

# McCLARNIN SHOOTS A NATURAL

by ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

*Stealthily the four men entered that water-tight storeroom and dogged down the door.  
Yet they soon found a fifth one among them, grimly smiling at their little game.*

IT WAS APPARENT that mystery, perhaps even treachery, was afoot. The four men slipped stealthily down the passageway on a lower deck of the *North Star*, American cargo ship twelve days out of Brooklyn for Liverpool.

Horowitz, a member of the freighter's crew, led the way. Just behind him came Terry McLarnin, gunner's mate second class and one of the navy gun crew aboard, a gray blanket over his arm and a look of high resolve on his freckled young face. Following Terry was another bluejacket, Jess Logan, and bringing up the rear came another merchant sailor, named Adams.

The passageway spread into a cargo hold where great stacks of heavy timbers rose from the deck almost to the overhead. Horowitz led the other men down the starboard side to where a number of storerooms jutted out into the hold, and paused before a watertight door. The other men halted too, and looked about them. There was no one in sight.

"This is the storeroom," Horowitz said. "It's the very place."

"Open her up, then," demanded McLarnin. "You got to show us, sailor—ain't that right, Jess?"

"Correct as hell!" declared the other navy man. "You sure the skipper won't be wanderin' down this way while we're at work?"

"Why should he?" Horowitz wanted to know. "He's up on the bridge, and he'll damn near sleep and eat up there until we're within sight of England. The Old Man ain't takin' no chances. He says if a sub shows up, it's everybody in the boats, and to hell with this armed guard idea of shootin' back. 'Let the navy ships do the fightin,' he says. He's been torpedoed twice. The

last time he had a damned armed guard aboard that fought back till the decks was awash—and then the Heinie shelled the boats to learn 'em better. He ain't ever liked armed guards since."

"Yeah, I kinda got that impression," Terry McLarnin said. "Well, make it snappy, sailor. Let's get this over with."

Horowitz swung the levers over and opened the door. The quartette entered the tiny, empty compartment and he pulled the door shut behind them, dogging it down and switching on an electric light.

McLarnin spread his blanket on the steel deck. He kneeled down and the others did the same.

"Who's got the dice?" demanded Adams.

Jess Logan rattled them in answer. "Put down your money, big boy!" he exhorted gleefully. "This is part of the training in the navy. Everybody learns to do their own cleanin'—and that's what Terry and me are here for. Shootin' a dollar!"

*Wham!*

The cubes clicked against the bulkhead and bounced back across the blanket noiselessly. They lay with two aces staring bleakly at the overhead.

"Snake eyes!" Logan groaned.

"The navy must've sent you to sea too soon!"

Adams chuckled, as he picked up the money and the bones. "Now, on a merchant ship—be good to me, dice!"

*Wham!*

"Read 'em and weep!"

"Do it again!" begged McLarnin. "Dollar says you can't!"

*Wham!*

Five and ace. "Big Dick! Be good to me, dice!"

*Wham!*

"I didn't call for you, Phoebe! I want your big brother!"

*Wham!* Seven.

"Too bad, too bad!" McLarnin lamented as he took his turn. "Here's where my girl in Brooklyn gets a new pair of shoes. And the one in Norfolk."

*Wham!*

"Less talkin' and more action!" cautioned Horowitz. "The Old Man's death on gamblin', especially crap-shootin'. Crap-shootin' and armed guards—they's his pet peeves. And if he catches half his armed guard down here shootin' craps with two of his crew—it'll be a damn sight worse than throwin' aces with your pay day in the pot!"

"As I was sayin', my girl on Sands Street," McLarnin went on. *Wham!* "I don't believe in shootin' craps myself, but no merchant sailor's gonna say he can beat the navy at anything and get away with it. Read them babies!"

"And if you two guys should break us, we'll go up and relieve the other half of the gun crew and let 'em try their luck!" Jess Logan declared. "Dollar says he makes his point!"

*Click—rattle and roll—wham!*

"And he made it!" Logan exulted. "The navy took 'em over and the navy took 'em!"

"If I ever get them dice—" Horowitz began, but he never finished. There came a water-muffled boom, a rending crash and a lurch of the cargo ship that sent the four men piling head on into the bulkhead where they had been bouncing the dice. They fell on the Steel deck in a helpless tangle of arms and legs, stunned for a long-drawn second.

