

The background of the top two-thirds of the image is a waving American flag with stars and stripes. The text is overlaid on this background.

From the Delta Mud

A black silhouette of a man in a suit, standing with his right hand raised in a gesture. The silhouette is positioned in front of the American flag background.

Guy B Wheatley



Teaser for
“From the
Delta Mud”

Guy B. Wheatley

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DEDICATION

For Sharon, the center of my universe.

Thanks to friends and family who encouraged me to keep writing. Thanks to my early years in southeast Arkansas, and thanks to the incredible people who live there. That area and those people are the images that come to my mind when I hear the words, “America,” and “American.”

Thanks to a man among men, my father GB Wheatley. Obviously Gibb to those who know him.

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PROLOGUE

July 1992

John was red eyed with greasy hair and peach fuzz on his twenty-year-old chin. The other deck hand had abruptly blasted him from sleep by flipping on the light in the cabin they shared, and pulling the covers off of him. Shouting would have done no good as the cabin was separated from the twin 12,000 horse engines by less than an eighth of an inch of steel. You just didn't have meaningful conversations in the deck-hand cabin when the engines were running. Especially when they were at full throttle as they had been for the last twelve hours. The time was currently eleven-forty pm, and John was starting the six hour shift from midnight to six am known as the second part of the after watch. He sat up and looked through bleary eyes as Stinky, the other hand, satisfied himself that John was awake. Satisfied, Stinky disappeared back out the door to finish the last fifteen minutes of his watch.

John slid from the upper bunk, pulled on his clothes and grabbed the ever-present flashlight. He killed the cabin

lights and stepped out in the companion way. The stairs to the second deck were almost directly across from his cabin and he made his way up them. At the top of the stairs was a small common room with a couch, a couple of chairs, a table, and a TV set. The port holes on his left were actually double paneled sliding windows, just like those found in any industrial building. More windows in the front of the room on the wall behind the television looked forward, out over the weather deck and onto the barges that made up the tow the boat was pushing. John crossed the back of the room to the other entrance. This opened on a companion way that led into officer country where the cabins for the captain, the chief engineer, and the cook were located.

There is no quiet place on a tow boat while the engines are running. But in these cabins, a deck above and slightly forward of the engine room, conversation was at least possible. John rapped on the door to the pilot's cabin then pressed his ear against it listening for the sounds of someone stirring on the other side. He heard some muffled grumbling, then a groggy, "OK!" Satisfied that the pilot was awake, he went to the chief's door and repeated the process.

His duty finished here, John headed back up the hall. He would be back in a few hours to wake the cook, but for now he wanted to grab a snack from the galley before his watch started. Retracing his steps, John found himself again in front of the door to his cabin. In this part of the boat, the rumble and clatter of the engines was something you felt more than heard. When he had first been shown his bunk he wondered how he would ever sleep, enveloped in such a cacophony. Much to his surprise, he slept incredibly well. His body quickly accepted the mechanically steady rhythm

of the engines as the gentle sway of the boat rocked him to sleep. The best sleep he ever had was in the dark swaying cocoon of his cabin while two engines, each the size of an eighteen-wheeler's trailer, rumbled their reassuring lullaby.

He turned aft to a set of double doors just past his cabin that led to the engine room. The main deck companion way continued through the engine room as a catwalk between the engines. Opening the doors to the engine room, the noise which had been a physical sensation, became a physical assault. John made his way down the catwalk and through another set of doors at the other end of the engine room. He was now in another short companion, off of which were the second engineer's cabin, a utility locker, and a head. Continuing aft, John passed through the last set of double doors into the galley.

The galley was a large space that ran the width of the boat. It held enough seating for twelve people as well as the industrial sized stove, oven, refrigerator and freezer. It looked especially cavernous around midnight with only two people there. Stinky was washing something down with a glass of milk. From the crumbs in his scraggly beard, it must have been the last of the apple pie. Finishing the milk, Stinky tossed the glass and dish into the sink where they bounced around but miraculously didn't break. He was supposed to rinse them, then put them in the dishwasher. Leaving them in the sink for John was just a subtle reminder that Stinky was still a step above John in the pecking order. A forearm across his mouth completed Stinky's hygiene for the evening. He headed for his bunk giving John a friendly slap on the shoulder as he passed.

