

## Chapter XVI

### An Unexpected Rendezvous

January 1, 1927 – June 11, 1927

On New Years Day 1927 Fighting Two ceased to exist. The very next day however a new squadron was formed. The aircraft and personnel from the old squadron were transferred to Fighting Six B. The B stood for Battle Fleet. During January and February, the new squadron continued training in their F6C-3's, honing their fighter tactics as well as their new found dive bombing abilities. Curly hadn't been to sea very much for quite a while and had stayed close to home, with the exception of a day or two now and then for carrier qualifications with the new planes. By the end of February, the squadron was ready for the upcoming exercises.

The day Curly left, was like so many times before. Geannie and Sandy met him at the air station to see him off. At three months pregnant, Geannie was displaying a slight bulge that Curly could definitely feel as he held her close to him in parting. "Gosh, by the time I get back, you'll really be showing won't you?"

"I'm going to miss you girls." he said to Geannie and Sandy. "I'll be sure to write to you."

"It will be lonely around here without you, but we'll manage just fine, won't we Sandy? I'll look forward to you letters. I never know if you'll get mine. Remember the one that didn't catch up to you until after you'd been home for a month?"

"I enjoyed reading it anyway." Curly assured her. "Listen, I have to go now." There was another round of hugs and kisses.

"Take care of yourself Lieutenant and come back to us. I love you."

"I love you too. I'll see you in June." As Curly walked away, he turned and called out, "See you in the funny pages."

It was a familiar sight. Curly dressed in his flying uniform, walking away from them with his sea bag slung over his shoulder until he disappeared into the crowd. Then the short wait before the planes began taking off. Once they did, Geannie watched for his red scarf. Once she saw it, she waved vigorously as 6-F-8 sprinted down the runway and take to the air. She usually lingered to watch the planes form up in the air. Sometimes she could pick him out in the sky, sometimes not. As usual, this day Geannie watched until they disappeared out over the ocean. Then there was nothing to do but go home and go on with her life until he returned.

As the squadron headed out to sea, they altered course to the southwest were a short time later they found the Langley and her destroyer escort. One by one, in their proper order, each plane was brought aboard. Once all aircraft were recovered. The Langley set a course to rendezvous with the battle fleet to participate in Fleet Problem VII with the Battle Force in the vicinity of the Panama Canal.

After the first round of the war games, the Battle Fleet dropped anchor off Balboa on the Pacific

side for a few days of rest. It was the first opportunity that Curly had to get a letter off the ship.

March 6, 1927

Aboard the USS Langley

Anchored off Balboa, Panama

Dear Geannie

It has been a month since I left and this is the first real opportunity I have had to get a letter off to you. The mail barge hasn't come alongside yet. I'm sure there will be a letter or two from you when it does. I wish I could read them before getting this off to you.

We had a leisurely cruise on the way down arriving off Panama on March 1<sup>st</sup> when the exercises commenced. Let me give you a little background. The plan called for the Orange Force, played by the Battle Force (that's us), represented a Pacific power, presumably Japan. The Black Force, played by the Scouting Force based in Norfolk, represented a European power. Together we were to carry out a simultaneous attack on the Blue Force, representing the United States at the Panama Canal, defended by the Army Air Corps and small naval presence including several submarines.

The exercises began when Blue Force patrol planes spotted us a hundred and fifty miles northwest of the canal. On the 3<sup>rd</sup>, the battleships bombarded the coastal defenses while we carried out air strikes on a Blue Force airfield and put the Miraflores Locks out of commission. Later in the afternoon we carried out an unsuccessful raid on the Gatun Locks. Freddy, Tomcat and I were part of the fighter escort for that attack. After our success at the Miraflores Locks during the morning, the Army was prepared

and waiting for us.

Finding no aircraft in the air to challenge us, we commenced a gradual descent to carry out a strafing run on the locks. That is when the Army swooped down out of the sun. We didn't see them coming. Having the advantage of altitude, they decimated us. Without warning, I found myself on the losing end of dogfight with an Army Air Corps fighter. I'm sure glad that one wasn't for real. I wasn't the only one, most of our fighters were eliminated from the exercise. With us out of the action, the torpedo bombers were easy pickings.

