

## Chapter I

### Reprisal

April 29, 1942 – June 4, 1942

Sheffield awoke from the dream quite shaken by it. Then it dawned on him, that it was the answer to what had been gnawing at him ever since that fateful day. The thought kept crossing his mind, "If I had only resigned from the Navy after Charles Emmett died. I could have gone to work for an airline and none of this would have happened."

It occurred to him with great force that it wouldn't have mattered if he had resigned from the Navy or stayed in. Either way, the result would have been the same. Again, he remembered being in the chapel at the Academy pleading for twenty more years with Geannie as she lay dieing from the influenza. He realized that God had kept his word and the twenty years would have been fulfilled one way or the other.

Unable to go back to sleep after the dream, he decided to go ahead and get up. After all, it was already four thirty. He kept thinking about the dream as he got ready for the day. As he compared the dream to that day in December he came to realize the futility of asking, "What if?". It wouldn't have made any difference in the end. What was important was that they had a wonderful life together. It didn't make him feel any better, but at least maybe now he could stop blaming himself.

As he put on his dress blues, he found it interesting that he had such a vivid dream, a vision actually, after the experience he had at the cemetery with Geannie only the day before. Putting the two together, he realized that it must be a sign from God. Was he healed from the loss and the pain? No. Not by a long ways but it was what he needed at that time.

With that obstacle out of the way, Sheffield had taken another big step in getting on with his life and the matters at hand. He had a ship ready to get ready to sail off to war. Sheffield knelt beside the bed and offered his morning prayer, expressing gratitude, asking for the insight into what was, and sought guidance for what was to be. By the time he got up off his knees, he heard someone stirring out in the kitchen.

Pat, wearing her bathrobe and curlers in her hair, greeted him, "Good morning Sheffield. Mason will be out in a moment and breakfast is about ready. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Yes, please." As she filled a mug for him he continued, "Thanks for your hospitality and putting me up for the last two nights."

Pat poured herself some coffee and sat down at the table with him. "It's been our pleasure. We haven't seen much of you since we left Hawaii, other than briefly at the funereal. Now that you're here and you and Mace will be serving together, please feel free to come by anytime. There will be a home cooked meal waiting for you. It will be a break from living aboard the ship and eating whatever it is they feed you guys."

Setting down his cup, he responded with, "Thank you, Pat. I think I'll take you up on that."

Just then Commander Owen came out into the kitchen, also in his dress blues. "Good morning, sir."

"Look, Mace. I'm a guest in your home for heavens sake. Save the sir stuff for the ship." Sheffield chided.

"Alright then. Sheffield, are you ready for today?"

"I've been looking forward to it ever since I got my orders."

"I will be as soon as I get some of those pancakes down me." Mace said. "I hope you're hungry."

Turning to Pat Sheffield said, "I'm really not very hungry, but they sure smell good."

"I made plenty, just for you." Pat protested.

"Alright I'll have a couple."

"Would you like your egg on top or to the side?"

"On top, please."

Mace devoured a fresh stack of pancake from the griddle while he told Sheffield about what he had lined up for the day. When he was finished, Sheffield left his only half eaten. As they left, he thanked Pat for their hospitality and complimented her on her pancakes.

After breakfast, Mason drove Sheffield to the dock where the Reprisal was tied up. That is when he got his first look at his new command. Sheffield commented as he stepped out of the car, "She sure is a handsome ship. She looks a lot like the Enterprise, only bigger."

