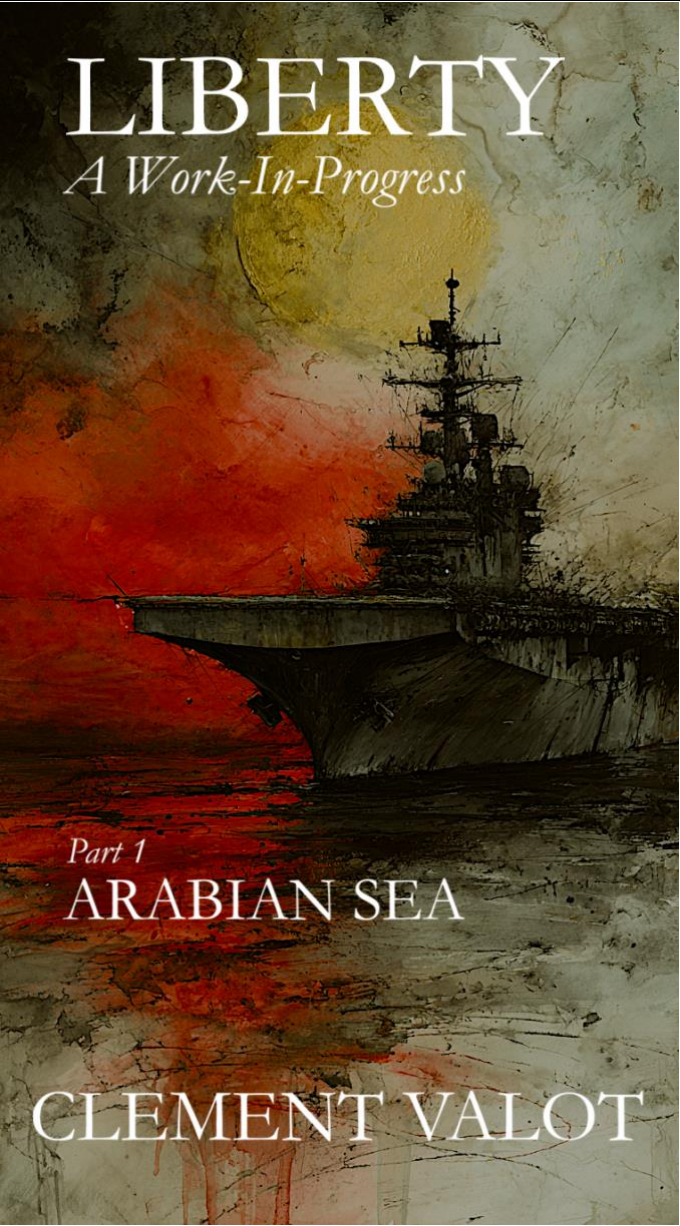

TRENCH ART PAMPHLET SERIES
NONFICTION HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS



LIBERTY

A Work-In-Progress

Part 1

ARABIAN SEA

CLEMENT VALOT

O:JA&L FIREFIGHT PRESS

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LIBERTY

Part One, Arabian Sea

(Excerpted from WIP)

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“Mount 1, mount 9. How fucking loud is that thing?” I said over the sound-powered phones.

“This is mount 1. It’s loud as fuck. I can hear it in my teeth.”

“All mounts, this is GCO. No cussing on the net. Keep it professional.”

“Mount 9, aye.”

“Mount 1, aye.”

“Mount 1, mount 9. Foxtrot, marry, kill. Oprah, Monica, Angelina?”

“Mount 9, mount 6. Foxtrot?”

“This is mount 9. Yes. Foxtrot. F.”

“Really, F?”

“Yes. F, marry, kill! Oprah, Monica, Angelina?”

“This is mount 1, what the fuck is F?”

“GCO said bad words are unauthorized. So... F.”

“All mounts, this is mount 7. Monica, Oprah, Angelina.” There

was confusion with sounds of laughter, sighs, and disbelief over the net amongst the collective. Which is silliness, because one must push the button on the sound powered phone to react over the net so everybody can hear it. It was natural to react on your own, without transmitting your reaction over the net. With the phones we wear, one must push the button to contribute to the conversation. There were a lot of ridiculous things said over the net, that guaranteed a response without a need to transmit, but it was a courtesy to respond while pushing the button to affirm the level of absurdity of another's comments.

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"This is mount 2, how are you gonna choose to fuck Monica over Angelina?" That was Ski on mount 2. Ski is a woman – not to underestimate the level of profanity that comes naturally to women in this profession. "Angie is way too sexy. Have you lost your mind?"

