

## Chapter IV

### Shakedown Cruise

August 19, 1942 – September 23, 1942

Captain Brason was well aware of what lay in store for the shakedown cruise, after all this would be his fourth. The first time was as a young Ensign on the Wadsworth. Rather than sailing to Rio de Janeiro as on Ranger and Enterprise, this one would be conducted in the relative safe waters of the Gulf of Mexico. With German U-boats on the prowl, the open waters of the Atlantic Ocean or even the Caribbean were unsafe for an untested ship and an untrained crew. There had been several U-boat attacks all up and down the east coast since January and even a few in the Gulf of Mexico, two just off Louisiana in the last three weeks. Another thing different about this cruise is that Geannie and the kids wouldn't be waiting for him to come home.

The Reprisal sailed out of Hampton Roads at eight o'clock on the morning of August 19<sup>th</sup>, heading east by southeast. Escorted by the destroyers Glenn and Armstrong, Sheffield was the senior officer present and was in overall command of the small group. Passing between Cape Henry and Cape Charles about an hour a half later, they steamed out of Chesapeake Bay into the open Atlantic. Around ten o'clock the air group began arriving and were all aboard by noon, with the exception of six Dauntlesses, three Devastators, and six Wildcats that remained aloft. With German U-boats known to be operating off the eastern seaboard at the time, anti-submarine patrols had to be maintained enroute.

During the afternoon of the first day, the crew got their first gunnery practice as the ship rounded the Outer Banks of North Carolina. A long sleeve was towed behind an airplane by a long cable for the gunners to shoot at. This was their first of several gunnery practices of the cruise. This session lasted all afternoon, only taking breaks to launch and recover aircraft.

The air group conducted gunnery practice as well. A spar, a makeshift raft, was towed five hundred yards behind the ship as moving target. First the fighters swooped in on strafing runs, firing live ammunition. Next, the dive bombers peeled off at twelve thousand feet into sixty to seventy degree dives and dropped practice bombs. Finally, the torpedo planes lined up to drop their practice torpedoes. The idea was to come as close to the spar as possible without destroying it. Someone watching from the ship with a pair of binoculars scored each pilot on his attack.

At sunrise on the second day, they were two hundred fifty miles east of Savannah, Georgia. The Bat Team had been airborne since well before the first light of dawn. Their relief was launched around eight o'clock and they were brought aboard. The main focus of this day was air operations. Since there were more pilots than planes, the planes of the Bat Team were serviced and flown by other pilots during the day.

Prior to sailing, the three small Ford tractors were delivered to the ship and had been hoisted aboard. Rather than conventional traction tread tires, they were fitted turf tread for use on the wooden flight

deck. They were repainted machine gray with US Navy and their property number stenciled along the hood. The machine shop fabricated some towing bars that attached to the plane's landing gear at one end and to the tractor's draw bar at the other. It was found that the tractors did speed up the process considerably. Captain Brason was impressed and wrote up a commendation for his smart thinking and had it delivered to the man who had come up with the idea.

Just after noon, as the three ships were approximately two hundred forty miles east of Jacksonville, Florida, the Armstrong, which was steaming ahead of the Reprisal, made sonar contact with a possible German submarine. The contact was fairly close by, so as precaution the three ships went to general quarters in anticipation of a torpedo attack. An aircraft carrier would be a great target for a U-boat. Lookouts scanned the surface looking for a conning tower breaking the surface, or worse – a spread of torpedoes. The anti-submarine patrol was beefed up with the launch of six more Dauntlesses.

Sheffield was on the bridge monitoring the contact reports when all of sudden he heard gunfire. "What the devil?" he exclaimed as he ran out onto the starboard wing of the bridge in time to see the aft five inch battery cut loose again. A moment later the Glenn opened fire for with all four of her five inch guns. Sheffield and the others with him peered through their binoculars, scouring the water erupting with shell splashes. "Who ordered them to open fire?" he demanded.

Seaman 1<sup>st</sup> Class Andrew Ross was the lookout at the starboard aft five inch gun battery. He spotted a dark object that breached the surface momentarily. Then he saw it again. He pointed it out to Ensign Mathias Conterio, the battery officer. In the excitement of the moment he ordered the two mounts to open fire before the sighting could be called in. The first shells landed short and the object disappeared momentarily only to reappear. Again the battery opened fire as did the Glenn.

Sheffield returned to the plot table on the bridge to size up the situation. The last contact report from the Armstrong put the contact in the opposite direction. He had to wonder, "Are there two of them?" By the time Seaman Ross's sighting report reached the bridge, confusion prevailed. One of the Devastators on anti-submarine patrol nearest the sighting swooped in. As he dove in from above, the pilot had a clear view of the object barley below the surface. He had his radioman radio the ship that it was a whale, approximately forty feet in length.

Once that message was received, Captain Brason ordered cease fire. The gun director officer frantically attempted to get through to the battery officer. The order to cease fire was also flashed to the Glenn. The message was not received until another round had been fired as well as another salvo from the Glenn.

After the shooting stopped, the Devastator made another pass. The radioman reported that the animal was floating on its side. Captain Brason ordered the Glenn to investigate. A few minutes later, it

came to stop along the whale. That is when it had discovered that it was accompanied by a calf. It was determined the the target of the unauthorized gunfire was a forty two foot female Bryde's whale. Both mother and calf were dead.

