

The Murder of Captain Wanderwell

Captain Walter Wanderwell, born Johannes Valarian Pieczynski, changed his name for two reasons. The first reason was that he was among the great travelers of the twentieth century, a relentless globe trotter whose surname was a familiar one from Jakarta to the Kilimanjaro Plains. The second reason was that his real profession was that of swindler and it was easier to swindle as Wanderwell than Pieczynski. It is rare to find someone who is naturally dishonest. Wanderwell was. He gyped everybody he came in contact with, but especially the confused and luckless volunteer cadets of the Wanderwell International World Police, the pacifist organization that in his role of paramilitary peace messiah he ruled and bilked. Being a swindler is risky. It was the reason why, in Long Beach California, on the edge of Los Angeles, during the night of December 5 1932, in a cabin on the rumrunner schooner Carma, Captain Wanderwell was shot fatally in the back.

His traveling and swindling started in the United States but he was born in Posen, near Warsaw, in the region that later became Poland. In 1914, war broke out. Europe being the last place he wanted to be, he ran away to sea and for two years served on vessels plying ports everywhere. These two years were the only honest labor Wanderwell ever performed. In 1918, after

jumping ship in St. Petersburg, he pulled his first con: A bogus picture postcard racket plundering the backwater hamlets of Florida. His mistake was that he was wearing a German army uniform. After picking him up on suspicion of being an enemy spy, the Bureau of Investigation incarcerated him for a month then released him. Encouraged, Wanderwell took off the uniform and added automobiles to his props. Cars gave him greater swindling range and around 1920, Wanderwell temporarily quit the United States to set out on a series of journeys circling the globe, eventually visiting 43 countries on four continents and rooking every one of them. He was accompanied on his travels by his second wife – his first wife, a New York Follies girl named Nel Clark had divorced him – whose maiden name was Gilvis Hall but for atmosphere changed her name to Aloha. Tall and slender, a haughty beauty, she was so devoted to Wanderwell she may never have noticed that he was a swindler.

Around 1925, he became “Captain” Wanderwell because he founded the pacifist Wanderwell International World Police. The W.I.W.P. was supposed to be in support of Woodrow Wilson’s League of Nations: A body of men and women circling the planet selling peace propaganda and films as well as collecting signatures making war illegal, to be delivered to the Peace Palace in the Hague. After all the big countries had been persuaded to give up their munitions, the W.I.W.P., the last body permitted to bear arms, would, on behalf of the League of Nations, police the world making sure no war broke

out. There is a strong possibility that Wanderwell never was a pacifist at all and instead had grasped the swindling possibilities of pretending to be one. They were excellent. Volunteer cadets joining the W.I.W.P. had to put down a deposit of \$190 dollars for uniform and badges and then work day and night; in return they were paid a small percent of the peace literature they sold. According to cadets who worked for him, Wanderwell was a high-handed leader who regularly harangued about the regeneration of mankind and greeted them with the Roman hand – later the Nazi – salute while keeping them at arm's length. No matter how many cadets there were there was only one Captain. It was he.

James William Guy, called Curly, a Welsh soldier of fortune who, like Wanderwell, had been all over the world, had worked at every occupation imaginable – from able-bodied seaman to professional pugilist – so long as it was out of the ordinary and involved adventure and risk, joined the W.I.W.P. in South America. It was 1931. The W.I.W.P. was setting out on Buenos Aires-to-Los Angeles expedition and Guy, who wanted to be in Los Angeles, joined it in Buenos Aires, with 15 others, including Scots, Poles, and Germans. A few weeks later Guy and the others were half dead from overwork as well as starving from the meager rations Wanderwell served them. The more Guy saw of the operation the more he realized what he had gotten himself in for. Finally he had had enough. He presented Wanderwell a round robin ultimatum saying everybody was quitting and

expected the return of their \$190 plus their propaganda earnings. Wanderwell said no; and while Guy went to visit a lawyer, the Captain skipped out on a Los Angeles-bound ship. Stranded, Guy and the others were forced to spend six weeks living in a dilapidated dance hall: Then the Panamanian government returned most of them to their homelands. Guy set out for Los Angeles on foot; got as far as Nicaragua where the bandit Santiono briefly put him under arrest; returned to Colon and got an able-bodied seaman's job in the South Seas; spent some time in London; and in June 1932, another ship brought him to where he most wanted to be: Los Angeles.

