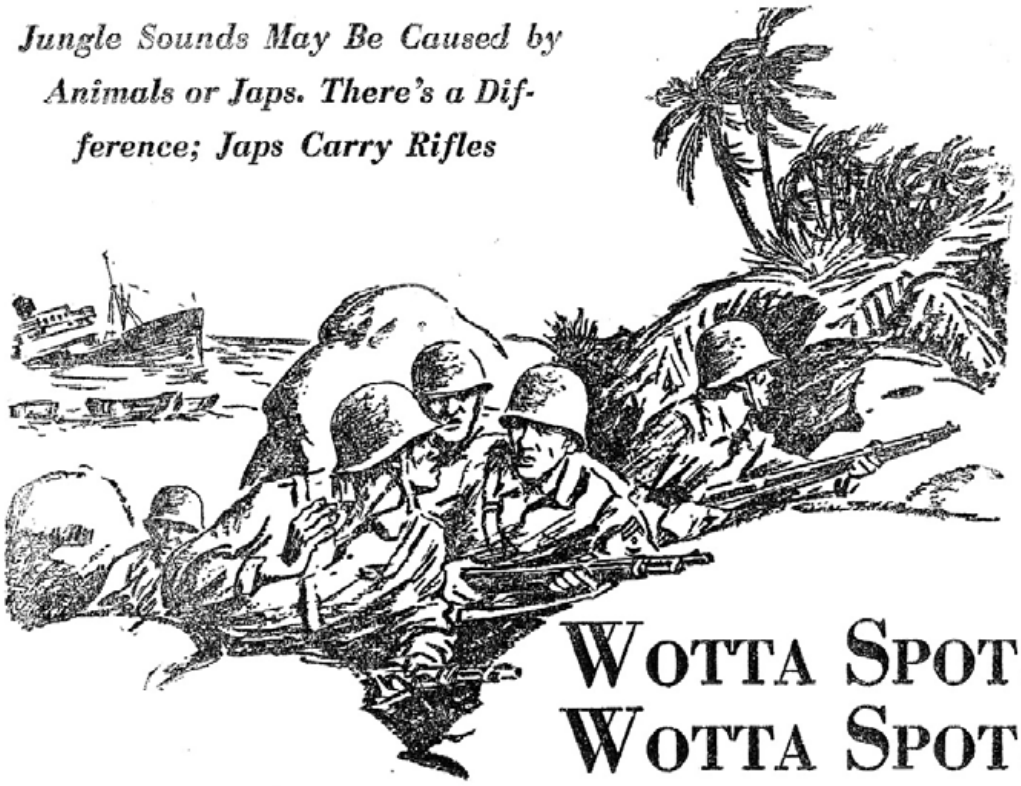

WOTTA SPOT! WOTTA SPOT!

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "The Honorable Williwaw," etc.

"WOTTA spot to be in! Wotta spot!" The sergeant whispers his complaint because there are sounds of life out there in the dark jungle, and the sounds may be caused by animals or Japs. There's a difference. The Japs carry rifles.

The sergeant wipes his face on his sleeve and again moans, "Wotta spot! Japs closin' in on three sides! No grub! Ammunition about gone and us stuck with an ancient history professor for a commandin' officer."

I feel the same way. We're as good as dead and it all happened because some army clerk, with his mind on women instead of war, balled up the paper work and sent Professor J. Kemper Bringhurst to a combat outfit instead of to a university where they are training guys to be military governors.

When the prof first shows up in camp, he don't make sense from any angle. The American Legion button on his coat shows he'd been in the last brawl. In color he looks like somethin' found in a cave where they age cheese—sort of yellow and mildewed. He has two red corpuscles which rush to his cheeks when he's excited—which isn't often.

Some claimed scientists had made a bet you could get a mummy drafted if you'd warm it up to a 98.6 degrees temperature and make it breathe. And that the prof was the mummy. That was a foul rumor, though you couldn't blame the guys for believing it. J. Kemper Bringhurst got himself inducted.

When he showed up for basic training, the brass hats knew a mistake had been made and started investigating. We

expected Bringhurst to fall apart in basic, but he held together. Not a bad guy, either, if you needed a kindly uncle to ship you packages from home, but no good as a commanding officer.

