"Camp Slugs and Mushroom Clouds" by Ross

Summary: While working a brushfire, Gage gets bumped up, from base camp to the firelines. The move causes some major 'fallout'—er, in.

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By Ross

Station 51’s A-shift paramedics had been assigned—and confined—to the Domingo Canyon Brushfire's base camp for the past seven hours and fifty-three minutes.

The two men were tired of taking vitals and irrigating eyes. They were tired of treating cases of dehydration, heat exhaustion and smoke inhalation.

Most of all, they were weary of being referred to as 'camp slugs'.

Slugs is firefighter slang for 'slackers'. Slackers are anyone not actually on the fireline. There are 'engine slugs', 'heli-slugs' and, of course, the dreaded 'camp slugs'.

Roy flashed his pacing partner, with all the pent up energy, a sympathetic smile.

Johnny made a terrible 'camp slug'. Confining John Gage to a base camp was like locking a wild mustang stallion up in a box stall.

John just couldn't wait for their tour in the 'Staging' area to finally end, so he could take his turn on the actual fireline—the fire control line that is scraped, 'scalped' or dug clear down to mineral soil, to create a fire barrier.

It was far more prestigious to be working on the fireline, than to be slacking off back at base camp all day.

Finally, at two minutes to three, Squad 16 pulled into the staging area to relieve them.

Gage gladly passed the Rehab' Zone's responsibilities over to their replacements and went racing off to receive his next assignment.

The chief in charge of Fireground Operations spotted the paramedic emblems on the new arrivals’ helmets and immediately arranged for the pair to be split up.

DeSoto was sent to a fireline on the left flank of the fire, and his partner was deployed to a crew working the line directly ahead of them.

Johnny reported to his crew chief and was briefed.

The crew chief reminded his new lineman of the importance of accountability, constant communication and situation awareness.

Gage was then informed that their crew's closest Safety Zone was on the backside of the ridge that ran directly behind their current fireline.
After being advised of the need to be extra vigilant, due to the swirling wind frequently shifting directions on them, John was issued an aluminum fire shelter and an Adze hoe, and put to work—on the fireline.

An Adze is ideally designed to grub out, trench, and scalp a fire break through even the densest of vegetation—with copious amounts of elbow grease, that is.

Speaking of copious amounts of elbow grease...

51’s paramedics had been scalping away on the fireline for close to three backbreaking hours, creating a three to five foot swath of bare ground, effectively establishing a perimeter along the brushfire’s left flank. Suddenly, word came across the radio channels that a fuel supply truck had broken down, and the nearest dozer had just run out of fuel, making it unavailable to them for the next forty-five minutes.

A few seconds later, the fireline crews received more bad news from their lookouts. The wind was shifting directions on them—again.

The lookout for John's crew also reported some 'spotting'. The fire was producing sparks or embers that were being carried along by the wind and which were starting 'spot fires' beyond the zone of direct ignition by the main fire. Their lookout was worried a cascade of spot fires might cause a blowup. As a result, handline construction on the fire's left flank was immediately halted.

Everybody along the fire's left flank suddenly found themselves engulfed in a wall of dense, black, acrid smoke, making for zero visibility.

So much for 'accountability'.

The call quickly came down the fireline for the crews to move into their respective Safety Zones—areas that had been cleared of all flammable material.

The fire crews used these clearings for escape, in the event their firelines were to be outflanked, or in case a spot fire caused fuels outside the control line to render the fireline unsafe.

Along with clearing firebreaks, dozers were always working to create and maintain Safety Zones that were close at hand to the fire crews.

Once they reached their Safety Zones, firefighters and their equipment would be 'relatively' safe, in the event of any 'blowups' in the vicinity.

Halfway up the ridge, whilst blindly heading for his crew's Safety Zone, John literally stumbled upon the concrete foundation of an old house. The firefighter figured the home had probably been a casualty of another canyon brushfire, decades earlier.

As he was traversing the old homestead's overgrown backyard, John happened to step upon the rusted out cover on the entrance to an abandoned fallout shelter. The fireman's boots broke through the rotted hatch and he dropped twenty-five feet straight down, into the buried underground chamber.