Frank, the second engineer was seated at a table

delicately picking at a bowl of chocolate pudding. John did his best to stifle a grin as he stepped to the cupboard and retrieved a mug. Every crew member had a favorite snack, and the cook took great pride in leaving something for the people going on watch. John liked fried oysters, and it was a good bet that there was a bowl of them waiting in the fridge. Bob, the pilot John had just awakened, like chocolate pudding. Every crew member, seeing a single serving bowl of chocolate pudding in the fridge, would understand that it was there for Bob. The cook had asked Frank what he liked. Frank had mumbled that he didn't want anything, then started eating the snacks left for other people. Lately he had been zeroing in on Bob's pudding. The cook even left two bowls so Frank could have one if he wanted it. Frank ate them both.

Tonight John had instruction from the cook to be sure that Bob didn't eat the pudding in the unlikely event Frank left it. In the two months he'd been on the crew, John had learned there were times you just followed instructions without asking questions. This was a summer job, and John still had a year before he graduated college. But you didn't need a degree to figure out there was probably a couple of bars of ex-lax in that bowl. He appreciated the idea that old Frank was probably getting his just desserts tonight, as well as Bob's dessert. John lifted the coffee pot, but hesitated before pouring any into his mug. He looked suspiciously at the contents of the pot. It looked more like asphalt than coffee. Stinky must have made a pot for the Captain before going off watch. The Captain could chew his coffee as easily drink it. If you could get another grain in the filter, the coffee was too weak for the Captain. John poured his mug about a third

full, then filled it the rest of the way with hot water. It still tasted bitter, but it didn't dissolve the skin on his tongue. He'd make a new pot soon, but decided to wait until Bob replaced the Captain in the wheelhouse. The Captain might want another cup before turning in. He found the expected oysters in the fridge then took a seat as far from Frank as he could.

Frank gave him a sullen glare as he spooned the last of the pudding into his mouth. He stood then sauntered over to the sink and joined Stinky's social statement by tossing in the unwashed bowl and spoon. John didn't exactly appreciate Stinky doing it, but it at least had the feel of good natured ribbing. Somehow when Frank did it, there was a vindictive edge to it that John really resented. He watched Frank leave the galley. He was pretty sure that old Frank wasn't going to be so full of shit in a few hours. A few minutes later, Bob came through the doors sleepily rubbing the back of his neck

"Morning." he said, giving John a friendly nod. He went to the fridge and pulled the door open. Leaning lazily on the door facing, he stuck his head in the fridge and looked around for the bowl of pudding. Convincing himself that it wasn't there, he withdrew and gently pushed the door shut. The hint of a smirk played across his lips. John now knew that the pilot was also aware of the setup, but neither man was going to mention it.

Bob turned and sauntered over to the coffee pot. He hesitated as he was reaching for a cup. Leaning closer to the pot, he got a good whiff. He wrinkled his nose as he returned to the fridge and removed a small bottle of orange juice.

"This is probably better for me," he said as he took a seat

across from John. He removed the safety ring and flipped the top off. He took a sip to allow his mouth to adjust to the acidity of the liquid. "I'm still going to need some coffee though. You're going to make a pot as soon as Capt'n' Charlie turns in aren't you?" he asked.

"I thought I'd check the tow first." said John.

"I checked with the Capt'n'." Bob said. "We're still coming out of Victoria bend. The tow ought to be all right for a while. Why don't you wait on the Capt'n' to turn in before heading out. That way, we can get some coffee before you get tied up on the business end of an idiot stick."

It was the first bad decision on this shift, in a series that would lead to disaster. Working the tow is what deck-hands do. Of course they also wash dishes, help the cook and clean the boat. But all of that comes in the time left over from tending the tow. Tow boats push barges up and down the river. That's why they were there. The McNeece normally ran from Little Rock, Arkansas to Baton Rouge Louisiana. On this night she was making one of her rare runs to Paducah Kentucky. She usually pushed eight jumbo barges loaded with anything from rock to grain. On this trip she was hauling dredging equipment back to the company's headquarters.

