

Prologue

Flying combat air patrol at 15,000 feet over the Caribbean, Commander Sheffield “Curly” Brason noticed an enemy patrol plane off in the distance. “Bogey bearing two – niner – zero at ten thousand!” he radioed his wingmen.

“Roger that.” came the reply from his right wingman as the three Grumman F3F-2 fighters, with the trademark yellow upper wings, characteristic of naval aircraft during the golden age of naval aviation, charged off to investigate.

Upon closer examination, the unidentified aircraft was indeed an enemy flying boat. Before beginning his dive, Curly put his left index finger to his lips and then touched the photograph of the beautiful woman attached to his instrument panel. “Tally ho!” Commanded Brason called as he commenced his attack run and swept down out of the sun on his unsuspecting prey. Watching from just behind, his wingmen witnessed a perfectly executed attack. “You got him, Skipper!” shouted the right wingman with excitement.

The left wingman chimed in, “Congratulations, sir. I believe that makes five. You're an ace!”

Satisfied with with his “kill”, Commander Brason was worried that it came too late. As they swung around he could see the wake of the carrier flanked by the two smaller wakes of her destroyer escorts. If he could see them, the enemy could have too. Not wanting to risk any further chance of giving away their position, he decided to return to the carrier and make his report in person.



F3Fs Over Enterprise by Steven Andersen

Within minutes, the three stubby fighters with hooks down, made a pass along the starboard side of the giant ship painted in beautiful standard Navy gray. After circling around he was directly astern as he made his landing approach; cockpit canopy open, landing gear down, flaps down, hook extended, Curly lined up with the mahogany stained flight deck with the landing strip outlined in yellow. The letters EN, also in yellow, at each end of the flight deck identified the ship as the USS Enterprise.

Curly could clearly see the landing signal officer as he guided him in. His approach right on, the landing signal officer, paddles in hand, stood on his platform on the port side of the aft end of the flight deck with both arms extend strait out to each side. As Curly cleared the ramp the LSO dropped his left arm to his side and brought the paddle in his right hand to his left shoulder indicating for him to cut his throttle. Curly

immediately complied. Taking his eyes off the LSO, he sized up his alignment with the deck and relaxed his rudder. The plane glided forward, nose up. At the precise moment, Curly pulled back on the stick. The wheels and tail hook touching the deck simultaneously for a perfect three point landing. His F3F caught the arresting cable which slowed the aircraft before bringing it to an abrupt stop on the flight deck.

A man wearing a green jersey and green skull cap ran across the flight deck to disengage the hook from the cable. Once free, Curly was directed to taxi forward and parked on the forward end of the flight deck. As soon as he rolled to a stop, the plane captain was standing on the wing next to the cockpit as he shut off his engine. The plane captain helped him out of his harness and out of the cockpit. Curly hopped down from the wing and made a dash for the superstructure to make his report. Just as he was about to go through the hatch, his right wingman's hook caught the wire. Still wearing his flight gear, men got out of his way as he raced up the ladder to the bridge.

"I think they might have seen us, sir." he reported to Captain Ponwall.

At that moment, lookouts in sky control called down to the bridge, "Enemy plane off the port beam!"

All eyes turned to see for themselves. Sure enough, it was an enemy carrier based scout plane. "They must have directed him to us before I shot it down," Commanded Brason observed as they watched three more pairs of yellow wings engage the enemy snoopers.

"Well, now they have seen us for sure," the Captain snarled. "But were are they? Our scouts have been out long enough to have made contact by now. Now they know where we are, there's no need to keep radio silence any longer. Get on the horn and call Scouting Six." he ordered his air officer. Expecting an eminent attack, he turned to his executive officer and ordered, "Sound general quarters."

Immediately, the obnoxious, intermittent buzzer went off and the ship scurried to life. From the bridge they could see men running in all directions in a mass of organized confusion as each man knew exactly where he needed to be. Those on the bridge donned their helmets and kapock life jackets. Within two minutes all guns were manned and the repair parties were at their stations.

"Now, all there is to do is watch and wait." remarked Captain Ponwall. He then turned to the air officer and ordered three more yellow winged F3Fs into the air to be followed by the all of the serviced aircraft that had to be brought up from the hangar.

After the order was given, Commander Brason watched with pride as his pilots responded as he had trained them over the last several months. His own plane was struck below to clear the deck, there was nothing for Curly to do but watch.

"By the way, Curly. Congratulations on your kill." the air officer said as he patted him on the back. "That makes you and honorary ace."

"Thanks," he replied. "But it was too little too late."

Several minutes later, the deck was clear with only a handful of planes still on the hangar deck remained aboard. Scouting Six, who were returning from their search, were advised to stay clear of the ship as an attack was expected at any time.

After several tense moments, "Bandits at nine o'clock!" was heard from sky control.

"Here we go, gentlemen." Captain Ponwall said calmly.

Within moments, enemy aircraft poured out of the sky overwhelming the Enterprise. Put out of action by aircraft from the Ranger, she "sank".

