

Chapter VIII

The First Mission

October 28, 1942 – November 12, 1942

Early on the morning of Wednesday, the 28th of October Lieutenant Sicamour's men lit the boilers and began building up steam. Captain Brason had breakfast early and went up to the bridge to monitor the process of getting underway. Commander Owen was receiving reports from all over the ship as the various departments reported in. The gangplank was hauled in just before 0730 and the ship was ready to depart. Three tugboats had been waiting at the ready since sunrise. Sheffield gave the word and the message was relayed to the tugs. The mooring lines were cast off and the big ship began to move.

At the same time, the Syracuse, the four destroyers, and the tanker Yellowstone were also getting underway. Soon all seven ships were slowly maneuvering single file through Hampton Roads, with the Syracuse leading the way, followed by Reprisal. It was a very unusual sight for the onlookers who must have marveled at the big olive drab bombers on the flight deck.

Once out in the open Atlantic, the ships assumed an anti-submarine cursing formation. Again with the Syracuse out in front. Reprisal was boxed in by the four destroyers, with the tanker astern. Almost immediately, Captain Brason ordered a zig zag course. The morning anti-submarine patrol was provided by Scouting Nine from Norfolk Naval Air Station, as no flight operations would be conducted that day.

Once well out to sea, Sheffield decided to let the men on the all seven ships know where they were going. He directed the signal officer to hoist the signal flags that was the predetermined signal for the commanders of the other ships to do the same. The only ones who knew were the commanding officers of the ships and Colonel Morrison. The pilots and crew of the B-25s didn't even know where they were going. The senior officers were summoned to the bridge for the announcement.

The Captain picked up the microphone and switched on the intercom and said, "May I have your attention. This is the captain speaking. It's time that I let you know where we are going.

"Undoubtedly, you noticed all of the ships departing Norfolk earlier this week. They were part of a massive armada of warships, transports, and cargo ships that got underway all up and down the east coast. They are all part of an invasion force bound for French Morocco in North Africa. On the morning of the seventh, General George Patton's Third Army will establish a beachhead and it is expected that area will be secured by the 10th. At that time, we will launch the B-25s some six or seven hundred miles off Casablanca. They will fly to the newly secured airfields from which they will carry the campaign to German and Italian forces across North Africa.

"Now didn't I tell you that this is a mission we could be proud to be part of. Then with our mission completed, we will put in at Praia da Vitória on the island of Terceira in the Azores to await further orders. That is all."

After clicking off the intercom he said to the senior officers, "While in port, Colonel Morrison and I have some business with the Portuguese government. After that has been wrapped up, I have been told to expect our next orders. I was told that they would take us into the fight. Now I don't what that means, but if I were a betting man I say our next destination is Noumea, New Caledonia by way of the Indian Ocean."

Then he stipulated, "That is only my speculation, but what do I know."

During the Captain's announcement, Colonel Morrison and the B-25 pilots were listening from the Bat Team's ready room. When built, Reprisal had six ready rooms on the galley deck, immediately beneath the flight deck. The ready rooms were designed to accommodate the smaller prewar squadrons. During her time in the navy yard, two adjacent compartments were combined to accommodate the Wildcats. The Crusaders, Scouts and Seahawks each had their own ready room leaving an extra one, which was used by the Bat Team.

After their destination was revealed, Colonel Morrison briefed the twenty four pilots on the conditions they could expect on arrival. There were only twenty planes embarked of the twenty four that had practiced for the mission. The other four pilots came along as extras, in case one or more were unable to fly at the time of launch. They were also to accompany the planes to provide replacement pilots once at their new base of operations.

By late afternoon, the task group was beyond the range of the anti-submarine patrol and the ships continued on under the watchful eyes of a couple of airships and number of long range PBY amphibious patrol bombers. The autumn sky was clear and calm, ideal for sailing. The first day at sea passed into evening as the ships steamed east at fifteen knots.

That evening, Sheffield invited Colonel Morrison to dine with him in the captain's mess. Harvey commented on Geannie's portrait that hung prominently on the bulkhead directly opposite of the captain's seat. Knowing the her and how she and their children had died, he commented about the kind of person that she was. He said that she was the kindest, most loving, decent person that he had ever known.