When his fireline tool's long, wooden handle hit the dirt floor of the subterranean cavern, the Adze head flew up and conked the falling firefighter on the left side of his head. The blow knocked his helmet off and rendered him unconscious.
The fallen firefighter's fellow fireline workers blindly fought their way up the brush-covered hillside, en route to their crew's designated SZ.

The fire crew left the billowing clouds of thick, black, acrid smoke at the top of the ridge and started scrambling down the other side, heading for the safety of that little bulldozed clearing.

The crew chief waited for his guys to regroup in their safety zone and then took a preliminary headcount.

Nineteen out of twenty.

One of them hadn't made it over the ridge...yet.

The line chief gave his fitfully coughing crew a careful scrutiny.

The guy with the paramedic emblem on his helmet was currently unaccounted for.

The chief cursed beneath his breath and called his lookout over. "That paramedic...what's his name?"

The lookout glanced down at his clipboard. "Gage. John Gage. Station 51."

The chief raised his HT and radioed his counterpart on the next ridge over. "Curtis, Hanley here. You wouldn't happen to have an extra man over there by any chance. Would you?"

Roy, who had just reached the safety of his own crew's bulldozed clearing, overheard the radio chatter about his partner being missing. He fought back the feeling of dread that he was presently experiencing and promptly requested permission to go help locate his 'unaccounted for' friend.

Curtis saw the paramedic emblem on the fireman's helmet, and the deeply concerned expression on his soot-darkened face, and kindly granted his request.

Upon completion of their first rotation on the firelines, Station 51's Captain and engine crew had been bumped back to base camp for some mandatory 'down time'.

Hank Stanley and his men had spent the past three-and-a-half hours sprawled out in the shade, alternately snoozing and sipping water.

Currently, they were standing in the chow line.

The Captain's red, watering, smoke-irritated eyes roved about the Rehab' Area. "Anybody seen our guys?"

"Are you kiddin', Cap?" Chet Kelly asked right back. "Gage prob'ly got sick a' 'sluggin' it out here in camp, and volunteered to go work the lines."

"Yeah," Marco quickly concurred. "And Roy prob'ly tagged along, to keep him out of trouble."

The two mustached firemen traded grins with each other—and their engineer.

Hank was about to voice his displeasure, at the way his paramedics were spending their 'down time', when Craig Brice suddenly came trotting up to them.
"Excuse me, Captain Stanley," Brice breathlessly began. "When Bellingham and I relieved Gage and DeSoto, they mentioned something about asking to be bumped up to the firelines for a few hours..."

"...Ye-es?" Hank prompted, when the paramedic paused.

"We just received word that there has been a major blowup along the front of the fire's left flank. Three hand crews were forced to evacuate the area. A firestorm shot up the ridge leading to one of the crew's safe zones..." Brice hesitated again. "One firefighter is currently unaccounted for."

Hank and his men exchanged anxious glances. "I take it you're telling us all this, because you believe the missing man may be one of our guys?"

Brice swallowed hard. "The missing firefighter is a...paramedic."

The Captain and his crew exchanged alarmed looks this time. Then they passed Craig their cups and plates and went racing off, toward the Fireground Operations' tent.

DeSoto followed the dozer trail to 'the next ridge over' and came upon the crew Johnny had been assigned to.

The paramedic introduced himself to Hanley. "Hi. Roy DeSoto. Station 51. I'm John Gage's partner. Has there been any sign of him?"

"Gene Hanley. Station 12. Visibility remains practically nil, the air quality is extremely poor and the fire is rapidly advancing. If the wind doesn't swing back around pretty soon, I'm afraid we'll be forced to evacuate this sector—entirely. I've called Air Ops and requested some water drops in the area in which your partner was last spotted. We were just about to go take another look. You're welcome to join us..."

"Thanks," Roy told him and fell in line behind the search and rescue party.

It was hard to follow along in single file, when you couldn't even see a foot in front of your face.

At last, the coughing climbers reached the top of the ridge.

Roy gazed down at the flaming inferno below—in abject horror.

The windblown fire was racing up the ridge, consuming everything in its path!

Well, hopefully not everything.

Roy prayed that his partner had had time to deploy his aluminum-foil-lined fire shelter.

