

Chapter VII

Getting Out

October 20, 1942 – October 27, 1942

Sheffield was pleased to receive an answer to his letter to Ramona. Once the letter was handed to him, he excused himself from the bridge and retired to his office to read it.

Oct 16, 1942

Dear Sheffield

I was very pleased to receive your last letter. It shouldn't be long now that you and that new ship of yours will be steaming up the channel and past Hospital Point. I doubt you will be staying long as you will be needed urgently in the South Pacific. Something big must be up down there. The Big E completed her rush repairs and left this morning with one of the brand new battleships and several escorts.

Now, about when you get here, I'd love to go out to dinner with you. Will this be a date? If so maybe we could take in a picture show or something. Would you be up to that? I haven't been out since you took me to your farewell party nearly six months ago.

I'm glad that the "medicine" got to you alright. I hope that you enjoyed them. I'm sorry that I don't have anything to send you this time. How about I bake a cake for you when you come? I know, I'll make in the shape of your ship. Oops, that would have been a good surprise.

I'm really glad that you have been getting off the ship some. You really need to get out more. You have to live life too. Going to the wedding was just what you needed. I bet you blushed at being hugged so much. I know how you are. You always blushed when I hugged you. I know that Geannie got a kick out of watching you squirm. I'll tell you what, I'll have one of those waiting for you too.

Now on a more serious note, how are you doing really? Is it getting any easier for you? From the tone of your letters I sense that they are little by little. It has been nine months now, I would expect that time has brought a lot of healing.

I understand what your brother said about loving again. After I lost my first husband I thought that I could never love again either. But then along came Tom. When I fell in love with him, it didn't detract for the love I still held in my heart for Oliver.

But after losing Tom too, I have been afraid to love again. Time has

healed my heart. It is only fear that has held me back. There has been someone I have been in love with for a long time. At first I couldn't tell him. Now that I can, I don't think the time is right. Hopefully someday.

I didn't mean to get personal there, it just came out. The point is, someday you will be able love again.. I hope you can find someone who truly loves you for the wonderful man that I have known for so many years now. You're a true friend.

Love Ramona

Getting her letters always made his day. "She is a true friend indeed." he thought to himself. "She really understands me and what I've been going through. But I didn't know she felt that way about someone. She has never mentioned it before. I wonder who he is?"

When she mentioned going to his farewell party, it gave him an idea. He went back on the bridge and pulled Mace aside. "I have another favor to ask of you. Actually it is probably more up Pat's alley. I know its short notice but do you think she could find an escort for me that evening?"

"You want her to set you up with a blind date?"

"Shhhsss. Gees, keep it down won't you. No, I'm not looking for date, just a companion for the banquet."

"Well, we could see if Madelyn is available. She's married again already, but that wouldn't be a problem for her."

"Get serious Mace, before I change my mind."

"Okay, okay. I'll talk to Pat and see who she knows. I understand, just a companion. Someone to escort you to the banquet, nothing more."

"I'm glad to see that you understand your orders, Commander. Let me know what she comes up with. Now I need to get below and see how things are coming on the hangar deck."

The next morning Mace came to Sheffield's office. "Okay, Sheffield. Here's what Pat came up with. There is a widow lady in our neighborhood who is willing to accompany you to the banquet. When I mentioned it to Pat she immediately thought of her and called to to see if she would be interested. She already knew all about you from Life Magazine when Pat told her it was you. Her name is Paula Drussell and she is thirty nine years old. She has three children ages seventeen, fifteen and elven. Her husband was a veteran police officer who was killed during a bank robbery standoff back in January, so she is at about the same stage that you are. Pat explained to her that there would be no strings attached, just accompany you to the banquet. Pat said that she thought about it and decided that she needed to get out a bit. So what

do you think?"

"I think it was a mistake to suggest such a notion."

"Come on Sheffield, the woman is actually looking forward to it. You wouldn't want to disappoint her now would you?"

"No, I guess not. Thanks for coming through for me."

"Now do you have a progress report for me on the status of the preparations for the cruise?"

"Yes, sir. All of the aircraft have been stowed below. It is a tight fit, but with a little creativity, they made it work. The loading of supplies and provisions will be completed today. All of the men who were on leave have returned. Morale is high. The men have gotten over their disappointment over not sailing for the Pacific just yet.

We have found quarters for the Army personnel that will be sailing with us. I have Colonel Morrison in the admiral's quarters and the pilots doubled up in the admiral's staff quarters. Some additional bunks will be erected in the enlisted marine section for the army crews."