The normally even tempered Sheffield was livid. Rarely did he get angry, let alone let it show. He demanded to know, "Who gave the order to open fire? I want that battery officer summoned to my office immediately". In the meantime the the actual contact that they were plotting had gone silent. No doubt as a result of the gunfire.

A report was received from the Glenn and brought to the Captain. Upon further investigation, it had been determined that the whales were not killed by a direct hit, but more likely from the concussion of the shells exploding on contact with the water.

The battery officer arrived on the bridge. Saluting the Captain, "Ensign Contario reporting as ordered, Sir."

"Follow me." Sheffield grunted without returning the salute as led the young ensign into his cabin. Once inside he growled, "Close the door behind you." Captain Brason had one question for him, "Did you give the order to open fire?"

Ensign Contario began to explain himself. Sheffield cut him off. "Yes or no, Ensign. Did you give the order?"

"Yes. Sir."

"Did you know that you where shooting at helpless whales?"

"No, sir." he answered in disbelief. "I thought it was a submarine, sir"

Captain Brason, still hot under the collar, planted his hands on his desk as he starred down his subordinate, "You are relived of duty, Ensign. You are confined to your quarters until we can sort through the events that has taken the lives of two innocent creatures. That is all. Dismissed."

Ensign Contario left under escort and Captain Brason returned to the bridge. He was informed that contact had been reestablished, but that it was moving away from their position. About a half an hour later contact was lost altogether. After a tense couple of hours, the danger passed. The order was given to secure from general quarters and resume flight operations.

Commander Stockton was given the charge to piece together what happened. During the remainder of the afternoon, he interviewed Seaman Ross who had made the initial sighting. He also talked to the gun captains of both mounts in the battery. Finally, he talked to Ensign Contario.

Sheffield realized that he hadn't handled that very well and decided to wait until morning to investigate the matter further. It was to everyone's advantage. He had a chance to sleep on it and calm down. He remembered back in November when the Enterprise took the Marine fighter squadron to Wake.

Admiral Halsey had said, "We'll shoot first and figure it out later." He also was able to recognize that his unusual display of anger was probably related to his bookshelf.

The next morning at sunrise, the ships were transiting the Straits of Florida. Sheffield had called for a Captain's Mast at 0800. He, Commander Owen, and Lieutenant Commander Stockton had Ensign Contario brought before them to explain his actions. The purpose of a Captain's Mast is make inquiry into the facts surrounding minor offenses allegedly committed by a member of the crew; afford the accused a hearing as to such offenses; and dispose of such charges by dismissing the charges, imposing punishment under the provisions of military law or referring the case to a court-martial.

Ensign Contario was one of the newly commissioned officers who had reported aboard the ship after it had been commissioned. Since his assignment to the Gunnery Department, his record had been admirable. He had demonstrated exceptional leadership traits and judgment. He had the beginnings of a promising career. No one wanted to see it cut short. Prior to the deliberations, Commander Stockton briefed Sheffield on his interviews with those involved.

A much calmer Captain Brason asked the Ensign to explain his actions. "Tell me Ensign, what were your reasons for opening fire without first reporting the sighting and awaiting orders?"

He answered, "Sir, at that range, a spread of torpedoes could reach the ship in the amount of time that it would have taken to wait for orders. I acted on that premises." He went on to cite the fact, "Surface attacks by U-boats are not all that uncommon. As you know, a submarine on the surface is more maneuverable and faster, giving them an advantage, especially at close range."

Captain Brason asked, "Did the thought that the object might have been a whale cross your mind in making your decision?"

To which he answered. "Yes it did, sir. There was no tail sighting typical of whale going under. Therefore I concluded that it was most likely a submarine."

Sheffield turned to his friend, Commander Owen. "Commander Owen, tell Ensign Contario what you learned about this particular species of whale."

Mace explained, "This particular whale is known as a Byrde's Whale. They prefer the tropical and subtropical warm waters between forty degrees south and forty degrees north. An interesting characteristic of these animals is that they do not raise their tail out of the water when diving. Did you know that, Ensign."

"No sir."

"Thank you Commander." Sheffield's attention was shifted back to Ensign Contario. "We didn't know that either. We're all naval officers, not marine biologists." He then explained Admiral Halsey's shoot first and figure it out later theory before continuing. "Had this been an actual submarine attack, you would have been commended for your action. The information that Commander Owen discovered has a great impact on

your defense of your actions. Therefore, Ensign Contario, I am exonerating you of any fault in this incident and it will not reflect on your record. However, don't let this be license to make it a habit of taking matters into your hands. As for the whales, they were simply innocent victims of a war they knew nothing about. Case closed. You are dismissed to return to your duties, Ensign."

This was the first time that as Captain that he had to hold a Captain's Mast. He decided to make himself available on a regular basis to hear concerns, complaints or requests from the crew. Traditionally in the days of sail, the captain would stand at the main mast. The crew, who by custom did not speak with the captain, could speak to him directly at these times. He could see that it could have a reciprocating affect, it would give him a sense for the morale of the crew which in turn not only boosted morale but went a long ways toward the things that he talked about in his discipline speech. He sent word through the ship that he would be available in his ready room every Thursday afternoon at four o'clock.

