

Chapter XXIV

Survival

August 2, 1929 – April 23, 1930

Curly was surprised to find several changes had occurred in only three days. Transfers within the squadron necessitated some shakeups. In his absence he had been appointed the division officer for Division Three within Bombing Two. He still kept Scoop and Cowboy as his wingmen and now had three other pilots in another section under him as well. To go with it, he was promoted to full Lieutenant. That evening Curly, Geannie, Sandy, Austin, and Marie went out to celebrate.

Among other changes that had occurred was that Shorty became the air officer aboard the Lexington, which meant that he and Wilma would be moving up to Long Beach. His position as the squadron resource officer was not filled and his responsibilities were once again divided up among the division officers and section leaders. In addition to his other duties Curly was the squadron flight officer, responsible for scheduling.

Not only was Bombing Two affected by the shakeup, changes were made in the other squadrons at North Island as well. Freddy was being transferred to Washington D.C. to work in the Bureau of Aeronautics. In the process of their move, their three bedroom duplex came available. The housing office notified Curly that it would be available in two weeks.

Geannie and Curly took it upon themselves to host a going away party for their friends. Shorty and Freddy had taken Curly in fresh out of flight school and had been his mentors. Learning to fly in flight school was one thing. It was their tutelage that had made him into a seasoned pilot. The bond he had established with them was sure to endure, despite going different directions. When Shorty was grounded and Tomcat joined the section, he too became part of that team, therefore Ramona was also invited.

Curly felt he had a responsibility to her and did all he could for her. He checked in on her frequently to see if there was anything she needed. She and Geannie remained close friends and they had her over often.

Geannie considered Ramona and Susan two of the best friends that she had ever had. She too had a connection with them that was sure to endure. For some reason, she didn't connect with Wilma in quite the same way.

The party was held at the playground on the Saturday before Shorty and Freddy had to ship out and lasted all afternoon and late into the evening. At one point, the conversation turned to that fateful day off Panama and the drama that played out there and in Coronado. Tomcat's promising career and marriage to Ramona was cut so short. Naturally Ramona was still getting over his loss. She appreciated Curly's big heart and came to depend on him, almost clinging to him. Geannie chalked it up to her time of need. Knowing the gentleman that Curly was, she didn't have anything to worry about. The times she spent with

Geannie, Curly, and the kids helped her to hold on and get through.

Looking back and remembering was good for everyone. The following Monday they left. Curly had a lot to look forward to. Now that he was the division officer as well as section leader. He had a great team with Scoop and Cowboy. They had their social get togethers as well. Curly wanted to extend that same bond to the rest of his division, he and Geannie hosted another gathering the following Saturday for his entire division.

A few days later, the Saratoga showed up offshore after laying at anchor for three months at San Pedro. She was sporting a broad black vertical stripe on both sides of her funnel in order to be distinguished from the Lexington. For two days she conducted flight operations with her squadrons. Curly returned home late in the afternoon of the 16th. That evening they celebrated Austin's second birthday. The next day a spectacular air show was staged at North Island with over one hundred aircraft participating. Later that day the Saratoga sailed back to San Pedro.

During the third week in August, they got to move into Freddy and Susan's place across the street from the playground. The extra space made a lot of difference as Austin and Sandy no longer had to share a room. For the duration of her stay, Curly moved a cot into Sandy's room for Marie. Before moving in, the apartment had been repainted, the bathroom was updated with a shower tub combination, and the best feature of all – a brand new General Electric refrigerator.

It seemed that all of their old friends were leaving. Next to leave was Ramona. She felt she needed a fresh start on life after losing Tom. She put in for a transfer and was sent to the Navy hospital at Pearl Harbor and was promoted to Lieutenant (junior grade) at the same time.

Geannie missed both Susan and and Romona but stayed in touch with them.

A Pacific cyclone moved north northwestward along the coast of Baja California during mid September. On the 18th it dissipated but brought the strongest September winds ever recorded in San Diego up to that time. The storm dumped up to four inches of rain on the San Diego area. Very seldom were flight operations suspended at North Island due to weather. This storm was one of those rare occasions.