One barge was loaded down with forty-thousand pounds of fertilizer in eight-hundred, fifty pound, water tight bags. The barges are "wired" together using steel cables half-an-inch thick wrapped around steel posts a foot-and-a-half high at the corners of each barge called turn heads. The cables are then tightened using ratchets attached to turnbuckles. The ratchets handles are steel bars six-feet long, some times called idiot sticks. The name comes as a friendly dig at the

deck-hands. It was explained to John that they're called idiot sticks because when in use, you can find a ratchet at one end of the stick, and an idiot on the other.

When the tow is made up, the cables are tightened until they are as stiff as granite. If you tap a properly tightened wire with a ratchet handle, it will thunk like stone rather than ring like metal. As the tow is pushed through the water, torque works them loose. After just a few miles, the wires will actually sag. Left unchecked, the tow will continue getting looser and sloppier until the unequal loading snaps a coupling. A good part of a deck hand's life is spend on the business end of an idiot stick.

With a little more experience, John might have held out for a quick check of the tow. Stinky wasn't known for going over and above, and John would like to have had an idea as to what kind of shape the tow was in. Still, Bob was in command when the captain was off watch, so John held his piece. "Will we be in the bend much longer?" he asked the pilot.

"We should be clear in about an hour." came the reply. Victoria bend was a narrow turn in the River. Because it was so narrow, the current was fast. With both engines pumping twenty-four thousand horse power into the screws, it still took the McNeece a little more than six hours to run the mile and-a-half upstream against the current. She had nosed into the bend just as John went off watch, and was only now coming out as he was again coming on watch.

John felt a little better about the tow. In the bend for the last six hours, the boat wouldn't have been maneuvering much and the tow wouldn't have gotten much of a work out. For the hour or so that the boat would still be in the bend, it

wouldn't have to make any hard turns, putting stress on the tow. That would give him an hour to get a pot of coffee going and get out on the barges. "I guess I'd better get to the wheelhouse," Bob said. He took another swallow of orange juice, then left the galley.

Captain Charlie heard Bob coming up the stairs. He took a quick glance out the wheelhouse windows. There was little to see. He could make out the tree line, but there was only inky blackness below that point. He couldn't see where the bank was, or anything in the water. He flipped on the huge spotlights for a quick check. The lights can be directed from inside the wheelhouse, and Charlie scanned them over the bank to be sure it was where he thought it was. He then checked the water's surface in the immediate vicinity of the boat. Satisfied, he flipped off the lights and checked the radar.

The display looked much as it had for the last 6 hours. The screen showed an ill shaped, curved "H." It is tempting for the novice to think of the radar as a sort of magic moving map. The reality of late twentieth century technology was somewhat less impressive. Though the image was drawn from an overhead perspective, the information was collected from a line of sight scan. The shorter leg of the "H" was the part of the West river bank that could be seen from the radar's position on top of the wheelhouse. The longer leg was the East bank. As the curve of the river takes each bank out of sight around the bend, the images disappears on the scope. The Queen Mary could be sitting in the middle of the river just a few hundred yards ahead, but not show up on the radar if she was behind trees along a curving bank.

The cross bar of the H was made up of ground clutter in

the vicinity of the boat. The surface of the water was choppy from the current and presented enough reflective surfaces to bounce back the stronger radiation a few tens of yards from the transmitter. The radar was also picking up the front third of the tow. While the radar had serious limitations, it was still a valuable tool when used by skilled pilots like Charlie and Bob.

The navigation buoys marking the navigable channel were topped with radar reflectors and showed up well on the scope. No pilot would try to navigate by radar alone, but in fog or rain radar could make the difference in continuing on or tying up. In a business that measured its operating expenses in millions of dollars per hour, radar paid for itself very quickly.

Satisfied that the immediate area was clear, Charlie stepped back to let Bob slide into the pilot chair. As Bob settled in to the seat, his hands reached out in an unconscious ritual, lightly grasping the "sticks." He didn't feel as though he had taken control until he extended his tactile self to include the boat. He needed to feel her talk to him through his hands on the sticks. To reassure him that all was well, and she was ready to respond to his wishes.

