

Chapter XX

Rescue

January 26, 1929 – April 9, 1929

Curly was left clinging to the piece of wing with the afternoon tropical sun beating down on him. He knew that Scoop had seen him and that help would be on the way. He prayed that someone would find him in time. He couldn't bare the thought of leaving Geannie a widow and Sandy and Austin without a father. He then prayed for Ramona knowing the challenge she faced with being a widow for the second time only five months after she and Tomcat were married.

He wasn't expecting the source of help that first arrived, as a pair of dolphins took up a vigil around him. It was as if they were offering encouragement to him with their high pitched clicks. They came close enough for him reach out and touch them. They didn't seem to mind.

Towards mid afternoon, after being in the water for about seven hours, he noticed bubbles breaking the surface about a hundred yard from were he was. Then he saw something black breech the surface. At first he thought it was a whale. But then he recognized the unmistakable shape of a submarine conning tower. As the boat surfaced, several men appeared on deck.

A moment later a boat was lowered over the side and began rowing toward him. As it drew near, Curly could see the faces of the men in the boat. He had never been more happy to see anyone. They hauled him out of the water and began rowing back to the submarine. As he was helped aboard, his ankle really hurt and was unable to stand. He was helped though the deck hatch and down to the ladder and was seated on a piece of equipment.

No sooner than the hatch was closed, he could hear water rushing over the hull as the boat submerged. In a moment the ship's medic was at his side attending to him. "I'm not a doctor," the sailor said, "but I'm all you get."

After looking over his ankle the medic said, "Lucky for you fly boy, its only a sprain. That I can take care of." Before dressing it, he directed another sailor to go to sickbay bring back a pair of crutches.

As the medic wrapped his ankle, an officer appeared through the hatch. He greeted Curly with, "Welcome aboard the S-42, I am Lieutenant John Potter, the XO on this boat. You're lucky we spotted your flare."

"Lieutenant Curly Brason." he introduced himself. "Thanks for the lift. That was going to be one long swim if you hadn't showed up." Then he inquired, "Say, are you Black or Blue?"

"Blue." John answered.



“Just great.” Curly grinned. “I guess that makes me a POW doesn't it?”

“Aw shucks, Black, Blue. Where all on the same side.”

After the chit chat, the medic asked Curly to try to stand up.

Standing on one foot, the medic handed him the crutches, “Now see if you can walk.”

After Curly took a few steps he said, “Yeah this will do. Thanks.”

Once he was sure their prisoner was alright, Lieutenant Potter took him to his stateroom where he could change into a dry uniform once some clothes were brought to him from the ship's store. The executive officer then invited Curly to come with him to bridge to meet the skipper, Lieutenant Commander Clint Hale.

“Thanks for the lift.” Curly said as he saluted the Commander.

“No problem, Lieutenant.” as he returned the salute. Then he said. “I've been tracking that flat top of yours all day. As soon as I sink her, I'll let them I know I have you aboard, safe and sound. You don't expect me to give away my position now do you?”

“No, sir. I wouldn't want you to do that. I'm just glad to be dry.” Curly answered.

“After all, you did cost me an hour by plucking you out of the drink. I'll bet your hungry aren't you?” Commander Hale asked.

“Starved,” Curly answered. “I haven't had anything to eat since four this morning.”

The Commander directed his XO, “Take him down to the officer's wardroom so he can get something to eat. Then bring him back here.”

Directing his next comment to Curly, “I want you to see how we sub boys take care of a target.”

Curly was happy to have something to eat. More importantly, some water. He had become pretty dehydrated.

After eating and resting a little he made his way back up to the control room where the submarine commander engaged him in conversation. “So what do you think of the S-42?”

“She's pretty small and crowded.” Curly answered. “I cant see why anyone would want to be welded inside of a steel pipe under water. I feel so claustrophobic, I'll take my chances in the air.”

“Look where that got you today.”

“Yep, and I'm sure glad you came along.” Curly agreed.

“As for me, I prefer being down here where no one can see me coming. Just like that carrier of yours.”

Late in the afternoon the S-42 made sonar contact with something big. Commander Hale ordered the boat to be brought up to periscope depth. After having a look around, he asked Curly, “Would you like to see what a carrier looks like from my world?” He stepped away from the periscope and gestured for

Curly to have a look.

Curly peered into the scope at the giant ship he had left early that morning in the dark. "She's a beauty isn't she?" he asked admiringly as he stepped away.