"Good. Thanks Mace. I just got off the phone with Colonel Morrison. The planes will be flying in first thing Monday morning. The Colonel will be back tomorrow to take care of arrangements at the air station. His wife is still with him, so I invited them to the Office's banquet as guests of the United States Navy in appreciation for his cooperation with us in the exercises in the Gulf and the preparations for this cruise."

"That will be fine, Captain. About the banquet, the Tazewell hotel assures me that everything is set for Saturday night. Lieutenant Gates has the food for the barbecue and everything is ready for that."

While the ship was at sea, Harvey had flown down to Florida to see how the training was coming and to continue his working vacation with his wife. He returned to Norfolk on Friday as scheduled. He and his wife were delighted to accept the invitation to the banquet. In fact, they were staying at the Tazewell.

The much anticipated Saturday dawned to warm sunny fall day. All morning men worked at setting up tables and equipment. Others brought the meat up from the refrigerated stores. Tubs were filled with ice to chill hundreds of bottles of Coca-Cola and other soft drinks. Absolutely no beer or other liquor was allowed aboard. Other tubs of ice were filled with scores of watermelons. The mess staff was busy preparing baked potatoes, corn on the cob and variety of deserts.

At noon the flight deck was crowded with most of the crew, except for those who had to stand watch in critical areas. They would be relieved at one o'clock so they too could attend. Those who were to relieve them were first in line. Chief Solozar, the senior enlisted man, stepped to the microphone and everyone quieted down.

"On behalf of Captain Brason, I welcome you all to our first Crew Appreciation Barbecue. I want you

all to know that this was his idea. Lets hear it for the Captain!"

He led the crew in shouts of, "Hip, hip hurray! Hip, hip hurray! Hip, hip hurray!"

Again he waited for the men to settle down. "Now I am proud to present our illustrious Captain."

Captain Brason stepped to the microphone. "Men of the Reprisal, I salute you." He raised his hand in salute." Before they could respond likewise he continued, "This is a party, your party. A salute from you at this time is not expected."

It was a mute request. In unison, every man stood at attention and saluted him anyway out of respect and appreciation.

Captain Brason continued, "Thank you. I am honored by your salute. I am honored to be your captain. You are the finest crew on any ship in any navy. I really mean that. I am grateful for the hard work that you have put in to make this ship ready. We sail next week and are ready to perform our duty whatever that might be. Even if it is to give our friends in the army a ride to where it is they're going. I want you to go out of your way to be accommodating to them while they're aboard. And by all means, don't take all of their money.

"I speak on behalf of all of the officers, your department commanders, your division commanders, and everyone else. They too appreciate your work. They can't carry out their orders without you. In this man's navy it takes all of us, working together to get the job done, officers and enlisted men alike. As you can see, I am the only officer in sight. That's because all of this is for you. Besides most of them are getting ready for their dates tonight at the officer's banquet.

"Again, Thank you for all that you do. We'll do this again someday. Enjoy the party!"

At the conclusion of his brief remarks, the men cheered. Some one began a round of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" and everyone joined in. Once again Chief Solozar waited for them to quiet down before announcing, "We have a lot of food and some good entertainment lined up for you today. But before we get started, Chaplin's Assistant First Class Mark Gunderman will say Grace. Petty officer Gunderman..."

After the collective "Amen" men began making their way through the line as mess attendants began filling plates. Sheffield mingled with the men, shaking hands and patting backs. Most he greeted thanked him for the party.

At one point while standing near the beginning of the line someone handed him a plate, "Won't you eat with us, sir?"

"Oh no. Thank you very much, but I'm having a big dinner tonight. But I will fill this plate and take it to Petty Officer Pucheskey."

He took the plate and got in line and had it filled to the brim and stuck a bottle of Coca-Cola in his back pocket and made his way below to the brig. The Marine sergeant snapped to attention. He nodded in

return. "This is for your prisoner. Open the cell and leave us alone for a moment."

"Yes sir," the guard responded as he put the key in the lock and opened the door. "I'll be just outside if you need me sir."

"Thank you Sergeant."

Petty Officer Pucheskey stood there in disbelief, not knowing what to say as the Captain entered his cell, with a heaping plate of food.

"I didn't want you to miss the party. After all its for the crew, and you are a member of my crew."

"Thank you sir," he said gratefully as he sat down to the small table. Sheffield pulled up a chair and sat across from him.

