

Tough Bridge Builder Nears End of a Tough Job

By GAY TALESE

John Murphy, the toughest ironworker on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge — everybody calls him Hard Nose or Short Fuse—is about to strut across the bridge for the last time.

The heavy work that he has supervised these last two years — spinning the cables and stringing 51,000 tons of steel across the sky from Brooklyn to Staten Island—is just about finished.

Already the twin decks of the bridge are being paved, 80 electricians are at work, and the painters have begun to cover the red steel beams with coats of gray. The army of 675 ironworkers that had worked under Hard Nose Murphy—subdivided into teams of riveters, steel connectors, raising gangs, "punks" (apprentices) and "pushers" (foremen)—has now dwindled to 320.

To Open Nov. 21

When the bridge is formally opened, on Nov. 21, most of Mr. Murphy's men will not be around to cross it; they will, in the tradition of their trade, already be off to another bridge, or another skyscraper, perhaps in another country. They travel like migratory workers, caring little where the work is—caring



John Murphy at work on Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.

only that it is challenging, and promises plenty of overtime pay. It is in this tradition that

John Murphy has toiled for 40 years, commanding the construction of such skyscrapers as the Pan Am Building; connecting steel on the George Washington Bridge; supervising men on the Pulaski Skyway, the Holland Tunnel and 92 overpasses on the Garden State Parkway. No matter where he travels these days, John Murphy is retracing part of his own life.

After the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, he does not know what is next. As a superintendent for the American Bridge Company, a division of United States Steel, his next job could be anywhere in the world, wherever steel work is being done.

Most Challenging Job

There is little doubt, though he will not admit it—he admits nothing — that the Verrazano was the most challenging assignment of his career. He and his men had to contend with hazardous heights in high winds; to wait out a tugboat strike and an ironworkers'

strike over nets, and to compensate for errors by both machines and men.

With each error, John Murphy's face — already ruddy—would turn an explosive red, and his vocabulary—never printable—became explosively startling.

He said the most difficult day on the bridge was when the clamps holding a 400-ton steel unit slipped, and the steel looked as if it might fall. It didn't.

Another time, hoisting machines failed, leaving 400 tons of steel dangling over the Narrows all night.

Born on May 4, 1902, in Rexton, a tiny town in New Brunswick, Mr. Murphy drove timber in Maine and built railroad bridges in Pennsylvania. He did not start giving orders until "I knew every job better than every man on the bridge."

A longtime associate says: "He's tough outside, but he really likes people. But don't let on you know, he'll blow up."