

Chapter XI War Games

March 21, 1926 – June 30, 1926

By spring, Curly's section had become just as efficient and effective as they had been under Shorty. They had only been to sea with the Langley a couple of times for short carrier qualification cruises.

Curly and Geannie watched as Sandy continued to grow before their eyes. Her vocabulary was increasing by leaps and bounds. Her motor skills and coordination were developing exceptionally well. Sandy, now eighteen months old, was also developing an independent streak of her own. Geannie feared the day when Sandy wouldn't need her as much.

Geannie needed to be needed. Curly had noticed that the look of longing and desire in her eyes had intensified since she had announced her desire to have another baby. Curly had noticed the hearts and dots on the calendar and he knew that she was serious. He wanted it too and did everything he could to give it to her as new hearts were added to the calendar with greater frequency.

As for Tom and Ramona, they were seeing each other on a regular basis.

During the second week in June, Fighting Two and Torpedo Two sailed north for fleet exercises along the California coast that would include a week in San Francisco Bay. The morning Curly left, Geannie and Sandy and many others gathered at the air station to see the squadrons off.

All decked out in his flight gear, his red scarf around his neck, Curly took the two very special women in his life into his arms. "Do you remember all of our rendezvouses in Norfolk?" He asked Geannie.

"How could I forget! We had some amazing times together." Geannie remembered.

"How about a rendezvous in San Francisco?" he asked.

"When?" Geannie asked excitedly.

"This morning in our briefing I found out that we will be flying into Crissy Field at the Presidio Army Base on the thirtieth. We'll have a whole week of liberty, which includes the Fourth of July. You and Sandy could come up on the train. I don't know that you would want to drive that far."

"Where will we meet up and where would we stay, Lieutenant?" she wondered.

"That's all taken care of." Curly assured her. Then he explained, "When Commander Ellison found out about all of this yesterday, he had Shorty contact the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco and reserve a block of rooms. We're supposed to double up, but I swung a deal with Shorty that I could have one to myself if you could come."

"Is anyone else going?" She asked.

"I really don't know. You might ask around among the other wives." He suggested. "What do you say?"

“Well, Flyboy. I think its a rendezvous! Why don't I just meet you at the hotel?”

“Great, then! I'll see you there. Here's the address.” Curly slipped a piece of paper into her blouse pocket, then paused to give her a kiss. “I can't wait to see you!”

Then Curly gave Sandy a kiss on her cheek. His mustache tickled her soft face causing her to giggle. “You be a good girl, okay. Bye-bye. Daddy loves you.”

“Bye-bye Da-dy,” Sandy cooed.

“Listen,” Curly said to Geannie, “I have to go now. Take care of yourselves, okay. I love you.” As her hand slipped from his grasp he said, “See you in the funny pages.”

I love you, too” Geannie called out as she watched her Lieutenant walk away.

Curly climbed into the cockpit and the plane captain strapped him in. He checked his instruments before signaling the plane captain to give the propeller a spin and his engine sputtered to life. When it came his turn, he taxied onto the strip. As Freddy lifted into the air ahead of him, Curly revved his engine to full throttle.

Geannie watched as 2-F-8 bounded down the runway, Curly's red scarf blowing in the wind behind him. Holding Sandy's precious face next to hers, she took her by the wrist and together they waved good-bye. As he rose into the air, Tomcat began his short dash down the runway.

Once airborne, the three sets of yellow wings formed up as they headed out over the ocean to join up with the rest of the squadron. It was only a short hop before they overtook the Langley escorted by four destroyer as she steamed southwest into the wind to recover her air group. First to land were the fifteen Vought VE-7s of Fighting Two followed by nine Douglas DT-2's from Torpedo Two. Once all planes were aboard, the five ships changed course and steamed up the coast at ten knots to rendezvous with the Battle Fleet off San Clemente.