"So have you had time to think? It has been just over a week now."

"Yes sir, I have. I guess I'm just a bad seed sir."

"Nonsense, your a good kid who makes bad choices. I want you to think about your choices and I'm going to give you some more time to think. If I detect a sincere change of attitude, I just might let you out of here sooner. You're a valuable member of this crew, but there has to be discipline. I get the idea that that is something you haven't much of in your life."

"No sir," he said after savoring a bite of sirloin. "I pretty much grew up on the streets in the Bronx. I had to fight and scrap for everything. Its all I know."

"What about your family?"

"The navy is the only family that I have, sir."

"If you're not careful, you won't have it either. Once I let you out of here, I'm giving you chance to prove yourself to me and more importantly to yourself. But if you mess up again, I won't have a choice but to give you a dishonorable discharge. Think about that while you think about everything else." Enjoy your meal, son. I'll check in on you again a week or two. Remember what I said."

"Yes sir. I will. Thank you sir. I promise I won't let you down again."

"I sure hope you're right." Sheffield extended his hand.

Petty Officer Pucheskey shook his hand and then saluted. Sheffield returned the salute. And called out, "Sergeant."

The guard returned to the room and shut the door behind the captain. As he was about to leave, he turned around and said, "Enjoy your meal."

Pucheskey, swigging down his Coke, nodded and waved.

Sheffield made his way backup to the bridge, where he watched the party from the wing of the bridge. After about half the men had been served, Chief Solozar announced the entertainment.

Hooting and hollering erupted as a half a dozen attractive women in red white and blue costumes

emerged from the superstructure on to the makeshift stage. The women, a group from a USO troop, had been brought aboard earlier in the day through a service entry and had been sequestered in the admiral's territory. They performed for an hour and half; singing, dancing, acting, and telling jokes. At times interacting with the men. At one time, they blew kisses the captain watching from above. The men who had been standing watch were relieved and got in on their share of the food and entertainment as well.

By the time the entertainment ended around two o'clock, the men began leaving. Once everyone had left, preassigned details and volunteers began clearing away and cleaning up. That is when the first of a long string of Army P-40 pursuit planes began taxiing down the pier. One by one, they were hoisted aboard the Chenango, which was on the other side of Pier 7. They were obviously bound for the same destination.

It was time that Sheffield began getting ready for his evening out. He showered and shaved to be fresh for the evening and changed into formal dress blue uniform. As he tied his bow tie, he wished that Geannie was there to help him with it. He always struggled with a bow tie for some reason. Now he could tie a double Windsor with his eyes closed. As he struggle with it, he looked at her picture and said, "I wish you were here to go to this with me. You will pleased to know that I won't be going alone.

"No, its not a date or anything like that. I asked Mace if he and Pat knew someone to accompany me as dinner companion. As it turns out, Pat knows this widow lady who lost her husband back in January and she agreed to accompany, me.

"I don't know much about her. Her name is Paula Drussell and she has three children the same ages as ours. I don't even know what she looks like.

"Yeah, I am a bit nervous. If Ramona were here, I'd of asked her to accompany me. I'm comfortable around her. Did you know that she has had a thing for someone for several years but evidently he doesn't have a clue.

"There how does my tie look? It will have to do. Okay sweetheart, wish me luck."



Sheffield left the ship and his driver met him at the gangplank. He climbed into the back seat of the black 1941 Packard with suicide doors. He gave the driver the address. Sheffield rode quietly as the setting sun had turned to dusk. The driver pulled up in front of the house, just one street over from where Mace and Pat lived. He took a deep breath and got out of the car and walked up to the door.

Paula was already and sat waiting in her bedroom, smoking a cigarette. Something she did on occasion to settle her nerves. She had only started since her husband died. She heard the doorbell ring.

Her heart jumped into her throat. "He's here." she gasped. "Its too late to back out now."

Sheffield stood on the doorstep with his heart in his throat as well, looking for an escape route when the front door opened. Fifteen year old Evelyn greeted him, "Won't you come in Captain Brason. Mother is expecting you. One moment and I'll go get her."

Evelyn left and went down the hall to her mother's room. Form her excitement, you would have thought that it was her first date. He could her exclaim to her mother, "The Captain is here. He'd even more handsome than his picture in the magazine."

"Alright I'm coming." She said as she crushed put her partially smoked cigarette.

