



## Pop Cliff – Hold Still I Won't Hit You

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*Author's Note: This is #7 in the Growing Up With Pop Cliff Series*

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Sure, my heart says I can trust him, but my head is saying, “No way, that’s a 16-pound sledge he’s swinging at my fingers.”

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When you are an independent contractor like Pop was, you have to be a jack-of-all-trades to stay in business. You can’t just send the dozer to the shop or call for a mechanic when something breaks. Or just call for a wrecker or another dozer to pull you out when you get stuck.

You have to do things for yourself. Improvise, make-do, - whatever it takes to get the dozer running again, and making money for you.

That was Pop. The one-man operation, the master of improvisation, the owner-operator-mechanic-greaseman-fueler, and whatever else he needed to be to keep the tracks turning.

That meant money coming in. When those dozer tracks were stopped it meant he wasn’t making money, or even worse, he was spending money.

His dozers were both TD14’s – pretty good size International bulldozers, not like the dinky little field dozers a lot of farmers had. Heck, each of the track plates were as big as a cafeteria tray, and the top of the tracks were chest-high to me. I had to climb on the blade bar just to be able to reach them so I could get to the driver’s seat.

Or I could step on the winch casing and climb up from the back.

Either way, climbing was involved. But that was fine with me, whatever it took to get into that operator’s seat was worth it.

Even during the school year, I spent most week-ends at Pop’s. I had gotten pretty good with “MY” rifle, (the 22 cal. single-shot Pop gave me last summer), graduating from shooting tin cans to shooting bottle caps – and was steady at hitting them from about 75 yards.

Not bad for a seven year old kid. But I was still playing catch-up, Pop could hit empty 22 casings at the same distance.

Speaking of Shooting...

Pop's a really smart guy, but he let his macho-bravado get him in trouble when he made a joke about Mom-mom's biscuits. Maybe he thought it would make a really good story to tell the guys.

Maybe he thought the story was worth the cold-shoulder treatment and no-biscuit hiatus he might get from Mom-mom over it. It's more likely that he didn't think about it at all.

It all started when Pop found a couple old biscuits that Mom-mom had left out on the back porch.

Now, you should know that she baked great made-from-scratch biscuits two or three mornings a week, and every Saturday morning that I was there. But the ones Pop found had been on the porch for at least a week.

It's amazing some animal hadn't eaten them, there were plenty of squirrels, at least one raccoon, and one or two possums around the woods behind Pop's house. And that's not counting all the snakes. (I really don't like snakes)

Anyway, for whatever reason these biscuits had survived a week on the porch and were hard as rocks.

I don't know what put the idea in Pop's head, but when I commented on how hard they were, he said "I bet you couldn't even break these with a bullet."

I was too young to see the trouble we were headed for, but Pop should have known better.

Off we go – biscuits in hand, to "MY" shooting range back by the shop.

Pop told me to get my gun and a box of Shorts on the way, while he walked back to the marsh mat back-stop to set up the biscuits.

My shooting table was at 75 yards, from my bottle cap practice, so that's where we shot from.

Pop went first. Bam! A hit, but it didn't break the biscuit, just cratered it. My turn. Bam! I hit too, same effect, just cratered the biscuit.

That's all Pop needed. He couldn't wait to tell his buddies the story about the biscuits that were so hard you couldn't break them if you shot them with a rifle. Pop loved telling stories, and this was going to be a good one.

You could also be sure that even though he could honestly tell it as a "true" story, there would be a couple pertinent facts left out, like; that the biscuits were weeks old, and that we shot them with

22 cal. Shorts at 75 yards – which is about 25 yards past their significant impact range. Which means that the Shorts were hitting the biscuits with about the same impact as a powerful BB-gun, maybe a little harder, but not much.

At seven years old, I didn't catch on to any of this. I was caught up in Pop's enthusiasm.

"Wow, Pop! Those sure are some hard biscuits. Bet we would have broke our teeth trying to eat them." I proclaimed.

Pop just smiled, and we finished plinking Shorts at those biscuits until they finally disintegrated. We finished off that box of Shorts shooting bottle caps, then headed back to the house.

Looking back, the best part of this story was what happened at dinner that night.

We had country-fried steak and gravy. Which means fresh biscuits. You just don't have country-fried steak and gravy without hot fresh biscuits, and as mentioned, Mom-mom made some good biscuits.

I was in the middle of sopping up some of the gravy when I commented, "These sure are better than those other biscuits, aren't they Pop?"

