

## Chapter XIV

### Edelweiss

December 2, 1942 – December 7, 1942

Task Force 35 continued on their southerly course after crossing the line. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> vigilance was maintained, yet the patrols found nothing out of the ordinary. It was pretty much just another routine day at sea. The guest stateroom was transformed into an office for Captain Brason's newly appointed personal secretary. Lieutenant Gates found a desk, some chairs, filing cabinets, and typewriter among some surplus items that were in storage.

The office was on the galley deck at the foot of the ladder, just around corner from the Captain's suite. Yeoman Gover's first official act was type up his own promotion for the Captain's signature. His role and functions were still being defined and would be for several days.

On the morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, as the destroyers were fueling from the Gunnison, lookouts sighted masts coming over the horizon. The scouting patrol had earlier reported the approach of two cruisers and five destroyers, including four Brazilian destroyers, from Admiral Inrgam's South Atlantic Force. Around noon, the two forces rendezvoused and Admiral Weston on the Billings reported for duty.

The South Atlantic Force had been established in 1941 to provide coverage of what is known as the Atlantic Narrows, between the eastern most tip of Brazil to the southern tip of West Africa. Brazil remained neutral at the beginning of the war, but in May Germany launched a U-boat offensive directed against Brazil. During a three day period in mid August alone, five merchant ships were sunk, leading Brazil to declare war on August 22<sup>nd</sup>. The once modern Brazilian Navy was now hopelessly obsolete so Brazil relied on the United States in patrolling the the South Atlantic.

Brazil had ordered six new destroyers from Great Britain, but at the beginning of the war, the contract was canceled and they were completed for the Royal Navy. Brazil turned to the United States wanting to buy some surplus destroyers. Six old four stacker flush deck destroyers were made available, including the Wadsworth, Sheffield's first ship. The purchase price included a refit with two 5inch 38 caliber dual purpose guns and two 1.1inch anti-aircraft guns in place of the old 4 inch guns. The refit also included an optical fire control system. Another distinguishing feature was the funnel caps that had been installed. With Brazil's entry into the war, they were further upgraded with four twin 40 millimeter anti-aircraft guns in place of the 1.1's, eight 20 millimeters in place of the .50 caliber machine guns, and radar.

Toward late afternoon the combined force separated. The cruisers and their escorts headed back to Recife. Task Force 35 also separated into smaller units before probing farther into the South Atlantic in search of the Edelweiss, U-boats, and blockade runners. The Gunnison, Nash and Gordon into one group, the Billings, Cedar Rapids, Percival, Watson and two Brazilian destroyers in another, and the Reprisal,

Syracuse, Moody, Archer, Kirkman, and the Brazilian destroyers, the Japurá (formerly the Wadsworth) and Jauary, in a third. The Reprisal group was re-designated Task Group 3.5, with Captain Brason as the senior officer in command.

As the hunt began, the cruiser group were the first to find and sink a U-boat. The next victory went to the Cutthroat which sank a blockade runner. The Reprisal was looking for the big prize, the Edelweiss which had claimed yet another freighter. In the process, a pair of SBDs from the Scouts found and sunk a U-boat on the 5<sup>th</sup>. Sheffield focused on the mission at hand, trying desperately to ignore their pending birthaversary.

After the Bat Team was sent up for their evening patrol on the 6<sup>th</sup>, Sheffield retired to his emergency cabin adjacent to the bridge rather going down to his stateroom. He left instructions to be notified immediately of any contact reports. The Bat Team returned to the ship around one o'clock without running across anything.

At 0147 a distress call was received in Portuguese. Captain Brason was summoned to the bridge and immediately called for Yeoman Gover to come and translate. It took him about a minute and half to get from the crew's quarters to the radio room.

The voice on the other end frantically repeated the distress call. Petty Officer Gover repeated the message in English. "Mayday! Mayday! This is the Brazilian Navy destroyer Juruena escorting the freighter SS Amazon. We are under surface attack from an unknown vessel. Repeat, we are under surface attack. Our location is nineteen degrees twenty two minutes south, thirty four degrees fourteen minutes west. Request assistance from nearest allied warships. We are severely out gunned. Please respond."

Captain Brason remarked, "That has got to be the Edelweiss. Don't respond. We can't give away who and where we are. From what I understand, the captain of the Edelweiss has a reputation for going out of his way to rescue the survivors of his victims. He'll be sure to take care of them. The thing we have to do is to make sure that we are careful not to put his detainees at risk when we deal with him.

"I just hope Admiral Weston doesn't go charging to rescue. That is just what the Captain of Edelweiss would want. By the time anyone arrived on the scene, he would be long gone. We know where his is. What we need to do is anticipate where he is going to be."

He plotted the location given in relation to their location. "We will be in range to launch aircraft in forty five minutes. The estimated time of arrival over the area is two hours thirty minutes." Sheffield ordered, "Make a flight of three Bat Team Avengers ready for launch. They can at least tell us if there is anything still afloat."

