

The Short Decision

Once upon a time there lived a young man who wanted to be a soldier. He was a citizen of the United States, born just after the first Great War of the 20th Century. While growing up he played with toy soldiers and listened to colorful tales of combat told first hand by combat veterans. Later he saw movies like Wings and All Quiet on the Western Front. He read war novels, and then news accounts of the Civil War in Spain.

This very impressionable youth had taken a shine to the Military early on. In time it became an obsession, undiminished by graphic horrors depicted in newsreels and photos, and undiminished by pacifism and isolation as preached during the era of the Gay Twenties and the Melancholy Thirties.

Barely beyond adolescence when the Second World War was declared in 1939, our hero, whom some were already calling "our idiot", began his Junior year at one of the country's finest liberal arts colleges. As an elective he had chosen Military Science. His father, who was paying the tuition, objected to this choice. Father leaned toward the humanities- Philosophy 201 or something in the Department of Ancient Languages and Literature, perhaps. But depression era thinking prevailed: Father approved Military Science when he found out it was a euphemism for ROTC, and that the U.S. Government paid a small stipend.

As the Nazis advanced, Dad's indifference toward Military Science turned to delight as he realized his son would be a Second Lieutenant upon graduation. Two more years passed, and in June 1941, his father, mother, sisters, brothers, step-sisters, step-brothers and two stepmothers watched with pride as the gold bars were pinned on the family hero's skinny shoulders during Commencement exercises.

His name, incidentally, was Lieutenant Short, an appropriate name because his military career was destined to be very brief. Before the next two years passed by, the proud family would be in mourning, but not because their lieutenant had been killed in action. Lots of things are worse than death. One of them is facing a General Court Martial on charges involving cowardice and desertion.

Anyone who is old enough to remember, or who is familiar with World

War II history will recognize the name Short in connection with the notorious court martial in Casablanca in 1943. It was widely reported in U.S. newspapers.

A few days after receiving his commission, Lieutenant Short, in a fervor of patriotism, volunteered for active duty at the nearest recruiting office. The waiting room was filled with reservists armed with excuses to avoid being called to active duty. But the eager lieutenant was interviewed immediately and directed to another room for a physical examination, which revealed that he was 2 pounds underweight, had a mild case of Athlete's Foot, and was uncircumcised.

"Keep your feet dry and keep yourself clean," said the doctor. "Now sign this waiver, and you'll be in the army".

Lieutenant Short sprang to attention and saluted. "Thank you. Sir" he exclaimed with a big grin.

"You don't salute when you're in the nude, and don't smile. It's very unmilitary," the doctor replied, "now put on your clothes and get out of here." The doctor was in the army because he had not been able to find any other position.

A few days later Lieutenant Short found himself assigned to a "line outfit", a unit that would serve in the front lines during combat. It was an artillery battalion stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Its mission was close support of an infantry regiment, part of a Regular Army Division being reactivated for service in case that the United States was drawn somehow into World War II.

Fort Bragg was an ideal spot for Lieutenant Short to savor army life. Before Pearl Harbor old army customs and traditions still prevailed. The First Sergeant spoke to him in the third person: "Would the lieutenant be taking reveille tomorrow morning?" or "When does the Lieutenant wish to inspect the mess hall?"

After Pearl Harbor the old army customs vanished as training became more intense and focused. But for Lieutenant Short and many others, military life was not yet real.

Lieutenant Short's world of dreams was shattered by a nearby shell burst on a beach of French Morocco. It was not at all the same as in a book or film, nor was it like combat training in North Carolina. Here on the beach was reality. Someone was shooting at him.

In November 1942, units of the Ninth Division had made amphibious landings in the Maghreb, the name the French have for that part of North Africa which includes Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. French forces there had been ordered by the collaborating French Vichy government to resist any Allied landing attempts.

The French were ready. Their outmoded coast artillery fired shells left over from World War I accurately at surveyed targets on the beach. P-39's^given earlier to the French by U.S. Lend-Lease^ strafed the Americans desultorily. The ancient shells exploded and the shrapnel flew, and it killed the Americans just as dead as weaponry made yesterday.

Lieutenant Short had no time for fear. He suppressed it, and went about his duties efficiently, getting his guns and cannoneers off the beach and into position. He would do what had to be done, or even more. So, in the face of reality he found himself to be neither fearless, nor exactly brave. Most certainly, though, he was not a coward.

Lieutenant Short's brand of courage was further tested later on a dark night in Tunisia in February 1943. So was his judgment.

While Rommel's troops were still retreating from the British into southern Tunisia, the 10th Panzer Division broke through a thin British-American defense line at the Kasserine Pass in western Tunisia. The big Allied supply and ammunition depot at Tebessa, Algeria, was immediately threatened. If the 10th Panzers were not stopped, they could play hell with the Allied rear as far back as Algiers and Oran, nullifying the whole purpose of the Allied occupation of North Africa. Future plans to invade Europe and to divert Axis troops from the Russian front would then be delayed.

