



BURIAL at SEA

by EARL MERCER

LIEUTENANT Colonel Billings was a large man, almost a fat man, who insisted on wearing pince-nez glasses. Pince-nez glasses are a rarity in the overseas areas, but Billings himself was a kind of rarity. With a professorial head, and a Roman nose, and the pince-nez glasses, he was a strange sight among the other officers on the ship: He looked and acted so much like a visiting lecturer wandering among warriors.

Actually, there was nothing at all pedagogic in his personal history. Lieutenant Colonel Billings had been the manager of a department store in Duluth before the war; his specialty was supply. Nevertheless, he was a pedantic man, always ready to tell you all about the war, to discuss the issues one by one in his finger-pointing professorial way. He knew everything. He tried to talk tough. He considered himself a hard man.

Chaplain Eglantine was a much shorter man than Lieutenant Colonel Billings. He had a strangely shaped head on practically no neck at all: the cranium seemed to rise, ellipse-like, to a knob on top. The Chaplain had straight black hair which he parted in the middle. It is hardly necessary for me to add that Chaplain Eglantine was not a handsome man. His body, in strange contrast to his sharp and towering head, was short, bull-like and stocky.

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Eglantine, Billings and I were together on a ship which joined a convoy in New Guinea and started moving towards a Jap-held island. The Chaplain was the regular Chaplain on the ship. Billings, an Army man traveling with the troops on board, would be with us only until the island was taken. Then he would leave us and go ashore to take up his quarters on that island.

On a ship going into battle you make lifelong friends in a few days, and on that ship we were all particularly friendly. It was a good ship, an experienced ship, a brave ship. The men, even the new men, felt pride in her past accomplishments and were proud of being together on her. The only two men on board who hated each other were Chaplain Eglantine and Lieutenant Colonel Billings.

The little Chaplain said to me one day: "Your friend Billings has been telling me all about God. He despises me because he says I worship a dogma, not a God. The fool hasn't the faintest idea of what dogma is. He's an idiot."

A little later Lieutenant Colonel Billings tapped on my chest with his finger and said: "That Eglantine! Thinks he's Billy Sunday. Wants the old-time religion. Always thinks he's rasslin' with the devil. I wish he'd stay away from me."

The two men avoided each other with a deliberation that embarrassed the rest of us. At first, when the convoy left New Guinea, they sat next to each other at the mess table. Then one day I saw the Chaplain whispering to the chief bosun's mate, who was the mess sergeant, and at the very next meal Eglantine and Billings were sitting at opposite ends of the table.

Once I saw little Eglantine walk the entire length of the wardroom looking for a fourth at bridge. The only man in the room he did not ask was Billings—and we all knew

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that Billings was the best bridge player on the ship.

Billings and I stood on the bridge one evening after supper. He wiped the fog from his glasses and moved his big shoulders and said to me, "I've seen a lot of Chaplains under fire. This is Eglantine's first battle. I'll bet my bottom dollar he folds up. He's just not the type. Shoulda stood in bed."

It went on that way for two weeks, growing worse all the time. When two officers among fifty openly dislike each other, even the biggest ship in the world will shrink to the size of a dinghy, and the thing becomes a spreading sore. Two weeks of it, with the impending battle for the island looming larger every minute, and we were all pretty well fed up with the situation. I doubt if it could have gone on that way one more week, but there is no way of ever telling.

Suddenly one morning the Jap island floated over the horizon.

And then the petty grievances of life on shipboard were lost in the larger fury of the fight for the island. The Lieutenant Colonel went to work with his troops—unloading them, checking them, sweating out the thousand details of a man who dispatches other men into battle. The Chaplain took up his station in the sick bay, where he would help the doctors.

I saw Eglantine taking up his position in one corner of the sick bay. And then when we were getting into the landing boats, I saw Billings with the troops on deck. He knew his job, he had been through it all before, and as I watched him I kept thinking of what he had said about the Chaplain folding up.

TWENTY HOURS later I got back to the ship. The first thing I did was go down to the sick bay, and there I saw Chaplain Eglantine.

I have a pretty vivid memory of that bull-necked, bullet-headed

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man in the sick bay that night. He was all over the place. Talking to a sick man on a table is either a carefully acquired science or an instinct, and Eglantine had the gift instinctively. He spoke softly, nodded. Then he gave the one single sign of his fallibility that night: a tremendous sigh. Releasing the man's wrist, he laid it carefully down across the man's chest. He took the prayer book out of his pocket. And then he looked over and saw Billings, his sworn enemy, standing next to me.

He was about to say something to me, but in that split second he seemed to change his mind and turned his eyes to Billings. He pointed to the table where the boy was being given a blood transfusion. "Take over, will you, Joe?" he asked.

Billings jumped forward to the table like an eager little boy. Gently, he took the young soldier's wrist in his hand. He looked up at the Chaplain. "Okay, Padre," he said.

He smiled at the Chaplain. The Chaplain waved the prayer book, then was out of the sick bay and walking down the corridor again toward the fantail of the ship.

Billings did a good job of feeling for pulses, and emptying buckets, and carrying litters, and holding bandages for the rest of the night. He spoke to the wounded men, too, and managed to make some of them smile, but it was hard for the rest of us to look at Billings for very long because all the time he was talking to the men he kept dropping great big tears on the operating tables.



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