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Henry F. Allard

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*Henry F. Allard*

## CRAZY LIKE A FOX: A WAR SKETCH

**A**S I RECALL it now, my first meeting with John Bull seems more like a skirmish than an encounter. The opening shot of our private war was fired in the summer of 1944, about two months before the invasion of Normandy and soon after I had been assigned to a rifle platoon of the 104th Infantry Division. John Bull, soldier extraordinary, was one of the eleven men in the squad to which I was eventually transferred.

Although I knew most of them by name, Staff Sergeant Jersyk introduced me to every man under his leadership, outlining the position and duties of each one and explaining how the twelve of us would train together as a highly disciplined fighting unit. He said that we should cooperate fully in the best interests of the war, and he added with a sharp glance at me, the newcomer, that we should all try to be good friends.

I remember there were a few jokes at my expense. Somebody said that if *I* was coming into the third squad, *he* was going AWOL; and somebody else said that I should go AWOL, too, because they'd much rather have an old woman than me. I shook hands with everybody and tried to counter the rather obvious humor with some of my own.

Arriving at the next-to-last bed in the row, Jersyk pointed out someone who apparently had been overlooked. "That's John Bull," he explained. "He carries the BAR ammunition."

"Hello, John," I said holding out my hand.

John turned and fixed me coldly with beady black eyes. He ignored the hand. He said nothing.

Jersyk waited in amusement. "John doesn't speak much English."

"What do you mean, he doesn't speak much English?" I said.

"John's a Navaho Indian," Jersyk replied. "He can't speak, read, or write English. He can't read or write Navaho. All he can do is speak Navaho."

I was astonished. While making my bed, I cast a few sidelong glances at this strange creature—the illiterate with whom I was supposed to cooperate and be friendly. John still hadn't made a sound—not even a grunt or an ugh. The expression on his scowling face reminded me of a gemmologist estimating the possible cleavage angles of a large, uncut diamond: he was surveying me, I was sure, with the intention of splitting my skull some night with his tomahawk. I stared back ferociously.

He certainly looked like an Indian. His skin was dark and coppery; his hair was intensely blue-black; and his nose, aquiline and high-bridged, might have belonged to the chief on the buffalo nickel. I watched him as he thumbed through a magazine. Was he going to read it, I wondered? His lips did not move, even laboriously in the manner of someone whose education has been rudimentary, and his eyes, furthermore, did not flick downward and to the left at the end of a line but wandered aimlessly across the page. Under the pretext of smoothing out the blankets I sauntered to the foot of the bed where I could look over his shoulder. A party that *Life* attended had held his attention for more than five minutes, yet anyone else could have assimilated the short paragraph in thirty seconds. Jersyk was right about one thing: John Bull couldn't read English. When the lights went out, he tossed the magazine to the floor. I was already in bed.

"Good night, John," I said. There was no answer. I fell asleep trying to imagine how anthropologists break down the reserve of a primitive people.

In the morning Sergeant Jersyk awoke us with a vulgar rhyme about socks and, running down the aisle, stopped at each bed to yell, "Morales, if you don't move, I'll turn that bunk over!" "Allgeyer, let's wiggle out of there!" "New Man, are you up yet?" "Okay, you crazy Indian, get out of that sack!" No one was anx-

ious to rise: a five-mile march was scheduled for nine o'clock. In the Army short marches are usually conducted at a fiery pace that makes breathing through the mouth a necessity. This one was no exception. Immediately ahead of me the five-foot-six-inch John Bull was laboring so hard under the double handicap of a full field pack and a limp that during the first break I asked Jersyk whether he would have any difficulty in finishing.

"No," he answered, "John never falls out on a hike." He turned to the Indian, who was lying limp and tired by the side of the road, and said, "Fall out soon, Lukeechukee?"

John smiled and said, "Nahh!"

After the march when the platoon leaders dismissed their men to the barracks, the third squad noticed with great interest a visitor sitting on John's bed. The friend was Jacob Tsinnajinnie, a Navaho boy who lived near John's home town of Lukachukai, Arizona.

"Hi, Jake," I said, removing my dusty shoes.

"Hi, Harvard," answered Jake. "Got a word for me today?"

The radio was playing *Sleepy Lagoon*. "What about lagoon?" I said.

"Easy. A body of water."

The radio played on. "Lugubrious, l-u-g-u-b-r-i-o-u-s," I suggested.

He took a small dictionary from his hip pocket and thumbed swiftly to the middle. "'Mournful, sorrowful,'" he read.

"Good work, Jake. You get the gold-plated foot locker."