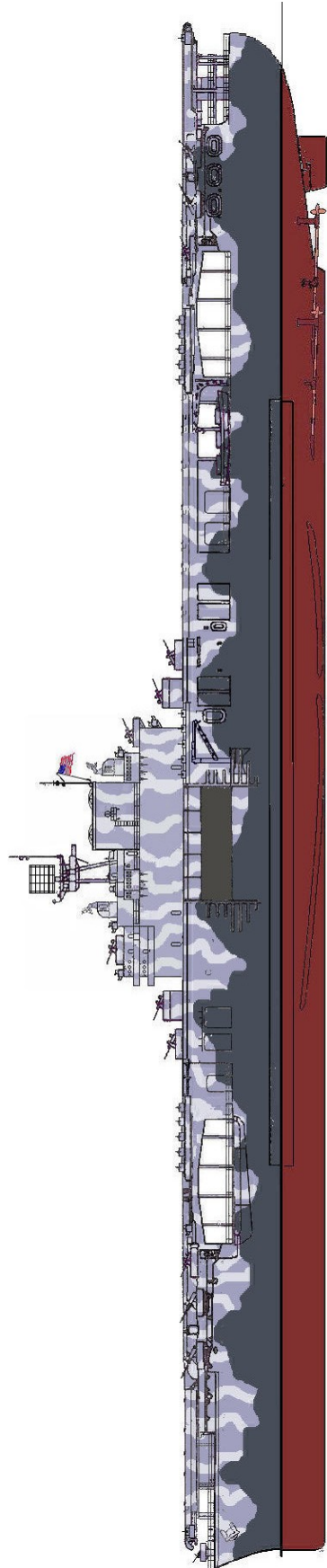
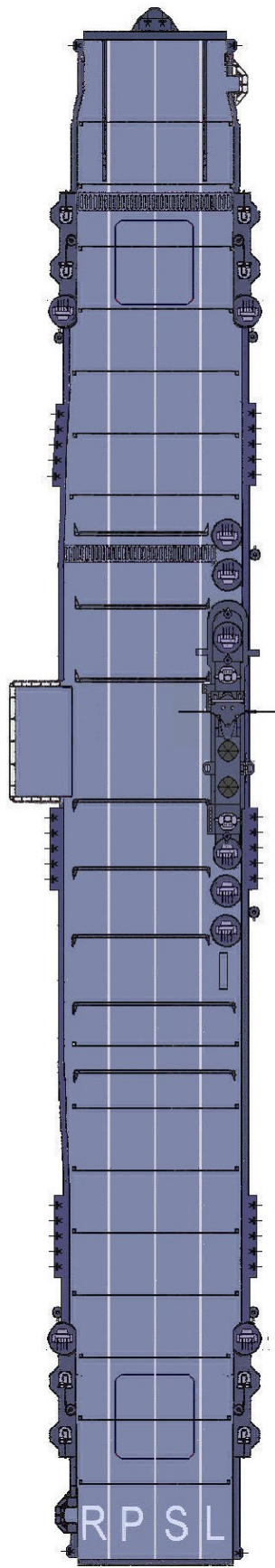
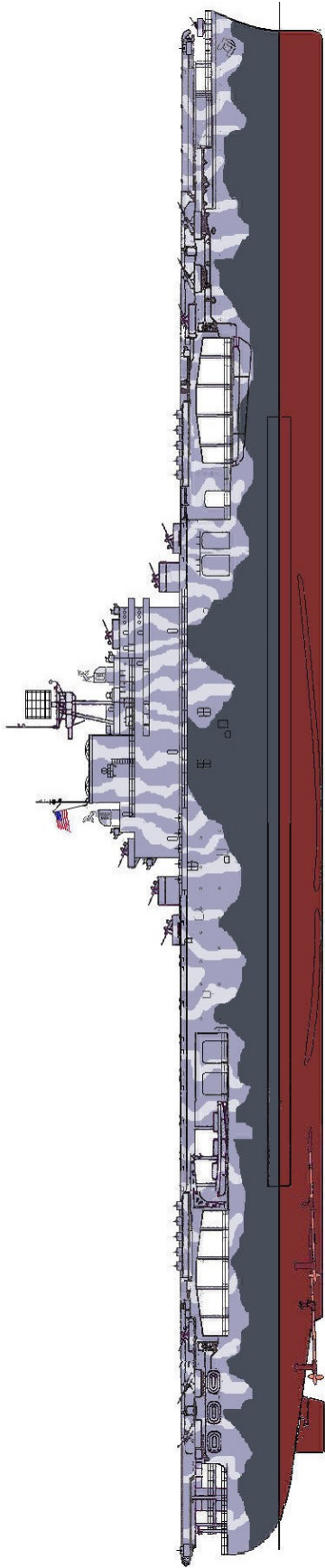
Walking up and down the dock looking her over, he noticed that the lower hull was painted sea blue separated by an uneven wavy line at the hangar deck level from the ocean gray with haze gray streaks on the upper hull and super structure.

"Her armament hasn't been installed yet, but when it is," Mace asked. "do you think eight five inch guns, ten one point one mounts and thirty six twenty millimeters will do the trick?"

"That, and a sharp crew." Sheffield answered. "I'm afraid we're going to find out all too soon."

Proper military protocol took over as they reached the gangplank. Commander Owen allowed Captain Brason to go aboard first. As he stepped onto the quarterdeck, he faced aft to salute the flag flying from the fantail. He then turned and faced the officer of the deck and saluted the young Lieutenant. As the officer of the deck returned the salute, the boatswains mate standing next to him piped the captain aboard.

From the quarterdeck, they made their way up to the flight deck. The redwood planks had been stained blue gray with light gray lines outlining the runway. They made their way to the aft end of the flight deck where the letters R P S L were spelled out in light gray. This was an archaic identification system that had been phased out on the carriers in the Pacific. "I kind of missed that when they did away with it on the Big E." Sheffield lamented. "I want to keep the traditional alive on this ship."



“You should hear it from me first, before you hear it from someone else, but the the crew has already given her the a knick name.”

“And what is that?”

“They tenderly refer her as Rapunsel.”

Sheffield chuckled. “ I can see where they got that from. RPSL. It even sounds somewhat similar to Reprisal. I remember reading the story of Rapunsel to Sandy when she was a little girl.”

“You're okay with the name?”

“Sure, why not? It gives her a feminine persona, kind of like the Sara”

Together they strolled up to the superstructure and made their way to the bridge where all of the senior officers were assembled. “The Captain's on the bridge!” the officer of the deck called out. The twelve men came to attention and saluted.

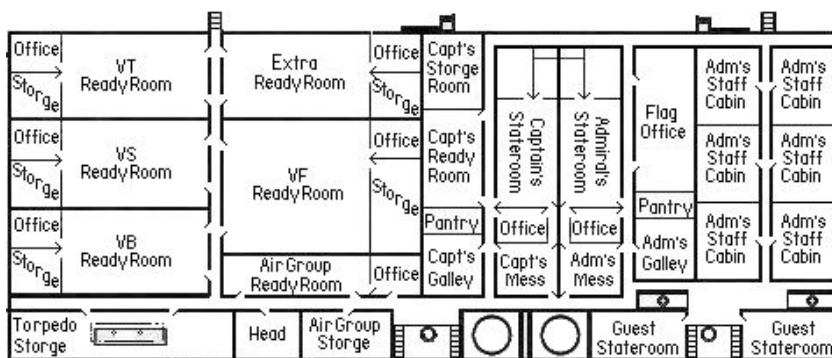
Sheffield returned the salute and said “At ease, gentlemen.”