Though the control cabin of boats the size of McNeece are generally referred to as "wheelhouses," tow boats haven't been steered by a wheel in decades. Each of McNeece's twin screws could be rotated independently through three-hundred-sixty degrees. There was a pole running from the top of the control console to the overhead for each screw. A handle protruded from each pole at 90°. When both screws were aimed dead ahead, the handles stuck out straight back. These are the "sticks" that guide the boat. With the ability to

independently steer each screw, and independently apply a range of power from full forward to full reverse, a skilled pilot can actually move a boat sideways.

Charlie took a seat on the bench behind the pilot chair. This is the time when the pilots share information, the man going off watch making sure his replacement knows about anything going on. It also gives the man going off a chance to wind down a little. To reverse the process Bob just went through and draw back in to himself.

Normally Charlie was an animated captain. He constantly pulled on the sticks, making adjustment that were necessary more as an expression of his personality than to guide the tow. And on a six hour watch, he would pour Kilo Watts of his pontification into the ether on the marine bands. Often he would stand next to the pilot for an hour or more after going off watch holding the mike and continuing a conversation with the pilot of some other boat.

Tonight had been hard on Charlie. He had been blocking the bend for more than six hours. Boats behind him also going upstream couldn't enter the bend under these conditions until he got clear. If he lost power, or his tow broke up, a boat down stream would be unable to maneuver out of the way. As a result, they just tied up to the bank. Boats coming down stream also could not enter until Charlie got clear. The current would sweep them through the bend in a little more than a half an hour. But they would have little control, and the river was narrow so they also were tied up waiting on Charlie.

Charlie was not a popular man on the river tonight. Most of the other captains thought that he should have acknowledged that his boat was simply not powerful enough

for the current, and tied up for a day or so until the river went down a little. So Charlie had been deprived of the banter that usually helped him sit in the pilot's chair throughout a watch.

With one avenue of relief gone, Charlie's tension had poured out the only other channel. He had been pulling on the sticks all night, wagging his tow up river. The more he worried the tow, the looser the couplings got. Since his maneuvers were always short, the tow never had time to swing fully one direction. Water pressure kept each barge pushed to the one behind it, and the last barges in the tow up against the push knees of the boat. While Charlie knew the tow was a little sloppy, he didn't understand just how loose those couplings really were.

"I'm going to leave you with it," said Charlie.

"Good night capt'n'," said Bob. "I'll still be here in the morning."

Charlie stepped through the door at the bottom of the stairs into the companion way on the second deck. Usually he would have gone to the galley for a last cup of coffee. Tonight though, he was exhausted. He went straight to his cabin, took a warm shower and hit the bunk.

— — —

John looked at the clock on the galley wall. It was twelve-thirty. He knew the captain often hung around the wheelhouse for an hour or more after going off watch. Still, he was anxious to get out on the tow. At twelve-forty-five he decided to expedite things. He poured a large mug of coffee and headed for the wheelhouse. The captain had his own mug, but John could fill it from the one he was carrying. He'd get permission to start a new pot, then get out on the

tow. Reaching the wheelhouse, John looked around. "Where's the Capt'n?" John asked.

"Dunno," said Bob. "I thought he was in the galley."

"I haven't seen him," said John.

Neither said anything more for a few minutes. John finally broke the silence. "Do you think he turned in?"

"Why don't you check his cabin?" said Bob. It wasn't really a request. It was unlikely that the captain had stepped out on deck and fallen overboard, but on a tow boat you didn't take safety for granted. If someone wasn't where you expected them to be, you took the time to find them. John set the mug of coffee on the oversized arm of the bench at the back of the wheelhouse and took the stairs. He pressed his ear against the captain's door listening. He was prepared to take a peek if he had to, but the captain was known to snore. With a little luck John would be able to confirm the captain's presence with out violating his privacy. He listened for several minutes, trying to decide if the indeterminate sounds were proof of the captains whereabouts. He was about to give up and rap on the door when he finally got a satisfying "snort."