"She sure is. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to sink her." Commanded Hale gave a series of orders to maneuver into position. Then he gave the order, "Fire all tubes."

As the four practice torpedoes sped toward their target, confident at least one or two would hit their target, Commander Hale ordered that the boat be taken down to two hundred feet and rig for silent running to avoid being detected by the destroyer accompanying the Saratoga. Everything went silent except for the sonar scope as the sonar pings from the destroyer could be heard. They came close but never made contact. Eventually they moved on.

Commander Hale ordered the submarine back to periscope depth and took a look around. There was nothing in sight, but still he waited until dark to surface. Once in the clear he had a radio message transmitted that he had the missing pilot aboard.

Curly spent the next couple of days as a guest on the S-42 as she finished her patrol. He had the choice of a cot in sick bay as a patient or in the brig as a prisoner of war. He opted for sick bay. His new friends made him feel right at home and he was given a complete tour of the S-42 from stem to stern and had everything explained to him. During the two days he was aboard aboard, the submariners were more than happy to share their world with the fly boy.

Commander Hale had Curly sit at the wheel that controls the forward dive planes and give it try. He explained, "As long as the boat is moving, the bow and stern dive planes are used to 'fly' through the water just like the control surfaces on an airplane."

After two days, Curly had a new found appreciation for the "silent service" and the world of submarines. Even at that, he hadn't changed his mind. He would still rather take his chances in the sky.

On the evening of the 27th the S-42 sailed into the anchorage at Balboa, Panama to join the rest of fleet. Commander Hale maneuvered in close to the Saratoga and had his signalman flash a message requesting permission to come alongside to transfer personnel.

Within moments the submarine, with Curly and Commander Hale standing on the deck, pulled up to one of the Saratoga's boat ladders. Curly again thanked Commander Hale for rescuing him and for his hospitality. Commander Hale made Curly an honorary member of the crew and invited him back for a visit when they both got back to San Diego.

After exchanging salutes, Curly hobbled up the boat ladder onto the quarter deck where he reported in with the officer of the deck. The officer of the deck called the bridge to report the return of Lieutenant Brason. He was instructed to have Curly have a seat and someone would be right their.

A moment later there was a stir of commotion as Commander Davis, the squadron commander, greeted Curly. It was as if he had seen a ghost! "We thought you were dead!" Commander Davis exclaimed.

Curly came to attention the best he could and saluted his commanding officer. "Didn't you get the message from the S-42?" Curly asked. "That night after they torpedoed us, they surfaced and transmitted the message. I heard it myself."

"We never received anything. My God, its great that you're alive. What's the matter with your foot?"

"Thanks." Curly responded, "I didn't know I was dead." Curly answered. Then he lowered his head and said, "But Tomcat is." Then he answered the commander's question, "Oh, I sprained my ankle when I bailed out. It's a lot better than it was."

Commander Davis told Curly to go to his quarters and get some rest and to report to his office in the ready room first thing in the morning.

Curly did go back to his quarters and the first thing he did was to write a letter to Geannie telling her all about what had happened. He had no idea that she knew about the accident and also thought that he was dead.

Another radio message was sent to North Island. It was the middle of the night when Captain Mitchell got the word that Lieutenant Brason was alive and well. He hesitated for a moment before placing a telephone call because of the late hour. He thought it would be best to end the grief of one poor woman. He went ahead and placed the call.

"Mrs. Brason, this is Captain Mitchell." The tone of his voice sounded positive. "I'm sorry to call you so late, but I have news about your husband."

Taking her silence as his cue to continue, "I am happy to tell you that he was picked up by a submarine after several hours in the water. That is why the search planes couldn't find him. After two days aboard the submarine, he is now safe aboard the Saratoga. All he has for the ordeal is a sprained ankle, and that is healing nicely. They radioed in the fact that they had picked him up, but for some reason the message was never received."

"Thank you! Thank you, Captain!" Geannie cried as she bounced up and down on the balls of her feet. Then she got serious. "And what about Lieutenant Katmuth?" She asked.

"That's the bad news," Captain Mitchell answered. "From your husband's account, we have every reason to believe that he died in the collision and sank with his plane."

"Poor Ramona." was all she could say.

"Yes." the captain replied. "I need to call her next." He concluded with, "Good night, Mrs. Brason,"

and hung up.

Geannie was ecstatic! Now all hope for sleep had escaped her. Even though it was three o'clock in the morning back home, she called to tell Curly's parents that he had been found and that he was alive and well. Hope, what a marvelous concept. Finally after a couple of hours she did drift off to sleep.

