The First Time I Died

They made a big thing of it, telling how I hunted a Korean tiger and ran smack into a band of bandits

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Foam dripping from his ugly mouth, the huge wild boar got up out of the thick grass and lunged at me

A few months ago a news magazine referred to me as "the late Roy Chapman Andrews." That was the third time my demise has been anticipated in the public prints. It's been quite interesting to read my own obituaries, to be featured in a memorial service, and to see telegrams of condolence to my family. I find it mildly amusing, perhaps because I can still eat three square meals a day, wade a trout stream, and shoot as well as I ever could. Now, I'm perfectly sure that when I really do push off my friends won't believe it.

But of my three "deaths," the first, reported in 1912, was the only interesting one. There was some reason for that report, for I had disappeared into the wilderness of northeastern Korea and my return to civilization was long overdue. The American Museum of Natural History sent me out to explore the great forests just south of the Paek tu-san, or Long White Mountain, along the Manchurian frontier. It was terra incognita, for no white man had ever been in that area. Not only would the geographical results be important, but the museum hoped I would bring back a collection of mammals and birds, some of which probably would be new to science.

What particularly was wanted was a Korean tiger. At that time tigers ranged all over Korea, northward through Manchuria, and far up into Siberia. These northern tigers live most of the year in snow regions and are much lighter colored than the tropical beasts of South China and India. Their habits are quite different, too. They hole up in caves because most of Korea, except the north, is denuded of great forests. Virtually all the tigers are man-eaters. They trek from one village to another taking pigs, goats, cows, dogs, and, now and then, a human—children mostly.

But tigers weren't the only big game in Korea in those days. Bears, wild boars, and roe deer were fairly abundant. The hillsides near rice paddies swarmed with pheasants, and along the coast and inland lakes ducks and geese came in by the thousands. It wasn't a bad assignment for a young naturalist who loved shooting.

When I presented myself to the American consul general in Seoul and explained my mission, he didn't like it. He was a fussy old gentleman who was about to retire. A daily expedition from his office to the club was all the exploring he had ever done. He thought it a damned silly business for a youngster to bust off into the wilderness. Get into trouble, of course, and that meant embarrassment for the consulate. He said that a big force of bandits, operating along the headwaters of the Yalu River, often swooped down on the logging camps. The forests, moreover, were full of savage beasts just waiting to make a meal off a tender young explorer. All of which added fuel to my inner fire.

I must admit that the consul didn't exaggerate much, for I found all the terrors he had predicted and, in addition, was able to read my own death notice when I returned to civilization.

My adventures started when I heard that, not far from the edge of the great forests just south of the Tumen River, a tiger was harrying the Korean villages. By the time I arrived half a dozen children had been killed. The people welcomed me with open arms and gave me a fine old hunter, Paik. He had received the honorable title of sontair because he had killed a tiger single-handed with a spear.

The marauding tiger ranged over an area of about forty square miles. Paik suggested that we sit tight until the animal was reported at some village on his beat. News of a girl victim came shortly, and we hurried to the scene. The remains weren't pleasant to look upon, but the tiger had disappeared. Next day he killed a cow thirty miles away. Paik and I started over the mountains at daylight, but again the tiger had left. We made a fast trek of twenty-five miles trying to cut him off, only to discover that he had gone in the opposite direction.

(continued on page 76)