As Captain Brason gazed out the window of the the R5D, the Navy's version of the new Douglas DC-4 passenger liner, he reflected on that day in contrast to the the last four and half months. On that day in February 1939, there was no battle. It was Fleet Exercise XX, a simulated war game pitting the White Fleet of which Enterprise was part of against the Black Fleet. No one died. The Enterprise was not sunk. And the pilot of the patrol plane that he had shot down later became one of his closest friends. Lieutenant Commander Mason Owens and his wife Pat had later lived next door to Curly and Geannie.

"Oh, Geannie. My dear Geannie," he said to himself as the R5D took off from the Alameda Naval Air Station bound for Norfolk, Virginia. Clearly in a reflective mood, his thoughts took him all the way back. His new assignment was the farthest thing from his mind. There would be plenty of time to focus on that once he arrived in Norfolk.

Geannie had been his best friend. There was not a time that he didn't know her. In fact they had come into this world together.

Geannie's father was a state senator and the president of the Roanoke Bank and Trust, which was founded by his grandfather just after the Civil War. Their home was the original mansion house of the Austin Plantation located on the corner of Franklin Road and 1st Street in Roanoke, Virginia.

The Austin Mansion was a two story white frame house with a porch supported by six columns that stretched across the front of the house with a porch swing at one end. Above the front door was a covered balcony with a door between the two front bedrooms.



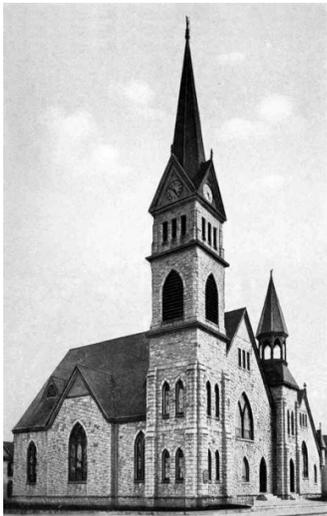
There were four bedrooms upstairs and a bathroom that had been converted from a room that once held a two thousand gallon water tank. Before the city waterworks system was installed, the house had gravity flow running water, complete with a flushing toilet, supplied by the tank. The tank had to be filled each morning from the well. The water was pumped into the tank by means of a pump powered by a

horse walking around in a circle. When the waterworks system was installed, the tank was no longer needed, so the room was converted into a bathroom.

Just inside the front door was a spacious entryway. There was a staircase on either side that went up three fourths of the way, then turned toward each other, meeting at the upstairs hallway.

Downstairs there were two more bedrooms, a kitchen and dining room, a bathroom, a parlor, and a study, which had once been a bedroom. The basement housed a modern oil burning furnace which replaced the original coal fired furnace. In 1890 when electricity was made available, the mansion was wired for electricity and electric lighting and other electric appliances were installed.

The original home built by Captain William Austin in 1784 was mostly destroyed by a fire in 1848 and was rebuilt into the home just described. It was a magnificent home with two sprawling oak trees gracing the front yard. Behind the mansion were the horse stables and other outbuildings.



The rest of the plantation had been sold off long ago as the city grew up around it. The last remaining parcel was donated to the Greene Memorial United Methodist Church, to which the family belonged.

The church is a two story rock building with a bell tower topped by tall steeple with four clocks at the base, one facing each direction. The church is situated facing north on the corner of 2nd Street West and Church Avenue. Over the years it has been built onto from time to time as needs required.

The parsonage behind the church and next door to the Austins was modest in comparison to the Austin Mansion. Nevertheless it was a very nice one story, three bedroom home built from the same rock as the church. Both the parsonage and the church were constructed in 1891 and completed in

1892.

About four years after parsonage was completed, the pastor retired and Emmett Brason, who had been the assistant pastor, became the pastor. He and his wife, Ellen and their two small sons moved into the parsonage. They were from Northern Virginia and were married after he graduated from the Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. in 1892. Not long after that, he came to the Greene Memorial United Methodists Church as the assistant pastor.

The Austins and Brasons were acquainted through the church, but as neighbors they soon became dear friends, spending many an evening together, not to mention outings to the Austins property in the mountains west of town. As a matter of fact their children became close friends as well.

An unusually heavy winter storm blanketed Roanoke in deep snow during the first week in March of 1898. Everybody was snowbound and unable to get out of their homes. Consequently there was an

epidemic of births in early December that year. Neither the Austins nor the Brasons were spared.

On Wednesday afternoon, December 7th, the midwife was summoned to the Austin Mansion. Just ten minutes after five, a beautiful baby girl was born. As soon as mother and baby were taken care of, the midwife had to hurry next door to the parsonage where a baby boy was born at a quarter to eight.

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Fleet Problem XX took place in February 1939 in the Caribbean and Atlantic. The exercise simulated the defense of the East Coast of the United States and Latin America by the Black Fleet from the invading White team. Participating in the maneuvers were 134 ships, 600 planes, and over 52,000 officers and men of the US Navy. (All ships mentioned in this story are actual unless otherwise noted in this section.) The engagement involving the USS Enterprise under the command of Captain Charles A. Ponwall occurred on February 25, 1939.

The Green Memorial United Methodist Church is an actual church located in Roanoke, Virginia and setting for many of the scenes throughout the story. It was established in 1859. The building described in the story was built in 1892 and is still use today.