"This is mount 7. Monica is a freak, clearly. Angie prolly a hoe too. But Monica got all the dick, a President knew what the fuck was up. I feel like Bill and I would get along great. And Oprah money. That is self-explanatory. Plus, I feel like Angie a bitch. Ask Brad."

"True," from mount 1.

"Preach," from mount 4.

"Yup," from mount 2.

"I'm convinced," from mount 6.

"Amen," from mount 9.

"All mounts, GCO. Jesus fucking Christ! Shut the fuck up and act professional."

"GCO, mount 9. You disagree?"

"Negative. I concur." This elicited more giggling and banter from the individual mounts collectively. "All mounts, GCO! Silence on

the net!” GCO stood for Gun Control Officer. He was positioned in the pilot house of the ship, not far from the Captain and the Officer of the Deck, who were responsible for safe navigation of the vessel headed into port. This would normally be a routine sea and anchor evolution for arguably experienced mariners, but this one was different. Visibility beyond the skin of the ship was almost zero, maybe one hundred yards, hence the one prolonged sound signal coming from the ship’s whistle every two minutes or so. The environment the ship was navigating through was due to a heavy sandstorm and scattered squalls in the area. I imagined sandstorms like Hollywood portrayed them in movies, with gusting high winds and abrasiveness that could be felt throughout the body. The sandstorms we encountered looked like a thick fog on the horizon to the untrained eye. It was not until you were in the thick of it that you would notice the grit on your teeth, in your ears, your eyes, and in your nose. Then any prolonged time in the sand would cause a buildup on any surface around you. If that surface was the deck of a ship, you could be sure the sand would build up enough to make the deck gray paint disappear. Even on vertical surfaces, like the bulkhead, the gray haze would disappear to a thick layer you could wipe your finger on and draw an outline through the sand. On the deck, footprints would remain. For us on the gun mounts, the sand would coagulate within the crevices of the machine gun, mixing with the remnants of cleaner, lubricant, and preservative. It is a nightmare to clean up after the fact, but there was no avoiding it, so accepting the hours of extra maintenance that these storms bring is typical.

What the fuck else are we going to do with our time after watch anyway. Free time? Fuck no. We are in the middle of the Arabian Sea, just east of the Straits of Hormuz. The ship is supposed to be pulling into Muscat, Oman. This sea and anchor detail is taking so damn long, we’re starting to get worried about what the outcome will be, however. Bullshitting on the mounts is what we do to pass the time. No one tells us shit on the mounts, including updates to navigational status, unless we needed to focus attention on a contact to determine intent, or kill a target. I knew we were not going to get any updates from the GCO on the bridge. First of all, he is a knuckle dragging ordnance type, along with the rest of us.

He does not know fuck from shit about driving a warship. Only

enough to be dangerous like the rest of us. He had simply already served his time on a gun mount, and he is more senior to the rest of us. So, congratulations Gun Control Officer, get your ass out of the sandstorm and off a gun mount and have a seat in the climate-controlled pilot house. Fuck him though, I would rather be on a gun mount than on the bridge. In his defense, it was probably stressful as all hell on the bridge in this environment. Driving a 46,000-ton warship in zero visibility, close to shore, with almost 3,000 souls onboard could have its complications. The feeling on the bridge was likely a nightmare. And then there are the gun mounts, talking about dicking down a former President's mistress on the net.

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I took the sound powered phone headset off. If they needed me, they could contact me on the radio. Typically, it would be our job to make reports of contacts we saw. We were not seeing shit in this environment. The guns were ready however, and if a bad guy did show up within 100 yards of the ship ready to do harm, there would be no time to determine intent. It would be on the gunner to make a split-second decision to shoot or not shoot. If I shoot and it was a threat, I am a hero. If I shoot what I thought might be a threat, and it turns out to be civilians in the wrong place at the wrong time, my life is over. We knew what they told us about making a judgement call to kill a threat at our level was bullshit.

The captain of the ship looked us all dead in the eye and told us, "The lives of 3,000 Sailors and Marines are in your hands. If you need to shoot, you shoot to kill. And I will be there to justify your actions." *Yeah, right buddy. I've been in those situations, and these motherfuckers never let us shoot. We need to be shot at and likely someone killed first before we are allowed to engage.* At this point on deployment, we knew the routine. We were expendable assets in the grand scheme of 3,000 souls. My give-a-fuck-level to being a gun mount captain at this point was still high, but I was starting to see behind the role-playing that we were doing. If I needed to be a sacrificed to the Navy gods while the captain revokes my inherent right to self-defense in the name of avoiding World War III, I had accepted my fate.

