

Chapter XLVI

One Last Goodbye

April 28, 1942

His plan was to get a plane and fly to Roanoke first thing in the morning and spend the day and come right back in the late afternoon. Mason and Pat were gracious to host him for a second night. Then he would report aboard the Reprisal and assume command.

Sheffield had considered calling his folks and let them know that he would be coming, but then he got a better idea. He remembered showing Austin how to make a parachute by tying an object to the four corners of a handkerchief. Mason had a big bolt that he used and tied a note to it.

After getting a good nights rest and breakfast, Mason dropped Sheffield off at the training hangar at the air station the next morning. He explained that he hadn't had any flight time for some time and needed to keep his flight status active. He was permitted to check out an old N2S Stearman Kaydet for the day. After the two hour flight to Roanoke he swooped down low and buzzed over his parents house and the Austin Mansion.

At ten o'clock that morning, Emmett was outside working in the flowerbeds as the bright yellow plane flew over at tree top level. He stood up and watched as it flew off to the west and began making a sharp sweeping turn and lined up for another pass. Now standing, facing the on coming plane, he watched as whoever was flying the contraption dropped something over the side. As the plane began climbing back up into the sky, Emmet observed a white object drifting slowly to the ground. He moved toward it and grasped the bolt with a handkerchief tied to it before it reached the ground. Attached to the bolt was a note which read, "Pick me up at the airport. Sheffield."

As the plane came around for a third pass, Emmett held the note in one hand and gave the thumbs up sign with the other. Sheffield waved back in acknowledgment and flew off in the direction of the airport.

Emmett ran back into the house all excited. Ellen asked, "Land sakes, Emmett. What was that racket all about?"

"That was Sheffield. He wants me to pick him up at the airport." Emmett said as he laid the little parachute on the counter and grabbed his car keys before heading out the door.

Ellen didn't have a chance to respond before he had rushed off. She went to the telephone and called Sarah. When Sarah picked up, Ellen frantically exclaimed, "Sarah, Curly's here!" In her excitement she forgot that she was now supposed to call him Sheffield. "Can you come over right now and help me put together a picnic lunch? I have a picnic ham that I was saving for the weekend."

"I just made a potato salad to take over to Helkers. I could bring it and make them something else for them later. Let me see what else I have and I'll be right over."

"That will be great. I need to call Shenan and Emily. I'll see you in a few minutes. Bye."

While Ellen called Emily, Sarah gathered some things into a basket and stopped by the church to get Walt. He was in the middle of some bookwork and put down his pencil and left the office with Sarah and hurried next door.

When they arrived, Ellen had just got off the telephone with Emily who had called her right back to say that Shenan was taking the rest of the day off and they would be over as soon as he got home. She had a batch of rolls about ready to come out of the oven and would bring them. Ellen and Sarah set about working their magic in pulling a picnic out of thin air. Asked what he could do to help, Walt was sent next door to get Marie.

After landing and taxiing to the parking area, it was only a few minutes before the surprised Emmett found Sheffield at the hanger. "Hey, my boy. What a surprise! I thought you were gallivanting around the Pacific. What brings you here?" Emmett asked as he gave his son a big hug.

"Well Dad, I just got transferred back to Norfolk. I got in late yesterday afternoon and I wanted to come out and surprise everyone."

"Boy, you surprised me alright. I thought I was going to be strafed, just like in those war movies." He said as they got into the car for the ride home. "So how long are you here for?"

"Just for the afternoon." Sheffield replied. "I have to have this plane back to the air station by eight o'clock, which means I need to leave by six."

"Well son, it nice to see you again, if only for a few hours." As they drove home they engaged in casual chit chat, saving the important details for later. When they got home, Ellen, and Sarah were still putting together the impromptu picnic. Walt had returned from next door with Marie. Shenan left work early and he and Emily rushed over and arrived soon after Sheffield. The younger kids were all at school while the older ones were all about their own affairs.

It was a warm round of greetings, unlike the somber occasion that surrounded his last visit. Sheffield was a little shocked at how much older and frail Marie looked.

Everyone sat around the kitchen table visiting while the picnic was coming together.

"So how goes the war, Sheffield?" Walt asked.

"Its a long story." he began. "When I left here in January I went to San Diego and went to sea aboard the Yorktown and sailed for Samoa where I caught up with my ship. On the way back to Pearl Harbor, we raided enemy installations in the Marshall and Gilberts."

"Yeah, that was a big deal in the news here at home. That first action really bolstered morale on the home front." Shenan interjected.

"We didn't do a whole lot of damage to them but it let them know we weren't down for the count." Sheffield explained. "After a couple of weeks we went back to sea and hit Wake and Marcus."