Sheffield talked about how they had grown up together and all they places they lived during his career. He concluded with, "I sure miss her. Even now after all of these months later I still think about her and the kids several times a day. It is getting easier, but I don't think I'll ever get completely over it."

"I can't imagine a marriage like that. I mean I hope to now with Marcella. You know my first wife. We were married for fifteen rocky years. It didn't take much to set her off." Harvey said. "When she got mad, look out. She was a thrower. It didn't matter what she could get her hands on, she'd throw it. I was the target of a lot of nice stuff that got busted up. I often wished that I was in the Navy instead, at least I could have sailed away for long periods of time."

"I can't imagine living like that." Sheffield said. "Geannie was so even tempered, for the most part.

Sometimes she got a little exasperated by me but she rarely got angry.” He paused and chuckled, “There was one time early in our marriage when I did or said something that upset her. She was making the bed and in frustration she slammed the pillow that was in her hands down on the bed so hard,” his chuckle turned to laughter, “that it exploded. Feathers went flying everywhere. For a moment it looked like a snow storm as the feathers settled. Well, we both burst out laughing so hard that we immediately forgot what it was that set the whole thing in commotion. Ever since then, when we had a disagreement we'd settle it with a pillow fight.”

“You were lucky to have had a woman like that .” Harvey said as he set down an empty coffee mug.

“Hey boy.” he said directing his comment to Reggie as he nodded toward the mug.

Sheffield cut him off. “Seaman Jackson is a valued member of my crew and I'd appreciate it if you would treat him with respect.”

“I'm sorry Sheffield, but he's just a...”

“Just a what?” Sheffield cut him off again. “You don't need to apologize to me, apologize to Seaman Jackson.”

The Colonel sat dumbfounded for a moment. He wasn't accustomed to apologizing to a colored man, let alone being respectful to one. The look in his hosts eye told him that the captain was absolutely serious. He swallowed his pride, and mumbled, “I beg your pardon, Seaman. I'd like some more coffee.”

“Reggie, I'll have some more too, please.”

“Sure thing, sir.” The young sailor said as he brought the pot to the table. He first poured the captain's.

“Thank you, Reggie.”

“Your welcome, sir.”

Then he poured the Colonel's.

Taking the clue from his host, Harvey mumbled, “Yeah, thanks.” without looking at the steward.

Reggie politely asked, “Is there anything else I can get you, Colonel, sir?”

“No... Thank you.”

“What about you Cap'an, sir?”

“Yeah. I'll have another of those biscuits of yours, please.”

In the grand scheme of things in the military, a navy captain and a colonel in the other three branches of service are equal in rank. Harvey actually outranked Sheffield slightly through seniority. But in this case, Harvey was a guest of the Navy and had no authority over anything, except for the bombers and their crews. This incident didn't affect their relationship, either professionally or socially. They continued on with their conversation throughout the the rest of the meal until parting company for the evening.

At dawn the next morning, four of the operational Wildcats were brought from the hangar by the forward elevator and were moved into position behind the catapults. Once their wings had been extended and their engines warmed up, they were sent aloft. Next, three of the Avengers repeated the process. With the planes on patrol, the order for the day was general quarters drills and gunnery practice. Only the forward guns could be fired as guns aft couldn't be fired without damaging the bombers.

The ship-bound pilots of the air group spent the day in their ready rooms getting a review of their training material. Their time was better spent in class than working on their poker and pinochle skills. Besides, some of the men new to the squadrons had not been had it presented to them yet.

Before recovering the morning, patrol the other seven planes were brought up and readied for launch. The ship turned into the wind and they were catapulted into the air. In order to recover aircraft over the bow, Sheffield brought the ship around one hundred and eighty degrees. Once on course he ordered "All stop."

The four huge propellers came to a stop and the ship coasted for several hundred yards as she slowed down. Then he ordered the engines into reverse. The ship began steaming in a straight course backwards and the planes aloft were cleared to come aboard. Each plane easily caught the third or fourth wire, stopping well short of the barricade. Again the engines stopped and were reengaged in forward. The task group again resumed their original zig zag course at fifteen knots. This process was repeated every four hours as the patrols were rotated. Gunnery practice continued between flight operations.