Another call came from the Juruena, one of urgent desperation. Again Yeoman Gover interpreted, "The situation is desperate! Fires are out of control and we are taking on water. We are abandoning ship." In

the background the commotion on the helpless ship could be heard. Then the radio went silent.

Sheffield returned to the chart table and reasoned out loud, "The Edelweiss will be making her way deep into the South Atlantic to be out of range before the shore based search planes can find her. They don't know that we're here." he said pointing to the map. "I suspect they will head due east at high speed along this course." he said as he drew a line on the chart. Then he deducted, "If we launch the rest of the Bat Team at this point," again marking the chart, "they should establish contact in time to launch a strike while they are still in range."

He stood there for a moment with his arms folded, looking at the chart and thinking through the plan. After a moment, he was satisfied and issued the orders to put the plan into action. Then he added, "Have the Dauntlesses equipped with a additional fuel tanks, so they can stay on station and track their course until the strike group is well on its way."

Sheffield paced the darkened bridge and then stepped out onto the wing of the bridge into the warm tropic night air. It was a moonless night as the moon was new. The stars of the southern hemisphere shone brightly. He wasn't as familiar with them but was able to easily identify the Southern Cross. His star gazing was interrupted when the first of the three plane flight of TBFs was brought up to the flight deck on the outboard elevator, directly across the flight deck from his observation point four decks up in the island structure.

On the dimly lit flight deck, plane handlers moved the plane into position. The elevator was lowered and came back up with the second aircraft and then the third. As soon as all three planes were in position, the plane captains started the engines. With the roar of engines in his ears, Sheffield watched as their wings were unfolded. From across the flight deck, the flight crews emerged from the catwalk onto the deck and raced to their planes.

Once aboard and strapped in, the landing lights on the flight deck came on, only bright enough to make out the path to the forward end of the deck. Sheffield watched from the wing of the bridge as one by one, they rolled down the deck and into the night sky. Soon their running lights faded into the blackness as they headed toward the location of the one sided surface engagement.

Once they were airborne, he returned inside the bridge. There had been no further radio traffic. He studied the chart again as the rest of the Bat Team were being fueled and armed on the hangar deck; the Dauntlesses with a five hundred pound bomb and two drop tanks. The Alleycats would not have the same range, and would not accompany the search. They would be kept close to home on dual combat air patrol and anti-submarine patrol. Even though they would not be capable of carrying out an attack other than a strafing run, they would at least be eyes in the dark.

As the aircraft were being brought up to the flight deck, the Reprisal and her consorts charged ahead

at twenty four knots, right into a light breeze. Sheffield was so confident that he knew right where the Edelweiss would be when the strike group caught up with her, that he detached the Archer and Kirkman to race ahead to toward the anticipated location. His hope was to cripple the fast ship with a torpedo in the engineering spaces. Once disabled the destroyers could catch up and without a fight, remove the passengers and crew before sending her to the bottom. That was the plan any way.

The destroyers were not adequate to house all of the people he was anticipating so he ordered preparations for transferring the survivors aboard while underway in same manner as had been done in the Bay of Biscay a little over two weeks earlier. Again the hammocks were brought out of storage and a detention area was set up for the German POWs in the repair hangar. Other quarters, including those designated for an admiral and his staff were made ready for the rescued prisoners.

At just before three o'clock the flight crews were ordered to their planes. Sheffield again went out onto the wing of the bridge to watch. The aircraft were spotted for launch with their engines running. While the Alleycats took off, the Dauntlesses were spotted for launch and they too lifted off in to the starry sky. It was still more than three hours before sunrise. At least some of the nine Dauntlesses should find what they were looking for in half that time.

Sheffield returned to the bridge and turned his attention to the strike group. He decided to send Commander James in his TBF and nine Avengers from the Seahawks, a dozen SBDs from the Crusaders, accompanied by four Wildcats, with external fuel tanks. The F4F-4 were fitted to carry two fifty eight gallon tanks, one under the base of each wing. The torpedo bombers were to go in first. If they were unsuccessful, the dive bombers were the backup option. As an after thought, Sheffield decided to have the bomb bay of Commander James' Avenger loaded with life rafts and life vests rather than a torpedo; just in case something went wrong. Even at that something could go wrong, so he ordered a second plane to loaded with life rafts as well.

While the preparations were underway, Sheffield decided to return to his emergency cabin to get try to get another hour or so of sleep. It promised to be a long day. He laid in his bunk but sleep would not come. He was well aware of what day it was. It was December 7<sup>th</sup>. Even though he had come a long ways over the last twelve months, the sting of his loss was very real that morning in particular. He had hoped that this would be the magic day that Walt had promised. In the past few weeks he had looked forward to this day with hope. He found that he dwelt on it far less often and the pain had eased considerably. But now the day had come, he wasn't so sure. At least he had something to keep him busy. It looked like it was going to be a very busy day. No matter how he tried, he couldn't go to sleep. Eventually he got up and returned to the bridge to wait for the contact report.