Our ship has nine gun mounts situated around the troop catwalks, a deck below the flight deck of the ship. Four of the gun mounts are 25mm chain guns. These are big beefy bastards. A gunner would situate himself behind the gun and press their body into shoulder braces and grab the controls to contort the gun in a limited range of direction covering a certain sector of fire necessary to protect the ship. We can shoot ball rounds (TP), high-explosive rounds (HE), or semi-armor piercing high explosive incendiary tracer rounds (SAPHEI-T), depending on the threat. A wooden dow would catch those TP rounds. A small military threat would justify HE rounds. If Satan and Hitler teamed up on an armored version of Noah's Ark, they would get them SAPHEI-T boys. The other five gun mounts could be modified for either M2 .50cal or M240B 7.62 machine guns. Gun mount nine, my mount, happened to be a dual .50 cal mount at the moment. It is positioned directly off the starboard quarter, hanging about 15 feet off the back of the ship by nothing more than one-inch steel grating, and held up by metal wire. They called it the suicide mount. Walking onto it and hanging 50 feet in the air off the back of the ship, you could understand the cute nickname that it acquired. It is fun. And it is reserved for the most junior of the gunners. That happened to be me at this point.

"Please tell me this is not the eeriest fucking thing you have seen. It looks like a scene out of a horror movie, doesn't it?" I said to my loader.

"I don't know. I've seen some pretty eerie shit before," Jarrod said. He was my loader.

"Shut the fuck up dude. More eerie than this? Where mother fucker?"

"Texas."

"Of course, Texas. What were you doing in Texas? You're from Pennsylvania."

"I was visiting some cunt," he said with shame in his voice. "She was from Houston. We were driving outside El Paso, I think. We got caught in this shit storm of sand and lightning. It was pretty fucking gnarly."

“Alright, but were you on a fucking gun mount of a warship, in the Middle East, just South of countless people that want to kill you?” I exaggerated each point to emphasize the fact that every bit of this scenario was much more ill-suited than his consideration of a sandstorm with some hoe.

“No, I guess not.” There was a moment of silence between us. “Ya know, most New Mexicans hate Texans?”

“I fucking hate you right now,” I said, shaking my head. “And that’s not really what you call people from New Mexico.”

“Uh, yes, the fuck it is. What the fuck do you think you call people from New Mexico?”

“Damn.” I wished I had not really said that. “I guess I never thought about it.”

“Idiot.”

“It sounds funny!” I barely tried to plead my case. “It sounds like some racist shit.”

“You’re a racist shit.”

“Fuck you.”

“It does look eerie out here. Dude, look at the water! Is that a sea snake?” Jarrod pointed just off the stern of the ship where the rudder wash was churning up the dark water.

“Sea snakes? We really are in hell. Where?” I said casually. I looked down below us, through the grating of the gun mount, 50 or so feet below us to the surface of the water, and no shit, he was not joking. It was a sea snake. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5... shoot there must have been a dozen or so below us. They were all over the place. And they looked huge. If they looked huge from 50 feet up, they must really be huge. “Holy moly!” I said with real excitement.

“Imagine falling overboard and being in the water with them.”

Jarrold's excitement matched my own.

"That makes me want to puke. Being overboard alone terrifies me but being in this shithole stretch of water surrounded by sea snakes and watching the ship take off into the abyss without you. Just fucking shoot me."

"No, dude, for real. Fucking shoooooooooot me. If I fall over this cursed fucking ship in this cursed fucking situation, shoot me right the fuck up. Take both machine guns, and point blank, dump 200 rounds into me, spray and pray. Tell GCO it was a Goddamn terrorist attack, and fucking sea snakes, and tell them I was sacrificing myself for the ship. We will both be heroes. He'll understand." This cracked us both up. Neither one of us was joking, however.

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"The ship's whistle makes this whole scene even more ominous."

"Another reason to kill me. Maybe if you shoot me while the ship's whistle is going off, they won't even hear it. You won't even have to explain yourself."

"What about when you go unaccounted for, and we have to turn over?" I said, challenging him.

"Just say I went to take a shit and never came back." I should not have questioned his train of thought.

"Word." We stared at the sea snakes contorting themselves in the rudder wash for a while. It was mesmerizing.

