

Chapter XII

Thanksgiving

November 26, 1942 – November 27, 1942

Thanksgiving Day 1942 was the Reprisal's final day at Praia da Vitória. It was day like any other for the most part. There was a lot of work to be done in preparation for getting underway. Sheffield arose at his usual time and got ready for the day. After a light breakfast, he went to his office to take care of some things before the morning briefing in his ready room. It was so convenient to have everything so close to his stateroom. While at his desk he penned a quick letter to his folks back home. In it he mentioned seeing Seth and that we was well. He still needed to write to Ramona, perhaps later in the day.

At 0800 he walked across to corridor to his ready room, where the senior officers had already assembled. Two main items were on the agenda; getting underway and Thanksgiving Dinner. Perpetrations for both were well in hand. The fuel bunkers had been filled to capacity and the stores had been restocked with what was available locally. As for dinner, the bakery had tuned out thousands of rolls and hundreds of pies. Hundreds of pounds of roast pork was already in the ovens. Sheffield was pleased with the progress for both. At 0845 he reported for duty on the bridge.

Later in the morning, the Cutthroat came along side and tied up next to the carrier. Soon after, the crew of the Cutthroat came aboard. The men on the carrier were eager to show off their ship. Likewise, many of them got a tour of the submarine. Hardly a man was willing to trade places with their counterparts.

Sheffield went back to his office and had Seaman Pucheskey brought to him. He entered the room with proper military protocol. Captain Brason returned the salute and said, "Have a seat, Seaman Pucheskey." gesturing to the chair across from his desk.

Seaman Pucheskey sat down, his hat on his lap. He didn't say a word, waiting to hear what his commanding officer had to say.

"Now that you have had a lot of time to think, what have you figured out?"

"That I really screwed up. My whole life I have been screwing up."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"What are my options, sir?"

"When we first met, I gave you a chance to redeem yourself with some clear guidelines. I really hoped that you would be able to walk away when trouble came looking for you. I explained very clearly what the consequences would be if you couldn't. You made your choice and I am bound by the terms that were set down. I could just say, 'Oh well.' and let you off the hook. Believe me, that is what I would really like to do, but that would negate my authority now wouldn't it. I'd really love to give you a third chance."

He picked up an envelope from off his desk and held it up for Seaman Pucheskey to see. "As promised, this is my recommendation that you receive a dishonorable discharge once you return to the

States. This afternoon a transport is pulling in. When it leaves, you will be on it and this letter will go with it. In a way, what I'm giving you is better than another chance. It is a chance to start all over. I suggest that you don't go home to the Bronx. All of the trouble you had there will come looking for you. That would just set you up to fail. You're free to go any where you want and get a clean start.

"I'll tell you what." He paused and wrote something on a piece of paper then folded it and wrote something on the outside and slid it across the desk. "Its entirely up to you, but if you happen to find yourself in Roanoke, Virginia take this to the Austin Lumber Company and tell them that I sent you. Inside is my recommendation to them that they give you a job and put you to work. These guys are as fair minded as I am. I know them well and they will help you get that fresh start. You see, they are my brothers-in-law. If you choose to go that direction, don't let me down again. Don't let them down. Don't let yourself down.

"Face it. You were never cut out for the Navy. You joined up looking for the easy way out. There is no easy way out. According to your records, you have nearly served your original enlistment anyway. Get on with your life and go make something of it, alright. I'm releasing you from the brig. Go join your shipmates for Thanksgiving dinner and say good bye to your buddies. That will be all. You are dismissed."

Seaman Pucheskey stood up and saluted. "Thank you sir. Thank you for believing in me. I won't let you down again, sir."

Sheffield extended his hand. "Good luck, and don't let yourself down. Perhaps I'll run into you sometime."

Seaman Pucheskey returned to the enlisted quarters and Captain Brason went down to the hangar to see how things were going. The men were already gathering as the last of the food was brought up from the galley.

It was kind of like that first Thanksgiving in a way; just as the pilgrims and Indians came together that day, this day the crew of the Reprisal and the men of the air group were joined by their guests from the Cutthroat, the Yellowstone, and the Marines from the Fifth Marine Raider Battalion. All of whom had just come through their first action of the war, and grateful to still be alive.