Geannie went home to take care of some household chores. As she hung the laundry on the line, she dreamed about going to San Francisco. She had heard so much about the mystical Golden Gate City and it had always fascinated her. When her work was caught up, she and Sandy had lunch before she telephoned the train station to inquire about the schedule and fare to San Francisco. She made arrangements with the ticket agent to purchase her tickets prior to boarding the train. Over the next two or three days, she talked to several of the wives and girlfriends but none of them were going. Either they weren't invited or like Ramona, there were circumstances as to why they couldn't go.

During the passage north, the Langley conducted routine air operations, giving the pilots plenty of practice in carrier take offs and landings as well as their all important navigation skills.

On the morning of the third day, the pilots of Fighting Two assembled in their ready room to be

briefed by Commander Ellison on their operations for the day. They were nearing the rendezvous point with the Battle Fleet. Two sections of Fighting Two would be sent out on a scouting mission covering an arc to the northeast of the Langley's position and one section would fly cover over the ship. The scouts were to fly out no further than one hundred and twenty five miles. Once contact was made they were to return immediately with their contact report.

Once the position, course, and speed of the Battle Fleet was received, all nine aircraft of Torpedo Two, carrying practice torpedoes, would be sent out to intercept and carry out a mock torpedo attack. They would be escorted by two sections of Fighting Two. Their orders were to intercept any aircraft aloft and conduct mock strafing attacks on the ships. The remaining section of Fighting Two was to relieve the section flying cover. At the conclusion of Commander Ellison's instructions, Shorty, who had sailed with the ship, gave out their specific assignments. Curly's section was to cover the torpedo bombers.

With the briefing complete, the nine pilots assigned to the first flight went up on deck where they found their aircraft spotted for launch. Once airborne the six scouts fanned out to the northeast as the other three began circling the carrier at a distance of about ten miles out. For Curly and the rest, it was a waiting game. Six more VE-7s including 2-F-8 were brought up to the flight deck along with the nine DT-2s with their wings folded back. The plane handlers manually moved the planes into position at the aft end of the flight deck.

About two hours later, a lone VE-7 approached the Langley from ahead. It passed along side to starboard and turned and flew up the flight deck, just feet above the parked planes. The pilot dropped a beanbag with a note attached to it squarely onto the flight deck before flying off to take up station with the other aircraft orbiting overhead.

The note reported three Idaho Class battleships seventy five miles out heading southwest, toward the Langley. With their position, course, and speed in hand, the pilots of the strike force were briefed. Their orders were to fly on a parallel to course twenty five miles to the west of the target. Once they were at the position where the battleships were estimated to be, they were to close in for the attack.

The pilots scrambled to the flight deck and mounted their aircraft. Curly was the fifth plane off the deck. Once the fighters were aloft, they headed out ahead of and above the torpedo bombers. After less than an hour in flight, they found what they were looking for. A float plane from one of the battleships was encountered but he didn't have time to return and report the approaching strike. Commander Ellison and his right wingman concentrated on the lead ship. Curly and Commander Ellison's left wingman took on the second ship, while Freddy and Tomcat went after the last one.

As he commenced his dive, Curly watched as the gray ship grew larger in his sights. As he drew closer he could easily make out the sailors on the wooden deck. He was glad that they were friendly and

that he really wasn't shooting at them. At the same time, he was confident that if they were an enemy who threatened his country, his home, and his wife and daughter he would have no reservations. This was part of his training if, God forbid, that should ever be the case.

As Curly and the other plane pulled up from their pass, he could see that the three torpedo bombers behind and below him had dropped their practice torpedoes and were also pulling up over the ship. Circling around for another pass Curly could see two splashes erupting skyward from the hull of ship as the water filled soft warheads found their mark. He also noticed similar splashes from the other two battleships. He could see the water drenched sailors at their guns as he made his second pass. This time he was glad that they were friendly and were not shooting back at him. But if they were he was ready to die for his country, his home, and his wife and daughter.

He had participated in countless war games before. They were always just games. You win some and you lose some. This day he realized that they were "war" games. In war you don't have that luxury. He had to win every time! You can only die once. Even though he was ready to die for his country, his home, and his wife and daughter, he much preferred to live for them.

