



# HOW I ESCAPED FROM GILLIGAN'S ISLAND

and Other Misadventures of a Hollywood Writer-Producer

WILLIAM FROUG

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## How I Escaped from *Gilligan's Island*

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A RAY AND PAT BROWNE BOOK

*Series Editors*

Ray B. Browne and Pat Browne

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And Other Misadventures of  
a Hollywood Writer-Producer

William Froug

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whose love and support have kept me afloat  
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## How I Escaped from *Gilligan's Island*



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## Introduction

**T**he single most arresting aspect of Hollywood is its unpredictability. It is a business built on the rock-solid foundation of a floating crap game, which is appropriate since the motion picture and television businesses (identical in many ways) *are* floating crap games. The players come and go, they win or lose and hope the next roll of the dice will change their luck. And change it will. Overnight stardom is commonplace for people who have worked a dozen years to get to that one night.

In Hollywood you can be a hero one day and a bum the next, without so much as a phone call. I left for a one-week vacation in Mexico as a richly rewarded, lauded hero and returned to Hollywood to learn that during my absence I had become a pariah. The new management couldn't get me out of CBS Television City fast enough.

Surprise is the most persistent and potent drug in Hollywood. Just knowing that by getting up one morning (or going to bed one night) your fortunes can change dramatically will leave even the most reasonable person's nerves jangling like live wires. It's true that



Hollywood is a state of mind, not a city, town, or even a place on the map, but it is planet Earth's epicenter of drama.

We good burghers of these bizarre studio villages eat, sleep, and drink drama, which we sell at a tidy profit. Is it any wonder so many of us behave like inmates in an asylum?

If someone had told me as a kid growing up in Little Rock, Arkansas, that I would one day be working at each of the major studios in Hollywood, California, I would have laughed in his face. Like almost every kid of my generation, I grew up with the movies, about which I was nuts, and network radio, about which I was even nuttier. I loved showbiz as an audience loves it, not with any concept of winning the Screen Producers Guild Award or winning an Emmy Award the same year and being nominated for another a few years later. Such gilded trinkets were never on the distant fringe of my imagination. Nor did I exhibit even a hint of talent that might suggest gilded baubles were in my future. What I did have was an enormous appetite for enjoyment of the many entertainments in my life.

When I was four my mother took me to see my first movie, the original, silent *Ben Hur*. Because I was small and people were seated in front of us, my mother had me stand on the arms of the theater seat. She loved to tell the tale (over and over again) of me cheering and shouting for Ben to win the chariot race. Soon the entire audience moved to sit close to me, she recalled. "They loved your enjoyment as much as they enjoyed the movie, maybe even more. You were the best audience anybody ever had," she would brag shamelessly.

As luck would have it (I call it pot luck because in Hollywood none of us ever knows whether the luck we get is actually going to turn out to be good or bad in the long run) some of my sure-fire winners turned out to be flops (*Sam Benedict*) and some seeming flops were rousing successes (*Gilligan's Island*). You climb aboard one of these vehicles (more like bucking broncos) not really knowing whether you're about to win a trophy or be thrown on your ass. Having produced ten network television series in my lifetime as well as three movies made for television, I've experienced plenty of both. My life in "the business" (as we in "the business" call it!) was frequently a matter of luck. I got lucky many times, and unlucky just as

often. My most important luck happened far away from Hollywood. It was the day my Navy crew was shooting sharks.

It was the precise moment when my life in Hollywood began, even though I was on the other side of the world, across the international date line. It was the day I changed from being an audience to an audience maker.

In late August of 1945, in the great lagoon of Eniwetok atoll in the Marshall Island chain in the remote reaches of the Pacific, a vast armada of war ships swung lazily at anchor pending orders to return to their home bases in the United States. Eniwetok was one of the staging areas for the no-longer-needed invasion of Japan. The Japanese had surrendered two weeks earlier; World War II was over.