Except for those scheduled to stand watch, the men gathered on the hangar deck and sat down at the long rows of tables that had been set up. The submariners, the raiders, the Yellowstone survivors, and the two RAF crewmen intermixed with their hosts. Commander Owen called the men to order and recognized the four commanding officers, seated together at the head table. He then turned the time to Captain Brason for some remarks.

He began, "Over the river, and through the woods, To Grandfather's house we go; The horse knows the way to carry the sleigh through the white and drifted snow. Those words don't fit this Thanksgiving do they. But, we have come a long, long way from the day this ship was placed in commission. This isn't quite

like grandma's house, but Praia da Vitória will have to do. I know it's not the traditional Thanksgiving dinner that we all dream off, but Commander Gates and his men have gone to a lot of work on short notice to put this together. Lets give them three cheers!"

In unison, every one shouted, "Hip hip hooray! Hip hip hooray! Hip hip hooray!" The roar was so loud that it was heard on the other ships in the bay as well as in town.

Capitan Brason continued, "I hope that each of you take a moment this day, if you haven't already, to reflect on what you are grateful for. Personally, I am grateful to all of you, for the work that you do to make this ship run so smoothly. Everyone has a job to do and does it well. It doesn't matter if you're a mess steward or a fighter pilot. We all depend on each other. I'm grateful for the great nation that we serve. For those who have gone before and fought and died to make it what it is today. Now we have the obligation to fight for it, and some of us have already died, others of us have yet to pay the ultimate sacrifice. I'm grateful for my hometown of Roanoke, Virginia and my family. I'm sure all of you have the same sentiment for yours.

"You have all made me proud. We have now completed two missions. Tomorrow, we embark on yet another. I can't tell you where we are going or what our orders are just yet, but I assure you we will yet again engage the enemy. When were are through, we will be one step closer to the end of this war. Then we'll take the next step, and the next, and the next. Then one day, we will have prevailed and we can all go home to our hometowns and families and sit down with them for Thanksgiving dinner.

"Thank you, each and every one of you, and may God bless you."

At the end of the Captain's remarks, Chief Solozar spontaneously stood and said, "Lets here three cheers for the Captain." Again the roar carried across the water to the other ships and into town.

Commander Owen then gave Commander Halversen, Commander Chappin, and Captain Danpora a moment to say what was on their minds. At the conclusion of their brief remarks, he called on Lieutenant Fellows to say Grace and invited those who were assigned to relieve those standing watch to get in the front of the several lines of food. Reggie served the captain and his three guests.

Everyone filled their trays with roast pork and baked potatoes, rolls and various vegetables, salads and deserts, including pumpkin pie. As those who were assigned to stand watch left to their various duty stations, those who they relieved got in line and got in on their share. After everyone had been through the line once, Sheffield had the German POWs brought up and under guard and they too were allowed to join the feast.

Captain Brason made his way to the table were the POW's were seated. Through an interpreter he told of the ship that was coming for them later in the day and that they would be taken to the United States. He promised that they would be well treated. He told them that after dinner, they could go up on the flight deck for some fresh air and sunshine, under guard of course.

The ranking prisoner, the executive officer of the U-boat thanked him for his generosity and hospitality.

After dinner, Sheffield went back up to bridge. Before long, three more ships were observed entering the already crowded bay. They were the USS John J. Pershing and two old flush deck destroyers. The Pershing had just delivered a batch of reinforcements and reserve troops to Casablanca and was on the return trip when they responded to the call for help. Once at anchor, she signaled that she was ready to take on passengers.

The first to board the launches were the German POW's and the Marine Raiders. That took a few trips. It took several more trips to take all of the Yellowstone survivors to the transport. Also to leave the ship were two of the more severely wounded crewmen and Seaman Pucheskey.

Sheffield commented, "Its nice to have company, but its even nicer to see them leave." While all of this was going on, word was received that a plane had just landed at Lajes for the two RAF crewmen. The crew of the Cutthroat boarded their boat and cast off and returned to her place in the anchorage.

Sheffield wanted to get one more letter in the mail bag before the last launch made the trip over to the Pershing. He retired to his emergency cabin and sat at the small table and began his letter to Ramona. He last wrote to her just before leaving Norfolk and hadn't heard back from her since.