Everyone working the lines carried a personal fire shelter. The aluminized tent was designed to provide 'some' degree of protection, by reflecting radiant heat, and providing a volume of breathable air, in a fire entrapment situation.

The safety device was an entrapped firefighter's last means of resort, as severe burns or asphyxiatioin often resulted from its deployment.

John Gage groaned and gradually came around.

'Where the hell am I?' he dazedly wondered. He unsnapped his coat, pulled his penlight from his front pocket, flicked it on and took a look around.
Judging by all the survival supplies, he’d dropped into some kind of an abandoned bomb shelter.

The first thing the paramedic did, upon completely regaining his senses, was to perform an initial patient survey upon himself.

He was pretty badly bruised, and he had one hell of a headache, but—miraculously—nothing felt like it was *busted*.

So he pocketed his penlight, retrieved his Adze tool, and his helmet, hobbled over to the base of a wooden ladder and started climbing slowly and cautiously up out of the concealed, underground chamber he’d fallen into.

After over a quarter of a century, the ladder’s rungs had suffered some dry-rot.

Anticipating that, the climber was careful to keep his feet placed toward the rungs’ outside edges.

Gage got almost to the top of the ladder, when several of its rotted rungs suddenly snapped beneath his weight, and he went toppling back into the black abyss—again.

Having learned the hard way, the falling firefighter wisely dropped his Adze *before* hitting the ground—again.

Speaking of hitting the ground again...

Gage hit the dirt feet first, but then fell onto his back so hard that he got his wind knocked out of him.

Eventually, his breath returned and the grimace gradually disappeared from his sooty face.

When he took inventory *this* time, the paramedic discovered, much to his dismay, that he had now *twisted* his already badly bruised left knee.

The fireman emitted a few choice expletives and sat stiffly up. He pulled his penlight back out of his shirt pocket and then used it to explore his surreal surroundings—once more.

It was like he'd fallen into some kind of a buried 'time capsule', or something.

The fireman figured the homeowner had to have forked out an awful lot a' dough for this little buried fortress.

The underground lair consisted of a ten-foot high, ridiculously long tunnel. Judging by the wall-mounted telephone, the place had even once had phone service.

It also had a built-in outhouse. Which, Gage guessed, made it an inhouse.

His curiosity piqued, the paramedic struggled up onto his feet—er, right foot, and then began to hobble around the fallout shelter on his one good leg.

'Sheesh!' The dark tunnel had to be at least fifteen feet wide and fifty feet long!

At one point, an earthquake had caused a partial collapse of one of the shelter’s outer walls. A row of bunk beds had been buried beneath the debris.

There had also been a slight ceiling collapse. The explorer had to scramble over a few fallen shoring beams. Which caused a considerable amount of pain—and produced a few more choice expletives.

John found a glass jar filled with wooden matches. Being as how they’d been kept in an airtight container,
the fireman had high hopes that they would still light. He removed a match from the jar and struck it.

It lit!

So he hopped back over to where he'd seen some kerosene lamps, burners, heaters and candles. There were 5gallon cans of kerosene sitting on a shelf behind the lamps. The paramedic picked one up. It was still full.

'Cool!' He had a few dozen kerosene lanterns and a month's worth of kerosene—at least.

The fireman quickly filled and lit a half dozen of the kerosene lamps, and two of the kerosene heaters. Then he put his penlight away, latched onto one of the lit lanterns, and continued his cave exploration.

There was an old, crank-type Victrola record player and stacks of acetates.

Wooden shelves along one of the shelter's outer walls bore books, as well as loads of other musty-smelling reading materials. He brushed a bit of the dust off and noticed that some of the magazines were dated as early as 1951. Others were dated as late as October 1962. Which, the fireman seemed to recall, happened to coincide with the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

There were six 50gallon sealed drums of water, and countless more corked glass jugs of H2O, as well.

'Great!' He could boil the water on the kerosene burners. At least he wouldn't be dying of thirst.

There were dozens and dozens of large, metal ammo boxes, which had undoubtedly been purchased from a local Army Surplus or Survival Store.

Food and other emergency supplies had been placed in the large metal containers to prevent moisture and rodents from getting in.

Some of the ammo boxes contained once non-perishable food items, such as canned meats, fruits, and vegetables.