Commander Owen spoke next, “Gentlemen. It is my privileged to introduce Capitan Sheffield Brason, our commanding officer.”

“Its good to finally be here.” Sheffield said. “I'd of been here sooner except I was detained by a special mission in the Pacific. I'd like to thank Commander Owen and all of you to holding down the fort until I could get here. The Commander assures me that I will find everything in order. I am confident that that is the case. Now Mace, will you introduce these men to me. I look forward to meeting you in person and getting to know you.”

Commander Owen introduced each of the officers to Sheffield. He already knew about them from the biographical information he had received. They were: Lieutenant Commander Seymour Whitouse, the air officer; Lieutenant Commander Conrad Eaton, the engineering officer; Lieutenant Commander Henry Stockton, the gunnery officer; Commander Orlando James, the commander of the Reprisal Air Group; Lieutenant Joel Williams, the navigation officer; Lieutenant Melvin Gates, the supply officer; Lieutenant Charles McFadden, the damage control officer; Lieutenant Paul Cameron, the communications officer; Lieutenant Wally Bashor, the chief medial officer; and Lieutenant (junior grade) Doug Fellows, the chaplain.

Also present were Major Manning Jerbowski, the commander of the marine detachment; and Senior Chief Xavier Solozar, the ranking enlisted man in the ships company. Whitouse, Eaton, James, and Stockton were more seasoned



officers, as was Solozar, while the rest were less experienced, but highly capable nonetheless.

Sheffield noticed with curiosity the red “baker” flag posted prominently on the bridge. Among its various meanings, one was “No Smoking”. “Mace must have put it there.” he thought to himself. He had obviously briefed them about him. Although he could smell tobacco on most all of them, they showed respect for their new captain by not smoking in his presence. It was also obvious that they were also careful to refrain from cursing around him as well.

After the formalities, the officers were dismissed and Commander Owen took Sheffield on a guided tour of the ship. In each department the senior officer had the opportunity to brief the Captain on the status of their area of responsibilities.

Following the tour and the briefings, Sheffield settled into his quarters. His stateroom was much more luxurious than anything he ever had before. It was twice the size of the staterooms that he had aboard the Enterprise. His in-port-cabin was part of larger suite that included all of the compartments down both sides of the corridor that ran across the galley deck, immediately below the flight deck. The passageway was perpendicular to the aft uptake shaft in the stack.

The spacious stateroom was 540 square feet, measuring eighteen feet by thirty feet. That didn't include a private bathroom, complete with a tub. Nor did it include a large walk in closet. The stateroom itself had an actual bed rather than a bunk, a nightstand with a lamp, a chest of drawers with a mirror, a dresser, and a bench at the foot of the bed. Inside the bench were some extra blankets. The sleeping section could be separated from the living section by drawing a curtain across the room.

The living section had a sofa, two wingback chairs, a coffee table, and small table with two chairs. The entire room had a wainscot of wood paneling covering the steel bulkhead with wallpaper above. The deck was covered with carpet. The furniture, except for the chairs, were secured in place to keep them from sliding across the deck during stormy seas or sharp turns. Even the drawers had latches on them to keep them closed.

Except for the fact that there were no windows to the outside, it didn't look like it was on a ship. It needed some wall hangings to give it a homey touch. Sheffield decided to bring some things that they had in their home in Hawaii to spruce the place up a little. All of that was in the storage shed behind the Austin Mansion. The picture of Geannie that he brought with him went on the nightstand. He would definitely bring some family portraits and the large painting of a sailing ship under full sail that Geannie had got for him as birthiversary gift early in their marriage. It had always been prominently displayed in the living room everywhere they had lived over the years. Another picture he wanted to bring was one of Jesus knocking at the door. It had hung in their bedroom for years. As he put his things away, he wasn't sure what to do with the dress he had bought nearly a year earlier for Geannie as a birthaversary gift, so he stashed it in the

closet. He wasn't ready to part with it yet.

A private hallway lead from the stateroom to the Captain's Office and the wardroom. His office featured an executive desk and swivel chair. Behind the desk was a credenza and a couple of filing cabinets were off to the side. Across from the desk where a couple of wooden arm chairs.

He decorated his office with some framed photographs that he had brought from his office in the administration building at Pearl Harbor. Geannie had made enlargements of photos from various stages in his career and had framed them. There was one of him as a young Ensign at the helm of the old Wadsworth. There were pictures of him setting in the cockpit of the various aircraft he had flown over the years. Other photos were of him with the men he had served with. There was one of Shorty, Freddy and him. Another one with him, Tomcat and Scope. There were some squadron group photos of the various squadrons he had been in. He had a photograph of Admiral Halsey's staff aboard the Enterprise that he still needed a frame for. A real prize was the one depicting his naval heritage. Geannie had found somewhere a photograph of the CSS *Shenandoah*, the full rigged steam cruiser that his grandfather had served aboard during the Civil War. In framing it, she had inserted a photo of his grandfather, Peter Brason as an officer in the Confederate Navy. The photo that he treasured the most was the one of Geannie and him with President Hoover taken at the campaign rally for Senator Austin in Arlington.