November 26, 1942

Aboard the USS Reprisal

Praia da Vitória, Portugal

Dear Ramona,

It has been a month since we left Norfolk and a lot has happened since then. We delivered the Army bombers to Casablanca, Morocco and then sailed to Praia da Vitória on the Island of Terceira in the Azores. Portugal, as you know, is neutral, but invited us here on a trial basis for thirty days in consideration of a permanent arrangement. My assignment was to negotiate the terms of our usage.

Since arriving, we have operated from here. We did have a the

opportunity to engage the enemy. It is probably too soon to be specific, but I can say we were successful in our mission, even though we got roughed up just a little in the process. I had the solemn responsibility to preside over the burial at sea for ten men. That doesn't include others who were lost but never recovered.

With that mission behind us, we sail tomorrow on yet another. All I can say is that it won't bring us anywhere near you. That dinner date will have to wait. One of these days, we'll get together. I don't know when or where, but I will make good on my promise.

Earlier today we held a Thanksgiving dinner for the crew and some invited guests from some other commands. It wasn't a traditional Thanksgiving dinner with all of the trimmings, but it turned out quite nice. We had roast pork and baked potatoes. I hope you did something special.

A lot has happened since last Thanksgiving. That was one of the last good days before the war. You came and spent the day with us. Geannie went all out to make it a special occasion. I'll never forget that pineapple coconut cream pie that you brought. I can still taste it. If it hadn't been for Geannie, I'd of asked you to marry me on the spot. It was that good!

Then that evening Geannie, you, and me went to a movie together. Sandy spent the evening with her boyfriend's family and Rustin was off somewhere else. Do you remember the strange looks we got as threesome, Geannie on one arm and you on the other.

That was a year ago. We knew that the war was coming, but who would have thought that it would start the way that it did. Or that it

would have taken Beannie and the kids like it did. I sure miss them. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't miss them. Fortunately it doesn't hurt nearly as bad.

I can see the light at the end of the tunnel now. I know that I'll be alright. I will never get over it completely, but I know that I can go on with my life and fill it with love and happiness. But first, we've got this war to win. After nearly a year, we're only getting started.

I trust all is well with you. I think I am a letter ahead of you now. There's probably one in transit somewhere. I'm sure it will catch up to me somewhere in my travels. As always I look forward to getting them. You're a true friend and I appreciate your kindness and cherish our relationship.

Love Sheffield

After sealing and addressing the envelope, he reached for the letter that he had written to his folks earlier. Instead, he got out another sheet of stationery and penned another letter.

November 26, 1942

Aboard the USS Reprisal

Praia da Vitória, Portugal

Dear Paula,

I hope you had a nice Thanksgiving. We are in the Azores, but will be sailing tomorrow. Since we left, we have been pretty busy and have seen our first action. We lost a few good men, but we came out on top. Our next mission will also put us in contact with the enemy.

I've been thinking about you. I really enjoyed your company at the banquet. I

Know it was a little awkward for both of us at first. We barely got to know each other and I would like to get to know you better. That is if you are agreeable to it.

I don't know when I'll be in Norfolk next, but perhaps I could call on you and we can go out for an evening. Only it will be a real date and not a charity case like I was the last time.

I hope all is well with you. Tell Brent, Evelyn, Jillian hello for me. They seem like really good kids. You're lucky to have them.

I really don't have a lot to say. I just wanted you to know that I was thinking of you. Take care of yourself and if you get a chance, drop me a line. All sailors, even captains, enjoy getting mail.

Sincerely, Sheffield

He finished time to get his letters posted before the mailbag was taken over to the Pershing on the launch carrying the last of the Yellowstone survivors. With their house guests gone, all of the extra cots and bedding was stowed away and the final preparations for getting underway were taken care of.

On Friday morning, Sheffield reported to the bridge early as Commander Owen received reports from all over the ship. When informed that everything was ready, he gave the order to weigh anchor. His next order put the ship in motion and it slowly steamed out of the bay, along with the Billings, Cedar Rapids, Syracuse, the destroyers Moody, Percival, Watson, Archer, and Kirkman, and the Cutthroat.