"You were in on all of that?" Emmett asked. "You never said anything in your letters about that."

"Their real big on censorship right now. They have people who's jobs are to go through all of the mail. If I had, it would have been cut out with a razor blade. You've heard the term, 'Loose lips sink ships' I'm sure. If somehow a letter was to fall into enemy hands we don't want anything to give away where we've been or where were going. For example, there were only two carriers in on the Marshall and Gilberts raid. We wanted them to think we had a much stronger force.

"Here's another example. I just returned to Pearl Harbor three days ago from something so sensitive, I can't even tell you about it after the fact."

"I think I can guess." Shenan quipped. "You were in Shangri La, as Roosevelt called it, weren't you?"

"Where on earth is that?" Ellen asked.

"The place where the raid on Tokyo supposedly took off from." Walt answered. "From what I hear, they took off from a carrier."

"Maybe someday that information will be declassified, or until someone with a few too many drinks lets the cat out of the bag."

"So, you were in on that." Shenan deducted.

Curly changed the subject, "So anyway, that brings me to why I'm here. I've been promoted to Captain and tomorrow I take command of a brand new carrier just being completed at Norfolk."

"Why, Sheffield. That is wonderful news. Geannie would be so proud of you." Marie spoke for the first time during the conversation.

"That should keep me close to home through the summer, at least. I hope to be able to come home from time to time while I'm there. Say, why don't you come to Norfolk for the commissioning ceremony as my guests. Any way, once we're combat ready, my guess is that we'll be heading for the Pacific."

Shanon boasted, "Our boy Daniel will graduate from college in May and has been accepted into officers training with his sights set on flight school at Pensacola. Joe still has a year of college left and will most likely do something similar."

Sarah added, "As you know, Tim enlisted in the Navy and left for boot camp in January, right after you went back to the war. Well, after boot camp he came home for a couple weeks before going to radio school for six weeks. After another two weeks at home, he reported for duty with a blimp squadron in Lakehurst, New Jersey."

"I'm glad to see that I'm not the only one to carry on the Brason naval tradition."

Marie told him, "The Austins are pitching in too. Charlie's two boys are also going into the officer training program, only Chuck opted for the Army. Winslow's boy is considering his options, Stirling's boy

Sam tried to get in but failed the entrance physical, but Julian enlisted in the Navy and just left for boot camp a couple of weeks ago.”

“Well.” Sheffield said satisfied, “It looks like the Brasons and the Austins have stepped up to the plate. It will take a while to really gather our forces, but once we do, Emperor Hirohito, Hitler, and Mussolini won’t know what hit them.”

“There are dozens of young men leaving Roanoke every week.” Walt said. “Many of them right from my congregation.”

“God bless them all.” Emmett declared.

“Yeah. There going to need it.” Sheffield concluded.

Ellen changed the subject. “So Sheffield, how are you holding up?”

“I have my tough moments. I find that keeping busy and staying focused on my work helps. When I’m off duty and alone in my stateroom is when it gets hard. Sometimes at while at sea there is nothing to do but wait and think. Walt, I think you were wrong about it taking a year to start getting over it. I think it will take the rest of my life.”

“Do you remember my bookshelf analogy?” Walt reminded him. “The same thing applies here.”

“Yeah, well this is more than bookshelf. I’m dealing with the whole cotton picking library.”

“Its real easy for me to set back and tell folks how its going to be. I learned it from a book and have never had to deal with it myself. I loved Geannie and the kids too. She was a real special person to me. Yeah, I felt bad when they died. It was a real shock, and I miss them. I’m sure I’m speaking for everyone here except for Marie. You’re in the same boat with Sheffield, aren’t you Marie?”

“It was real hard when I lost Charles. And yes, Walt was right for the most part when he says that it takes at least a year to begin to get over such a loss. But this is a triple whammy. I agree with Sheffield. This is going to take a lot longer. I may go to my grave still trying to get through it.”

“The thing that makes me angry is how it happened. It was all so unnecessary.” Sarah interjected. “And on top of all of that, theres now this horrible war. How many more families are going to have endure loss. I have a son going off to war. I pray to God that Walt and I won’t have to find out for ourselves what you are going through.”

“Don’t get me wrong.” Sheffield went on. “Its not like I’m constantly in grief and misery. Like I said, ‘I keep busy and focused on my work.’ I get a lot of satisfaction form it when the pilots come back from the missions that I help put together with their claims of destruction to the enemy. I feel as if I am bringing justice to those who caused all of this. I envy them. I wish I could climb into a plane and go out after them myself. I guess I’ have to settle for the two I got during the attack.

