

## ***It's just some little old man!***

*A beer bottle sails past Uncle Paul's head and lands in the yard next to him with a hollow thud! **What the...?!?***

*It's summertime. It's warm, the birds are singing and it's that easy time of late afternoon when everything is right with the world...almost.*

*A few teenagers are busily entertaining themselves on the other side of the fence. The peace and tranquility of the back yard is gone. In its place is the loud, primal beat*

*of rap music and the raised voices of young men attempting to scream obscenities at each other. The noise of a car radio turned up way past its capabilities is earsplitting.*

*From the sounds of it, much alcohol has already been consumed. Most of the pack of youngsters are getting rowdy. The sharp sound of another beer bottle hitting the parking lot shatters the afternoon stillness and a new barrage of insults are loudly traded...fueled on by liquid courage.*

*This is not a courteous bunch.*

*by  
Jim Cann*

Uncle Paul has been enjoying a quiet life since retiring. He has worked long and hard and is savoring the fruits of his many labors.

He and his lovely bride of fifty years have built a nice, comfortable life for themselves. Since both are no longer working, Jean and Paul entertain themselves with world cruises, family gatherings, volunteering, their dog and many, many outside interests. Paul reads, keeps up with world events, enjoys making woodworking projects and he casts and paints miniature lead soldiers.

Uncle Paul has a very nice home and he derives much satisfaction from working in his yard. He keeps his lawn nicely manicured and does not take kindly to rude people using it as a *wastebasket!*

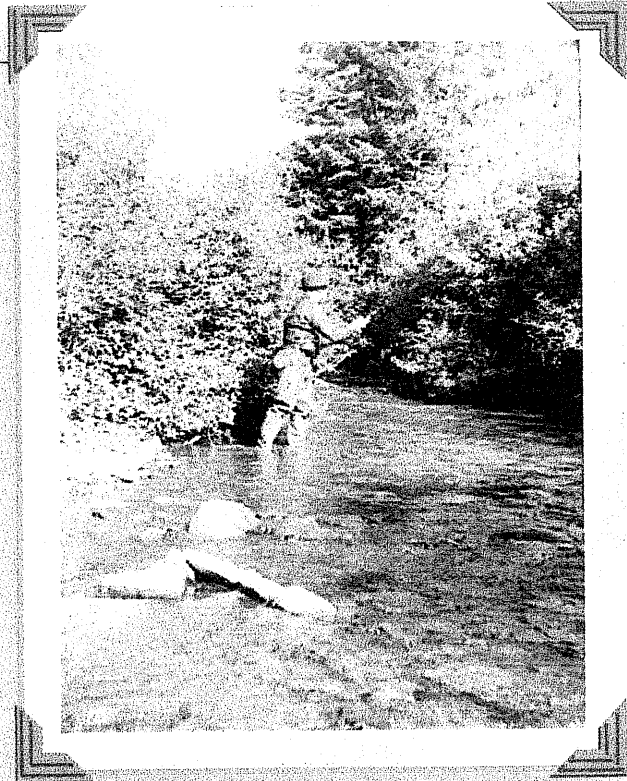
The empty beer bottle flies *back* across the fence, lands on the roof of their car and startles the boys. Uncle Paul is neither a pushover *nor* a bad shot.

Angry words are spoken and ugly threats are exchanged. Someone offers to come on over the fence...and someone else invites them to do just that. Unseen tempers flare and the first boy starts scaling the fence from one side as Uncle Paul prepares for battle on the other.

As the boy's head clears the top of the barricade, his eyes widen in surprise at the sight of his...*seventy-five year old adversary!* The boy's jaw drops open and he halts in his tracks. As Uncle Paul approaches the fence with *both* a shovel in-hand *and* bad intent, the beginner alcoholic turns to his friends and says: "*Forget it. It's just some little old man!*".

The boys pack up and leave in a cloud of squealing rubber and in a sea of loud music ... honoring Paul with plenty of vile screaming and the one-fingered salute.

Uncle Paul is left standing in confusion and disbelief: "Old man? *WHAT* old man?? I don't see any old man around here, who are they talking about? *WHAT OLD MAN??!*" It's hell getting old, *especially* for an old soldier.