Just outside the lagoon a lone subchaser patrolled slowly back and forth as if guarding the huge naval base. Aboard the *PC 800*, a 170-foot, 300-ton, steel-hulled ship resembling a miniature destroyer, I was the newly arrived commanding officer. My orders, when I took command the week after the war ended, were to search for downed aircraft. With the war over, there were of course no combat planes flying.

I had been taken by longboat out the narrow channel entrance where we intercepted the *800* about a thousand yards off shore. As I climbed up the ladder to report on board the skipper was there to greet me, his face one big smile. He almost hugged me with joy. My arrival meant his war was over, he could go home.

We did a hurry-up ship's inspection, a five-minute change of command ceremony, and he leaped into the longboat and was gone. I found myself with five officers and sixty men whose sole mind-set was going home. With no external enemy to fight, they were trying to cope with the enemy within: boredom. All of America and the rest of the world were seemingly at home celebrating victory, except us. The crew felt abandoned, in a kind of time warp. We were all anxiously awaiting orders as we lazily made just enough headway to hold our course. Fortunately, the seas were calm. The weather was hot and sunny, but the ship's movement gave us a slight breeze making the heat bearable. We were a young ship with young officers and crew. At age twenty-three I already had two years of subchaser duty in the backwaters of the Pacific under my belt. Older crew members

had been the first to receive orders home. Among this young ship's company I was a seasoned pro.

The waters off Eniwetok Atoll were so crystal clear that looking down over the rail we could see countless schools of sharks circling all the way down to the smooth sandy ocean floor. These sleek prehistoric animals seemed attracted to our ship. I stood at the port side rail fascinated as I watched. But I was pondering what I was going to do with my life. I was just short of enough points in the Navy's discharge plan; it was only a matter of a couple of months at most when I would be ordered back to the States. I hadn't a clue what I was going to do as a civilian. I had graduated from the University of Missouri's School of Journalism with a BJ degree, but working on a newspaper held no interest for me, nor did advertising.

Smitty, our young bo'sun's mate approached me, "Request permission to shoot sharks, skipper," he said.

"Permission granted," I replied. The crew had to do something to fill the hours.

In a matter of minutes our entire port side afterdeck was lined with armed sailors eagerly scanning the shark-infested waters, choosing moving targets. Randomly, they opened fire: rifles, .45s, even submachine guns. The war against the sharks was on. The roar was deafening.

It was clear from the start the sharks were winning. For all the firepower we brought to bear, the bullets hit the water and were instantly flattened, rendering them harmless. The sharks were unfazed. Their numbers seemed to increase, as others were fascinated by the hubbub. But on deck the crew was frustrated.

"I've got it!" our cook shouted with the boisterous enthusiasm of a kid about to jump into his backyard swimming pool. Cookie rushed down the after hatch into our mess hall and almost immediately emerged triumphantly raising a big hunk of stew meat. Cheers went up from the crew. Quickly our bo'sun's mate grabbed a heavy line, a huge hook, and rigged a fishing line big enough to grab the *Queen Mary*.

The crew gathered around, full of excitement. Smitty hurried to the port side aft swinging his hooked line back and forth like a cow-hand trying to rope a steer. The crew, frantically reloading, hurried

to position themselves along the rail for the next phase of the attack. Cookie leaned over the railing, swinging his bait in a wide arc, then with one mighty effort let it fly. As soon as the stew meat splashed into the water a great gray shark leaped for it. It was the poor animal's last leap. Our entire store of small arms opened fire. The innocent victim took hits directly to his head, piercing cleanly between his eyes. He rolled over and, as the crew cheered, the dead shark's body slowly drifted down to the sandy sea floor.

Other sharks escorted the victim down to his final resting place, seemingly puzzled but not aggressive. None attacked him. They followed him until his curiously arched body flopped like a rubber toy on the sea floor. Then, swirling in an undersea whirlpool of their own making, they rose toward the surface.