The plan had called for proceeding directly into the area of operations. That changed when a tropical storm formed off the Yucatan Peninsula and was making its way right through the middle of the Gulf of Mexico with eighty mile an hour winds. After being at sea for only three days, that Saturday afternoon the three ships stood into Havana Harbor and dropped anchor to wait out the storm.

While in port, the crew was granted twenty four hours ashore. For many of the crew, it was their first visit to a foreign port. This was Sheffield's third visit to Havana and he opted to remain aboard the ship rather than going ashore. He said that he didn't care much for what the city had to offer. A number of men were returned to the ship early, escorted by the local police, their offenses ranged from disorderly conduct to trespassing. As each group reported aboard, go number of them were intoxicated.

After laying at anchor over weekend, the ships weighed anchor and got underway at 0800 on Monday morning, the 24<sup>th</sup> and steamed into the Gulf of Mexico where the real work began. The first order of business was to launch a long range search, anti-submarine patrol and the combat air patrol. After all, they were operating in an area where there was a definite possibility of encountering enemy forces.

The war necessitated that the Reprisal's shakedown cruise be a dual mission; first to give the ship a proper workout to discover any possible flaws and test all its systems and second to train the crew and air group. The objective was to forge a combat ready team of men and steel.

Once again, there was urgency in reaching that objective. That afternoon news arrived of the Battle of the Battle of the Stewart Islands half way around the world in the Pacific. The Enterprise received considerable damage and had to return to Pearl Harbor for repairs. With her out of action, only three carriers were available for the fighting around Guadalcanal.

For the next few days the routine included continuing air operations, hours and hours of gunnery practice for both the ship and the air group, general quarters drills any time of the day or night, damage

control drills, and any other kind of a drill that someone could think off.

At dawn on the 27<sup>th</sup>, the fleet tanker Yellowstone, escorted by an old flush deck destroyer USS Welborn C. Wood, rendezvoused with the three ships. The deck hands had their first opportunity to practice refueling at sea. For the next several hours, the Yellowstone steamed along side the Reprisal only yards away at ten knots while fuel oil was transferred to from the tanker into the carriers fuel bunkers. At the same time, first the Glen then the Armstrong steamed along side on the other side of the tanker while being refueled. Once their tanks were topped off, the Yellowstone and her escort left and the Reprisal and her escorts continued on their way.

Each day, the daily routine began well before dawn with the launch of the predawn flight and bringing up the planes for the first flight of the day and spotting them for launch. The day wasn't over until the last of the Bat Team were recovered well after dark. The men were putting in eighteen to twenty hour days.

Sheffield was also just as busy from early in the morning until late at night with the myriad of operational decisions that had to be made and orders to be given. It was not the best time for him to deal with the next book that he randomly picked up off the floor; the book titled "Apprehension". He had always been a very confident and decisive individual. Now all of sudden he found himself struggling to render immediate decisions and second guessing himself after the fact. He had learned early on to trust his instincts and he rarely ever went wrong. Now more than ever he had to rely on his instincts and not allow himself to waver. Above everything else, he could not let his officers and crew see him waver or catch him doubting himself.

For example, a second hurricane was moving through the Caribbean Sea well to the south and was projected to make landfall on the Yucatan Peninsula on the 28<sup>th</sup>. The operational plan called for them to be operating in the western gulf. His instinct told him that the storm could turn and head north into the Gulf of Mexico. He found himself torn between following the plan or changing the plans based on something that wasn't supposed to happen. He wrestled with the decision for hours as the small group of ships continued to steam west. He finally decided to follow his instinct and change course to the northeast. During the night of the 27<sup>th</sup>, the storm did change course, brushing the tip of Yucatan and intensified as it raged through the the western gulf with one hundred twenty mile an hour winds. Had he not decided to change course, they would have been caught right in the middle of the cyclone. It eventually made land fall near Palacios, Texas on the 30<sup>th</sup>.

Flight operations were the main priority, that was the whole purpose of the ship. Everything and everybody had to work together. As with her sister carriers, Reprisal had two bow catapults and one across the forward end of the hangar. Although they weren't used often, they had test them to make sure they

worked properly for those rare occasions. Not only that, the crew had to be proficient in operating them. All one day was spent launching aircraft via the catapults.

Another seldom used feature was the ability to recover aircraft over the bow. The forward end of the flight deck was also fitted with arresting cables and crash barriers. One afternoon prior to recovering the air group, Sheffield ordered the ship to steam in reverse at twenty knots. One by one, the planes in the air made their approach over the bow and were brought aboard. The idea was to be able to land planes with others spotted aft for take off, or the deck was fouled by a crash, or rendered unusable due to battle damage.

The Reprisal had some features not found on the other carriers. One was the outboard elevator across from the super structure. However, the Wasp did have a prototype outboard elevator. It had two advantages, one it didn't break up the flight deck when lowered and two, it didn't take up space in the hangar, making it more spacious. The other feature was a small repair hangar below the main hangar which was serviced by the aft elevator.