Outside the water tight door new noise added to the din. The heavy timbers were toppling, crashing against the storeroom and piling up in a jumble of confusion. The *North Star* listed to port and wallowed helplessly in the trough of a sea.

McLARNIN was first to regain his voice. He sat erect, dazed and white of face, and stared at Jess Logan.

"Torpedo, Jess!" he exclaimed. "Up on deck, quick! Maybe we'll get one crack at the lousy tin fish!"

Logan sprang to his feet. The deck was slanting a little. He wrenched at the levers on the water-tight door, and Horowitz turned to and helped him. They pushed, but the door remained shut.

"Bear a hand here!" Logan called. "Them damn timbers outside are jammin' this door!"

All four pushed and shoved. Their hearts missed a beat, their faces paled slightly as the peril of their position became clear in a quick, stabbing thought. A sinking ship, the crew taking to the boats, and behind—four men in a tiny, stifling compartment to await a sudden inrush of water, a crushing collapse of a bulkhead

*Boom!*

It was the five-inch—their five-inch, barking defiance to the Germans even in this last hour. McLarnin chuckled despite himself. Imagine how sore the Old Man would be, with Spud and Joe sticking to the gun till the last boat.

They pushed again, panted and struggled; exerting every ounce of weight and strength. The door gave not an inch. There were tons of heavy timbers just outside, a dead weight against their puny muscles. The ship was listing to port—they were on the starboard side. But the weight seemed thrown as securely against the door as though the list were dropping it there.

"Listen!" gasped McLarnin. He held up a trembling, sweat-reddened hand.

Dim and faint from the deck above came the sound of running feet, the creak of a block as a boat was lowered. Another and more ominous sound reached their ears. It came from the hold outside the fouled door—the splash of water as the *North Star* rolled.

"Why don't them sons-a-guns shoot again?" demanded Jess Logan. "They sure ain't shovin' off with just one shot

*Boom!*

"There's your answer!" McLarnin said. "Hope to God they got her!"

"Not much chance though, you got to admit!" Logan said. "She may have cut loose that torpedo without showin' more'n a foot of her periscope. Otherwise somebody would have sighted her and Spud and Joe could have cracked loose with the popgun before the torp hit. They're probably shootin' blind before takin' to the boats. It looks better in the report to say they fired at the Krauts."

"It'll look like hell in the report to say that the two birds who just went off watch wasn't there when the thing hit, and wasn't seen afterward," McLarnin declared. He licked his dry lips with a nervous tongue.

"Less talkin'—more shovin'!" demanded Horowitz. "We got to get outa here!"

"We got to—we got to!" half-screamed Adams.

“The water will be comin’ in soon. We’ll die like rats in a trap.”

He clutched his throat; turned a pasty face toward the gunner’s mate.

“Oh, pipe down!” grated McLarnin. “Keep your pants on! All together, now! Heave! Heave! Heave!”

They grunted and labored in unison until the sweat stood out on their pale faces and streaked down their necks in little rivulets. They shoved with every bit of strength until lights flashed before their eyes and the tiny compartment reeled dizzily. The exertion left them sick at their stomachs and panting for air in a place that was already becoming foul. But it all did nothing toward opening the door that blocked their liberty and, probably, their lives.

At last Jess Logan flung himself down on the slanted deck and laughed jerkily between gasps for breath.

“A crap game! A crap game!” he chuckled mirthlessly. “And who gets the pot in the long run? Old Man death himself! We come down here for a nice, quiet crap game and find we’re shootin’ with death! Terry, old shipmate, it looks like we’re gonna take a long cruise!”

“You pipe down!” McLarnin shot back. “Come on and push. Push till you bust somethin’! We got to get outa here—and damn quick if we get out at all!”

“We can’t open that damn door, and you know it,” Jess said. Better sit down here and get your wind—you can check out better when the time comes. She’s liable to slip under any minute now, I figure!”

He reached out uncertainly and picked up the dice that had been forgotten. The other three men shoved and shoved until Horowitz slipped weakly to the deck. Then McLarnin sat down near Logan, swabbing a heated brow. Horowitz was picking nervously at the blanket. Adams, clawing at the door and beating on the steel bulkhead with hands that were almost raw, blubbered incoherently until Logan pulled him to the deck beside him and held him with main strength.