The captain's wardroom was a private dining room with enough room for himself and six or seven dinner guests. The office and wardroom followed the same decor as the stateroom. In the wardroom was a china hutch full of nice china, flatware, and crystal glasses. The hutch was built in such away that it and its contents were secure from the rolling and pitching of the ship.

While Sheffield was checking out the wardroom, a handsome young black man stepped out of the galley, directly across the corridor from the wardroom, and entered the wardroom. He came to attention and saluted. "Cap'an Brason, Sir. Seaman Second Class Reginald Jackson at your service."

Sheffield returned the salute. "At ease Seaman Jackson." He extended his hand and added, "I'm pleased to meet you. Can you cook as good as your mother?"

"Oh yes sir, Cap'an."

"I'm sure you can, but can you cook as good as my mother?"

"I understand the Cap'an is from Virginia, so I assume you appreciate fine southern cookin."

"That's right, and a lot more."

"Then you and me should get along just fine sir. Just tell me what you like, and if I have it, I'll fix it for you. What would y'all like for supper. Sir?"

"I'll tell you what Reggie. Do you mind if I call you Reggie?"

"No, sir. Thats what everyone calls me."

“Alright then, Reggie, why don't you surprise me.”

Reggie flashed the biggest grin and replied, “Yes, sir.”

Tell, me Reggie, how long have you been in the Navy?”

“Two years, sir.”

“And what do you think of the Reprisal?”

“Why sir, she's the finest ship in the Navy. Everyone on board says so too.”

Sheffield took an instant liking to Reggie. He seemed to be polite and conscientious. He obviously had a good upbringing. Sheffield could see that this intelligent young man of twenty four had far more potential than what he was limited to by society because of the color of his skin.

Directly across the hall from the captain's wardroom was the captain's galley where Reggie prepared his meals. It included the all of the features of any kitchen, including a large pantry which could be stocked with whatever he wanted, providing it was available.

Continuing down the passageway, the captain's ready room was directly across from his stateroom. It was basically a conference room with a long table surrounded by several chairs, enough to seat twenty people. Others could be seated along the far wall if needed. At the end of the room, behind the captain's chair, was a large blackboard, with a bulletin board on either side. This is were he would hold meetings with his senior staff and others. The last compartment in the suite was a storage locker that contained a variety of gear, including folding chairs and other miscellaneous equipment.

On the next corridor over, forward of the captain's suite was the nearly identical Admiral's suite. Beyond that was another corridor with six smaller staterooms for the senior members of the Admiral's staff. This area was known as the Admiral's Country and was vacant except for when an admiral and his staff were embarked.

In the opposite direction, the other half of the galley deck was comprised of the squadron and air group ready rooms. The galley deck was noncontiguous. This section was 235 feet in length and covered center section over the hangar. The passageways lead either up into the superstructure to starboard or up onto the catwalk along the flight deck to port on either side of the outboard elevator.

The section of the flight deck between galley deck and the fore and aft elevators was supported by support girders that spanned the width of the hangar. Forward and aft of the elevators, the galley deck contained more officer's cabins, some were smaller private staterooms, others were shared cabins with two bunks.

All in all, Sheffield had a pretty nice place aboard the ship. It was intended to be a comfortable place for the captain to stay while on duty and away from his home port. It wasn't really meant to be a permanent residence. That is exactly what he intended to make it. A home ashore just wouldn't be home without

Geannie and the kids there. To him, it was perfect for the lonely, grieving, recluse of a widower that he was. In addition to his stateroom, he also had a sea cabin adjacent to the bridge. It provided a place close by to rest when he was likely to be called the bridge. The sea cabin was sparsely equipped, containing just a bunk, a desk, and basic toilet facilities.

After getting settled in his cabin, Sheffield spent the rest of the afternoon reviewing reports and other statistics regarding what had been accomplished prior to his arrival. The thing he came away with was the competence of the officers and crew as they worked to get the ship ready. He knew he had dedicated bunch of men in whom he could depend on in any situation.

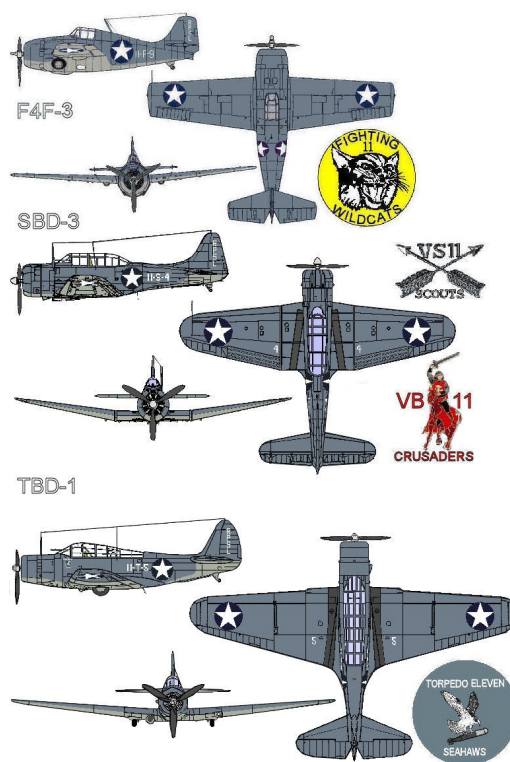
That evening, Reggie had prepared southern fried chicken, complete with mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, and biscuits fresh from the ship's bakery. Sheffield sat down to eat, but only picked at it.