The next thing she knew, Sandy was softly shaking her. "Mommy, I'm hungry." She said. Then it dawned on her that Austin was crying. She glanced at the clock and saw that it was nine thirty. After taking care of her children, Geannie knew what she had to do. She went to see Ramona.

After being reunited with his squadron Curly rested well in his own bunk that night. As ordered, he reported to Commander Davis first thing in the morning. After debriefing Curly and getting his side of the story, Commander Davis told Curly that an investigation had been conducted by an official from Boeing who was aboard to handle any operational problems with the new aircraft.

From Scoop's account, the Boeing official concluded that a control cable had failed, which threw the aircraft out of control in a manner that would have caused it to roll over the way Scoop described. All of the F3Bs in the squadron were examined to determine if any other planes might be at risk of the same malfunction. One other aircraft did show signs of wear that would have caused the cable to fail. The problem was caused by the cable coming in contact with the the head of a rivet in the fuselage. All aircraft in the squadron had been modified by relocating the rivet. The results of the investigation had been sent on to Boeing so the problem could be rectified in all F3Bs.

Satisfied with the cause of the accident, Commander Davis and the Boeing official were confident that no other pilots and aircraft would be lost do to something so simple. That didn't bring Tomcat back, but no one else had die for the same reason.

With the loss of Tomcat, two aircraft, and Curly's injury, his section was temporarily out of commission. Commander Davis told Curly that he was grounded until the flight surgeon gave his sprained ankle the all clear. Once the exercises resumed Scoop would be an extra to be used wherever needed. He informed Curly that once he was cleared to fly, he would be rotated among the the other section leaders. At the conclusion of the meeting, Commander Davis commended Curly for his reaction in the face of an emergency and expressed his confidence in Curly and his leadership abilities.

After riding at anchor at Coco Solo for a few more days, the fleet sailed once more for further exercises. Ten days after the accident, Curly was cleared to resume flying.

During February as special guest came aboard the Saratoga and spent two days observing flight operations. The "Lone Eagle" otherwise known as Charles Lindbergh was made an honorary member of Bombing Two. In a special briefing in the squadron ready room, Lindbergh talked about his 1927 solo flight

across the Atlantic and his other barnstorming adventures. Lindbergh was also a 2nd Lieutenant in the Army Air Corps Reserve, a rank equivalent to Lieutenant (junior grade).

After concluding the maneuvers with the fleet, the *Saratoga* left Panama on March 11th and headed home. Before leaving Panama, Curly got a letter from Geannie. It wasn't often her letters caught up with him. Usually he didn't get them until he had already returned. She told him about what she went through after hearing of his accident and how she thought he was dead and the agony that she went through during those two days. She told him of how concerned and helpful Captain Mitchell and Commander Scott were and the out pouring of love and support that everyone had shown her. She expressed her deepest love for him and how she longed to see him again.

A few days after Geannie received word that Curly was safe, she received his letter in which he told her all about the accident, the experience of bailing out of his stricken airplane and free falling through the atmosphere, the feeling of floating in the air dangling from his parachute and landing in the water. He told her about the dolphins that kept him company and the feeling of being adrift all alone in the ocean. He was always confident of being rescued knowing that Scoop had seen him. It was Scoop's flare that got the attention of the S-42.

He described being on a submarine and how he would much rather be in the air than under water. He felt so claustrophobic down there. He told her that he couldn't wait to get back into the air where he belonged. Even more than that, he couldn't wait to get back home to her and the kids. He concluded by asking her to forgive him for losing his prized red scarf that she had so lovingly made for him.

Geannie didn't know how she felt about him going back up in the air. But she remembered the golden eagle at the San Diego Zoo with its wings clipped. The poor bird looked miserable. She loved Curly too much to clip his wings.

She couldn't bare the thought of going through losing him for good. It was horrible enough to think that she had lost him for those two days. She picked up the figurine of the Statue of Liberty that he had brought her from New York and remembered that he told her that it was to remind her why he did what he did. She remembered her role in the "Empire of the Dragon" and concluded that it was his way of keeping her safe; of keeping their homeland safe. That didn't come without risk. Nothing good in life does.

Having gone through such a scare made her love him all the more. She was grateful that he was alive and well; and that she was his. She looked at Sandy and Austin who he had given her; she thought of how he and they made her life complete and meaningful.