Other once edible/drinkable items included: canned juices, milk, soups, salt, pepper, sugar, jars of peanut butter and jelly, ground coffee, teabags, hard candy, and boxes of breakfast cereals.

Still more ammo boxes contained tools and everyday household supplies.

There were non-electric can openers, pads of writing paper and dozens of pencils, flashlights and loads of badly corroded batteries, pots, pans, plates, cups, drinking glasses and plenty of eating utensils—including sharp knives, a corkscrew and a bottle opener.

There were boxes of dishtowels, bath towels, hand towels and wash cloths, toiletry items, soaps, disinfectants, bleach, personal hygiene products such as toothbrushes and toothpaste, area maps, items of clothing, bedding, such as sheets, pillows and blankets.

The fireman even found a couple of dosimeters, for measuring radiation levels.

The paramedic pulled another metal container open and—for the first time since his unanticipated arrival—he smiled.

The box was obviously the fallout shelter's 'liquor cabinet', as it contained corked bottles of every conceivable kind of alcoholic beverage imaginable.

Gage gazed down at all the 'fire water' and his grin broadened. "Well, all-righty then," he muttered to himself. "Company whiskey."

In another of the large ammo boxes, the explorer discovered an amazingly well-stocked First Aid Kit, which
consisted of the following items: bandaging and splinting supplies, adhesive tape, sterile adhesive bandages in assorted sizes, assorted sizes of safety pins, sterile gauze pads, 2-inch & 3-inch sterile roll bandages, triangular bandages, folding splints, medical tools, scissors, tweezers, razor and razor blades, thermometer, iodine, rubber gloves, cleansing agents, a jar of petroleum jelly, aspirin, antacids, eye wash, rubbing alcohol, hydrogen peroxide, activated charcoal and Syrup of Ipecac.

The injured paramedic promptly put the kit to good use and expertly wrapped his wrenched knee up.

With only one good climbing leg—and no rope of any kind—Gage glumly realized he wouldn't be going anywhere...for a while.

The kerosene heaters were doing an excellent job of removing the chill from the air, so he took his turnout coat off and made himself at home.

The soot-covered fireman used some of the stored soap and water to clean himself up a bit, and then toweled himself dry.

Finally, the fatigued fireman, whose left knee was now killing him—and whose right leg was also hurting, from having to bear the full weight of his body for so long—spread some blankets and pillows down on a row of ammo boxes, and then laid down to rest...and await the arrival of his 'company'.

The imprisoned paramedic was just about to doze off, when he heard a muffled 'chop-chop-chopping' sound.

John snapped bolt upright on his ammo box bed and looked up at the shelter entrance, 25' above him. Water droplets rained down the circular 15' corrugated steel tunnel opening and landed in the dust on the dirt floor of his spacious tomb, another ten feet below.

His line crew had realized he was missing! The crew chief had contacted Air Operations and requested a water drop on his last known position.

His 'company' was on the way.

A few minutes later, another chopper made another water drop.

During the last remaining hour of daylight, a dozen more water drops were made upon the flaming ridge where the missing paramedic had last been seen.

The first searchers to canvas the still smoldering hillside had found no sign of a fire shelter or even so much as a footprint in the thin layer of light gray ash.

It was like the young firefighter had simply dropped off the surface of the earth.

He had.

 Darkness descended rapidly upon the already smoke-darkened Domingo Canyon area, making search efforts even more difficult.

On the bright side, nightfall also caused the relative humidity levels to rise and the winds die down.
This allowed the fire crews to finally get the brushfire contained.

As the fire continued to rage on, in some of the canyon's more remote, inaccessible areas, the rescue teams continued their search for the missing firefighter—right on through the wee hours of the evening.

John just couldn't seem to get to sleep. So he cranked up the old Victrola and put on a Perry Como record. Over the needle's 'scratch-scratch-scratch' ing, the singer's deep, mellow voice began to croon.

"Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket
Never let it fade away
Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket
Save it for a rainy day
For love may come and tap you on the shoulder some starless night
And just in case you feel you want to hold her
You'll have a pocketful of starlight...pocketful of starlight"

The listener's lantern-lit face scrunched up a might and he redirected his attention to the stack of reading materials he had placed in his lap.