We flew back out to the Langley with our tails between our legs. Commander Wagner filed the dismal report and called us together to figure out what went wrong and what we could learn from it.

We were told that the Black Force had been delayed in reaching the exercise grounds which allowed the Blue Force to concentrate solely on us. After the fiasco at the Gatun Locks, the Blue Forces counter attacked and hit us before we could get back in the air and inflicted "damage" on the Langley.

Things continued to go bad for us the next day as well, after all we were the bad guys. A Blue submarine "sank" our flagship, a cruiser, and a seaplane tender.

After taking a beating, that portion of the exercise ended on the 5<sup>th</sup> when our antisubmarine patrols from the Langley made the area west of the canal too dangerous for the submarines to operate which forced a conclusion to the scenario.

Now that I have bored you with all of the details, but hey that is what I've been up to. To me it was all pretty exciting. I don't know if you know this or not, but every time I take to the air, I have your picture attached to my instrument panel. Its there to remind me that wherever I go or how high I'm flying I know that I'm in your heart and your every prayer.

A day doesn't go by that you're not on my mind. When a fond memory surfaces, I'll cling to it for the rest of the day, reliving and relishing the moment. At night when I'm asleep in my bunk, you come to me in my dreams.

When I'm away on these cruises I keep pretty busy doing what I love to do. As much as I love flying and the sea, the best part of the cruise is always coming home to my one true love.

I do hope that all is well with you, Sandy and our child that you carry within you. Knowing you, you are busy with all of your things. I do hope there are moments when I cross your mind or come to you in your dreams.

I just heard the call for letters, so I better close and rush this down to the ship's post office so it can make it on the mail boat.

Until we meet in each others dreams tonight!

Love Curly.

Curly got his letter to the post master in time and waited around for the mail bag that had been brought aboard to be sorted. Sure enough there were two letters from Geannie. He took them back to his bunk in the squadron quarters and read each of them twice.

The fleet remained anchored offshore for a few days rest before continuing with the exercises. It took three days for the entire fleet to transit the Panama Canal to the Caribbean side. Once the fleet had

reassembled, it set sail, but not before getting another letter off to Geannie and receiving one from her. For the next several days the fleet steamed the waters of the Caribbean in preparations for the next phase of the exercises.

April 15, 1927

Aboard the USS Langley

Anchored off Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Dear Geannie

We have concluded the second phase of the exercises and are anchored offshore from Port-au-Prince, Haiti. We arrived here yesterday afternoon. There isn't a suitable airfield so the air group remained aboard. I haven't had a chance to go ashore yet. Freddy, Jomeat and I have a three day shore leave beginning this afternoon. I'll bring a souvenir and send you some picture post cards.

In this part of the exercises, the battle fleet became part of the Orange Force, representing the United States. This time we got to be the good guys. The Blue Force from Norfolk represented Japan. The islands of the Caribbean represented the Philippines. This round of the games began on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April when the Black Force put to sea. For our part, aircraft from the Langley provided air cover and anti submarine patrols.

The real action as far as we were concerned took place on the 13<sup>th</sup>, the last day when we conducted a dive bombing attack on a force of Black destroyers. You'll never guess what I found in my sights. As I came down, I could make out the number 204 on the bow as plain as day. It was my old ship, the Wadsworth. I was credited with a near miss by the umpires.

Anyway, while we were carrying out our attack, twenty five Army bombers showed up over the Blue Force. Without sufficient air cover, the Battle Fleet was dealt a serious blow since we weren't there to break up the attack. At the conclusion of the exercises the next day, the entire fleet steamed into the Gulf of Gonave and held a fleet review for the President of Haiti before dropping anchor off shore.

After a week here, we'll sail north for more maneuvers and will put in at New York City. I sure wish we could have arranged one of our rendezvous. I'll be sure to tell you all about it.

I'm doing fine. There's no need for you to worry about me, although I know that you do. To tell you the truth, it's nice to have someone to worry about me. I feel sorry for these guys who have no one.

