

Major Sheldon's Last Watt

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When the major burst into my backcountry general store that night, in possession of his rifle but not his dog, I knew something was up. His face was stubbled and anxious, his silver hair ruffled. The confident manner was gone. He closed the door, then froze with his hand on the knob, gazing through the window.

"Damn bears," he mumbled.

I thought I detected a touch of fear in his voice.

At the time, I assumed he was referring only to Mork and Orson, a pair of tourist-pleasing California black bears who'd adopted our rural community. This was back in 2015, the same year dozens of them had invaded Three Rivers, some ten miles to the west.

In the brightly illuminated parking lot I could see Mork nosing my bear-proof dumpster for the thousandth time. Orson was up on two legs beside the porch, shaking an oak branch. A few acorns rained on his shaggy head.

I dropped the bills I'd been counting.

"Bears? What else is new? They're all over Tulare county. And by the way, Ed, you look like hell."

He turned toward me, defeated, easing his rifle to the floor.

"All I wanted was to bag a few quail, Bill. Eat dinner, work a little DX, then go to bed."

I rolled the cash drawer back in, wondering why Ed hadn't mentioned he'd be up this weekend.

Major Ed Sheldon (U.S. Army, retired, '06) and his wife, Pam, owned a small cabin at the end of a dirt road several miles to the south. Though the cabin's exterior was storybook, its

interior was strictly man-cave. Once Ed had added the final touches—fifty foot tower, antennas for 40 through 6, and an intimidating wall of radio gear in the spare bedroom—he and I both knew Pam would capitulate. It was the place he'd be going to get away. From everything.

Yet he rarely went solo. More often than not I'd be invited, too, heading up the hill on Friday evenings after securing the store.

Ed and I had been best friends for thirty years, even predating Pam. We were of a rare breed: avid hunters of both wild fowl and weak RF. We'd take his Wrangler and his dog up-country all day, then tune the low end of 20 and 40 meters at night. By Sunday morning both of us would resemble cold road-kill, like Ed did now.

But this time it was different.

As I came out from behind the counter, I got a good look at his jacket, which bore deep gashes across one sleeve. Didn't look like a case of blackberry snag.

"Since when do you hunt alone, Ed? Where's Chloe?" Chloe was Ed's affable lab, new at the game and small for her age but a quick study. Point, flush, shoot, retrieve. She never tired of it.

"She's disappeared," he said. "I'm worried I might never see her again."

I couldn't imagine the major without his constant companion.

"Sorry, Ed."

I put a hand on his shoulder.

"Let's get you into a chair. I'll pour some coffee."

I steered him toward a scarred wooden table in the store's tiny dining area. My vintage Grindmaster was still glowing, so I had a steaming mug in front of him in no time. I didn't need to be reminded about the two sugars.

Ed sighed as he sat down. He lay his rifle on the table, safety on, then reached for the mug with two hands and took a tentative sip.

Before he could speak, a crescendo of engine noise began building as a group of bikers rounded a hairpin turn on 198 on their way back to the valley. I counted at least thirty headlamps. Though I depended on the revenue from riding clubs, I was relieved this group wasn't stopping for supplies.

"Are they gone?" Ed asked, eyes closed. He had a low tolerance for both bikers and bears.

"Yeah. There'll be more."

He leaned back in his chair, opened his eyes, and gave me a blank stare.

"I'm really sorry I didn't call you. Stock market took a bit of a dive two days ago. You know how Pam worries."

Translation: he needed some alone-time.

Ed and Pam had ploughed their savings into index funds at the lowest point of the Great Recession. They'd ridden the subsequent wave, which nicely supplemented Ed's pension. Now both could indulge their passions—Pam's for travel, Ed's for a piece of land in the southern Sierras and the latest in tech. A recent addition was his lightweight shotgun, a Benelli 28-gauge. I'd done the research on this gem in exchange for shooting it now and then.

"Good thing Pam's not into bitcoin," I said, trying to cheer him up. It didn't. He dropped his chin and glared at me beneath salt-and-pepper brows.

Despite the volatile market, I knew he wasn't hurting. And I was grateful for his willingness to share his toys.