If you've been in the army you know how a flock of links—all bad—can lead into a chain of events. The brass hats hadn't investigated fast enough, and Bringhurst was our skipper when we were shipped to port of embarkation. The guy on the wharf waving a telegram as we shoved off might have had the prof's recall orders or a pardon from some governor. We never found out.

On the voyage we learned he lived and breathed ancient history. He'd get his pipe going, then start talking in his deliberate way and the first thing you knew you'd be touring Syracuse in a chariot, or telling Archimedes that one about the whiskey drummer and farmer's daughter.

A guy like that had to have a hobby or go nuts. The prof had one—weapons of the ancients. If you'd just mention catapult, the two red corpuscles would leap to his cheeks and a beautiful light would come to his eyes. You've seen the same light in a young mother's eyes when she sees her first baby. "Ah," he would murmur tenderly, "the catapult, not as powerful as the ballista, but more uniform in range. They were used as late as the eighteenth century. One was used by General Melville in the siege of Gibraltar. He dropped rocks on the Spanish. We get our word ballistics from ballista. These machines—the fathers, we might say, of our artillery—lacked mobility, but some were capable of projecting a rock weighing several hundred pounds as much as a half mile. Projecting, by the way, fathers the word, projectile."

HE WOULD pause, take a couple of deep drags on the pipe, then add, "Not all of the weapons devised by the ancients have gone through progressive stages of design that is exemplified by the ballista. I was reminded of that in the last war when I observed the French seventy-fives in action. If one of Archimedes' rather potent ideas had been given the benefit of two thousand odd years of similar experiment and study, I've often wondered—but this is no time for speculation."

The prof never got around to details, and we weren't interested in Archimedes' deals, though some of our boys are throwing the Romans out of his old stamping grounds, and he'd like that.

"Wotta spot! Wotta spot!" the sergeant moans again. "Where's Bringhurst? Out looking for a ballista?"

"We could use one at that," I tell him. "A quarter ton rock lobbed into that ammunition the Japs are piling up might touch it off. Bringhurst took a detail and said something about going back to the transport."

"Mebbe he *is* after a ballista," the sergeant mutters. "I said, 'Cap'n, on account of the fortunes of war, we're on a spot. What'd we better do? We're about out of ammunition, and we can't throw rocks without a ballista.' That was sarcasm, but he took it in stride, and said, 'When you run out of ammunition, use your imagination, Archimedes did'."

Forty-eight hours ago the transport had sneaked into the channel. The idea was to set us ashore on an inky black night. We were to take Point X on the chart and hold it. By holding Point X our troops could land themselves and their heavy stuff on a curving, sandy beach, with a minimum of surf. The Japs weren't expecting us to attack this particular island. That's why we were doing it.

About the time we got the landing barges over the side, a Jap task force jumped our main transport group. That was a mistake, because our cruisers and cans

just about tore the hide off of the Japs. One of their destroyers, hunting cover, came down the channel and almost ran down our ship. When they recovered from their surprise they eased a spread of torpedoes at us, and two hit.

Our cans picked up most of the boys. With water up to the boat deck, and our ammunition and supplies below, the deal was off. The men who had landed on Point X were done for unless they could hang on until support came. A Jap float plane got a clear picture the next morning, and by noon, they were pouring it to us—the idea being to blunt the point of our spearhead.

Now you understand why the sergeant is annoyed and keeps moaning, "Wotta spot!"

Dawn finds us alive and crouched among heavy boulders. The sun's rays are hot enough to boil coffee—if we had any coffee. We look at the wrecked transport. The tide is low and a couple of decks below the boat deck are clear. There's no sign of life aboard. "Where's our ballista-huntin' C. O.?" the sergeant growls. "Chances are him and the detail was drowned, or the Japs got 'em."

We put in the day watching a seemingly lifeless jungle. There's plenty of life there, though. Jap snipers ready to pick us off the instant we show our positions by shooting. The pile of supplies they're building up has grown to a dump during the night.

The picture is clear. They know our main body is going to land in that cove, regardless of cost. They plan to wipe out our bunch, take over the point, and be all set with guns, ammunition and supplies. In the meantime why waste more ammunition on us?

Night comes after the longest day any of us had ever known and we get set for dirty work. Nothing happens. The Japs figure it's in the bag and put in the night bringing up supplies. Midnight a sentry challenges and the prof answers. The detail is coming up a cliff, and hauling up several crates with ropes. "You'd think them crates was filled with eggs, they're that careful," the sergeant says. "Knocked-down ballistas, mebbe. Wotta spot!"