Toward the end of September, Geannie began to suspect that their efforts had paid off. Marie had planned on going home during the middle of the month but decided to wait until after Geannie's doctors appointment during the last week in September. She went with Geannie to see Doctor Reynolds, who was still at the Naval Hospital. He confirmed that she was indeed expecting and set her due date for April 30th.



Again that night Curly, Geannie, Sandy, Austin, and Marie went out to celebrate. Life was good for the Brasons. Curly had been promoted, they moved into a bigger duplex, and now another baby was on the way.

About the same time, the Saratoga returned for a week during the end of September and first of October and took Curly away the next day. He had been fortunate to be able to stay close to home for as long as he had. That wouldn't always be the case. A few days later, Marie left to go back to Roanoke.

Ten days later when he returned to North Island, Curly came home to find Geannie, Sandy, and Austin eagerly awaiting him. "I'm home!" he called as he came through the front door. Excited to see their Daddy, the kids dropped what they were doing ran to greet him. Geannie was right behind them.

After a round of hugs and kisses Curly announced, "I've got some good news and I've got some bad news, and I've got some more good news." He continued, "The first piece of good news is that I won't have to leave again until the middle of February. The bad news is that I will be gone until after the first of June."

"But that's when the baby is due." Geannie lamented.

That's where the other good news comes in. The Sara will be in Norfolk from the around the last week of April until the first week in June."

"How's that good news?" Geannie wanted to know.

"Here's the way I see it. Why don't you and the kids take an extended trip home while I'm gone. I can schedule my thirty day leave during the time the ship is in Norfolk and I can meet you in Roanoke and be there when the baby comes. How's that for timing?"

"Wow, you do have it all figured out. If your goin to be away, being home would be the next best thing. It would sure be nice to go home to have the baby."

"So what do you think?" Curly asked.

"I think its a great plan! I'll call home tomorrow and let my mother know what our plans are. Why don't you sit down and rest a spell. Supper is almost ready."

During dinner and and the rest of the evening Curly caught up on what had gone on at home while he was gone.

The next couple of months passed quickly. Halloween was exciting for Sandy who was now old enough to really get into trick-or-treating. That year she dressed up as a princess. Geannie, dressed up like a queen, took her around the neighborhood while Curly and Austin stayed home to greet trick-or-treaters. The next day was her fifth birthday.

For Thanksgiving, they invited Cowboy and Francis and their three year old son, Jake to join them.

Francis was also expecting and was further along than Geannie. Scoop and Veronica were also invited, but they spent that day with her family who lived nearby in Chula Vista.

And then it was their berthiversary again. This was their thirty first birthdays and eighth anniversary. In no time it was Christmas and the new year. They had lived through the Roaring Twenties, a time of peace, prosperity, and social advancement.

1930 dawned with a hint of uncertainty in the wake of the stock market crash in late October. No one was certain what the outcome would be. Things had been good for so long. When Geannie and the kids went home in February, her father was very concerned about where it might go. So concerned in fact that he gave up the seat that he had held in the Virginia State Assembly for thirty four years to run for the United States Senate against the Democratic incumbent, Senator Carter Glass.

He was in the middle of a tough state wide primary campaign when Geannie arrived. She went to work in his campaign office while Marie watched the kids. Geannie even accompanied him on a couple of his campaign stumps. The election was on the first Tuesday in April, which happened to be the 1st. When the election results were in, he won by a slight margin. His Democratic challenger in the fall was an even more formidable challenger, but he was up to it.

Curly left with the fleet during the middle of February. The exercises got underway on the 24th when Bombing Two and Torpedo Two carried out a mock attack on the Lexington. Curly planted his practice bomb squarely on her elevator next to the super structure. As he pulled out of his dive he found a Lexington fighter on his tail. The F3B was more of a fighter plane than it was a dive bomber and Curly was able to out maneuver and "shoot down" his opponent.