“I had a wake up call when I had the opportunity to add a message to a bomb that was meant for a

special target. I wrote on it, 'For Geannie, Sandy, and Austin.' That was less than two weeks ago. Then the thought occurred to me, 'Geannie wouldn't seek vengeance.' I remembered how she forgave the man who assaulted her. I decided that I needed to conduct the business of war in a professional manner and not let it be a personal vendetta. This new command will let get a fresh start on that approach. I found that to help."

Walt interjected, "I see you're still wearing your wedding ring."

"Yeah." Sheffield admitted. "I thought about taking it off a couple of times. Once I actually took it off and held it in my hand for a moment, but then I put it back on."

"That's alright Sheffield." Emmett said. "Wear it as long as you need to. You will know when you're ready to take it off. The day that you do will be the day when you realize that you are ready to move on."

"Something else helped me too. The flight from Pearl Harbor to here over the last two days gave me a lot of time to think. The first day, I admit, my thoughts were taken up with my new assignment. Then yesterday, the most amazing thing happened. I started off by remembering the first time I encountered the man who is my executive officer and how Geannie and I became close friends with him and his family while they lived next door to us in Hawaii.

"That got me to remembering Geannie and our lives together. Over the next several hours, our entire lives played out through my mind as if I were watching a motion picture. It was so vivid in every detail, even things I hadn't thought of in a very long time. I think that was the best investment in my time in the last four and half months. It really helped me to put things into perspective."

Everyone was silent for a moment, then Walt spoke up. "Little brother, that was huge step forward. I'd say you're closer to working through it than you give yourself credit for."

At that, Ellen announced "Lunch is ready. If we could get some help taking it all outside, we can eat."

As they had lunch, everyone began sharing memories of Geannie. Many of them light hearted and comical, some tender, and others serious. After lunch and more visiting, they accompanied Sheffield to the cemetery to pay a visit to the graves of Geannie and the kids. The first thing he noticed was the headstones which had been erected after he left. The center piece was a large double stone that spanned Geannie's grave and where he would one day rest bedside her. It was of the same style as Charles Emmett's. On the left was his name, on the right was Geannie's name. Centered below their names it read, "Born December 7, 1898". Centered below that it read, "Married December 7, 1921". At the bottom under Geannie's name it read, "Died December 7, 1941"

Next to Geannie was one that read, "Charles Emmett Brason, April 9, 1930 – April 10, 1930. " on the other side were two more matching headstones. One read "Sandra Gean Brason, November 1, 1924 – December 7, 1941" the other read, "Austin Sheffield Brason, August 16, 1927 – December 7, 1941".

Sheffield stood there looking down on the graves of his entire family. Only he was left; all alone. But he realized that he wasn't alone. He had his family and was still considered an integral part of the Austin family. He wasn't really alone.

He began speaking as if he were talking to Geannie. Everyone stepped back and let him have his conversation in private. "Hi sweetheart. It's me, your Flyboy. I know that your not really here, but I know that you are somewhere out there. I hope you can here me.

"First, let me say how much I love you. That has not changed and it never will. I miss you and the kids so much. Fortunately I have been pretty busy lately, with the war and everything. I have been to Samoa, we have been hitting back at the enemy in the Central Pacific, I've even been as close as six hundred miles from Japan itself. We've hit them there too you know.

"I don't know if you know this or not, but you would have to get used to calling me something knew. I always loved how you called me by my rank. It had a way of reminding me that it wasn't as important as who I was to you. You see I just been promoted to Captain. The only thing I ever wanted to be was the captain of was your love.

"With this new promotion, I have a big responsibility ahead of me now. You see, tomorrow, I'll be assuming the command of my own carrier. Do you remember when I was promoted to Lieutenant junior grade and I came home to surprise you and we went to dinner at that new fancy restaurant in the Hotel Roanoke? Remember we talked about the our future. I jokingly said that someday I'd have my own aircraft carrier. You teased me about it being the USS Curly and I told you that it would have a name that meant something and would instill pride and resolve. How does Reprisal sound to you?

"I didn't know that this day would really come, but if it did, I thought that you would be here to share it with me. You were always there to share my accomplishments with. I couldn't have done any of it without your support.

"I know I was gone a lot and that it wasn't easy for you. I was gone the one time when you needed me most. I was on my way, I'm sorry that I didn't make it in time to protect you like I always promised I would do. I'm just glad that you held on long enough to say goodbye.

"I have to tell about something interesting that happened to me yesterday. As I flew across the country, our entire lives passed through my mind. I relived every moment of it in every detail. We really had a good life, didn't we? That alone has done more for me in the healing process than anything else.