After the mock battle, the fifteen planes regrouped and turned back toward the Langley. The three battleships continued on their course. When the strike group neared the position where the Langley was to have been, Commander Ellison spotted an Omaha class scout cruiser to their east but saw no sign of Langley or the four destroyers. Assuming that the cruiser had been spotted and reported, he concluded that the Langley was further west. Following his hunch he changed his heading. The rest of the group, trusting his instinct, followed him. Within a few minutes they found home. As the planes formed up in a landing pattern awaiting their turn to come aboard the Langley came about to the southeast and headed into the wind. 2-F-8 was the fifth plane to land.

Once all aircraft had been recovered, the Langley resumed her previous course. Later in the afternoon, smoke was observed over the horizon dead ahead. Sometime later three ships appeared. The same three ships that had been attacked earlier in the day. As they drew near, they reversed course and the Langley fell in behind them. The four destroyers fanned out ahead.

While Curly was away, Geannie kept busy chasing after Sandy, pitching for the Navy Wives' women's baseball team, and what volunteer work she could fit into her schedule. One of her favorite volunteer opportunities was with the Red Cross at the Navy Hospital across the bay where Ramona worked.

They had become good friends and now that she was going steady with Tom, they became even better friends since the men of the section often socialized when they were off duty. Many of their get-

togethers also included Shorty and Wilma. Since they all had young families, their children were included.

Shorty and Wilma were a older and had been married the longest. They had five children, ranging from nine to one. Freddy and Susan were much closer to Curly and Gennie's age and had only been married slightly longer and had two children, ages three and nine months. Then there was Tomcat and Ramona who were younger than Curly and Geannie.

Although Geannie had more in common with Susan and they had a good friendship, for some reason she related better to Ramona, which was kind of odd since they were quite different. Perhaps it was the way Ramona looked to her as a big sister and a role model. She had just turned twenty three and was four and half years Geannie's junior. Ramona didn't have it easy growing up and Geannie was the first true friend she had ever had.

While the men were away on maneuvers, Geannie and Wilma got together at Susan's one afternoon for coffee and to let the kids play. Later, when she got off duty at the hospital, Ramona crossed the bay on the ferry and joined them. Since she came straight from work, she brought a change of clothes with her.

While the kids played, the women sipped coffee and visited about a host of topics. That's when Geannie brought up another one, which in turn lead to something else altogether.

"So none of you are goin to San Francisco next week to meet up with the guys?"

"With five kids?" Wilma shot back. "Are you kidding?"

"We talked about it and I'd love to, but I have to work." Ramona's bemoaned.

"What about you Susan?"

"Freddy never invited me."

"You're kiddin." Geannie replied with surprise.

"I guess it never occurred to him. You know how men can be."

"Yeah, I know." Wilma agreed.

"Well, I'm lookin forward to it." Geannie beamed excitedly. "It will be a swell opportunity to work on havin another baby."

"How long have you been trying now?" one of the ladies asked.

"A few months now. We haven't had any luck, but we're sure havin a gay old time tryin."

Her remark brought around of snickers and laughs from the other women.

Then Wilma said, "I'm glad that you're having fun. In my experience, it's no picnic."

"Oh, whys that?" Susan asked.

"Well, I shouldn't say this, but Shorty is always in too big of a hurry and it ends up being slam, bam, thank you ma'am, whether I'm ready or not. But I do my duty and let him have it. Most of the time we don't

even bother getting undressed.”

“That sound's like a real bore.” Geannie quipped.

“You must get something out of it.” Susan added. “After all, you have five kids.”

“Yeah, and an extra ten pounds for each one of them to show for it.” Wilma lamented.

“Since you brought it up.” Susan went on. “I have the opposite problem with Freddy. He's always wanting to try something off the wall.”

“Like what?” Geannie asked innocently.

“I'd rather not talk about it.” Susan replied. “But I will say that I am uncomfortable with it.”

“If it makes you uncomfortable, then why on earth do you go along with it?” Geannie asked.

“Its like Wilma said, I'm just doing my duty.”