As he had anticipated, at five thirty just as the eastern horizon was beginning to lighten, the word

came. 11-B-15 radioed the contact report of a large surface ship heading due east at twenty two knots a hundred and twenty miles south west of the Reprisal's position. "This is it, men." Sheffield calmly announced. "By the time the strike group arrives, she will be right about here." he said pointing to the chart.

Rather than having the coordinates sent down to the Seahawk's ready room, he took them himself. He stressed that they show restraint and attempt to only disable the ship without sinking it and explained why. Before the pilots were ordered to their planes, he wished them, "Happy hunting." He then delivered the same information to the Crusaders in their ready room.

Rather than return to the bridge, since he was already on the galley deck, he decided to go to his stateroom and freshen up. The uniform that he had worn for two days was wrinkled from having attempted to sleep in it. He could feel the stubble on his face and he was sure that he didn't smell very good either. As he passed the Captain's galley, Reggie was already busy working on breakfast.

The first order of business was to take a hot shower. Feeling much cleaner he put on a fresh pair of khaki trousers and clean undershirt. After a shaving, he picked up the bottle of Old Spice after shave and went to splash it on his face. It was as if Geannie was right behind him. "Awww," he heard her exclaim, "I just love the smell of Old Spice!" She did, too. She'd always say, "Now that is how a man is supposed to smell."

When he went to his closet to get a clean shirt, he saw the present that he had intended to give Geannie for their twentieth anniversary and her birthday tucked away in the closet. "I've really got to do something with this." he said to himself. "A year is long enough."

As he finished dressing, he picked up the picture of Geannie from his night stand and studied it for a long moment. "Happy birthaversary, Sweetheart." he said out loud. "I don't ever want to forget your beautiful face." He sat it down and picked up a smaller framed photograph of Sandy and Austin. "I'll never forget you either." he promised. Duty called or he would have lingered longer.

Reggie greeted him as he went into his wardroom for breakfast. "I hope you're hungry Cap'an. I made something special for you this morning."

"Actually I'm starved. What have you got for me, Reggie?" he asked as his faithful steward stood beside the table with a serving cart. He took off the lid and picked up a plate with a stack of buttermilk pancakes with a candle sticking up in the middle. "Happy birthday Cap'an." He said as he proudly set it before the captain. Next came a small picture of maple syrup and a plate with two eggs, over easy, and four strips of bacon.

"Why, thank you Reggie. How did you know it was my birthday?"

The young black man pointed to his head and answered, "I have a good memory sir. Enjoy your breakfast." He left the wardroom and returned to the galley leaving the captain to himself.

But it didn't seem that he was alone. It was as if Geannie and the kids were sitting at the table with him. He remembered the many, many times over the years that they enjoyed breakfast together before he rushed off to work and they to school. He realized that they had never left him and that he would always carry them with him in his heart. The realization didn't make it feel so empty that morning.

He looked up at Geannie's portrait smiling down on him from the bulkhead across from the table. It was as if she was saying, "It's been a year now Captain. It's time."

"Your right, as always Geannie. It is time." he said as he got up from the table, leaving his dishes for Reggie.

He stopped off in his office for just a moment before going out into the passageway on his way back to the bridge. He stuck his head into the galley where Reggie was having his breakfast. "Thanks, Reggie. That was especially good this morning." With a spring in his step, he bounded up five flights of stairs to the bridge.

When he arrived at six thirty, the sun was up with just a few scattered clouds in the sky. He stepped onto the bridge and was greeted by a round of "Happy Birthday" lead by Commander Owen.

"Thank you Mace. Thank you everyone. I think it is going to be a good day in deed. What's the report?"

"The strike group is well on its way and should make contact within the hour. The Bat Team shadowed the Edelweiss, apparently undetected until they had to break off and return to the ship. They will be coming aboard soon. The other patrols are on station. When the three Bat Team Avengers returned, they reported nothing on the surface, sir." Commander Owen replied.

"Now all we can do is wait, my friend."

The action began earlier than expected. At just after seven, radar picked up a bogey sixty miles out, far enough that the Reprisal's position could not have been discovered. The fighter director ordered a pair of Wildcats to investigate.

Minutes later the voice of Lieutenant Randal "Boss" Manconi was heard over the radio, "Homeplate, (Reprisal's code name) this is Kitten Nine. We have an Ar-196 in sight. Closing in for the kill." After a slight pause the call, "Tally ho!" was heard on the bridge from the speaker.