As I undressed to take a shower, John and Jake began a breathy, sibilant conversation in Navaho, which sounded to my alien ears like nothing more than a high, narrow waterfall heard from a distance. In the middle of the lively but muted discussion John handed his friend a letter and listened intently while Jake translated it from English to their native tongue.

When I returned from the washroom, the visiting Indian had departed and Jersyk was pretending to catch John in an omission

of discipline. "Hey, John Bull," he was saying, "is your weapon clean?"

John blinked. "Nahh!" he said.

"By God," cried Jersyk, "if it isn't, you'll be scrubbing floors!" He strode over to the rack, snatched up the nearest rifle, and clicked open the bolt. "It's rusty! One month KP and no furloughs to Lukachukai, you crazy Indian."

"*You* crazy," said John, grinning. "*You* crazy." He pointed to his own rifle standing by the window.

"Bravo, John," I said. I might as well have addressed the can of shoe polish I held in my hand.

That afternoon as most of us were preparing to spend the weekend off the post, John squatted quietly on his bed, making no effort to join the crowd that was bound for Colorado Springs and Denver. His dark eyes were alert and interested. Then Jersyk raced up the stairs and waved some white slips at us—our reward for a successful march.

"Hey there, Sitting Bull," he shouted. "You want a pass?"

"Pass?" said John.

"Come on. We'll go into town together. *Ice cream*, John."

"Ice cream?" said John, a shade more warmth in his voice.

Roy Allgeyer, who was accompanying Jersyk, joined the conversation. "You like *beer*, John?"

The smile on John's face left no doubt that he liked beer even better than he liked ice cream.

"Oh, oh," they chorused, "John likes beer."

"Get drunk tonight, John?"

"Nahh!"

"You're full of baloney, you don't get drunk!"

"*You* fulla baloney."

"We get a couple of girls tonight, John?"

"God damn!"

Shortly after midnight a drunken soldier entered the barracks with all the fervor of a fanatic assaulting a pillbox. His two es-

corts tried to put a hasty stop to most of the uproar, but they couldn't silence the superb and uninterrupted monologue of profanity. As the obstreperous person charged up the stairs, I realized with a start that he sounded very much like a certain squad mate of mine who was, as a rule, exasperatingly mute, and when he stopped by the adjacent bed, I sat up and stared at him in the dark. There, fumbling with his clothes, stood John Bull; he was still cursing. The volume was now gentle, the tone cheery, but the content was dreadful.

In the morning I asked Jersyk about John's surprising, though limited, vocabulary.

"He drank too much beer and remembered all the wrong words," Jersyk said. "Do you hear that, John Bull?" he called across the room. "No more firewater for young warriors like you."

John wasn't feeling well and didn't answer.

"That crazy papoose has been to the Army language school," continued Jersyk with an angry toss of his head, "so he isn't as stupid as he looks. When he doesn't want to speak or understand English, you can't make him. You say, 'John, I want you to dig a latrine,' and he'll just stand there looking at you. You say, 'Chow, John,' and that little cigar-store Indian is halfway to the mess hall. I don't know how we're going to use him in combat."

For two weeks my taciturn neighbor gave not the faintest sign that I occupied the next bed. Since he clearly did not approve of an outlander entering a world whose limits had already been established, for my part I continued to be casual, neither ignoring him as he did me, nor forcing his hand. This policy was the best in the long run. Members of other squads who took certain liberties with him, all the usual vulgarities among men, found themselves baffled by a devastating aloofness that denied their very existence. In my opinion the storming of the ivory wigwam required time, patience, and the right opportunity.

The right opportunity came finally in the form of a package from home. My mother had sent me a birthday present consisting

of a roll of color film, a pair of tan silk socks, and a tin of her special cookies. Spurning the inedibles for a moment, I offered the cookies first to the card players across the aisle, then to the letter writers at the far end of the row, and lastly, as an afterthought, to John, whose hungry stare had been fixed on me all the time. Not a muscle moved in his face as he reached inside the tin, but when he had taken a bite, he cocked his head at me and said simply, "Is good." We were friends. Evidently he had accepted me as he accepted the tumbleweeds that blew past his hogan on the reservation.

Hopefully and with little progress I tried to interest John in the world about him—the white man's world, to be sure, but very real and very different from his own. When I thought he would explode either from gas or boredom if he spent another night drinking near-beer at the PX, I would coax him to Colorado Springs or across the street to the theatre. The camp movies were an entertainment I couldn't resist: the admission was only twenty cents and the program was changed three times a week. But John could. Perhaps the required sex films had disillusioned him, or perhaps the benches were too hard; at any rate, he offered so much initial resistance to the technicolored dreams of Hollywood that I had to campaign energetically for his company.

