

Chapter XXXIII

Enterprise

July 18, 1938 – June 5, 1939

The Enterprise, with the air group aboard and the destroyer Shaw left Norfolk on 18th of July and set a southerly course. After five days at sea, they dropped anchor off Puerto Rico for a few days. Before sailing again, Curly got a letter off to Geannie.

July 25, 1938

Aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise at anchor off Ponce, Puerto Rico

Dear Geannie,

Well, here we are in Puerto Rico. We had a rather uneventful trip down here. While off Florida, I convinced Captain to turn on the landing lights for some night time take offs and landings. After a near accident by a junior pilot, the idea was again put on hold. Someday I really want to prove the value of night flying. Before that can happen, we (meaning naval aviation) need to be taken more seriously by the brass.

We arrived here on the 23rd and dropped anchor off Ponce, on the southern coast of Puerto Rico. Today was supposed to be a big day, but it turned out to be bigger than anyone bargained for. The Governor of Puerto Rico decided to observe the 40th anniversary of the U.S. Army landing here during the Spanish American War.

The event included a parade, to which the ship contributed a 105 man landing force, complete with rifles, and the ship's band for the parade and a fly over by both Fighting Six and Torpedo Six. I was invited to sit on the review stand along with other officers from the Enterprise and Shaw, the Governor and other local dignitaries.

The whole thing went unappreciated by the Puerto Rican Nationalists

who want independence from the United States. But no one was prepared for what happened. While watching from the review stand, a touring car sped between the band and the landing force and screeched to a stop. Three men in white suits jumped out and began shooting into the crowd with handguns.

Since none of the sailors had any ammunition, all they could do was scatter and seek cover. Being on the stand, we were right out in the open. We all hit the deck to avoid being hit. When it was all over with, one man, a Colonel in the Puerto Rican National Guard, was killed and others were wounded. The Colonel was seated near the Governor, who was their obvious target. The police returned fire and killed one of the gunmen and captured another, while the third escaped. In all of my years in the military, this was the first time I have been shot at. I must say, it was rather unnerving. When it was all over, the police gathered up the attacker's bloody body and tossed it into the car like a sack or flour.

But that wasn't the end of the excitement for the day. Later, the men adjourned to a nearby Catholic Church for sandwiches and refreshments. With no regard to the fact that they were in a church, someone spiked the punch with something mighty potent. As a result, men had to be hauled to the pier where the ship's boats brought them back to the ship. Sailors who could barely stand up themselves were carrying their buddies up the sea ladder. One bunch had to be hauled aboard in a cargo net. What a day, a parade, a shoot out, and drunken church social.

So much for our time here. I have enclosed some picture post cards for you and the kids. I hope you're enjoying your summer. I miss you and

look forward to coming home. But at the same time, I'm looking forward to the rest of the cruise. I'll write again from our next stop.

With all my love, Curly

A few days later, the ship made an additional port call at Gonaives, Haiti before continuing south. As promised, Curly got another letter off to Geannie and the kids.

On August 20th they crossed the Equator at 37 degrees 00 minutes west longitude, three hundred miles north of Fortaleza, Brazil. The traditional polliwog ceremony was held to initiate those crossing the equator for the first time. Since a good share of the crew, including the six hundred men straight from boot camp, had never been across the equator, it was a rather lengthy process as the shell backs dressed in pirate attire administered the various rigorous rites. Captain White made sure that the sailors didn't get out of hand and no one got hurt. But in the excitement, one sailor succumbed to an enlarged heart and died.

Six days later they pulled into Rio de Janeiro for a ten day stay. This was Curly's third visit to Rio, a place that he had come to love. He and three other officers, one from the air group and two from the air department put together a hundred dollars, which was worth seventeen hundred Brazilian réis and rented a furnished beach house at Ipanema, with its spectacular view of the Twin Brothers peaks and the scenic shoreline. One day Curly and two other officers ventured to the top of the twenty three hundred foot Mount Corcovado to the famous Christ the Redeemer statue. Naturally he wrote home to Geannie and the kids to tell them all about it.

The church rummage sale was held on Saturday the 20th, the same day that Curly crossed the equator. Geannie and Samantha with some extra help from Marge Casper got everything set up that morning and were ready when people started showing up. Not only did a lot of the members of the congregation come, but so did several from the neighborhood around the church. At the end of the day, most everything was sold. They were pleased when they counted the proceeds, which they handed over to Walt.

