

Chapter XLV

The Business of War

January 2, 1942 – April 27, 1942

Ready or not, it came time for Sheffield to go back to the war. The day after New Years Day, he caught the train to Norfolk and the two day cross country flight to Oakland and on down to San Diego. As ordered, he reported to the Yorktown as Admiral Halsey's representative to Admiral Fletcher and his staff.

The Yorktown and her escorts sailed on January 6th. Their mission was to escort a small convoy of ships carrying five thousand Marines to occupy Samoa and set up a defense perimeter. Enroute he observed flight operations on the Yorktown and presented the same training that he had prepared and presented on the other three carriers of the Pacific Fleet. He was particularly interested to learn from the experience the Yorktown had gained from their anti submarine patrols in the Atlantic.

On the 11th news came that the Saratoga had been torpedoed by a submarine five hundred miles south of Oahu. She made it back to Pearl Harbor under her own power but would be out of commission for at least six months.

Upon arrival in Samoan waters on the 23rd, the Yorktown rendezvoused with the Enterprise and the two carriers provided air cover as the Marines went ashore. During flight operations, an SBD from Bombing Five was assigned to return Sheffield to the Enterprise. After a brief flight, he was back aboard the Big E. He exited the aircraft, which immediately took off again, and made his way to the flag bridge.

Stepping through the open hatch, Sheffield came to attention and announced, "Commander Brason reporting for duty, sir."

Admiral Halsey, who had his back to the hatch, bent over a table covered with charts, turned around, returning the salute. A broad grin crossed his face as he stepped toward his air officer, with his hand extended. "Sheffield. My God, it's good to have you back." he said as the two men shook hands.

Before getting down to business, Admiral Halsey asked, "Tell me, I trust you got home alright. How was the funeral?"

"It was very nice, sir. Thank you. It was very fitting of Geannie and the kids."

"I still can't believe what happened to them. And how are you Commander?"

"Ready for duty, sir."

"I mean, really. How are you doing? Its only been six weeks."

"I must admit, I have my moments sir." Sheffield confided. "But I assure you, I am ready to resume my duties. Its what I need to keep myself occupied and take my mind off it."

"By the way, I understand that you were much more that a passenger on the Pacific Maiden. I received a copy of a letter of commendation to you from the president of Maiden Voyages Shipping. That was a hell of thing you did. They've made you an honorary captain and have recommended you for the

Maritime Administration's Distinguished Service Medal.”

“I just did what needed to be done. I happened to be there and did what anyone else would have done.” Sheffield humbly replied.

“You're too modest, Brason. That's what I like about you; getting the job done without calling attention to yourself.”

“Now, how would you like a crack at the Japs? But first, how did you find things aboard the Yorktown?”

“Top notch, sir. Its all in my report.” Sheffield said as he handed an envelope to his boss.

Halsey took the envelope and immediately handed it to the yeoman. “I'll take a look at it later, Commander. But right now, I want you to see something.”

Admiral Halsey resumed his place at the table and had room made for Sheffield to join the staff who were studying the charts. “I need your help in planning the first strikes against the Japs in the Marshall and Gilbert Islands. It's about time we began getting back at those s.o.b's. I'm sure that you're anxious to get a crack at them. It will be the first counterattack of the war. My attitude is “hit'em hard and hit'em now.

“Miles, explain to Commander Brason what we're thinking.”

For the first time, Commander Browning acknowledged Sheffield's presence. Without so much as greeting or welcome back, he got strait to the point. “I envision one massive blow to be delivered by both carriers on the highly developed military base at Kwajalein Atoll. I tend to concur with the Admiral. Lets really show them that we mean business.”

“What do you think, Brason?” Admiral Halsey asked.

“With all due respect sir. I suggest we make it a strategic operation rather than a tactical one.”

Commander Browning directed a cold stare in Sheffield's direction. Before he could say anything, the admiral said, “Go on Commander.”

“I would split the carriers into two groups and have each carrier attack multiple targets throughout the islands. The cruisers should be detached to carryout shore bombardments. The attacks should commence at dawn, meaning the air groups would take off in the predawn darkness. My theory is that it would convince the enemy that we have mustered a force much greater than they thought possible. Let them think it is an all out assault.”