So, how are you? I'll bet that by now you're obviously in a motherly way. From your last letter I trust that you're doing well. I don't know when your next letter will catch up with me. By now I imagine you're feeling the baby move. Last time you were sure that it would be a girl. This time, I'm hoping for a boy. We need to be discussing some names, don't we.

Give Sandy a hug and kiss for me. We're just past the half way point, so I'll be home soon. I sure miss you girls.

I love you, Curly

Curly got to spend some time ashore and sent home some picture post cards. He wished he could have remembered some of his French. It would have made getting around much easier.

After a few days of rest, the fleet sailed to New York. Various elements of the fleet conducted exercises and maneuvers against each other en-route. During the week that the fleet spent in New York,

Curly wished that Geannie could have joined him for a rendezvous. There was so much to see and he would liked to have shared it with her. He wrote her a letter telling all about his recent maneuvers and his time in New York City.

On the last day in New York, he received a letter from Geannie that finally caught up with the ship. It was interesting that her letter was postmarked in Roanoke. Her letter read:

8 April 1927

Dear Flyboy,

I hope this letter catches up with you with you at some point in your travels. The last I heard was that you are somewhere in Carilbean and won't be home until the first week of June.

You will be surprised to know that Sandy and I are in Roanoke visiting with our families. Mother and Daddy suggested that rather than sitting home alone all of this time, that we come and spend some time with them. Daddy offered to wire me some money for two round trip train tickets. It was too good of an offer to pass up, so here we are. We arrived here the day before yesterday and will be here until the end of May.

We have been having a wonderful time, especially Sandy. She thoroughly loves being spoiled by her grandparents. Since it hadn't been too long since we had been here, she still remembered everyone.

She has learned a lot of new words since you have been gone. And she is becoming more and more independent. See, I

wonder where she gets that from? Every day she asks me when you will be home. She misses you. We both do.

The baby is growing, too. I first felt him move a little while after you left. Oh, did I say him? I think this one is going to be a little boy. I'm not as sure as I was with Sandy. Are you still okay with naming him Austin? I have finally come up with a middle name. What would you say to Austin Sheffield Brason? If it's a girl, I'm thinking Marie Ellen. What do you think?

I have been taking it easy. My mother won't let me do much else. So I'm taking advantage of the slow pace. I do miss my piano students and all of the other stuff that keeps me busy.

This has been the longest you have been away since your world cruise. I'm glad these exercises only come once a year. I think I am going to start coming here when you are away for so long. It's lonely without you. Sure, I have my friends in Coronado and all of my things, but it's not the same without you. Besides, Sandy needs to spend time with the family. It would be dreadful if she grew up to have them be strangers to her.

I long to see you when you come home. We should be home about the same time. If you happen to arrive before us, at least you will know where we are.

*With all my love, Geannie - and Sandy too.*

*P.S. See you in the funny pages!*

*X O X O X O ♥ ❀*

After a week in New York, the fleet sailed on the 15<sup>th</sup> of May. Unfortunately, there wasn't time to get another letter off to Geannie. The final phase of the exercises was to defend the New England coastline against an amphibious assault. This time the Battle Fleet played the role of the invasion force. On the 18<sup>th</sup> the Battle Fleet bombarded the coastline in preparation for the invasion with aircraft from the Langley providing air cover.

The next day, the invasion force attempted a landing at Watch Hill, Rhode Island with the two squadrons from the Langley providing air support. With the Langley operating so close to shore, she was caught by land based bombers and was ruled out of action. The exercise concluded on the 20<sup>th</sup> without the invasion force securing a foothold and was ruled a failure.

One thing these exercises proved was that the numbers carrier based aircraft was insufficient to meet the demands the exercises required. Naval aviation was beginning to gain recognition as a vital role in fleet operations.

At the conclusion of Fleet Problem VII, the Langley put into Norfolk on the 22<sup>nd</sup> for a week prior to returning to the west coast. With a week of shore leave, Curly decided to make a visit to Roanoke. At first he was going to call ahead, but then he thought that it would be more fun to surprise everyone, especially Geannie.

Curly boarded the morning train for Roanoke and arrived early in the afternoon and caught a ride from the train depot to the Austin Mansion. He had himself dropped off around the corner so he would have a better chance of sneaking up on them. He made it to the front door undetected and went in. Geannie was asleep on couch.