"No, I'm not out of the woods yet. This is going to take me a while. I remember what it took for us to really get on with life after we lost Charles Emmett. This time I have to get through loosing not only you, but Sandy and Austin too, and I have to go through it alone.

"I know that life goes on and I now know that I can get through this the rest of the way. I'll never

forget you and you will always be a part of me. Even though you're not here to help me through it, remembering what we had will. Perhaps someday, I'll be able to love someone again like I love you. And if so, that won't diminish my love for you.”

As Sheffield poured out his heart, he felt as if she was there with him. That feeling lingered with him while he was there. It felt as if she touched his face with her hand and kissed him. After a moment. He spoke again. “I knew you would be listening. I have to go now. I need Dad to take me back to the airport so I can get back to Norfolk, but I'll be back. No matter where I go, you are with me in my heart until we are together again.” He paused before turning to leave. It was as if Geannie's presence wanted to linger just a little longer. He felt compelled to linger as well and turned back toward her grave.

Geannie was indeed there. There was so much that she wished that she could communicate to him. She knew that he sensed her presence when she touched his face and kissed him on the cheek. She wanted so much for him to understand. “I'm alright, Captain. Sandy and Austin are alright. We are at peace and we're happy. This is a wonderful place. I can't even begin to convey to you how wonderful it is. I'm learning things that I would have never imagined and there is so much more to learn.

“I have been watching over you, and it is hard to see you in such pain. If you could only understand, you wouldn't grieve so for us. I want you to be happy and really live your life and I feel as if I am holding you back. I know that its going to take you more time.

“That's the thing, here time doesn't have the same meaning, but unfortunately, you are bound by it's limitations. I remember all too well what it was like when Charles Emmett left us. I'm glad to see that you have made some progress. I promise you, you will be alright. I wish I could say the same for Mother.

“You have a lot of living ahead of you and I want you to do it to your fullest. I don't see the whole picture myself, but I know that there is a lot of good and wonderful things in store for you. I want you to have them.

“I have to get back to my world now. Now you have to go too. I know you won't walk away from here today healed from the pains of sorrow and loneliness, but I'd be much more content to see you make some progress. Please understand that I still love you. That has not changed, nor will it ever. I will look in on you from time to time and then one day when your old and feeble, I will come for you. Just think of it as all of those time I saw you off. Those goodbyes were not forever, neither is this one. Until then, goodbye my best friend and my love.”

Sheffield just stood there for a moment in silence, twisting his wedding ring around his finger. After a moment, it was as if Geannie had left, if she was even there to begin with. Again he turned to leave. Somehow he knew that he would be alright. Coming to Roanoke had paid off. He felt as if he made considerably progress. “Goodbye, Geannie.”

He walked away and joined his mother and father and Walt and Sarah, who were waiting patiently for him at the car. On the ride home, Sheffield's heart felt lighter. There was still a little while before he had to leave. When they got home, there was plenty of picnic left for a light supper and a piece of his mother's peach pie. Their conversation was about Sheffield's new command and what lay ahead. Geannie and the past wasn't brought up again.

As it came time to leave, Sheffield promised that he would be back to spend a couple of days sometime in the next few weeks when he could get away. Before leaving there was a round of hugs and goodbyes. First from Walt, then Sarah, and finally his mother. At the airport he and his father had their goodbye.

The plane was ready and waiting for him. He donned his flight gear and climbed into the open cockpit. Once he was settled and had checked his instruments, he signaled that he was good to go. The engine roared to life and moment later he was at the end of the runway ready to take off.

The yellow Stearman rose into the afternoon sky. Soon the lowering sun was behind him as he headed east. All the way he reflected on his day. It had certainly been worth it. He felt as if he had taken a big step over the last couple of days. Now he could really focus on his new command and the business of war. He knew that it would still be a while before he could take off his wedding ring, at least he was more certain that that day would come.

About a half hour out, he radioed ahead with his approach position and asked that Commander Owen be notified that he was on his way. Soon he was on his final approach as he made his descent. The landing was smooth and routine. It was good to have been at the controls again. He missed flying on a regular basis.

Mace was waiting for him at the training hangar to take him home for the evening. That night Sheffield was more at peace than he had been for a long time. He found it easy to go to sleep that night. After all tomorrow was going to be a big day and he was ready for it; in more ways than one. Not only would he assume command of the Reprisal, but he also ready to take command of the rest of his life.

Yes, he still missed Geannie and the kids, but he knew that he would be alright. He couldn't quite see the light at the end of the tunnel, but he knew that it was there. He knew what it would take to get there because it was Geannie who had showed him the way. After all, she had been showing him the way all of his life.

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