

## THE PHANTOM TRUCK DRIVER By ROG PHILLIPS

*"Hey, Frank! Heard the news? Captain Summers is back! Yeah, same old business: he's nutty as a pecan orchard. 'Course who can blame him for goin' off his rocker? Up front there, sluggin' it out with them screwball Junies. I never seen one myself, but the stories they, tell about 'em — brother! New kind of warfare, all right, when your enemy starts lovin' you to death!*

*"No, that's not what drove him batty. In the first place, you gotta understand that Captain Summers is — or at least was, anyway — a mighty level-headed guy. And don't worry about him havin' guts; he's got all any ten men could use. Way I hear it, he came up with some ridiculous idea that's supposed to explain what them Junies are up to. He's got it written out, I hear, but I never got a chance to read it. . .*

It had started to rain during the night, and we learned why this place was called Glue Valley by the native Junies. The muck clung to boot soles in thick layers that grew thicker by half an inch with every step — until unpredictably it broke off, making you trip and sprawl full length in it. You came up with the mud coating your hands and clothes and equipment. And the smell . . .

But you kept on your feet in the trenches, and you used your handkerchief or your shirt tail to work the trigger of your tommy gun with your mud-crusted fingers.

And when a wave of Junies looked like it was going to sweep up to the trench, you used one more of your precious atom grenades, ducking down so the radiation didn't get you, and straightening up again to watch them topple over dead — dead even before they started to fall.

They were like vermin, the Junies. Intelligent vermin, with guns made in their factories, with faces that portrayed bravery, fear, desperation, as they rushed against the wall of lead thrown at them.

Naked vermin. Not housebroken. Better informed on Shakespeare than you were, and having their offspring in litters of eight to sixteen.

You couldn't do anything with them. That was the trouble. You couldn't do anything but wipe them out. They learned your language and learned how to read in a matter of days. They overran your living quarters and read all your books and messed your floors. Their I.Q. and aptitude tests made you look sick. But they thought words were just words. They signed treaties and ignored them. They knew what you wanted and did what they wanted to do.

You locked them out and they unlocked their way back in. You used combination locks and they thought you were presenting them with a puzzle on another aptitude test.

They liked you. Fifteen or twenty of them adopted you. They slept with you, ate out of your plate and even tried to eat out of your mouth, all the time keeping up a running chatter on literature or science or anything they thought might interest you.

They'd mess beside your plate or on your shoulder and try to change the subject when you screamed at them.

And so you shot them. You closed the doors and the windows and went around the house killing them until you found the last one poring over a book on advanced calculus and wetting on your pillow. And you shot him — only to discover it was a she and she had just tucked her new litter under the blankets, and the ten new Junies decided you were their mother.

Meanwhile, others had been looking in the windows. They liked this new game. They swiped a gun and figured out how it worked. They built smelters and factories and made guns small enough for them to carry. Then they came back and shot you.

That's why we were in trenches killing them. That's why they came in wave after wave killing us. And

the only good thing about it was that so long as you could hold them back you could eat and not have them sitting in your plate. You could sleep without a dozen of them curled up against you for warmth.

Best of all, you could say something and not have it topped by a Juny, unless he got close enough to hear what you said, and then you could get him easy.

Sure it was hell. Like that Juny that came running toward me, his face wreathed in smiles, saying he had just invented an improved firing mechanism for our rifles he wanted to show me. I shot him, and snaked in the gun he had been carrying. And sure enough it had an improved firing mechanism. And I knew he had probably worked hours figuring it out, driven by a desire to have something to interest some human enough to buy a few minutes of companionship.

It was hell. You had to keep telling yourself they were vermin. But it was killing things smarter than you. It was killing friends who would do anything to gain your friendship, but couldn't accept the fact that you didn't want to wallow in their filth and be surrounded by them and pawed over every minute without letup.

It was as if they had a lack of integrity coupled with a determination to do what they wished to do regardless of you, coupled with a clinging personality. A caricature of the human soul.

We should have given up and evacuated the planet, but human beings aren't built that way. So for five years now we had been in this war of extermination, wanting to let go and run away, and knowing we never would.

And here I was, with a force of eight hundred men under my command, surrounded by the Junies. We had to stick to the trench or we couldn't use our atom grenades. We had about two hundred grenades left. When they were gone, our tommy guns couldn't hold the Junies back for long.

What would happen then? Picture being the pet of a hundred or so Junies. No gun. No clothes. No way to escape them. No way to kill yourself. Believe me, burning bamboo slivers under your fingernails is something sane and solid and human by comparison. It leaves you with your self-respect intact.

A mud-coated figure lurched toward me along the trench, and I could tell by the eye that glittered through the glue-coated features that it was bad news.

"Captain Summers," the kid gasped between breaths. "We got the radio going again. The whole front has retreated — all except us. That leaves us half a mile from our front, and —"

"And it might as well be a hundred miles," I said. "We couldn't get a hundred yards through this slippery muck. Did they say they're going to get to us?"

