

*The
Damned
Cargo:*

An Adventure of the

SkullMask

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This is an original short story and has
never appeared elsewhere.

Blazing! Adventures Magazine

Publishers
2007

New York

Down through the corridors of time-comes a whisper:

The Skullmask

A legend, a myth, a nightmare story told around the campfires of an undying avenger who never stops until the guilty are punished-the helpless-avenged: *Skullmask*.

Called by dozens of names across the centuries & known in different cultures: *Captain Skull, The Skull Rider, Lady Death's head, The Skull Avenger, The Midnite Skull, The Skull Ace, The Bloody Skull, The Skullman, The Laughing Skull, The Skull Commando*-over two hundred years, always the mask appeared when the need was great enough. Always a new cause, always a vengeance fulfilled. A sinister mask, that links the minds of all who've worn it in the quest-for just vengeance.

The *One* hero, who is *many* heroes.

Prologue:

Spring 1945

"Get the Midnight Skull!" Captain von Dunder screamed shrilly. "He has *crippled* the steering mechanism." He pointed to the tiny figure high up in the spider web of support struts of the Zeppelin Ragnarok and added, "Kill him, now!"

The leather clad crew members scrambled up the struts like so many murderous ants, holding knives and tools as improvised weapons.

The trench-coated figure that the German pointed at had a visage that was hideous and his situation was clearly desperate. He was wedged in a tiny maintenance walkway between the enormous gas bags of the dirigible. He was bleeding badly from a

stomach wound and he knew that this time, after so many near misses, his number was up.

'You may have killed me,' he thought, *'but you'll not dump this cargo of poison on America, von Dunder.'* In his hand-a Mauser automatic pistol-the irony of it being a German weapon, was not lost on him.

"Gotta admit the von Dunders of this world are good at making death dealers," he said out loud.

He watched the dirigible's crew, all dedicated Nazi's, climb toward him with an odd calm. He realized he didn't fear death or what would come after, not anymore. He would have before, when there were so many of the scum left that had killed his family in his home village of Nantue.

Von Dunder was the last of the commanders that had ordered the deaths of innocent villagers in reprisal for a single act of sabotage. Now, though his work was almost done and his thirst for vengeance almost satiated, there was just one more. Here, over the Caribbean, the poison gas the Nazi had planned to rain on America's gulf coast would dissipate in a day or so with no fatalities.

Here, it would *all* end.

The closest crew member was barely four yards away and was sure that the death's head masked man would not dare risk discharging his gun so close to the gas bags. They believed he, like they, had reason to want to live.

They were wrong.

The cornered man raised the gun to take deliberate aim at the nearest of the hydrogen filled bags.

"I'll see you in hell von Dunder!" He yelled, squeezing the trigger twice.

Before he could squeeze it a third time, the Ragnarok lived up to its name; it erupted into an apocalyptic ball of flame! That, together with the poison gas, killed all on board.

The Midnight Skull was dead.

Long live the Skullmask!!

Chapter 1.

Fall 1952

Tiger McMullen had never even seen the ocean until he had shipped out for Europe and now, here he was on the deck of a rum smuggling ship in the rain with his friend and employer, Joey "Frenchman" Collins. It was the most remarkable thing that had ever happened in his unremarkable life.

In fact, Tiger was a very average guy. He had been an average student in school until December seventh when he heard the Japanese had made their sneak attack. He had become an average soldier the next day when he'd run off and lied about his age to join.

He'd seen some combat in Italy, got injured in a non-combat truck accident that had badly broken his leg and gotten him shipped home just before V.E. day. He'd recovered in the veteran's hospital, been discharged and got a job pumping gas in a Fort Lauderdale gas station. He was average height, had medium brown hair a medium face that was neither too ugly nor too handsome.

He was average in every way except one: Molly.

Somehow Molly Acton, the prettiest girl in the whole state, had decided he was something special and had actually said yes when he had proposed. He had no idea how to be able to support her on his gas jockey salary.

And he had been lucky enough to run into his old army acquaintance, Frenchman, in a bar one night long after. Tiger had first met Collins (Frenchman) in Italy and saved his life when a crane malfunctioned. In the meantime, Frenchman had inherited his

dad's shipping business and just happened to need a night watchman and didn't give a hoot if Tiger had a limp. The pay was better and the hours, even the second shift hours, were more regular. There was an occasional bonus for *'looking the other way'* when Frenchman brought in some smuggled cargo or ivory or machine parts.

It had been the best six months of his life, the happiest. He and Molly had even become good social friends with Frenchman, an oddity to be sure. A watchman and his boss, out at the same parties-but it made Molly happy to go out and Frenchman picked up the bill.