On hearing someone open the door Marie poked her head out from the kitchen. Upon seeing Curly, her eyes got as big as saucers. Curly put his finger to his lips before she could say anything.

At that moment, Sandy toddled out of the kitchen where she had been helping Grandma. "Mommy, Daddy's home!" Geannie twitched and snorted. Sandy now standing next to her, patted her and repeated, "Mommy, Daddy's home."

As she rolled over and opened her eyes, Curly was standing over her.

Geannie screamed! She sat up rubbing her eyes as if she didn't believe what she was seeing. She screamed, squealed, and laughed all at the same time, if that is even possible. She sprung to her feet and

into Curly's arms in one single bound. "Flyboy! What are you doing here!?" She jumped up and down as she held him tight. Curly could feel her pregnant belly as she pressed against him. Once she settled down, they sat down together. Sandy climbed on to his lap and began playing with his mustache.

Finally, Curly was able to greet her. "Hi, sweetheart." he said. "Surprised?"

"Boy, am I ever." Then she repeated, "What on earth are you doing here?"

"We pulled into Norfolk yesterday on our way home to San Diego and I had a week off. I got your letter in New York..."

Geannie interrupted him, "You've been to New York City! Without me?"

"Yeah, You probably didn't get my letter from Haiti, did you?"

"No, not yet, anyway. I have the mail forwarded here."

"I brought you something." he said handing her a small bag.

Geannie reached in and pulled out a six inch tall figurine of the Statue of Liberty. "I love it, Lieutenant!" she said as she threw her arm around his neck, nearly clobbering him with Lady Liberty.

"You can put it on the table by the door next to Jesus. When I am gone you can look at it to remind you why I do what I do."

Curly spent the next while telling Geannie all about Panama, Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico, and especially the Big Apple. As he was describing getting "shot down" over the Gatun Locks his parents came over and interrupted his story. He paused to greet them before continuing with the stories of his adventures. That evening Mrs. Austin set an extra plate at the table for the unexpected dinner guest.

Curly and Geannie stayed up late in the evening talking. When they finally went to bed, she was more than delighted to snuggle up against her man.

They spent the next few days together and with family. The letters that Curly mailed from Haiti and New York finally caught up with Geannie after being forwarded from Coronado.

Curly, Geannie, Sandy spent an overnigher at the cabin. They hiked back to the lake to have a picnic and to do a little fishing. This was Sandy's first visit to lake. It was as if she were in paradise.

A couple of monarch butterflies flitted by. Sandy chased after them. Geannie and Curly were amused by it. "You know," Curly said "whoever named them did it wrong. I always thought they should be called flutterbys."

"Flutterbys? Whoever heard of such a thing? Do you know what? You're cuckoo."

"No." Curly insisted. "Think about it. What do they do? They flutter by."

"Okay, if you say so." Geannie said twisting her wrist with her index finger pointed at her head.

After lunch, they broke out the fishing gear. It was the first time since their buddy days that they had gone fishing. Sandy wanted to help her Daddy "catch fishies". She wasn't much help, but Geannie caught

very nice eight inch Roanoke Bass. Curly did a nice job of flaying it and Geannie cooked it for supper.

They spent a day with Walt and Sarah. That evening Ellen and Emmett watched their kids while two couples went out to dinner and took in a movie; the Duncan Sisters in "Topsy and Eva, Under Way".

Among other things, Curly and Geannie attended a baseball game and of course on Sunday they all attended church. Curly made sure he spent a lot of time with his father.

As with all of their rendezvouses, they ran out of time. But it was only a matter of days and they would be back home together. Curly caught the train back to Norfolk and sailed with the Langley back to San Diego, via the Panama Canal. After four months away, Curly finally returned to North Island during the first week of June.

Geannie and Sandy stayed in Roanoke for a few more days before making the four day cross county trip. They arrived home a couple of days ahead of Curly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fleet Problem VII included all of the components described here. The deatis came from the book "To Train The Fleet For War: The U.S. Navy Fleet Problems, 1923-1940" By Albert A. Nofi