Waiting for Guy when he arrived was the man Guy was coming to Los Angeles to see, the aviator Eddie DeLarm. DeLarm's home was in Los Angeles but his real home was Latin America. He had flown over every part of it, transporting everything from cargos to revolutionaries. He and Guy had met in Buenos Aires, hit it off, and DeLarm had promised Guy a job if he got to Los Angeles. The job was helping overhaul DeLarm's trio of rumrunner airplanes. In addition to being an aviator, DeLarm was a bootlegger.

Unbeknownst to Guy, Captain Wanderwell too was in Los Angeles at this time. Upon arriving from Colon, he had taken up lodging at the Arcady Arms in the Wilshire district; lodging for free, naturally, because his prevarications about traveling under protection of the League of Nations had impressed the hotel's management. Now he

was advertising for cadets for what was to be the W.I.W.P.'s next expedition, a tramp across China. In any case, Wanderwell was the last person Guy expected to see again but see him he did. It happened while he and DeLarm happened to be out for a drive and by chance passed the Arcady Arms where one of Wanderwell's cars was parked in front. Guy and DeLarm entered the hotel and Guy confronted Wanderwell in his room on the third story. There are two versions of the confrontation that followed. One version had Guy politely asking Wanderwell to pay him the money he owed him; and the second version had Guy threatening Wanderwell and Wanderwell having to break a window and call down into the street for the police. The police never came but the hotel management did. Guy never got any money from Wanderwell but had the satisfaction of getting Wanderwell and Aloha ejected from the Arcady Arms and temporarily getting left with no place to stay.

The rumrunner schooner Carma became that place. Originally constructed at a cost of \$75,000, she had fallen on such hard times that \$2,100 was all she could bring at auction. Wanderwell was the winning bidder. He was also the only bidder. Her trio of previous owners had come to bad ends: Two of them were serving prison terms and a third was being hunted after all of them were indicted by a grand jury on charges of conspiracy for violation of the customs laws and for the transportation of liquor. Even though she was battered and old, Wanderwell registered her as a

pleasure yacht; that way there were no regulations about her being seaworthy. Wasting no time, by October he had turned her into the W.I.W.P.'s first gun boat and had organized another peace expedition. This one would gird the world. No seamanship skills were necessary. Showing up almost immediately with their \$190 deposits were eight women and seven men, the most prominent of them being Lord Edward Montagu.

Lord Montagu was the second son of the ninth Duke of Manchester and a godson of King Henry II. He had heard a lot about Wanderwell's world cruise and joined the W.I.W.P. to take part in it, even without being sure what the W.I.W.P. was. Lord Edward being from a royal family, Wanderwell may have thought he could swindle him royally. But Lord Montagu was bankrupt and facing deportation for overstaying his American visa.

The Carma was docked in San Pedro, just across the harbor from Long Beach. Throughout October, November, and into December she didn't budge from the wharf. The dockage fees were piling up and the cadets becoming mutinous: All they had done so far was use their uniforms and anti-war propaganda to chisel free groceries and goods from the local merchants. To skip out on dockage fees and calm his cadets, Wanderwell, performed his first act of seamanship since the Great War, which was to take the Carma into the main channel and set out for Long Beach. The Carma barely made it. Right In the middle of the voyage her auxiliary engines blew up and while she

was adrift a tug boat appeared to help. But while Wanderwell and the tug boat's master argued about the high cost of towing fees the Carma got loose and smashed up some fishing smacks in their moorings. She anchored at last in a criminal backwater of Long Beach where suckers caught speed boat rides to the gambling galleons three miles out.

The next day was December 5th. Wanderwell went ashore and didn't return until the sun was setting and it was time for dinner. Dinner consisted of a tough and greasy stew whose ingredients had been bartered from a cat's meat butcher. Lord Montagu was doing the cooking. Wanderwell was in one of his bad moods and throughout the awful dinner discoursed angrily about countries with munitions and the regeneration of mankind. Afterward a dozen cadets including Lord Montagu went ashore to a movie theatre where Wanderwell had arranged for their free admission; then, with a Roman hand salute he went to his cabin which was the Carma's nerve center. The four cadets who remained in the mess hall played records on an old windup phonograph. They played by lamplight because the broken auxiliary engines had taken the lights down. Suddenly the face of a man wearing a grey overcoat appeared at the darkened port hole asking if Captain Wanderwell was aboard. Everyone thought it was either another bill collector or an electrician come to repair the Carma's broken electrical system. A few moments later came a shot followed by a scream. The four cadets took the

lamp and went out of the mess hall up the deck to Wanderwell's cabin. Captain Wanderwell was kneeling across the desk top of his office. He was dead of a gunshot wound to the back.