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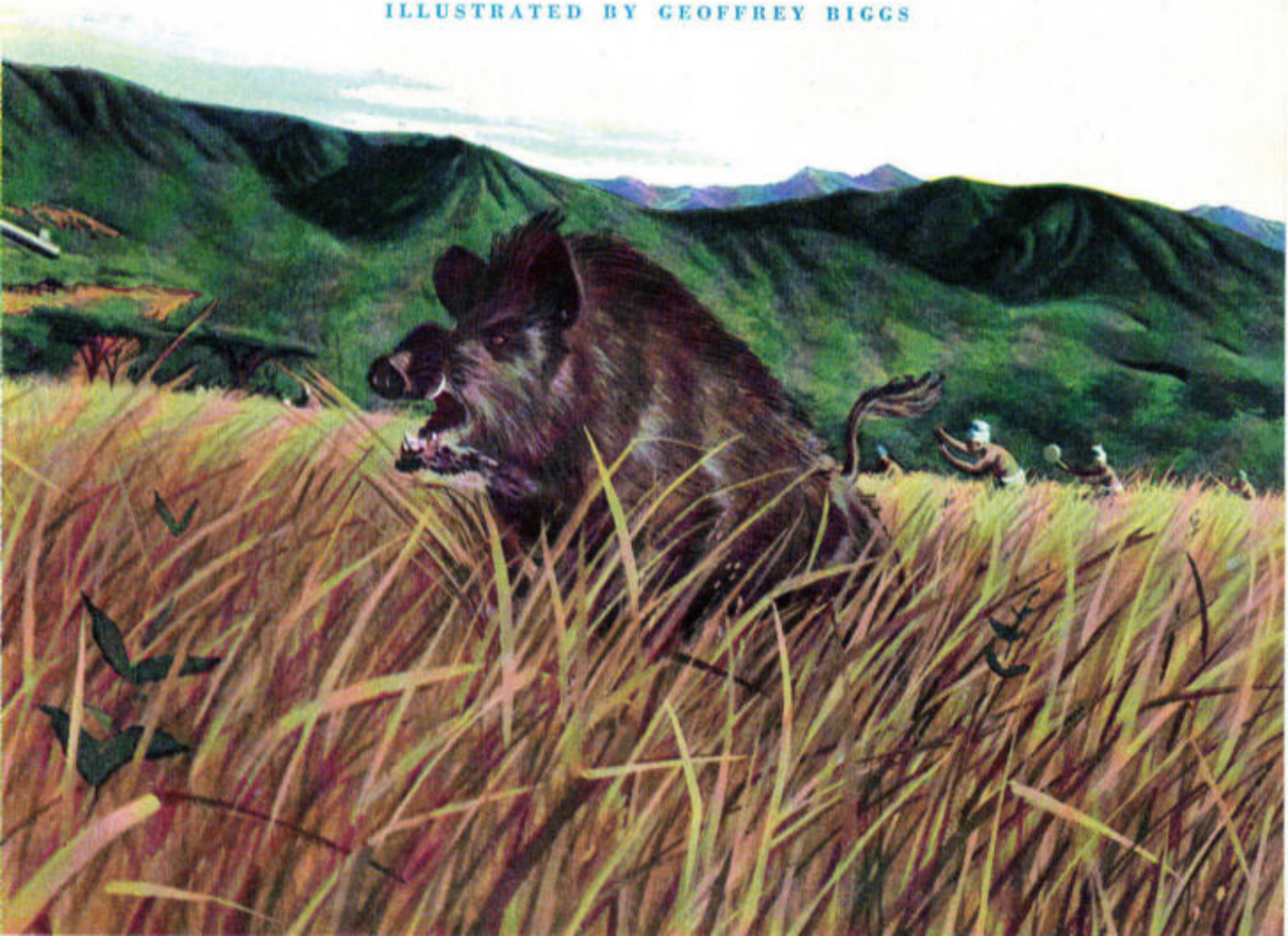

FIRST TIME I DIED

(continued from page 21)

After ten days of this sort of thing I felt we were chasing a will-o'-the-wisp, but eventually the three of us arrived in a village at the same time. I had hardly made camp before a native appeared, almost incoherent with excitement. He'd seen the tiger go into a cave not two miles away. It was only 10 a.m. and Paik said he was as good as ours already. The tiger would sleep until late afternoon, he explained, and then come out for a night raid. We would watch at the mouth of the cave.