"They're bogged down all along this front. The goo. A truck can't go ten feet in it. The tires roll it up like carpeting until it jams."

I looked up at the low, unbroken cloud layer, and groaned. A plane couldn't possibly find us. The mask of mud that was the kid's face cracked into a grin. "Maybe the phantom truck driver'll come to our rescue," he said. His grin vanished. "Sorry," he said uncomfortably. "I —"

"That's all right," I said mildly.

I watched him salute and turn away, staggering down the trench the way he had come, back to the radio dugout.

I took the grenade-counter out of my pocket. A neat little thing like a stopwatch, only it works by Gamma radiation. Its pointer showed we had just one hundred and twenty-seven atom grenades left — and even as I squinted at it in the bad light, the needle jumped a couple of times, synchronized with the echo-like sharp bap of grenades going off. Nice things, the atom grenades. They don't do any physical damage. It might break the windows if one exploded in a room. But a gust of wind could do that too.

All I know of how they're built is that they consist of an inner core the size of a small vitamin capsule and containing pure neutrons. The capsule is made of something that keeps them from escaping. Around this is cotton, then a thin spherical layer of fissionable material weighing two-and-a-half ounces. Non-radioactive. Then the aluminum covering. There's a small pin you shove in just before throwing the grenade. This pin breaks a small vial of an acid that soaks across the cotton to the neutron capsule and eats it, releasing the neutrons. A bulletin I read says the neutrons are traveling at a speed of nine thousand feet a second when they are released. They hit the shell of fissionables, and instantly the whole shebang is

nothing but Alpha, Beta, and Gamma radiation, and million-degree hot atoms. That's what makes the distinctive bap. A couple of feet of solid dirt will protect you against it. That's why the trench. In open field combat an atom grenade would be suicide if you were within a quarter of a mile of it.

The phantom truckdriver. That had been about six months ago at Lost Hope Ridge. The situation had been about the same as now, except that it wasn't due to radio trouble, but a sudden wave of Junies that kept us trapped in our trench while the rest of the front fell back.

At the last minute this truck came through with a load of supplies, mostly atom grenades. It saved the day. But afterwards it turned out that no truck had been dispatched to us, and the two thousand atom grenades he delivered had never been released to us and, to make it even more puzzling, had never existed.

You have to understand about atom grenades to know the significance of that. The counter registers every grenade explosion. When it's over you have so many grenades left and so many explosions on the counter. They add up to the figure of grenades assigned to you. There's more chance of a bank having two thousand dollars too much at the end of the day than there is of having two thousand extra grenades.

It was the only one who had gotten a close-up look at the driver of the truck. I was shown the picture of every truckdriver in our sector, and he wasn't any of them.

The medics gave me two months away from the front, in a nice quiet place with gardens and, clean sheets and leisurely meals, for which I was grateful. The story of the phantom truckdriver spread over the whole front, with my name tagged to it. You know how those things go. Hush-hush around me, but whisper-whisper and fingers pointing at me behind my back.

But, regardless of the medics, I *had* seen that phantom truck-driver.

The messenger from the radio dugout was coming along the trench again. When he got to me he reported, "They're sending a load of grenades to us. Five thousand. Welded some scrapers onto the truck body to peel off the goo on the tires."

"Good," I said. "How long do they think it'll be before it gets here?"

"An hour. Unless it stalls."

I nodded. We'd know if it stalled. The driver would touch off his load to keep the Junies from getting it.

I watched the kid go back along the trench, pausing here and there to tell the men about the truck. I could see the mud-covered faces split into grins.

Would it get through? I stared into the curtain of rain, and so tricky is the imagination that I was sure I could see it out there, a vague shadow that seemed to come closer, stop, come on. . . . But it couldn't be. It would be at least another hour before it could arrive.

I started to turn away, then jerked my eyes back. It was definitely the truck. For an instant there had been clear vision for a hundred yards, and I saw the truck. I did some mental arithmetic. The messenger had taken maybe five minutes from the radio dugout. It could be that the truck had already started when the message came through. Also, the truck could be making much better time than they had hoped for — or they could have purposely said an hour so we wouldn't get our hopes too high and then too low if it didn't arrive in a shorter time.

I relaxed. It was the truck they had sent out. And it was close enough now so that I could see it plainly. I passed the command down the trench to lay off the grenades and use fire power only.

I sent word down the lines for five husky men to come forward for the unloading.

They were behind me as I climbed out of the trench and struggled to my feet, bringing heavy chunks of glue-mud with me. We went around to the back of the truck and dropped the tailgate. The men started unloading, passing the boxes of grenades from hand to hand to waiting hands in the trench. An occasional Juny bullet splattered against the truck, fired blindly from a distance.

I went around to the truck cab and opened the door, then froze. The driver was the same one. The phantom truckdriver.

"Hi," he greeted me casually.

"I made it through."

He didn't remember me.

"Yes, you did," I said. I remained standing with my hand on the door, and looked at the right front tire. It was clean. There was no scraper welded to the frame to take off the layers of mud as they piled up. Instead, there was a fine spray of some liquid playing against the top of the tire from a nozzle.