That was the routine for the next three days. The drills were suspended on Sunday. However the patrols were still sent out, watches were maintained and the ship remained at a high level of readiness. That day happened to be November 1st, what would have been Sandy's eighteenth birthday. That should have been a big day for her, the day she officially became a woman in the eyes of some. She had already become a woman, and a lovely one at that; one just like her mother. A woman who was just beginning to experience what it was like to be falling in love for the first time in her life. Sheffield wondered whatever became of Chip.

Sandy would have been a senior in high school, looking forward with eagerness to graduating in the spring and going on to experience life. A life that now she wouldn't live, love that she wouldn't experience, a husband that would never be, and children, his grandchildren, that would never be born. This all was weighing on his mind as he sat through Lieutenant Fellows' services in the enlisted mess.

As Sheffield sat listening to the sermon with Geannie's Bible on his lap, two pieces of paper folded together that had been stashed away between the pages slipped out onto the deck. Sheffield was amazed when he unfolded it to see that it was a letter that Geannie had written to him three days before she died,

but hadn't mailed. He got up and left the service and retired to his stateroom to see what it was. As he read, he could hear her voice in his head as if she was speaking to him from the dead.

December 4, 1941

Dear Curly,

I hope you make it home for our birthaversary on Sunday. I can't imagine what is keeping you. I wonder if maybe they sent you off somewhere in anticipation of the coming war. I'm glad that the kids and I are going home. We'll miss it here, but it wouldn't be the same without you here anyway. Once the shooting starts you'll be right in the middle of it all.

I worry about you and pray that you will be protected. I thought that I had lost you once. I don't want to have to go through that again for real. I understand the reality of war and I have to accept the possibility that something could happen to you.

The reason I am writing this in a letter rather than waiting for you to come home is because it is easier this way to say what's on my mind. If something were to happen to you, it would be absolutely devastating. The kids and I would have to go on and manage on our own somehow. I would hold my head up high knowing that your sacrifice was not in vain. Freedom is not free, it never has been and it never will be.

All of these years, I never rally thought it would come to this. Even as the world began falling apart around us, I thought that America would be immune from it. Recent events tell me that that is not the case. Maybe the kids and I should not have held out as long as we have. Perhaps we should have gone home to Roanoke sooner. It was the thought of not wanting to be parted from you that we stayed as long as we have. Of all of the places that we have lived over the years, I love it here. It truly is a

paradise. So, we will go home so you will be free to go wherever you are sent.

There is something else I want to tell you as well. With all of this talk of war and my concern for you, in the event that something were happen to me while you are off to war, here is what I want you do. I want you go forward and do you your duty and serve our nation well. I wouldn't want something to happen to you because you were moping around over me and not paying attention. I would need you to be sure to take care of yourself so Sandy and Austin would have a father to come home to them.

I would expect you to pick up the pieces and move on with life, just as we did after we lost Charles Emmett. I would want you to look for love again. You are too good of a man to not bless the life of another deserving woman as you have me. Of course, I wouldn't want you to run right out and find another right off the bat. I would want you to miss me just a little bit first.

You are the most incredible man I have ever know. There has never been or ever will be anyone I could be as happy and content with. You are the kindest, most considerate, and loving husband a girl could ever expect to have. I count myself blessed that I have been the recipient of all that you have to offer for the last twenty years, and more when you consider the twenty three years before we were married. If something were to happen to me, I'd hate to see all of the love that you have to offer go to waste.

Rest assured, I don't plan on anything happening to me. I only say this just in case. As far as you and me are concerned, I plan to grow old with you and watch our grandchildren grow up and begin families of their own.

Regardless of what may come, I love you with all of my heart and I always will even if we are separated from one another in death. I don't know how, but I'm sure that in God's mercy there is way that we can be together forever. Love is just too strong to be broken by death. I don't know where we'll find the way, but I'm going to keep looking until I do.

So, I'll be here waiting for you to come home in the next day or two. Let's enjoy the next thirty days. I'm really looking forward to the cruise and time at home in Roanoke. All too soon it will come to an end and we'll have to bid farewell.

With all my love,

Seannie

Sheffield sat there dumbfounded after reading the letter that she wrote only three days before that tragic day that changed his world and the whole world at large forever. He read it again, particularly paying attention to what she expected of him, if something were to happen to her. He wished that he would have found it months ago. It was interesting that her advice and encouragement to him was same thing Walt had told him four weeks earlier.