Once out in the open Atlantic the task force formed up with the Syracuse in the lead, The Billings flying the flag of Rear Admiral Weston to starboard and the Cedar Rapids to port. The five destroyers boxed in the Reprisal while the Cutthroat brought up the rear on the surface. The air group was soon overhead in the landing circle, ready to come aboard, except for the standard patrols.

That first day at sea was routine, with no drills or exercises planned. Once well underway, Sheffield retired to his office to go over the material concerning their mission in more detail. The German ocean liner SS Edelweiss was built by the Deschimag shipyard at Bremen, Germany for the Norddeutsche Lloyd Shipping Company. Edelweiss was similar to the Potsdam class ocean liners, only much larger. She was designed for speed and endurance and was intended for circumnavigational operations. Her propulsion

system consisted of three Deschimag geared steam turbines and twelve Wagner high pressure boilers driving 3 – three-blade propellers; the same machinery found in contemporary German warships.

The three funneled Edelweiss had a displacement of 10,250 tons standard and 13,500 tons fully loaded with a top speed of 35 knots, or 40.3 miles per hour, making her one of the fastest ships of her size. The ship was 650 feet long with a beam of 75 feet at the waterline and a maximum draft of 33 feet. The Edelweiss had a crew of 350 and accommodated 650 passengers. She also had considerable fuel, stores, and cargo capacity allowing her to remain at sea for long periods of time.

She was delivered to Norddeutsche Lloyd on October 28, 1938. After acceptance trials and her shakedown cruise, she departed on her around the world maiden voyage from Berman on January 10, 1939. The cruise took her to London and New York City, then through the Panama Canal to San Diego.

At that point, Sheffield set the papers in his hands down and leaned back in his chair. In his mind he was transported through time to one afternoon in March of 1939 when they were living in San Diego. At the time he was the commander of the Enterprise Air Group. It was a Friday afternoon and he had just come from work. Geannie and the kids weren't home yet.

When they came home, they were all excited. "What's all the excitement about?" he asked.

Wide eyed, Geannine answered with a question of her own. "Did you see that ship come into the bay this afternoon?"

"No. What ship?"

She explained, "This morning in the newspaper there was an article about a brand new German ocean liner on a world cruise for its maiden voyage. The paper said that it would be stopping off in San Diego this afternoon. It really sounded like something worth seeing and a lot more exciting than your warships. So after school, the kids and I went to the beach to watch it come in. We could see it a quite a ways out to sea as it approached. It was huge.

"As it rounded North Island, we got in the car and drove over to the bay and watched with hundreds of others lining the bay as it sailed in." She paused. "You really didn't see it, Commander? How could you miss it?"

"No. For some reason I missed the whole thing. This is the first I heard about it." He admitted.

Geannie went on. "Anyway Curly, as it sailed down the middle of the bay, she was dressed out in all of these colorful flags. You know what they are. I never could figure out how you read them. Passengers were lining the decks waving at the people on the shore as we all waved back. She was blowing her whistles and horns and ringing her bell."

Sheffield interrupted, "Come to think of it, I did hear some commotion going on, but I didn't know what it was."

Geannie continued, "They bay was full of all kinds of sailboats and motorboats. Out in front of it was a tug boat spraying water high into the air. It was really quite a site. We watched it as it headed for the Broadway Pier. After that we couldn't see it any more and that's when we came home. I'm sorry I don't have supper ready for you."

What could he say, but, "That's alright sweetheart. I wish I'd of known about it. I'd like to have seen it too. Don't worry about supper, why don't we all go out tonight?"

That idea stuck with Sandy and especially Austin. Geannie consented, "That sounds great. We haven't gone out for a while. Where do you want to go?"

"Oh I don't know. Nothing fancy. How about Smiley's Diner?" Sheffield suggested.

"Yeah Flyboy, that sounds great.

"Now I want to tell you more about the ship. The paper said that its name is Edelweiss. All day tomorrow and Sunday it is open to the public for tours. The kids and I would really like to see it. It sounds so luxurious. I'm sure its much nicer than the Enterprise, as nice as it is. How about it, can we go?"