Reggie noticed and asked, "Is something wrong, Cap'an?"

"Oh, no, Reggie. Everything is fine. Thats some of the best fried chicken I've had. It's just that I haven't had much of an appetite lately." Then Sheffield found himself confiding in this young man some of his deepest feelings regarding the grief that he was still dealing with. Reggie listened with empathy without trying to offer any advise, he simply listened, showing interest in how his captain felt.

The next day he and Commander Whithouse, called on the air group stationed at Norfolk Naval Air Station. He had known Commander James when he was the commanding officer of Torpedo Three on the Saratoga before the war. Sheffield became acquainted with him while severing as Admiral Halsey's air officer when he spent a few days at sea aboard the Saratoga observing and presenting his training material.

The Reprisal Air Group and the four associated squadrons were created on December 1, 1941 . Fighting Eleven consisted of twenty four Grumman F4F-3s with non-folding wings, since the newer F4F-4s were urgently needed by the squadrons in the Pacific. Lieutenant Commander Stewart "Loverboy" Lovelace was the squadron commander, which was appropriately named the Wildcats. Their logo was the face of wildcat in a yellow circle. Sheffield was particularly pleased to





see another good friend, Lieutenant Ronald “Cowboy” Perry. Cowboy had once been his wingman back in the days of Bombing Two on the Saratoga. It was Cowboy who had filled Tomcat's slot after his tragic death. Cowboy was now the executive officer of Fighting Eleven.

Two squadrons, Scouting Eleven and Bombing Eleven were made up Douglas SBD-3 Dauntless dive bombers.

Consisting of twelve SBD-3s, the Scouting Eleven Scouts commanded by Lieutenant Commander Timothy “Cub” Lyon, adopted the crossed arrow insignia of the Indian scouts of the US Cavalry in the days of the old west as their logo.

The Crusaders of Bombing Eleven were under the command of Lieutenant Commander Gene “Snoops” Elder with fifteen aircraft. Their logo was a mounted mid-evil knight from the crusades wielding a sword.

Lastly, the Torpedo Eleven Seahawks under Lieutenant Jack “Lumber Jack” Timberwood only had nine Douglas TBD-1 Devastators. Their logo sported an osprey with a torpedo clutched in its talons. A tenth Devastator was allocated to Commander James.

Except for the Wildcats, the squadrons of the air group were under strength since they were still getting organized. More planes and personnel, both of which were scarce, would be forthcoming in the months ahead.

In addition to the individual squadron logos, all of the aircraft in the air group had RPSL spelled out in white letters arranged vertically on the rudder. The use of the squadron number in the identification number had been phased out in the Pacific for security reasons. Not so with the Reprisal Air Group. Each aircraft bore the squadron number, 11 in each case; the squadron type, F for fighter, B for bombing, S for scouting, and T for torpedo; and last number was the number of the plane with in the squadron. It was just like the system that had been used in Sheffield's early flying days.

After meeting with the squadrons, the three men retired to Commander James' office. “I'm very pleased with what I've seen here today, Commander.” Sheffield directed the comment to the air group commander. Then he asked, “What have you used for your training regiment?”

“Funny you should ask.” Commander James smiled. He turned around and picked up a stapled booklet from his credenza and held it up to show the Captain. “Does this look familiar?”

Sheffield chuckled as he read the title on the cover, “Aircraft Battle Force Pacific Fleet: Air Group and Air Department Training Manual, Commander S. Brason, USN.”

“I brought a copy of it with me when I left the Sara. Each squadron in the air group has copies of it and have implemented it as their training program.”

At that Commander Whithouse added, “That's not all, Captain. Orlando made a copy for me and I

have duplicated it and distributed throughout the air department and my men have been going through it as well. I might add, that is some pretty comprehensive material. Top notch stuff, sir.”

“Thank you. But I must admit that isn't all mine. I simply compiled it from my observations and with a lot of input from others.”

“You're too modest, sir. I was there when you put it together.” Commander James reminded him.

“Well,” Captain Brason responded, “I'm pleased to see that it being used.” Changing the subject he commented, “I see some of the men are veterans of the neutrality patrols here in the Atlantic before the war.”

“I wish some of them had some actual combat experience.” Commander James answered. “You're the only one that has seen any action, sir. Pearl Harbor and the Pacific raids.”

Sheffield squirmed in his seat as Commander Whithouse added, “Not to mention a purple heart.” Then he added, “I don't believe any of the ship's company have seen any action either, sir.”

“How much deck time has the squadrons had?”

“Some here and there, whenever the Wasp or Ranger are available. The thing is, neither of them have been around lately. The last time we had any deck time was about three weeks ago after the Ranger completed her overhaul. The only other options are the auxiliary carriers Long Island and Charger, but they are so small that they can only accommodate two squadrons at a time. We have used them from time to time.”