She had no way of knowing what was about to happen to her when she wrote that. The timeliness of her words seemed incredible. Ever since talking to Walt he had been struggling with the idea of ever loving someone else the way he loved her. Now here she was encouraging him to do just that. It certainly gave him something to think about it all that afternoon and for the next several days.

Monday was fueling day. First the thirsty destroyers fueled from Yellowstone, followed by the Syracuse. After the rest of the task group had fueled, it was the Reprisal's turn. Sheffield ordered the carrier to slow down to ten knots on a steady course. The Yellowstone pulled along the starboard side and matched course and speed. Only several yards apart, the fueling lines were connected and soon fuel began flowing across through the hoses and into the tanks far below.

The Yellowstone had been one of the National Defense Tankers that had been built for Standard Oil of New Jersey before being taken over by the Navy prior to the outbreak of the war. She carried 24,275 tons of fuel, enough to fill the Reprisal's tanks four and half times. That afternoon, she only needed to have them topped off.

The routine of the first few days of launching and recovering patrols, gunnery practice, various drills, and the typical life at sea continued for the next several days. Sheffield had a lot of time to think about Geannie's letter. He didn't quite know what to think. Moving on meant letting go. He was afraid that with time he would forget how he felt about her and how she made him feel. All he had felt for the last ten months was emptiness.

She was telling him that she didn't want him to feel that way. She was telling him to fill that emptiness with love. The only way to do that was with someone else who could love him the way that she did. He didn't see how that could ever be possible. Other than her, he had felt the love of no other. All of his life, there was no other. Now, how could there be another?

Geannie's brother Stirling came to mind. He had tagged along with Stirling and Walt even though he was younger than them. Wherever they were, Geannie, Sarah, and their friend Lorraine Reeves were also. Not only where he and Geannie destined to marry each other, but so where Walt and Sarah as were Stirling and Lorraine. In fact out of the three, they were the first to get married. She had quit school to marry him.

Then tragically Lorraine died in child birth nearly ten months later leaving him a young widower with a tiny baby. Sheffield, Geannie and Sarah were still in high school at the time. He remembered how devastated Stirling was. He now knew first hand how devastated he was. Until he left for the academy he saw what Stirling went through. What he didn't witness was how he was able to fall in love with the young widow who the Austins had hired to take care of his son along with her own son. Sheffield wasn't able to attend their wedding, but on the occasions that he was able to be at home, he saw how completely in love he was with Mary Ann. And how together they had their own family together. They had now been married for going on twenty three years.

Sheffield knew that it was possible. It had worked for both of them. But then he found himself rationalizing that they had both only been married for such a short time before being widowed. Certainly that didn't count for as much as the twenty years that he and Geannie had been married. But did it really? He remembered how he felt when Geannie lay dieing even before they were married. He realized that the length of time someone was married was not a multiplier in the grief factor.

Then he reread Ramona's last letter in which she talked about her experience of finding love again after being widowed the first time. He concluded that in theory, it was possible for him to love another as well. It was possible for someone to fill his loneliness as Geannie had done. Stirling never stop loving Lorraine and yet there was enough love for Mary Ann as well. Now Sheffield had something else to think about.

Someone else had had time to think as well. After two weeks in the brig, he had Petty Officer

Pucheskey brought to his office. He asked the prodigal sailor, "Have you had enough time to think about your life and where it is heading?"

"Yes, sir, and where I was heading don't look pretty. I realize now that I need to change course and set sail for calmer seas."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"I need to give up all of my vices. Well, maybe not all of them. A guy still has to have a little fun."

"Can you really do that?"

"I went for the last two weeks without getting into any trouble, didn't I?"

"Yeah but you were where you couldn't get into any. The way I see it, your problem is when trouble comes looking for you. You can't seem to resist going along for the ride. What you have to do when trouble taps you on the shoulder is just walk away. Can you do that?"

"I can try."

"You have to do more than try, Pucheskey. Are you ready to commit to me that you can tow the line? If not, maybe you need another week or two to think about it. I need you and your abilities as a member of this crew. Everyone has a job to do and yours isn't getting done. As much as I need you to do your job, I can't tolerate anymore disorderly conduct out of you. A saint, you'll never be, but you can honor your commitment to the navy and to this ship. Let me ask you again, can you do that?"