"How much pussy is there in Oman you think?" He asked. This was going to be my first real overseas port visit to the Middle East. I had pulled into Mexico on a warship before, and Hawaii, Guam, and Singapore, but I had a feeling this one was not going to be comparable to any of those.

"I've never been to Oman. Middle East country though, I would guess not much." This was my first deployment. Jarrold had been

on another before, but clearly this was going to be the first time either of us had liberty in Oman. This was the ship's first Middle East liberty port of the deployment. He likely would have a better idea than I would. I assumed he just wanted to talk about pussy, which was fair.

"Depending on where you're at in the Middle East, puss can be readily available. Bahrain. UAE. Israel. Plenty of puss and plenty of debauchery. I don't know about Oman though."

"It sounds like you would know better than I would. These fucking snakes are creeping me out, man," I said. "Christ, look at that one!" I pointed down through the grating. It looked like it was two or three times the length of the others. It must have been 18 feet long. I remember hearing about water moccasins swimming in lakes in Tennessee at dusk, but these things we were seeing here seemed like sea dragons compared to the thin black lines you may or may not see swimming next to you on the lake. These fuckers were thick, boy.

"Yugh. I can feel this sand in my teeth." Jarrod started smacking his lips together and flicking his tongue out.

"Yea, this is some bullshit. Oman better be worth it."

"Oh, like you're gonna get all picky now about where you enjoy your liberty? Liberty is liberty dude. You gotta make the best of it no matter where you go. Thtwoo!" He sent what he could of spit over the side of the gun mount.

"You better hold onto that saliva, Bruh."

"True. Spitting just made it even worse in my mouth. My tongue feels like a cement mixer."

"How bad could you go for a drink right now?"

"Scale of one to ten?"

"Yeah."

“Ten.”

“Bet, me too. Hopefully in a few hours from now we will be belly up to the bar with some belly dancers shaking that ass.” I suppose I was being hopeful of what Muscat had in store for us. Jarrod was right, I did not give a shit about where we were going. I just wanted to get off this damn boat. I just wanted a cold drink.

“What’s the first thing you’re going to drink when we get off?”

“I’d drink titty milk if I could right now, I’m so damn parched.”

“Bitch, you’d drink titty milk if you weren’t parched.”

“True. But, for real I don’t care. Maybe a beer and a shot of whiskey.”

“You’re about to be in port on the other side of the world, and you’re gonna drink the same shit you drink sitting on my couch?”

“I don’t fucking know man!” This was something I had not considered. It had been over a month since we were last in port where we could tie one on. Our last stop was Bangladesh, and there was no fun to be had. We were just crossing into the Indian Ocean from the Pacific, and a huge monsoon had just hit Bangladesh. Our course to the Persian Gulf was redirected to provide humanitarian assistance. It was all work and no play. It was rewarding though. As Americans we can forget how good we have it until we see a third world community go through one hell of a storm. These poor people did not even have drinking water until we showed up. We could help them with medical supplies and sustenance. They didn’t even have fresh water, but we helped them with that. The Marines helped provide security to enable distribution of the supplies we brought ashore, so the militias would not hoard all the goods we were providing. There was some mild disappointment from some Sailors when they realized our future liberty ports were going to be delayed. I admit I felt the same way at first, but when I saw all the good we were doing for these helpless people, the selfishness of my own plans was immediately set aside. That mission was the first time I felt real pride in our military’s capability.

“I’m drinking teqi...” Jarrod started.

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“What?”

“I’m drinking tequila.”

“Oh, real original. Middle East tequila, huh?”

“Shut up man. You’re right though. I’ll drink anything at this point.”

“Tequila, with a chaser of sand.”

“Yooo! We need to make up our own drink for this port! We will call it a sandstorm.” He was genuinely excited about this proposal.

“Alright, what’s in a sandstorm?”

“I don’t know. Tequila - and...”

“Tequila and some wild Omani spices.” I was not sure what that meant, but I figured this idea could flower into something unique and possibly enticing.

“Yeah, tequila and some Omani spices.” Jarrod was on the same page.

“I’m not sure what that means, but tequila is great with salt or tamarind. So, I am sure we can find some shit like that the locals dig.” I had my moments.

I put the sound powered phone headset back on, “All mounts, mount 9. We are making up a new drink for Muscat, and we need help with the final ingredient.”

“Mount 9, mount 1. What do you got so far?”

“Mount 1, mount 9. Tequila.”