With the Korean conflict at its height the import business in radio parts had begun to boom and the late night shipments had increased.

Then last week Collins had come to Tiger with a proposition: come along as a guard on a run to the keys to get some rum and share in the profits. It was a risk, more than just looking the other way for a little late night shipment. Tiger went along; the money was good, he and Molly wanted to start a family and, he reasoned, *'Hey, just a little Cuban rum, what's the harm?'* Even Molly didn't know he wasn't at the warehouse tonight.

"Hey, Tiger," Frenchman said from the wheelhouse of the cutter. "You wool-gathering out there?" Collins was a tall, thin, tan man with a quick smile and bright blue eyes.

"Sorry, Joey," Tiger said, "Just enjoying the night air." He made his way of the short ladder to the wheelhouse of the thirty footer.

"Take the wheel, will you," Collins said, "the buoy is off the bow and I want to climb down there and hook it before this storm gets worse." Tiger took the wheel while Frenchman got a boat hook and pulled the buoy close enough to extract two packages the size of suitcases from it.

"That sure is expensive rum to fit into cases that small and be worth this trip," Tiger said when his boss came back into the wheelhouse and shook off the rain. Collins looked at him with slitted-eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Frenchman said.

"I don't like-being *lied* to Joey," Tiger said. "What's going on?"

"Oh well," Frenchman said, "I guess we're far enough out even here and you had to know sometime." Suddenly Joey had a gun in his hand. "You were right, it's not rum this time, Tiger," he said, "it's horse."

"Heroin?" McMullen said in shock. "You made me help you bring in that junk?" There was anger in his voice, but still disbelief.

"Oh don't be so naïve gimp," Frenchman said. "I got debts; the four legged horses have been good to me and the rum and radio parts ain't cutting it no more."

"But why involve me?" Tiger asked. Outside the storm winds were churning up the sea and the wind was worsening.

"Three reasons, old chum," Collins said in a tired voice, "I needed a fall guy. You see some auditors are gonna find a big chunk of my legit business capital is gone next week and it seemed convenient to be able to blame it on you."

"But I'll tell them-"

"No, chum, you won't," Frenchman said. His eyes gotten suddenly cold and Tiger knew what was going to happen. "You won't be around to tell anyone." He raised the forty-five to draw a bead on McMullen.

The frightened McMullen turned to race out of the wheelhouse just as the impact of the first bullet *slammed* into his back-pushing him into the glass side window. He slumped to the deck just as the burning of the bullet hit began to spread across his back. He tried to move his limbs but they seemed paralyzed by the impact.

"And now the second reason," Frenchman said as he dragged the stunned McMullen out to the railing and began to hoist him over. "I'll be around to console your charming widow after her feckless husband ran away with all that money."

The eyes of the two men met for a moment and a strange energy seemed to pass between them. "Why?" McMullen managed to form the word soundlessly.

"Why not?" Frenchman said, and then threw his *'friend'* into the stormy sea and certain death.

Chapter 2.

Tiger McMullen was dead but for the spark of fire deep within him that burned with one word: revenge.

It burned in him like a hellacious fever, volcanic in its fury and atomic in its rage.

It radiated out from the bullet hole in his back in a spider web of agony and enveloped his entire being. With the image of the betrayer Collins who fired the bullet into him, his hate was complete. It kept his heart beating, it kept his lungs sucking air and it kept his mind focused on one purpose:

'I will kill the one who did this to me!'

Meanwhile his body floated in the brackish ocean water, his lifeblood seeped out in invitation to predators. "I'm never gonna see Molly again," McMullen thought, "I'm gonna end up shark food and that rat Collins is gonna live. Is there no Justice in the world?"

There might be no justice in the world, but for Tiger McMullen that day, there was providence. He drifted semi-conscious for a while when he became aware of a roaring that was not inside him. He managed to raise his head enough to see whitecaps ahead of him. An Atoll; a tiny coral island in the middle of the ocean where there shouldn't be one.

McMullen willed his numb arms to move and tried to steer himself toward the swirling water, already feeling the ebb and flow of the tide around the splotch of sand and trees. He was able to marginally move toward the island, but the ocean kept moving him one step forward and two steps back. He had to surrender to the watery hand of fate and he was tossed for the best part of the afternoon toward and away from the

island and the coral reefs that surrounded it

'The reef'll cut me to ribbons,' he thought.

But again providence provided as a gentle swell lifted him over the shallow reef and all but threw him on the white sand of the beach.

And there he lay for half a day and a night exhausted and aching, slipping in and out of consciousness.