The following Monday, Geannie and the kids boarded the train for the trip back to Norfolk. It had been a memorable summer. It had been nice to have Curly stationed on the East Coast so they were so close to home; but it was very likely that a move back to San Diego was in store. That's why Geannie wanted to spend the entire summer. If that was the case, their trips home would once again be few and far between. On Wednesday Geannie and the kids went back to school and settled in to wait for Curly to return.

On the 20th of September, the Enterprise and Shaw got underway for the return voyage. On the passage back, the ship, crew, and air group continued their rigorous routine of getting the ship in shape. Even though it was peace time, the Big E was a fighting ship and they needed to be prepared for whatever might be required of them. They stopped off in Cuba before proceeding north. In the mail bag that came aboard was letter from Geannie in answer to the letter he sent her from Rio.

23 September 1938

Dear Curly

I just got your letter today. I suppose by now you are homeward bound. The kids and I can't wait to see you and have you home again.

We are all doing fine and have settled back into the routine of school and life. Its nice being at the same school where the kids attend. It's especially nice having Sandy in my class this year. I sometimes think she would rather me be somewhere else. She thinks I'm spying on her and her friends. That's a 12 year old girl for you.

I really enjoyed hearing all about Rio, it sounds a lot like how Ramona describes being in Hawaii. Speaking of Ramona, I got a letter from her a few days ago. She's just been working and going to school. She says that slowly but surely she's making progress on her masters degree.

She does take time to enjoy herself when she can and told me about going up to the North Shore for a weekend. But I'm

afraid she has sworn off men altogether. If the truth be known, I think she is still pining over that married man. She has never told me who he is, but I hope she gets over him for her sake. She would make a good catch for someone. Don't you agree?

The word around her is that the Enterprise and Yorktown are being sent to San Diego in the spring. I reckon that will mean another move for us. After spending the summer at home, I have a notion to take the kids back to Roanoke and let you go on without us this time. But I made a commitment to you that I would go wherever you were sent. I enjoyed San Diego when we lived there before. Since you're stuck with me, we're coming too. But there is still plenty of time to figure all of that out. You'll be home soon and we'll just see what develops.

Love, Seannie

P.S. I hear that our old friend Bill Halsey has been promoted to Rear Admiral and is in command of the division made up of Enterprise and Yorktown. It will be good to see him and Fan again.

As the Enterprise and Shaw continued north, they encountered rough weather that suspended all flight operations. Captain White rang up full speed in an attempt to outrun the storm. While off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina on the 21st of September the ship was caught in the powerful hurricane.

The big ship was battered by monstrous waves and shrieking winds that caused some damage to

the ship. As a precaution, all hands rode out the storm below the main deck. Curly stayed in his cabin as the ship pitched up and down and rolled from side to side. He had been through severe storms before, but this was one of the worst. When the storm moved on, it moved up the eastern seaboard bringing heavy rain and high winds that caused considerable damage in New England.

Two days later, as the ship neared Norfolk, the air group flew ashore. That afternoon when Geannie and the kids got home from school, Curly was there waiting for them.

The Enterprise returned the next day and went straight to the Norfolk Navy Yard for repairs, maintenance and further fitting out while the air group operated from the air station. No sooner than she was docked, Admiral Halsey had his flag hoisted on the mainmast.

Curly was able to remain close to home and had evenings and weekends with his family for the next several weeks. During that time, on occasion he took the air group out to operate from the Yorktown on day cruises while the Enterprise was still in the navy yard.