Some fifty miles from the ship, Lieutenant Manconi and his wingman surprised the unsuspecting German pilot and his observer. They were obviously looking for surface targets and weren't accustomed to keeping an eye on the sky. Lieutenant Manconi's six fifty caliber machine guns found their mark. Tearing off the float plane's left wing. As the two Wildcats pulled up from their attack, the enemy plane spiraled out of control into the sea. On a pass over over the crash site, no survivors were seen in the water.

This was exciting news for the Reprisal, particularly for Fighting Eleven. Lieutenant Manconi was their first ace. A veteran of early action in the Pacific, he was credited with shooting down a Kawanishi H8K "Emily" flying boat and a Mitsubishi A5M "Claude". Then just sixteen days earlier, he bagged a Me-109 and an HE-111 over the Bay of Biscay. And now the Ar-196 made him and ace! News spread quickly through out the ship. The chief baker started putting together a huge sheet cake, enough for the entire squadron, just for the occasion.

A few minutes later, just after seven thirty the strike group reported that they had the Edelweisses in sight and took up a position just out of range her anti-aircraft guns. Commander James directed that four Seahawk Avengers maneuver into position for beam attack, two on either side. They were met by sporadic machine gun fire as the Edelweiss maintained course and increased speed. The two Avengers on either beam adjusted accordingly and released their torpedoes. At the last moment, the ship made a sharp turn to port and all four torpedoes missed. After making their drops, the Avenger piloted by Lieutenant (jg) Daniel "Danny Boy" Weighman caught a burst of machine gun fire that shot away many of the plane's control cables. He struggled to fly the plane but managed to regroup.

Next Commander James ordered the four remaining Avengers to make a coordinated attack from all four directions. No matter which way the ship turned, one should have a clear shot, hopefully disabling the engine room. All four dropped their torpedoes. Again the sleek, fast ship made another sharp turn. This time however not one but two torpedoes found their mark, one amidships and one aft. The results were devastating. Thick smoke poured from the hull which began settling stern first.

Commander James feared for the worst; that they had more than disabled the raider. She appeared to be in serious trouble. Holding back the Dauntlesses, he ordered the eight Avengers to return to the ship, while Lieutenant Weighman's plane could still fly. With the other raft laden Avenger on his right wing, together they moved in closer and circled around the stricken ship, which began listing to starboard.

The crew and prisoners began going over the side into the water. Several of the ships lifeboats made it into the water. The list made it nearly impossible for the life boats on the port side to be lowered. On their next pass, the two Avengers carrying the rafts flew low over the swimmers in the water with the bomb bay doors open and released the lifeboats and life jackets. They quickly filled with swimmers as only the forward section of the ship remained above water.

Commander James wrote a note that said, "Rescue ships coming." and attached it to a bean bag. He made another slow, low approach as the radioman stood in the open hatch on the right side of the plane and tossed it into one of the ships life boats. Evidently the message was understood because on the next pass, someone in the boat stood and gave a thumbs up.

Commander James radioed the situation to the Reprisal. Captain Brason was disappointed with the

way it played out, but the business of war is so unpredictable. He ordered the planes on the scene to remain as long as possible and sent out another flight of three Avengers to monitor the situation. When the strike group began running low on fuel, they were forced to leave the area.

In the meantime, Commander Halversen on the Cutthroat had made the same assumption that Captain Brason had made, but didn't come upon the scene until after the Edelweisses had already gone down. Observing through his periscope, he quickly summed up the situation and ordered his boat to the surface. With the 20 millimeter guns manned and sailors on deck armed with M1 rifles, he maneuvered into middle of the flotilla of life boats and came to a stop.

Commander Halversen immediately took charge and began managing the survivors. There wasn't room on the Cutthroat to bring them all aboard, so knowing that two destroyers were on their way he directed the life rafts and the Edelweisses' ship's boats to come alongside and tie up. There were still people in the water who needed attention. The Cutthroats whale boat was brought up from its storage space between the upper deck and the pressure hull and was launched for the purpose of pulling survivors out of the water.

While commander Halversen attempted to sort out who was who, a dangerous situation arose. Sharks began circling around and the race to pull people from the water intensified. Commander Halversen ordered the 20 millimeter gunners to fire on the sharks in an attempt to drive them off, or at least keep them at bay.

Within the hour, the three Avengers arrived on the scene and took up station. After two more hours, the destroyers arrived and began taking on survivors. With the rescue complete, they set course to rejoin the Reprisal and the Cutthroat went on her way.

The Avengers of the strike group were the first to return to the carrier with Lieutenant Weighman lagging behind. As he made his landing approach he fought to keep his aircraft on a level approach. As he cleared the ramp, the LSO gave him the wave off. Unable to pull up, he continued his descent to the deck and hit hard and bounced once before crashing onto the deck midway between the stern and the island structure.

The plane exploded, rupturing the fuel tank sending fuel running across the flight deck. Before anyone could react, it ignited, engulfing the plane in flames. The three men aboard didn't have a chance. Flames soared into the air and thick black smoke billowed into the sky.

