

Wind, Rain, and a Face in the Palmettos

By Ken Cable

He stared at us from out of a forest of thrashing palmettos that lined the Okinawan shoreline at the edge of the East China Sea at a place called Machinato. Typhoon-driven rain alternately revealed and obscured his child face.

It was late October, 1950, deep into typhoon season in the Northwest Pacific Ocean. World War II had ended only five years before and the Korean War had just come to savage life months earlier. Machinato, a fierce and bloody battlefield in the fight for Okinawa five years before, was now the site of a U.S. Army Signal Corps supply unit at which I arrived in May, six weeks before the North Korean army surged across the 38th parallel plunging the United States into yet another war.

The 8112th Signal Supply Depot was situated on a hill a mile or so away from our Company Headquarters. Our barracks at the supply depot consisted of two rows of Quonset huts, five in each row, lined up parallel to the road that ran along the coast. My hut was in the middle of the row closest to the road, one end facing the sea.

When I arrived at the depot, all was quiet in the world. The U.S. Army had all but disbanded globally except for outposts here and there like the one to which I was assigned. On arrival, I was issued a khaki uniform, boots and army tennis shoes – and a pith helmet. We were warned against all the health pitfalls that awaited military personnel around the world and told especially not to go out in the summer sun without our pith helmets. Sunstroke. Oh, and by the way, there were occasional typhoons.

Hurricanes are called typhoons in the northwest Pacific Ocean. They differ in name only. The Japanese island of Okinawa lies in the Ryukyu Island chain southwest of Japan, framed on the east by the Pacific Ocean and the west by the China Sea. During my two years on Okinawa the island was struck by five typhoons. Some hits were direct; others were glancing blows. All of them were wildly exciting. My first was Clara. Big storms worldwide were all given ladies' names in those days.

Typhoon Clara slammed ashore in late October 1950 – and then slowed to a crawl. Because of her intensity all operations were shut down and we were hunkered down in our Quonset Huts.

Unable to get to the mess hall, we were issued enough C-rations for several days and ordered not to go out of our quarters except to the latrine. A rope was strung along the company street along which one pulled himself to this important facility.

Typhoons and hurricanes spin counter-clockwise in the northern hemisphere. (They whirl clockwise below the equator). When Clara first struck, the wind battered the east end of our hut allowing us to open the door facing the sea (this would change as the storm crept along so that later we couldn't open the seaward door). On about the second day, some of us were looking out at the storm-tossed sea through the open door when one of the guys spotted the kid's face in the palmettos across the road.

One of the tragedies spawned by the battle for Okinawa just five years before was the number of children suddenly orphaned by the war. We were briefed about these wild children but I never saw one until that day in the storm.

When the battle for Okinawa ended in mid-June, 1945, the devastation on the island was complete. The wreckage included more than 95 percent of all buildings destroyed. Most trees were gone, ancient castles were reduced to rubble, and villages were shattered. War wreckage – sunken and beached ships, destroyed tanks, landing craft, trucks and aircraft – littered the island. Americans suffered 50,000 casualties with 12,000 killed. The Japanese lost more than 100,000 troops. Civilian casualties numbered several hundred thousand – and thousands of those were suicides.

In the chaos, children of all ages, including infants, were left to fend for themselves. Once, while another guy and I were exploring the terrain near our company, we found a hidden camp with a small cardboard shelter. In it was a tattered mat, some empty ration cans and a small pot, but no kids. They undoubtedly had heard us coming and faded into the undergrowth.

Our child in the typhoon had to be a baby when the battle ended. My conclusion was that he was cared for by siblings and other children as they fled into the countryside forming a shadow society of orphaned kids hiding from the feared Americans, scavenging through the wreckage of war to survive. It was clear to me that our young survivor was watching us under the cover of the storm for just such an opportunity.

Our intention to rescue (capture) this child in the palmettos was formed quickly. We knew that if we tried to approach him directly he would run away. Instead the rescue party (two men) slipped out the other end of the hut, made their way to a point beyond where the boy was watching us, crossed the road into the palmettos and grabbed him before he could run. They brought him, struggling and frightened into our Quonset hut. We thought him to be no more than six years old, maybe only five.

We fed him two cans of bully beef and two half-moon lemon drops from our C-rations. He ate it all. Somewhere in our hut we found a small shirt and pants to replace his ragged clothes. Night was falling and we decided to keep him overnight and then try to get him placed somewhere when the storm abated.