*Trout fishing in Sweetwater, Colorado circa 1935*

Uncle Paul was born in Colorado in 1918.

He grew up in Colorado Springs during the hard years of the Great Depression, when no one had much of anything. The times were tough and so were the people living in them. You grew up learning how to fight. The kids were just as mean and nasty as their parents. School recesses were more outdoor brawls than they were pleasant respites from studies.

Paul's father was a tough old buzzard who could fight and drink with equal skill. Besides being good with his fists, he worked ten hours a day, six days a week at two jobs. The family lived on his earnings of sixty dollars a month.

Young Paul was an avid outdoorsman and an accomplished athlete in his high school years. He was tough and lean, playing football, boxing and getting into his share of brawls. He spent many days up in the Rocky Mountains hunting, trapping and fishing. Often was the time that the family dined on wild game that Uncle Paul brought back from his hunting trips. He developed into a crack shot with a rifle. The cost of ammunition prohibited the luxury of shooting at something and missing it. There was no room for waste during the Depression.

With no work available in Colorado and with finances getting progressively worse, young Paul decided that his best bet was to join the Service. With the dual lure of adventure and a steady paycheck, he went to the U.S. Navy recruiter's office to sign up and get out of the depressed conditions that were around him. He didn't get far, though...the Navy rejected him, saying that his eyesight wasn't up to par. Sorry, Pal, you aren't good enough.

The recruiter knew Paul's story and knew how badly he needed some decent income. He asked Paul to come back the next day to talk to a fellow from Australia who "might be able to help him find work".

The man was large and rough. He talked in a very deep voice and carried himself with extreme confidence. The Australian was in search of recruits himself, but for a much different sort of assignment. The man was here to recruit *mercenaries!*

This was 1937, four years before Pearl Harbor. America had not entered into any hostilities, at this point, and Congress was staying away from anything of the sort, officially or otherwise.

The Australian was here recruiting hired guns to go to Asia to resist Japanese infiltration of the Chinese mainland. The man was in Colorado looking for tough-ass, hard-fighting and straight-shooting mountain boys. He had found just what he was looking for in Uncle Paul.

The two adjourned to the openness of the barren prairie outside of town for a little job interview. After a shooting demonstration for the Australian and a fist fight *with* him, it was determined that Paul had the right stuff. He was offered a job on the spot and promptly accepted. The pay would be one hundred dollars a month and the checks would be sent directly to Paul's mother at home. The pay was wonderful, but the work was hell.

At an time when most young men his age would be dreaming of going to the prom...or hanging out throwing beer bottles into peoples' yards... Uncle Paul was on his way halfway around the world to hunt down and kill men for a living. At the tender age of seventeen, travel and adventure were soon to be his.



*Paul (right) on South Pacific beachhead with friends.*

Paul told family and friends that he would be away working on the Hoover Dam project and that he'd have his checks sent directly home. He could not reveal his true livelihood because *total* secrecy was required. *No one* could know! It would **not** do to have anyone know that there were American mercenaries active in Asia, or anywhere else for that matter. Besides being totally illegal, the ramifications of being caught or discovered were international in scope. War was brewing worldwide and America did not want to be involved.

Paul had to assume a false name and leave any personal effects behind. His real name and identity were not to appear on anything. There must be no evidence or ties to the fact that he was an American. No wallet, no drivers license, no pictures of Mom, no letters from home. None of the rest of the group of eleven other newly hired guns knew anybody else's histories or names, either. They all had false names, too. If one of them were to be killed, his body would have to lie where it fell and no one would ever know his whereabouts, or his fate, including Paul.

Travel wasn't what it is now and a trip around the world was an adventure in itself in 1937. The group made it to mainland China and got its way up into the interior without loss of life.

Uncle Paul's first incident as a mercenary came shortly after the group had set up camp. A Japanese gunboat had been discovered in the river, exploring the territory for future invasion. The Chinese warlords had hired the mercenaries to eliminate any Japanese that entered their territory, and the gunboat was doing just that. It was *showtime!*

The mercenaries were provided with equipment including a Chinese Junk, a nondescript sailing boat quite common in those waters. There was nothing unusual about a Junk in that river...except its cargo.