Sheffield ordered the ship to come about so the smoke drifted away from the ship, allowing the firefighters to bring the blaze under control. Four minutes later, the fire was out, leaving the charred remains of the plane and her three man crew.

The bodies were recovered, the burnt out plane was pushed over the side and the debris on the

flight deck had been cleared away, leaving a large scotch mark on the flight deck. By the time the rest of the strike group returned, the flight deck was once again open for business.

Late in the afternoon the destroyers carrying the survivors rejoined the Reprisal. The cargo net was standing by and the outboard elevator was in the lowered position as the Archer came alongside, maneuvering her bow just under the edge of the elevator. The cargo net was lowered over the side and the survivors began scrambling up the net and onto the elevator.

Lieutenant Bashor, the ship's chief medical officer, and his personnel had set up a triage center for sorting the injured, including the Germans, according to the severity of their injuries. The less severe were treated on the spot. A few of the more severe injuries were taken immediately to sick bay.

Also standing by was Major Lerbowski with his Marines. The Edelweisses crew members were separated from the survivors of her numerous victims, including the Juruena and the SS Amazon. Lieutenant Gates and his storekeepers were on hand, issuing clothing to those who needed it. Yeoman Gover was there to translate for the Brazilians.

Once the Archer had transferred her survivors, she pulled away and the Kirkman came along side and the process was repeated. The process worked so well that someone dubbed it the "Brason Maneuver". In the end, two hundred sixty seven German officers and crewmen, including the captain, were under guard by the Reprisal's Marine detachment. Eighty three of her crew were lost. In addition, there were one hundred seventy one former prisoners, mainly British and Brazilians, who had been rescued.

All during the transfer of personnel, Sheffield was pretty much just an observer. He was pleased at how well his men handled the situation. He was caught off guard when he saw a woman and little girl crawl over the edge of the elevator. Without hesitation he bolted to their assistance and helped the woman to her feet. "I'm Captain Sheffield Brason. Here let me help you."

He helped her to her feet and reached for the little girl's hand. She reluctantly pulled back and hid behind her mother. They were both wearing only ripped and tattered nightgowns and were barefooted. Their ragged clothes were oil stained and their exposed skin was covered with grime and their hair was snarled. He led them into the hangar and took a blanket from the top of a stack and wrapped it around the woman and then did the same for the little girl.

"Thank you Captain. Thank you for everything. We have been through a lot in less than twenty four hours, not to mention the last three days. I'm Debra, Debra Watson and this is my daughter, Molly."

Sheffield stooped down and with his thumb, wiped some grim from her face. "Hi Molly, I'm Sheffield." He said. "How old are you, Molly?"

"Eight." She responded shyly, trying to hide behind her mother.

Taking the little girl by the hand, he led them to the front of the triage line. Sheffield stayed with them

while Lieutenant Bashor personally looked them over and found them to be alright physically.

He immediately knew what to do. "Come with me." he invited. Leading the way, the mother and daughter followed without saying a word. Sheffield took them up to the galley deck and to the Admiral's stateroom. "This is the best I have to offer." He said as they entered the cabin. "It's extremely private down this passageway. I hope this will do."

"This will be just fine Captain. Thank you."

Showing her around, he pointed out the bathroom. "There is a shower with a tub in here. Everything you need is in this closet." He opened it revealing towels, a bath robe, washcloths, and an assortment of toiletry items.

He led them over to the couch. "Sit right here." he said. "I'll be back in just a moment."

He left and went around the corner to his own stateroom and retrieved the complimentary gift wrapped package, complete with a tag that read, "Madam Stella's Fashion Boutique" and returned to the Admiral's cabin. "I hope this fits. I was keeping for my wife's anniversary..."

"Oh no. I couldn't possibly accept it if it's for your wife."

"Let me explain. You see today would be our twenty first anniversary. I had intended to give it to her for our anniversary a year ago, but she was killed that day. I have packed it around with me for a whole year, wondering what to do with it. You need it a lot worse than I do. Why don't you clean up and try it on. I'll check back with you in about a half an hour."

"I don't know how to thank you." She said as he left the stateroom and closed the door behind him.

He went around the corner to his suite where he found Reggie in the galley, beginning his preparations for dinner. "I'll be having two dinner guests, Reggie. Could you whip up something special?"

"Sure thing, Cap'an."

Sheffield spent the next thirty minutes in his office going over some things that he hadn't gotten to for a couple of days. After what he considered to be a sufficient amount of time, he went back to the Admiral's cabin and knocked on the door.

"Come in." Mrs. Watson called.