Austin was a year and half old, and just like Sandy at that age, he didn't need her as much as when he was a baby. Geannie realized that she was born to be a mother; and a good one she was. At thirty, she

felt there was still a lot of mothering left in her. As she watched Sandy and Austin playing together, she decided that it was time to do it again.

In the remaining weeks before Curly came home, life continued as usual. She kept busy with taking care of the kids and all of her other activities outside of the home. One day she got word that the squadron would be home on the 22nd of March. Each passing day the anticipation and excitement of being reunited with Curly mounted.

Then the day came. About mid morning, she heard the sound of aircraft engines approaching from out over the ocean. She stepped out onto the front step and watched them as they passed by just off shore before circling around to land. The airfield came to life as one by one the aircraft touched down.

Geannie knew that Curly wasn't among them and that he would be coming in on the ship. She finished her piano lessons and loaded Sandy and Austin into the car and drove down to the beach. She spread out a blanket for a picnic with the kids. After lunch they played in the surf for a while. Tuckered out, it was their nap time and Geannie put them down in the shade of their beach parasol where they soon were fast asleep. Geannie thought about joining them, but she wanted to watch for the ship.

Sitting there gazing out to sea and relaxing, she watched wave after wave wash up onto the beach. Then she saw a wisp of smoke just over the horizon to the southwest. It drew nearer and before long she could see the unmistakable top of the Saratoga's superstructure, with the help of the binoculars that she had given him for their birthaversary a couple of years earlier. She watched as the majestic ship appeared over the horizon and came into full view.

The closer it came, the larger it loomed. As it neared, it slowed until it came to complete stop just offshore. It was close enough that she could see the sailors on the flight deck as they went about their work. She could hear the rattling of the chain and the splash of the anchor hitting the water.

Before long, the ship's boats were lowered over the side and the sea ladders were let down. The boatmen maneuvered the boats into position next to the ladders. A few moments later she saw men descending the ladders and into the boats. The first one pulled away from the side of the ship and started for shore. She could see a small blue flag at the bow and figured that was the admiral's launch. Soon the other boats also began making their way toward shore as well.

Geannie watched as they tied up to the pier at the air station to the north. As quickly as the men had boarded, they scrambled onto the pier. She figured it would be while before Curly would be home and since the kids were still asleep, she continued watching.

With all of their passengers unloaded, the boats headed back to the Saratoga. Once along side they were raised out of the water and were lowered back into their cradles. Again she heard the rattle of the anchor chain as the ship weighed anchor. A moment later the ship got underway. Sandy woke up from her

nap as the ship began to disappear over the horizon to the northwest. Geannie wanted to know what it would be like to sail away on a big ship. She hoped one day she would get the chance to see what being at sea was about and why Curly loved it so much.

Geannie woke up Austin and said to the kids, "Let's go home and get ready for Daddy to come home."

Geannie was putting the final touches on dinner when she heard the front door open and Curly call out, "I'm home!"

Geannie dropped what she was doing and ran into the front room, almost knocking Austin over. In a flying leap she tackled Curly to the couch and began smothering him with kisses and bathing his face with her tears. Curly laid there on the couch with one foot the floor and his wife on top of him. He reached around her with both arms wrapped them tightly around her.

Finally, Geannie came up for a breath of air. She stood up letting Curly get on his feet. Then she slugged him in the arm and said, "Don't you ever die on me again, Lieutenant!" She threw her arms around his neck and pulled him close and gave him another barrage of kisses. All Curly could do was hold her and return the greeting.

When Geannie pulled away for another breath of air, Curly looked deep into her eyes. What he saw told the whole story. He saw love and adoration. He saw her joy of being reunited. And he saw something else too. Something he had seen in her eyes twice before.

Finally Curly had the chance to say how glad he was to be home. He got down on his knees and took his daughter and son into his arms and gave them each a big hug and a kiss.

Geannie set the remainder of dinner on the table and they sat down to eat. Curly said Grace and expressed his thankfulness for the blessing his family was and for being home. Through dinner they talked about their more pleasurable experiences of the last two and a half months. Curly told Sandy about petting the dolphins.

The conversation turned more serious when Curly asked, "How's Ramona?"

Geannie told him, "She took a month off and went home to see her mother in Tacoma, Washington. She's only been back for a week but I have only seen her once since then. She is taking it pretty hard."

"I'll bet she is." Curly sympathized.