“That is the most preposterous notion I have ever heard!” bellowed Commander Browning. “We'll stick to the original plan.”

“I will let you gentleman hash out the details. I want a first draft of your plan at 1800 hours. In the meantime I'll be in my office taking care of a pile of paper work, including Commander Brason's report on the Yorktown.”

After first rejecting Sheffield's idea, Commander Browning presented an idea that sounded very much the same, only worded differently. Sheffield didn't say a word as he listened as the others contributed their ideas to the plan. Over the next few hours they worked out the details. Their collective ideas wove the tapestry of a master plan.

At 1800 hours, the Admiral returned to the flag bridge and asked, "Well, what did you come up with?"

"Here is what I propose, sir." Miles presented the plan to Admiral Halsey as his own idea.

At one point, Admiral Halsey glanced at Sheffield and winked. He was used to that kind of behavior and didn't care where the credit went, as long as the operation was a success.

"I like it! Good job men." Admiral Halsey said after having the plan presented to him. "You all did well. This ought to get Yamamoto's attention. By the time he can gather his forces for a counter attack, we'll be long gone."

"I met him once when he was the guest of the Navy at North Island, you know." Sheffield remarked off hand.

"Why didn't you kill him when you had the chance." Halsey snorted.

"Geannie thought he was charming. Look where that got her." Sheffield reflected.

"Yeah," Halsey snarled. "We're in this mess because of him."

By this time, it was well into early evening and the two carriers and their escorts were steaming away from Samoa toward their next objective. Over the next day or two, the plan was finalized and the details were worked out.

Keeping radio silence, Admiral Halsey sent Sheffield off in the back seat of an SBD to convey the plan of attack to Admiral Fletcher aboard the Yorktown. He was to carry out raids on Makin, Jaluit, Toroa, and Mili. With the message delivered, Sheffield flew back to the Enterprise.

The day of the attack was February 1, 1942. The Yorktown group was hampered by bad weather and was not very successful. On the other hand, the Enterprise raids on Kwajalein, Wotje, and Maloelap sank three ships and damaged eight others. A number of patrol bombers were destroyed on the water and undetermined damage to shore installations.

In return, the Enterprise came under attack by land based twin engined bombers. Thanks to the quick thinking of Capitan Murray, the ship eluded all of the bombs dropped. One went off in the water only fifty feet from the port quarter. Fragments from the blast severed a gasoline line, starting a fire which was quickly extinguished.

The most harrowing moment of the attack occurred when a damaged bomber attempted to crash dive the ship. The plane sliced across the fight deck, its wing tip severing the tail section of a parked SBD,

and crashed into the sea. At the conclusion of the raids, the task force set course for Pearl Harbor.

When Sheffield returned on February 5th, it was first time he had been back since taking Geannie and kids home. Since he hadn't returned when planned, he decided he had better look up Ramona and let her know that he was back.

She was on duty at the hospital when he found her. She took a break and she and Sheffield had lunch in the cafeteria. He told her about taking Geannie and the kids home, the funeral, his time in Roanoke, and the change of orders that brought him back by way of Samoa and the Marshall and Gilberts.

Ramona told him that she had found a home for Geannie's piano and had closed up the house for him and that someone else had already moved in.

After lunch she took him to the activities center where Geannie's piano proudly displayed a brass plate that read, "In memory of Gean Marie Brason Dec. 7, 1898 – Dec. 7, 1941".

Ramona asked Sheffield what his plans were. He told her that he decided that he would live in his stateroom aboard the ship even while in port. Which he did for the next nine days before going to sea again as the Enterprise carried out raids on Wake Island, now in enemy hands, and further west to the Japanese stronghold on Marcus. In addition to living aboard the ship, he attended Methodists services aboard the ship and became good friends with the Chaplain, Commander Hank Stromborn. They spent a lot of their off duty time visiting. Commander Stromborn helped Sheffield as he continued to work through his grief.