Sheffield opened the door and stepped inside. He wasn't prepared for what he saw. Ever since he saw the dress in the shop window nearly a year and half ago in San Diego, he had pictured what it would like on Geannie. Every time he saw it tucked away, he imagined her wearing it. Now before him stood a complete stranger wearing the red dress with the white collar that was intended for Geannie. He found himself gawking at her with his mouth open. She was shorter than Geannie and a little smaller all the way around. He judged her to be about thirty five. Her shoulder length dark brown hair was still wet. With the grim cleaned from her face, she was quite attractive, even without makeup.

"It looks as nice on you as it would have on my wife." He complimented. "How dose it fit?"

"It's a little loose, but the shoes are perfect." she answered.

"I'll bet our ship's tailor could fix that up for you in no time. Why don't you come with me? I have a little pull around here, I can make it a rush job."

Mrs. Watson and Molly followed the Captain as he led them down to second deck. Again, they didn't have much to say. As they came to the ship's store, Sheffield asked, "This is the ship's store. Is there anything you need?"

"God yes, I'm dieing for a cigarette."

"A pack of cigarettes for the lady." Sheffield said to the storekeeper behind the counter.

"Which brand, ma'am?" the storekeeper asked.

"Lucky Strikes please."

"Can I get something for Molly? Sum gum, perhaps."

"Would you like some gum, darling?" Debra asked her little girl.

She simply nodded her head.

"And a pack of gum, too. This is on the ship."

The storekeeper handed over the goods to the Captain. He then handed the pack of cigarettes to Mrs. Watson and the pack of gum to Molly. "Is there anything else you need?"

"I guess these won't do me any good without some matches."

Sheffield reached into the bowl on the counter and picked up a book of matches with the name of the ship embossed on the cover.

"Put it on my tab." He told the Storekeeper Third Class who manned the store.

"Sure thing Skipper." as he eyed the pretty lady accompanying the the captain. A sight you don't see on a warship in a combat zone.

With the transaction complete, he lead them on. "The tailor's shop is just a little further." He assured her.

"I'm impressed." Mrs. Watson commented. "You have just about everything you need on this ship don't you?"

"We're pretty much a floating city. I'd be happy to give you a tour when I have some time. Here we are." He said as he opened the door and allowed Debra and Molly to enter first.

Chief Ship's Serviceman Karl Audmanson was surprised to look up and see a woman enter his shop. Right behind her was the Captain. He snapped to attention and saluted.

Captain Brason returned the salute and asked, "Can you take this in for Mrs. Watson?"

Chief Audmanson dropped what he was doing and surmised the situation. "Yes, sir. I can do that."

He put some strait pins between his lips and began fitting the dress to the woman's figure. Then using his sewing tape measure, he got her measurements. For being a sailor, he blushed as he measured her bust. When he was done, he had her look in the mirror and asked, "How does that look, ma'am? Would you like me to do something with the hem?"

"No. It looks nice just the way it is. Thank you."

"This isn't exactly a dressing room but why don't you step into the supply closet and take it off. You can hand to me through the door."

Chief Audmanson blushed again as he took it from the arm that extended through the partially opened door. He quickly ripped out the seams and restitched them. All the time, Sheffield tried to keep Molly entertained. She was still very reserved but had warmed up to him just a little. When he was finished, Chief Audmanson knocked on the door. Mrs. Watson opened it a crack and snatched it from his hand.

While she was putting it on, Capitan Brason asked Chief Audmanson if he could whip up something for Molly who was still wearing her tattered nightgown.

"About all I have is denim. I could make a jumper for her pretty quick." He then measured the little girl.

Using her measurements he drew up a pattern and was cutting out the shape of the jumper when Mrs. Watson came out of the supply closet. He directed her back to the full length mirror for her to examine herself.

"It's fits perfectly. Thank you Chief."

She turned to Sheffield and commented, "Its a lovely dress. I'm sure your wife would have loved it. Thank you again."

"My pleasure, ma'am. I'm glad that you can use it. I need to thank you for taking it off my hands."

In the meantime, Chief Audmanson stitched together a crude but suitable jumper for Molly. He handed the finished product to Mrs. Watson. She and Molly went back into the supply closet. A moment later they came back out she brought Molly over to the mirror to have a look.

"What do you think?" The ship's tailor asked.

"I like it!" she beamed.

"What do you say, Molly?" her mother coached.

"Thank you." she said shyly.

"Can you discard these?" Mrs. Watson asked, referring to the rags they had been wearing.

"Oh sure. I can dispose of them for you." he answered as he took them from her.

"Thank you again. I can't believe how quickly you did everything."

Capitan Brason responded for his crewman, "On this ship, we have the best in the Navy."

Chief Audmanson said, "You're welcome, ma'am. It was my pleasure. Let me see what else I can come up with for you."

"You wouldn't happen to have a bra would you?"

The Chief looked at the Captain and both men blushed. Looking back at Mrs. Watson, Chief Aumanson stuttered, "No ma'am. I'm afraid not."