After dinner Curly helped clear away and do the dishes. They spent the evening talking until it was time to put the kids to bed. Then Geannie gave Curly the kind of welcome home that any fly boy, sailor, soldier, or marine would die for.

Now that Bombing Two B was home, the first order of business was the memorial service for

Lieutenant (junior grade) Thomas Wayne Katmuth. A squadron is a close knit group and his loss was felt deeply by everyone in the squadron, especially by his section; Curly and Scoop. It was Scoop who had watched Tom's and Curly's planes crash into the sea.

The memorial was held in the air station chapel with Captain Mitchell presiding and Commander Scott, the chaplain, officiating. The entire squadron and their wives were in attendance along with many others from the Saratoga's other squadrons. Many of the staff from the Naval Hospital where Ramona had been stationed also were there.

Ramona and his parents were seated in the center of the front row. Before them was a large floral wreath. To her left was her dear friend, Geannie who had introduced her to Tom. Next to Geannie of course was Curly, Tom's section leader. On the other side of Curly was Scoop. To Ramona's left were Tom's mother and father, Mr. and Mrs. Michael Katmuth, who had come down from their home in Bakersfield, California.

Commander Scott addressed his remarks to Ramona. His remarks were comforting but what can you say to a woman widowed for the second time after only five months of marriage? He gave a sermon befitting of any funeral service. He spoke of the soul and its standing before God and the promise of immortality through the resurrection. Though his body was never recovered and was lost to the sea, it was not lost to God who in that great day would bring it from the depths and restore it to his soul, which was at peace.

Commander Davis paid his respects to the widow of Lieutenant Katmuth. He spoke of the fine pilot that Tomcat was and of his promising career which had been cut so short. He talked about how it was an accident completely out of his control.

Captain Mitchell concluded the service. In his remarks he spoke of the sense of family and community at North Island Naval Air Station and the greater San Diego Naval community, including the hospital, base, and training facility on the other side of the bay. He talked about the outpouring of love and support that was shown to both Ramona and Geannie. He said that he has grateful that it wasn't a double memorial service.

At the conclusion of the service, the wreath was carried outside by an honor guard which lead the procession. Once outside, Lieutenant Katmuth was saluted by a flyover of a section of three Bombing Two B aircraft flown by pilots who volunteered to render the honor.

After the three planes flew past, a lone bugler off in the distance sounded the mournful strains of Taps. Seven sailors fired a three volley salute. The crack of the rifles pierced Ramona to the heart with each of the three volleys. The service concluded when Captain Mitchell presented her with a folded flag. As all but the those closest to Tomcat dispersed, the Navy Wives hosted a luncheon for those who remained.

The director of nursing at the Naval hospital approached Ramona and offered her old job back, if she wanted it. She accepted the offer and was reinstated into the Navy Nurses Corps, as if she had never left.

The second order of business was to reorganize Curly's section. Two new F3B-1s were procured to replace those lost in the accident. Curly's new plane carried his old number, 2-B-10. Scoop received the other new plane, numbered 2-B-11. Tomcat's replacement, Ensign Ronald "Cowboy" Perry got Scoops old 2-B-12. Over the next several weeks, the regrouped section worked out a training routine that forged the threesome into an efficient team.

One Saturday Curly took Geannie and the kids across the bay and down to the Navy base to call on his new friends on the S-42. Commander Hale was more than happy to show Geannie around his boat. She too found it small and cramped and had to agree with Curly, he was better off in the air. As they left, Geannie thanked Commander Hale profusely for coming to Curly's rescue.

Geannie was happy to have Curly home for the foreseeable future as there weren't any extensive maneuvers scheduled. Once again he was on regular workday schedule with his evenings and weekends free. Hearts once more appeared on the calendar as she began keeping track again. It was in part due to realizing how close she came to losing him, which made her all the more affectionate and worked in nicely with her ulterior motive. She had not discussed with Curly her desire to have another baby, but she knew that he had it figured out. He was more than happy to do his part and really enjoyed the special attention that he was getting. When it came right down to it, he loved his children and being a father. He too was ready to add to his little family.

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The simulated torpedoe attack on the Saratoga by S-42 is uncertain. The Saratoga was attacked by a submarine, and USS S-42, an S class Group III submarine commissioned on November 24, 1924 based in San Diego did participated in Fleet Problem IX.

The defect causing the accident is also fictional.

Charles Lindbergh did visit the Saratoga on February 8, 1929 to observe flight operations during subsequent exercises following Fleet Problem IX.