The arrest of Curly Guy on the charge of murdering Wanderwell occurred two days later. Finding Guy was easy for the police. Aloha, who had not been staying aboard the Carma but in a hotel in Los Angeles, gave them an account of the incident at the Arcady Arms as well as a photograph of Guy from the South American expedition. The management of the Arcady Arms backed her story. Somehow DeLarm's name came up and the police remembered him and his liquor airplanes. They visited his home and DeLarm said Guy had been there with him the night of the murder but the morning after had moved out because he knew the police would have a manhunt going for him and he, Guy, didn't want to involve DeLarm and his family. DeLarm advised him to turn himself in but Guy didn't want to do that: Among other things he was in the country illegally. So DeLarm told the police where Guy was staying. That night the police arrived and took Guy into custody. Guy denied murdering Wanderwell and said he had been waiting for them to track him down anyway.

Those around the harbor who knew about the Carma said Wanderwell's death had been life-saving because had the W.I.W.P.'s round the world expedition gone through and the Carma entered the open ocean she'd have sunk with all hands. But

Aloha and the still-loyal W.I.W.P. cadets disregarded this and decided that Captain Wanderwell merited a funeral at sea. Because of Lord Montagu's familiarity with the rites of aristocratic burials he was put in charge: Noblesse oblige and all that. On the day of funeral a storm of gale-force was blowing out in the channel and vessels larger than the Carma remained at anchor. Then the Carma's auxiliary engines refused to fire. A tug boat was hired to tow the Carma to sea. It was hazardous. At one point the tow line broke and the Carma was left to pitch and toss and render everyone ill with seasickness including Aloha and Lord Montagu. Someone had borrowed a bugle from a local Boy Scout post, but except for a newspaper man everyone was too sick to blow it. Just then the jib came down with a rush and the bier containing Captain Wanderwell was pushed over the side.

At the trial of Guy it was the Carma herself which saved him from being found guilty of murder. The prosecution's case was circumstantial and based on the accounts of the four crew members, who'd seen the man in the grey overcoat at the porthole. But none of them could positively identify Guy. Conditions on the Carma had been too dark.

Aloha Wanderwell had said she would continue with the voyage but did not and leased the Carma to a man named John Branson instead. Like everyone else in the Wanderwell saga, Branson was out of the ordinary. First he had been

a board track motorcycle racer; then he embarked on the circus and sideshow circuit as a motordome rider, an occupation which required riding a roaring cycle around an oversized barrel – he rode the act clear to Manila and made a lot of money in Singapore, Borneo and Siam where another opportunity presented itself: Wild beasts were in demand by zoos back in the United States, so he set to work capturing and exporting elephants, leopards, tigers, several deadly poisonous cobras and constrictor pythons, a few thousand shrieking birds – everything you can think of. Now Branson saw the chance to reinvent the Carma as an adventure yacht and sell passage for a romantic cruise to the far South Seas. Hightone folk promptly purchased tickets including a banker from Los Angeles, an actor from Hollywood and an opera tenor from San Diego. Branson also saw the financial windfall of offering forms of entertainment at whatever ports the Carma called. So he wrestled aboard a Ferris wheel, a calliope, three live monkeys, and a trio of barking seals trained to juggle balls, straddle tight ropes and play musical instruments. Branson also hired one Speedy Babbs, a fellow wall of death cyclist and maniac devoted to the art of wing-walking and parachuting out of blimps.

This was the sort of voyage it was: Limping down the west coast of Mexico the Carma had her clutch burn out past the inlet at Turtle Bay. And the 40-year old diesels at last succumbed for good about the same time taking with them the bilge pump and the ability to lower and raise anchors.

Sustenance consisted of what was left of the W.I.W.P. supplies including aged rice and moldy beans plus some tubs of raw peanut butter that not even the monkeys would touch. Everybody came down with malnutrition and kidney stones and the seals jumped overboard. Reaching the port of Mazatlan at last, Branson set up his Ferris wheel and pitch shows. For publicity he had the bright, dangerous, idea of sending Babbs up in an ancient Bianca airplane to afford Mazatlan's citizenry its first parachute jump. Babbs dropped 2,000 feet, at first getting blown in the direction of the shark-infested estuary. But he landed on top of a hotel instead. Then he made a hysterical appearance at the city's plaza de toros, and in this exhibition afforded something different since he was riding an Indian Scout motorcycle while fighting the bull. Publicity stunts notwithstanding, all of Branson's plans got discombobulated. He had to refund passage to the banker, the actor, and the singer. And he lost the Carma, which never made it back from Mazatlan.

The Captain Wanderwell murder has never been solved. (2012)

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