The next thing he knew, standing before him was an attractive women with honey colored hair wearing a lovely red evening gown. She appeared to be about five foot eight, with heals. She had a nervous smile on her face as she introduced herself. "Good evening Captain Brason, I'm Paula. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

"I'm Sheffield, but I guess you already know that." he stammered. "Thank you for agreeing to accompany me tonight. I have to admit, I'm a bit nervous. I haven't gone out much since my wife died."

By then her other two children, seventeen year old Brent and eleven year old Jillian, had also gathered around. Paula replied, "I know what you mean. This is the first time I have done anything like this since I lost my husband."

"Oh," Sheffield hesitated, "this is for you." He produced a corsage that had been delivered to the ship earlier in the day. He hadn't thought of it. Pat had insisted that Mace suggest it. She even told him what to get. She knew that he wouldn't think of it. Sheffield fumbled with it as he pinned it to her gown. It matched perfectly.

Paula sent Evelyn to refrigerator to get a white carnation boutonniere. She too fumbled with it as she nervously pinned it to the lapel of his uniform, next to all of his ribbons.

"Shall we go?" he suggested.

Before she could respond, Brent stepped forward and said, "Now Captain, we expect you to have our mother home no later than one o'clock."

That broke the tension a little. "Sheffield answered, "I'll be certain to do that, young man."

Sheffield instinctively offered his arm. She took it as he escorted her out to the car. He opened her door for her and he went around to the other side and got in. On the ride to the hotel, the conversation was as sparse as the space between them was wide.

Once they arrived at the hotel and teamed up with Mace and Pat, both Sheffield and Paula were more relaxed. The two ladies took their places while the Captain and his First Officer mingled with the officers and their companions. Some brought their wives, others bought a date, a few came stag.

When it was time to begin, they too took their seats. On cue, Mace stood at the podium and on behalf of the captain welcomed everyone present and introduced their special guests, Colonel Harvey Morrison and his wife Marcella. He also introduced Paula as the Captain's dinner companion. Next he acknowledged those who had worked on putting the evening together, especially his wife Pat who had put a lot of time and effort into it.

He then told the story of how he and the Captain became acquainted and the time they lived next door to each other in Hawaii. He praised him for his dedication and commitment despite his own personal tragedy. He cited the various stages of his career that brought him to where he was. Nothing he said was anything that everyone didn't already know. He concluded with a toast to his friend and commanding officer.

Next Sheffield took the podium. He drew the attention away from himself and directed it to officers who served under him. He thanked them for their hard work and dedication. He said that there was more to their orders than he could say at that point and that there was more to them than he even knew. He told them that he didn't know when or if they'd be back to Norfolk, perhaps they would still end up in the South Pacific before the cruise was over. He concluded by raising his glass of Coca-Cola and toasted his officers.

Mace took the podium once more and invited Lieutenant (jg) Douglas Fellows, the chaplain, to say Grace. At the conclusion, the hotel staff served dinner as an orchestra played dinner music. Sheffield, with Paula at his right, were seated at the center of the head table. On the other side of Paula was Pat and Mace. To Sheffield's left were Marcella and Harvey. As they visited, they learn that Harvey and Marcella were actually on their honeymoon. They had only been married for three weeks. This was the only chance they had to get away together, even if Harvey had work to do.

As they visited over dinner, Pat thought that Mace was occupying too much of the conversation and gave him a not so subtle clue under the table to butt out and let Paula and Sheffield get to know each other. By then their nervousness had subsided.

"So what do you do to occupy your time?" Sheffield asked.

"Well, that's an interesting story. Before I lost my husband, I was a housewife and mother. When I found myself having to be the provider all of a sudden, the bank that he died protecting was generous enough to offer me a job as a teller."

"How do you like that?"

"It took me a while to learn everything I needed to do, but they were so patient with me. I'm finally getting the swing of it. Between that and the settlement I got over his death, we get by pretty good."

"My late father-in-law was in the banking business, until it failed back in thirty one. What bank do you work for?"

"I'm at the down town branch of the Bank of Virginia."

“Really. I have an account there. That reminds me I have three or four pay checks that I haven't deposited yet.”

“Well, you had better come in before you sail and let me take care of that for you.”

“I'll have to do that for sure.”

It was Paula's turn for a question. “I understand that you're from Roanoke. I have a cousin who lives in Roanoke, perhaps you know of her.”

“Its hard to say. I've been been away for a long time. What's her name?”

“Samantha Taylor.”