Relieved, he returned to the wheelhouse. "I guess he won't be needing this," he said to Bob as he took the mug of coffee to the port side door of the wheelhouse. He stepped out onto the deck and flung the contents of the cup out into the darkness. Back inside, he checked the indiglo dial of his watch. It was now after one o' clock. "You think I'd better got out on the tow?" he asked the pilot.

Bob was a good pilot. One of his few weakness was an addiction to good coffee. At one o' clock in the morning, sitting in a darkened wheelhouse, Bob really needed the kick

the caffeine would give him. He had been smelling the aroma from the mug John left on the bench. Now the residual smell from the empty cup was almost overpowering. Bob could tell the tow was sloppy and needed attention. That was part of the reason he was so reluctant to let John go. He knew that once John got out on the tow, it would be hours before he got back. He might not get back at all before the watch was over. It was leading Bob to make the same bad decision for the second time that watch. "Go ahead and make a pot of coffee first." he told John. "A few more minutes won't make that much difference.



While John was making the coffee, a mile upstream a party balloon was working its way loose from the tree it had been hung in. A plastic float tied to the end of the string was intended to keep it from getting away. Lettering over the reflective red background declared wishes for a happy fifth birthday. It had blown off of a pontoon boat three days earlier when a gust of wind had blown it from the celebrant's chubby hand. The lady of the hour sucked in a deep breath, ready to give voice to a piercing expression of her grief when her tearing eyes fell on the brightly wrapped package in momma's hands. Birthday presents! The balloon was gone from her mind as though it had never been. The wail of distress turned into a shriek of delight. Dad would have chased down the float, but his attention was on the river ahead, and he was unaware of the escape. Mom, focused on removing packages from a plastic sack also failed to notice the departure.

Lacking the buoyancy to lift the float from the water, the

balloon skated across the surface eventually tangling in a tree at the water's edge. The water had continued to rise for the next three days to record levels. As water rose higher around the spindly trunk of the tree the balloon was hung in, the trunk began to bob up and down in the current. The oscillations had increased with the water level over the last three days until now it was shaking the balloon loose from its grip. The reflective sack slipped from the wet branches and was carried by the current out into the river. It had lost too much helium to get airborne, so it floated on the surface connected to the float by a three foot segment of water logged ribbon. As the river curved away the balloon was carried further out into the river, headed down stream toward the McNeece. Just before it got close enough to be in site of the tow boat, the ribbon snagged on a submerged tree. For just a second momentum carried it almost underwater, then it bobbed back to the surface. Its wet reflective sides were efficient reflectors in wavelengths from the optical range down into radio frequencies. Though it wasn't as tall as the navigation buoys marking the channel, it presented a similar radar cross section.

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Bob was watching the radar as the McNeece came around the bend. He was finally clearing the narrow part of the river and the boat was moving faster over the bottom. Suddenly a blip appeared on the scope. He was looking for a buoy called a Nun. These buoys mark the right side of the channel when headed upstream and were conical at the top. They were painted red, and the ones the coast guard used to mark the river channel also had a red reflector on top so that they could be seen at night.

The blip on Bob's scope showed up a little sooner than he expected it. Still, it was in a logical location. He could see another blip further up the river that must be the next Nun buoy. He was heading a little too far to port so he gently pulled the sticks to starboard. The boat turned more quickly than he expected as the sloppy tow bent back to port. Bob eased off the sticks a little taking a deep breath and letting the adrenaline decrease in his blood. He sure didn't want to bust up his tow by snapping a coupling. Not only does that not look good on a pilot's record, but with a deck-hand out on the tow, it could be deadly. As barges are ripped apart from each other, the half-inch steel cables that hold them together are pulled apart. The ends whip around at supersonic speed, and friction from the individual strands pulled against each other heat the metal past the melting point. Bob had seen tows break up at night. It looked like a fireworks display. He had seen granite boulders on a rock barge busted apart by flying cables. He didn't want to see what would happen to human flesh hit by something like that.

He flipped on the huge spot light and shined it on the tow at the forward coupling. He could see John looking back at him. Bob was about to switch the mike over to the PA and call John back when the deck hand dropped the ratchet handle and started back toward the boat. Apparently the deck hand also realized it was too dangerous out on the tow and was heading back. Bob flipped off the light and began easing the tow to back starboard.

