

ACROPHOBIA

By: Gus Dick Andros

Being a real tourist in Paris means a lot of walking, museums, landmarks, and blisters. I found a book on sightseeing in Paris and discovered that on my own I had seen everything in the book except the Eiffel Tower. So on my last day I walked from my hotel to the Tower.

The Tower can be seen from all over Paris, but not until I was under it did I realize just how tall it was. When I bought my ticket, there was a waiting period of an hour before I could go to level three. So, being impatient, I decided on the first two levels. From the ground to level one was like being on any elevator; but this one was open on three sides, providing a view of the city that a postcard could never convey. As I ascended to the second level, however, my palms began to sweat and my heart to palpitate -- I thought I was having a heart attack. My forehead was wet with sweat, focusing was difficult and my knees became so weak that I thought I would collapse. Pride kept me from yelling. Once I was on the platform I sat down until my breathing became normal. I thought to myself, "when I get home I must have a medical check up."

Going down on the elevator, I began to feel ill, so I faced the back and the feeling went away. That night while I was trying to sleep, the feeling that I experienced on the tower came back--I suddenly remembered that I had had that feeling once before. Lying in my hotel room, my mind took me back to my military days.

After a year of military service overseas, I became eligible for TDY (in civilian terms--a vacation). I took advantage of this opportunity after I served my first year in Japan. I chose to go to O-Shima, a volcanic island about thirty miles off the coast of Honshu. It was at this volcano that many Japanese committed hari kari by plunging into the crater. The US Army took possession of any facility that they could use, and the only hotel on the island was used by the armed services to house servicemen on TDY. Prior to the war, this hotel served the people bent on suicide.

The hotel itself was very typical of the early 1940's. About 20 servicemen, soldiers, airmen, and sailors were staying there. The Red Cross provided one recreational worker to help arrange activities for our stay. The

well being. I outranked the man behind me, whose face and name I can't remember, but at this time we were equal. He started to cry and I was too afraid to help him. Many ideas were offered from the top and the bottom, but no one could come up with a sure-fire way for us to get out of this situation. I don't pray, but I found myself repeating a poem that my Aunt Oma taught me as a child.

I am the place where God shines through
For He and I are one, not two.
He wants me here as I am;
I need not fret nor will or plan.
If I will be relaxed and free,
He will carry out his plans through me.

It worked like a mantra that hypnotized me onto another level of consciousness and gave me a clearer head to see the possibilities. Looking down with less fear, I saw another small ledge about 15 feet below us from which we could descend to the bottom. I decided to try to get to this ledge. My companion did not like the idea. I told him if he wanted to stay until help could get to him, he could, but I was going to try to get to the ledge.

I have always had an ability to see all the possibilities open to me. I recited the poem one more time, flung my arms out in a "T" formation, and began to slide. I cut my back very badly, but I felt no pain at the time, and when I hit the ledge, I instinctively bent my knees. My companion desperately wanted to join me. I told him to do what I had done, neglecting to say that it was crucial to bend your knees. He thrust his arms out, pressed against the cliff, and began his slide. But when he hit the ledge, he didn't bend his knees and it was as if he had hit a diving board, at any moment we could lose him to the ocean or the boulders. If there is a divine power, it was with us. I shut my eyes and reached for him and, before he could pull me down with him, I got the strength to pull him back. No one was more surprised than I that I had caught him, because I never looked, I just grabbed. From the top and from the bottom, everyone was cheering. We continued our descent until we were safe. Those who had stayed behind said that they couldn't see the ledge and thought that we were fish food.

worker was a very attractive lady with short, dark hair and a million-dollar smile who did her best to fill our days with interesting sights to see. One outing took us to the top of the volcano and the ruins of the temple next to the crater and another took us to the far side of the island that overlooked the Pacific Ocean. There were cliffs at the beach, high enough to put the fear of God into you. From our vantage point they looked very rocky and slightly inclined. Five of us decided that we would climb one of the cliffs and meet the rest of the party on the other side. We were young and immortal and any thought that something could go wrong didn't enter our heads; in fact, I took off my shirt so I could tan. A sailor started the climb and we followed--I was number four of this chain.

About 20 feet up we realized that what we thought to be solid rock was nothing more than volcanic ash that would crumble at our touch. We didn't turn back because of our need to prove our manhood to the men who were too afraid to climb, but they already knew the adage that I was about to learn "I'm no coward and I'm no fool."

We proceeded with great caution until the sailor reached a ledge that was about six inches deep and three feet long. He yelled down to the rest of us that there was a rock about five feet above him from which the top could easily be reached. He made the move look very easy. The second guy also had no trouble. By this time the three of us remaining were crowded on the small ledge. The sergeant in front of me started to the top, but when he stepped on the rock, ash gave way. He was successful, but at the top he cautioned us to be careful because the rock was loose. There was no other way to get to the top, so I reached up to position myself on the remaining step to safety. As I put my weight on this crumbling support, it gave way. Luckily, I landed back on the small ledge. Hugging the wall, I turned around and for the first time saw the ocean and the huge boulders at the foot of the cliff. I will admit that the view was incredibly beautiful, but fear of the sheer drop was interfering with my appreciation of this sight. I have found in times of crisis that I resort to all the survival instincts given humankind.

From the foot of the cliff everyone was yelling to find out if I was all right. The guys above could see that there was nothing between them and the two of us--we were stranded. The Red Cross gal seemed almost hysterical. After all, she was responsible for our safety and had a sincere concern for our

For the rest of my stay on the island I could do no wrong. I was suddenly everyone's friend and the talk of the hotel. When I returned to duty in Tokyo, I never told anyone about this incident. I shut it out until I was reminded of it in that hotel in Paris, and subconsciously let the Eiffel Tower become the cliff with the ocean and boulders below.