John noticed that some of the newspapers from 1951 actually carried a radiation reading on their front pages, right beside the daily weather report.

While digging through the stacks and stacks of musty, dusty, dated periodicals, the paramedic had even came across a Popular Mechanics magazine containing a fallout shelter blueprint for the 'do-it-yourselfer'. He found a government pamphlet filled with Nuclear Warhead Detonation Info, and learned some astonishing—and rather hair-raising—facts.

For instance, he found out that the blast wind produced by a nuclear bomb will reach 2,000 mph within the first half mile from ground zero...drop to about 1,000 mph at 2 miles out...and will still be at hurricane force (200 mph) several miles out.

'Fallout arriving within a few hours after a nuclear explosion will be highly radioactive. If it collects on the skin in large enough quantities, it will cause beta burns. If a mushroom cloud is seen, one should seek immediate shelter in places that appear to provide the best shielding from gamma radiation.'

Heck, after what he'd just read, the fireman figured that, if he should ever be unfortunate enough to see a mushroom cloud, he would be much better off to just bend over and kiss his ass goodbye.

The reader suddenly realized that his eyes were really beginning to burn from all that accumulating kerosene smoke.

Speaking of the reader's burning eyes...

John's jaw suddenly dropped open and his smoke-irritated eyes widened. "Where there's smoke, there's fire!" he excitedly exclaimed. "And where there's fire, there's firemen!"

He scrambled off of his ammo box bed and began hobbling about the abandoned bomb shelter, collecting
every lit kerosene lantern in sight.

John placed the gathered glowing lamps directly beneath the hidden shelter’s busted entrance hatch.

When dawn came, he would crank the cotton wicks on the lamps way up, causing them to 'smoke'—like crazy!

The shelter’s 15-foot long by 5-foot diameter, circular corrugated steel hatchway to the surface would act as a chimney.

The spotter planes would see the smoke, report a 'hot spot' and somebody would be sent in to extinguish the blaze.

The paramedic’s little plan was positively brilliant—and so was the smile that illuminated his face, as he carefully crawled back onto his ammo box bed.

The old Victrola gradually wound down, and the foxy firefighter finally drifted off into a deep, peaceful slumber.

John fell asleep praying he would not be seeing any 'mushroom clouds' in his dreams.

The missing firefighter's shiftmates had completed their mandatory rest period, following eight hours of rigorous searching, and were out looking for their lost friend—again, even before first light.

Gage groaned himself awake, shortly after sunrise.

"I must be getting old," he grumbled aloud. His poor, abused body just didn't 'bounce back' like it used to. Hell, he didn't seem to bounce anymore—period. The now moaning old man tossed his blankets back and began crawling stiffly—and painfully—off of his ammo box bed.

Body willing—or not—he had an important task to perform.

The search team was in the midst of making its umpteenth pass along the burnt-out ridge, where the missing paramedic had last been seen.

Chet Kelly was the first one to get a good 'whiff' of the kerosene smoke. "Hey! Guys! Over here!" he called to his crewmates. "I think I might a' found something!" he joyously added and went trotting off across the ridge, in the direction the 'smoke smell' was coming from.

Chet's heart suddenly leapt in his chest.

The cloud of kerosene smoke seemed to be ascending up out of a small black hole in the hillside's charred, ash-covered landscape.

The happy fireman halted dead in his tracks, suddenly unsure of his footing.

If the earth had swallowed one fireman up, it could quickly gulp down another.

"Careful, Cap!" Kelly advised, as the remainder of the search and rescue party came running up. "This whole area might be undermined."

Hank Stanley stared down at the 'smoldering' hole in the ground. "Well, I'll be damned..." he muttered
beneath his breath.

They’d already covered that entire area of the ridge—at least a dozen times.

Hank quickly cupped his hands around his smile and called out—at the top of his lungs, "Ga-age! You in there, pal?"

John had headed—er, hobbled, further back into the fallout shelter, to avoid the thick cloud of smoke his ‘signal fire’ was creating around the entrance tunnel.

He heard his Captain calling him and quickly hobbled his way back over to stand beside the abandoned bomb shelter's dry-rotted ladder. "Yeah, Cap!" he finally managed to answer back, between bouts of coughing.