“Well with Curly and me, I'm a little more adventuresome than he is. We've tried it a few different ways to see if it will get me pregnant.”

That's when Ramona spoke for the first time on this topic. “That might be your problem. From a medical point of view, you have the best chance of conceiving when you lie on your back.”

“I've heard that if you're trying to get pregnant, you should stand on your head right afterwards.” Wilma added.

“Maybe I'll try that next time.” Geannie said. Then she burst out laughing after picturing herself standing on her head naked.

“That's just an old wives tail.” Ramona assured everyone. “If you're serious about getting pregnant, you need to keep track of your cycles and do it when you're ovulating.”

“That's what I'm doin.” Geannie went on to explain, “I keep a calendar that shows me when the best chances are and I keep track of when we do it. The next best time will be when we're in San Francisco. Lately we've been doin it a lot. I think I've about worn poor Curly plum out, but it sure is, shall I say, quite pleasurable to say the least.”

“We sure enjoy it too.” Ramona blurted out without thinking of what she was saying. As soon as she said it, she regretted it. The fact that she wasn't married, her comment got everyone's attention.

She justified herself by saying, “After having been married once, I found out how good it is. Since Tom's been with a couple of other girls before, it just seems like the natural thing to do.”

“But aren't you afraid of getting pregnant?” Susan asked.

“There's no possible way I can ever get pregnant, so what does it matter?”

“So you and Tom are...?” Geannie started to ask with surprise.

“Yeah, why not? We're both adults.” Ramona responded rather defensively.

“You're right.” Geannie said. “Its your business. I'm no one to judge.”

“Do you mean you don't think any less of me because of it?”

“Of course not, Ramona.” Geannie assured her. “That's not what friends do.”

“Oh good, because I was afraid that if you found out, being religious and all, that you wouldn't want to be my friend any more.”

“Don't be silly.” Geannie said as she gave her a hug.

Geannie's reaction only made Ramona look up to her all the more.

By then, Wilma and Susan were off onto another topic of conversation that Geannie and Ramona joined in on.

The day after joining up with the battleships, they rendezvoused with the main Battle Fleet off San Clement Island. For the next three days they steamed nearby conducting exercises, including communications, various cruising formations, and other activities. Meanwhile the aviators aboard the Langley carried out routine flight operations and training.

On the fourth day, the Battle Fleet split up into smaller units. Two groups each consisting of six battleships and a number of destroyers took up station offshore of San Clement Island. The Langley and four destroyers were detached to operate to the southwest.

The battleships, in two battle lines to the west of the island commenced their bombardment. A section from Fighting Two provided air cover over each group. Curly was protecting the same ship he had strafed a few days earlier. Another section was flying cover over the Langley.

Torpedo Two had a special assignment. The DT-2 was designed to carry an eighteen hundred pound torpedo. The aircraft in the squadron had been modified to also carry six two hundred fifty pound bombs and fitted with a bomb sight similar to those on larger Army bombers. The rear seat gunner doubled as the bombardier. Prior to these exercises, they had practiced with practice bombs to determine the feasibility of a single engine two seat carrier based bomber. The tests proved that it was possible.

This mission was to try the concept with live bombs. The nine planes took off with their bomb loads. Escorted by two sections of Fighting Two, the torpedo bombers crossed the shoreline to the north of the bombardment zone. Their targets were large canvas bullseyes laid out on the ground. Flying in formation they flew over their target and dropped their bombs. After the planes moved out, observers on the ground moved in inspect the accuracy of the bombers. Overall it was deemed a success. There was room for improvement and the technique needed some refinement. If the Army could do it, why couldn't the Navy?

In the meantime, Army bombers made an appearance over San Clement Island. Eighteen Army Air Service Martin NBS-1 twin engined bombers flying in two formations made a beeline for the battleships.

They were from the 20th Bomb Squadron stationed at Kelly Field, Texas. They had been brought in for these exercises and were operating out of a makeshift airstrip near Santa Barbara.