In addition to flight operations and drills, the ship participated in some realistic exercises as well. Some were carried out independently and others were conducted in conjunction with various military units stationed in the gulf coast states.

Many times the air group would split up for independent exercises. All of the air group, except for a few fighters would carry out mock attacks on the carrier and her escorts while the rest of the fighters and the ships defended themselves. Sheffield remembered all of the times that he participated in these kinds of exercises as a pilot. He longed to be in the air. He never did like being in on the receiving end whether in exercises like these and particularly the real thing, like the time off Kwajalein back in February. He had the feeling that there would certainly be more of the real thing in store once they sailed for the Pacific.

The urgency of get the Reprisal fit to fight became even more critical. On the 31<sup>st</sup>, it was learned that the Saratoga had been torpedoed by a Japanese submarine in the Solomons and was limping back to the west coast for repairs. With Enterprise and Saratoga both out of action and the Ranger deemed to be unsuitable for combat operations in the Pacific, Hornet and Wasp were the only carriers available.

In some exercises the air group carried out mock attacks on military installations along the Gulf Coast, even on commercial shipping. The biggest of these inter-service exercises occurred during the middle of the second week at sea while operating a hundred and fifty miles off Mobile, Alabama. The bulk of the air group had been sent off on a mock raid on naval facilities in and around New Orleans, with orders to land at the Naval Reserve Air Station, located on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. There were six Wildcats overhead on combat air patrol and six Devastators from the Seahawks on anti-submarine patrol. The only aircraft aboard the ship were six Wildcats and the other six Seahawk Devastators.

It was just after one o'clock in the afternoon when Captain Barson returned to the bridge. He had taken a break and went to have lunch. Yes, he was eating again and had actually regained ten pounds and his clothes were fitting him better. He had just relieved Commander Owen so he could go have a bite to eat when word came of a radar contact. "Sir, we just picked up a large number of aircraft approaching from the northwest at ten thousand feet about sixty eight nautical miles out and closing."

"Do you have a fix on their speed?"

"Yes, sir. Their estimated speed is approximately one hundred eighty knots. That will put them right over the top of in about twenty minutes."

"Thank you Lieutenant." He said to the radar officer. "It looks like the Army has come to play. Keep me posted of their movement."

There was no indecisiveness over the orders he issued. Fortunately that book was now in its proper place on the shelf. He called down to Commander Whithouse in Primary Flight Control, or Pri-Fly as it was called, "Seymore, we have bogies at three – zero – five at ten thousand feet. You know what to do."

Commander Whithouse ordered the six reserve Wildcats into the air and passed the information on to the fighter director who ordered the combat air patrol to intercept.

Sheffield's next order was to the helmsman, "Bring us into the wind. Increase speed to twenty four knots."

The bow began swinging around the southwest and headed directly into the prevailing wind. Once on a steady course, the first Wildcat raced down the deck.

Sheffield's third order was, "Sound general quarters. Lets see if we can set a record." The bugler stepped up to the intercom and blew the call to stations followed by the obnoxious intermittent buzzer. Work parties dropped what they were doing. The men in the mess halls left their lunches on the tables. Everyone knew where they had to be and how to get there. Ever since the cruise began they had practiced it countless times. Each time trying to beat their best time.

Commander Owen was at his post in the Combat Information Center within seconds. As reports begin to come in from all over the ship, he passed along the information to Captain Brason. Finally he reported, "All stations manned and ready, sir."

"What was the time?"

"One minute, forty seconds, sir. Thats a new record."

"Very good, Mace. We're getting there. Stand by."

Other reports came into the bridge. Commander Whithouse reported, "The last Wildcat just left the deck."

That report was followed by, "Radar contact now at fifty one nautical miles, sir."

Sheffield gazed out from the bridge and scanned the sky. He turned to the helmsman and said, "Set course for those cumulus clouds about five miles to the southeast. Lets see if we can get there before they can see us." Again the ship began turning as the Glenn and Armstrong followed suit.

The next report was from the Wildcat flight leader. "Bogies in sight. Twenty four Martin B-26 Murderers companied by a dozen P-40's. Will engage in approximately three minutes."

Throughout the ship, lookouts scanned to sky to the northeast to make visual contact. The gun directors turned on their mounts trying to get a fix on the incoming bombers.

From the loudspeaker on the bridge, the fighter pilots could be heard as they made contact with their Army counterparts. It brought back a lot of memories for Sheffield from his long past flying days.

The radar officer reported, "Army bombers now at fifteen nautical miles. They have split into three groups sir. One heading right for us at ten thousand feet. The other two are moving to our flanks and are dropping altitude, sir."

"Well, I'll be." Sheffield commented to those on the bridge. "It looks like they are setting up for a torpedo attack. I didn't know they had it in them. Lets not make it easy for them." Then he ordered, "Ring up full speed. Prepare for evasive maneuvers. They've seen us by now." Almost instantly, the ship surged forward as it raced for the clouds at thirty two knots.

At seven miles the five inch guns had them in their sights and were trained on their fellow countrymen. Not a shot was fired as they followed them in. The three ships ducked under the clouds when the bombers were still two miles out. The Wildcats were still tangling with the P-40s and had not been able to break up the main formation.