Considering the enormity of the 10th Panzer threat, it is startling to realize that an inexperienced American lieutenant happened to be in the cab of an artillery 2 Vz ton prime mover, leading a rescue convoy of 3 battalions of field artillery and antitank guns. It was the only force available to stop the Panzers' advance. They had made a forced march from over 700 miles away and Lieutenant Short was now leading them to positions which his superior officers were selecting several miles ahead, near a hamlet called Thala. The high command had determined that the German attack must be stopped at Thala. This was standard operating procedure. Commanders went ahead to locate gun positions and then a battery officer would lead the batteries to the positions. A Scout Corporal would be placed on the road to meet the batteries at the proper turn off and lead them to the reconnoitered positions. Lieutenant Short, a battery

officer, had done this many times in training. So had his Scout Corporal, a man named Ricci.

Here on the road to Thala, the artillery convoy proceeded at a snail's pace. They had stopped only long enough to load extra ammunition. It was very dark, and the narrow road wound through mountainous country, but worst of all, there was increasing traffic bearing down upon them. Single vehicles of all kinds from tanks to land rovers, British and American, barely avoided crashing into the advancing Americans in the darkness. Stragglers on foot further obstructed progress. These were all troops fleeing from the Kasserine Pass, and the Germans were not far behind them. The darkness was being broken more and more by the flash of shellfire and occasional flares, and noise like thunder resounded from the East. At this time air superiority belonged to the Germans.

The fleeing men were shouting at Lieutenant Short's advancing convoy. "Stop now and turn around" (as if they could!) "They're close behind us with a thousand tanks!" "Save yourself, lads, before it's too late!"

"This isn't much like training back in Carolina either," thought Lieutenant Short, as he stopped his convoy to let a British ambulance get by. Then came a small British vehicle from which a British officer leaned out. Probably a captain, thought Lieutenant Short. This was his crucial moment.

"You had best turn 'round, or leave your vehicles, it's suicide ahead," cried the British officer. A couple of high explosive shells fell about 100 yards away with the usual sound effects, as Lieutenant Short made his decision.

It was about an hour before dawn.

"The reconnaissance party must be overrun, obviously, from what these guys are telling us", the lieutenant reasoned. "If we continue forward it will be the end for us. Corporal Ricci cannot possibly be on the road to stop us. Firing batteries on the move, not in firing position are practically defenseless. I am leading over 1000 American soldiers to annihilation."

Lieutenant Short therefore decided to give the order to abandon vehicles and materiel, which could not be turned around on the narrow road. True, certain officers and men behind him disobeyed the order and stayed-with their vehicles, hoping to find a way to go forward, but they were never able to move. Lieutenant Short and the others who left became part of the rabble fleeing to the rear.

The result of Lieutenant Short's decision is a sad chapter in modern American history, well known to many of us. 1000 American officers and

soldiers abandoned more than 36 field artillery pieces, 75 or more trucks and other vehicles, loaded with ammunition, on the road to Thala. Other vehicles still retreating from Kasserine could also not get through. Miles of the road were filled with motionless trucks and guns, and hundreds of men trying to climb through the mess like ants. At dawn the Stuka bombers dove down and deposited their 500 pound bombs with accuracy, and Messerschmitts strafed anything that moved.

Eventually, as you know, the Germans reached the Atlas Mountains, bottling up what was left of the Allied North African forces in Morocco for almost a year. When a newly formed Allied force finally arrived at Casablanca, it was not until late 1944 that the Germans were finally expelled from Africa.

Because of the fiasco at Thala, brought about solely by Lieutenant Short's decision, the long awaited Allied invasion of Europe did not occur until the spring of 1945, as we all know-don 't we?

Lieutenant Short's court martial in Casablanca was not lengthy. The Trial Judge Advocate successfully prosecuted the lieutenant under the 64th Article of War: willful disobedience of the lawful command of a superior officer, punishable by death in wartime. However the Defense insisted that fear was not involved, only judgment. The penalty was 5 years at Fort Leavenworth with dishonorable discharge, but he was released early after the end of World War II.

He was of course not welcome in the Reserves or the National Guard, so perhaps we are fortunate that he missed Korea and Vietnam, He always regretted that he could not continue his military career

If you are still listening, you may have noticed some historical discrepancies in the story of Lieutenant Short. The invasion of Europe began with Sicily in July 1943, next the Italian mainland, and in the spring of 1944 Normandy and then southern France. These assault landings had not been delayed by the German thrust through the Kasserine Pass in Tunisia. The deviations above from historical fact have been printed in italics,

The true story is that 3 battalions of truck drawn American field artillery without armor or infantry stopped the Germans at Thala, Tunisia, on February 22nd 1943. They were the only force available to meet the attack, and had traveled non-stop for over 700 miles to get there. They had gone into position the night before while under attack by the advancing panzer division, which had broken through the British American defenses at Kasserine.

There was no Lieutenant Short, there was no question of turning back, but there was a Scout Corporal Ricci. He was waiting for his lieutenant under intermittent shellfire on the side of the road, in a hastily dug foxhole. When the convoy finally arrived, Corporal Ricci jumped out yelling:

"Where in the hell have you guys been?"

The lieutenant had never heard more wonderfully warm welcoming words. For an answer, amid the shellfire, Corporal Ricci got a very unmilitary hug.

All three battalions of artillery received Presidential Unit Citations for their action at Thala.