After returning from Marcus, the ship spent the next few weeks in port having her weapons upgraded and received a fresh coat of sea blue paint. All the time, Sheffield maintained his residence aboard the ship and only left during the day to go to his office in the Administration Building.

Sheffield was having a difficult time. While at sea he had an easier time keeping Geannie and the kids off his mind. It was like all those times through the years that he was away. But sailing into port brought back the painful reality that they would not be there to greet him. Living in his stateroom made it seem like he was simply away at sea, but he knew that he was only fooling himself. His stateroom had become both a place of refuge and prison cell.

It had only been just over three months since that horrible day. Everywhere he looked around the harbor, the devastation was very much visible. Salvage work was ongoing as one by one the sunken battleships were being raised with the intention of repairing them and making them seaworthy once again. The Arizona, the Oklahoma, and the Utah would never be salvaged. To him, they were like his broken heart. Could it ever be salvaged and repaired? Would it ever stop hurting?

This was so much more unbearable than losing the son he never met. Geannie and the kids were his whole life. As he looked around his stateroom, pictures and mementos were everywhere. He picked up

the eight by ten framed picture of Geannie and took it out of the frame and carefully placed the lock of her hair with it and put it back in the frame. Even the shirt stained with her blood still hung in his closet. They were the only physical remains he had of her. They brought him comfort, yet made him sad at the same time. He looked down at his his hands. His wedding band was still on his finger, right where it had been for the last twenty years. He slipped it off and held it in his hand momentarily before putting it back on. He wasn't ready to take it off yet.

When he could finally fall asleep, they came to him in his dreams. Some were pleasant dreams, reminiscent of the good times. Others were hellish nightmares where he was unable to get to them and protect them, only to helplessly watch them bleeding and dieing.

He had become quite reclusive, only being where he had to be. Occasionally, on his way back to the ship he would make a detour by way of the base chapel where he would week solace. It was from those moments that he gained strength through meditation and prayer that gave him the courage to meet each day.

One day Ramona came to see him at his office, knowing that she would find him there. She was greatly concerned for him. She had a favor to ask him. She asked him if he would accompany her on Sunday as she wanted to attend services on the base. She had been thinking a lot about her last conversation with Geannie and had decided to do something about it.

Besides, she wanted to get Sheffield off the ship and out of his office. He needed to get out of the rut that he was in. He agreed, and met her at the ferry dock and together, they went to the base chapel.

It was the first time since she was young girl that she had gone to church. It was a big step for her and she didn't want to go alone. It didn't matter to her which denomination it was, so Sheffield took her to the Methodist services. During communion when he went to partake, she took a deep breath, stood up, and made her way to the alter.

After services, she invited him to her apartment for something he hadn't had for a longtime, a home cooked meal. At first they talked of the good times with Geannie. Ramona listened empathetically as he poured out his heart to her about how lost he felt. She understood first hand exactly how he felt. Once it had been he and Geannie who listened to and consoled her. They had done a lot for her in her time of need, now she was doing the same for him. After all, that is what true friends do; they stand by each other in times of need.

As he left her apartment, he thanked her for being there for him. He offered his hand as he would have to any friend. She took it and pulled him close and gave him an embrace. He felt like a frightened child being held in the comforting arms of a mother. Somehow, he knew that eventually everything would be alright again. He didn't notice how tightly and how long she held him. It was what he needed at the time.

That evening he went aboard the ship and made his way to stateroom. As he looked around at his familiar surroundings, he felt as if a bit of healing had taken place. Sleep came easier that night and his dreams were pleasant.

At the end of the month Sheffield accompanied Admiral Halsey and Captain Miles Browning to San Francisco. Admiral Halsey had rewarded Miles with a promotion for the well planned successful raids on the Marshall and Gilberts. Unbeknown to Sheffield, Admiral Halsey had also put in a special recommendation for him as well.

The purpose of the trip to San Francisco was to discuss plans for a secret mission that had been handed to them. They meet with Captain Donald Duncan and Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle of the Army Air Corps to plan for the mission which involved launching sixteen Army B-25 Mitchell bombers from the flight deck of the brand new Hornet for a raid on Tokyo itself. The Enterprise was to rendezvous with the Hornet at sea and provide escort.