“Well gentleman,” Captain Brason concluded, “we have our work cut out for us. Our goal is to whip things into shape before they send us to the Pacific. That's where we're needed, you know. The master plan calls for a couple of days at sea during the third week in June and a couple of times in July before the shakedown cruise. That will really give us a chance to show what we're made of. I know we aren't up to strength yet. We need to build a good solid core with what we have so when we get new men, most of them will be new and inexperienced, they can be worked in to well functioning units. The same goes for the ship's company.”

They went on to discuss the work that needed to be done in the few months that lay ahead. At the conclusion of the meeting, Captain Brason informed the two senior airmen, “Ever since I flew off the Langley in the dark off Panama during an exercise many years ago, I have been fascinated with the idea of flying at night. What would you say if I told you that I intend to implement night operations on this ship? What do you think of that? Will you give some thought to the concept?”

Commander James reflected, “Let me see what we can come up with.”

After the tour, Commander Whithouse accompanied Sheffield back to the ship.

The following week, the Reprisal went to sea for a day to conduct her final acceptance sea trials.

The trials were conducted with strict security measures in place due to the potential threat of German U-boats lurking just off shore. She was accompanied by 4 destroyers, while the more experienced pilots from the Reprisal Air Group operating from the Norfolk Naval Air Station flew anti-submarine patrols. In addition, two airships drifted over the trials area.

On board were representatives from the Bureau of Ships and Newport News Shipbuilding to observe as the captain put the ship through its paces. One by one, items on the checklist were marked off. The trials were successful and the ship was given the go ahead for her scheduled commissioning. That evening she returned to port without incident.

During the month of May, the Reprisal remained at Newport News for further fitting out in order to be ready for her June 7<sup>th</sup> commissioning date. News of the Battle of Coral Sea and the loss of the Lexington reached the East Coast on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May. Now more than ever the Reprisal was needed in the Pacific.

During that time Sheffield settled into his new command. He drew upon his prior command experience as a squadron and air group commander, but it was his time as executive officer that he found to be most helpful. It was a busy time for him and he found that he didn't dwell as much on Geannie and the kids. When they did cross his mind, the emptiness in his life stung at his heart. It didn't help that he rarely left the ship. Occasionally Pat would insist that Mason would pry him away and bring him home with him for a home cooked meal.

Along with the responsibility, command had its perks too. Some of the other benefits included access to a car complete with a chauffeur while in port, not to mention the captain's barge. Each Sunday he made it a point to attend Lieutenant Fellows services on the hangar deck.

At the end of the month, Sheffield took the Thursday afternoon train home to Roanoke for a relaxing three day visit over Memorial Day. Waiting for him at the depot were Emmett and Ellen. It had only been a month since he dropped in unexpectedly for the afternoon. It was nice to have him home for a little longer this time. Rather than first going home, Sheffield had his father drive them downtown where he treated them to dinner. By the time they got home it was late in the evening, too late for anyone to stop by and greet him.

On Friday morning, Walt and Sarah stopped in for a visit. After some casual chit chat, Walt invited Sheffield to go next door with him and took him in his office at the church to have for an emotional check up. It was a week short of six months since Geannie and the kids had been killed and as his minister, Walt wanted to know how he was doing.

He was concerned that he had become too reclusive and hadn't progressed as much as he hoped he would during that amount of time. For one thing, Walt said, "I'm concerned about you living on the ship

when you're in port. I really think that you should find an apartment or someplace off the ship.”

“I appreciate your concern, Walt. But, if I had a home, it would only remind me all the more of what is missing. What good is a home without a family?”

“I see your point. Curly. I'd just like to see you more engaged and interact with people, and I mean other than at work.”

“Mace dose take me home with him at least once a week for dinner.”

“That's a start.” Walt conceded. “Trust me, if you try to be a little more outgoing, like I know you to be, it will help you through this better.”

They went on to talk some more and at the end of their visit, Sheffield thanked him and promised to try to take his advise. When they went back over to their folks Shenan and Emily had stopped by to say hi.

Memorial Day was always a big deal for the Brasons. It had been four years since Sheffield, Geannie and the kids had been there for Memorial Day. Early in the morning Sarah came over and she and Ellen and Marie went to work cutting fresh flowers from both yards and arranging them into bouquets. The peonies had bloomed just in time. There were plenty of irises, or flags, as Ellen called them, and a host of other flowers and blossoms. By the time they were done, there were plenty of flowers for the cemetery and lots of color left in their yards.

After arranging the bouquets Ellen and Sarah enlisted the help of Emmett and Sheffield in preparing for the famous Brason Memorial Day picnic. Their first task was to go next door to the church to get some tables and chairs.

As they went into the church, Walt was there taking care of some bookwork. He finished up what he was doing and he called home for his sons to come and help. A few minutes later Tim, who was home on a three day weekend pass' and Curtis showed up. Together the five of them made the first trip with a table and a several of chairs. No sooner than they had set up the table complete with a table cloth, Walt's daughters Emmeline and Sylvia were waiting with the first load of items from the kitchen. The men made another trip to the church. This time when they returned, Shenan and Emily and their family had just arrived with all of their children, including Danny who had just graduated from the University of Virginia the previous weekend. Emily and the girls were put to work in kitchen while the guys made one more trip to church.