“Pop” Green was a 48-year-old perennial private. His advanced age earned him his title and his addiction to the bottle made his rank permanent. His bunk at the end of our hut was often empty as he would be AWOL and drunk somewhere in a village unable to

get back to barracks. And so it was that he was away during this typhoon giving us a bunk for our storm waif.

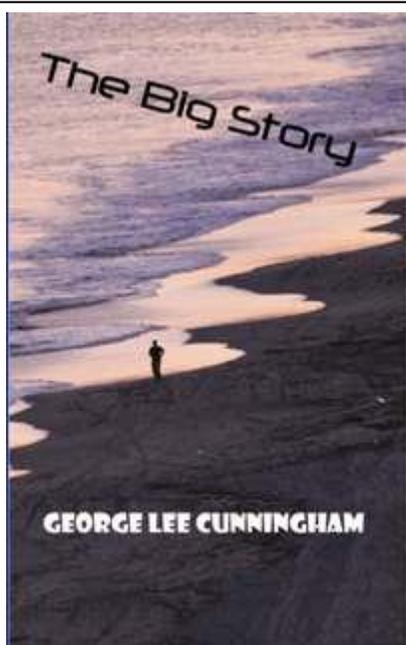
Our visitor did not speak or make a sound all the while he was with us. All of us could, by now, ask “what is your name” in Japanese. Our little friend did not respond. His only reaction was the fear of us we could read in his eyes.

The shriek of the wind continued unabated through the night. On waking in the grey dawn we discovered our guest was gone, his borrowed clothes lay on Private Green’s bunk. His rags, hung to dry on his mosquito net, and two C-rations went with him into the wild night.

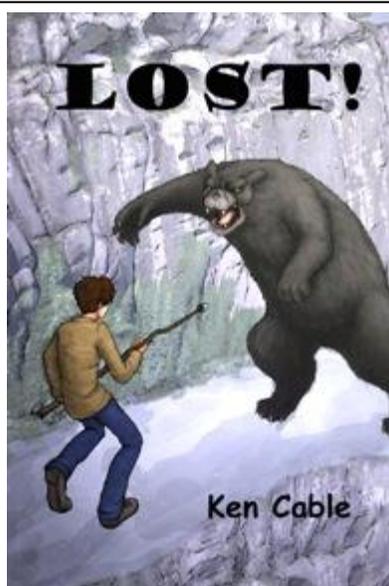
Okinawa is a different world today. Freeways and tall buildings, commerce and peace have converted the disaster of that forlorn island into a thriving society. A declining number of Okinawans remain who remember that sad genesis of their renewal.

I often wonder if our storm child is among them.

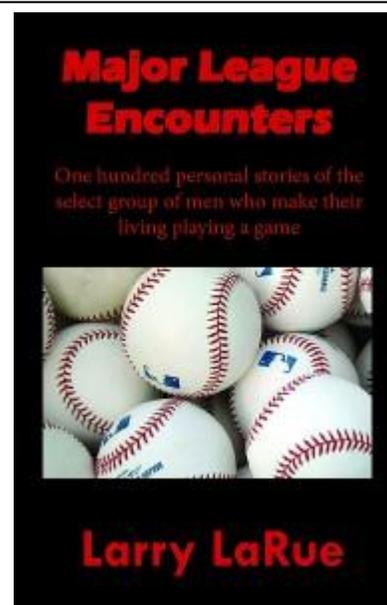
Ken Cable is a nature and travel writer, whose novel of survival about three young boys lost in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, is a return to the young adventure novels of the past. The novel follows the boys as they struggle to keep from freezing, find food, and find a way to fight off a rogue bear who is not sympathetic to their plight. The novel, set in the '70s, is about three real boys – Cable’s two sons and his nephew. The story is made up.



A hard drinking reporter has to decide whether to keep chasing his big story or to make his bosses happy, rekindle the flame with his ex-wife, and be a responsible adult. Guess what he chooses. Mobsters, corrupt police, sissy editors, and the body of a nude girl on the beach. What more could you ask for?



Three boys – trapped in an early summer snow storm – struggle to survive in California’s Sierra Nevada mountains. This story by author Ken Cable marks a return to the traditional youth story – with the focus on adventure rather than social or political issue. The book – set in 1970 – follows the boys as they learn to deal with cold, hunger and a rogue bear in order to stay alive.



Author Larry LaRue gives an inside look at the world of Major League Baseball as he relates 100 personal encounters with the men who make their living playing a game. LaRue, who spent more than 30 years writing about a sport that he loves, tells tales that are sometimes inspiring, sometimes heartbreaking, and often very funny. This book is both easy to read and hard to put down.