Admiral Halsey assigned Sheffield to remain behind as his personal representative aboard the Hornet. He was to make sure that Doolittle had everything he needed and present his training to the squadrons and air department on the Hornet. Once the B-25's were launched he was to return to the Enterprise and report to Halsey.

The amount of fuel the bombers carried was a concern for the distances they would have to fly. Sheffield made arrangements with his friend Shorty, who was still the commanding officer of the Almeda Naval Air Station where the Hornet was tied up, to procure eighty – five gallon gas cans. That would provide each plane with an extra twenty five gallons of aviation fuel that could be poured directly into the internal fuel tanks while in flight.

With her entire air group disassembled and stored on the hangar deck, the bombers were loaded aboard the Hornet from the pier. On April 2nd the Hornet steamed out of San Francisco Bay on her secret mission known only to Sheffield, the Captain of the Hornet, Colonel Doolittle, and Major Harvey Morrison. It wasn't until they were at sea that their destination was revealed.

Harvey was now on the staff of General Hap Arnold, the commander of the Army Air Corps. His role in the mission was similar to Sheffield's; observe, assist, and report. They rekindled the friendship that began with their past encounters. He was devastated when Sheffield told him about Geannie and the kids.

Aside from presenting his training material to the Hornet's squadrons and air department, Sheffield sat in on the briefings given the Army crews. He was asked his perspective from his visit to Tokyo as a young Ensign all those years ago. On the morning of the 13th the two carrier groups joined up north of Midway and together sailed west. Each passing day brought them closer to Japan.

On the afternoon of the 17th there was brief ceremony held on the flight deck. A number of medals

that had been presented to American Naval Officers during a 1908 visit to Tokyo were attached to some of the bombs being loaded into the bombers. Several men scrawled personal messages onto some of the bombs. Someone handed Sheffield a small paint brush. He dipped it into a can of white paint and added a message of his own. It read, "For Geannie, Sandy, and Austin."

The further west the task force sailed, the worse the weather got. That afternoon, the planes were loaded with ordinance and fuel and were spotted on the flight deck for take off. At dusk the weather grew even worse. At one point, the Hornet took water over the forward flight deck as the ship pitched in the heavy seas.

At 0300 radar operators on both carriers began picking up blips on their radar scopes as they encountered the outer ring of picket boats of Japan's early warning system. The darkened ships of the task force were not sighted. Then, after sunrise a trawler was sighted only twelve miles away. It was attacked and sunk by an Enterprise SBD. Another trawler was taken under fire by the cruiser Nashville.

These encounters prompted Admiral Halsey to have a message flashed to the Hornet directing that the bombers be launched immediately. Sheffield and Harvey watched from the bridge as the bomber crews raced to their planes. Engines came to life and warmed up. Colonel Doolittle struggled aloft, followed by the the rest of the big bombers. B-25's required a much longer distance to get airborne than the Hornet's flight deck provided. Only through the special training these pilots had undergone for weeks prior to coming aboard were they able to make their way into the sky.

Sixty five minutes later, all sixteen were airborne and the flight deck was empty. The task force turned around and retired from the area at high speed. The air department on the Hornet went to work reattaching wings to the planes of her air group, making them ready to fly. Soon they were taken up to the flight deck and spotted for launch. With a bolstered combat air patrol, the task force continued it's retreat. The communications rooms on the ships were all tuned to Radio Tokyo, listening for word of the raid. At the calculated moment, programing was interrupted with the announcement that Tokyo and other cities were being bombed by the Americans.

Later that afternoon. Sheffield was flown back to the Enterprise as a passenger in the rear seat of an SBD. He made his way to the flag bridge and made his report to Admiral Halsey. Once the report was received, the Admiral handed him an envelope. "This arrived for you just before we left Pearl."

Sheffield opened it and read his new orders to himself. Admiral Halsey winked and said, "Congratulations, Captain Brason."