"Sir, I never really had a father. Right now you're sounding pretty damn fatherly. I respect you for that. I give you my word that for you, I'll do it."

"I don't want you to do it for me. I want you to do it for you. You have a lot of life ahead of you, right now is a pivotal point in your life."

"You're sounding a lot like the chaplain, not the captain right now sir. Maybe you should have been a preacher."

"I guess I come by it naturally, my father was a minister and so is my brother. What I'm asking you to do is not only for your own good but for the good of this ship."

"Now you're talking like a captain. All I can say, sir, is that I will do my best. I owe it to myself, to you, and to everyone else."

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do for you. I'm going to give you another ninety days to think about it."

"Sir? I thought it was for thirty days."

"You didn't let me finished. I'm going to release you from the brig and give you ninety days to prove yourself. At the end of that time I'll consider giving you that stripe back. Know this, I'll be watching you. If you cause me any grief, I'll throw you back in the brig and bust you back to Seaman. Then the next time we are in a US port, I'll turn you over to the Navy with the recommendation of a dishonorable discharge on the

grounds of disorderly conduct. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Alright then, against my better judgment you are free to return to duty. Now don't make a fool out of me. Dismissed."

"Yes, sir!" Petty Officer Pucheskey, who had been standing at attention the entire time, saluted, turned around in military fashion and left the left the Captain's office.

Saturday was another day of fueling for the task group, followed by another day of routine. Word was received that the invasion took place as and was proceeding as planned. Each day the report from the battlefield was good news. On the morning of the 10th while six hundred fifty miles from Casablanca, word was received that the French had surrendered and the air fields were in American hands.

With the morning patrol aloft, the flight deck crew went work untying the B-25s and fueling them. The Army mechanics gave them the once over to make sure each plane was ready to fly. The pilots were summoned to the Bat Team Ready Room for a final briefing from Colonel Morrison.

The crews loaded their gear aboard their aircraft and settled in. Captain Brason ordered the helm to come about into the wind and for the engine room to ring up thirty knots. The big planes needed as much wind coming over the bow as possible. Combined with a the ten knot breeze, they would have plenty of updraft to lift them in the air in such a short distance. Reprisal and the destroyer Archer surged ahead of the task group, leaving the rest of the ships in their wakes.

The word came over the bullhorn, "Start you engines." Thirty nine engines sputtered to life and thirty nine propellers spun to life. The left engine on the number four plane in the second flight refused to cooperate. If they couldn't get it started, the plane would have to be pushed over the side into the sea.

Chief Evans, who had been standing by with a back pocket full of wenches took a look. It turned out that all it needed was an adjustment to the carburetor. He stepped back and signaled the pilot to try it again. This time the engine started.

The flight deck officer motioned the lead bomber, piloted by Major Bradley, into position and had him stop. As he twirled the black and white checkered flag above his head, the pilot revved both engines to full throttle. Reminiscent of that day nearly seven months ago six hundred miles east of Tokyo, every man aboard the seven ships whose duty would permit, watched as the first bomber surged forward when the flight deck officer dropped his arm, pointing the flag forward. Everyone collectively held their breath as that morning six hundred and fifty miles west of Casablanca, the first plane took to the air with a few feet of flight deck to spare. It couldn't be heard above the roar of the engines and the wind over the flight deck, but a every man was cheering.

Sheffield and Harvey watched from the bridge. They patted each other on the back while shaking hands. As the next plane was brought into position, Harvey commented, "Was that a walk in the park or what? That went so much better than when Doolittle lead his group off the Hornet. Do you remember how he almost stalled?"

Sheffield replied, "Yeah, but these guys have some things going for them that those men didn't have. For starters, the deck isn't pitching up and down in heavy seas. Their planes are a lot lighter with no payload, less fuel and fewer crew aboard. They have a longer deck to work with and last of all they have the lessons learned from Doolittle and his men."

"All true, my friend. All true." Then he mused, "Wouldn't it be fun to put a hook on one of them and land it on this thing?"

Sheffield chuckled, "Not on my ship. You'll have to find something a lot bigger than this girl."

