

Chapter XLIII

Going Home

December 10, 1941 – December 17, 1941

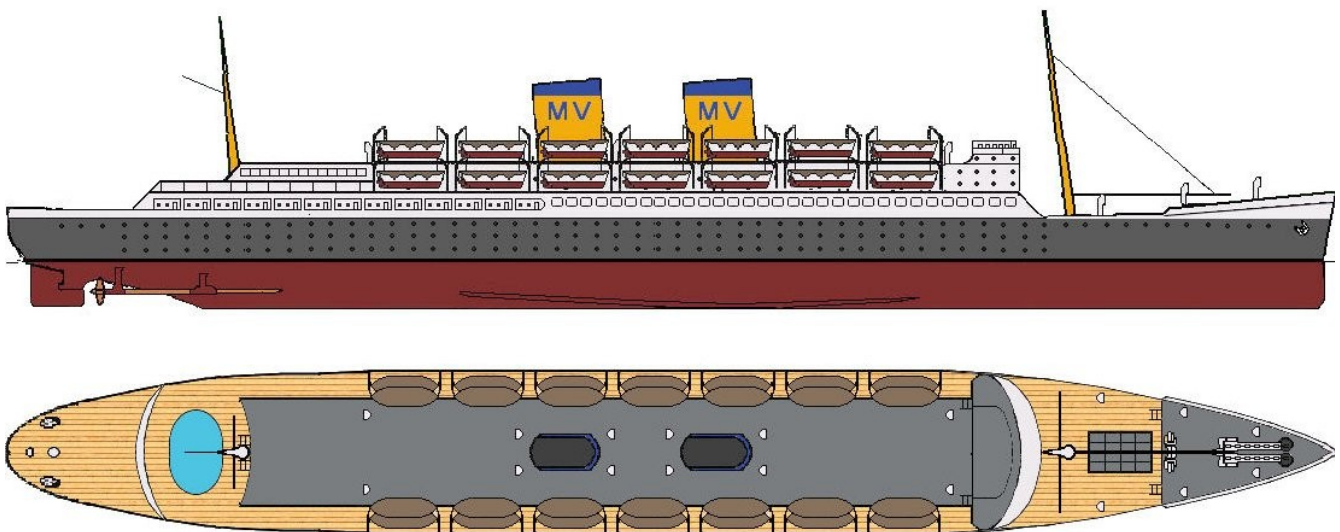
Curly made his way aboard and found a spot at the rail where he waved goodbye. Romona waited on the dock to watch as the ship got underway. She wondered if one day after healing from the loss, if there would ever be a way for them to be more than friends. The gangway was pulled away and the ship slipped her moorings. The ship's whistle blew as two tugboats began pulling it away from the dock.

Geannie would have been disappointed. There was no confetti drifting down the on the deck and the docks. The fanfare was dispensed with due to the nature of the cruise. The passengers were mostly wounded servicemen and the wives and children of military personnel. There would be no entertainment and fabulous food. The mood took on that of a wartime cruise. Curly stood at the rail looking back as the ship distanced itself from the dock. He saw Ramona there looking back at him. He wondered why someone hadn't snatched her up.

He continued to stand there as everyone around him dissipated. He was left alone, looking out to sea as the ship cleared the harbor into the Pacific Ocean. His thoughts turned to the trip ahead. He wondered what the reaction of the family was going to be. He wished he could get there sooner. If only he could fly. "Why not?" he thought.

The SS Pacific Maiden was a sleek, new passenger liner featuring first class accommodations. Now that the war was on, this was her last cruise as such. She had already been selected to be converted into a fast troopship. Curly stayed at the rail, his sea bag at his side, until Oahu was barely visible in the haze.

He slung his bag over his shoulder and and made his way to the bridge. He paused at the hatch and asked, "Permission to come onto the bridge?"



"You must be Commander Brason." Captain Hewlett greeted. "I heard that you would be sailing with us. Permission granted."

Captain Hewlett introduced his First Officer, Alan Carpenter and the rest of the staff present on the bridge. After a round of introductions and handshakes, Captain Hewlett said, "That was good of you to forgo your stateroom. We have more passengers aboard that normal. I guess we need to find a bunk for you don't we?"

The First Officer spoke up, "You can bunk with me, Commander."

"Why thank you, Mr. Carpenter."

"Now that that is settled, would you like a tour of the bridge? I'm sure it is not like the bridge of one of your navy ships."

"It looks very much the same, actually. I served as the executive officer of the Enterprise for about a year." Curly said. Then he began identifying all off all of the key components.

Then the Captain got serious, "I'm really glad that you are with us on this trip. I have no training for sailing in a war zone. I'm just glad that we arrived in Honolulu before the attack."

"Our intelligence reports place a number of enemy submarines operating in the area." Curly said grimly.