Sheffield had to read it again to make sure it said what he thought he had just read. There was no mistake. He had been promoted to Capitan effective April 1, 1942 and was to report to Norfolk as soon as possible to take command of the nearly completed USS Reprisal and prepare her for commissioning.

Admiral Halsey said, "I told them that you were busy with a secret mission and would report when you returned." Then he added. "Thanks for all that you have done for me on my staff. Don't think for one moment that I'm not aware of your contributions. I'll miss you."

That gave Sheffield something to think about all the way back to Pearl Harbor. He was beginning to find that week after week, Geannine and the kids occupied less and less of his conscience thoughts. Not that he didn't miss them, or they didn't cross his mind, they did, a lot. Perhaps with time, he was healing, just like Walt told him that he would.

He took great satisfaction in having been involved in the Doolittle Raid and the other raids during the last three months. He felt that he had done what he could to avenge their deaths. Then he remembered the example that Geannie had set in offering forgiveness to William Chaney for what he had done to her. Was he willing and able to do the same or was he going down a path bent on hatred and revenge? That would not bring them back. He decided that to truly heal, he needed to conduct the awful business of war without making it personal. This new command would give him the opportunity to give it a try.

The task force returned to Pearl Harbor on the 25th and Sheffield was formally relieved of duty as the air officer on Admiral Halsey's staff. The entertainer that he was, Admiral Halsey told him that he was hosting a farewell dinner for him that evening at the Halewulani Hotel.

He had always celebrated such occasions with Geannie and the kids. It was a shame that they couldn't be apart of this. Then he got an idea. He left the ship and crossed over to Hospital Point and went looking for Ramona. Even though Geannie couldn't join him, he didn't want to celebrate alone. He found her on duty.

"Hey ,Sheffield," she greeted him. "I saw the task force sail in this morning. I was wondering if you would come and find me."

"What time does your watch end?"

"Not until midnight. Why?"

"Tell them that you have a dinner appointment with Admiral Halsey tonight at seven."

"What's the special occasion, Commander?"

"That's Captain." he said pointing to the new collar device he was wearing on his uniform. "I have been promoted to captain and have orders to report to Norfolk and take command of the Navy's newest carrier."

"That terrific, Sheffield! Congratulations. And yes, I think I can arrange to get off. I'd love to accompany you." Ramona was excited for him even though she knew that his new assignment would take him far away. She understood that it would take a long time before he would ever be to the point of noticing her, or anyone else for that matter. When he was, she would be waiting.

"I have to return to my rounds now but come by my apartment at six thirty." She had no problem getting off her shift early when she mentioned that it was to have dinner with Admiral Halsey.

Sheffield went to his office and began clearing out his desk. He organized the things that needed to be passed on to his replacement and left a written description of what he was working on and what still needed to be done. Other things he sorted through that could be tossed.

Later he returned to the ship with the things he had gathered from his office. After stashing them in his stateroom, he went around to some of the people he had got to know during his almost four year association with the Enterprise. First as the commander of Fighting Six, then as air group commander, then the executive officer, and finally as Admiral Halsey's air officer. The Enterprise was the finest ship in the Navy in his estimation. Certainly the finest that he had served aboard up until that time. He wanted to make the Reprisal into a ship equal to the Big E.

As the afternoon began fading into evening, he changed into his dress whites and made his way back across to the harbor to Hospital Point. It was a short walk to the nurses' dormitory. Ramona answered the door also wearing her dress whites. She just had to add the last minute touches and she was ready.

Taking her car, she drove into Honolulu. As they left the main gate, Sheffield noticed that Geannie's car had been towed away. It was the first time since December that he had been by there.

Once they arrived at the Halewulani Hotel they were ushered into a private dining room. Admiral Halsey, who had been in meetings with Admiral Nimitz all afternoon was already there along with others of his staff. Fan had been evacuated to the mainland along with nearly all of the rest of the military families during mid December. There were only two or three other women at the banquet.

Admiral Halsey greeted Sheffield and Ramona as they entered the room. Sheffield introduced her, "This is my friend, Lieutenant Commander Ramona Katmuth. She's my dinner companion for this evening."