On deck the crew began good-naturedly squabbling over who had fired the fatal shot. Then, bored with the game, one by one most of them began to stow their weapons. Only a few stragglers remained hoping to score again. They fired some random, half-hearted shots.

"Knock it off, men," I called to the stragglers, "you've proved your point."

"Aye, aye, skipper," they replied and drifted off to stow their weapons.

As skipper I was not required to stand watch; I was on duty 24/7. I went below to my cabin and pulled my little black Royal portable typewriter from under my bunk, slipped in two sheets of blank paper divided by a sheet of carbon paper, and typed:

"Anybody who looks at dead bodies long enough is bound to get tired of it, sooner or later." That sentence had nagged at me during the entire war against the sharks. I didn't know why, but I could not shake it out of my mind. Then I wrote another sentence and then another. My fingers kept adding new sentences that took on a life of their own and, finally, new paragraphs, then new pages. I was totally immersed in my tale, telling myself a story I did not know, having no idea where it was going to take me. On cruise control, I was writing as fast as my fingers could strike the keys. I was taking dictation from an invisible yet demanding boss: my imagination. Characters I had never met were speaking through my fingers and leaping onto the page, saying things that usually surprised me. It was one of the

most exciting and powerful experiences I was ever to know in my life, and yet it was as effortless and exhilarating as breathing. As the hours miraculously turned into days and sentences became pages, I began to realize that I was a *writer*. This was what I was going to do with my life. I had not actually discovered my future life's work, it had discovered me. Somewhere in the clacking of pounding typewriter keys, the thought entered my mind that perhaps no one else would enjoy the story I was telling myself. Simultaneously came the realization that it didn't matter in the least. I was writing this story for me. Every sentence, every twist and turn the story took came as a delightful surprise to me. When the story told me it had been fully told and I wrote "The End," I discovered almost two hundred typed pages stacked beside my typewriter. I titled it "Enough Money."

That first single sentence was the moment my career in Hollywood began. In the days that followed I discovered I'd written a mystery novella. I haven't the slightest doubt that my encounter with shooting sharks launched my career as a writer. I could hardly have imagined that I would spend the next forty years of my life in Hollywood as a writer-producer, encountering sharks of the two-legged variety, several of them shooting back at me.

I sent the manuscript to my former college roommate, E. (for Ernst) Jack Neuman, then working in Hollywood as a successful writer of radio dramas. Jack responded that he thought my story was terrific. He would get me an agent and felt certain the story would be published. He urged me to take my discharge in Los Angeles and consider a career as a writer, which idea, freshly minted in my mind, still seemed like a giant pole vault with no landing cushion. What if I had no other story to write?

Within weeks after my arrival in Los Angeles and an honorable discharge from the Navy, Jack fulfilled his promise and contacted an agent who liked the story. He quickly sold it for three hundred dollars to *New Detective* magazine, which featured my name on the cover of their May 1947 issue. Suddenly I was a *professional* writer! Neuman urged me to collaborate with him writing radio scripts. We soon sold several to the CBS Pacific Radio Network for ninety dollars, which gave each of us forty-five dollars a script. Meanwhile, I was also collecting twenty-five dollars a week for fifty-two weeks

under the GI Bill of Rights. Within a few weeks, however, Jack took off on his own. He was in demand and easily doubled his income writing top-ten dramas like *Lux Radio Theater*, a half-hour series hosted by famed film director Cecil B. DeMille and featuring major movie stars every week in adaptations of hit movies. How Jack boiled down a two-hour movie to twenty-nine minutes never ceased to amaze me. No doubt that's why they paid him six hundred dollars a script, big money in 1946.

I continued to scratch out a living writing on my own just enough radio dramas for CBS's Pacific Radio Network, where I knew I had found a home and an unexpected career.

Gradually this morphed into producing and directing as the clock on network radio was rapidly winding down. My nine years writing, producing, and directing radio dramas for CBS were, in many ways, the most rewarding years of my life. But network radio was sinking rapidly under a tidal wave of television. Though I had no great desire to work in the new medium, the next logical step was television.