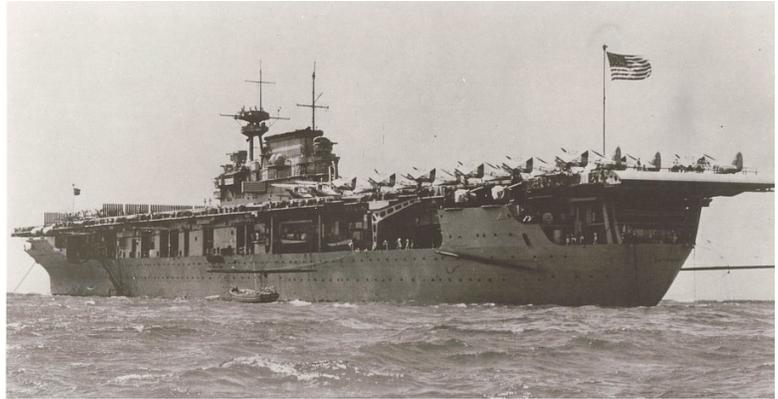
One of the things that the admiral believed in strongly was moral. Always looking for an excuse to have a party, he hosted a banquet and an evening of dancing for his staff, the officers of the carriers and their air groups and their wives and girlfriends. As part of the event, he stood in a reception line to meet and greet the men under his command. When it was Curly and Geannie's turn, he told Curly "Its good to have you on board, Commander Brason. I wish I had more men like you." He turned to Geannie and took her by the hand and said, "And you my dear Geannie are as lovely as ever." and then raised her hand to his lips and kissed the back of her hand in a debonair, gentlemanly way. He took a little longer than most to visit with his old neighbors. Before moving on he made Geannie promise to save a dance for him later in the evening, to which she graciously obliged.

Admiral Halsey was anxious for the air groups of the two new carriers under his command to get into shape and actively participated in preparing and overseeing their training regiment. One of the first things he did was meet with Curly and his counterpart from the Yorktown, none other than his old rival, Commander Miles Browning.

On one occasion while the Enterprise was wrapping up her yard period, Curly took the air group up the Chesapeake Bay to Quantico, Virginia for a week to operate with the First Marine Aircraft Group at Turner Field. The two air groups conducted exercises together as an integrated unit as well as opposing forces. Curly stressed to his men that they were military officers first and pilots second. To give them a picture of how their counterparts on the ground functioned, he had his pilots go out with the Fifth Marine Regiment of the the First Marine Brigade on bivouac maneuvers for two days. His men were each assigned as an observer to a Marine unit under the command of an officer of equivalent rank. After two days, his

men had a better appreciation for the Marines on the ground and a better appreciation for being in the sky.

Geannie and the kids got out of school early on the the day before Thanksgiving. By the time they got home, Curly had the car loaded up and ready for the trip to Roanoke. It was nearly dark by the time they pulled up in front of the



The Enterprise at anchor off Puerto Rico

Austin Mansion. Austin and Curly unloaded the car and carried everything upstairs to their usual rooms. Since no one else used them, Austin and Sandy had claimed their rooms as their own. Marie even let hem decorate them the way they wanted them.

On Thanksgiving, all of the Austin family gathered for the annual feast. Curly and Austin spent the morning with Curly's parents while Geannie and Sandy helped Marie get things ready. Sandy felt so bad when she dropped the platter that had belonged to Marie's grandmother, which shattered into a million pieces. She knew that Grandma wouldn't scold her, because she never did, but she still felt terrible. Before worrying about sweeping it up, she gave Sandy a reassuring hug and told her not to worry about some old dish.

Before going over the Austins, Walt and Sarah and their family stopped by the Brasons as well. Since two of their three sons had married into the Austin family, the Brasons typically had their get together on the Sunday after Thanksgiving. That let Shenan and his family spend thanksgiving with his wife's family every year. As dinnertime neared, they migrated next door where Geannie's brothers and their families had already gathered. Dinner was lovely and the gathering lasted long into the evening.

True to her word, Geannie kidnapped Curly on Friday afternoon and took him to the cabin. It was first time he had seen it since it had been all fixed up. He couldn't wait to see what she had in mind for him; and he wasn't disappointed. Curly built a fire in the fireplace and kept it stoked and they stayed warm and cozy as they enjoyed their time alone. The next morning they woke up to two inches of new snow on the ground but it had began to melt by the time they were ready to leave.

On Sunday after services, the Brasons got together. Unfortunately Curly and Geannie had to leave right after dinner for the trip back to Norfolk. It was well after dark before they got home. The next day, Curly reported to the air station and Geannie and the kids went back to school.

December 7, 1938 was their fortieth birthdays and their seventeenth wedding anniversary. Geannie

felt a little sad about turning forty. She thought that she was getting old although she wore her age well. Curly took the opposite view. To him, it was coming of age. He was a seasoned pilot, well established in his career with a command of his own. He had already gone through the feeling old stage when what was left of his hair started turning gray.