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Commander. How do you know our guest of honor for this evening?"

"Geannie was my best friend. In fact she introduced me to my late husband who was Sheffield's wingman at the time."

"Geannie was a wonderful woman. It was tragic what happened to her. Any friend of hers is a friend of mine." The Admiral charmed.

After mingling for a little while, the guests were seated and dinner was served. Before beginning the meal, Admiral Halsey stood and made a speech congratulating Captain Brason for his promotion and commended him for his service on the staff. He addressed the junior officers and told them that if they wanted to progress in their careers they should follow his example and just get in a work hard at whatever their assignment was and not worry about climbing all over each other for recognition. In conclusion he

wished Sheffield well in his new command. He then raised his glass in a toast. Everyone raised their glass and toasted with soft drinks in honor of the newly promoted Captain.

After a wonderful meal and evening, Ramona drove Sheffield back to the ferry at Hospital Point. Before he got out of the car, they sat and talked for a while.

“Thank you for being my dinner companion for the evening.” Sheffield began.

“Thanks for inviting me.” Ramona replied. “I had an enjoyable evening. I didn't know that Admiral Halsey was such a charming man. I'd always heard how gruff and course he is.”

“He can be whatever he needs to be when he needs to. I got to know him quite well when we lived next door to each other several years back.”

“He sure seemed to have taken a liking a to Geannie.”

“Who didn't.”

“You've got a point there.” Ramona concluded.

Sheffield then went on to say, “Thank you for everything you've done for me over the last few months. I'm not sure I could have made it through without you.”

“Listen, Sheffield. It was the least I could do after all that you've done for me over the years. I'm really going to miss having you around.”

“I haven't been around here that much lately as it is.”

“I know. But at least I got to see you from time to time.”

“Yeah, those times have been a real boost.”

“Well, now you'll at least be closer to your family back home.”

“Well, from time to time any way. About like how much I've been around here.”

“I'm sure that you'll be able to go home from time to time. After all, its going to take a few months at least to get your ship operational.”

“That's true, but as soon as she is, I'll be taking her to war.”

“Perhaps you'll be passing through here on your way to wherever that might be.”

“Most likely.”

“Well, you'd better look me up when you do. I'm really going to miss you, you know. You're about the only friend I have.”

“I'll be sure to do that.”

“Can I drop you a line from time to time just to stay in touch?”

“Yeah sure.” Sheffield agreed. I'd like that.”

“Promise me that you'll write back and let me know how you're doing.”

“I promise. You know, I've got a busy day tomorrow, I'd better turn in. Thanks again for this evening

Ramona.”

“I don't have to report for duty until noon tomorrow. Can I come see you off?”

“Sure. I'd like that.” Sheffield said as he reached for the door handle. “My flight leaves at eight.”

“Why don't you meet me at the Ford Island Officers Club and I'll treat you to breakfast.”

“Alright. Breakfast it is.” he said as he got out of the car and shut the door. “Meet there at six thirty.”

“It's a date then.” Ramona said as she started the car. “I'll see then.”

As she drove off Ramona wondered if “date” was too strong of a word to use. She realized that he certainly wasn't ready to go on a date anytime soon.

Sheffield didn't think anything of it as he got on the ferry for the short trip across the harbor to the Enterprise. He returned to ship and spent his final night aboard.

The next morning after getting ready for the day and gathered together the last of his things. He found the dress he had bought for Geannie nearly a year before. It was still in the complimentary gift wrapping with the tag attached to ribbon. He had planned on giving it to her for their twentieth anniversary and her forty third birthday after returning from taking the Marines to Wake. That morning everything changed. His whole world as well as the world at large was turned upside down that day. In the commotion of the day it never happened. Instead, he got to her in time to say goodbye – for good. Uncertain of what to do with it, he put it with the other things he had boxed up to be shipped directly to the Reprisal. Having already said his farewells he left the Enterprise for the last time at 6:15.

It wasn't far to the officers' club and when he went in Ramona waved to him from a corner booth.

As he neared the booth, she remained seated as she greeted him. “Good morning. Sheffield. Are you ready for your trip?”