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The bright Caribbean sun warming the back of his neck woke Tiger at midmorning of the next day.

He was weak and his back hurt like heck, but he was alive.

And he was thirsty.

'Fat chance of a cold drink,' he thought. Tiger knew that these coral atolls seldom had fresh water on them, being little more than a bump of coral that accumulated sand above the water's surface. He was in fact surprised that the storm of the night before had not washed the little copse of trees and shrubs off the pimple of sand.

He forced himself upright and staggered along the beach, quickly circling the little atoll that could not have been more than a half-mile across. No wonder it was not on the charts, it probably came and went with the seasonal winds.

'But those do look like palm trees,' he thought, *'and they are clustered in the center of the island-maybe there is a pocket of high ground or rock where some fresh water might be.'*

Tiger staggered inland and in twenty feet discovered the island's secret: a rock outcropping that was the peak of some subsurface mountain that had pitted, coarse surfaces. He found some with tiny pools of water that had not yet evaporated and greedily sucked handfuls down to slake his thirst.

It was after the first rush, when his immediate thirst was quenched that he noticed the odd nature of the depression the water was in. It was not a stone hollow-it was some sort of fabric. Then he looked up.

Tiger McMullen almost fell over: the fabric was indeed a non-porous coarse cloth that had collected water, and that was no surprise, as it was part of the skin of a downed dirigible!

Bits and pieces of the sky-craft lay jammed into the center of the island, screened entirely from the shore by the trees and shrubs. Among the debris were bodies as well; he counted at least a dozen in various stages of decay, all wearing remnants of some sort of uniform. He stood in the center of the chaos and felt the world spin around him.

He slumped to his knees exhausted and suddenly aware that he hadn't eaten in a day and a half. Then he saw it: the thing that would change his life forever....

Chapter 3.

The thing that changed Tiger McMullen's life was lying in the sand half buried beneath a twisted aluminum support strut. Both had been blown clear when the dirigible had slammed into the atoll.

The thing itself was almost sand colored, a strange aged parchment look that was so in contrast to the pitted silver of the aluminum. It seemed so small and yet so out of place, that it somehow seemed important among the Cyclopean debris.

Without thinking, he knelt beside it, scooped some sand away and pulled the support off it so he could see the whole thing.

It was a mask, but one such as he had never seen or imagined in any nightmare he had ever had.

It was shaped like the visage of a death's-head with exaggerated brow ridges, gaping empty eye sockets, and the two canines of the upper (and only) jaw extended beyond the four center teeth by a full inch.

It was *hideous* and fascinating all at once.

He stared at it a full five minutes, imagining the sand filled sockets were staring back...

He studied the fine uniformed pattern of whirls and textures that covered the mask and came to the realization that it was fine-grained leather, molded so subtly that it was imbued with expression. That expression seemed to change as he looked at it.

It was a trick, done by the light to be sure; or a mere shifting shadows caused by a cloud passing the Caribbean sun or a reflection of the water off a cloud.

It was compelling-nonetheless.

He reached for it then, snatching his hand back as if it were burned: the thing was warm!

"Idiot!" he admonished himself, "it's just warm from the sun and the sand."

He reached for it again, this time with both hands. It was like warm burlap in his hands.

He reversed it to look at the back. It was all one color, though the interior of the mask seemed worn a bit smoother than the exterior.

The next step came without thought; he lifted it to his face, looked through the eyeholes and pressed it to his skin.

The Skullmask!

The thing adhered to him, joined to him, becoming apart of him.

A flood of thoughts-confusion; images laid one over the other, life after life and death after death stretching back for fifty lives to the first who had worn it...

'We are the Skullmask,' said the voice that echoed in his head with a chorus of mirror voices, '*we are the atavist of just vengeance; you will be our instrument.*'

Tiger McMullen dropped to his knees as waves of strange pain swept over him, not physical pain, but the accumulated suffering of a half hundred souls who'd worn the mask.

Half a hundred souls whose lives had been turned into living hells by *cruelty, evil, wickedness, horrific loss or betrayal.*

Souls whose need for vengeance had burned through their pain and loss, more important than their own need to survive, and burned like a beacon that drew the Skullmask to them; for when the pain was great enough, *Vengeance is Justice.*

The mask self adhered to him.

He rose to his feet, the pain in his back-a distant memory, as the powers of the mask had already begun to heal him at an extraordinary rate.

Within him, the agony and horror of his betrayal became more than pain. It was focused now outward, focused like a sniper's scope on the ones who had betrayed him.

"I will have justice," he said aloud in a new voice, "Vengeance will be mine!"

The Skullmask lived again!