"What do you say, John?" I began. "Let's go to the movies."

"Nahh."

"Come on. You need a change of scenery."

"Nahh."

"Free English lessons!"

A slight shake of the head.

"Academy Award performance!"

Complete withdrawal.

I tried a different approach. "Betty Grable, Betty Grable." I pointed to a photograph of her in a tight white bathing suit. He was interested now.

"Plenty sexy," I tempted, outlining her figure in the air with my hands.

John got his cap. In the theatre he sat impassively throughout the performance, grinning whenever I nudged him at a bosomy moment. Although obviously not at all impressed (neither was I), he accompanied me to other musicals starring Betty Grable simply at the mention of her name. There was at least one, it seemed, about every other week.

John regarded mail with the same tranquillity as movies. The second letter he ever received brought forth a great cheering from us when his name was bellowed out just before retreat, and of course afterward no one missed the opportunity of chaffing him.

"Lukeechukee's got a *great big letter*," said Jersyk.

"I bet it's a *love letter*," said Allgeyer.

John ignored the taunts beautifully and held up the prize in my direction. We were now buddies, and he was wondrous at the amount of mail that showered me. On the envelope in red ink was written the name, John Bull Chee.

"John," I said, "what does the *Chee* mean?"

"Chee?" he repeated.

"Is your name Chee?"

He nodded. He never *said* yes.

"No, it isn't. It's Bull. What's your name, John?"

"John Bull." He started to giggle.

"Look—is your name John Bull or John Bull Chee?"

John found this question hilarious.

"You're crazy, Lukeechukee," I said at last, somewhat annoyed at being so easily thwarted.

"*You* crazy."

"Yeah, John's a crazy Indian," said Jersyk. "Crazy like a fox."

"*You* crazy Indian," said John, enjoying the mystery he was causing as well as the attention he was getting from his friends.

"Nobody's crazy," said Rudy Morales, the New Mexican boy for whom John carried the BAR ammunition. He explained that



the Navahos sometimes have two names, and that Chee, as is the practice in Spanish countries, was possibly the maiden name of John's mother.

As far as I could tell, John never received another letter. He seemed to care very little; in fact, the lack of mail didn't bother him even after we sailed directly from New York to Cherbourg—a damp, chilly place thousands of miles from Lukachukai. While the regiment was being held in reserve for the battle of northern France, our company was allowed a freedom so generous in time and so modest in space that we had difficulty at first in finding amusement. In a few days, however, my friends and I conquered boredom by playing rounds of chess on a pocket board, taking photographs, and trading scraggly copies of paper-bound books. John Bull kept busy, too. He occupied his spare time by weaving small, intricate objects from string, thread, or horsehair. Although the watch fobs and bracelets were handsomely fashioned, what I coveted most were some of his curious gewgaws, which might well have been made in the Stone Age.

Late one afternoon I noticed him hard at work with the air of someone who is creating a masterpiece. He was sitting cross-legged in the entrance of the tent that he shared with Sergeant Jersyk, oblivious to the noisy ball players who had established third base dangerously close to his front tent peg.

"Hi there, Sitting Bull, little brown horned toad of the desert, how about letting me see the latest artifact?" I said.

"Nahh!"

"Aw, we're buddies, aren't we?"

A shrug meaning either that the latest artifact wasn't finished or that he didn't care whether or not we were buddies. John's shrugs required interpretation.

"To hell with you, John Bull. You know what you can do with your old peace pipe."

A wall of complete indifference.

But just before dark he caught my attention with a low hiss and

showed me the mysterious object on which he had been working for such a long time: it was a shiny black rosary woven entirely from horsehair. I was somewhat surprised. Until that time I had never doubted that John's religious training was in the hands of anyone except a witch doctor. Praising his craftsmanship highly, I tried to return the rosary, but with a wave of the hand he signified that I should keep it.

"Thank you very much, John," I said, fingering the little crucifix in admiration. "Where did you get the horsehair?"

Intercepting the light of a candle he had just lit, John made a shadow picture of a horse on the wall of the tent. He was articulate in pantomime.

"You crazy John Bull, of course you got it from a horse!"

He nodded, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"Arizona?" I said doubtfully.

John pointed in the direction of a nearby farmhouse, pulled a hair from my head, and whinnied. We both laughed.

Then I asked him a question that I knew beforehand would bring no satisfactory answer. "Are you a Christian, John?"

He seemed puzzled.

"You go to church in Lukachukai?" I made a church and steeple with my hands. "Ding dong, ding dong."

He nodded a halfhearted yes.

"Are you a Catholic?" I made the sign of the cross.