"Come in out of the rain," the driver said casually.

"Guess I will," I said. I lifted a heavy mud-caked foot up to the step and climbed in, sinking onto the seat beside him.

I slammed the door shut. I looked at the dashboard. Not because I expected to find anything different, but because I didn't want to look at the driver and give away the fact that I knew him.

My hair began to crawl under my sou'wester. At first glance the dashboard was regulation, but a dozen little things stood out after that. It was a hand-made dashboard, very well made, but unable to completely capture the details of the mass production stamp job.

I thought of that spray that kept the tires from fouling up.

I thought of the Juny that had come running toward the trench with an improved rifle.

It was obvious now. This truck had been built by hand — by the Junies. That meant

My head was spinning. The Junies were manufacturing atom grenades. They weren't using them on us. This was the second time they had brought me a truckload of grenades.

But who was this driver sitting beside me?

I studied him out of the corner of my eye. He wasn't looking at me. It occurred to me he hadn't looked directly at me at any time. He had kept his face straight ahead, as though he were just relaxing. His hands were on the wheel.

He was husky. His chest was thick, his arms muscular. A theory entered my head and I tried to reject it. The driver couldn't be a robot. Or could he?

Maybe not a robot. Maybe an automaton with a Juny sitting in his chest running him.

"I'd better see how the unloading's coming," I said, opening the door.

His lips moved in a natural way, curving into a likeable smile. "Sure," he said.

I slid off the seat to the ground, looked at him again, then slammed the door.

The last of the grenade cases was being tossed into the trench. The truck was empty.

We closed the tailgate. I shouted to the driver. The motor roared, and the truck started up.

I wanted to run after it, to get back in the cab and see where it was going. I didn't. I dropped into the trench and watched the truck disappear into the drizzling rain.

The next few minutes were filled with grenade explosions as the Junies were stopped in their tracks. So many had been killed that emotions didn't connect with it. At least, not until now.

Now I watched the slaughter with a sense of horror, a feeling of insanity. They were manufacturing atom grenades to deliver to us to use in killing them.

Aside from everything else, how had they discovered how to make them? It had taken human scientists over half a century from the first atom bomb to mass isolation and containment of pure neutrons. It had taken another half century to produce the atom grenade in its present form.

There was only one answer to that. Obviously some of the Junies had run across the information in our books. They had then duplicated every step, from locating ores to building neutron isolation plants.

The messenger from the radio dugout was coming along the trench toward me again. A shaft of sunlight struck him and those around him. I wasn't the only one who looked up at the break in the clouds. The eastern horizon was visible. The rainstorm would soon be over.

The kid grinned nervously when he reached me. "They're crazy back at base," he said. "They claim the truck they sent turned back before it reached us. When we told them it got through with the grenades they just sputtered."

"Let them sputter," I said. "Tell them if they rigged oil spray to coat the truck tires, they wouldn't pick up the mud. And tell them we were kidding about getting a truckload of grenades."

He started back toward the dugout.

"Wait a minute!" I called. He turned and came back.

I was thinking of the last time. Clean bedding, lawns, good meals with dishes and tablecloths. A hundred miles from the front.

"Tell them," I said slowly, "that the phantom truckdriver brought us three thousand grenades. Tell them I recognized him." I grinned at the kid. "Tell them I let him go because I knew he didn't exist. The medicos cured me of believing he existed. Tell them that. It's an order." I grinned. "Get with it, son."

His eyes were round bright marbles sticking in the mud that coated his face. "Yes, sir," he said, and was gone, stumbling through the muck of the trench.

Ten feet away I saw an arm go through the motion of throwing a grenade. It went off. I counted three and raised my head to look. Fifteen or twenty Junies lay sprawled in the mud. Dead. Their last expressions still on their little faces: pathetic, eager friendly expressions.

To them nothing had any meaning unless it contributed to social intercourse. The futile, impotent understanding of this was plain to me now.

They didn't understand we were waging a war of extermination against them, grim and ear nest. Such a thing would be incomprehensible to them, without meaning within their framework of nothing having meaning unless it furthered companionship.

They thought it was a game we were playing with them, like football or canasta. And they'd think that up to the end, when the last few hundred of them were surrounded and one last grenade would make their species extinct.

And that would happen, too. Man had landed on this planet and named it Juno, and he would never abandon this planet. Instead, he would make it over into the image of his desires. He would do so because he always had, and always would, wherever he went.

Anything else would be as inconceivable to him as the idea of wanting privacy would be to a Juny.

It stopped raining. Alpha Centauri, a little smaller than Earth's sun at this distance, would be setting in another two hours. I wondered if I would have to spend another night here.

I hoped not. I wanted to get away from it to the sane atmosphere of the psychopathic ward, where there would be nothing but the neatly classified normal insanities.

Maybe if I told them the truth about the phantom truckdriver and stuck to my guns, they would keep me there.