“You're kidding. I know Samantha. She and her family attend church where my brother is the pastor. In fact, they invited me to dinner while I was home a while back. As it turned out, she and my late wife had become good friends while she and the kids spent the Summer in Roanoke about five years ago. I just talked to her and Mike at my nephew's wedding three weeks ago. They sure have some terrific kids. So tell me about your children.”

They visited back and forth about their children for the next little while. Sheffield spoke of his as if they were waiting for him at home.

Their conversation was interrupted when Mace got up to introduce the entertainment. Lieutenant Paul Cameron, the communications officer had a hilarious comedy routine that he put on. Everyone was surprised to learn that Lieutenant (jg) Arnold Ronelli, the Aviation Supply Officer, had an incredible tenor singing voice. He sang "Night and Day", accompanied by the orchestra. The song had been around for about ten years but had just recently been recorded by Frank Sinatra on his first solo album. Lieutenant Drew Sicamour from the engineering department and his wife danced the Argentine Tango.

Sheffield leaned over and asked Mace, “How did you know these guys were so talented?”

“I posted a sign up sheet in the officer's mess asking for volunteers for the floor show. I had a lot more but I could only pick so many.”

The final number was barber shop quartet made up of four Ensigns who had only graduated from the Academy in June.

At the conclusion of the floor show, the orchestra switched into dance mode. Sheffield didn't hesitate to ask Paula if she would like to dance. She was delighted. They were only half way through the first number when she said, “You're not a bad dancer, Captain.”

“Really. Do you think so? Geannie was always the better dancer.”

“You're a lot better than Gary. He had two left feet and absolutely no rhythm. Bless his heart, he loved to dance.”

They visited as they danced three or four more numbers before trading partners with Mace and Pat.

Pat asked, "So how's it going Sheffield, are you having a good time?"

"Yes, very much so. Thank you for arranging this. She is a very delightful woman. We got off to a bit of an awkward start, but its going pretty well now."

After that number, the orchestra leader announced, "Alright ladies and gentlemen, for your dancing pleasure we will have a mixer for the next five numbers. The rule is that you have to dance each of the next five numbers with someone you haven't danced with yet tonight. We'll give you just a moment to exchange partners." After about a half a minute, he turned around and struck up the orchestra. Sheffield ended up with Marcella for his first partner of the mixer. She asked, "Is the story that Harvey told about how you met really true?"

"What's his version?"

She repeated the story of the dogfight over Maui all those years ago and how they hooked up back on the ground. To which Sheffield replied, "That's pretty much it, except it was me who shot him down."

After the mixer, Sheffield and Paula danced a few more numbers before siting down to visit some more. That is when they realized that they were both still wearing their wedding rings. They confessed to each other that they weren't ready to take them off yet. The evening wound down around midnight with the last dance of the evening. Not wanting to sit it out, Sheffield stood and took Paula by the hand and led her back out onto the dance floor.

As they left the hotel, his car and driver were waiting for them. On the drive back to her home, the space between them wasn't nearly as wide as it had been on the way to the banquet. It wasn't as quite either as they talked and laughed all the way. When they pulled up in front of her house he told the driver to wait. What else was there for him to do? Sheffield, always the perfect gentleman, got out and went around to the other side and opened her door and took Paula by the hand and helped her out of the car. She took his arm as they walked up to the door.

"I had a wonderful time, Paula. Thank you for agreeing to accompany me."

"It was my pleasure. I had forgotten how to have a good time. Thank you for showing me one."

They paused on the doorstep. Sheffield said, "It looks like I kept my promise to Brent. Its only twenty after twelve."

"Would you like to come in for a while? We still have forty minutes."

"I'd like that. My driver can wait that long."

For the next forty minutes they visited over a couple of bottles of Coca-Cola and some left over popcorn that her kids had made earlier in the evening. As the time approached one o'clock, Sheffield said, "Well, according to your son, our evening is over." He stood to leave and she followed him to the door. He continued, "Perhaps when I get back, whenever that might be, could I call on you again?"

“Perhaps that would be nice.”

“Well,” Sheffield said standing in the open door. “Good night then.” He offered his hand.

“Thank you again for a lovely evening, Captain.” she said as she shook his hand. “Good night.”

Back in his stateroom as got ready for bed, Sheffield told Geannie all about his evening and how good it was to get out. As he hung up his uniform, he noticed her birthaversary gift stashed in the back of the closet.

The next morning, Sheffield could see that both Walt and Ramona were correct in their encouragement for him to get off the ship. Instead of dressing in his uniform, he put on his suit. During breakfast, he gave Reggie the rest of the day off. With none of the senior officers aboard he left the lieutenant who was officer of the deck in command.