"That does sound pretty exciting. Sure why not. I'd like to see it too."

He remembered going to Smiley's for dinner. That was one of their favorite places in Coronado. Naturally he couldn't remember what they had, but he was sure it was good. The food at Smiley's was always good. He could just about guarantee that Austin had a hamburger.

The next morning they all piled into the car and drove down to the ferry dock. They left the car there for the trip across the bay which took them right to the Broadway Pier. Geannie was right, it was an impressive ship. Its accommodations were first class all the way. The staterooms were much, much more spacious and lavish than any thing he had ever had, even on the Reprisal.

As they went through the ship, Geannie kept saying how much she would love to go on an ocean voyage sometime. She eventually got to when she and the kids moved to Hawaii to join him there. Sheffield on the other hand took particular interest in its construction as they toured the ship.

The Edelweiss was truly a magnificent ship. Now his orders were to hunt her down and sink her. He picked the papers up off his desk and continued reading.

From San Diego, she sailed across the Pacific calling on Honolulu, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Sailing through the Indian Ocean she called on Bombay, India before transiting the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. Steaming through the Mediterranean Sea, she visited Athens, Greece; Naples, Italy; and Marseillaise, France. On the final leg of the cruise in the Atlantic Ocean, she called on Lisbon, Portugal and Amsterdam in The Netherlands before returning to Berman on August 12, 1939.

With the beginning of hostilities on September 1, 1939 and the declaration of war on Germany by Great Britain and France, any further world cruises were not possible. Edelweiss remained dockside at

Bermen while several possibilities for her use were considered. She sailed again during July and August of 1940 on two cruises transporting occupation troops to Norway.

Once again retained in Berman, she escaped damage during the occasional RAF bombing raids over Berman. With no other foreseeable use as troop transport, her speed and endurance made her a prime candidate for use as an auxiliary cruiser for commerce raiding sorties. She began her conversion from a luxurious ocean liner to a warship at Bermen in December 1941.

German auxiliary cruisers were typically armed with six obsolete 150 millimeter (5.9 inch) guns that had been removed from older capital ships from the First World War. Given Edelweiss' speed and endurance, it was determined to arm her with modern weapons. Therefore, she received ten 150 millimeter guns in three twin turrets and four single mounts. These were the same guns that formed the secondary battery on the newest German battleships.