What Bob didn't realize was that John had dropped a glove. He had been unable to find it with his flash light, but when Bob illuminated the tow with the spotlight, John had

seen where it had fallen, about half way back on the barge. John headed back toward the glove. Bob flipped the light off just as John reached it. He retrieved the glove and started back toward the front of the now darkened barge to resume tightening cables.

Bob was growing more uneasy with the situation. He was putting as much pressure as he dared on the tow, trying to get it back in the channel. That buoy just didn't look right on the scope. It seemed to be heading him too far toward the starboard bank. He flipped on the spotlight and aimed it in the direction of the blip. At that distance, he couldn't see the surface of the water, but right where the radar said it should be was a red reflection. He raised the light, trying to see the next buoy, but it must have been too far away. He brought the light back to the spot he first checked. Again, there was the light being reflected from a red reflector.

He wasn't exactly satisfied, but he didn't really have much of a choice, so he flipped the light off and returned his attention to getting the loose tow back on course. As soon as they got in the straights, he'd ease off on the throttle and have John get it tightened up. He'd get Stinky's lazy butt up to help too. Bob was concentrating so hard on navigating he didn't stop to wonder why John hadn't shown up in the wheelhouse.

The picture on the scope was making less sense by the minute. As he continued to starboard, another blip appeared from behind the trees further up the river. He couldn't connect the dots he was seeing into a sensible channel. He flipped on the spotlight again. He could see the red reflection from the closest buoy. Raising the light, he again looked for the next marker. Out in the darkness, he caught a

faint glimpse of green. It didn't make any sense at all. The next marker had to be red. The thought flashed through his mind that he was seeing a buoy further up the river, but even as the idea occurred to him he knew it wasn't right. He brought the light back to the closest buoy. Something wasn't right. The color was off. It was red, but not quite the red it should be.

He suddenly felt hot and cold at the same time as acid poured into his stomach. What ever that was, it wasn't a buoy. Ignoring the bogus contact, the radar image suddenly made perfect sense. He was almost sideways in the channel heading for the east bank at full throttle. Just as his mind grasped the horrible truth, he felt the faint sigh of sand lightly kissing the bottom of the tow boat.

His reaction was as reflexive and mindless as it was wrong. He shoved the sticks hard to port thinking only that the channel was in that direction. Even a well made tow would have had a hard time holding together under such a load. The sloppy mess the McNeece was pushing never had a chance.

Bob watched with stunned fascination as fire danced at the couplings and barges went their separate ways. He became aware of the boats whistle blasting four short bursts in the emergency signal. He was surprised to find his hand on the cord. His mind was racing, trying to figure out where to send the people who would soon be showing up in the wheelhouse.

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John felt the tow move under his feet in an unexpected jerk. Suddenly he felt a low moan raising from the deck. The moan rose to a shriek until there was a sudden bang as the

parting cable ends broke the sound barrier. He saw a fiery orange flash that seemed to pass right through him as he felt a thump. He seemed to be off balance and tumbling. The cable had caught him just below the buttocks. It didn't even slow down as it passed through him. His legs continued to stand for a few seconds then toppled over. His torso had siphoned off enough energy from the cable in the form of angular momentum to lift him into the air and spin him slowly backwards. His arms instinctively whirled counter clockwise, trying to get legs that were no longer attached back beneath him. Nerves in the affected tissue were traumatized into silence. By the time they would recover enough to send searing messages of the horror to his brain, blood loss and shock would shut down his nervous system.

As he sailed weightlessly through the darkness, John tried to figure out where he was. His brain was so fuzzy he couldn't think. It seem as though there was something important he should know, but he couldn't clear his head enough to figure it out. He became distantly aware of cold water on the back of his neck. What did that mean? Why was it so dark and why couldn't he wake up. Was he still in his bunk? Why was there water in his face? A death that was horrible beyond words to see enveloped him with surprising mercy. He slipped gently into his final sleep before pain or fear had a chance to intrude.

