

# The Blizzard and the Lost School Bus

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As it was most Sundays, the Helen House Café was almost full. Many churchgoers continued their Sunday morning with a visit to Helen's only eatery. Frank looked around. There were no empty tables. As he surveyed the crowd, he realized there were fewer and fewer familiar faces not that he didn't know the people in the restaurant. It was that those he did know were not former students. A whole generation of children had grown up since he retired from the school system.

Because of his status as the oldest living citizen of Helen, South Dakota, Frank Stanbauer would be welcome at any table. He looked around again, this time to see who he would enjoy engaging in conversation. There was Henry Woodson with his wife. No, he saw Henry almost every morning. Tom and Sarah Ogden were there with their children. Max had been Tom's grandfather, but he only knew this younger family slightly. Maybe he would sit with them. I'm sure they would like to hear about Max and Tom's father, Robert, as a boy. Then he saw Mike Finney with his family. He was thinking about Roger Finney and the way he showed up during the lost school bus blizzard. Maybe Mike would like to hear that story.

"Good morning," he said as he walked up.

"Good morning to you, Mr. Stanbauer," Mike replied.

"I see you have an empty seat. Do you mind if I join you?"

"Of course not," Mike answered. "Please, have a seat."

"Thank you," Frank grunted slightly as he lowered his ninety-seven-year-old body into the straight back wooden chair. "Tell me, what did your father do with that Deuce-and-a-Half he brought to town?"

"That old World War Two Army truck? I haven't thought about that thing in decades." Mike's face indicated he was lost in thought. "I know he still had it when I joined the Navy. By the time I retired and

came back home, it was gone. He was too."

"That's right. He died while you were away."

"I got emergency leave for the funeral, but I had to go right back. The squadron I was in was about to deploy, and they needed me. I was only here five days. Why do you bring up that old six-by cargo truck?"

"You haven't heard the story about how your father arrived driving that thing in the middle of a blizzard?"

Mike smiled, it wasn't often he got to listen to a story about his father. Mike and his father didn't get along when he was young. It was only after Mike had joined the Navy did his father warm up to him. "He drove that thing into town in the middle of a blizzard?"

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The wind had subsided, and Frank could see the street. After the howling wind and whiteout conditions all night, it wasn't clear, but the visibility was improving. He had put on a warm hat and coat. Rose wrapped a scarf around his neck. Once outside he could see about a hundred feet. Good enough to get out and find that lost bus.

Frank could hear the rumble from a block away. Though he realized it was a sound he knew, he couldn't identify it. It wasn't the firetruck he had been expecting. Out of the snowy fog came a giant green behemoth. As the vision crystallized, Frank put a name to the sound. "A Deuce-and-a-Half!" he said out loud. No wonder he couldn't place the sound right away. The last time he saw one of those six-wheel army trucks was in Germany more than ten years ago.

The oversized cargo truck's brakes squealed as it rumbled to a halt. Frank walked over to the driver's side and stepped up on the sideboard. The window rolled down, and a man said, "I hear you're looking for another lift soldier."

"Chief Finney!" Frank was as surprised by the driver as much as he had been surprised by the truck.

"It's just Roger, now," Finney replied. "I've been retired for a while."

"What brings you here?"

"That can wait for a while." He hooked his thumb at the passenger. "Henry here tells me you got some kids lost out there with a school bus. I figured this old veteran truck might come in handy."

It was only then that Frank noticed Henry Earnst, Helen's Fire Chief, on the other side of the passenger compartment. "Good morning, Henry."

"Good morning."

"This has got to be one hell of a story. I can't wait to hear it." Frank stepped off the footboard. "Let's head inside. Rose has coffee, and I can call around to get the search moving."

"No need for that," Henry said. "I have Mark calling who he can. Most of the lines are down."

"Coffee can wait," Roger said. "Besides," he held up a stainless steel thermos, "I have that covered."

"Good enough. Let me tell Rose I'm heading out with you. Be right back."

As Frank turned, he saw Roger roll up the window. He walked up the walk and into the house. The wind was calming by the minute. He could almost see the end of the block. "Rose!"

"What is it, Frank?" Rose rushed into the room. Frank almost never used the front door.

"Finney is here with a six-by and Henry Earnst. We are going to look for the bus." Frank turned to go out again.

"Wait, Frank," Rose said forcefully. "You said a bunch of words in English, but they didn't mean anything. Who is Finney and what is a six by?"