For his initial foray into action, Uncle Paul was to be hidden down in the hold as the Junk pulled alongside of the Japanese gunboat. As it happened, the decks were empty, except for a lone guard who came over to the rail to investigate. That was the last thing he would do.

The guard peered down into the darkness of the hold where Uncle Paul lie hidden under a tarp with a rifle. Paul drew a bead on his head as the Japanese attempted to sound a warning to his compatriots. As he started to yell, Paul put a bullet up through the roof of his mouth, blowing his brains out. The top of his head blew off and the impact of the shot threw him against the bulkhead. The lifeless body bounced back toward the railing and rolled overboard into the hold of the Junk... right onto Paul! The Japanese's brains flowed out into his lap and the whole scene was covered in blood. The pay was great, but the work is hell.

The other mercenaries swarmed the Jap gunboat and dispatched all of the soldiers on board. All of the bodies were weighted down and sent to the bottom of the river without fanfare. The warlord took control of the gunboat and the mercenaries returned to their camp to await their next action. Just another day at work.

This went on for eleven months before the rigors of killing and warfare caught up with Paul and he felt the need to get into a new line of work. You can only press your luck just so far. Paul had personally killed forty-two men and he was homesick. He was tired of it and he came home. The money wasn't worth it.



*Picture sent home to Aunt Jean in 1943.  
She still carries it in her wallet.*

After his return to normal life in Colorado, Paul held three jobs to make ends meet. He also played professional hockey, won a Golden Gloves title and became a professional prize fighter, winning forty-three bouts out of forty-four, 38 by knockouts.

For extra money, Paul and his cousin would ride the ore train up into the mountains to fistfight for bets in the mining towns. They'd go into bars and his cousin would talk up the action and hold the bets

while Paul would do the fighting. It was a rough life and Uncle Paul was willing to do whatever it took to stay ahead...until Pearl Harbor brought America into the war.

Uncle Paul enlisted in the Army. His eyes were just fine, this time. The recruiters weren't quite as picky as they were a couple of years earlier. He could tell everyone where he was going, this time. He was rushed through basic training and shipped off to the South Pacific...to fight the Japanese, again! No one knew of his previous experience, of course, and Paul decided to keep that little secret to himself.

Within a half-hour of his first combat landing, Paul saw his first action as a regular soldier. He came ashore after the first waves of combat soldiers landed, and had the duty of setting up the radios and establishing communications. This suited Paul just fine, since he was already tired of combat and killing after his experiences in China. This was much safer. This wasn't bad.

A group of men were standing around on the beach, discussing where to set up the radios, when a shot rang out and the Officer standing next to Paul had his shoulder ripped off by a Jap bullet. Without thinking, Paul grabbed his rifle and shot the sniper out of a distant palm tree with a single shot. Boom! Gone. Dead.



Uncle Paul, November, 1943

Unfortunately, a Colonel saw what Paul had done and came over to congratulate him on a fine shot. When it was reported to the officer that the sniper had been shot through the head at that distance, The Colonel 'promoted' Paul to leader of the sniper hunters. Now, instead of coming ashore on the safer boats carrying the radio equipment, Uncle Paul was on the first landing crafts hitting the beach. This was *not* a healthy place to be when they opened the door and everybody on the beach is trying to shoot you with everything that they've got. Some 'promotion'!

Things went from bad to worse, at this point, and the fighting took on a whole new meaning for Uncle Paul. He thought that he had avoided the violence, brutality and killing from before, only to find himself facing it once again. Now, the war became an up-close and personal experience once again. Although he was good at it, Uncle Paul did not look forward to killing Japanese, or anyone else, for the next portion of his life. He didn't know *IF* he'd have a life, *if* he'd ever get back home or *if* the war would ever end. It was kill, or be killed. There was no guarantee that he'd live another day, *ever*.

The war continued like that for Uncle Paul for the duration of the hostilities, which amounted to not months, but years!

Paul made *sixty-three combat landings*, each as difficult as the last, each with the distinct possibility that it could be his last day on earth.

The mortality rate for guys coming ashore on the first wave, as was Paul's lot, was in the ninety percent range. Nine out of ten guys coming in on the first landing crafts were killed. You didn't keep buddies around long. You were lucky to get out of that alive yourself.