— — —

Stinky and the chief appeared in the wheelhouse at the same time, followed closely by the captain. "What's going on?" demanded the captain. "I've busted up the tow." said Bob flatly. He was way past any concerns of how this would look. His career was sunk, but for a few hours yet he still

had some responsibility. There were loose barges being swept down river, and he was going to make sure they didn't do any more damage. He had all ready broadcast a general alert on marine band channel six-teen. A couple of captains down river had come back promising to catch and tie up any barges that came their way.

"Jesus," the captain muttered. "What have we still got?"

"We've still got lines on three barges, and two more are grounded outside the channel." said Bob. "The other three were headed back into the channel last time I saw them."

"How the hell did this happen?"

"I let the radar sucker me out of the channel," said Bob. "Then, when I tried to get back in, those sloppy couplings couldn't take the load." The captain and pilot both glanced at Stinky, but neither said anything to him. Both knew they should have taken action long before now. This was as much their fault for letting him get by with it as it was his for not keeping the tow in good shape.

For his part, Stinky kept quite. He knew he would probably lose his job, but he would be able to get on with another company. Unlike the captain and Bob, this wouldn't ruin his career such as it was.

"OK then," said the captain. "Let's get two of these barges tied to the bank some where, and face up good to the other one so we can start chasing down runaways."

The square front of a tow boat isn't designed for speed through the water. The powerful engines can actually push the nose of a boat underwater if it's not tied, or faced up, to a barge. The fastest way for a tow boat to travel is faced up to a single barge. The barge will also give the deck hands more

room to move around while trying to wrangle in the errant barges.

The captain was debating about taking the pilot's seat, but decided that at the moment Bob probably was in a better position to know where to find the runaway barges. Having decided to leave Bob at the helm, he turned his attention to the rest of the crew. "Where's Frank and John?" he asked. He glanced back to Bob and saw the sudden look of concern come over his face. "He wasn't on the tow was he?" asked the captain.

"I saw him come off." insisted Bob.

The captain grabbed the mike, and flipped it over to PA. "John," his voice boomed over the boat. "Come to the wheelhouse now." He replaced the mike and turned to the chief. "Get Frank's ass out of the bunk. You man the weather deck and get Frank and the boys out on the barge. Break out the radios so we can stay in touch."

The chief left, heading for Frank's cabin aft the engine room. He stopped at his station in the engine room and pulled three hand held radio's out of a locker. He flipped them all on and did a radio check with Bob as he went to Frank's cabin. He rapped on the door and was surprised to hear Frank's voice come from the other side of the companion way.

"I'm in here." Frank groaned. "I can't get off the pot."

The chief poked his head through the door, then quickly pulled it back. "Damn!" exclaimed the chief. "What crawled up your ass and died?"

"My guts are killing me." whimpered Frank.

"Well, your going to have to hold it for a while." said the chief. "We've got problems."

The radio crackled. "Chief," came Bob's voice through the radio. "Have you seen John?"

"Negative," the chief replied. "I haven't seen him."

"Check the boat and see if he's aboard." came Bob's worried reply.

The chief stuck his head back through the door. "Come on Frank. We've got a man to look for."

"I don't think I can get off the pot," Frank whined.

The chief was unaware of the reason for Frank's distress. Frank worked for the chief. As aggravated as the chief got at Frank, he felt a responsibility for him, and he wouldn't have gone along with the prank. While it was obvious that Frank was really having trouble, he assumed that Frank was milking it, trying to get out of work. Tonight there just wasn't time for to put up with Frank's procrastinating.

"Get your pants up and get your ass on deck!" the chief roared.

Frank hastily pulled up his pants as the chief handed him a radio. The chief stepped through the door into the galley with Frank on his heels. Seeing that John wasn't in the galley, he pointed to the port side door which led to the narrow deck that ran down the side of the boat. "You take the port side, I'll take starboard. We'll meet on the bow," he told Frank.