That was his third confirmed simulated kill. Having a simulated kill confirmed during qualified exercises was not easy. It was all very subjective, based on the conclusion of the umpires. Everyone thought they had more kills than the umpires gave them credit for. On the other hand, many of those who were confirmed as shot down, felt that they had gotten away.

Three days later the Saratoga dropped anchor in the fleet anchorage at Balboa, Panama. After four days, she transited the Panama Canal to the Caribbean side and anchored in Limon Bay to prepare for the next phase of Fleet Problem X. On the 10th of March she got underway as part of the Blue Force. Together with the Langley they were to battle the Black Force, which included the Lexington, for control of the Caribbean. Three days latter, planes from the Lexington found and "sunk" both the Saratoga and the Langley before they could put a single plane in the air. The next day, the Saratoga put into Cuato Reales, Cuba for five day rest and shore leave.

On the 20th the Saratoga weighed anchor and conducted flight operations off Guantanamo Bay

before dropping anchor. Before getting underway from Guantanamo, a launch brought a welcomed bag of mail. There was a letter from Geannie postmarked Roanoke. He quickly opened it and read it.

4 Mar 1930

Dear Flyboy,

The kids and I are now here in Roanoke. We had a nice trip for the most part. Austin decided to play a game of hide and seek in the passenger car. It quickly turned into a game of tag. Me and my big belly weren't able to catch him as he pestered the other passengers. An older gentleman enticed him with a piece of candy and lured him onto his lap. He kept Austin occupied by telling him stories. After he had settled down, the man brought him back to me. He pretty much behaved himself the rest of the trip. Sandy was a big help. She kept him busy with games of "I see" and other games.

Everyone here in Roanoke are fine and send their love. Daddy put me to work in his campaign. I don't know if you know, but he is running for the US Senate. I am helping out in his office by answering the telephones and handling the mail. He wants me to go to Lynchburg with him next week. I'm not sure why he needs me to go, but I will. Mother is watching the children for me while I am at work. It's nice to have something to do. It helps me not miss you quite so bad.

I have been thinking a lot about names for the baby. If it is

a boy, I am thinking of naming him Charles Emmett, after both of his grandfathers. If it is girl I want to name her after her grandmothers, either Marie Ellen or Ellen Marie. I haven't quite decided which. That is unless you'll let me name her Suzie Q!

I look forward to seeing you in April. Take care of all those "bad guys" and do be careful. Don't go for another swim in the ocean, this time there might not be anyone to fish you out. I want you to come home to me. I know that they are only exercises and games, but after the last time, I learned that I can't take it for granted that you won't get hurt.

All my love, Seannie.

Curly quickly wrote a note back while the launch was still alongside.

March 29, 1930

Aboard the USS Saratoga

Guantanamo Bay, Cuba

My Dearest Seannie,

I just got your letter and wanted to write back. We are in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba getting ready to get underway later today. After exercises on the Pacific side, where I got a "bad guy", we spent a week anchored at Balboa before coming through the canal.

We were engaged in further exercises but were knocked out of

the game before I could even get in the air.

I did spend some time in the ocean, however. No I didn't crash. We spent a few days anchored off Cuato Reales, Cuba. I had an opportunity to go ashore and do a little swimming. Since then we have spent a week off shore conducting flight exercises.

Give my love to everyone, especially Sandy and Austin. Tell your father good luck in his campaign. Its good that you are helping him. You need something to keep busy with. Take care of yourself and the baby. By the way, I think those are some great names.

I am so looking forward to seeing you next month.

With all my love,

Lieutenant Sheffield Brason, USN

or Curly, whichever you prefer.

Curly finished his letter just in time before the mail launch pulled away. That afternoon the ship got underway for Barbados where it arrived on the 5th of April. With no adequate airstrip on the island, the air group remained aboard the ship as she entered Carlisle Bay and dropped anchor offshore from Bridgetown with other elements of the battle fleet.