Frank stopped. He realized his language had reverted to Army talk. He slowed down and took a breath. "Roger Finney is a Navy man I met on the way home from England after the war. I told you about him. He was on the ship."

"I remember now," Rose said. "What is he doing here, especially in the midst of a winter storm?"

"I don't know, yet," Frank answered honestly. "He hasn't told me. To answer your other question, look outside."

"It looks like an army truck," Rose said after moving the drapes aside.

"It is. Or rather it was. Roger Finney owns it now."

"Why does he have an army truck?"

"I don't know, but look at the tires. Notice there are two on the front and two sets of four on the back? It is a six-wheel-drive truck with a two-and-a-half-ton capacity. That is why they call it a six-by or Deuce-and-a-Half."

"Deuce and a half? Plus, it has ten wheels." Rose looked at her husband. "Frank, this isn't the time to be teasing."

"I'm not," Frank replied. "Deuce-and-a-Half refers to its two-and-a-half-ton capacity." Then he added, "Look, the thing is perfect for what we need to do. It can put power to all of the axles. It will go even where Max's Power Wagon would get stuck. I'll try to explain everything when we get back."

"Let me get something," Rose said and left the room. She returned in under a minute with a brown paper sack. "Here, I packed these earlier. I have six sandwiches in here. When you find the bus, the kids will be hungry."

Frank was surprised. Rose continued to surprise him even after all these years of marriage. "Thank you, Rose. You are a thoughtful and caring woman. I am proud to know you."

"Oh, Frank..." she waved off the compliment. "Now you be careful with that army truck thing. Be careful and find those kids."

"I will. We will." Frank walked out the door. He moved to the passenger side of the truck and opened the door. Climbing inside, he was amazed at how warm it was. "Okay," he said. "Let's go."

Roger Finney's leg pushed in the clutch, and he shoved the shift lever into gear. The beast lurched forward. "Okay, where to?"

"What do you think, Frank? Run the route backwards?"

"That'll work. We need to get to the Ogden farm. The bus route is not the fastest way but it's only a couple miles different. I think we should backtrack the bus route."

Henry said, "On the next corner, Roger, turn left. That road will take you out of town."

They were sitting three wide on the narrow front seat. Frank was getting too warm in his winter garb. The hat was first to go, then the scarf. He unbuttoned his coat and let it hang open. Roger had complied

with Henry's instructions, and they were on a gravel road leading away from Helen. Roger was moving slowly. The visibility was almost half a mile in the country. The sky was getting brighter by the moment. Roger slowed as he approached a drift. It looked to be about two feet deep. He moved into and through it with ease. It was as if the old Army truck didn't even realize it was there.

"We stay on this road for two miles, Roger."

"Roger," he said with a grin.

"So, what's the story?"

"No real story. Once I got you and your buddies on the train, I went back to the ship. I told you that was my last trip on the old girl."

"That's right."

"Well, I transferred to the Navy Yard and was supposed to retire in three to six months."

Frank picked up on the implication. "Supposed to?"

"It didn't work out. I was asked to ship over one more time to put the old tin cans in mothballs."

"What does that mean in English?"

"What? Oh, sorry." Finney continued, "I was asked to volunteer for two more years to help retire and preserve the destroyer fleet. We put them in what we call 'mothballs' at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. They are sealed up against the weather, preserved so to speak, in case we need them again. Well, that one hitch turned into two then the two turned into three. Next thing I notice, I have thirty years and they are kicking me out."

"That doesn't explain why you are here and why I am riding in an army truck after a blizzard." Frank looked ahead. There was another snow drift across the road. He could feel Finney add power to the wheels. The truck moved quicker as it hit the drift. Frank had his hands on the dash to help hold him in the seat in case of a sudden stop, but nothing happened. There was a brief whiteout and then clear vision again. "This thing is a beast!" he said.

"I haven't hit anything as big as the ones I went through in Montana last month. Some of those drifts I had to back up and hit twice before I got through."

"You drove this thing from Montana?"

"I have been driving this thing since I retired last

year. I built a trailer to go with it."

"Where's the trailer now?"

"Parked at a friendly farmer's house up on the highway. We were coming to Helen to look you up when the storm hit. We have been staying with the Galvin family for the past two days. Great folks. Insisted we sleep inside, even after we said we'd be comfortable in the trailer."