The twelve Marauders broke through the clouds at six thousand feet with their bomb bay doors open. Sheffield ordered, " Prepare for evasive maneuvers! Hang on gentlemen." Watching the approaching bombers, he waited for the right moment. "Hard right rudder!" The helm responded immediately and the huge ship careened to the starboard at full speed. Anyone not braced for the sudden turn was thrown from their feet. Anything not secured went flying.

Right on the heal of the sudden turn, he ordered, "Hard left rudder!" Again the helm responded and the ship lunged to port. The bombers had adjusted their flight path to match the first turn and began dropping their flour sacks. As the ship veered off to port, all of the sacks splashed into the water. The bombers continued on their way and Sheffield ordered, "Rudder amidships." and the ship straightened out in its course.

Out of danger from the first wave of bombers, he turned his attention to the those approaching barely above the water from either side, just ahead of the ship in a classic pincher maneuver. Sheffield called to the helmsman, "Steady on course. Wait for my order." When the Marauders were at the point of

drop, he ordered, "Hard right rudder ninety degrees!" Again the ship lurched to starboard and straightened out on a heading at a right angle to its previous course. As it did, the bombers passed parallel to ship as would have their torpedoes, if there would have been any. As the bombers speed away at low altitude, the ships guns continued to train on them, without firing a shot. Once they were out of range, the Wildcats that had broken up the P-40 escorts followed in pursuit.

Pleased with the performance of his ship and crew he commented, "Well done gentlemen. Well done indeed. Secure from general quarters and set course for New Orleans, speed fifteen knots."

In putting together his training plan for the cruise, he wanted to throw in something as realistic as possible. He remembered his old friend Harvey Morrison who he first meet during an exercise in the Hawaiian Islands way back when. Their paths had crossed again when they were both stationed in Washington and a few months earlier on the Hornet during the Doolittle raid. Colonel Morrison was at the time and still was on the staff of General Hap Arnold, the commander of the Army Air Force.

Sheffield had placed a call to Washington and was put in touch with Harvey. He told him about his upcoming shakedown cruise and told him that he would like a realistic training exercise. Harvey told him that he would put something together. After all a little inter-service rivalry was always good for morale. Sheffield gave him the a rough schedule of where he anticipated being at any given time.

Sheffield didn't know what to expect or when. In fact he had kept the arrangement to himself. As it turned out, the exercise was exactly what he wanted. The Marauders were very similar to Japan's Mitsubishi G4M Betty. The Army even followed typical Japanese tactics in their mock attack. The bombers were from the 17th Bombardment Group stationed at Barksdale Army Air Force Base located at Shreveport, Louisiana. Their P-40 escorts came from the 33<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group stationed at Mitchell Field just east of New York City on Long Island and staged out of the New Orleans Airport.

At the conclusion of the exercise, the planes in the air were ordered to land at the New Orleans Naval Reserve Air Station and most of what was aboard were launched with the same orders. With the bulk of the air group ashore, for the rest of the day the Reprisal continued operating with the torpedo squadron and half of the fighter squadron, maintaining a combat air patrol and anti-submarine patrol. All though they were known to be operating in the Gulf, so far no German U-boats had been encountered. At the end of the day they were recovered and the Bat Team was sent up on the evening and predawn patrols.

At sunrise the next morning, Reprisal, Glenn, and Armstrong were just outside of the mouth of Mississippi River. With what aircraft on hand below in the hangar, the flight deck was clear. Around seven o'clock a single Devastator approached the carrier as is steamed southwest into the wind. The TBD, piloted by Commander James, the air group commander came aboard with the river pilot, Lieutenant Stanley Bourgeois (pronounced búzh-wä), of the US Coast Guard. Still steaming into the Southwest, all aircraft were

brought up to the flight deck sent aloft.

With the rest of the air group on their way to the Naval Reserve Air Station, the ships changed course and were soon at the mouth of the Mississippi River. At that time Capitan Brason relinquished navigational control over to Lieutenant Bourgeois, who knew the river well. He was a native of the area and as a young man worked on the shrimp boats. He knew every bend in the river and understood the channel. The river was regularly traversed by large freighters and tankers, but rarely anything this big. No one wanted the embarrassment of the Navy's newest carrier stranded on a sand bar in the Mississippi River.

At ten knots the column of three ships, with Reprisal leading the way, began making their way up the Mighty Mississippi River past the bayous. Enroute a dispatch was received stating that another ship, this time a Mexican freighter, had been torpedoed by a U-boat in the Gulf of Mexico. It took nearly eight and a half hours to travel the ninety miles to New Orleans. As the ships neared The Crescent City, their crews were called to man the rails as large crowds had gathered along both sides of the river to see the spectacle.

Just after four o'clock in the afternoon, the Reprisal was eased up to the dock at Bienville Street by three river tugs. A navy band struck up Anchors Aweigh as the ship was tied up. Glen and Armstrong tied up side by side just astern. Waiting on the dock was Rear Admiral David Gavin, the Commandant of the 8<sup>th</sup> Naval District, which was headquartered in New Orleans. With him was the Honorable Harold Holbrook, the Mayor of New Orleans.