“No use, no use, fellow!” he told the merchant sailor. “Let’s go on with the crap game—that’s what we came down here for. Why let a little thing like a torpedo bust it up? Might as well shove off like men when the time comes. Adams, get a grip on yourself! Look here! Shoot the works!”

He reached into his pea-coat pocket and drew out a handful of crumpled bills, scattering them over the blanket. “Fade me, somebody, fade me!”

*Wham!*

Five and two—seven in anybody’s crap game!

“Read ‘em and weep!” yelled Terry McLarnin. “I guess we got some luck yet, gang. Don’t give up the ship until all the spots are knocked off the dice. Five dollars he does it again!”

MINUTES crawled by and the air in their little prison grew worse. Adams dropped out of the dice game and sat with his back against the jammed door, staring dully at his shipmates. In the passageway outside they heard the splashing water creeping higher. The deck was slanting a little more as the list of the *North Star* increased. She couldn’t stay up much longer—each of the four men in the storeroom knew that.

Finally McLarnin straightened and wiped the sweat from his brow. His other hand grasped a mass of crumpled greenbacks.

“Whew!” he whistled. “It took quite a session to do it, Horowitz, but I knew we could. Now maybe this’ll teach you somethin’—don’t never shoot craps with a navy man and figure to come out ahead. It can’t be done!”

Horowitz looked at the bluejacket silently a moment, then he sighed and shook his head. “I guess that last advice is kinda foolish,” he said. “It looks like we rolled our last bones.”

McLarnin listened a moment to the water gurgling outside, splashing against their door with the roll of the doomed ship. He gave the door a half-hearted push, then sat down on the deck and laboriously began separating the greenbacks into two piles.

“Here’s what I had; here’s what I won,” the gunner’s mate said. “Now, you birds claim your money. I don’t want to check out with somebody else’s jack, especially when you can’t spend it where we’re goin’. Here, Adams, how much did you lose?”

“Never mind!” Adams said. “Keep the lousy, filthy stuff! If it hadn’t been for money, we’d probably be out in the free air somewhere instead of dyin’ in this stinkin’ trap.”

“I said take your damn money,” McLarnin retorted. “You’ll take it, too, if I have to cram it down your throat. I’m squarin’ up before we go. What was your pile, Horowitz?”

“Twenty-six bucks,” the merchant sailor answered.

“Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five and one makes twenty-six,” the bluejacket counted. “Here, take it and buy yourself a new pair of wings when your old ones begin to moult. Don’t say I never gave—what the hell?”

McLarnin had extended the bills to the merchant sailor. He jerked his hand back suddenly, his eyes turned to the jammed door, mouth agape. Adams, who had been sitting with his back against the steel barricade, arose slowly. From the other side of the door came the grating of wood on steel as the *North Star* wallowed. Then the grating changed to a steady banging.

Terry McLarnin flung his strong young body against the door with all his force. It gave—it gave only an inch or so, but it was enough to bring a sweep of dirty salt water into the storeroom. Jess Logan sprang to his feet, the seat of his trousers soaked.

“Hey, dammit, what’s the idea lettin’ water in on the deck when I’m settin’ on it?” he demanded.

“Pipe down, sailor!” McLarnin answered. “I guess I’ll keep these winnins’ awhile, after all. Maybe I will buy the girl in Brooklyn a new pair of shoes. Now, you horses’ bustles, turn to here and let’s shove. The water’s high enough to float them timbers, and the way’s almost clear. Bear a hand here!” The four men put their shoulders to the door. The banging continued with the swing of the imprisoned waters.

“We may have to swim to make a ladder to the topside,” McLarnin cautioned. “Ready? Shove!”

Together the four shoved as one man. The door gave, swung outward and open in the face of waist-deep water that rushed in on them and swept Jess

Logan off his feet, pounding him against the opposite bulkhead. Timbers that had been pounding end-on against the door bucked suddenly against the three standing men, bruising and wounding them. They fought their way clear, Logan following profanely, climbing over jammed timbers here and crawling beneath it there, while part of the cold North Atlantic swirled about their middles.

McLarnin was first to make the ladder. He seized the chains with eager hands and dashed to the deck above with the other men on his heels. They burst forth into the gray of a threatening day, but never had skies, however blue, seemed as sweet.

“All here?” gasped the gunner’s mate as they gathered shivering in the lee of the bridge. “From the way things look up here, we didn’t get out any too soon.”