"Tell me about it. A cargo ship was torpedoed about eight hundred nautical miles south of here just yesterday."

Mr. Carpenter, the first officer, interjected. "There was a report that earlier today a Japanese submarine was sunk a hundred and twenty miles north of Molokai."

Captain Hewlett commented, "With all of these reports of enemy submarines, I would feel a lot better if we had an escort." Turning to Curly he asked, "I'm open to suggestions, Commander."

"What is your standard cruising speed, Captain?"

"Fifteen knots."

"What is your top speed?"

"Twenty two."

"Here's what you do. Raise your cruising speed to eighteen knots and be ready to ring up full speed at a moments notice. Set a zig zag course and change direction every two hours."

Captain Hewlett turned to his navigation officer and said, "Make it so."

Turning his attention back to Curly he asked, "What else?"

"What are your standard watch procedures?"

"I'm sure there not good enough."

"If I were you, I would double or triple your watch. Enlist passengers if necessary. I can teach them

what to look for to spot a periscope and torpedo wakes.”

Captain Hewlett turned to his First Officer and ordered, “Round up all available crewmen and any willing passengers and have them assemble in the theater in two hours.”

“What else, Commander?”

Curly went on to identify lookout posts and made other suggestions that Captain Hewlett was eager to implement. Curly was grateful to be busy. It helped to take his mind off the real purpose for his trip. In the afternoon, he instructed the crew and volunteers on what to look out for as they stood watch. They were given their posts and watch schedules, which were implemented immediately.

The Captain asked Curly if he would mind staying on the bridge in the event of an enemy submarine being sighted. Captain Hewlett was a competent and experienced captain but had no military background or training. If an emergency were to arise, he wanted Curly's professional advise.

That night as the Pacific Maiden sailed into the darkness of night, she was completely blacked out. The watch continued into the night. Curly began thinking about flying across country rather than taking the train with their belongings. Admiral Halsey did authorize any resources or assistance necessary in transporting the bodies. Shorty, was the commanding officer of the Alameda Naval Air Station where the navy transports were based.

He began wondering if there was a way to make it happen. He wouldn't know unless he asked. He wrote out a message to have sent by wireless to his old friend. Curly took the message to the radio room and had it transmitted.

PATRONS ARE REQUESTED TO FAVOR THE COMPANY BY CRITICISM AND SUGGESTION CONCERNING ITS SERVICE

CLASS OF SERVICE
—
This is a full-rate Telegram or Cablegram unless its deferred character is indicated by a suitable sign above or preceding the address.

**WESTERN
UNION**

NEWCOMB CARLTON, PRESIDENT

J.C.WELLEVER, FIRST VICE-PRESIDENT

SIGNS
DL=Day Letter
NM=Night Message
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LCO=Deferred Cable
NLT=Cable Night Letter
WLT=Week-End Letter

The filing time as shown in the date line on full-rate telegrams and day letters, and the time of receipt at destination as shown on all messages, is STANDARD TIME.

Received at

1941 DEC 10 PM 9:34

CAPTAIN WILLIAM SHARP USN

COMMANDER ALAMEDA NAVAL AIR STATION

SUBJECT AIR TRANSPORT TO NORFOLK NAVAL AIR STATION

REQUEST TRANSPORT FOR MYSELF AND THE BODIES OF GEANNIE AND KIDS

UNDER AUTHORIZATION OF VADM WF HALSEY STOP SHOULD ARRIVE SAN

FRANCISCO DEC 16 STOP

COMMANDER SHEFFIELD BRASON USN,
COMAIRBATFOR STAFF
ABOARD THE SS PACIFIC MAIDEN
MAIDEN VOYAGE SHIPPING, INC

He then went to Mr. Carpenter's cabin. Alan had cleared some space for Curly to stow his gear and had folded down the spare bunk. Curly was tired from the busy day and soon went to sleep. He dreamed that he and Geannie and the kids were at the cabin.

The next day, December 11th, proved to be a very eventful day. Soon after the sun had come up, one of the lookout volunteers, a woman by the name of Emily Glover, reported seeing a brief flash of light. Curly was summoned to the bridge and asked what he made of the sighting. Given the position in which the flash had been observed and the position of the sun, he concluded that it could very likely have been the reflection of the sun off the lens of a periscope. He suggested that the Captain increase speed.

A few minutes later, the same woman reported seeing something protruding above the surface of the water that caused a thin wake. There was no doubt about it, they were being stalked by a submarine. Extra lookouts were posted in that area.

Again, it was the sharp eyes of the same woman who was first to see four bulbing trails streaking toward the ship. Everyone on the bridge could see them too. If current course and speed were maintained, in a matter of seconds, they would strike amidships on the port side.

Captain Hewlett looked at Curly. Without hesitation Curly ordered, "Emergency speed! Hard left ruder!"

