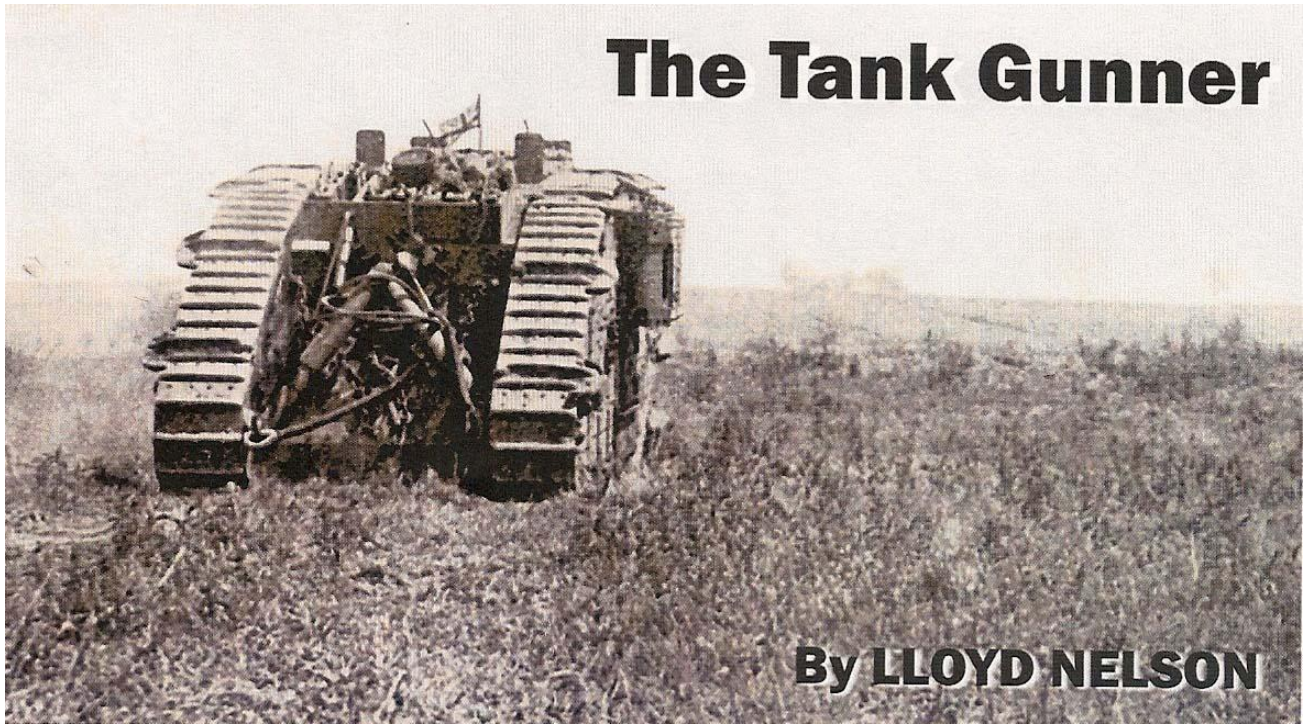


# **The Tank Gunner**



**By LLOYD NELSON**

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by  
Lloyd Nelson

Richard Hartigan, Lieutenant, Batchelor of Commerce (L.S.E) is chewing the fat with his British Tank Crew in Baghdad. The big shootings over, they are now into running in hard to take out the odd pocket of resistance; its all getting a tad boring Richard thinks. He's used to working under extreme pressure on offensives; fires his cannon, machine guns and the odd RPG when it's called for. He's always been a great natural shot, whether he is using tank guns, shotguns or telescopic sighted carbines. The crew calls him Dead Eye Dick and he works hard at maintaining a good hit average, lest his mob turn on him and start calling him Dick Dead Eye as in Gilbert and Sullivan's H.M.S. Pinafore. Right now, as he's sipping his mug of char, Brit dispatch riders pull in. The flimsy tells him to report immediately to the Tank Command in the area, later to be known as the green zone. He hops on the back of the motor bike and within minutes, walks into the CO's office. Major Richmond is closeted with a tall American soldier, a rifleman by the look of his patches.

He meets Benjamin Graham, Chicago born and as smart as a whip. The Major explains that the Yanks need a good rifleman for a series of hits they have planned among the Sunni's that are causing the invaders just so much trouble. Thus a few days later he and Graham, just the two of them, are well into ruins in the Northern Suburbs of Baghdad and they are on the look-out for a party that, according to their Intel will pass close by where they are hiding, fairly soon. Graham produces a computer picture of their main target.

"Let me tell you about him," Benjamin says.

"No need," says Richard. "I can tell what he looks like from his picture, and I need to know no more. By the way, we are out on a hell of a limb here. Here's hoping the party we are laying for are not numerous."

"No worries," Benjy says. "My sat phone can get a chopper here in seven minutes from when I press the button."