None of this was making sense to Frank. It was as if he was in a dream. On the other hand, it would make sense if it were a dream. Dream logic has a good deal of latitude. "So, let me get this straight. You are driving this behemoth pulling a home built trailer around the country?"

"That's right. Carmen and I weren't sure where we wanted to live after the Navy. So I suggested we go see this great country and let 'home' find us." Another snow drift was ahead. At four feet it was the biggest one yet. "Hold on!" Finney said and pushed his foot to the floor.

When the whiteout dissipated, Frank realized there were blue areas in the sky overhead. The clouds were breaking up. He elbowed Henry and pointed to the sky. "It's clearing."

"Thank God," Henry said seriously.

"Roger, slow down, you'll need to turn left up here."

"I don't see the road," Roger said as the truck slowed.

"It's here. Go along slowly."

Roger idled the truck along at about ten miles per hour. Six eyes were watching for a change in the flat terrain indicating a road. Frank saw it first. "There it is."

"Where?"

"About fifty feet ahead."

"I don't see it."

"I do. Move up a little and I'll get out and make sure."

"Okay."

"Stop here," Frank commanded. He opened the door and was surprised. The cold wind was gone. He stepped out carefully making sure the footboard on the truck hadn't iced up. There was a layer of snow, but not much. For all the white out and howling wind,

the snow was minimal. It looked to Frank to be about five inches. Couldn't be right, he was thinking. This must be an area where the snow drifted away.

Frank walked to the side of the road. The sun was starting to show. The air was cold, but the wind was all but gone. He was comfortable in his winter coat. He found the ditch on the left side of the road. He followed it to where he thought the intersection was. He was wrong. The ditch continued. Now he had a choice, look for it behind or ahead. He decided to keep walking in the same direction. He could hear the truck creep along behind him. Ahead he saw another flat spot. That had to be it. He walked onto what he thought was the crossroad and then continued down fifty feet. Kicking the snow away with his foot, he found gravel. This was the road. He waved for the truck to follow.

When the truck caught up, he climbed back into the cab. "This is the road we want."

Roger Finney was nervous, "What road?" he asked. "All I see is flat landscape."

"The snow has filled up the ditches," Henry commented. "It's hard to make out the road."

"Hard?" Roger asked. "Darn near impossible."

"Just go slow and keep it straight," Frank advised. "See that grouping of trees ahead? They are on the right side of the road. Behind them is the last bus stop. That's the Higgins farm."

The truck crept along at ten miles an hour. It seemed the trees were not getting any closer, but it was a trick of the eye. The snow had stopped, the wind was gone, and the sky was rapidly turning blue. The storm went as fast as it came.

"Oops!" Roger said as the six-by slid off the road to the left. It leaned over toward the ditch. Roger added power and the truck didn't sink any further, but it also did not climb out of the ditch, the front tires slid on the embankment. Roger reached down and engaged the front wheel drive. "This should do it." He crept forward. The truck refused to climb out. They still moved along with the left side tires a full foot lower than the right.

"I think we're stuck," the fire chief said.

"There should be a field approach up here somewhere."

"Field approach?"

"That's where the farmers get into their fields from the road. The approach is the same height as the road. When we get to one, the truck will right itself."

"I'll get us out." Roger stopped the truck. He turned the wheels hard to the right and put the truck in reverse.

Henry was the first to see what he was going to do, "Roger, you're going to put the front of the truck deeper into the ditch!"

"Yup, and I'm going to put all the rear wheels on the road. A little momentum will do the trick." As he said it, he engaged the clutch. The truck lurched backwards. With the front wheels turned toward the ditch, the rear wheels popped up onto the road. He kept the power on, and the front followed dutifully.

"Okay," Frank said. "I'm impressed."

"Ain't much this girl can't get out of," Roger said with a smile.

"Okay," Henry said. "Let's see if we can keep it on the road this time."

"That would be easy; if I could see the road."

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"So, Dad was driving blind?"

"Not blind, we could see just fine by then. The sky was almost clear and the sun was out. It was just that the wind had blown the snow over the ditches, and everything was flat. There was no delineation. The snow all looked the same."

"So did you run off the road again?"

"We did, but not as bad. Your dad drove out of it the second time. After that Henry and I took turns walking ahead of the truck."

"That route was miles long!" Mike said.

"We only needed to walk that one mile." Frank continued, "Once we turned again, we could make out the road."