Rather than going to Lieutenant Fellows services, he had his driver take him to the church were they had attended as family when they lived in Norfolk. Upon getting out of the car, he dismissed his driver. Once inside, the pastor immediately recognized him and came straight to him. After the hand shakes and “how are you” the pastor acknowledged that he knew what had happened to Geannie and the Kids. He too had seen the Life Magazine story. Many of the congregation remembered him, and he saw many familiar faces. After the services he lingered to visit with old acquaintances.

From the church, he just started walking around aimlessly. He came across a 1930s style diner and went in to have some lunch. He ordered a bowl of chili and a cinnamon roll. Geannie always made a batch of chili and cinnamon rolls in October when the weather began to change. This was pretty good, but not as good as hers. He tried not to think of the past or the future. He just focused on right now, being off the ship and dressed in a civilian suit, being inconspicuous.

After lunch he wandered around some more and came across a park. He just sat on a bench and soaked in the waning fall colors and watched people. There were people of all sorts; young families with small children, young couples just falling in love, older couples still in love. At one point an older gentleman out walking his dog sat down beside and struck up a conversation. They talked about the weather and the world and the war. Sheffield talked as if he were removed from it, keeping his identity to himself. He simply introduced himself as Sheffield.

After the man and his dog moved on, Sheffield lingered a little longer before moving on himself. His wanderings brought him to a movie theater where there was a matinee of “The Pride of the Yankees” starring Gary Cooper, Teresa Wright, and Walter Brennan. He thought about it for a minute and stepped up to the window and purchased a ticket and went in. Geannie loved the movies and she loved baseball. This was the story of the legendary New York Yankees first baseman Lou Gehrig, who died only the year before. He

bought some popcorn and went in and sat down and enjoyed the picture. It was as if Geannie was in the seat next to him watching it with him.

As the afternoon turned to evening, with the sun sinking low, hunger began gnawing at his stomach. Down the street from the theater was an upscale restaurant that he decided to checkout. He was promptly seated and handed a menu. What caught this eye was the pheasant under glass. He couldn't remember ever having pheasant, so he ordered it. All alone, he dined on roast pheasant stuffed with wild rice and mushrooms and a side of steamed broccoli, cauliflower, and carrots. It was really good.

Satisfied by his meal, he decided to go back to the ship. Outside of the restaurant he hailed a cab that took him back to the naval station. He showed his identification and the cab was allowed in and delivered him at the foot of the gangplank. He went aboard and went directly to his stateroom. It had been nice to get off the ship and to just be Sheffield and not Captain Brason. He had been alone for more than ten months, but he had really never been alone by himself. The alone time that day helped him to find himself as an individual, not attached to his family, the Navy, or anything else. His life had always been defined as being half of a couple rather than as an individual. He now realized that he could make it in the world on his own.

It was back to the real world on Monday morning. But first there was just one item of personal business that he had to take care of. He left Mace and Commander Whithouse to look after some last minute details before the Army bombers began coming aboard. He told Commander Whithouse about something he had thought of during the night. He wanted the number three crash barrier, just ahead of the outboard elevator extended to better protect the the bombers during over the bow landings. He wanted it extended enough to keep a plane from bouncing over it into the parked planes. Commander Whithouse assured him that he would see to it.

Sheffield had called for his car to pick him up. He left Commander Owen in charge and had his driver take him to the downtown branch of the Bank of Virginia. Upon entering the bank, he scanned the row of tellers and found the one he was looking for. Paula smiled as she saw him approaching her window. "Good morning, Captain." she greeted him.

"Good morning, Paula. Thank you again for Saturday night. You don't know how much that did for me."

"Oh I think I can guess. It did wonders for me too. Thanks to you, I am one step closer in the healing process myself. But you're here for more than just a thank you visit aren't you."

"Yes, but it gave me a good excuse to say it anyway."

"What can I do for you, Sheffield?"

“Do you remember those paychecks I told you about. I need to do something with them before I sail. Would you please deposit them into my savings account?”

“Do you have your account number?”

“No, I'm afraid not.”

“That's not a problem, I can look it up. One moment please.” She stepped away from the window and went to the large book that contained all of the banks accounts. Sheffield found himself eying her over when her back was turned to him; he couldn't help but admire her shapely figure, particular her bottom which was emphasized by her form fitting navy blue skirt and the white blouse tucked in at the waist.

