

## ENTRY BLANK

AIR FORCE  
SHORT STORY CONTEST

15 March 1952

Name KIRWAN, Thomas A. Jr.

Grade Private First Class

Serial Number AF 11 234 129

Military Address Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron  
91st Air Base Group Lockbourne Air Force Base, Ohio

Home Address 30 Glen Road Winchester, Massachusetts

Hometown Newspapers Winchester Star Winchester, Mass.  
Boston Herald Boston, Mass.

The contestant warrants that the manuscript submitted herewith is original, has never before been published, and is solely his own property. Further, the contestant has read and agrees to abide by the rules and regulations established by AFL 212 - 3.

Title of Manuscript "The Last Eight Minutes"

I certify that the attached manuscript, title as above, is free and clear of libel.

*Thomas A. Kirwan, Jr.*

Signature of contestant

The Last Eight Minutes

There was only stillness. The light drizzle had ended and drops of moisture trickled slowly from the leaves above me. The pine needles beneath my feet were soggy; my steps were soundless. Nothing had stirred since I entered the forest at dawn and now moonlight sifting through the trees threw shadowy patterns on the trail.

I walked slowly, steadily. There was no need to hurry for my search had to be thorough. I had not seen a living creature in that forest and day after day it was the same. The monotony was broken only by frequent weather changes, by the pungent smell of pines and salt air beyond and occasionally the rustling of a small animal in the brush. Now, it was quiet. At times the quietness seemed peaceful and other times, ominous. There was no mistaking this ultimate feeling — it was my reason for being there.

From time to time my thoughts wandered back over the serene, uncomplicated days of my youth, the days when thoughts of destruction and violence, of labor camps and the M.V.D. were nonexistent. The hushed atmosphere through which I searched reminded me of happy years which could never be recovered, but the memory, at best, was dim. Now I had been trained for a new life, trained to live and act and think like an animal. When night descended, I prowled the forest and coastline, like an animal.

The crumbs of bread and cheese I found at the bottom of my pack were stale and tasteless. Several mouthfuls of tepid water from my canteen ended the supply and I refilled it partially from rainwater caught in rock crevices. Finally, when I could hear the rumblings of surf against rock, I lit a cigarette. Before it was half smoked I had passed out from under the trees and stood watching the waves move sluggishly down the channel. Overhead, a bird screeched despairingly

into the bleak night, dipped hesitatingly over the beach and glided out of sight. A shroud of heavy, black clouds hung listlessly in the sky that hot August evening, and all but blotted out the glow of a nearly full moon. Dim reflections flickered in the turbulent waters of the sea far below, making vision difficult but not impossible. Suddenly I became tense.

From my position on a jagged ledge jutting out over the channel, I could just make out the shadow of a man jumping catlike from a high wall, and then slipping quickly into the murky waters. Within those walls of confinement there came no sounds of disturbance or alarm. My luminous watch dial shone 11:22.

The swimmer, lost to sight for a short time under the surface, reappeared twenty yards from the rocks on the near side of the channel, and struck out blindly for the beach on the far side. He lashed furiously at the waves which thundered over his straining body— using to the utmost every available muscle— but progressed very little. A swirling undercurrent clutched at him greedily, trying to pull the struggling form into the suffocating, unrelenting grip of the sea outside. His spasmodic kicking merely served to tire him more quickly than the sea itself, and several times he slid beneath the waves only to return choking and gasping for air. His wild gestures gave proof of his panic-stricken frame of mind, yet in his abnormal fear he was strong and unyielding.

Just at this moment the moon broke clear and bright from behind its dark curtain; with it, reassurance seemed to come to the swimmer. The now glittering and choppy breakers whipped back and forth across the middle of the channel despite the fact that it was usually calm there. I glanced at my watch again. It was 11:26. The death struggle of the man below was useless and foolhardy, I was sure, but my

undivided attention was held partly by his unconquerable spirit and partly by my own curiosity.

Between this unfortunate struggler and the beach— his goal of freedom — loomed a sharp-toothed rock covered in part by ragged-edged barnacles. Before he had time to veer away, the treacherous rip tide had enveloped him and then had spewed him crushingly against the almost human-like obstacle. He tried to climb up on the rock, but the seaweed at its base afforded too slippery a surface. He was dragged over and beyond the rock by the rushing water and plunged into a seething cauldron of clean white foam and brine. Once more he started for the beach; his glistening skin had become periodically stained with rivulets of blood and then washed clean with stinging salt water. Beneath the ledge was a yawning chasm into which the sea roared, and then clutched viciously at the slime covered seaweed and barnacles before sullenly returning to its source. The figure below was swept past this final menace and struggled once again toward the beach. All this had occurred in a space of seven minutes. It was 11:29.

The swimmer was fast becoming exhausted; his arms grew heavy, and his kick became weaker, but at last the shore was a scant few yards through the rolling combers. He was so close, in fact, he began floundering around for a foothold in the shallow water. Calmly, and with great care, I swung my weapon around and squinted along the barrel; when the target passed directly before my sight, I slowly squeezed the trigger. After the report had died away in the drumming of the surf, I was alone again, watching the unbroken, gentle rippling of the tide in the warm moonlight.....