Once the gangway was in place, the Admiral and the Mayor were piped aboard. The crew was then dismissed. Many of them went ashore to begin their liberty. Others remained aboard to tend to necessary functions. They would get their turn later. Sailors and Marines poured off the ship and found their way into the famous French Quarter. For most, their destination was Bourbon Street with its nightclubs, burlesque shows, striptease acts, exotic dancers and brothels.

While the crew were indulging in wine, women and song, Admiral Gavin invited Captain Brason and the senior officers as well as the captains of the destroyers and their senior officers to attend a banquet in their honor that evening. The mayor welcomed them to his fair city. Captain Brason assured him that he would provide an ample shore patrol to help keep the men in line. Thus began the four day visit, which coincided with Labor Day weekend.

Before leaving Norfolk, Sheffield had his staff car brought aboard and parked in what was known as the "garage", a bay off the forward hangar intended as storage for the mobile crane. It was slightly too big to fit and was usually parked on the hangar deck. All the garage was used for was storing the tow tractors and the ship's jeeps. It seemed a handy idea to bring his staff car along for shore excursions, such as this. The car was unloaded and driver was provided from one of the deck divisions. Sheffield and Mace were driven to the Hotel St. Pierre that evening where they and the officers assembled for the banquet.

Besides the officers from the three ships, many of the officers from the facilities in the area were also in attendance, many of them with their wives. As Admiral Gavin introduced his wife, Eunice, to Sheffield his heart jumped into his throat. As the Admiral welcomed the “real navy” to New Orleans and introduced the commanders of the various facilities, Sheffield was distracted and wasn't paying much attention. All during the meal, he couldn't take his eyes off Eunice. When it became apparent that his stare was making her uncomfortable he had to say something.

“I beg your pardon, Mrs. Gavin. Forgive me for starrng, but you look exactly like my late wife. You're every bit as lovely as she was.”

His friend, Mace came to his defense, “Its true ma'am. Its uncanny how much you look like her. You could be twins.”

She appeared to be put at ease, “Apology accepted, Captain. In fact I take that as a compliment.” She went on to say, “I read about you in Life Magazine. I can't imagine what that must have been like for you.”

Even after that exchange, all during dinner he kept looking at her. Mrs. Gavin was only two or three years older than Geannie would have been. As they visited over dinner Sheffield learned that the resemblance was only in appearance. In nearly every other was she was no where near like Geannie. How could she be, there was only one Geannie.

He was missing Geannine terribly that evening. “This would have been a perfect rendezvous. She could have flown to New Orleans and we could have got a hotel room, perhaps right here in the magnificent Hotel St. Pierre.” he thought to himself as he looked at the woman who looked so much like Geannie. “We could have gone exploring and discovered together what 'The Big Easy' has to offer. I could get off the ship and get away for a while.” His thoughts turned negative as he reasoned, “As it is, I just want to go back to the ship. Its safe there. Why does Mrs. Gavin have to be here? Maybe I'll pour myself a glass of bourbon. Maybe that will ease the pain. It seems to work for others.”

Then he reprimanded himself, “What are you talking about, you fool? You've never touched the stuff in your life. Don't even think about it. What would Geannie think? She watching you know.”

As the evening wore on, an orchestra began playing as the dance floor opened up. He missed Geannie even more. Even though he wasn't the best dancer, she made up for it. As he was dreaming of dancing with Geannie, Mrs. Gavin brought him out his trance, “I realize that I am only a look alike, Captain, but I'd be honored if you would favor me with a dance.”

Sheffield's heart inched even farther up his throat. He appeared visibly nervous. Admiral Gavin nodded his approval. Without hesitation, Eunice rose to her feet and extended her hand. Sheffield slowly rose from his seat and took her by the hand and placed it through his arm and lead her onto the dance floor.

They assumed the hold for the foxtrot and Sheffield clumsily lead her through the first few steps until his feet went on auto pilot. As they danced to a couple of numbers, she asked him to tell her more about Geannie. As he walked her back to their table, her arm in his she said, "Thank you for the dance Captain. I'm flattered to be compared to such a remarkable woman."

Once they sat down, Sheffield was emotionally spent. Mace knew his friend well enough to recognize it too. He tactfully excused himself and the Captain with a reason to return to the ship. After a round of thank yous and good nights, Mace had their driver take them back to dock.

During the four days in port, Sheffield hardly left the ship and when he did, he didn't venture much beyond the dock. His Uncle Rick and Aunt Braquette, who lived in New Orleans, came to see him and took him home for dinner and to spend the night. He hadn't seen them since the time that he, Geannie, and the kids and he had stayed in New Orleans on a lay over when they switched trains while moving to San Diego the last time.

Uncle Rick was Emmett's youngest brother and had made the navy his career for twenty five years, retiring as a captain after serving in the Spanish American War, sailing around the world with the Great White Fleet, the occupation of Veracruz during the Mexican Revolution, and the First World War. When he retired, he and Aunt Bra settled in her hometown of Meraux, St. Bernard Parrish, Louisiana, just down the river from New Orleans.

It was Uncle Rick's example, that in part, influenced Sheffield's decision to go into the Navy. Having served aboard battleships during his entire career, he scoffed at the notion of Sheffield becoming a naval aviator. He thought that he'd be wasting his career. While touring the Reprisal, he finally admitted that Sheffield had done alright for himself.