He shook his head.

Dangling the rosary in front of him, I attacked the problem from a different—and perhaps more practical—angle. "You go to mass with Roy and me next Sunday?" I asked. I thought the service in the flamboyantly decorated village church would appeal to him more than the plain services that the various chaplains held in the open air.

He merely shrugged his shoulders.

The following Sunday, however, he played the heathen Indian, neither budging from his tent nor speaking. I attended mass in

the village without him, and while the parish priest was exhorting in rapid French, I wondered whether John had understood the orientation lectures as imperfectly as I was understanding the sermon. In Colorado he had slept soundly in the darkened theatres at the showing of the documentary film "Why We Fight," probably because of the language barrier, although the combination of post-calisthenics fatigue and summer heat might have made anyone drowsy. I resolved again, as a relief from my own boredom, to undertake in earnest the education of John Bull. Monday afternoon I borrowed an atlas from a friend in Special Services, sat down beside John's tent, and turned to a map of the southwestern United States.

"What's this, John?" I said, pointing to a state in the center of the page.

He gestured that he didn't know.

I wasn't a bit discouraged. "Yes, you do. It's *Arizona*."

"Lukachukai?"

"That's right, your home town. Now where's *Camp Carson*?"

"Colorado?"

"Good work! You're getting to be a smart Indian, like Jake." I riffled a few pages until I came to a large map of eastern United States, the Atlantic Ocean, and western Europe. "Where are we now, John?" I traced a finger slowly across the ocean.

He formed the word with his mouth but made no sound.

"We're in *France*, right here." I pointed to the ground and to the map.

John said, "France."

"Do you know *why* we're in France?" I held my breath. "Why" questions were hard for him.

John made a face indicating that he didn't understand the question, and that if he did, he wouldn't be able to answer it by saying, "Nahh."

"We've got to *kill* the *Germans*, isn't that right?"

John was delighted. He reached inside the tent and pulled out

an extra bayonet that he had sharpened patiently to dagger size and razor sharpness. "God damn Germans," he said.

"You're crazy like a fox, John Bull. You don't need any orientation."

"*You* crazy," said John.

In October the entire division was ordered from France to Belgium and then in November from Holland to Germany. We resumed fighting at Aachen. After a month of combat two members of the third squad were dead, five were hospitalized, and I was to be next on the casualty list. The day before I was wounded the company was caught in an intense bombardment from both German and Allied artillery. The fact that the American heavy weapons were the most accurate and the most abundantly supplied was of little comfort to John and me, who were hiding beneath a steel door in a burning saw mill. He looked forlorn and out of place—like a jellyfish washed up on the sand. The new men who replaced our dead and injured considered him an anchor to the squad, since he was rarely sent on a reconnoiter, but he was crafty and battle-wise, despite his obvious shortcomings, and as comforting to have close by as soap in the tub. I didn't regret lying beside him.

A mortar shell burst a short distance away and made us both cringe. "Fourth of July!" I shouted.

John indicated that the noise was too loud for his ears. At the next lull in the firing he nudged me, and dragging his rifle around in front of us so that I could examine it carefully in the bright moonlight, he pointed to twelve small, neat notches cut in the underside of the butt. Each notch represented a German he had personally killed. I suppose I was to be blamed for that grisly method of bookkeeping, because during our departure from France I had proposed jokingly that he take scalps. John was always too receptive to uncivilized suggestions. I made a second count.

"What happened to that prisoner yesterday?" I asked suspiciously.

The line that John drew across his throat was as broad as his smile.

"Why, you bloodthirsty little Gila monster!"

When the bombardment began without warning the next day, I could find neither a steel door nor a foxhole for protection against shell fragments. Later, as the medics bore me on a stretcher to the ambulance, I waved a cheery goodbye to my squad mates. John watched me silently with bright, eloquent eyes.

In an English hospital I heard via the grapevine that my crazy Indian friend was safe, and at the end of the war I learned not only that he was still unharmed but that he would return home with the division and be discharged in California. I could imagine the clerk at the separation center questioning him, for example, on his "last name, first name, and middle initial," "military occupational assignments," and "service schools attended." Stoicism, I believe, must have triumphed stunningly over bureaucracy.

After my own discharge I mailed the photographs that I took in Normandy to the members of the third squad who were alive. To my delight I received a prompt letter written in red ink and bearing the return address of a Mr. John Bull, Lukachukai, Arizona. The letter began "Dearest Pal Henry"; it told of his wife, the house he was building, the "corps" he had planted, the "winding" weather, and the sister who knew how to write; it closed with a comment upon international affairs: "Will see you soon when the war start again."