Together they and everyone else watched the second bomber repeat the performance. About every four minutes a bomber roared off the deck and into the air. That was much slower than the smaller carrier planes, but the difference was to be expected given the unique circumstances. As the planes joined up overhead in flights of four, they headed east. Soon the flights were strung out at regular intervals across the Atlantic. One hour and twenty minutes after the first bomber took off, the last plane left the flight deck empty.

Sheffield ordered a reduction in speed and for the helmsman to point the bow northeast toward the Azores. Even as the ships of the task group reformed, the air department was busy bringing up the planes of Scouting Eleven up from the hangar deck and prepared them for launch on a long range search ahead of the task group, They were followed by an increased anti-submarine patrol from half of Torpedo Elven and four more Wildcats from Fighting Eleven on combat air patrol.

With space on the hangar freed up, crews went to work bringing the Wildcats that were lashed to the overhead down. The process was as involved and time consuming as it was to put them up there. The first to come down were the Alley-cats so they could be reassembled and ready for the evening patrol. By the end of the day, about half of the fighters had their wheels under them on the deck again.

The last planes of the afternoon flights were recovered just before sunset. With plenty of flight deck space available, the Bat Team was brought up and prepared for launch. When they took off, it was for the first time in several nights. As with the day patrols, nothing was found that night. They had been lucky so far.

Their luck ran out the next morning while launching the first flight of the day. The anti-submarine patrol was already in the air as was the combat air patrol. Just a few planes of the morning search had been launched when the Watson flashed the warning of a submarine contact.

Flight operations were immediately suspended and Captain Brason ordered emergency speed. Utilizing one of her best defenses, Reprisal sprinted ahead at thirty two knots. Sheffield signaled

Commander Cruz, the commander of the destroyer squadron aboard the Syracuse, to have one of his ships stay with the contact and another to stay with the much slower Yellowstone. Accordingly the Watson was detached to search for the U-boat while the Percival stayed behind with the tanker. The rest surged ahead with the carrier.

The coordinates of the contact were passed on to the patrol planes. The sharp eyes of one of the Avenger pilots briefly spotted a the feather wake of periscope and reported the sighting. By the time he had lined up for his approach, the U-boat had obviously spotted the danger and dove. He dropped his four depth charges, spaced at regular intervals. The resulting underwater explosions sent water high into the sky.

The Watson arrived over the target area and took over. One by one depth charges rolled over the stern of the sleek greyhound of the sea. Again, underwater explosions, sent geysers of water skyward.

In the meantime, the speedy carrier had gotten far enough ahead that she was out of immediate danger. Captain Brason slowed his ship down to twenty two knots and flight operations were resumed. Once the remainder of the morning search was airborne, he slowed down further to allow the portly tanker and her escort to catch up. The task group, minus the Watson, continued on their zig zag course toward the Azores. Watson stayed with the contact.

Colonel Morrison, who was on the bridge as an observer, had watched the battle with the U-boat in amazement. He had been enthralled with watching the planes of the morning flight being launched. Once things settled down, he commented, "I must say, I'm very impressed with the efficiency of your flight operations. I'm even more amazed by your Bat Team. That's something we haven't been able to do yet."

Sheffield assured him, "Neither can most Navy pilots. When I first tried to experiment with the concept several years ago, I got so much opposition from above that I wasn't permitted to pursue it. Now that we are in the war, they can see the potential and now I have their support in developing the concept. The real credit goes to Commander James and Commander Whithouse for picking it up and running it."

Harvey reflected for a moment and asked, "What's it like to fly off one of a boat, anyway? I was amazed that our bombers were even able to do it, and yet your boys do it several times every day."

"All I can say," Sheffield responded, "is that it is exhilarating. I guess it is like trying to explain what salt tastes like to someone who has never tasted salt." He paused and got a gleam in his eye and winked, "How'd you like to find out?"

"Are you serious?" Harvey asked. "Yeah, I'd like that. What do you have in mind." A worried look came over his face, wondering what Sheffield was about to suggest.

"Take a look down there," He said nodding to the flight deck. "They readying the dive bombers for the next flight of the day. They're going to get in some bombing practice. How would you like to ride along in the back seat in one of them?"