She wrote down the account number on a piece of paper and closed the book. He then saw her write down something else on another piece of paper. Momentarily she returned to her window and took his checks and added them up. “Would you like any cash back?”

Sheffield thought about for moment and said, “Yes, please. How about two hundred dollars.”

“Thats a lot of money big spender. Going somewhere?” she winked.

She counted out two hundred dollars in cash. “There you go. Don't spend it all in one place. Now will there be anything else?” as she handed him the cash with a slip of paper on top of it. “That's my address. Why don't you drop me a line somewhere along the way in your travels?”

“Thank you. I just might do that.” he responded as he placed the money in his billfold.

“Say,” Paula added. “I noticed that your wife's name is still on the account. Would you like to have it taken off. Its a simple matter of filling out a new card.”

Her question caught Sheffield off guard. “Umm. No I don't think I'm ready to do that quite yet.”

“I understand.” she said sympathetically.

“Well, it was good to see you again, Paula. I need to get back to the ship. I've got a lot to do before we sail on Wednesday. See you later, okay.”

“Have a good voyage, Captain.” She reached out and grasped his hand. “Take care of yourself out there.”

Sheffield nodded, “I'll be sure to do that.”

As he left the bank and was getting into the car he heard the sound of planes approaching form the southwest and looked up to see the first flight of four B-25s from the 101st Bombardment Squadron approaching the Naval Air Station, followed by two more flights staggered behind them in the distance.

By the time he returned to the ship, two more flights were approaching to bring up the rear. The lead planes had already landed. He quickly made his way to the bridge from where Colonel Morrison was watching the the process. Together they observed the lead bomber taxiing down the street through the base and onto the pier, its wingspan barely cleared the buildings and obstacles along the way. A plane director

directed it to a stop directly under the boom of the dockside crane. The pilot shut off the engine and once the propellers had spun down, the crew deplaned. Two sailors climbed on top of the plane and strung a large piece of rope through the hoisting eyelets in the top of the fuselage. Once the rope was secure, it was hooked to the giant hook suspend from the crane. The two sailors got down off the plane before it was raised in the air.

It was about even with the flight deck when another bomber taxied onto the pier. With the big plane sufficiently high enough to clear the anti-aircraft guns that lined the ship, the crane slowly swung around until it was directly over the center of the aft elevator. Gently it settled onto the deck and two more sailor climbed on top of it to unhook the the crane and undo the rope. At the same time, the second plane was in place and ready to be hoisted. As the crane raised the hook and began swinging back over the dock, the first plane was being pulled forward by a deck tractor.

Sheffield and nearly everyone else aboard watched the unusual spectacle along with hundreds of others throughout the naval station. As all of this was going on, the four auxiliary carriers, including the Chenago, were getting under way along with a host of other ships of various types. One by one they made their way into Hampton Roads and out to sea. It was certainly a busy place that day. The loading of the planes took several hours. By the time the last plane was in place they took up better than the entire forward two thirds of the flight deck, back past the superstructure.

While all of the attention was focused on the bombers being loaded, something else unusual was loaded aboard that went practically unnoticed. Since having his car aboard was only useful when the ship was pier side, he decided to see if he could get his hands on an LCVP, a thirty six foot landing craft designed to for carrying thirty six men, or eight thousand pounds of cargo, or in this case, a vehicle. One just happened to be available, and was loaded aboard and stowed right behind his launch. On either side of the aft hangar bay, there was an area of deck, called the boat deck, between the hangar bulkhead and the edge of the hull for boat storage, along with a crane for lowering into and raising them out of the water. The ten and a half foot wide craft fit perfectly.

During the rest of the afternoon, Colonel Morrison, Major Conrad Bradley the squadron commander, Technical Sergent Eugene Bertinelli the chief mechanic, and Chief Evans began an inspection of each aircraft to make sure there was not any structural damage to any of the aircraft during the loading process. In the meantime the pilots and support personnel were removing their gear from the planes and getting squared away in their quarters aboard the ship. Sheffield was satisfied with the way the crew went out of their way to be accommodating to their guests.

At the conclusion of the inspection, all aircraft were found to be in satisfactory condition. It had been a long busy day aboard ship. Colonel Morrison left the ship to be with his wife. Everyone else settled in for

their first night aboard ship. It took some adjusting for the Army boys. They weren't used to ducking their heads or when stepping through a door, or a hatch as the sailors were quick to correct them. There was more than one Army airman with a bump on his head and skinned up shins. As predicted there were numerous card games and money changing hands that went on that first night and every night they were aboard.