Chapter 4.

The Mask had given Tiger the skills he needed to fashion a shallow draft craft from the wreckage of the Dirigible that he had found on the tiny atoll. It was complete with an improvised sail made from the skin of the great sky craft.

It had taken him weeks to finish and sail the boat to the mainland, using navigational skills to steer by the stars that had not been possible before. The skeletal contenance, had shared the nautical knowledge with him.

He slipped into the shore furtively, by night, and with a fedora pulled down to shadow his death's head appearance, he found his way to Collins' home. What he saw there filled him with fresh rage: Molly. She was seated at Collins' table where the two had just had dinner.

Skullmask/Tiger barely resisted the urge to smash through the window and kill Collins. He watched while Collins came on to Molly and Tiger felt a surge of pride

when it was clear the woman had pushed away angrily from the betrayer with a cry, *'I thought you were his friend!'* He rounded the table and approached her again, but she rebuffed him and stormed out of his house in tears.

Tiger wanted to run to her, to comfort her, but the Skullmask whispered *'Vengeance first.'*

"Go on you ungrateful cow," Collins yelled after her. "I don't have to put up with your whining like your two timing gimp!"

She stopped then, and turned to face Collins with her own fury washing her fear away.

"I'll never believe what the police said," she screamed back at him. "Tiger would never steal that money from your company and he would never leave me for some floozy. You lied and they believed you."

'He did frame me,' Tiger/Skullmask thought. *'I have to clear my name: I'll get him when Molly leaves.'*

"Vengeance first." The voices of the Skullmask echoed in his head.

Molly fled down the street and for a moment it looked as if Collins might give chase. In that moment, Tiger/Skullmask made up his mind to strike Frenchman down where he stood and clear his name later.

Then, Fate intervened again.

A late model dark green sedan pulled up to the curb and a brute of a man in a gabardine suit stepped out.

"Frenchman," the man said in a nasal voice at odds with his appearance.

"Gabretti wants you to the warehouse-*now*."

"What the hell is this?" Collins protested.

"The stuff in the last shipment has some irregularities," Gabardine said. "And Gabretti is unhappy about it."

"Okay," Collins said, "let me grab my coat and hat."

"You're fine as you are," Gabardine said. "Get in."

That stopped Collins in his tracks as the unmistakable tone of command and con-

sequences was clear. He slipped into the back seat and Gabardine slipped in beside him.

Skullmask *raced* from the shadows and slipped onto the outside running board as the driver put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb.

The wind whipping past the car seemed to call to him '*Vengeance.*' It seemed to say, '*Vengeance.*'

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The midnight trip to the warehouse was a quick one through empty streets. Skullmask sprang from the car just before it slowed to enter the warehouse compound by the main gate. There were half a dozen rough looking types standing by several trucks parked at the loading dock-waiting for something.

Collins strode past the men with an annoyed hunch to his shoulders; Gabardine half a step behind him.

Skullmask, meanwhile, worked his way around the side of the building that he knew so well, easily avoiding the two armed guards he discovered.

Tiger moved with the agile grace of a dancer; he no longer limped-the Skullmask had taken care of that. In fact, despite the hardship of the time on the island and the long journey he was in the best shape of his life.

'Our strength is your strength,' the voices of the mask said. *'In vengeance we will find strength.'*

Skullmask climbed to the rafters of the warehouse like some huge spider, using the web of support girders. He found a position above Collins and the man he had come to see, Vincent Gabretti. His was a face splashed across the newspapers with headlines like '*Gangster Beats Murder Rap*' and '*Gabretti Rival Found Dead*' with alarming regularity.

"What is this mess?" Gabretti was screaming. "This stuff is supposed to be eighty percent pure and Jojo says it's more like fifty percent." Gabretti was a ten-dollar hood

in a hundred dollar suit.

"Hey, hey," Collins said, "I just picked the stuff up; I never even opened the canisters."

Gabretti looked like he didn't believe a word that Collins said. "I know that's a lie, Frenchman. My brother Vito packed these canisters after some customer down the line complained about shortages from the last shipment.

You got caught being too greedy, Joey; too *damn* greedy."

Collins saw the look in the gang boss' eyes and started to protest, but a commotion at the door drew all their attentions.

"Let go of me, you Gorilla," a female voice yelled.

'Molly!' Tiger thought.

A burly guard pulled the resisting woman into the warehouse.

"She come right up to the gate yellin' about seein' Frenchman," the guard said, "I couldn't get her to shut up or go away."

She saw Collins and then Gabretti beside him. "What are you doing with him!" She yelled. "You *did* have something to do with Tiger's disappearance."