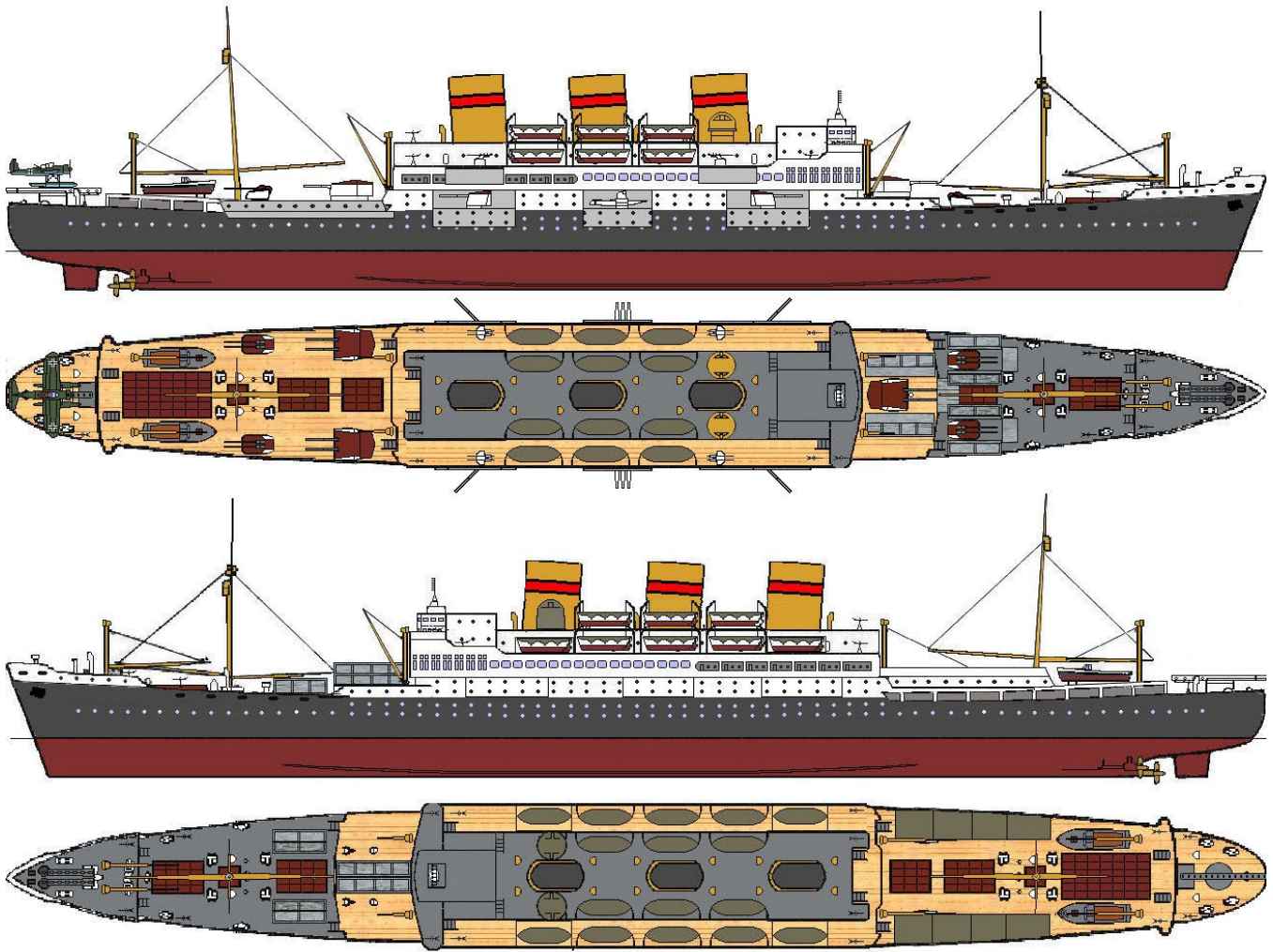
One twin mount was mounted forward of the bridge and two aft of the superstructure, one to starboard and one to port. The other four single mounts were on the main deck within the superstructure with openings that folded down. They could fire a 100 pound shell over 13 miles at a rate of 6 to 8 rounds per minute. In addition she carried four twin 105 millimeter (4.1 inch) gun mounts on the main deck, two forward and two aft. They had a range of 11 miles at a rate of fire of 15 to 18 rounds per minute.

Four twin 37 millimeter anti-aircraft guns were mounted on the main boat deck. Sixteen single mount 20 millimeter automatic weapons were arranged along the ship with eight on each side. The armament was rounded out by two triple bank torpedo tubes located in the superstructure. The aft cargo hold was modified into hangar for six Arado 196-A float planes. A catapult was mounted at the stern. Two more crated aircraft were aboard as spares.

All of the guns, except for the 20 millimeters, were hidden when not in use. The forward gun mounts were enclosed in dummy crates that appeared to be deck cargo. The aft gun mounts were hidden behind a false bulkhead that folded over the side of the ship. To conceal them from the air, they were covered by a canvas tarp. The 37 millimeter guns on the upper boat deck were concealed by dummy lifeboats painted on a folding shield and covered with canvas.

The Edelweiss also featured modern electronics as well. She was equipped with a radar set that had a range of 14 to 18 nautical miles (16 to 20 miles) mounted above the bridge. There were two sets of radar controlled fire control equipment perched on the upper boat deck on each side of the forward stack as well as a number of optical range finders.

Edelweiss was the largest, best equipped, and fastest of the German raiders. When her conversion was complete, she displaced 11,500 tons standard and 15,250 tons fully loaded. Her spacious cargo holds allowed her to double as blockade runner to bring raw material from the orient. Her speed allowed her to



outrun more heavily armed cruisers and battleships. She was commissioned into the Kriegsmarine on April 9, 1942 and retained her original name. British Intelligence referred to her as Raider M.

After fitting out, she broke out into open Atlantic on June 6th under the cover of massive storm front that had settled in over a large portion of the North Atlantic. After stopping at Praia da Vitória, she set a course for Indian Ocean by way of the South Atlantic.