"Oh well." Debra said. "I guess I can do without." Cupping her breasts in her hands, she concluded, "I feel so immodest without one. Thank you again for everything."

Captain Brason escorted his guests backup to the galley deck. Still, they didn't have much to say. Sheffield figured that they had been through what no woman or a child should have to be put through. Once back on the galley deck he asked, "I'll bet that you're hungry, aren't you?"

"Famished!" Debra exclaimed.

"I thought so. I have asked my steward to whip something up for you. Would you care to join me for dinner in my wardroom?"

"Yes, thank you. That would be nice."

"Let me see when it will be ready. Wait right here."

Sheffield disappeared around the corner. A moment later he returned. "It is just about ready. Right this way." He showed them to his wardroom and asked them to be seated. He then took his seat.

Debra noticed the portrait of the attractive woman on the wall. "Your wife was very beautiful. What was her name?"

"Geannine. Actually it was Gean Marie but she always went by Geannie."

"What happened to her? If you don't mind asking."

"Not at all." While waiting for dinner to be served he gave a condensed version of their story. Debra found it interesting that they were not only born on the same day and grew up together, but were married on their birthdays. He explained that they had three children, one of which died as an infant. He summed it up with that day one year ago when he lost his entire family.

Mrs. Watson didn't have a chance to respond before Reggie entered the wardroom with a cart bearing three plates of spaghetti and a basket of French bread. After being served, Sheffield paused to say Grace. It was obvious that his guests were not accustomed to the practice.

Over dinner Sheffield commented, "I know you have been through a lot in the last twenty four hours. Things didn't go as I had planned in dealing with the Edelweisses. I had hoped to only disable her so we could take everyone off before sinking her. I'm sorry that you had be put through all of this."

"You were only doing your job Captain. She had to be stopped." was all Debra said.

"I don't mean to pry, but how did you end up being on the Edelweisses?" Sheffield asked, trying to be

sensitive to the trauma she had been through.

Debra told her story over dinner, "It all actually started three days ago. My husband was the Naval Attaché to the American Embassy in Rio. Friday night I attended a state function with him at a hotel near our apartment. Molly was at the ambassadors residence being watched by their fourteen year old daughter. It was only short distance from our apartment to the hotel so we decided to walk. It was a warm evening and was raining lightly. It was quite romantic actually.

"On our way home, we were accosted by a man who came out of an alley and we were robbed. We had been instructed to not resist if confronted and give them what they want. The man must have been nervous, for when Jerald reached for his wallet, he must have thought he was reaching for a weapon. He shot my husband in the chest at point blank range and fled.

"I caught Jerry as he collapsed and helped him to the street. I think that he was dead even before I caught him. There I was in a formal gown, all covered with blood screaming for help. By the time the police arrived, the killer was long gone. I was told that there would be very little chance of catching whoever had done it.

"His body was taken directly to the morgue where I called the Ambassador to tell him what happened. He assured me that Molly was fine and that she could stay with them that night. He met me at the morgue to do what he could for me.

"To make a long story short, he arranged passage on a freighter to take his body home. I wanted to accompany my husband's body to make sure he made it home alright. So the Ambassador arranged for Molly and me to have a passenger stateroom on the same ship."

Sheffield interrupted, "Let me guess. The Amazon."

"Yes. We left Rio yesterday morning with an escort from a Brazilian navy ship bound for Recife where we were to join a convoy headed for the States. Then during the middle of the night we heard shooting going on. I looked out the window of the cabin to see the escort on fire and sinking.

"Then we became the target of whoever was shooting at us. The whole ship shuddered with each hit. Soon we were on fire and sinking too. Fleeing our stateroom with only what we had on, we were ordered to the life boats, but there wasn't time. Holding Molly's hand, we jumped over the side into the sea. Holding her head out of the water and oil, I struggled with one arms to swim away from the ship as it sank.

"With only the burning oil to light up the night, a lifeboat spotted us and pulled us out of the water. It wasn't long, only a few minutes later, when this huge ship that looked like an ocean liner came along and rescued everyone who had made it off the ship.

"It turned out that they were the ones who had been shooting at us. One of the officers who spoke English explained that we were guests aboard the SS Edelweisses, courtesy of the German Navy. He

apologized for having to sink our ship and promised that we would be well treated on the ship. He said that once we arrived in Bordeaux we would be detained there.

“Molly and I were taken to the stateroom that was to be our quarters to try to get some rest. After what I had been through I couldn't sleep, but fortunately Molly could. After all I had just lost my husband and now his body and everything we owned had gone down with the ship. All we got away with was what we were wearing. There wasn't enough time to get dressed before leaving our cabin. I can't thank you enough for the dress.

“They were about to feed us breakfast when your planes showed up. Being a Navy wife, I instantly recognized them as American navy planes. We watched from our cabin as the first planes approached and dropped their torpedoes. We were thrown off our feet when the ship made a sharp turn. Then we saw the next four planes come in. The ship turned, knocking us off our feet again. We were just getting up when we felt the torpedoes hit the side of the ship.

