dreary.

"In your experience, Captain Sitwell," he asked, "is it possible to communicate with the living?"

The *Bethesda's* skipper walked to the lee rail and relieved his cheek of an immense load of tobacco juice.

"Wa-al," he drawled, "yes. And no. There's mediums, but mighty few of 'em are any good. You can only send a word or two and they mostly get those mixed up. What they send back don't hardly ever make sense. Anyhow, living folks can't help us much."

"Maybe not," admitted the commander, but he cast a thoughtful eye toward Jockens, just the same. The last of the supplies had been sent down into the *Bethesda's* boat and Jockens was back, watchful and drinking in what was said.

Captain Sitwell repeated his thanks and made his formal farewells, adding as an afterthought:

"They do tell me this newfangled thing you call radio will do it. The messages you send, the living folks call static; but if you could find an operator that was a medium, too, you might get somewhere."

Jockens cocked his head to one side and delivered himself of a solemn wink. Then he disappeared below. Presently he emerged with Harkey, and the pair hurried away to the radio shack. In the meantime the boat had shoved off, the *El Paso* was picking up speed along her resumed course, and the faint running lights of the clipper were dropping fast astern. High up between the masts, an antennae-set began crackling out

static. Half an hour later Jockens stole softly out of the room and mounted to the bridge.

"Sir," he said, addressing his skipper, "Harkey and me's found the answer. He was always telling me about a niece of his he claims is psychic. I always thought that was so much hogwash, but lately I've been thinking maybe it's not. Anyway, she's in Communications at Honolulu. Harkey just got a message through and she managed to dope it out. We told her we're sunk, and where and how, and what a hole we're in for something to do next. She came back in plain English and said, 'I hear you perfectly and understand. The admiral's here and is interested. He wants to know what can we do for you?'"

The commander sighed. What, indeed, could the living do for the dead?

"Nice try, Jockens," said the skipper, "but I can't think of what to say to him. Can you?"

"Sure, sir." Nobody could see Jockens' wide grin in the dark, but it was there, as big and persistent as a Cheshire cat's. He was about to do some plagiarizing, but under certain conditions and with certain famous phrases, plagiarism becomes a virtue.

"Well?" snapped the commander, his nerves on edge.

"Why, sir, we could turn around and go scouting for live ones. They can't see us, but we can see them. Then we could

send word to the admiral where they are, how many, and how they're heading—"

"Swell;" answered the skipper, suddenly cheered. The *El Paso* sunk could still partly do her job in the world they had left, though her own guns and tubes would be useless.

"Swell," he repeated, "but it doesn't answer the admiral's question. He wants to know what he can do for us."

Jockens chuckled.

"Send us more Japs!"

THE END.

[The end of *Fighters Never Quit* by Malcolm Jameson]