The cave was a ragged hole about four feet high near the summit of a rocky limestone hill. Great pug marks, very fresh, showed in the sand at the entrance. The tiger was in there, without a doubt. About 4 p.m. we sat down to wait for him, concealed behind a clump of bushes. The sun set, and it grew dark, but there was moonlight and the tiger couldn't possibly get out unseen. It was a long night. Once I heard the faint sound of a rolling pebble, but nothing happened. In the first gray light of dawn we examined the dirt in the cave's mouth. There were no new tracks.

"If he won't come out," Paik announced in a matter-of-fact tone, "we'll go in and get him." Just like that!

I was tired and hungry and almost scared pink at the thought of crawling into that cave. When Paik said, "Are you going?" I gave him an evasive answer. He urged me, and I became more explicit. I told him to go to hell. He stared. "You've got a flashlight," he said. "The tiger won't charge a light. He'll be frightened." Well, I was frightened too, awfully frightened. I kept quiet.

"I'll be behind you with my spear," Paik went on, as though that made everything all right. I gave him a still more evasive answer. Then he lost patience. "If you're afraid, give me your rifle and I'll go in alone," he said. His face told me just what he thought of white men who pretended they were brave and wanted to kill a tiger. That was a bit too much. "Let's go," I said in a husky voice, and picked up my rifle. That rifle, incidentally, was a Winchester .405 which Teddy Roosevelt had recommended. He'd used a similar one to shoot lions in Africa.

We had to crawl on hands and knees, for the cave was only shoulder-high. I went first, rifle in one hand, flashlight in the other. Paik followed with his spear advanced. It was advanced so far that, to my intense annoyance, it kept pricking me in the rear. I wouldn't swear he did it on purpose, but I suspect him strongly.

There was a small chamber about twenty feet from the entrance of the cave. It was full of a sickening smell of rotting meat which almost suffocated me. But no tiger. A passage veered sharply to the left. I felt certain the cat was waiting there ready to claw me when I turned the corner. Paik seemed to know I'd lost my nerve and advanced his spear more strongly.

I edged around the rock, sticking my flashlight out at arm's length. No tiger, thank God! The passage led on, dipping slightly. I saw a faint gray patch of daylight in the distance. The beast was not at home! We emerged on the other side of the peak in a deep gorge filled with boulders which concealed the opening of the cave. Pug marks showed plainly in the soft sand, all leading out. Evidently the tiger had scented us at the main entrance and had quietly slipped out the back door. We heard of him next day at a village twenty miles away where he had killed again.

Once we thought we had him lying out in a thick jungle of grass. A Korean ran breathlessly into camp saying that he'd seen the beast go into the grass. Gathering twenty natives with pans and gongs, we prepared to drive the place. I told the beaters not to begin until I reached a knoll overlooking the high grass. But in the excitement they started while I was still on the level. Suddenly, with a terrific rush, a huge animal lunged straight at me. I fired quickly. The beast rolled over, but it was up again in a second and I found myself looking into the bloodshot eyes of a wild boar. Foam dripped from his gnashing tusks. He made no false motions; he meant business. My second bullet caught him in the neck, and he fell not five feet from the muzzle of my rifle.

In all this confusion the tiger escaped, but the Koreans were almost as pleased as though I'd killed the man-eater. They are afraid of wild boars, and not without reason, for I saw several natives who had received almost fatal wounds from the ugly beasts. I weighed the boar in sections at the village. It totaled 450 pounds.

We never did get the tiger. I hunted him persistently for three weeks, but he was a better traveler than I was. Completely exhausted from hard going and lack of sleep, I had to give him up. My experience convinced me that the only practical time to hunt these northern tigers is during the winter when they can be tracked in the snow.

After the tiger episode I went to the edge of the great forest and engaged four Koreans with eight ponies for the trek to the Long White Mountain. The men were extremely reluctant to go with me. They were afraid we'd get lost and die of starvation. My compass, of course, they could not understand.

The larch forest was a pretty grim place—swamps and surface water, lush ferns, and trees festooned with long streamers of gray moss. There were no birds or animal life, not even a

squirrel. It rained continually. The Koreans became frightened and threatened to desert with the horses while they could still find their way home, and I had to watch them every night. It was only when we reached the Long White Mountain that the strain relaxed.