Captain Hewett shouted, "Do it!"

Immediately the five hundred and fifty three foot long vessel surged to twenty two knots as she heeled sharply to starboard. Throughout the ship, anything that wasn't secured was sent flying. Unsuspecting passengers were thrown from their feet and sent sprawling. Seconds passed as the ship continued its full speed turn. The torpedoes came ever closer.

After completing a the sharp ninety degree turn, Curly ordered, "Rudder amidships! All ahead full!"

Without waiting for a nod from the Captain, the helmsman complied. The ship straightened up and everyone on the bridge as well as many of the passengers ran to the starboard side and watched as the four torpedoes raced past that ship, the nearest one only several yards away.

With the danger past, Curly ordered, "Resume course. Speed, twenty knots."

Captain Hewlett breathed a sigh of relief and confirmed the order. "Thanks, Commander. You just saved the ship."

Thank Mrs. Glover. If it weren't for her sharp eyes, there wouldn't have been enough time." Curly added, "Maintain this speed for about thirty minutes to put some distance between us and the sub. Then it should be alright to resume our previous speed."

A report from the ship's medical facility came to the bridge of passengers being treated for minor cuts and bruises as a result of the emergency turn. That reminded Curly that he needed his own bandage changed. But first he wanted to wait until they were clear of danger.

A short time later, the communications officer rushed onto the bridge and handed Captain Hewlett an urgent message. He read it in silence and stood there for a moment with blank stare on his face. He picked up the microphone, flipped a switch and began speaking. "Attention all hands and passengers. This is the Captain speaking. The following is a communication that I have just been handed. It reads:

"To the Congress of the United States:

"On the morning of December 11 the Government of Germany, pursuing its course of world conquest, declared war against the United States. The long-known and the long-expected has thus taken place. The forces endeavoring to enslave the entire world now are moving toward this hemisphere. Never before has there been a greater challenge to life, liberty and civilization. Delay invites great danger. Rapid and united effort by all of the peoples of the world who are determined to remain free will insure a world victory of the forces of justice and of righteousness over the forces of savagery and of barbarism. Italy also has declared war against the United States.

"I therefore request the Congress to recognize a state of war between the United States and Germany, and between the United States and Italy.

"It is signed, 'Franklin D. Roosevelt'.

"It goes on to say that Congress passed the resolution and declared war on both Germany and Italy.

"I thought you all should know. That is all."

Talk on the bridge tuned to the war. They had a lot of questions for Curly. The subject of the attack on Pearl Harbor came up and they asked him about his experience of that day. He unfolded the the whole story to them. When he was done, no one said a word. Curly broke the silence, "Permission to leave the bridge, Captain."

"Permission granted."

It had been quite an eventful morning, to say the least. Curly went to the ship's medical station and had his bandage changed and dressed. The ship's doctor personally attended to him. He asked who had

sewn the stitches. Curly simply told him that a nurse had done it. The doctor said that he hadn't seen a finer job and that his wound was healing nicely.

From there, Curly stopped in to have a mid morning brunch as he had not yet had breakfast. The kitchen and dining area still showed signs of the mess created during the emergency turn that had been executed to avoid the torpedoes. The kitchen staff said they would much rather be cleaning up the mess than treading water.

When he did return to the bridge, a telegram was waiting for him. It read:

PATRONS ARE REQUESTED TO FAVOR THE COMPANY BY CRITICISM AND SUGGESTION CONCERNING ITS SERVICE

<p style="text-align: center; margin: 0;">CLASS OF SERVICE</p> <p style="margin: 0;">—</p> <p style="margin: 0;">This is a full-rate Telegram or Cablegram unless its deferred character is indicated by a suitable sign above or preceding the address.</p>	<h1 style="margin: 0;">WESTERN UNION</h1> <p style="margin: 0; font-size: small;">NEWCOMB CARLTON, PRESIDENT J.C. WELLEVER, FIRST VICE-PRESIDENT</p>	<p style="text-align: center; margin: 0;">SIGNS</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"><tr><td style="padding: 2px;">DL=Day Letter</td></tr><tr><td style="padding: 2px;">NM=Night Message</td></tr><tr><td style="padding: 2px;">NL=Night Letter</td></tr><tr><td style="padding: 2px;">LCO=Deferred Cable</td></tr><tr><td style="padding: 2px;">NLT=Cable Night Letter</td></tr><tr><td style="padding: 2px;">WLT=Week-End Letter</td></tr></table>	DL=Day Letter	NM=Night Message	NL=Night Letter	LCO=Deferred Cable	NLT=Cable Night Letter	WLT=Week-End Letter
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Received at

1941 DEC 11 AM 8:17

COMMANDER SHEFFIELD BRASON USN

COMAIRBATFOR STAFF

ABOARD THE SS PACIFIC MAIDEN,
MAIDEN VOYAGE SHIPPING, INC.