She was reported to have put in at Buenos Aires, Argentina. Even though Argentina was neutral, Edelweiss assumed a false identity to throw off allied agents. She commonly assumed other names under the flags of various countries. Many officers in the ship's company spoke other languages which contributed to the ruse.

While rounding the Cape of Good Hope, she sailed way to south near Antarctica to avoid the British. Upon arrival in the Indian Ocean, she operated out of Japanese occupied Singapore from which she menaced the British shipping routes between Australia and India, South Africa, and the Suez Canal. The Arado 196A float planes were extremely useful in finding potential targets and in avoiding contact with allied

warships. Preying on stragglers or weakly escorted convoys, she sank eleven ships between July and September. On one occasion she traded salvos with a British light cruiser, which she escaped by outrunning. Neither ship was hit.

The story sounded all too familiar. Sheffield put down the briefing papers and looked up at the photograph of his grandfather and the CSS Shenandoah hanging on the wall. She too was a commerce raider. He remembered the stories that Grandpa Brason used to tell about the twelve and a half months in 1864 and 1865 when the ship made a commerce raiding cruise, which took them around the world, resulting in the capture or sinking of thirty-eight Union merchant vessels, mostly whaling ships.

When the war was over, to avoid prison and execution, he went to Rio de Janeiro where he hid out for the better part of a year before being granted amnesty and returned home. Sheffield attributed his fondness of Rio to that fact. He looked forward to spending time there after taking care of business with the Edelweisses.

Sheffield turned his attention back to the mission at hand. According to the intelligence briefing, her captain was Captain Johann Gottfried. It said that he preferred to have compassion on his victims. If possible he gave warning prior to attacking, allowing the crew to surrender. In those cases the vessel was boarded and the prisoners were removed along with anything of use aboard, including fuel. Once luted, the ship was set adrift and was sunk by gunfire or torpedoes.

On those occasions when that was not possible, he made a point to rescue the survivors from the water. Having been an ocean liner, Edelweiss had more than enough accommodations for prisoners of war.

In September, Edelweiss was spotted by a US submarine entering Yokohama, Japan presumably for upkeep and to take on cargo bound for Germany. On her return cruise, she evaded being torpedoed by another US submarine in the South China Sea off the coast of Borneo. After returning to Singapore in early November, she proceeded to the South Atlantic later in the month for further operations. In transit, she accounted for three more ships. Now she was once again causing havoc in the South Atlantic. Staying well beyond the range of land based search planes, she had been responsible for the loss of seven more allied merchant ships.

His job was to find her and stop her. After having read the part about prisoners being held aboard, Sheffield knew that he had to be careful about how he went about it. Fortunately, he had time to think about it. In addition to the primary mission, they were also to hunt down U-boats and blockade runners. By the time he was finished it was time to meet with the senior officers in his ready room to inform them of their mission.

In presenting the details of their orders, the fact they they would be crossing the equator was readily apparent. After the briefing and the business of the day was discussed, Captain Brason added, "Now for what is probably the most significant item of business. Admiral Weston has left it up to the captain of each

ship in the task force to decide if there will be a crossing the line ceremony. His only stipulation is that readiness is not compromised; stations are to be half manned at all times.

“I have thought about it, have decided to permit the ceremonies. I have one stipulation of my own. The initiations are to be conducted in a civilized manner. I don't want anyone roughed up and unable to carry out their duties. It is anticipated that we'll cross the equator on the first. So Chief Solozar, or should I say Your Highness King Neptune, that gives you and your minions of he deep three days to get ready. And remember, keep it civilized. If anyone gets out of hand, I'll toss them in the brig. I think everyone is aware of Seaman Pucheskey.”

After the briefing, we went up to the bridge and picked up the intercom and addressed the crew, informing them of their destination.

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The USS John J. Pershing is a fictional troop transport. Troopships were often named for Army generals. General Pershing was the commander of US forces in Europe during World War I

The SS Edelweiss is also a fictional ship. The concept of commerce raiders was employed quite successfully by the Kriegsmarine during the early stages of the Second World War. The part about the Confederate raider Shenandoah is factual.