A letter from Ramona caught up with him in and he wrote back telling her about how foolish he felt about his encounter with Mrs. Gavin. He told her that with the way the shake down cruise was going that he fully expected to be ready to sail for the Pacific in six weeks. He closed with, "See you soon."

The crew on the other hand took advantage of every moment. Some of them took too much advantage and had to be drug out of various establishments and hauled back to the ship by sailors armed with batons and wearing a shore patrol armbands.

While in port, technicians from Westinghouse came aboard to look at one of the main generators that had been acting up. The problem wasn't serious and was soon corrected. Also a commercial tanker pulled alongside and refueled all three ships. Unfortunately due to wartime security measures, the ships where not open for public tours. In fact, armed marines were stationed along the dock and along both sides of the flight deck. That didn't stop the curious onlookers who crowded the docks to get a close up look at the warships. Others took to the river in pleasure craft to see the ships. The restored paddle wheel steamboat,

Cajun Queen passed by several times a day with her decks crowded with onlookers, many of them sailors. With each pass, she saluted with her whistles. In return, the Reprisal would fire her three pounder saluting battery. On Labor Day, the air group treated the citizens of New Orleans to fly over and flight demonstrations.

On Tuesday morning at 0800, Reprisal was pulled away from the dock and out into the middle of the river by the tugboats and was turned around with her bow pointed downstream. With Lieutenant Bourgeois on the bridge once again, she got under way and made her way down stream with Glenn and Armstrong right behind.

After the eight and half hour trip downstream, they were once again in the open waters of the Gulf. In deep water with room to maneuver, they set course into the southwest and into the wind to recover the air group, that is excluding those that took up station on patrol. Once all of the planes were aboard, one was readied for launch to return Lieutenant Bourgeois to New Orleans.

For the rest of the day, the ship and air group conducted gunnery exercises. That evening after the air group had come home to roost for the night, the Bat Team was readied for launch. This night rather than practicing nighttime take offs and landings, they conducted actual patrols until late at night when they began running low on fuel. Once refueled and serviced, they took off again in the early morning hours and patrolled until relieved by the first flight of the day. Using radar, they were able to locate and track commercial shipping.

The next day found them off the Texas Gulf Coast, the air group was conducting mock air raids on naval facilities at Galveston and Corpus Cristi. Even Sheffield was surprised when the 17<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group showed up for a repeat performance. Again the crew and the ship performed admirably. A new record was set in the time that it took to man all stations for battle. One minute and thirty four seconds, just four seconds from the goal.

Later in the week, they left the western gulf and steamed for waters off the Florida Gulf Coast. While in transit flight operations, gunnery practice, and other drills continued to be the routine. Despite long days, morale was very high. One night while on patrol, one of the Bat Team Dauntlesses had a surface contact come out of nowhere. On a hunch, the pilot honed in on its position and surprised a U-boat on the surface, illuminated by the full moon. He dropped his five hundred pound bomb, but missed. On his second pass the U-boat had already submerged. He dropped his two depth charges in the vicinity of its last position. An investigation of the area the next day didn't reveal any of the tell tale signs that it had been sunk; no debris or oil slick on the surface. Nevertheless, it was considered a major success for the Bat Team to locate and attack an enemy vessel at night.

From time to time, the exercises were suspended for refueling. Which in and of itself was valuable

training as well. Every three days or so, the destroyers came along side and fuel was transferred from the carrier to the smaller destroyers. Then when she began to run dry, the Yellowstone appeared over the horizon on the 12<sup>th</sup> to top off everyone's tanks.

During these trials, the radar equipped Wildcats met with mixed success. It was determined that they needed more fuel for night patrols. Chief Evans modified them to mount external fuel tanks. Another thing was that teams of two fighters seemed to work better than a team of three. Rather than have an extra plane, one more Wildcat was converted to the radar configuration. Now there was a section made up of two – two plane teams.

Sheffield was very pleased with the progress being made. He had attempted to implement night flying from time to time in the past, only to have someone above him shoot it down. He had always seen the potential and now it was beginning to show results. With the war, the potential benefits outweighed the risks. There were now six fighter pilots from the fighter squadron and twelve from the other squadrons qualified for night operations.

Upon arrival off Florida, the cruise took on a new aspect. One morning a submarine surfaced off the starboard beam. This time no one got excited and opened fire as this was anticipated. The newly commissioned USS Cutthroat, a Gato Class submarine, was also on her shakedown cruise. For the next several days they played a game of cat and mouse as they sought each other out. For the Reprisal, they got some first hand experience with anti-submarine patrols, among other drills and exercises.

News of the loss of Wasp on the 15<sup>th</sup> emphasized the need for effective anti-submarine patrols. She had been torpedoed by a Japanese submarine in the Solomons. As for the Cutthroat, they gained valuable experience stalking and carrying out mock attacks on surface ships.

Only one serious incident marred the shakedown cruise which happened on the 16<sup>th</sup>. While recovering aircraft, Lieutenant (junior grade) Richard Goldham was bringing in his SBD, number 11-B-9, in for a landing. When he received the signal from the landing signal officer, he cut the throttle. For some reason it stuck, giving him too much speed. The Dauntless's wheels hit the deck hard and bounced. The landing gear got tangled in the crash barrier causing the plane to flip over, landing on its back. The racing engine tore loose and hurtled over the side of the ship.