"So it was good from there," Mike asked as a statement.

"No, once we were crossways to the path of the

wind we had drifts to deal with again. It was still slow going."

"So you found them, then?" Doris Finney asked.

"Not right away," Frank replied. "We followed the route all the way back to the Ogden Farm. That's where Tom and Sarah live now," Frank said as an aside. "We didn't find the bus, but we did find Max with Robert."

"They had the Dodge Power Wagon," Mike said. "I remember that truck."

"That's right. We met them on the road about a mile from their house. We had stopped at the Bagley's to make sure they were okay and then moved toward the Ogden farm. That was the last known place anyone had seen the bus."

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"Our phone is out," Max Ogden said as he pulled up to the big Deuce-and-a-half. "Oh, excuse me; I thought you were from the phone company."

Frank opened the door and stepped down onto what was about eight inches of wind packed snow. He walked around the front of the truck and to Max's window. "We know that."

"Hi, Frank."

"Good morning. Did you find the bus?"

"No, didn't you?"

"No."

"He could be buried in a ditch," Max said.

"I don't think so," Roger said looking down from the driver's seat. "The drifts haven't been that high, even around the tree belts."

"Max, this is a friend of mine, Roger Finney."

Max nodded up at the truck driver, "Max Ogden. Pleasure to meet you."

"Mine as well. I only wish it were under better circumstances."

"Me too," Max agreed. "So." He looked at Frank. "What now?"

"Well, they're not on the bus route. John must have turned between here and the Bayer's."

"Why would he do that?" Henry asked. He was still sitting in the middle of the truck seat and leaning over to see out the driver's window.

"Who knows?" Frank replied. "Maybe he thought

he could see."

"I'll tell you what," Max said. "Let's head back to the mile line. You take the road to the east, and I'll take the road to the west. We'll go one mile and come back to the intersection to compare notes. Then we'll start again on the second mile."

"I can do better than that." Roger got out of the truck. "Come around back."

All the men and young Robert followed Finney to the back of his truck. Roger pulled back the canvas flap to expose what looked like a storeroom filled with closed cabinets. "Let me just hike myself up here," he said with a small grunt. "I think they are in this cupboard." He unlocked the padlock and opened a door. Inside were three drawers. He pulled the top one open. "Here they are."

He took out what looked like two pistols. "These are Verey Pistols. They shoot flares. If one of us finds the bus, shoot a flare. The other will do the same when he sees the flare. Sound good?"

"Swell!" Frank said. "That'll work."

"Where did you get these?" Max asked as he took the flare gun and extra one inch canisters.

"My Uncle Sam had a bunch of these laying around when I was decommissioning the tin cans. I simply helped ease his burden of disposing of them."

"You stole them?" Henry said.

"No, I saved them from the briny deep," Roger said with a smile. "The Navy had us tossing them over the side. These along with tools, parts and other things as the ships were being towed to Philadelphia. I just held back some things. Figured they might come in handy."

"And they have," Frank said. "Let's get going."

As Roger drove, Henry watched out front for any signs of the bus. Frank watched behind in the side mirror for a flare. The motion caught Frank's eye first. He thought he saw something by an old machine shed. He looked again. There it was, a hat waving above a five-foot snowdrift. "Stop, Roger. I see something."

"Where?"

"Over there by that machine shed."

"You mean that broken down old barn?"

"Yes." Frank chose not to go into the terminology.

"I think someone is waving at us."

"I see it now." Roger started to turn.

"Stop!" Henry shouted. "There's a ditch between them and us."

"Over here!" Frank could hear John's shouts over the truck engine.

"We see you!" he shouted back.

"The driveway is another fifty feet!"

Frank looked, he could just make it out. "We see it!"

"We do?" Roger said.

"Sure." Henry pointed. "Right there."

"You'll have to show the way." Roger slowed but kept moving. "This all looks the same to me,"

"And you're driving?" Frank quipped.

"Here," Henry said. "Turn right here."

Roger turned, and the six-by rumbled up the old driveway. The farmstead had been abandoned since the dirty thirties. The house had been moved from the property, but the old machine shed was still there. As they approached, they could see the top half of the yellow bus behind the drift. John had it parked inside the shed to help shield the wind.

"Boy, am I glad to see you!" Frank said.

"You're glad?" John Fryer said. "I thought I was going to have to wait for spring before I could get this bus out. We were just getting ready to try to walk out."