On Tuesday morning came the stunning news that the Hornet had sunk overnight and the Enterprise had taken another beating at the Battle of Santa Cruz. Again the question was raised, "Why are we doing this instead of racing to the South Pacific at full speed?"

Committed to the mission at hand, work continued on making preparations to sail the next day. All of the bombers were moved aft and spotted as closed to each other as possible, leaving just four hundred feet for the lead plane to take off. The pilots had been through weeks of training and had proved that they could do it. After all, it's not like it hadn't been done before. Once the planes were in place, they were tied down to the deck with heavy ropes. No matter how much the ship might roll and pitch, they weren't going anywhere.

The men in the machine shop were able to fabricate a ten foot extension for the crash barrier. After all of the bombers had been moved to their permanent places, the extension was installed. However, because of the additional support required in the event of an aircraft engaging it, the barrier had to remain in the upright position until it was time to launch the bombers.

One other last minute detail for Captain Brason was to meet with the commanders of the ships that would be sailing with him. He held a brief meeting with them in his ready room to go over the details of their orders and communication protocols. He particularly wanted to workout the formation details for when he reversed his engines to land aircraft over the bow.

With everything ready, he took a moment to call home to let them know that he was leaving. Then he took a moment to write to Ramona so it could be posted before sailing.

October 27, 1942

Norfolk, Virginia

Dear Ramona,

I'm sorry that I haven't written sooner because we have been getting ready to sail. We did receive our orders and they were not what I was expecting. I'm afraid that we're going to have to postpone going out to dinner. Rather than sailing for the Pacific as I had anticipated, we're going in the

opposite direction. My orders are to deliver a load of Army bombers across the Atlantic and wait there for further orders. If we do go on to the South Pacific, it would probably be by way of the Indian Ocean, bypassing Pearl Harbor altogether.

Knowing how badly we are needed, especially now in light of the news about the Battle of Santa Cruz, it was hard for me to accept the fact. It was a real challenge to convince my officers and crew of the significance of our orders, when I have my own doubts.

I want you to know that I have been getting out more. It has made a lot of difference in my wellbeing and I have gained a fresh perspective of who I am as an individual rather than half of a couple.

I directed Mace to put together an appreciation banquet for the ship's officers to thank them for all of their hard work before we sail. It was to be a formal affair at nice hotel here in Norfolk. In your last letter you mentioned the time that you accompanied me to the farewell party that Admiral Halsey hosted for me.

If you would have been here, I'd of asked you to accompany me as my dinner companion. Since you weren't, I asked Pat to help me out. She knew a widow who lost her husband back in January and approached her with the idea of being my dinner companion.

For some reason, she agreed. I must admit, it was pretty awkward for both of us. As the evening wore on, it turned out to be a good experience. I learned that I could go out and enjoy myself rather than hiding from life in the safety of the cocoon I had fashioned for myself aboard the

ship.

Then I did something else. I spent a day all by myself alone. For the last ten months I have been all by myself in a crowd. On Sunday I dressed in my civilian suit and left the ship, alone. I attended services at our old church here in Norfolk. Then I went out to lunch and took a stroll through a park. I even went to a movie and treated myself to pheasant under glass at a nice restaurant.

Those two events have helped me come to that conclusion. Personally, I feel that it was a big step for me. Don't get me wrong. I still have a long ways to go. My brother says that when I take off my wedding ring, I'll be about there. I'm not ready to do that yet. In fact I went to bank yesterday to make a deposit. The lady that accompanied me to dinner was the teller and asked if I wanted to remove Geannie's name from the account. I wasn't ready to do that either. So you see, I still have a ways to go.

You have been a big help. I look forward to your letters. They're always full of the encouragement that I need at the time.. How do you do that? You're a great friend and I truly value our relationship. If you ever get through to this fellow that you are in love with, he will have someone truly special. I hope that one day you can have what you want.

So, I don't know when or if I'll be back this way. Don't let that stop you from writing. Somewhere in my travels it will catch up to me. I look forward to hearing from you.

Love Sheffield

It was too late for the letter to go out that day. At least it was in the mail bag that would be taken off

the ship just before sailing in the morning.

* * * * *

I have never read any accounts of a staff car and an LCVP being aboard an aircraft carrier. As far as I know, the idea is purely fictional.

The 101st Bombardment Squadron and Major Conrad T. Bradley are fictional.