“Damn, good start, son.” That was Loomis from mount 6. That unprofessional mother fucker did not announce himself appropriately before speaking. Not that we always do, but when Loomis fucked shit up, we liked to point that out because no one likes Loomis.

“Last station, say again,” I said into the net.

“This is mount 6, I said tequila was a good start,” Loomis responded. There was a collective of oooos and aaahhs over the net from the other mounts, it was all very sarcastic.

“This is mount 1, what type of drink are we thinking here?”

“I was thinking a shot or a cocktail, where you either mix the ingredient in, or you chase the shot with it, like how salt and lime is used to chase tequila with or mix in it,” I said.

“Wow, you guys put a lot of thought into this.” Mount 1 continued the sarcasm.

“Well, what do they eat and drink in Oman?” I was canvassing everyone now for some better input. There was silence on the net. The Sailors were digging deep into their bullshit container.

“Orange slices and coriander,” one mount suggested.

“Bananas and cumin,” said another.

“Melon and curry,” Loomis said.

“All mounts, mount 9. Jesus Christ, are you guys just naming fruits and spices?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Yup.

“Yeah. That banana and cumin though might be it boy,” said an

unannounced gun mount.

“What about, melon, and cumin? Tequila, melon, and cumin,” I proposed.

“Mount 9, mount 2. Is cumin even an Omani spice?” Ski said.

“It’s a world spice, who fucking cares?” I clapped back. “Stop being so cultured. We’re trying to get drunk here.”

“I don’t think anyone is getting drunk the way this sea and anchor is looking.” Ski stated the obvious.

“Don’t you put that fucking evil on us woman!” An unannounced mount said. It was not always easy to understand who was who over the net on these sound-powered phones. Plus, if you did not announce yourself and you said something crazy you would have plausible deniability at the risk of everyone having to pay for what was said. Except for Ski, because she was a woman, and Loomis because he had a real whiney bitch voice. Those two could not get away with saying anything wild.

“One more cuss word out of any mount and liberty will be secured until EMI is met,” said the GCO. EMI was extra military instruction, or in other words, punishment for an action.

“Last station, say again.” I do not know who said it, but they hit him with it, the madman. Good on them, whoever it was. I have my guess. The GCO did not utilize proper voice comms. Think, key, speak, hey you, it’s me. Know what you are going to say before you key the net. Then say it, but start by announcing who you are talking to, then who you are, then transmit message. Brevity, clarity, and being concise without clogging up the net was the foundation of proper voice communication in the Navy.

“All mounts, GCO. Silence on the net.” All the mounts ceased any noise over the net, although I know every damn Sailor listening wanted to say something smartass, or prophetic, or raunchy to the point of intended offense. And it was hard to offend most Sailors. One can imagine. I took the headphones off again.

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Jarrold and I looked at each other and rolled our eyes. Between transmissions I would fill in Jarrold, who was not on the net, with what was being said. This was a common courtesy to keep all on the mount part of the conversation. It became an art and science really, positively contributing and narrating the chatter of the average gun mount watch. I was the gun mount captain as the more junior of the both of us, only due to Jarrold relinquishing responsibilities so I could get more experience running the mount. Typically, the loader would handle the communications for the mount, but I was taking my turn, as over the course of a three to six hour watch we would take turns. This was done to keep things interesting, and to keep active involvement from both members of the gun mount. "Buoy." Jarrold nonchalantly pointed off the starboard quarter to a buoy with blue and yellow vertical stripes on it and a yellow cross on top. Lord knows what all that meant. It looked big from up here, again, suggesting that it must be relatively huge.

"Buoy aye," I said as I put the headphones back on. "GCO, mount 9. We just passed a buoy off the starboard quarter, maybe only twenty yards off the side of the ship." I was a Sailor, yes, but I was far from a master mariner. The term Sailor in the Navy only means that one is likely more familiar with life at sea, but this term does not guarantee that one knows what they are talking about when it comes to navigating the oceans. Shit, we have engineers that almost never see the light of day while at sea let alone aids to navigation or nautical charts. Yet, they are Sailors too.

"GCO, aye." I took the phones off after he said that, knowing he did not give a fuck about the report. The GCO was probably just as frustrated with the circumstances as we were. Although, I did not have to be a prudent mariner to know that taking a buoy down the side of our ship at less than 20 yards in zero visibility was likely not on purpose.

"So, Omani pussy." Jarrold was back at it.

"You need to get those rocks off or what big guy?"

“I’m just saying. Wondering what to expect.”