“Yeah, I actually am.” He said as he took a seat across from her, setting his overnight bag on the floor next to him. “I think the change will be good for me.”

“I'm sure that it will.” Ramona responded as the waiter arrived at the side of the table with a pot of coffee.

Sheffield turned over his cup and slid it toward the waiter, a young man who looked part Hawaiian and part Filipino. “Please.” he said to the waiter.

“Are you ready to order?”

Sheffield glanced at Ramona, indicating for her to go first.

“I'll have a grapefruit and a fruit platter.”

“And for the Captain?” the young man asked.

“Oh gosh, its going to be a long day.” Sheffield sighed. “I'll have the works. A stack of buttermilk pancakes, two eggs – sunny side up, some bacon, and a glass of orange juice.”

The young man reviewed their order and asked. "Will this be together or separate?"

"Together." Ramona blurted before Sheffield could respond.

She looked at him as the waiter left and smiled, "This is my treat."

While waiting for their breakfast to be served, Sheffield told Ramona about his itinerary for the first leg of his trip that day. They continued their visit over breakfast, which she finished long before him. When they were ready to leave, Ramona picked up the tab while Sheffield left behind a tip. He waited for her at the door while she paid for their meal.

As they left, the Lieutenant Commander took a hold of the Captain's arm as they strolled in silence over to the Naval Air Transport Service hangar, each in their own thoughts. Sheffield naturally was looking forward to his trip and what lay ahead. Ramona on the other hand was cherishing the previous evening and their time together that morning, not knowing if she would ever have the man she had loved for so long all to herself. If she could only tell him.

After entering the terminal building, Sheffield checked in at the counter while Ramona stood back. When he was finished with his business, he returned to where she was waiting.

"Well, I guess this is it." Sheffield said.

Ramona couldn't contain herself any longer and through her arms around him and held him close. He dropped his bag and reciprocated the hug. It wasn't anything new, for he was accustomed to her giving him hugs.

Restraining her tears, she said, "Hopefully someday in this crazy world our paths will cross again."

"I hope so too." he squirmed as she continued to hold him close. "I promise to stay in touch."

"I'll look forward to hearing from you." she said as she released her hold on him. Then she did something she hadn't planned on. She reached up and gave him a kiss on the lips. "Goodbye Sheffield."

She realized what she had done as he starred blankly into her face. "Oh Sheffield, please forgive me. I didn't mean to do that. Here left me clean my lipstick off of you." She apologized as she fumbled through her hand bag for a handkerchief.

"You don't need to apologize." he insisted. "It's just that I haven't had a goodbye kiss since...." He didn't finish the sentence.

"I don't know what came over me." she said as she took the hanky that she had moistened with her mouth and cleaned the lipstick smear from his lips.

"It's okay Ramona. Don't worry about it. I'll miss you too. I want you to know that you're a really dear friend and I will always cherish your friendship."

Still not knowing what he really thought of her for intruding on his personal space like that, she accepted what he said.

"I guess this is Goodbye." He said as he took her hand in both of his. He let go and picked up his duffel bag and added, "See you in the funny pages." and turned around to walk toward the plane.

Ramona watched as he walked away. She couldn't hold back her tears any longer. If she were to never see him again, she had had him all to herself for that brief time and had showed him how she felt, even though she knew that it didn't dawn on him. Perhaps in another place and time.

Sheffield walked away not giving the affectionate farewell from a dear friend another thought. As he climbed the ladder he turned around and waved farewell before boarding the R5D, the Navy's version of the new DC-4 which was capable of flying from Oahu to San Francisco.

During the flight he looked ahead to the responsibilities of getting the Reprisal in commission and ready for action, wherever that might be. Her newly commissioned air group was working up at Norfolk Naval Air Station. The senior officers were already on duty and looking after things until he could get there. He knew that things were in good hands with his executive officer, who happened to be his good friend, Commander Mason Owen. Sheffield found it interesting how he kept crossing paths with people.

