

*Before he could reap the rewards of police department glory,  
ex-Marine Johnny Tobin had to make a . . .*

# Tarawa Payoff

*By H. Wolff Salz*



THE pain-reddened fog lifted from his eyes slowly. Lying on his back, he stared up at towering dark buildings and thought, "What the hell are brick warehouses doing on Tarawa?"

His hands groped out beside him and he thought. "What's a concrete sidewalk doing where hot sands ought to be?"

The pain, though—the numbing pain that sliced upward from his hip to the base of his skull, and the wet sticky feel of leaking blood under him—that was unchanged.

He remembered slowly, a little incredulously, like reality probing tentative fingers into a nightmare. Tarawa and the hunk of Jap shrapnel in his hip were five months behind him. This was the States, and he was back on the force, where he'd been before the Marines. Before Guadalcanal, New Guinea, Tarawa.

No sense to it. Why was he stretched on his back staring at the stars? Why the fire in his hip? The leaking blood? Why was his head going around like a Fourth-of-July pinwheel?

*Take it easy, Johnny Tobin. Take it easy.*

Remember Gin-Eye Macklin? They had told Johnny about Corporal Wesley "Gin-Eye" Macklin when he woke up on the hospital ship steaming back to Hawaii. Johnny would have bled to death where he fell on the beach, if Corporal Gin-Eye

hadn't scuttled out into the open in the face of blistering machine-gun fire and dragged Johnny back into the foxhole.

*You never did thank Gin-Eye for that little service.*

What's the connection with *now*? With city sidewalks and dark warehouses? With the knifing pain in his hip and his head going around like a B-24 prop?

Scraps of memory penetrated the fog of pain like fast-moving scenes through a rain-drenched train window. Ruth. She hadn't wanted to marry him. No, that wasn't right. She had wanted him to get a cushy office job. "Weren't the foxholes and jungles and Japs enough excitement for you! Must you live your whole life doing a job where you'd never know when some rat's bullet will reach out for you in the dark!"

They had compromised. If he became a sergeant in six months she'd marry him. "If you get the promotion," she'd agreed. "I'll at least know there's more of a future for you on the force than a lifetime of pounding pavements."

*What's the connection with Corporal Gin-Eye, Johnny?*

If his head weren't going around so fast maybe he could think. Corporal Gin-Eye Macklin. He was a hero, coming home. The Congressional Medal. Something about knocking off forty monkeys and bringing a Jap general back alive. It was all in the newspapers. Corporal Gin-Eye was a local boy. He got a big spread, like he deserved.

JOHNNY TOBIN sat up suddenly. His lungs emptied of air in a gasp of agony as pain blitzed his nerves. The body was still there, awkward, lifeless, its middle-aged face white in the pale glow of the street lamp at the mouth of the alley, exactly as it had been before Johnny passed out. Like the words in the song, it all came back to him now.

He'd been patrolling along quiet, respectable Parkmoor Place when the man darted from the dark house and ran for a car. The second man who came from the house was wounded, shot in the shoulder. He had blurted out the details to Johnny. He'd come home late with his wife and discovered the crook robbing his wall safe. The crook had fired one shot and escaped without the loot.

But he had left an apple core in the safe.

Johnny had used the house owner's roadster in the wild chase. Dark streets, screaming tires, around corners on two wheels, and finally to this river warehouse district.

Johnny had known who the crook was. The Apple Eater. The man who had robbed a hundred wealthy homes and always left his queer signature behind. An apple core. The man whose long series of jewel thefts had the top men on the force tearing their hair. And the commissioner had promised a promotion to the man who ended the Apple Eater's career.

He remembered thinking, as he sent a slug into the fleeing car's rear tire, *This guy's for you, Ruth, for the promotion the commissioner promised, and the wedding bells and orange blossoms.*

It all came back to him now—with a wrench that twisted his heart and a lump that choked his throat. The leap out of the roadster as the fleeing sedan crashed into a store window. His quick shots as the Apple Eater jumped out of his car and

darted for the alley. The crook's answering shots, and the slug that knifed into his thigh and crumpled him to the sidewalk. Then his last shot that brought the crook down like a clay pigeon.

The Apple Eater was dead when Johnny reached his side, from a slug that had gone through his heart.

Johnny remembered the slug. Biting his lips against the pain that cut through his body, he crawled towards it, scooped it up and went back to the dead man's side. From the distance came the wail of sirens.

Johnny fought off the dizziness that returned with his movements. He wrenched the crook's gun from the stiffening fingers and laid his own gun on the cold hand. Painfully, he groped across the sidewalk, found the lip of the sewer at the curb and tossed the dead man's revolver in. The death slug from his own gun followed it.

The sirens were approaching fast. He inched back to the lifeless body, fumbled through the dead man's pockets. Nothing incriminating. Only one thing left to do before the enveloping fog overwhelmed him. The wallet and letter that still lay on the sidewalk beside the body had to be returned to the dead man's pocket.

The wallet with the identification card that said, *Lester R. Macklin*. And the V-mail letter that had traveled halfway around the world from the South Pacific. The letter that started, *Dear Pop* and was signed, *Gin-Eye*.

Corporal Gin-Eye Macklin, who was following his letter home as a hero.

Two squad cars arrived at the same time. Somebody put an arm around Johnny, held him up.

Johnny heard himself talking, in a voice that sounded as if it came from a tomb. "The Apple Eater . . . chased him . . . shot his tire. He ran to alley. I followed. He got me. That man . . . lying there . . .

was walking by . . . tried to help me . . . took my gun . . . started to chase Apple Eater. Apple Eater shot and killed him. Got away.”

He heard a gruff voice growl, “Practically had the Apple Eater in his hands and let him get away! How do you like that!”

Another voice said, “You mean how’ll the commissioner like that!”

The first voice said, “This dead guy, here. He sure had guts, grabbing Tobin’s

gun and going after the Apple Eater. Plenty guts! Like a hero, if you ask me.”

Somebody was helping Johnny to his feet. A tourniquet had been tied around his thigh. They were helping him towards a squad car. There was a blur in front of his eyes. The spinning wouldn’t stop. What was it he wanted to say to the dead man? He couldn’t seem to think.

“That was for Gin-Eye,” he murmured. “For services rendered.”