I'm not sure, but I think he might have choked a little just then, because he didn't say a word, just reached for his drink.

"What biscuits are you talking about?" Mom-mom asked. Looking first at me, then at Pop.

At seven, I was too young to realize how deep the water was.

"Tell her Pop, them biscuits were so hard we couldn't even break them shooting them with my rifle!" I exclaimed, feeling like a major contributor to an adult conversation.

Except there wasn't much conversation going on.

Pop just continued eating, head down, like he had to keep a close watch on his plate, least something should sneak away before he could get to it.

Now, I understand that in his head, he was ducking the mortar rounds that he knew were coming his way, but back then I was too young to see the danger signs, and just kept on, throwing more gas on the fire, (funny I should think of that analogy).

"You should have seen it Mom-mom, we had to shoot them biscuits half-a-dozen times before they would break. Bet we would have broke our teeth if we tried to eat them!" I enthusiastically explained.

"Cliff, what biscuits is he talking about?"

Caught up in the moment, I piped right in before Pop could say anything.

“Them biscuits we found on the porch. Pop said your biscuits were so hard, he bet we couldn’t even break them if we shot them with a rifle. And he was right, we had to shoot them five or six times before they broke.”

Well, apparently dinner was over.

“If you think my biscuits are so bad, then you don’t have to eat any more of them!” Mom-mom said as she got up from the table.

I just stared. I thought we were having a good dinner, but now Mom-mom was at the sink rattling dishes, and Pop was just staring at his plate with a hang-dog look on his face.

Go figure! Grown-ups!

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So back to holding that bar ...

The cable-blade had a bad drive wheel bearing and Pop had to pull the wheel to get to it. That meant he had to uncouple the track and jack up the dozer. Both were heavy-duty jobs.

The steel tracks are connected with coupler-pin. To separate the tracks you need to drive out that pin. Considering these are 10-inch long, 2-inch diameter solid steel pins that had to be driven in with a sledge hammer to begin with, and had been running in muck and mud and whatever since the last time the tracks were uncoupled, (at least months, if not a year or more), this was no small job. And it was a two-man job. One to wield the big sixteen-pound sledge, and one to hold the heavy six-foot solid steel drive bar firm against the coupler pin.

I was the second “man”, guess what my job was.

I trusted Pop. He was good with tools, and accurate with that sledge, but when you are seven, and a big man is swinging a big hammer at the tip of a small bar, that you are holding onto – well, it’s hard not to flinch!

Every time I flinched, Pop would have to abort his swing, and then we both had to set-up again for another try.

“Just hold it still, I’m not going to hit you,” Pop said.

Sure, my heart says I can trust him, but my head is saying, “No way, that’s a 16-pound sledge he’s swinging at my fingers.”

I just couldn't keep from flinching, so we had to come up with a compromise – which turned out to be the metal workbench stool from Pop's shop. I laid one end of the bar on the stool seat and slid my hands farther down towards the middle to hold it steady.

Wham! Pop hit that bar dead on. My hands stung like heck, but he hadn't missed, and the pin looked like it had moved, maybe.

Wham! Wham! Again, Wham! Pop was right, If I just held that bar steady, he never missed, and I could see that pin slowly moving out of the coupler link. It took a few more swings, but finally, the last swing drove the pin out, clanging against the drive housing, and it also drove that bar out of my hands as it slid into the coupler space the pin had occupied just a second earlier.

Whew! My hands stung, but at least they were still attached to my arms.

Now for the heavy work. Pop used a come-along to pull the track off of the drive wheel, and we got started on those huge bolts that held it in place. He looked like Hercules as he used a long breaker-bar and extender pipe to loosen those monsters. As soon as that was done, he put a hydraulic jack under the lower track-roller carriage arm and jacked it up until the sprocket teeth on the drive wheel were clear of the track links

Next came his home-made wheel puller. It was a rig with three pieces of heavy chain with hooks, and another hydraulic jack with a short length of an old spindle – slightly smaller than the drive wheel spindle, welded on the bottom. All he had to do was hook the chains on the drive wheel, place the jack/spindle in the center and pump away. Slowly but surely his home-made rig pulled that big solid steel wheel off the shaft so we could get to the bearing.

Then he just lifted that huge drive wheel clear away from the track and leaned it against the blade bar.

Wow! To a seven years-old, Pop was Superman. I bet he could lift that dozer with his bare hands if he needed to.

And I was his helper... life was good!

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**Next:** [One Me and a Million Bees](#)

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