The prof and detail drop in their tracks, they're that exhausted. An hour before dawn they're awake and as excited as a bride on her wedding morn. "Whatcha got?" the sergeant asks. "Some kind of a death ray? If it's ammunition you brought, it won't last long."

"This kind of ammunition will last plenty long," someone answers,

BY ten o'clock the gear is all set up, and we're studying the jungle for snipers. The Japs know their stuff when it comes to camouflage. "Ain't that one?" the sergeant asks, pointing. He hasn't made up his mind whether to regard Bringhurst as his captain, or a professor.

"Let's find out," Bringhurst answers.

It looks like a bunch of leaves to me, but suddenly that bunch of leaves comes to life, yells like a painted Indian, cuts loose and drops. The sniper was killed by the fall. Some of us grin, some laugh out loud, but the professor has a class-room expression on his face. You'd never guess he'd been in the last war and had raised hell at American Legion conventions. He mutters, "Interesting and—confirmatory, too." He makes several notes.

"Captain," the sergeant says. The prof is captain for the sergeant's dough from now on. "Captain, ain't that another?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Bringhurst says. A few minutes later another Jap yells bloody murder and cuts loose. Inside a half hour seven snipers have bit the dust, and you can hear Jap jabber all through the jungle. They figure we have a death ray that works.

"We will now make some adjustments," Bringhurst says. "From the sound of things, I'm confident the Japs are planning to shell us. The point is to cause a maximum of damage in a minimum of time."

"It wouldn't take much of a shellin' to knock the hell out of your Archimedes ballista, Cap'n," the sergeant says. "Wotta spot! Wotta spot!" His tone is different. You can tell he'd rather be on this spot than anywhere else in the world.

The adjustments take about an hour, then Bringhurst says, "You men will retire to points under the cliffs." When he sees some of us don't like the idea of leaving him alone, he adds, "That is an order. Be careful not to expose yourselves. There may be a Jap sniper or two left."

We crawl until overhanging rocks protect us, then we wait.

Did you ever hear an ammunition dump go up? It's the swellest sound in the world—if it ain't your dump. This one was the Japs'. First a few lusty blasts, then one hell of a roar, then a flock of little explosions—sort of after-thoughts.

It rains debris for a half mile in every direction, and sets the jungle on fire. When the last hunk splashes into the sea, the sergeant leads the rescue party. We lift up cocoanut tree logs, slabs of rock and find parts of the Archimedes ballista. Then we find Bringhurst crouched under a tangle of boulders. He's dazed, but he ain't hurt, except for scratches and bruises.

He's half conscious and is delivering a class-room lecture in Greek, which none of us can understand except Nick Pourtales, and he can only understand the words, not the subject. It's something about guys named Eratosthenes and Aristarchus. There's a gag about Archimedes watching his legs float in a bath tub. It don't add up.

After awhile he snaps out of it, and he's all veteran of World Wars I and II. "We got the dump, eh? Good! Good! For a time I wasn't sure. It required minute adjustments to the last to concentrate the maximum—" Now he was a professor of ancient history again. But what the hell, we'd tossed the Japs back on their fannies, hadn't we? And those planes coming over for a look-see weren't Zeros. They were carrier-based American jobs. The main landing force was over the horizon, and when the boys got ready to land, the way was clear.

"Where'd you get the idear, Captain?" the sergeant asks.

"From Archimedes," Bringhurst answers. "He's one of my favorite people. Invented a water pump by a rotating helix in a cylinder."

"A rotatin' –what? Skip it."

"Watching his legs displace water in a bath tub, he discovered the theory of displacement. He leaped from the tub and went down the street yelling, 'I've found it! Eureka'!"

"Without a towel, sir?"

"Without a towel!" the captain answered.

"He knew something about burning glasses, too. When the Roman fleet attacked Syracuse he rigged up burning glasses and mirrors and set the boats on fire. I've often wondered why something hasn't been developed along that line."

"So far as me and the Japs can see," the sergeant said, "there ain't nothing wrong with what you done with some mirrors and searchlight lenses from a torpedoed transport." I've never seen him happier. He couldn't have looked more pleased in a private dining room with a bottle of whiskey and a wild woman. He looks at the hole left by the exploding dump, then at the burning jungle and finally at Bringhurst. "Wotta spot!" he says. "Wotta spot!"