As the big bombers approached, Commander Ellison lead his two sections in to intercept, taking them to an altitude above the bombers. He signaled for Freddy to take on the formation to their right. Freddy in turn signaled Curly to target the the bomber to his right of the lead plane. Freddy took the lead plane and assigned Tomcat the one to his left.

Lieutenant McGowan led his guys down, spreading out to have room to maneuver. It was the first time Curly had encountered these aircraft. The huge twin tailed biplanes were much larger than the VE-7. They were forty two feet, eight inches long with a seventy four foot, two inch wing span. The two four hundred fifty horsepower engines allowed them to carry a payload of up to thirty eight hundred pounds of bombs (1,800 internal and 2,000 external). The crew of four were capable of defending themselves with five thirty caliber Lewis machine guns.

The combined firepower of a formation of nine aircraft could prove to be deadly. Curly made his run, passing just behind the big bomber. He could see a number of thirty caliber machine guns trained on him. Again the thought that war is serious business was impressed upon his mind. Never again would he take war games casually. There was just too much at stake. He realized that the real thing would be more than win or loose, it meant life or death.

Pulling up from his dive, he maneuvered into position behind behind the bomber on the rear right flank. Before commencing his dive, he put a finger to his lips and touched the picture of Geannie affixed to his instrument panel. As he bore on in, again he noticed the number of guns trained on him. He only had one pointing back. There had to be a better way. He thought that if he had four or even six guns it would be a more even match.

The smaller, out numbered Navy planes failed to break up the big army bombers as they made their bombing run on the battleships. As they neared the battle line, their bomb bay doors swung open. As they flew over the ships, they dropped a number of five pound flour sacks that corresponded to the number of bombs they actually carried. All but one of the flour sacks splashed into the sea. One landed on the fantail of the USS Nevada. It burst in a cloud of flour, leaving a mark indicating a hit. After the engagement, all aircraft returned safely to where they came from. For Curly that meant back to the Langley.

The next morning the aircraft aboard the Langley were sent aloft for a brief flight to the makeshift airfield where the Army bombers were stationed. The entire fleet anchored off shore between Santa Barbara and the Channel Islands. While the naval aviators met with their Army Air Service counterparts, the commanders of the Battle Fleet came ashore to meet with the Army commanders to discuss the lessons learned form the exercise. Both branches saw need for improvement.

The Army was satisfied that their bombers broke through the Navy's air defenses but disappointed that they only scored one hit. The Navy on the other hand was divided in their conclusions. The battleship commanders thought the exercise proved naval aviation a frivolous experiment with no future and dismissed it as of no value. The aviation commanders contented that with more and better planes they could provide a formidable defense. And as result to the tests carried out by Torpedo Two, they could also wield an effective offensive blow as well. The Army sided with the battleship commanders and basically told the naval aviators to leave the flying up the experts.

While the conference between the commanders turned into a brawl, the aviators from both services sought to see what they could learn from each other. The torpedo bomber pilots wanted to look at the bomb sights on the Army planes. The Army pilots looked over the torpedo planes to see if their bombers could be modified to carry torpedoes. The fighter pilots a were just happy be there. At the end of the day, both squadrons landed back aboard the Langley.

After two or three days, the Battle Fleet weighed anchor and moved on up the coast toward San Francisco for further exercises. On the cruise north, the Battle Fleet conducted more exercises and drills. The 20th Bomb Squadron went up the coast as well to join up with other Army Air Service units.

On the afternoon of June 30th the fleet neared San Francisco Bay. The Langley turned into the wind and sent both Fighting Two and Torpedo Two aloft. By mid afternoon they had landed at Crissy Field. The small Army Air Service air field was crowded with dozens of planes from both the Army and the Navy, including some of the patrol squadrons from North Island.

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The exercises in this chapter are fictional but indicative of the types of excises carried out at the time.

The Air Service, United States Army was a forerunner of the United States Air Force during and after World War I. Having been established on May 24, 1918, it became the US Army Air Corps on July 2, 1926 which happened to be during the time of the war games in this chapter.