During the middle December he spent a week at sea as the Enterprise and the air group prepared to participate in the up coming Fleet Problem in early January. Then on the 20th, there was a change of command on the Enterprise as Captain Charles A. Pomnall assumed command, relieving Captain White.

Curly was able to make up for the time that his leave had to be cut short during the summer. When school let out early on Thursday the 23rd they were on the road to Roanoke once again and were able to spend both Christmas and New Years at home. They returned to Norfolk on the 2nd.

After the last several years of being close to home, things were about to change. Geannie had got used to having Curly around. She had the kids and teaching school to keep her busy. Still, the thought of having Curly gone wasn't an easy one.

The world had come through the Great Depression and the nation was enjoying relative prosperity. However all was not well in the world. Japan had launched a full scale invasion of China as the Sino-Japanese war intensified. In Europe, Germany was continuing its strategy of persecuting the Jews and in 1938 they had occupied Austria and Czechoslovakia. The clouds of war were blowing in from two directions.

Two days after returning from Roanoke, the Enterprise and her sister ship, the Yorktown sailed out of Norfolk on January 4, 1939 to participate in Fleet Problem XX. The air station was abuzz with activity as the two air groups took off and flew out to their respective roosts. This was the first real exercise for the two new carriers that formed Carrier Division 2 under the command of Rear Admiral William F. Halsey who flew his flag aboard the Yorktown. Accompanied by three destroyers, they sailed south toward the Caribbean. After a brief visit to St. Thomas and a stop at Guantanamo for fuel and provisions, they set course for the Panama Canal where they were to rendezvous with the Battle Fleet coming from the Pacific.

Fleet Problem XX was a complex international scenario. Enterprise, Yorktown, and the Lexington were part of the White Force representing a powerful nation seeking to assert dominance over the revolution plagued Green Force. The Black Force which included the Ranger sought to stop the White Force from interfering.

The exercises began on February 20th when Yorktown, Enterprise, and three cruisers were detached from the main body of White Fleet to escort a convoy of three merchant ships and provide air cover. The pace of the exercise picked up the next day as Black Fleet made several attempts to intercept

the convoy. As a result, several surface engagements took place in which both sides received considerable damage.

On the 21st an Enterprise scout plane made a contact report of an “enemy” carrier and cruisers nearing the convoy. Yorktown launched a strike against the “enemy” carrier. Instead they found two Black Fleet cruisers which were eliminated from the exercise.

On the 22nd Enterprise and Lexington and accompanying escorts were detached to carry out a raiding mission.

The real action, as far as the Enterprise was concerned, took place on the 25th. Lexington and her escorts rejoined the main fleet, leaving the Enterprise escorted by two destroyers to operate independently.

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

“Roger that.” came the reply from his wingmen as the three Grumman F3F-2 fighters, with the trademark yellow upper wings, charged off to investigate.

Upon closer examination the unidentified aircraft was indeed an enemy flying boat. “Tally ho!” Curly called as he commenced his attack run and swept down out of the sun on his unsuspecting prey. Watching from just behind, his wingmen witnessed a perfectly executed attack. “You got him, Skipper!” one of them shouted with excitement. “Congratulations, sir. I believe that makes five. You're an ace!”

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

Within minutes the three stubby fighters with hooks down, made a pass along the starboard side of the giant ship painted in the beautiful standard Navy gray. After circling around he was directly astern as he made his landing approach. Cockpit canopy open, landing gear and flaps down, hook extended, and lined up with the mahogany stained flight deck with the landing strip outlined in yellow, Curly could clearly see the landing signal officer as he guided him in. His approach right on, the LSO stood on his platform on the port side of the aft end of the flight deck with both arms extend strait out to each side, with paddles in each hand. As Curly cleared the ramp, the LSO dropped his left arm and brought the paddle in his right hand to his left shoulder indicating for Curly to cut his throttle. Curly immediately complied. Taking his eyes off the LSO, he sized up his alignment with the deck and relaxed his right rudder. The plane glided forward, nose down and at the precise moment, Curly pulled back on the stick. The wheels and and tail hook touching the deck simultaneously for a perfect three point landing. His F3F caught the arresting cable which slowed the aircraft before bringing it to an abrupt stop on the flight deck.