Frank waddled out the door, knees together and bent over. Out on the narrow port side deck, he looked aft. He knew he should go all the way to the stern, but he was afraid that too much walking might make him soil himself. He decided to head straight for the bow, There was another head there and he all ready felt like he was going to need it. He took a few steps, then felt something leaking into his pants. He stopped

and grabbed the rail as he tried to keep himself dry. As he stood there holding the railing and clenching his rear something in the water caught his eye. He pulled the flashlight out of his back pocket and shined it out on the water. His eyes bulged as recognized a life jacket. There was something in it. "Man overboard, port side!" he screamed into the radio.

Immediately the engines dropped in pitch as the pilot chopped the throttles. With the engines idling the danger of sucking the man in the water under the boat and into the screws was gone, but Frank still had to try and get him back onboard. He grabbed a long gaff pole from it's hooks on the bulkhead behind him and began trying to reach the floating figure. He laid on the deck and, holding the rail stanchion with one hand, reached as far as he could with the gaff pole. He managed to get the hook on the end of the pole through the loop on the back of the life jacket just as the chief came through the galley door onto the deck behind him.

"You got him!" the chief said excitedly.

The back end of the pole kept hitting the side of the boat as Frank tried to pull the floating form in. Seeing this, the chief took the pole and backed down the deck, "I'll bring him to you." the chief said. "You just grab him when I get him along side." As the jacketed form got closer, Frank could see it was John. He was was face down in the water with his arms floating limply at his side. Frank realized he was going to have to get John's face out of the water, but the gaff pole was holding him in that position.

"I've got him," he told the chief, as he disengaged the hook from the life jacket. Still laying on the deck, Frank took a hold of the life jacket with his left hand and reached

underwater with his right, trying to grab John's belt loop. He couldn't reach the loop under the life jacket so he decided to just grab anyplace he could. He needed to get John on his back and see if he was breathing. Grabbing John's crotch, he rolled him back. Frank was surprised at how easily John rolled. His first glance at John's paper white face with open mouth and staring eyes shook Frank pretty badly. When his gaze fell on the gaping wounds on either side of Frank's hands, where John's legs should have been, he completely lost control.

Emptying his bowels on one end and his stomach from the other, Frank released the fearful thing in his hands and desperately crabbed backwards away from it. His screams of horror were muffled by vomit.

"Don't drop him!" the chief hollered. He dropped the gaff pole and fell to his knees trying to grab John's body as it came floating past. Getting his first look, the chief almost repeated Frank's reaction. He did manage to hang on and pulled what was left of John on deck just as the captain approached from forward.

The captain's hands shook as he took the radio from the chief. "Bob," he said, voice quavering. "forget the barges. We've got a dead man here. Head for .." He stopped as he tried to think of the closest landing.

"Rosedale harbor is ten miles back." came Bob's voice on the radio.

They had passed Rosedale harbor almost eight hours ago. Now, with the current working with them instead of against them, they could be back there in a little more than an hour.

"OK then," said the captain weakly. "Rosedale harbor."

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Of the eight barges McNeece had been pushing, two were grounded immediately after the accident. The dropping water eventually left them hard aground, waiting for the salvage crew. Two of the three still attached to McNeece were tied up along the bank and were also later recovered by salvage crews. The fourth was kept faced up to McNeece and accompanied her home. Two more were swept back through Victoria bend and later recovered by boats down stream. The last barge, carrying the unusual cargo of two human legs and forty-thousand pounds of fertilizer took a different path. It was swept well out of the channel above the bend, but somehow missed the sandbars and mud flats. The water at record high, carried it behind a hill along the bank that was usually 20 feet above the river. A small tree at the mouth of the inlet was pushed under by the passing barge, then popped back up effectively hiding it.

The McNeece, occupied with other problems never looked for it. By the time the towing company sent salvage crews out, the barge was aground, twenty-feet up the bank, behind a hill, three miles further upriver than anyone expected it to be. The towing company filed a claim and left the problem to the insurance company. The insurance company expected the barge to eventually be found by a towboat. As the weeks passed and there was no sign of it, they assumed that it must have sunk. The fertilizer would have been ruined, and the barge didn't represent enough value in scrap metal to be worth searching for, so they just

wrote it off as a loss. Vines and creepers grew up around the metal structure. Eventually spindly trees flanked it and it became a thing of the land.