Another example: he'd spared no expense on the cabin's ham gear, including a legal-limit amp, high-end station controller, and matching

laptops for our two-op contest efforts. Best of all, in my book, were the solar panels blanketing the roof; these were Ed's way of weaning the country off imported oil. The panels fed a bank of heavy marine batteries. Now we could be fully off the grid, even at 1500 watts out.

Ed cranked it beyond the limit, occasionally, after we split a bottle of anything red. This was perhaps his biggest vice. Any subsequent discussion of politics could boost his voice right off the bar graph, too. No need for speech compression.

Rather than point out these minor transgressions, I'd get even. When my turn came, I'd switch off the amp, back the drive down to a few watts, and try to work the same DX. He always toasted my success, though I could still picture *Life's Too Short for QRP* stenciled on his tanned forehead.

Finally, Ed crossed his arms, a clue he was ready to start talking. I leaned in, anxious to learn what could have shaken him so badly.

"I took Pam out for breakfast yesterday in SLO"—San Luis Obispo—"then got up here in record time. Chloe was just as eager to get out of town as me. By the time we pulled into Three Rivers, she'd smelled bear and was whining to get out."

"You didn't let her, of course."

"No sense stirring up the locals."

"Check. So when you got to the cabin, was everything OK?"

"Everything was not."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Orson out on the road, shuffling on two feet like a zombie, relieving willing motorists of their snack food. In exchange, he'd pose for snaps. Mork, the more timid of the pair, was investigating Ed's Jeep, vectored in at a forty-five with no regard for marked spaces. There was something odd about the Jeep I just couldn't put a finger on.

"I'm all ears," I said. "What'd you find?"

Ed sat up straight. His voice had become more animated. A bit of caffeine made the major a formidable storyteller.

"First thing I notice is that the exterior lights are off. They're on a timer, and I know for sure my deep-cycle batteries are charged."

"Suspicious."

"Truly. So I park at tactical distance from the cabin, next to Pam's once-and-future vegetable garden, then kill the jeep and unpack the Benelli. I spent enough time in the Green Zone in Baghdad to develop a sixth sense about things being too quiet."

"But that's another story."

He rolled his eyes.

"Yes, Bill. Remind me later. At any rate, I can't hear anything but the wind, so I grab a flashlight from the glove compartment and prepare to reconnoiter the battery shed. East side of the cabin, remember?"

"Uh-huh. Well-fortified."

He paused, aware I was teasing him. He'd rushed that particular project in an effort to make it water-tight before contest season started.

"Not fortified enough. The entire roof and front wall had been torn off."

"Oak tree above, no doubt."

He raised his chin.

"Who's telling this story, you me?"

"Sorry." I gestured for him to continue.

"It was a very big oak tree, thank you. A bear smorgasbord. I'm sure the shingles on the shed were full of acorns, some of which fell into the battery pack. Bears shoved the batteries around to get at them, severing the inverter's input cable. No way I could fix it without tools. So I headed for the front door."

"Was that breached, too?"

"Thankfully not," he said through another mouthful of coffee. "Now I'm inside the cabin, where everything looks normal. It's freezing inside, though. So I turn on the gas heater, which has an old-style thermostat that works even if the electricity's been sabotaged. Then,

while I'm hunting for the toolbox, the grunting and snuffling starts up."

I lean back, hands on hips.

"How many?"

"Who knows? It's pitch dark outside, and darned if I didn't leave my IR goggles in Iraq. But I probe the front yard with my flashlight and count at least a dozen of them. I gotta say, Bill, some of them were emaciated. Looked like an army of overgrown ferrets. Guess the Rough fire took out a lot of nuts and berries."

"Years of drought didn't help, either," I offered. With Ed, this was about as eco as one could get without being dismissed as a radical.

"Whatever," he said. "Now as you know, even a weakened bear is dangerous. There were cubs out there, too, meaning very aggressive mommas. But allow me get to the challenging part."

"You have the rifle, but the ammo is in the Jeep."

"Worse."

Uh-oh. I held my breath.

Ed's face went flush. He inhaled, then blew it out, looking up at the ceiling. "My food, my cell phone, my dog, and Pam's bear spray are also in the Jeep. The driver's window is wide open. By now Chloe's barking her head off, no doubt wondering why I abandoned her."

I paused, taking in the damning evidence.

"This is an 11 on the brain-dead scale," I noted, "which only goes to 10. But you knew that. So...you go get the Springfield out of its hiding place under the bathroom sink, then come out firing, right?"