"Hmmm," Richard says. "Perk up, something's moving now."

The weapon Hartigan is using is a very rare one. Its Russian made, has only two shots in the magazine, a very long thin scope and is a fairly small caliber, but also very long range. They're so rare that Fort Meade has only three of these and this one is on loan from them. He picks up the image of the fat little Shiite Cleric, ID's him easily and puts a shot through his temple. Benjy follows up with an RPG right on the other two. Their targets are now history and they crawl under their camouflage net and sit pat until dark. Benjy produces a bottle of Bourbon to ease the pain of waiting. Richard spends the next ten days on this work; it's a very productive bit of clandestine shooting on his part.

"You have a great nose for this type of work," Benjy says. "I could find you a very lucrative job when the present run of duty is over."

At the end of this patch of work, the day he is due to go back to his Tank, Benjy hands him a fat envelope stuffed with US bills. (He counts it later, there's a quarter million dollars in it.)

"What's this?" Richard asks.

"Oh it's a thank you from the CIA," he replies. "We'd never of got that guy without you."

"This is ridiculous," Hartigan says. "You're giving me a heap of money for something I'm here to do anyway, besides, I hear the good old US of A is financing this little war by selling US bonds to the Chinese. This is surely profligate spending."

"Absolutely," Benjy says. "That is what the Republic does best; spend money on ill thought out wars."

After a period back with his Tank Group at Fallujah, the insurgency in Iraq really picks up the pace and he is returned to Baghdad and back on sniping for the Yanks. He never does work out who is calling the shots, but it seems that Benjamin Graham is very well connected with the very best allied intelligence sources in the Capital. Thus he helps nearly a dozen Iraqis shuffle off this mortal coil. All the shots are long distance ones and Richard finds these easy, all with his Russian Kasmirov long range gun. It's a basic and thin looking bit of ordnance, but the technology is world class and there is no bulk in the gun. It breaks easily into two parts and in some cases he tucks it into his jacket and moves to the job hands free. Benjamin has a heart to heart with him in the spring. He's off back to the States.

"Richard," he says. "We have a great need for your skills in the good old Republic. We will know before you do when your stint here comes to an end. We've scoped your academic attainments. Why not book into some University in the US, we'll pay you a monthly up front retainer into whatever tax haven account you nominate and just whistle you up for the same sort of jobs you've been doing here, when we need you. Big money for accurate shooting and with you, we've never yet seen you miss the nominated target."

Thus a year later, Richard is the satisfied owner of Orchard Lane House at Burton on the Water in the Cotswolds. It's a magic little village, the tiny river Windrush, it's just a stream actually, but a constant one, flows down the main street under low bridges beside soft trees and lawns. The roads are well lined by mellow Cotswold stone cottages. It's an idyllic snapshot of the best English landscape as one could wish for. These cottages don't come cheap, but thanks to the wads of cash the CIA or whoever, has been passing to him he has made the purchase of the cottage and the main contents from a deceased estate. Inside of it, is Aubusson carpets, fine and quite graceful antique pieces and some marvellous water colours. He has done over the antique and art shops in Cheltenham and has acquired some exquisite mixed media originals in water colour and pastel. This adds colour over and above pure water colour. 'It's the coming thing,' he thinks. He hands over the keys of the cottage to a well known local looker-after of uninhabited cottages and flies out to Washington DC, to take up a course in English Literature at Georgetown University.

This is money for old rope to Richard. He is a very keen reader and can see absolutely no hardship in doing an academic course in something he is very, very partial to. It will make a nice change to studies of hard economic facts at the LSE. He's there near two months when Benjamin Graham gets in touch. They meet at a very discreet Georgetown restaurant. Benjy lays out the job. It's a water one. He wants Richard to pot a man walking his dog on a long sweep of lawn below the Bluff's on the high side of the Potomac. Thus, Friday morning, Benjy is steering a Chris Kraft pleasure boat upriver and Richard is straddling a stool inside the cabin. He is resting the Russian rifle on a cross piece of timber and sighting out through an open porthole. The river is relatively calm and Benjy is running along a bit better than idling. The mark is throwing a stick for his black Labrador to fox and is seemingly enjoying his riverside walk, when Hartigan squeezes the trigger, oh so softly, and head shoots him. Benjy softly says, "Shot, Dickie," and doesn't vary the boat pace at all. They head upriver to a boat house haven and tuck the Chris Kraft away. They're probably just in time. Along the Potomac choppers come and go all the time, generally at a bit of height. Minutes after they dock and shut the door, a low and intent looking search chopper comes speedily upstream. By mid morning, Richard is back in his classroom very much richer, that is, if the promised money turns up in his Channel Islands bank account.