Gabretti made a face. "You see, Joey," he said. "You see how you are making problems for me?" He turned to the man in gabardine.

"Tony," Gabretti said, "make both of these problems go away."

Tony produced a forty-five automatic from a shoulder holster and chambered a round.

"No!" Collins screamed.

'No!' Tiger thought.

"*Vengeance is now!*" Skullmask screamed as he let go of the support; with the instincts of an acrobat, (previous Skullmask had been) he leapt the thirty feet toward a pallet of cardboard boxes.

Almost magically, the two broom-handled Mauser automatic pistols appeared in his gloved hands. The guns belched fire! He shot Tony and the guard holding Molly, through the head while in midair.

"Get in here now!" Gabretti yelled frantically to the men outside.

Collins used the distraction to draw a pistol, shooting Gabretti in the back!

"The bean-counting son of a witch!" he yelled.

Skullmask executed a shoulder roll from the boxes to the ground still holding the Mausers. He whirled, trying to locate Collins, but the betrayer had made it to the back-door just as the men outside flung the main door open. Tiger called to his wife, "Molly drop to the ground!"

The woman reacted to her husband's voice instinctively and she dropped to her knees as the thugs entered the room-guns drawn.

"Vengeance is Justice!!!" Skullmask screamed in a voice beyond human. Then his Mausers spoke for him, blazing a dual gospel of flaming justice!

Three of the thugs fell at once and the others dove behind crates. The gangsters opened up with their handguns at the gruesome avenger. Bullets chewed up bits of wood from the crates around Skullmask.

'I have to draw their fire from Molly,' the masked man thought. He jumped to his feet racing across the floor of the building at an angle to the door. He fired both Mausers as fast as his fingers could squeeze the triggers-steel jacketed *justice* rained like *judgment* on the hoodlums by the door.

"Crawl out back way where Collins went!" He called to Molly.

The confused woman once more followed his commands, her mind so overwhelmed by the immediacy of the situation; she had no time to ponder why she trusted the voice.

Skullmask watched her exit before he too backed out; his reloaded guns spraying lead death behind him! By the time he actually stepped through the doorway, out the back of the warehouse, none of the thugs inside was capable of returning fire. Just as well, for his guns clicked empty as he stepped into the alley.

"Hold it there you Halloween freak!"

Skullmask turned to see Collins holding Molly around the throat with his left arm; a revolver in his right, pointed straight at the *Skull Avenger's* face.

"Give it up, Frenchman," Skullmask said with the voice of the grave. "You are defeated."

"What the hell is wrong with you, Skullface?" Frenchman said. "I got the girl. I got a gun in your freak mug, and you're telling me I'm done?"

Skullmask walked slowly forward, the fire of hatred making his eyes all but glow with rage. "No, you *are* done." He said. "Your bullets can only *hurt* our body, but our *spirit* will follow you all the days of your miserable life-and beyond!"

"Stop!" Collins screamed.

Skullmask continued to walk slowly forward-as inexorable-as Armageddon!

"Stop!" He yelled again. His hand began to shake.

"Release the woman." Skullmask/Tiger said. *"Confess your crime."*

"You have to stop!?!!" Collins voice cracked with his terror. His whole body began to vibrate uncontrollably.

"We are Vengeance," Skullmask proclaimed.

"We are destiny-to all who commit evil."

"We-are undying."

"We-are eternal."

"We-are Justice!"

"No!" Collins screamed and dropped to his knees, a blubbering mess. The gun slipped from his palsied fingers.

Molly stepped away from him and backed to the wall of the alley.

"Write your recent sins on this paper," Skullmask commanded the kneeling Collins.

He dropped a sheet of paper and a pen in front of the man and stood like a statue carved in hell while Collins wrote the tale of how he framed Tiger McMullen.

Epilogue:

With the confession in his hand, Tiger/Skullmask walked to the frightened woman who had witnessed the bloodbath.

"My God," she said, "Is that you, Tiger?"

The grim skeletal visage man stepped up to her and stood. In his head he heard a host of voices echoing, '*Vengeance is Justice. Justice is done.*'

The hideous Death's head softened into a smile.

"Yes, darling, don't be frightened. It's all over now." Only Tiger's voice spoke to Molly.

As if to prove it, the Skullmask fell away from Tiger's face, falling to the ground at his feet.

Tiger McMullen embraced his wife, praying his life would return to its very average pattern, though he knew it never would. When he looked down for a last look at the object that had changed his life.....

.....it was gone.

Had it been a dream-or a nightmare?

The Skullmask was dead.

Long live the Skullmask!

The End