He shook his head.

"No rounds. This was a resupply mission—food, pistol mags, a spool of copper-clad for that 80 meter dipole we talked about, and a few bottles of Laetitia Reserve."

"In other words, you were defenseless."

"Unless you count Pam's gardening tools, which I was fully prepared to deploy. Remember, my Chloe's in the car. Forget the rest of it."

At this point Ed stood up and started pacing. The store's ancient floor boards creaked.

"I go out the back, thinking the bears are all in front. Guess what? Three of the better-fed males, total of maybe eight hundred pounds of carnivore, are loitering between me and the tool shed. One chases me back to the door. They wouldn't do this in a good year, but these brutes are hungry, and there's an olfactory bonanza in the human-den. Before I can yank the door closed, he gets a piece of me."

"Break the skin?"

"Come to think of it, I'm not sure."

He pulled the jacket off, then slid his long-sleeve T up over a bicep, revealing a tattoo of a U.S. Army star. Circumscribing the star was 'THIS WE'LL DEFEND.' No blood.

"Just so I fully understand, let's review," I said, ticking off the list on my fingers. "No weapons, no cell phone, incapacitated dog. How in the world did you get down the hill in one piece?"

"Patience, Bill, I'm getting there."

He resumed pacing.

"I go back to the front window and shine the flashlight on the Jeep. Chloe's not there. I'm panning around, suppressing panic, when I find her at the base of that buckeye by the driveway—"

"The one that's going to support the center of the new dipole?"

"Right. Chloe's hopping as high as she can, growling and snapping. I sli-i-ide the light on up the trunk—" he pantomimed, building tension, "—and ten feet above her, there's a bear."

"Bravo!"

He grinned like a proud father.

"High point of her life, no denying it. But there are also two cubs nearby who are so young they don't know what to do. I step out on the porch and yell for Chloe, but she's preoccupied. She then makes the mistake of threatening the cubs."

"Ouch," I said, stomach sinking. I could feel it coming. "Then mom walks over..."

"No. Mom *gallops* over, getting between the cubs and Chloe. Bares her teeth. Chloe's as brave as any lab I've ever known, but it's fifty pounds of dog versus two-hundred-plus pounds of irate mama. Bear chases dog down the hill, out of flashlight range."

I cringed.

"Meanwhile," Ed continued, coming to a full stop, palms up, "the rest of the horde breaks glass and rips open my Jeep's left-rear passenger door. They fight over groceries, entrails of which hit the turf. It's the ursine remake of *Night of the Living Dead*."

"Yet it's not a movie."

"And my low-mileage Wrangler is not a prop."

"Yikes. What'd you do next?"

"I go back inside the cabin. It's very secure, at least compared to the shed. Good thing, since the bears in the front yard are as desperate as the ones out back. Contents of the Jeep aren't keeping them all busy. Before long I hear clawing on the doors, north and south."

My flesh crawled.

Ed came back over to the table, spun his chair around, and sat on it the wrong way. This boyish move reminded me of when I'd first met him, at the Visalia DX convention in '88. While everyone else did the banquet, we traded outlandish tales over Sangiovese and rotini at Rosa's.

He emptied the rest of his mug, maintaining eye contact.

"Here comes the part you've been waiting for, Billy-boy."

"Divine intervention?"

He looked up and to the left.

"That might have been faster. But not on the program."

"So...?"

"Isn't it obvious?" he said, hunching over the table. "I get on the air. Call for backup."

I did a double-take.

“What? How? You said the cabin’s battery wiring was dismembered. Can’t fire up the station.”

He chuckled.

“Hell I couldn’t. I used your spare KX2. The one you loaned me for ‘emergencies,’ remember? This certainly qualified.”

I was dumbfounded. Ed was the sort who couldn’t comprehend anything less than full power. Had to be the biggest, baddest dude on the air. He liked to say running low power was the equivalent of drinking lite beer. Now, at last, he understood one of my reasons for keeping a small rig around: em-comm. (No, Virginia, the world isn’t getting any safer.)

“Brilliant,” I said. Meaning it.

“Took me awhile to even find it, the thing’s so small.”

“That’s the point. You could hide it in the space you’d put a handgun.”

“I might do just that,” he said. Translation: under the bathroom sink.