For most of the men of the fleet, Barbados was a holiday port. All during the course of the exercises, the pilots of the squadron undertook a three day survival exercise. Some did their's in Panama, some in Cuba. Curly's division got their turn while in Barbados.

A rugged physical routine was part of everyday life while at North Island and included survival training. The purpose of this exercise was to give the men first hand survival experience over a three day period.

Three days after arriving in Barbados, Curly, Scoop, Cowboy and the three pilots of the other section in his division were taken to a grassy field that served as an airstrip where they were briefed on their mission. Arrangements had been made with the governor of Barbados for a platoon of U.S. Marines from the Saratoga to be placed in the exercise area along the northeast shore of the island. The pilots were to take with them only their flight gear and standard issue side arm and a knife. They would be dropped by parachute into a remote part of the island with the objective of surviving for three days without being detected by the Marines on patrol.

After a hearty breakfast, the six men were loaded into a Ford 5-AT Trimotor passenger/mail plane and flown to the drop area. Each man bailed out in three minute intervals so as to isolate them one from another. Being the division officer, Curly was the first man out, followed by Cowboy, Scoop and the others.

After clearing the aircraft at an altitude of seven thousand feet, Curly pulled his ripcord and deployed his parachute. The wind was calm and he had good control over his descent. Below he could see the tropical jungle looming larger as he drifted lower and lower. He spotted a clearing about three miles inland and made that his target landing site.

His feet touched the ground and he remained standing as he quickly pulled his parachute in and rolled it up. After unfastening his harness he dashed into the jungle for cover with his wadded up parachute before being discovered by a squad of Marines. After cutting a twelve foot by twelve foot piece of silk and several lengths of cord, he used a piece of a hollow log for a shovel and dug a hole to bury his parachute.

He next surveyed the area and found a low hill that would afford him a good view of the surrounding area with enough undergrowth to conceal his presence. He determined that it would be a good place to hide out. It was farther away than it looked and took him about an hour to get there.

He found it to be suitable and set up camp. Using the piece from his parachute, he pitched a makeshift tent. He soiled it so the white material would not stand out. He cut some branches to further conceal it. Next he set about making snares from the parachute cords to catch a bird or a small animal. Coconuts were as plentiful as they were sweet. Juicy West Indian cherries were also found in abundance and there was even a natural spring nearby.

With shelter, food, and water, Curly settled in for what promised to be nothing more than a three day camping trip. From his vantage point, he could see in all directions. To the east was a smooth stretch of sandy beach, protected by a cove that might be a good place to spear a fish. About a three miles to the southwest was a small village. If worse came to worse, he figured he could sneak down at night and steal a few eggs or a chicken or raid a garden.

Late in the afternoon he saw a squad of four Marines coming in his direction. As they neared, he could hear their voices. Fearing they were on to him, he moved to a spot about a half a mile away and

maintained his vigil. The squad passed between where he was and his camp, only three hundred yard from his campsite.

Curly hunkered down where he was and waited for them to backtrack. Sure enough, about an hour and half later they retraced their path. They paused and spread out. He could hear one of them say, "Some one has been through here recently. Its getting dark, we'll come back in the morning."

After they left, Curly made his way back to his camp, figuring that he would be safe there for at least that night. He slept uneasily that night but found his makeshift tent to be an excellent protection form the flying and crawling critters of the night. He thought about what his best options would be for the following day. He decided to go south and find a spot between the beach and the village.

At first light, he set out, abandoning his tent. Rather than take a direct path he set off in the opposite direction, making sure to leave a trail. Before long, he turned toward the shoreline through a rocky area where he wouldn't leave any tracks. Doubling back along a parallel route he could hear the Marines making their way toward his former camp. Hiding in the underbrush he watched and listened as they stumbled onto his tent. "Maybe that wasn't the best place to make camp, after all." he thought to himself.

After determining that they were onto him, the Marines found his fresh tracks and set out after him. Once they had moved on in the wrong direction, Curly continued making his way to the new location, wondering what he would do for shelter. About noon he got to where he thought he wanted to be. The area was a bit more rugged and didn't afford a view of the area and there was no water, but there were plenty of those delicious cherries which seemed to be in season almost continuously.