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

"I think they saw us, sir." he reported to Captain Pownall.

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

All eyes turned to see for themselves. Sure enough, it was an enemy carrier based scout plane.

"They must have directed him to us before I shot it down," Commanded Brason observed as they watched three more pairs of yellow wings engage the enemy snooper.

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

Immediately, the bugler stepped up to the intercom and played "Call to Quarters" followed by the obnoxious, intermittent buzzer sounded as the ship scurried to life. From the bridge they could see men running in all directions in a mass of organized confusion as each man knew exactly where he needed to be. Those on the bridge donned their helmets and kapok life jackets. Within two minutes all guns were manned and the repair parties were at their stations.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Two days later, Yorktown planes found and "damaged" the Ranger. At the conclusion of that portion of the exercises, Enterprise and Yorktown anchored off Gonaives, Haiti on the 28th.

Carrier Division 2 carried out further training exercises off Guantanamo which was interrupted by a port visit to Fort De France, Martinique from the 6th through the 9th of March.

At the conclusion of Fleet Problem XX, the entire fleet set course for Norfolk during the second week in April. As they steamed north, Enterprise, Yorktown, Lexington, and Ranger conducted tactical exercises. At the same time, the crisis in Europe escalated when Italy occupied the tiny nation of Albania on the 7th. By the 11th, the entire fleet was off the Virginia Capes and the four carriers sent their planes off to land at the Norfolk Naval Air Station ahead of the fleet, which would be entering Hampton Roads the next day.

Since it was a Tuesday, Geannie and the kids left school early and gathered at the air station with the families of other Enterprise and Yorktown pilots. It was quiet a sight as the nearly three hundred planes from the four carriers came into view and circled overhead as they waited to land. Curly's plane was easy to identify because of its unique markings. Austin was the first to spot it and pointed it out to his mother and sister.

With so many planes to land, it was a while before Curly made his landing approach and touched down. It was a few minutes later before they spotted him making his way through the crowd toward them with his duffel bag slung over his shoulder. When he saw them, he quickened his pace as they literally ran toward him. He dropped his bag just as Geannie rushed into his arms. After nine and half weeks at sea, he was home.

After a tender reunion, Curly walked with them to their apartment. After changing his clothes, he took them out to dinner and to a picture show, even though it was a school night. The movie "Bringing Up Baby" starring Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant told the story of a paleontologist in a number of predicaments involving a scatterbrained woman and a leopard named Baby.

Now that he was home, they discussed the plans for their pending move in the spring. Geannie and the kids had been feeling a bit unsettled about moving back to San Diego, after all it would be the sixth move in eight years. Geannie had already informed the school district that they were moving and would not be back in the fall. Having Curly home eased their anxiety because they knew that being where he was made it all worth it.

He was scheduled to be at home for two weeks before he had to leave again. But this time it wouldn't be for long and involved the whole family. The fleet was scheduled to sail on the 27th for New York City to participate in the new York World's Fair. Geannie and the kids were going play hooky from school and go up on the train and meet him there that after noon and spend the weekend. After that, he would return to Norfolk with the air group while the Enterprise and the rest of the fleet remained in New York until they sailed for the west coast at the end of May. That would give Curly plenty of time to be at home to get ready for the move. That would even give them a week to go home to Roanoke after school let out, although they wouldn't be staying for the Brason Memorial Day picnic.

At least that was the plan, but as plans go, plans change. After only eight days at home came the startling news that the fleet's participation in the World's Fair had been canceled and by order of President Roosevelt was to sail the next day for the Pacific, six weeks ahead of schedule. That included the Enterprise.

The order was urgent and was broadcast over the radio and printed in the Virginia Pilot. It was so sudden that there wasn't time to react, other than to pack his bags and report at the air station the next morning.

As he left the next morning while Geannie and the kids were getting ready for school, he told Geannie, "I'll stay in touch and we'll figure out what to do when I know whats going on." After the hugs and kisses, he said, "I'll see you in the funny pages." as he went out the door.

Confused and deflated from having their plans dashed, Geannie and the kids left for school a little while later. Meanwhile, before flying out to the ship, Curly attended a briefing that didn't shed any light on the matter.