The *North Star* was in a bad way, with her after decks so low the waves were breaking over them and her list to port increasing steeply. The four men could picture how it would happen—the stern going under with a rush that would throw the bow high

in the air, then a knifelike dive with the suction of whirling waters drawing everything within reach into a maelstrom of death; great bubbles rising to the surface—and finally a few bits of wreckage on a lonely sea.

“How about a life raft?” demanded Logan, his teeth chattering. “I see the boats—away over there!”

He pointed off the starboard bow to where two tiny objects pitched with the waves. They had had about forty minutes start. Too far now to signal.

“That’s them,” McLarnin said. “Say, the radioman surely got out a couple of S.O.S. calls giving our position before he took to the boat. There oughta be a destroyer comin’ soon!”

HE SCANNED the horizon to port, hoping for a smudge of smoke against the sky. Then he gave a yell and grabbed Horowitz. Jess Logan saw the periscope at the same time, about a quarter of a mile away, part of the conning tower breaking through the rough water. The submarine was still cruising around her victim.

“Fools! Fools!” McLarnin exclaimed. “Why didn’t we come out with our eyes peeled for somethin’ like this? They may have seen us runnin’ out here like a bunch of rats tryin’ to leave a sinkin’ ship. If they have they’ll either shell us or submerge and leave us and our chance’ll be gone!”

“Chance for what?” demanded Horowitz. “If she does submerge, our chance of gettin’ off of here alive will be a helluva lot better. There’s a life raft forward. Let’s get it!”

“To hell with that!” McLarnin flared. “It’s that five-inch gun of ours I’m thinkin’ of. It ain’t under water yet, is it? And as long as the gun ain’t under, I guess we can fight! You come along and pass the shells to Jess. I’ll do the pointin’. Let’s give ’em hell!”

He crouched low on the starboard side and ran forward to where the gun was mounted. Jess Logan was close behind. A two-man gun crew—that was what it amounted to. One to load, one to point.

Logan swung the breech open and shoved a shell home. McLarnin depressed the long gray barrel. This was close range. He saw the conning tower mount a little higher; saw the whaleback of the U-boat break water, her deck guns showing

“Ready?”

“O.K.”

Terry McLarnin jerked the lanyard.

A dagger of yellow flame stabbed from a sleeve of black smoke. There was a roar and the shock of jarred

steel as the gun recoiled. From the submarine came the crash of torn deck plates and the whoosh of water thrown high into the air. Part of the sub's forward gun was carried away. There appeared to be a hole in her deck.

"Seven come eleven!" Logan shouted. "Baby needs a couple of navy crosses!"

He blew the bore clean and hoisted a new shell into the gun.

"She's going down!" Adams called. "She'll get away if you don't hurry!"

The submarine was taking no chances. It had been completely caught by surprise. Down at her controls a startled officer swore in guttural German and wondered if this was a new trick of the Q-boats.

"Ready?"

"O.K."

*Boom!*

Horowitz and Adams, clear of the smoke from the five-inch, saw the result. Part of the conning tower, just going under, flew into the air as the high explosive shell sheared through. The submarine heeled over and went down, a torn, dying thing. Great telltale patches of oil blubbed up.

"We faded 'em!" Terry McLarnin remarked. "'We faded 'em proper. Now let's get off of here!"

Horowitz leaped to the life raft and cut the lashing. Terry patted the gun a last good-by. They threw the

life raft over the side and leaped into the sea beside it. Clambering on the tiny refuge they began paddling clear of the sinking *North Star*.

It was an hour before the destroyer came, splitting the water at a thirty-knot speed, to heave to and pick up the two boatloads of the *North Star's* crew. From them the warship officers heard the story of the belated shots, and of the missing men. Then the trim little craft bruised over the spot where the *North Star* had gone down. A little farther and she passed the oil splotches.

"Life raft off the starboard bow, sir!" a quartermaster sang out.

"Stand by to throw them a line!" the skipper ordered.

A few minutes later and Terry McLarnin, clambering up the boatswain's ladder last, saluted the quarterdeck and grinned at the young lieutenant commander.

"You just picked us up in time, sir!" he said.

"What's wrong—life raft leaking?" asked the officer.

"No, sir, but them two merchant sailors damn near won all their money back shootin' craps on that raft. I spread my neckerchief out and we had one hot crap game. I told 'em they couldn't beat the navy—and when we sighted your stacks I threw a natural and then pushed them damn dice through the grating!"