Curly stayed put the rest of the afternoon, trying to decide what to do that night. As he was contemplating his next move, he heard movement in the brush. From the sound of it he figured that it must be a small animal of some kind. The next thing he knew, he came face to face with about a nine year old boy. His white eyes and white teeth stood out in contrast to his shiny black face. Curly simply put his hinger to his lips, hoping that the boy would be quiet. After a few seconds, the boy turned and ran off.

Now Curly had to decide whether to stay put or move on again. About twenty minutes later he heard more rustling in the bushes coming his way. From the sound of it, there were two people. He thought for sure that he was about to be discovered by the Marines. He was relieved to see the same little boy with a bunch of bananas. With him was a young woman who appeared to be about eighteen years old and five or six months pregnant.

The little boy offered him a banana. The young woman spoke in broken English, "You hide from soldiers?"

"Yes." Curly nodded.

"You come down from sky?" she asked.

Again Curly nodded.

"Come. We hide you." the girl beckoned for him to follow.

Deciding that this was the answer to his dilemma, he followed as he ate his banana.

They lead him to hut a little ways from the village. The hut was nothing more than shack with no doors or windows and had a thatched roof. It was surrounded by a barnyard of sorts with a lean-to and a crude corral with a cow and several pigs. Chickens roamed free.

"We hide you here." the young woman said as she walked up to the hut. Form inside an older man and a woman, probably the parents and three or four other children emerged and surrounded Curly.

"You are American?" the man asked.

"Yes, sir. I am Lieutenant Barson, United States Navy. I am here on a survival exercise." Curly explained.

"I know of your exercise. You have to hide from the soldiers for three days."

"That's right." Curly said.

The man said, "My name is Charles Greenleaf. We will hide you from the soldiers. Come, I will show you." He lead Curly to the lean-to. He moved some baskets and made a place. "You can sleep here, but first you will eat with us."

He lead Curly back to the hut and introduced the rest of his family. His wife, Elizabeth, his pregnant daughter, Victoria, Windsor, the nine year old boy and the rest of his children. He invited him in to the hut and had him sit on the floor with them as Elizabeth served a scanty meal of chicken soup. They wanted to know all about Curly. He told about being a pilot and his family, especially about his wife due to have a baby in about two weeks.

Charles told Curly all about himself and how as a young man he had been a servant in the governor's mansion and accompanied the governor to London for the coronation of King George V twenty years earlier and how he got to meet the new king. That is why all of his children were named after the royal family. After a new governor was appointed he was dismissed and returned to this part of the island were he had remained ever since.

That night, Curly bedded down in the lean-to but had a hard time sleeping. When he did doze off he had a dream. It was as if Geannie was trapped inside of a fog shrouded crystal ball. He could tell that Geannie was in some sort of trouble and called out for him in distress but he wasn't able to get to her to take care of her. He made a note of the date, it was April 9th. The next morning a feeling of foreboding hung over him that he couldn't shake.

He was helping his host with the chores when Windsor came running with news that the soldiers were coming. Without time to run and hide, Curly jumped over the fence and got down on all fours amongst

the pigs. The Marines inquired if Charles had seen an American pilot. He feigned that didn't understand English and responded to them in the Bajan dialect. The Marines nosed around and even looked in the lean-to and the nearby sugarcane field. Curly could hear the whole conversation as hid among the pigs.

Once the Marines had moved on, Curly smelling rather rank, emerged from hiding and went into cane field where he hid out the rest of the day. The end of the exercise was in sight as he only had to make it through the rest of the day and that night. Later, after the Marines moved back through, he came out of the field and joined the family for their modest supper. He could hardly stand himself, but his hosts didn't seem to mind. Again that night, he slept in the lean-to.