“You'll let me do that?”

“Sure, why not? It would be a good experience for the Army Air Force's Naval Liaison Officer. If you're going to interact with us, you might as well have a feel for what we do. So what do you say?”

“Yeah, sure. I think that would be great.”

Get yourself down to the Crusader's ready room and they'll fix you up. I'll call ahead and let them know that you're coming.”

When he got to the ready room, Lieutenant Commander Elder was waiting for him and personally invited him to accompany him. He had his rearseatman get him into some flight gear and explain to the Colonel what to expect.

Once the flight was ready for launch, the flight crews were called to their planes. Harvey was helped into the rear seat and strapped in. From the swivel seat he was able to rotate himself around to see in every direction except for straight ahead, as the radio compartment blocked his view.

With all of the planes ready for launch, the ship turned into the wind to commence launching. Commander Elder was first up. With his canopy open, Harvey watched as the flight deck began to drop out from under the plane. Soon they nothing between it and the ocean but thin air. He watched from his bird's eye view as the next plane took off right behind them. As Commander Elder climbed higher, the Reprisal began to look like a little boy's bathtub toy. They continued circling as all eighteen planes were launched and formed up.

With the squadron in formation, Commander Elder lead them away from the task group as they climbed to fourteen thousand feet. Several miles out, the squadron swung around in unison and headed back. From that altitude, the task group appeared to be tiny slivers trailing long white feathers.

As the planes reached the pushover point, Commander Elder told him to hang on. Instantly the plane was in a seventy degree dive. Harvey felt the negative gravity as his stomach floated up into his throat. It reminded him of roller-coaster cresting the top of the highest point and beginning it plunge. In all of his years as fighter pilot, he had never experienced anything quite like this.

The Reprisal loomed larger and larger as he watched it growing directly below. He looked back and watched as the remainder of the squadron peeled off to commence their dives. Again he focused his attention below. He could clearly see the sled being towed five hundred yards behind the carrier.

Within seconds of commencing the dive, they were at one thousand feet. He could feel the plane lighten as the two five hundred pound practice bombs were released. The plane continued down as he watched the two black projectiles streak straight for the sled. The plane leveled out a few hundred feet directly over the stern. A split second later he saw the splashes of the practice bombs as they hit the water on either side of the sled.

He continued watching the ship below as they swept over its entire length in the blink of an eye. As the plane began climbing he watched as plane after plane repeated within seconds of each other what they had just done. In a matter minutes the last plane had made its drop as the squadron began forming up again. After flying on for several miles, they swept around again and flew back toward the ship and entered the landing circle.

Harvey watched as the plane descended all lined up with the flight deck. Off to one side he could clearly see the landing signal officer as he directed the plane aboard. Momentarily he felt a good hard jerk as the tailhook engaged the arresting cable. Within a just few short seconds, the plane came to a complete stop.

He just sat there relishing in the entire experience as the plane, now disengaged from the cable, taxied all the way to the forward end of the flight deck. With the plane parked, he unbuckled his harness and climbed out of the plane and onto the deck. Still wearing his flight gear, he made his way back up to the bridge with the biggest grin on his face.

“How was the ride?” Sheffield asked.

“That was fantastic! The Army Air Force prides ourselves as being 'the' air service. Our boys could never do that! We're pretty damn good at hitting our target from several thousand feet in level flight. But planting a bomb square on the target like that is quite a feat. You'll never catch me bad mouthing you navy flyboys again.”

“I thought that you would enjoy that.”

Harvey continued, “We've got a bunch of your Dauntlesses but nobody knows what to do with them. We just use them to tow target selves.”

“If you want to see what we do with target sleeves, that's up next.”

Throughout the remainder of the day, the ships continued on toward the Azores, conducting gunnery practice along the way. Pausing only to launch and recover aircraft. The Watson had rejoined the task group after losing the contact without any evidence of having sunk it. Another day at sea came to a close and the Bat Team was sent off on their evening patrol.

The next day began early with the Bat Team being sent up again for the pre-dawn patrol. When they were recovered just after sunrise, the task group was just a few miles off the island of Terceira.

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The entire mission is fictional, as no B-25s were transported to Morocco on an aircraft carrier. Other than that, the invasion of North Africa did take place as described.