Every landing was the same: Get shot at, and shoot back.

Paul saw every atrocity imaginable and then some. He killed an additional thirty-three Japanese soldiers as a sniper hunter, getting shot up and repeatedly wounded in the process.

Once in New Guinea, Paul and four other GIs got left behind to fend for themselves against a swarm of Japanese soldiers counterattacking a beach that they'd just taken. They were left alone, so they jumped into a Jap machine gun nest that they'd already taken, and turned the guns on their former owners. They fought off hundreds of attackers for eight hours, before being rescued by friendly reinforcements. The body count in front of the bunker was over three hundred dead. Paul's share of the kill was another sixty men, all intent on killing him first. Kill, or be killed.

Between the time that he'd graduated high school and the end of the war, Uncle Paul had personally extinguished the lights of one hundred and thirty-five people. This is *not* the kind of a guy with whom you'd want to pick a fight.

Paul went on to serve Occupation Duty in Japan after the war and was finally discharged. He married his pen pal and settled into a much quieter life in the Midwest. He went to school and got a job as an accountant. He became part of an extended family and tried to get on with life and to forget all that he'd seen and been through in the killing fields. He wanted to leave all of the violence and bloodshed behind. All he wanted to do was to live quietly.

Paul has a wall full of Combat decorations and medals, including three Purple Hearts. This man is a genuine war hero who wants to be left alone. Let others do the killing and the fighting, Paul is tired of it.

You'd think that this would be the *last* guy that you'd want to throw beer bottles into his yard and challenge to a brawl, even at seventy-five years of age?

Of course, the boys had no clue who they were dealing with. Even if they *did* know the story, they'd *still* be clueless. Ego would stand in the way of logic and reason.

These wannabe bad asses wouldn't consider that they owed this gentleman a great debt. If it weren't for Uncle Paul and others like him, these rowdy boys might be bowing to the Emperor, or speaking German.

We *all* owe a great debt to Uncle Paul, and to the other members of the Great Generation, for making the world safe for Democracy. The world would be a much different place without brave men like Uncle Paul putting his life on the line to stop aggression against freedom. He and his generation are entitled to all the respect and thanks that can be bestowed on them. Without the sacrifice of those who went before them, these teens wouldn't have the option of hanging around parking lots in their mom's car, drinking beer and hassling retirees.

Youth is wasted on the young. Had Uncle Paul retained some of his youthful vigor, he would have undoubtedly gone over the fence after the boys and shown them the error of their ways. As it is, Paul's youthful years are behind him, now. He has exchanged physical prowess for wisdom and knowledge. The exuberance of youth gives way to the knowing of old age. Fighting and killing give way to the easy chair. Time marches on.

That is the way of life.



*Uncle Paul, Jean and Clancy at home*

Learning to live within the limitations of old age is every bit as difficult for Uncle Paul as was traveling halfway around the world to go to war as a teenager. Facing loss of independence in old age is every bit as scary and requires as much courage as facing an armed enemy in the jungles of some far and remote South Pacific island. There are challenges at every age. How we face those challenges and how we deal with them is what makes us who we are.

Instead of discounting Uncle Paul as an unworthy

opponent, these young men would have been better served by honoring him and seeking his wisdom. Instead of littering his yard and insulting him, the boys would have been further ahead in their development by sitting respectfully at Paul's feet and learning from him. Uncle Paul has surely forgotten more than these boys know.

Until you walk a mile in another man's combat boots, you'll never begin to know who he is.

Perhaps, it is a good thing that the boys stayed on their side of the fence. They might have had to learn a rather unpleasant lesson about the capabilities of some senior citizens. Another sort of lesson could be learned from showing respect and empathy for Uncle Paul, and for all of the other Uncle Pauls out there. Our fathers, uncles and grandfathers have much to share.

Respect your elders! Be kind. Listen to them and learn from them. Treat them with kindness and compassion for they deserve your respect, you don't deserve theirs. Honor these gentlemen for who they are and what they have done to make this world a better place. Many of them have died to insure your peace. The cost of freedom is high and Uncle Paul has paid that price, and *continues* to pay the price. We owe him so much for his brave and unselfish efforts. Uncle Paul is a genuine Hero *...he is NOT just some little old man!*