The Captain exchanged grins with the rest of his guys. "Roy, let me see your radio..."

John's still-grinning partner promptly handed him his HT.

"Here comes a radio!" Hank warned. "You ready to catch it?"

The found fireman cranked the last of the lit lanterns' wicks back down, and the thick haze of smoke gradually began to dissipate.

The paramedic coughed and aimed his stinging, watering eyes upward. "I'm ready!" he finally replied back to his Captain's muffled question.

"Okay! Heads up!" the fire officer further warned and tossed DeSoto's hand-held radio down the hole in the hidden shelter's rusted-out hatch. Two seconds later, the Captain's own HT crackled to life.

"Got it, Cap!" Gage's voice rang out, via the radio's speaker.

Hank thumbed its send button. "Great! Where are you?"

"I'm standing about twenty-five feet below you, in an abandoned fallout shelter. The structure is roughly ten feet high, fifteen feet wide and fifty feet long. It's got a dirt floor, concrete walls and a shored up, wooden-beamed ceiling. As long as nobody parks a bulldozer over this place, there shouldn't be any danger of it collapsing on me, Cap."

The firemen exchanged relieved looks and quickly and carefully crossed over to the hole in the ground.

Stanley stooped beside—what appeared to be—the bomb shelter's ground-level entrance and peered down through the hole in its rusted, busted, thin metal hatch cover.

By the light of a half-dozen flickering flames, Hank could see his no-longer-missing crewman. John Gage was leaning back against a wooden ladder, grinning up at him. "I've been *hack hack* expecting you!"

The Captain's own grin broadened. "Were you injured at all in the fall?"

"Affirmative. I got knocked out—cold, the first time. And I sprained my left knee—pretty good, the second
time. The, uh, ladder appears to have dry-rotted, Cap."

Stanley studied the ladder's recently broken rungs. "I see that. Okay. Just sit tight, pal." The Captain straightened up and raised his radio to his still-smiling lips. "Search Team One to Base..."

Chet dropped onto his chest and stuck his helmeted head down the hole. "Hey, Chief. We got your 'smoke signal'."

The fallen paramedic pocketed his radio. "I was sort a' hopin' you would."

"Base here...Go ahead, Team One..."

"Base, Team One is pleased to report that we have found the missing firefighter—alive. However, he has fallen a considerable distance—twice, and has been injured. Request paramedics and air-evac. Our present position is on the west side of Ridge 7, in the upper right corner of Quadrant Three. We're gonna need a Stokes, a backboard, a few hundred feet of rope and some lifebelts. Tell the chopper to land at the base of the ridge and we'll guide the paramedics up here. Did you copy all that, Base?"

"10-4, Team One...Squad 16 and air-evac responding to your location. The paramedics and chopper pilot will be advised to meet you at the base of the ridge."

"Mike, Marco, you guys wanna go down and show them the way," the Captain requested.

Stoker and Lopez nodded and began taking their leave.

Hank replaced his HT and then leaned out over the hole in the ground. "I don't think this is what the department meant by 'mandatory down time'..."

The Captain's witty comment caused everyone within earshot to chuckle—including the two guides and the 'downed' paramedic.

"Yeah," Kelly agreed and continued to gaze down into the ridiculously deep underground cavern. "Criminy, Gage! It's a fallout shelter, not a fallin' shelter."

"Thanks, Chet. I'll try to remember that. In the meantime, I am hungry and I am thirsty. So, kin you guys please hurry it up?"

A tremendously relieved Roy DeSoto sprawled out on the ash-covered ground beside Kelly and stuck his helmeted head down the hole. "Who ever heard of a 'scared-y hole' that didn't have plenty of 'provisions' stock-piled in it?"

"Oh, this place has 'plenty of provisions', all right. Trouble is, the food and water is older than I am. Plus, there are spiders down here the size of Chihuahuas..."

The complainer's three remaining crewmates glanced at one another and exchanged a group eye roll.

Ten minutes of nearly continuous complaining later...

Gage glanced up as a dangling lifebelt finally appeared in the hidden shelter's now fully opened hatchway. He continued watching as both the rope and the belt gradually began to descend upon his position.