Producing ten television series was a succession of wild rides on the Hollywood rodeo circuit where I had more than my share of bucking broncos who threw me for several bone-crunching falls. It is no coincidence that one of the most upscale shopping streets in the world is named Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, California. The highs and the lows of those bizarre rides not infrequently knocked the breath out of me (and whatever else in me that was loose). I was quite literally lucky to have survived. Join me for an inside look at the other side of the tube where the pace is frantic, and fortunes are made and lost in the blink of an eye. There was always as much comedy and drama going on on the sets of the Hollywood studios as there was in your living room . . . except we had no commercial interruptions and no mute button.

It was during those years I learned a writer's best friend is his luck.

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## Welcome to Hollywood

Late one afternoon in April of 1946, the aging DC-3 touched down on the runway of Burbank Airport in the San Fernando Valley and taxied toward the terminal. Exiting the plane, I saw white wisps of gently drifting gold-tinged clouds brushed by the fading sunlight. The deepening blue sky was crystal clear. In the distance the Santa Monica mountains guarding Los Angeles seemed aflame in the last glows of sunset. There were no other planes on the runway, and the airport seemed nearly deserted. As the day faded, a gentle silence was settling over the vast desert valley. Inhaling the orange-blossom scented air, seeing the swaying palms, I was sure this was paradise. As much as I had loved the Hawaiian Islands during my year and a half aboard a subchaser operating out of Pearl Harbor and atolls far beyond, this place was going to be even more inviting and seductive—a paradise without the war. I was thrilled by the unpredictability of adventures beyond my imagining that lay ahead. To a kid from Little Rock, Hollywood was Oz.

Walking down the metal stairs, overnight bag in hand, I was resplendent in my Navy uniform, proudly wearing my appropriately

tarnished Lieutenant (junior grade) gold-braided sleeves. (It was called “salty” to have green-stained gold braid on your uniform, especially your hat; it showed you were a seafaring sailor, not a desk jockey). E. Jack Neuman had promised to meet me at the terminal. Instead I was handed a telegram that read “UP WITH SICK SCRIPT. BUZZ ME. MR. BLUE. JACK.” This was a play on Amos ’n’ Andy’s famous instructions to their secretary, “Buzz me, Miss Blue.”

I had not seen my college roommate since we said farewell at the Columbia, Missouri, train station in June of 1942 when he hopped aboard a train to join the United States Marine Corps. Jack had enlisted shortly after Pearl Harbor, whereas a few weeks earlier I had enlisted in the Navy’s V-7 program, which allowed college juniors and seniors to sign up and get a deferment until they graduated. We would then head for Columbia University’s Naval Officer’s Training Program in New York City the day following graduation. In their haste to accommodate the Navy, the university had forgone graduation ceremonies, dismissing us in early April, several weeks before the end of the semester.

But Jack had wanted to see action immediately with no waiting for the niceties of a diploma. Off he went, gung ho, to war.

Things didn’t quite work out that way. After a few months in basic training, a subsequent medical exam disclosed scar tissue on his lungs. He was given an immediate medical discharge. Shortly after his release he came down with tuberculosis and ended up spending the rest of the war in VA hospitals. We exchanged letters throughout the war years, culminating with his urging me to take my discharge in Los Angeles, move in with him and his mom, and begin collaborating on radio scripts.

A stranger in a strange land, I took a bus to Hollywood, then a cab to Jack’s address on Taft Avenue just off Hollywood Boulevard.

The long narrow street was guarded by forty-foot-high pencil-thin palms lining both sides of the street like anorexic sentinels. High above the very end of Taft Avenue, anchored into the side of the Santa Monica mountains, were enormous white letters, H O L L Y W O O D, lit by the fading sunlight; they seemed almost aflame in the fading light and much farther away than they actually were.

Jack lived in an old, three-story, faded white stucco apartment



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