The Reprisal had been authorized by a special act of Congress to fill the gap between the Yorktown Class and the new Essex Class. She had been ordered from Newport News Shipbuilding Company on October 15, 1940. Her design was half way between the two classes. In fact she was built to plans of an early advanced design of the Essex and had many features of both classes.

She was laid down on December 15, 1940, the day after the Hornet had been launched. Construction had been expedited and she was launched on November 30, 1941, just a week before the attack on Pearl Harbor. At 845 feet long over all, she had a standard displacement of 28,000 tons. Work was rushing forward at Newport News Shipbuilding to get her ready for her commissioning which was scheduled for June 7, 1942 – the six month anniversary of Pearl Harbor.

During the flight he reviewed the technical data on the Reprisal, the biographies of the senior officers, and the squadron rosters. He found the lists contained the names of men that he had been acquainted with over the years. The executive officer of Fighting Eleven happened to be his old wingman, Cowboy.

He went over the current status of the ship and what still needed to be done. He found that all of this took up the entire flight. The plane landed at the Alameda Naval Air Station where he was met by another old friend, Shorty. That night he stayed at their home.

The next morning he took off again for the non stop flight to Norfolk. As soon as he settled in, his thoughts turned to his first encounter with Mason over the Caribbean on that day in February 1939 during Fleet Problem XX and how they ended up living next door to he and Geannie. From there his thoughts turned to Geannie. He found that his mind raced through the years as he reminisced about

everything from their childhood right up to that very moment as the plane touched down at the Norfolk Naval Air Station.

It was toward late afternoon when the plane landed. As he disembarked the aircraft, he directed that his gear be taken to his stateroom aboard the Reprisal, keeping only his overnight bag with him. His intentions were to report in with Rear Admiral Ernest D. McWhorter, the newly appointed Commander Aircraft Atlantic Fleet, only to discover that he and his staff were at sea aboard the Ranger.

Instead, he reported to Vice Admiral Royal E. Ingersoll, the Commander in Chief of the Atlantic Fleet, aboard his flagship, the historic spar-decked frigate USS Constellation which was launched in 1855. Sheffield had never met the Admiral before, but he knew all about Sheffield from his resume; from his days as an Ensign on the Wadsworth to flight training, his squadron assignments, his command of the Enterprise Air Group, serving as executive officer, and lastly his assignment on Admiral Halsey's staff.

In addition Admiral Ingersoll knew about his action at Pearl Harbor, including shooting down two enemy aircraft, being shot down, being wounded, and the deaths of his family. He had a letter of recommendation from Admiral Halsey outlining his contributions to the raids on enemy outposts in the Pacific.

At the conclusion of the interview, Sheffield asked if he might delay reporting for duty aboard the Reprisal until the day after tomorrow. He explained that he would like to take care of some personal affairs first. Admiral Ingersoll consented.

After leaving the Constellation, he found a telephone and called the base switchboard and asked to be patched through to Commander Owen on the Reprisal. After a few moments he heard a familiar voice say, "This is Commander Owen."

"Mace, this is Sheffield."

"Yes sir!" he snapped.

"Save the sir stuff for day after tomorrow when I report aboard. I'm just calling to let you know that I just got in. I've reported in with Admiral Ingersoll and I'm taking tomorrow off to go home for the day."

"I new that you must on your way. Your things were just delivered to the ship."

"That was quick!" Sheffield commented.

"Where are you staying tonight, Sheffield?"

"I don't know. I haven't figured that out yet."

"Well, I do. I'm just leaving to go home for dinner. Where are you?"

"I'm just down the dock from the Constellation."

"Wait right there and I'll swing by and pick up. I'll call Pat and let her know that we have a house guest for the evening and to set another plate."

“Thanks a lot Mace. That sounds great. I'll see you in a few minutes.”

“I'll be right there.”

Sheffield had a nice visit with his old friends. It was nice to have a good home cooked meal too. They really didn't have much of a chance to visit much at the funeral, so this gave them a good opportunity to get caught up. As the evening wore on the conversation turned from social to a briefing on the status of the Reprisal.

* * * * *

The raids and time tables in this chapter are factual. Miles Browning did actually mastermind the Enterprise's raids of early 1942.