“Molly started to cry. I wanted to but I had to be strong for both of us. We could hear all kinds of commotion going on. I knew that we were in trouble when the cabin started to tilt. After a few minutes a German sailor opened our cabin door, shouting something in German motioning for us get out. We joined the other detainees and made our way out onto the deck. The lifeboats were being lowered over the side but the ship was leaning over so far that the side that we were on that the boats couldn't be lowered.

“We made our way to the other side but all of the boats were already in the water. The ship was sinking fast, so we had no choice but to jump. Again I held onto Molly and swam away from the ship. That's when one of the planes flew low over us dropping life preservers and rafts. We were out of reach of the nearest raft, but there were some life preservers close by. With a few strokes I could reach them. I put one on Molly and pulled the cord to inflate it. Then I put one on myself.

“We were floating there in the water, some distances from all of the life boats. Then I saw a submarine bob to the surface. I thought to myself, 'Great, more Germans.' It turned out to be one of ours. They put a boat into the water and went looking for people in the water. I hollered and waved and got their attention. A few minutes later we were pulled out of the water by two American sailors. After picking up more people out water we headed back to the submarine.

“That's when we saw the sharks. Again Molly started crying. I heard gun fire and looked to see what was happening. That is when I realized that the submarine was shooting at the sharks. When we reached the submarine, the boat was tied to it along with all of the other boats.

“The submarine's captain told us that rescue ships were on the way. After what seemed forever, two warships arrived. We were taken to one of them and went up the ladder onto the deck. It was so crowded with people that it was practically standing room only. I'm sure you know the rest. And that is how we ended

up at your dinner table.

“Thank you for all you have done for us Captain Brason. You have been more than generous. I'm sorry to hear what happened to your family.”

Sheffield ate his dinner as he listened to the incredible story this brave woman told. “I'm sorry for all that you have been through and that I was the reason for part of it.”

“Don't be. You rescued us from the Germans the only way you could. Were just happy to be safe and sound on your ship.”

At that moment, Reggie came back into the wardroom with a birthday cake and some ice cream. At first Mrs. Watson declined, but Molly gladly accepted hers with wide eyes. “Are you sure you won't have some birthday cake with me?” Sheffield asked.

“Well, since its your birthday, I guess I'll have a small piece, but no ice cream.”

While eating desert, he explained that it would three days before they would arrive in Rio. He promised to help them find a way back to the States.

“Thank you captain. You have been more than kind. I don't know about Molly, but I have had enough of ships. I think I'd rather fly.”

“I don't blame you there, Missus Watson.”

“Now if you would excuse us. I think we would like to turn in.”

Sheffield stood up as Mrs. Watson got up out of her seat and took Molly by the hand. “Thank you again. I think we can find our way back to our room. Good night, Captain.”

“Good night ma'am. Oh let me give you the number to ring if you need me.” He wrote down three numbers, one to his stateroom, one to his office, and one to the bridge. “If I'm not on the bridge, have them page me. Or you could see my secretary, Yeoman Gover. He can help you with anything you need. His office is just around the corner at the foot of the stairs. You can't miss it. Oh and don't be alarmed by the any sound you may here coming from above you. It will just be planes taking off or landing. You see, we are directly beneath the flight deck.”

She took the slip of paper and left.

Sheffield made his way back up to the bridge. While he had been busy taking care of Mrs. Watson and her daughter, the rest of the survivors had been taken care of. The German POWs were under guard in the repair hangar. At meal time, a makeshift mess hall was set up on the hangar deck, next to the aft elevator. It had to set up and taken down for each meal. The British and Brazilians had been distributed throughout the ship wherever space could be found. The senior officers among them were put up four to a cabin admiral's staff quarters the next corridor over from the admiral's suite. Sheffield realized that having a woman aboard presented certain problems and decided to post a marine sentry at either end of the corridor.

He stayed on the bridge until the last flight of the day had been recovered and the Bat Team had been sent up. It was well after dark before he left the bridge. With the Edelweisses taken care of, he retired to his stateroom rather than his emergency cabin. It had been a very long day but a very rewarding day, in more ways than one. Not only was the South Atlantic a much safer place that night, but he had reached a crucial point in the healing process after a very difficult year.

Giving away the dress was actually a big step in his healing. He found that by letting go of it, he was ready to let go and realized that he could move on with his life. As Sheffield got ready for bed, he felt a great deal of satisfaction. He twisted his wedding ring around his finger and slipped it off. He held it in his hand and looked at it for a moment. He went to put it back on but put it away in the drawer instead.

\* \* \* \* \*

The six destroyers acquired by Brazil from the United States are fictional. However the part about Great Britain keeping the six ships is true.