He does four more of these jobs over summer and so lucrative are these, Richard gets in touch with Arnold Wise at Young in New South Wales. They were good friends in Iran when Arnold was there with the Australian Contingent, who worked the back blocks. The Yanks are so pleased to have the Aussies along, that they don't hard task them. Richard never runs across the Aussies in the field, but he meets Arnold in Cairo when on leave and doing the Nile. They remain good friends and Arnold, who is the younger son of a Young farmer tells Richard of his life ambition to buy a property there.

"Whereabouts?" Richard asks.

"Oh, Mudgee would be good. You can grow grapes there, as well as farm and it's a coming area."

"Where the hell is Mudgee?" Richard asks.

"It's about 60 miles northish of Bathurst; a bit up from where gold was discovered in Australia."

With so much shooting money banked in the Channel Islands, he thinks he should invest some in something that won't go away. He writes Arnold – 'what would a good size farm cost and could you make a go of share farming it with me?' Thus he acquires the freehold of Tower Hill at Mudgee and unusually, the stock and plant. These are usually separate deals in Australia. It left Richard a bit short of the readies, so caution takes a back seat when Benjy wants him in a job unlike any Richard has essayed so far. Up until now, he has been a long distance removalist, in effect. He shoots his targets at long range. It's very clean and uninvolved and he always has ample time to vacate the scene before anyone comes looking.

This job is to shoot a jogger in Central Park, New York City. It's different also in that a feeling of urgency exists. Richard sets out dressed in shorts,

joggers and a cream New York University jumper over. In the small of his back he totes a silenced Chinese handgun, much favored by the chinks for clandestine work. He's never seen one before and he has no faith in handguns anyway, the shorter the barrel length, he thinks, the greater the risk of inaccuracy. He laughs when he sees heroes in Western movies pull off unbelievable long shots with a revolver. Unless they're using a vintage Mauser or a long barrel Luger, both with shoulder stocks, what you see is just a make-up Richard thinks. In the event, in the half dark of very early morning, he just runs up behind the mark, shoots him in the back of the head from seven feet back as they run, holsters the gun, turns his NYU jacket inside out to a green one with Dublin University on the front and runs back the way they came. There are no reprisals, it's too dark for much to show on the occasional camera and he gets back on the street and away.

Richard's bank balance thus resumes its credit growth after the big spend up on the Mudgee property and the next payment also carries with it a huge and unexpected urgency job bonus. He has a hard talk with Benjy at a Georgetown restaurant.

"Long distance only," he says.

"Sure, sure," says Benjy. "This was an out of the blue job and I reckoned you could do it easily and you did."

"Fair enough," says Richard. "But in future, bear in mind that it's long distance only. There's too much risk in close up and personal."

Benjy laughs and hands him over an airline package.

"Long distance," he says. "It's in Paris."

Richard goes over early. He visits Orchard Lane Cottage, walks around the delightful local walks, drinks ale and enjoys a Ploughman's at the Fescue Arms, just up the path a bit. Life has been different since he bought the place; just the same, he thinks he wouldn't mind a few months of reading and walking around the area when he finishes at Georgetown.

He is unsure whether the crew that Benjy works for will let him go quietly. Not that he has the foggiest of who they are, Benjy is his only link with the money chute and just now he is sitting on half a million up front for his next job. Again as usual, he has no idea of who the mark is; in fact he doesn't want to know. Part of his 100% score so far, has been his professional approach to who the hit is. He shoots hard, never misses and doesn't want to know more. That said he, naturally, avidly reads newspaper accounts of every last man down. To his continued puzzlement, the chaps he shoots are no big wigs, or at least they are no public big wigs. They are seemingly successful, but low key types, unless someone is doing a hell of a cover up.

Thus he and Benjy find themselves on a grassy knoll, well sheltered by screening trees. It overlooks a secondary black top road near Vincennes, the garrison town. Richard has the same Russian gun mounted on a light tripod; it's going to be a very long shot. They hang their sat phones by loops on close-by tree branches awaiting their wake up calls; they're using the very latest Thurayas, the same as those used by the Terror group that attacked Mumbai last month. They are blessed with clear air and perhaps the last of the year's

sunshine. Benjy goes back to check on their exit strategy, it's a light, but fast trail bike. They will have to move quickly when they go.

Benjy's Thuraya rings; Richard presses the button and perfectly takes off Benjy's American 'Yeahhh'.

The voice says, "It's a grey ordinary car; the Dalai Lama is in the rear driver's seat. Kick off now and leave the shooter to it. There's a chopper warming up to cover them."

Benjy comes back post haste down the hill. Richard gives him the Dalai Lama's usual gesture.

"Peace be with you, Benjy," he says and shoots him through the forehead.

He wipes the gun down thoroughly, wraps Benjy's fingers around it and kicks up the motor bike. A little slash of Dickens occurs to him as he goes.

'It's a far, far better thing than I have ever done. (he mimics Sydney Carton at the Guillotine) It's a far, far better life that I go to, than I have ever known.'

Whether he can get away with all this is a moot point. But he thinks he can.