

Richard Halliburton
Dept. of Biology
Western Connecticut State University
Danbury, CT 06810
(203) 797-4229 or (203) 797-4373

Word count: 1474 (computer count)
Rights Available: First North
American Serial Rights
(c) 1992 Richard Halliburton

THE ROYAL ROAD TO MEMPHIS

by

Richard Halliburton

Memphis. Home of Graceland, symbol of all that is commercial and tacky in American tourism. No sophisticated traveler goes there.

But you should. There, in that lovely, green, very Southern city, is a grand monument to the last Great American Hero, the original Indiana Jones. His name was Richard Halliburton.

Halliburton was a wildly popular adventurer, writer, and lecturer of the 1920's and 30's. He was best known for such stunts as crossing the Alps on an elephant, swimming in the Taj Mahal pool, and swimming through the Panama canal as the S.S. Richard Halliburton (fare \$0.36). He wrote seven

best-selling books and hundreds of newspaper articles describing his travels and adventures. He wrote with an enthusiasm and naivete that charmed and captivated his audiences and alienated the cognoscenti. The critics nearly always panned his books, and sometimes called him a liar and a fraud. But the public paid no attention and bought his books as fast as he could write them.

As my name suggests, I have a special interest in Richard Halliburton. I am related to him in an unknown, and perhaps unknowable, way. My attempts to get information have always been stymied. No one in my family has ever been willing to talk to me about family history. (I think I finally may have discovered the reason, but that's another story.)

Many years ago, a long forgotten friend told me of a monument to Richard Halliburton, located in Memphis. The conversation was a dim memory, and I wondered whether the monument actually existed. It was only a matter of time before I went to Memphis to find out for myself, but it took many years. One day last summer I rediscovered Richard Halliburton.

Inevitably, but almost accidentally, I arrived in Memphis one August morning. I expected to find, at most, a statue or plaque, spend a few minutes looking at it and photographing it, and then driving on (I was on a very tight schedule). I found the campus of Memphis State University, where I thought the monument was located, and began asking questions. No one seemed to know what I was talking about. I was, of course, asking the wrong people. I was talking to

college students who for the most part have never heard of Richard Halliburton. After several phone calls to the public library, chamber of commerce, and local newspaper, I finally was directed to Rhodes College.

I drove through the main entrance to Rhodes College, a beautiful tree-lined boulevard, quiet and insulated from the crowds and noise of the city, as all college campuses should be. The campus seemed to be dominated by a huge stone tower, rising high above the other campus buildings. I parked nearby and walked toward the tower to ask directions. I was astonished to discover Halliburton Tower. Built in 1962, it was planned and financed by Halliburton's father, as a memorial to Richard's life and works.

Inside the tower is a small museum, with exhibits of Halliburton's books, notebooks, letters, and memorabilia from his travels. Completely engrossed, I wandered around for hours, looking at each exhibit, reading, occasionally writing something in my notebook, and sometimes just staring into space, thinking of the two Richard Halliburtons. In photographs of Richard in his twenties, I saw my father. Even his handwriting remarkably resembled my father's as I remember it.

Finally, still in shock from information overload, I asked the receptionist who was responsible for this museum, and whom I could talk to about Richard Halliburton. Thus I met Bill Short, the archivist of the Halliburton collection. He was in the library. I walked up and introduced myself: "Hi, I'm Richard Halliburton." (I couldn't resist--it isn't

often I get to impress someone just by saying my name.) After his initial response of confusion and skepticism, I assured him that I really was who I said I was, and that I was very interested in learning more about Richard Halliburton. He was very cordial, and invited me into his office for a chat.

Bill is very knowledgeable and enthusiastic about his work. He spent much of the afternoon talking with me. He let me study a two volume Halliburton genealogy (in which I discovered some family skeletons), and showed me many letters from Richard, including the last letter he wrote to his parents.

He showed me a videotape copy of an 8mm film made by a member of the crew of the Sea Dragon, a Chinese junk which was to be Halliburton's last and greatest adventure. The film was remarkably clear and sharp and color-true for a film 50 years old. At one point, a figure walked across the deck in the middle distance, face not visible. "That's him--that's his walk..." I exclaimed spontaneously. Simultaneously the camera zoomed in to reveal the unmistakable face of Richard Halliburton. Bill stopped the videotape; we stared at each other in silence across the darkening room. We both knew there was no possible way I could have seen this film, or could have ever seen Richard Halliburton walk. "I mean...that's my father's walk," I said finally, after I realized what had happened. We were both stunned and moved. My father has been dead for 25 years, so even his walk must be a dim subconscious memory.

We spent several hours talking and looking at letters, photographs, and other memorabilia from Halliburton's life.

It was long after the library had closed when we finally left and drove a few blocks to see the house Richard built for his parents. No one was home, so we couldn't go inside, but we looked at it from the street, and Bill took a photograph of me in front of the house. A small attractive house, it looked like a comfortable place to live. Richard never actually lived in it, but he occasionally visited his parents there, between trips.

While talking in front of the house, Bill looked at my car, a 4-wheel drive Isuzu Trooper loaded with the paraphernalia of a summer's wandering. He asked where I had been. I told him I had recently returned from South America, and had spent the last few weeks traveling around the United States. That during this time, my wife and son had traveled across Canada. I mentioned that this was fairly typical, and that we hoped to spend next year in Australia. His response: "You're a Halliburton, all right!"

Richard Halliburton's last great adventure was to try to sail a Chinese junk from Hong Kong to San Francisco, to pass through the Golden Gate just in time to celebrate the opening of the 1939 World's Fair. He must have had a sense that something was wrong. In his last letter to his parents, on March 3, 1939, he wrote "Think of it as wonderful sport, and not as something hazardous and foolish." The Sea Dragon left Hong Kong the next day. On March 23rd came the last word from the Sea Dragon: "Southerly gales, squalls, lee rail under, wet bunks, hard tack, bully beef, having wonderful time. Wish you were here instead of me...." Richard Halliburton was lost

at sea.

The plaque at the base of Halliburton Tower summarizes Halliburton's life: "In daring a modern Icarus he flew too near the sun." It then quotes from *The Royal Road to Romance*, Halliburton's first book:

"I wanted freedom, freedom to indulge in whatever caprice struck my fancy, freedom to search in the farthest corners of the earth for the beautiful, the joyous, and the romantic."

Richard Halliburton lived at the right time, a time between two terrible wars when the American public longed for adventure and romance. Even during the depression, his books reached the best seller lists. People read them and dreamed of a more exciting life. Whether he was a mediocre writer is irrelevant; people needed Richard Halliburton. Toward the end of his life, Richard was caught in his own trap. He wanted to become a serious writer, but in order to make a living he had to invent more and more outrageous travel adventures. In the late 1930's, as the black clouds of World War II gathered, his popularity waned and he seemed to be losing his enthusiasm for adventure. After the *Sea Dragon* voyage, he planned to settle down and write serious literature. Perhaps he saw that an era was ending, and that he must change with the times. Perhaps he subconsciously knew the *Sea Dragon* trip was doomed, but that he must attempt it anyway. Something deep within my genes tells me that Richard Halliburton died the way he needed to, and when he needed to.

It was very late before I left the city of Richard

Halliburton. Still in a daze, I drove deep into the night,
thinking about my roots and my genetic and spiritual
relationship to the other Richard Halliburton.