“On another topic,” I said, “wasn’t the rig’s battery discharged? Last time I was up, I used it to hunt and pounce for two hours in an RTTY contest.”

“The internal voltmeter read a bit over 9 volts. But in your infinite wisdom you charged a second pack. That one read 11.2.”

“Basically a full charge.”

“Precisely. Back to the story: I disconnect the antenna from that old warhorse, the FT-5000, and plug it into your little KX2. 20 meters is dead, but 40 LSB is full of could-be Samaritans. Noise floor spectacularly low. Nevertheless, I crank the power control to max.”

He leaned back with an arm draped over the chair. Triumphant.

“Tell me something I didn’t know. Always after that last watt, eh, Major?”

He waggled a finger at me.

“A dB is a dB, especially when you’re power-challenged.”

Hallelujah. A new, safer outlet for his obsession.

“I found a chatty round table on 7180 and broke in,” he continued. “Just like that.”

“Let me guess. One call?”

Ed nodded diagonally, lips pursed.

“Yup. Not bad for QRP.”

I shook my head, incredulous.

“You cannot imagine how much this warms my heart.”

“Oh yes I can, my friend. You’ve been trying to convert me for years.” We fist-bumped. His idea. “But I digress. Net control gets right back to me, says I’m five-by-nine in Seattle. I explain the situation. He clears the decks to make sure I won’t get crushed by QRO ops, then asks what I have in mind. I give him Yamashita’s cell phone number.”

I slapped my leg and howled.

“Of course! Jim’s got a bigger arsenal than the Fresno PD. His cabin is what, three minutes from yours?”

“About that. Jim shows up in his tricked-out F150 with the roll-bar lamps blazing. He pulls out a Desert Eagle and pumps two rounds into the sky. Loudest thing you can legally hold in one hand.”

I snapped my fingers.

“Wait, I remember now. I heard two shots at around seven thirty. I could swear they echoed off Paradise Peak.”

“I’m sure the campers in Lake Kaweah heard it, too. Anyway, the bears scatter. I shut off the furnace, lock the door, then dash out to shake Jim’s hand.”

“Until now I wasn’t sure if we were on his good side. What a relief.”

“You kidding? He’s a hero. We could use another operator, too, licensed or not, on nights when we both pass out early.”

This had us both in stitches.

“It’s probably a good thing you came down here to cool off.”

“Agreed. I found my Jeep short three windows, but still drivable.”

“Amazing. I mean, I’m really sad about Chloe, but I’m glad you’re OK.”

“Thanks, pal.”

“Hey, Ed, just an idea: let’s take some photos up there tomorrow and do a PowerPoint. It’ll be the hit of the annual bear-safety spectacle.”

“Sorry. This is too good for the Chamber of Commerce. I’m taking it to the next radio club meeting back in SLO. I’ve got some crow to eat.”

“No more ‘life’s too short’?”

He raised his mug.

“Touché.”

While we worked out a plan for Saturday, I made Ed a roast beef on rye. He was still nursing the second half when we heard a vehicle pull up. I figured forest service; they’d be all over this. Instead it was Jim Yamashita, who for once I was happy to see. Ed could use the extra moral support.

Jim appeared in the doorway, shivering, wearing only sweats and running shoes.

“Major Sheldon, my man!” said Jim. “You doin’ OK?”

“Could be worse,” said Ed. “Thanks for helping with that unscripted field maneuver.”

“No problem,” Jim replied, rubbing his hands together. Then he noticed me, washing dishes.

“Hey, Bill,” he said with a wave. “Get this: I had a phone call from Ed, via Seattle. Thought it was a prank.”

“So I heard.” I rinsed and stacked. “Heater in your truck not working?”

“Oh yeah, works fine. But I’ve been out in the woods for the past hour.”

“Doing what?” Ed asked, now disappearing a pile of garlic fries. “Frightening the locals with that Desert Eagle?”

“Uh, no. I was doing a little—”

“Recon?” I interjected.

By now I’d put two and two together.

Jim nodded like a bobble-head, then held up a thumb.

I toweled, made a mental note to comp Jim on his next six-pack of Sculpin, then ran outside. Sure enough, there she was. I opened the truck’s passenger door and simply got out of the way.

There was no need to tell Chloe where to find Ed.