The fallout shelter's sole occupant extinguished the kerosene heaters and lamps and re-donned his turnout coat and helmet.
Next, the 'sheltered' fireman hobbled over to his 'liquor cabinet' and stashed four bottles of 'company whiskey' into his jacket's bulky side pockets.

John hobbled back over to the ladder just in time to buckle the now fully lowered lifebelt around his midsection. His left hand latched onto the handle of his Adze. His right hand gripped the dangling rope. The paramedic gave his 'gloom and doom' surroundings one last, lingering parting glance...and then tugged on his lifeline.

Squad 16's 'fall victim' was hoisted up out of his buried time capsule and placed upon a backboard.

Roy grinned down at his squinting partner and then dropped to a knee, to give his found friend's right shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Why are you 'clink' ing?"

John grinned back at him and began passing the contents of his coat's pockets out to his colleagues, one precious corked bottle at a time.

Chet gazed lovingly down at the vintage Irish whiskey in his hands. "Arrr! Buried treasure!"

Another round of chuckles ensued.

Gage passed the last bottle of 'company' booze on to his Captain. "I'd like you all to have a drink—on me. You guys might wanna wait until after eight, though. That way, you won't be drinking 'on duty'," he added, with a wry, sly smile.

The guys grinned gratefully back at him.

Stoker took a look over his Captain's left shoulder. "I hear 1951 was a good year."

"Guess we'll find out...in another fifteen minutes, or so..." Hank Stanley determined, following a quick glance at his watch. The Captain pocketed the liquid refreshment and then smiled down at his injured crewman. "We'll, uh, be sure to save you a few swallows."

"I'd appreciate that, Cap." Gage's squinting gaze suddenly shifted to the fallout shelter's shattered entrance hatch cover. "I would also appreciate it, if someone were to fill that dang hole in. A person could break their bloody neck fallin' into there." Hell, he could've broken his bloody neck!

Perhaps being a 'camp slug' wasn't such dreadful duty, after all.

The End

Author's note: (Some basic background info about the world scene at the time the fallout shelter that John fell into was built)

** The Russians had exploded a hydrogen bomb, touching off a nerve-wracking arms race.

Nuclear air raid drills were part of everyday life for schoolchildren in the late 1940s and early '50s. Children were taught to "duck and cover" under their desks and were herded into school basements for periodic air raid drills.

As the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union escalated, fear of the bomb and anxiety over the possibility of a nuclear war drove many Americans to dig deep into the earth in an effort to survive what seemed, at the time, an inevitable nuclear attack from our enemies. Ordinary Americans built bomb shelters in their backyards, often hiding them from their neighbors.
Millions of comic books were distributed to school children featuring a cartoon turtle called Bert that urged them to "duck and cover" in the event of an atomic strike. Metal identification tags similar to military dogtags were even issued in some schools.

Spotters were assigned to watch the skies for anything that looked suspicious or out of the ordinary.

Back in those early 'Cold War' years, the bomb shelter business was probably a billion-dollar industry.

Survival stores around the nation sold air blowers, filters, flashlights, fallout protection suits, first aid kits and water.

General Foods and General Mills sold dry-packaged meals as underground rations.

Families with well stocked shelters lived with the fear that after a nuclear attack they'd be invaded by an army of friends and neighbors who neglected to build bunkers of their own. Many ordered contractors to construct their shelters in the dead of night so nosy neighbors wouldn't see. One owner assured his neighbor that the bomb shelter he was building was really a wine cellar.

1960's:

Following Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev's scary shoe-banging tantrum at the United Nations, President John F. Kennedy warned his fellow Americans that they should build "A fallout shelter for everybody, as rapidly as possible."

The Russians ended a three-year moratorium on nuclear testing with a blast over central Russia and warned the west that "It would take really very few multi-megaton nuclear bombs to wipe out your small and densely populated countries and kill you instantly in your lairs."

A year later, the Cuban Missile Crisis would shove the world to the brink for 13 agonizing days.

But the bomb never dropped.

The world heaved a sigh of relief as the Soviets backed off. And as the immediate peril of nuclear holocaust began to fade, Americans began to accept that fallout shelters probably did little to protect them from nuclear disaster. The backyard bomb shelters became wine cellars, fruit cellars, or just quietly filled up with water.**

(**basic background info gleaned from the web)**