The aircraft was damaged beyond repair, but fortunately the flight deck crew was able to extricate Lieutenant Goldham from the upside down airplane, unhurt. He was protected by the frame around the canopy. Aviation Radioman 3<sup>rd</sup> Class Randal Bartoli wasn't quite as lucky, he received a broken collarbone. The mobile crane was brought up from the hangar and was used to set the plane back on its wheels. The aircraft was then taken down to the repair hanger where it was cannibalized for its parts. Once the wreck had been cleared away, flight operations resumed.

As the shakedown cruise neared its completion, the Reprisal and her escorts steamed into Tampa Bay for a three day weekend port call. It was a well deserved conclusion to a successful four weeks in the Gulf Mexico. All of the objectives in the planned outline had been met. The crew came together as an effective unit. The ship performed superbly. All in all, Captain Brason and the senior officers were confident that they were ready for duty.

Even more important, her captain had come a long ways as well. During the course of the cruise, he had dealt with a lot of emotions as he continued to sort things out. There were actually a lot more books neatly arranged on his bookshelf than were strewn about on the floor. In nine months he had already dealt with most of the major ones. However, he still could not part with the neatly wrapped dress that was stashed in his closet and he still wore his wedding ring. As the ship lay at anchor in Tampa Bay, the captain's barge remained cradled in its davits as he did not leave the ship to go ashore. He was still too much of hermit.

After a restful weekend, the three ships got underway on Monday the 21<sup>st</sup>. They transited the Florida Keys into the Atlantic Ocean and set course for Norfolk, all the while conducting gunnery practice and other drills. Flight operations were conducted now with the precision of a trained crew. Patrols were flown by confident experience pilots.

As the threesome rounded Cape Henry into the Chesapeake Bay, Sheffield was very conscious of the fact that he was coming home to a place that wasn't really home. The men with him on the bridge had the anticipation of reuniting with loved ones all over their faces as they talked about what they were going to do. He looked at his friend, Mace with envy. He had a nice home, a lovely wife, and his three boys to go home to tonight. Pat would have dinner waiting for him. Sheffield would have dinner served to him all alone in the Capitan's mess by the ever faithful Reggie.

The thought was on his mind as they steamed on into Hampton Roads of how he missed Geannie and the kids. He longed to have a home and family to come home to. As the ship was being eased into her berth at Pier 7 across from the Ranger, Mace asked, "How would you like to come home with me for a home cooked meal, tonight sir?"

"Oh, Mace. I don't want to impose on you. After all this is your first night home in more than a month." He started to make another excuse when Mace cut him off.

"Nonsense, Sheffield." He rarely called the Captain by his first name aboard the ship. "I know for a fact that Pat won't mind a bit. In fact I know that she would insist. And I promise you that Madelyn won't be there. We still need to make it up to you for that fiasco, anyway."

"All right, all right, Mace. You win. That sounds really nice. Thanks. I'll tell Reggie that he has the night off."

"Good. As soon as they get us plugged into the phone lines, I call Pat and tell her to expect you."

\* \* \* \* \*

The destroyers Glenn and Armstrong, the tanker Yellowstone and the submarine Cutthroat are fictional ships. The USS Welborn C. Wood DD-195 was an actual ship, but in reality was transferred to the Royal Navy in September 1940 and became the HMS Chesterfield.

Byrde's whales are medium sized baleen whales similar to fin whales. They prefer the highly productive tropical and subtropical warm water with temperatures of 61–72 °F. They inhabit the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific oceans, from 40° South to 40° North. Some populations migrate seasonally, moving towards higher latitudes during the summer and towards the equator during the winter. When submerging, these whales do not display their flukes.

It would not have been uncommon to encounter a Byrde's whale at that location. The fact that the flukes were not displayed would have added to the confusion that led to it being misidentified.

This incident is based on a story that my father used to tell. According to him, during the first weeks of the war while the Enterprise was patrolling the waters around Oahu, one of the five inch gun batteries opened fire on a whale without orders. I have never been able to confirm the story.

The two hurricanes were actual storms that moved through the Gulf of Mexico during the summer of 1942. They were the only tropical storms in the Gulf of Mexico that year.

The radar equipped Wildcats are fictional.

The Naval Reserve Air Station, constructed in 1941 as a training facility, was located where the University of New Orleans is now located. In 1943 it was re-designated a Naval Air Station and it closed in 1957 when the new air station opened.

There have been a few instances of an aircraft carrier sailing up the Mississippi River to New Orleans. The Ranger in October 1945, the Forrestal in 1988 and again in 1992, the Iwo Jima, an amphibious assault ship in 2005, and perhaps others.

Rear Admiral David Gavin, the Commandant of the 8<sup>th</sup> Naval District and the Honorable Harold Holbrook, the Mayor of New Orleans are fictional characters. The 8<sup>th</sup> Naval District was the administrative command that included naval facilities along the Gulf Coast from Pensacola, Florida to Corpus Christi, Texas.