SORRY ABOUT GEANNIE AND THE KIDS STOP AM LOOKING INTO IT STOP
SHORTY STOP

CAPTAIN WILLIAM SHARP USN

COMMANDER ALAMEDA NAVAL AIR STATION

The rest of the day was uneventful, as was the rest of the trip. A vigilant watch was maintained during the remainder of the cruise. The next day Curly received another telegram from Shorty. It read:

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Received at

1941 DEC 11 AM 11:23

COMMANDER SHEFFIELD BRASON USN

COMAIRBATFOR STAFF

ABOARD THE SS PACIFIC MAIDEN

MAIDEN VOYAGE SHIPPING, INC.

ARRANGEMENTS MADE STOP A TRUCK WILL MEET YOU AT THE DOCK STOP
SEE YOU SOON STOP SHORTY STOP

CAPTAIN WILLIAM SHARP USN

COMMANDER ALAMEDA NAVAL AIR STATION

As the routine of the remaining days drug on, Curly found himself with time to think and time to grieve. He spent his free time standing at the rail staring out to sea, missing Geannie, Sandy, and Austin. All kinds of things went through his mind and he felt as if he were to blame. "If this? If that? Why?"

On Tuesday morning, the Pacific Maiden sailed under the Golden Gate bridge and was soon moored at the pier. Curly said goodbye to his new friends. Captain Hewett was particularly grateful for his assistants. He said, "I have written a detailed report to be submitted to Maiden Voyage Shipping. A copy has been forwarded forwarded to your commanding officer. That's the least I can do for you. Thank you my friend and happy sailing." Captain Hewett saluted Curly and offered his hand. "I have directed that the caskets be unloaded immediately so you can be on your way. The rest of your cargo will be taken to the train depot as planned."

Curly shook his hand and said, "Thank you, Captain, for everything." He then shook hands with everyone else on the bridge. The last was Mr. Carpenter. "Thanks for sharing your cabin with me."

"It was my pleasure, Commander."

Curly left the bridge and went by Mr. Carpenter's cabin to pick up his gear and made his way to the

gangway.

At the foot of the gangway, an Ensign and a detail of six enlisted men, all in dress blues, were waiting for Curly. As he stepped onto the dock, they snapped to attention and saluted. With them was an official from Maiden Voyage who directed them to the cargo ramp.

The young Ensign stood next to Curly as one by one, the six sailors carried the caskets from the cold storage compartment to the truck. Once the last casket was loaded, the six sailors got into the back of the truck. The Ensign drove Curly across the bay to the Alameda Naval Air Station.

“Captain Sharp is waiting for you inside the Administration Building, sir.” the Ensign said as he stopped in front.

Curly got out of the truck and went in. Not only was Shorty waiting for him, but Wilma as well. After a brief reunion, they accompanied Curly to the aircraft where the quasi ceremony was repeated as caskets were loaded into the hold of the R4D, the Navy's version of the Douglas DC-3 airliner. There was enough time for them to take Curly to lunch where the old friends got caught up and Curly told the story of that fateful Sunday. They were extremely saddened by the deaths of Geannie and the kids.

Shorty asked him about the orders from Admiral Halsey authorizing use of military resources. Curly showed him the letter. “Well then, in that case,” Shorty said, “I am ordering this flight to make an unscheduled stop in Roanoke.” Shorty even offered to call ahead and make arrangements for the caskets to be picked up.

They had Curly back in time for the plane's scheduled departure. The first leg of the flight took him half way across the country. After a long flight, the plane landed in Olathe, Kansas at the Fairfax Airport which the Navy used as stopping point for their cross country transport flights. During the lay over, Curly tried but failed to get some sleep in a chair at the airport. The plane took off again the next morning for the final leg of the flight.

During all of this time, Curly had a lot of time to think. The more he thought, the more downhearted he became. He realized that a part of him had died with them. He decided that from that time forward he would no longer go by Curly. Sheffield would have to do.

The plane did make a brief unscheduled stop in Roanoke. A truck and a detail of airport employees were waiting and the caskets were quickly unloaded without ceremony and loaded onto the truck. After only a few minutes, the plane took off again. Sheffield accompanied them to the mortuary, the same mortuary that had taken care of Emmett Charles and Senator Austin.

After making arrangements with the funeral home, Sheffield called for a cab to take him home. He just stood out on the sidewalk between the two homes, not knowing which one to go to first. He realized

that he had failed to let anyone know that he would be arriving two days early. He hadn't had a chance to clean up since disembarking from Pacific Maiden. He was unshaven and his uniform was all wrinkled. He looked like a mess.

* * * * *

The SS Pacific Maiden is a fictional ship and Maiden Voyage Shipping is a fictional company.