“Isn’t that part of the fun though, not knowing what you’re gonna get into out there?”

“Hell yes, it is. Liberty is the best mission in the Navy.”

“Any hookers are probably not Omani, first of all. They are probably from other countries and brought in.” I really did not know, but this was usually the case, I was told, in this part of the world.

“True. I’m cool with that.”

“You need to take a head call or something man? Empty those pipes?”

“Nah, Imma save it for local poon.”

“That poor girl.” We both had a laugh. This detail was dragging on far too long. We were expecting to be in port by now. The radio started chirping.

“All mounts, GCO. Establish comms on sound powered phones.” The other mounts had likely taken the headsets off as well, so GCO was broadcasting on our secondary comms, the radios, to get everyone on the net again. Jarrod was closest to the phones that were draped across the ready service locker (RSL). This is the locker that we keep the ammunition for the gun mount in which also holds necessary equipment to service the mount and to fight if we need to.

There was about a minute of Jarrod listening intently to what was being put out over the net. Whatever it was, it was not good. “Mount 9, aye,” Jarrod said. Just as soon as he passed that transmission the gun mount started to rattle and shake aggressively. The wake of the boat was starting to shift to the starboard quarter, astern of the vessel. The ship was coming about. “I got some bad news brother. We’re headed back out to sea. No liberty for the boys today.”

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“Fuuuuuuuuuck!” I exclaimed with almost the same four to six second burst and tone of the ship’s whistle.

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck!!” Jarrod said, louder and longer. “Apparently navigating into port is too dangerous in these conditions. The bridge is calling it and heading back out.”

“Fuck this Goddamned shit! Fuck this sand. Fuck these sea snakes. Fuck this part of the world.” All this talk of liberty I should have known this would happen. In the Navy one can never count their chickens before they hatch. Or hookers, or tequila shots, for that matter. One cannot count on a thing to happen operationally until it is happening. That was the name of the game in the Navy. A jinx was always only a radio transmission away.

“I’m definitely jerking off tonight.”

“I feel bad for whoever is sleeping in the rack above you.”

“Fuck Loomis, he’ll be alright. If we stay out to sea without hitting a liberty port much longer, I might literally fuck Loomis.” Jarrod was frustrated with this change in circumstance.

“I’ll tell you what. Whatever liberty port we hit next, I’m drinking so much Goddamned tequila, melon, and cumin, I’m going to drown in that shit.” I was frustrated too.

“Mount 9, aye,” Jarrod said into the phones.

“What was that?” I asked.

“It was Ski. She said I told you so, and liberty is secured.”

“What a bitch,” I said.

“What a bitch,” Jarrod said, shaking his head.

ABOUT THE WRITER:

CLEMENT VALOT is a 20-year veteran of the United States Navy. He is a Doctor of Criminal Justice from Keiser University. He stays in St. Mary's, GA where he is pursuing writing full time. He has three children, two dogs, and is happily married for fifteen years so far.

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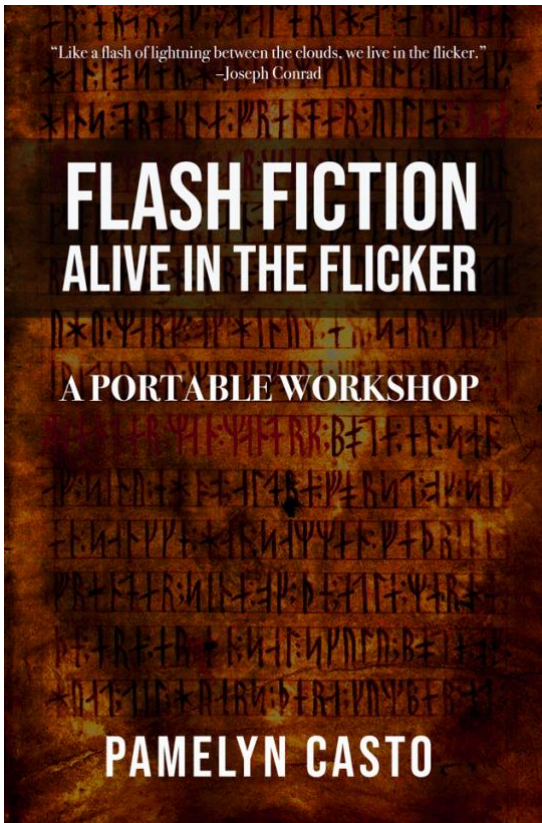
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