Once everything was set up and ready for the picnic, everyone piled into four separate cars, already loaded with flowers, for the trip to the cemetery. When they got there, Marie was already there with Charlie, Winslow, Stirling and their families. Marie had a hug for Sheffield and took him by one arm while in his other arm was a particularly special bouquet as she led him over to the graves of Geannie, Sandy, Austin, and Charles Emmett. She had already laid out her flowers. Sheffield placed his next to the headstone that bore both his and Geannie's names. Ellen and Sarah placed more flowers on the graves of the children.

What followed next was a somber moment as they all gathered around in silence reflecting on those who would not be joining them for the picnic that day. No one walked away with a dry eye. Sheffield lingered for a moment while everyone set about putting out the rest of the flowers. Ellen invited Marie to join them for the picnic. She in turn invited Sheffield to join the Austins for Sunday dinner the next day.

After returning from the cemetery, the rest of the picnic was brought out. The serving table was laden with southern fried chicken, a picnic ham, potato salad, baked beans, relish trays, a tub of Walt's homemade root beer, two watermelons, and a host of pies. Ellen, Sarah, and Emily had worked for two days getting it all ready.

Once everything was ready, Grandpa Brason said Grace and asked the Lord's blessings on his family. In all, twenty people were there. Besides Geannie and the kids, the only one missing was Emmeline's husband of six weeks who was away at Marine boot camp. In addition, Sylvia's boyfriend was there as were Danny's fiancée and Joe's girlfriend. Oh, and Marie of course.

There was plenty of food and a lot of good conversation. Everyone was particularly interested in Sheffield and his new ship.

"Well," he began, "Everything is set for a week from tomorrow. I'd like to have as many of you as can come over to Norfolk for her commissioning. I know you have responsibilities here with services and all, Walt, but I have arranged for you to give the invocation and blessing on the ship and crew. Typically it is done by the ship's chaplain, but I asked if a former army chaplain's assistant would do. How about it?"

"I think I can arrange for that. My assistants can handle things for one Sunday."

Tim spoke up, "I saw your ship about a month ago when you took her out for sea trials. My blimp was patrolling the area. She's a real beauty Uncle Sheffield."

"Well, thanks Tim."

Tim continued, "I'd like to get to do some real flying. Dangling from a bag of hot air just doesn't cut it. I'd love to hop in the back seat of one of your Dauntlesses."

"I can tell you from experience that it is a real thrill." Sheffield commented. "I have gone along in the rear seat a few times as a passenger. One time was particularly exciting. That was when I got two Zeros." Then he paused, "That was the day..." he couldn't finish.

Sarah finished for him, "We all know what that day was."

After a moment of awkward silence, Sheffield continued, "You know Tim, our squadrons aren't up to strength yet, over the next three months we're going to need some more radiomen. Maybe you could transfer into one of the squadrons."

That is when Daniel jumped into the conversation. "You know Uncle Sheffield, I'm heading to officers training school here in a couple of weeks."

“Yeah I know. You'll be what we academy men call a 'six week wonder'. But don't let that bother you. We need all of the good officers we can get.”

“Anyway,” Danny continued, “once I receive my commission, Rachel here and I are getting married and I'll be off to flight school. Maybe I can get assigned to one of the squadrons on your ship.”

“Yeah,” Tim chimed in, and I can be your radioman.”

Ellen who had been in on another conversation, overheard. “Oh no you don't. I don't want you all on the same boat. All it would take is for one torpedo and I'd loose the whole lot of you.”

The conversation turned to other topics. Ellen had noticed him picking at his food. He had hardly touched it. The concerned mother that she was had to say something, even though he was a grown man. “Why Sheffield,” she began. “You have hardly touched your dinner.”

“I guess I'm just not hungry, Mom.”

“Are you ever? It looks to me like you're never hungry. I noticed it last time you here but I didn't say anything. This time I can't keep quiet, so I'm just going to come out and say it. You're as skinny as a rail. Why you practically have no meat on your bones anymore.” Then she added, “I'm worried about you.”

Sheffield admitted, “I skip breakfast now and then. I just haven't had much of an appetite since...” He didn't finish his sentence but she knew what he was going to say.

“It looks to me like, its more than skipping breakfast now and then. Why even your face is gaunt. You need to start taking better care of yourself, boy. Now eat. You used to love my fried chicken and potatoes salad. Whats the matter, have I lost my touch?”

“No ma'am.”

“Then eat boy. Eat.”

She sat there and watched to make sure he did. Under her watchful eye he felt compelled. It was good. It was really good. He had forgotten how good it was. Once he finished. She offered to refill his plate. He insisted, “No more. I couldn't eat another byte. It was really good.”

“Good, I'm glad that you enjoyed it. Now promise your mother something. Take better care of yourself and make sure you get your nourishment. You do have people who cook on that ship of yours don't you?”

“Of course. As captain I have my own private steward and he's pretty good, but not as good as you Mom.” He went onto tell them about Reggie.

Being surrounded by his family helped him to lessen the reality of who was missing at the gathering. It was a perfect day for a family reunion. Perhaps the last one that everyone would all be together, at least for the foreseeable future. Hopefully the gathering next year or the year after that won't include a tribute to someone who had fallen in battle. For one day, at least, the war seemed not be happening. Neither Seaman

Second Class Timothy Brason nor Captain Sheffield Brason wore their uniforms that day.