"I'm glad you didn't. We might have missed you and only found the bus. You folks hungry?"

"And how!" one of the boys answered. He eagerly took the bag that held the sandwiches Rose had made. He pulled one out and passed it on.

"How about water?"

"Oh, we had water."

"You had water?"

Thuummmp! Frank jumped at the loud sound. Then he realized Roger had launched one of his flares.

Ten seconds later he said, "There's the reply."

"I had a tin can on the bus. We cleaned it out as best we could and used the engine to melt the snow. I would run the engine for a while to heat the bus. While it was running, I put the can full of snow under the hood. There is a flat spot on the exhaust manifold that held it perfectly. We took turns drinking the

water."

"That was smart."

It wasn't more than ten minutes before all the sandwiches were gone. Max arrived with Robert and took out three shovels. Henry had three more in the back of Roger's truck. The men took little time getting the bus cleared from the drift. Once the thing was clear, Frank asked, "You want me to drive it?"

"I've never not finished a route," John replied, "I'll finish this one."

"All right. If you don't mind, I'll ride with you." Frank was still not sure just how 'fine' John was. He figured to be nearby if there was trouble. "I'll get Roger to follow in the six-by in case you get stuck."

"That might be a good idea," John said. "Anybody ready to go home?"

"Yes! Sure! You Bet!" came the answers in unison.

"You got enough gas?" Roger asked.

"Don't tell me you're carrying gas too," Frank said.

Roger Finney smiled and shrugged his shoulders, "Doesn't everybody?"

"Navy surplus again?" Henry asked. The elation from finding the bus was turning the event into a joke fest.

"Army this time. Two five gallon jerry cans came with the truck."

"I still have plenty of gas, thanks for asking."

"Well, let's get going then. Thanks, Max for all the help."

"Do you know where the phone line is down? I could drive past it and call into town. Let them know John and the kids are found and safe."

"I'm not sure. We didn't follow the wires. We followed the bus route."

"Makes sense," Max answered. "Maybe I'll just head to town."

"I wouldn't do that, Max," Henry said. "The east-west roads are hard to see. The wind drifted the snow in the ditch even with the road surface. We'll be in town soon enough."

"Suits me. We'll head home then."

"Thanks again," John Fryer said.

"Anytime," Max answered.

"None too soon I hope," John replied with a chuckle.

"No, not anytime soon," Max agreed.

The bus followed the tire tracks made by Roger's Deuce-and-a-half all the way back along the route. As they went, he dropped off the three remaining children. Once in town, John pulled the bus into its designated parking spot and shut the engine down. "Now that's an adventure I don't want to repeat."

"I can imagine," Frank said. "How did you get off the route and into the machine shed?"

"After I left the Ogden's farm, I started toward the Bayer place. Helen Bagley wasn't on the bus so I didn't need to stop there. I got to the corner and found a six-foot drift across the road. I had no choice but to turn."

Frank was thinking about how Roger Finney had plowed through the four-foot drifts while they were out searching. He most likely would have tried to blast through a six-foot drift too. "I'm glad it was gone when we got there."

"If it had been, you might have figured out I had to turn and found us sooner," John commented.

"Only by a few minutes. We knew where you had been and where you had stopped delivering kids. It was simply a matter of backtracking. When we didn't find you on the route, we started searching the crossroads."

"I intended to follow the road around three sides and backtrack to the Bayer ranch. Then the wind really picked up, and the visibility dropped to a few feet. It was just luck or maybe the 'Man Upstairs' who let the wind ease off for a minute. I could see the old machine shed on the Baker property. I tucked the bus inside, and that took the sting out of the wind."

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"So it was just luck that John Fryer saw the shed?" Doris Finney asked.

"John said it was more than luck," Frank answered. "He wasn't much of a churchgoer before that storm, but after, we would see him every week."

"Thanks for the story, Frank," Mike Finney said.

"I was wondering how my father got here. It still doesn't explain why he stayed here."

"That part was easy. He was the town hero. Here was a guy out of the blue willing to put himself at risk for a town he didn't know," Frank said. "Once the storm was over, we invited him to stay. The Cooke brothers had stopped working right after the war, and they rented their welding and blacksmithing building to your dad. He set up shop as a mechanic and welder. They lived in the trailer behind. Two years later he bought the house you live in now. By then, he was a fully established Helen resident."