As the rooster crowed the next morning, he began stirring. He only had to hold out until nine o'clock and he will have succeeded in the exercise. After the chores were done and breakfast had been served, Charles hitched his mule to the cart and took Curly the five miles to the Marines' camp. After thanking Charles for his hospitality he reported in with the platoon commander, a first lieutenant.

He found Cowboy fresh as daisy as he had spent the entire three days in the company of the Marines. He had come down within sight of the camp and was immediately captured. Scoop had made it half way through before he was found in another village. Two of the pilots from the other section had also been found, one of them hiding in a cave and the other on the beach. Soon after Curly, the other section leader, who had also held out, arrived.

The six pilots and the platoon of Marines loaded into their trucks and drove back down across the island to Bridgetown. Curly, still reeking of the scent of the pigs was not very popular in the truck he was riding in. What could they say, he was the ranking officer.

Once in Bridgetown, they transferred to launches for the trip back to the Saratoga. Upon reporting aboard, the squadron commander ordered Curly to take a shower and change his clothes before attending the debriefing. Each pilot gave an account of their seventy two hours. Each squad leader also gave an account of their searches. They were surprised at how close they came to Curly so many times without detecting him. With the exercise over, the six pilots and the platoon of Marines were given three days of shore leave.

Curly first took the time to write another letter to Geannie telling her all about his adventure and the dream and the unsettled feeling that followed. He expressed his hope that all was well with her and the baby and said that he would be with her in Roanoke soon.

While looking around Bridgetown he came across a street vendor who made handcrafted jewelry form genuine Caribbean pearls. Be bought a necklace with four strands of pearls and a set of matching earrings for Geannie.

On the 14th the Saratoga got under way for the next phase of the fleet problem. At the conclusion of

the exercises, She returned to Cuatro Reales, Cuba to take on stores and fuel before getting underway for Norfolk on the 19th.

By the 23rd, the Saratoga had reached the Virginia Capes and went to flight quarters. Curly, his sea bag secured in his aircraft, took off with the rest of the Saratoga's squadrons who were soon winging their way to Norfolk Naval Air Station. The ship itself made port later that day. Once tied up to the dock, the mail was brought aboard. In it was a letter from Geannie. Curly just missed getting it.

Once he had landed, Curly was anxious to get to Roanoke. He still had time to catch the afternoon train. Before boarding the train, he tried to call Geannie but no one answered. He boarded the train and took his seat.

As the train wound through the countryside, alive with spring green, his thoughts were of Geannie and his family. He hadn't seen them for two months. When he left, Geannie was six and a half months pregnant. By now she would be about ready to have the baby. He was also looking forward to seeing his extended family as he hadn't been home for some time. When he got off the train in Roanoke, we took a cab directly to the Austin Mansion.

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The first refrigerator to see widespread use was the General Electric "Monitor-Top" refrigerator introduced in 1927, so-called because of its resemblance to the gun turret on the ironclad warship USS Monitor of the 1860s. The compressor assembly, which emitted a great deal of heat, was placed above the cabinet, and surrounded with a decorative ring. Over a million units were produced. As the refrigerating medium, these refrigerators used either sulfur dioxide or methyl formate. Many of these units are still functional today. The picture is from the June 1, 1929 New Yorker magazine.

The cyclone of September 1929 was an actual event. A Pacific hurricane or tropical storm is called a cyclone and develops in the northeastern Pacific Ocean. Identical phenomena in the western and south Pacific are called typhoons, and hurricanes in the Atlantic Ocean.

Senator Carter Glass was the Democratic Senator from Virginia who served in the United States Senate from 1920 until his death in 1948. During the 1930 senatorial election there was not a Republican challenger.

Fleet Problem X was held in March 1930 in Caribbean waters. The *Saratoga* and *Langley* were "disabled" by a surprise attack from Lexington, showing how quickly air power could swing the balance in a naval action.

Barbados was part of the British West Indies, under British rule until gaining independence in 1966. The official language of Barbados is English. Bajan is an English-based Barbadian Creole, a dialect of the language that linguists classify as broken English.