There I killed a bear, the first game we saw. I was sitting on a log when he came ambling along. I waited until he was only thirty feet away, and then sent a .405 bullet into his heart. That bear still haunts me, for I didn't give him a chance and he never knew what hit him. But we needed meat badly, and to a Korean or a Chinese bear paws are a great delicacy. That bear did much to improve the morale of my men. They feasted like children, forgetting for a time that they were far from home and mother.

On my return I struck through the wilderness to the headwaters of the Yalu River and there, while hunting roebuck, stumbled into the camp of eight Manchurian bandits. They were tall, brown, hard-bitten chaps armed with flintlock rifles and wicked-looking knives. They had me covered from half a dozen points before I knew it. There was nothing to do but try to bluff it out. Fortunately, I knew a little Chinese. I said I was a friend, laid down my rifle, and advanced. I told them my camp was only a couple of miles away and wouldn't they like to pay me a visit?

My men were petrified with fright when I appeared in camp with the bandits. I told the cook to cook as he never had cooked before, and to prepare a dinner of venison and rice. The bandits seemed pleased. When they looked over our stuff, the bird skins and mice and rats intrigued them enormously. But there was absolutely nothing of ours they could use except my rifle, so they let us go.

The next day we struck the bank of the Yalu, which at this point is only a rushing mountain torrent, and followed its winding course to the first lumber camp on the edge of Korean civilization. Since I had no further use for the men I sent them back, and after they'd gone I floated downstream on a huge log raft, sleeping in a little bark hut. I drowsed in the sun, caught fish, shot ducks, and lived like a king.

I reached Antung on the west coast, at the mouth of the Yalu, dressed in Korean clothes and wearing straw sandals on my feet, and I kept this rig on until I arrived at the Sontag Hotel in Seoul. The manager thought he was seeing a ghost. He told me that I was officially dead. My clothes and personal effects were in the hotel baggage room awaiting shipment to America. I couldn't have been more astonished. Certainly I was long overdue, but it never entered my head that the delay would be taken seriously. But it was, chiefly because I'd given the museum director an approximate time for my return to Seoul.

Day after day went by, and still no cable. At last he got the wind up. He telephoned to the State Department, and the American consul general in Seoul was asked to investigate. The consul dispatched an aide to Seishin, on the east coast, which is where I had started into the interior. The aide was the late Eddie Neville, who eventually became counselor of the American Embassy in Tokyo and one of my best friends.

Eddie got plenty of news. First, he learned of the tiger episode. Then he went inland to the half-ruined town of Munsan where he heard an amazing story. The Koreans who had accompanied me on the trek had returned home from the Yalu to find themselves heroes because they'd traveled to the slopes of the Paek tu-san, where no one had been before. But, not content with that, they told of a terrible fight with bandits in which I had been killed and they had barely escaped.

Eddie was new in the Orient at that time. Nevertheless, making due allowance for exaggerations, he assumed that I really was dead since I had not returned with the Koreans. The consul general cabled Eddie's report to Washington and to the museum. My friends were sorrowful, and you can imagine what the news did to my mother and father. They decided eventually that since there was no corpus delicti to be buried in the family cemetery at Beloit, Wis., they would hold a memorial service in the Baptist church.

This pledge should be recited regularly by school children and by all patriotic groups to inspire every American to save our irreplaceable natural resources

My "death" notices stressed the fact that I was a brilliant student (a gross exaggeration) and bemoaned the tragedy that such a promising life had been cut off in its prime. Since I had "died" in the line of duty I would forever stand as an example for the youth of the community. I was greatly pleased with it all. It's a pity they can't tell you those things while you're alive. It was strange to read about myself as though I were another person. The printed word carries such conviction that when I'd finished reading, I began to wonder if I really hadn't died and returned to earth in some other body. Perhaps I wasn't me, after all. But that was only the first time I "died." The next time was different, and the third time it was no novelty at all.

THE END