However, the next day they did, as they all attended services together at Green Memorial Methodist Church with the rest of the family. Sheffield did try to take Walt's advice and rather than hold back, he engaged in visiting with several people who went out of their way to talk to him. He got three invitations to Sunday dinner, one of which was from Samantha and Mike Taylor. In each case, he politely declined, explaining that already had an invitation.

After Church, Sheffield spent a delightful afternoon and evening with the Austins. He was glad that that they still considered him a part of their family. Again, he barely touched what was on his plate; a fact that didn't go unnoticed by Marie, who had to insist that he eat something.

On Monday morning Sheffield went through the items that he had in storage in the shed behind the Austin Mansion. He was looking for some specific items that he wanted to take back with him to spruce up his stateroom. In the process he ran across the bundle of letters that he had received from Geannie. He had been giving some thought to what he might say in his commissioning address and something she had said in one of her letters while he was the Executive Officer on the Enterprise came to mind. He began thumbing through them and quickly found the one he was looking for. In his mind he heard her voice as he read:

*November 22, 1940*

*Dear Curly,*

*I don't know about you, but I am certainly glad that Thanksgiving is over. How did yours go? I'm sure that it was lonely there all by yourself. This now makes two in a row that we have been apart for Thanksgiving. Whats even worse is that this will be the second birthaversary and Christmas that we'll be apart as well.*

*Yesterday over fifteen hundred wives and children from Enterprise families crowded into the hangar deck of the Yorktown. On behalf of Admiral Halsey, Commander Browning welcomed all of the families and in his brief remarks he all but took credit for the gathering. I see what you mean about him. Then Admiral Halsey personally addressed the families*

and thanked us for the service that our husbands and fathers were providing to our nation. He said that the reason the men under his command were as good as they were was because of the wives that all too often were left behind. At the end of his remarks, the Yorktown's chaplain said Grace and dinner was served. The kids and I were seated at the same table as the Admiral and his wife.

I was very satisfied with the way the event turned out. The first thing that I did was to write a letter of thanks to Admiral Halsey. Then I wanted to write to you and tell you all about it. I have something else to tell you too. Mace Owen was transferred to the east coast to be the executive officer of the seaplane tender, *Albemarle*. He and his family left just before Thanksgiving. I will miss them I hope someday we cross paths with them again.

So tell me all about how your Thanksgiving dinner for the crew went. Its too bad that I couldn't have met you there for a rendezvous. Those little get aways are always so fun. The only trouble with living in Paradise is that it is so far away. What I really would like to have done is to have gone home to Roanoke, with you of course. Maybe next year.

Its nice to have a break from school. Tomorrow Sandy, Austin, Ramona and I are going out to her beach house. It should be fun.

I think I have a little bit of an idea what your job entails, especially when it comes to your responsibility for the crew. Sure there is a lot more to trying to motivate three thousand sailors and instill discipline in them than what I have with a hundred and twenty eighth graders when it comes to history. But the thing I have learned over the years as a teacher is that I can't motivate them anymore than I can demand discipline. All I can do is



get them to motivate themselves to do their part by challenging them and making it interesting. Just like how you got the men excited and motivated to man their stations more quickly.

When it comes to discipline, if you demand it, you won't get it and in the process you lose their respect and loyalty. At least with school children, if I let them know and understand what I expect, they step up to the plate, to use a baseball term. (You know how much I love baseball.) They discipline themselves to be punctual, cooperative, and do their fair share, even going out of their way to do more. Sometimes discipline is too often associated with punishment.

I've got some good kids in my classes and I know that you have some good men aboard the Big E. I hear that they're the best in the Navy. It's your job to motivate them to be better. Let them know what you expect and they will be loyal to their ship, the Navy, and their country. Solidarity is the end result of discipline.

Wow! I really waxed philosophical there didn't I. I really didn't mean too. I'm not sure why I even got off on that. Any way, take it for what it's worth.

So, do you still reckon you'll be back sometime right after the first of the year? I can't wait. Neither can Sandy and Austin. Until then, I anxiously await your next letter.

Take care of yourself and remember, I love you. I always will.

Seannie

Reading her letter again made him feel that she was still part of him. He found some wisdom in what she said and it gave him an idea for his address. Rather than putting the bundle of letters away, he put them with the things he was taking back to the ship with him. He had to hurry to get down to the depot in time to

make the afternoon train back to Norfolk.

When he returned to Norfolk, his car and chauffeur were waiting to take him back to the ship over at Newport News. Fortunately the things he brought with him fit in the trunk. When he got back to the ship, it was unloaded and taken to his stateroom. The main item he brought was their Victrola phonograph player and records. He had it attached to the bulkhead so it wouldn't fall over and get knocked around in rough seas. Among other things, he also brought Gennie's Bible and the model airplane that he and Austin had built and displayed it in his office. The miniature yellow Stearman looked as if it were in flight, suspended from the overhead above his desk.

Captain Brason now felt right at home surrounded by the familiar furnishings in his stateroom and he had settled in to his new command. In a few days the new ship would be placed in commission. He, his officers, and the crew were ready to get her in ship shape and go take care of what Sheffield had come to refer to as the "Business of War".

\* \* \* \* \*

Fighting Eleven, Bombing Eleven, Scouting Eleven, and Torpedo Eleven were actual squadrons. The use of these squadron numbers here is purely fictional. There weren't any unused numbers available, so I borrowed eleven because it fit the times.