The Enterprise transited the Panama Canal on 27th and arrived in San Diego on the 12th of May. Since the time that Curly left Coronado eight years ago, the entrance to San Diego Bay had been dredged to make channel deep enough for the big carriers to pass through, allowing them to be based at San Diego.

Whatever crisis had spurred the hasty move had abated. Curly placed a long distance call to Geannie and was only able to talk for a few minutes but assured her that he would come for them and bring them back to San Diego with him, if they still wanted to come rather than go home to Roanoke.

Geannie's response was, "Of course were going with you. You're not getting rid of us that easy."

The air group was not scheduled to sail with the Enterprise again until the later part of June. During that time, Curly set about securing housing and ended up with another three bedroom duplex near the playground. He took his thirty day leave and flew back to Norfolk on a Navy Air Service transport and got there a day or two before school let out.

Before packing up to move, they spent a week at home in Roanoke. It had been nice being

stationed so close to home for the last eight years. They pulled up in front of the Austin Mansion on Monday the 29th of May. Marie had made everything ready for their arrival and was waiting for them on the front porch. After unloading the car, they were joined by Emmett and Ellen. For the second year in a row, they were there for Memorial Day and the Brason Family picnic after all. But first, there was a visit to the cemetery to put flowers on the graves of Charles Emmett and Geannie's father. They made the most of their vacation, not knowing how soon or how often they would be able to return.

They spent most of their time visiting with family. Early Thursday morning they headed up to cabin to spend a couple of days. The kids wanted to go swimming so they hiked back to the lake. On Friday afternoon, the entire Austin clan began assembling for an overnigher at the cabin. They all had a great time before coming back down mountain on Saturday afternoon. Ever since the cabin had come back into the family, it had been used a lot. It had been a part of the family for so long that everyone had taken it for granted. After a number of years without it, everyone had been taking advantage of it as often as possible.

Sunday was a day of rest, which included attending services. But on Monday they had to go back to Norfolk and get ready for the move. Marie fixed a big breakfast while Curly and Austin loaded their things into the car. She wanted to send them off full and satisfied. After lingering a little while, it was time to go. Sarah had come over to see them off too.

Sarah and Marie followed them out to the car. This goodbye was more emotional than usual, after all they were moving clear across the country again. There were tearful embraces all around.

"Take care of my baby girl and my grandchildren, Curly. Bring them home to me sometime." Marie plead.

"Oh, I'm sure we'll be back next year." Curly assured her as the car began to move.

There were waves and shouts of goodbye as they pulled out into the street.

Marie turned to Sarah and said, "I'm getting to be an old woman. I can't help but wonder if I'll ever see them again."

* * * * *

The first Enterprise Air Group Commander was Lieutenant Commander Giles E. Short who was followed by Commander Richard F. Whitehead by April 1939 and Commander Edward C. Ewen by November 1940.

The marking on Curly's plane are indicative of the time.

The story that Curly told about the parade, shootout, and drunken church social came from

Enterprise by Barrett Tillman

Captain Charles A. Ponwall became the second commanding officer of the USS Enterprise on December 21, 1938, succeeding Captain Newton H. White, Junior. Captain Ponwall served as the captain of the Enterprise until March 21, 1941 when he was succeeded by Captain George D. Murray.

The storm the Enterprise encountered was the Great Hurricane of 1938, the first major hurricane to strike New England since 1869. The storm formed near the coast of Africa in September of the 1938 Atlantic hurricane season, becoming a Category 5 hurricane before making landfall as a Category 3 hurricane on Long Island on September 21. The hurricane was estimated to have killed between 682 and 800 people, damaged or destroyed over 57,000 homes, and caused property losses estimated at US\$306 million. To date it remains the most powerful, costliest and deadliest hurricane in recent New England history.

The exercises with the First Marine Aircraft Group at Turner Field and the Fifth Marine Regiment are fictional.

Fleet Problem XX took place in February 1939 in the Caribbean and Atlantic, and was observed in person by President Franklin Roosevelt. The exercise simulated the defense of the East Coast of the United States and Latin America by the Black team from the invading White team. Participating in the maneuvers were 134 ships, 600 planes, and over 52,000 officers and men.

The order to send the fleet back to the Pacific six weeks early was as described and a reason was never explained.