

Chapter XVIII

Tropical Holiday

December 25, 1942 – December 31, 1942

Christmas Day 1942 was on Friday. That morning, Sheffield presented Morris and Reggie each with a Christmas gift as a small token of his appreciation for their service to him personally. After breakfast, he returned to his stateroom to write some letters. He had been in a contemplative mood ever since the night before. He realized that the best gift he had received that Christmas was not something tangible, wrapped in package tied with ribbons and bows. Nor was it given in a single bestowal. Rather it was the culmination of several circumstances from a variety of sources. The gift he had received was the freedom that resulted from healing. First and foremost he acknowledged the mercy and grace of the Lord. What had been one of Geannie's favorite versus took on a whole new meaning for him.

He opened her well worn Bible and read again the the verses that she had read on the last morning of her life; 1st Corinthians 15:55 and 57. 'O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.' He had always thought of it in terms of those who die having the victory. He now understood that the victory also goes to those who are left behind. It had been a long difficult year with a lot of challenges to work through, but in the end he had achieved victory. That being, the sting of the deaths of his beloved Geannie, his beautiful Sandy, and his devoted Austin had indeed been taken away.

Yes, there was still a hole in his heart that would ever be there, but the sting, the anguish, and the emptiness were gone. He owed it to others who had been mortal angels of mercy. First and foremost was Ramona who had been there with him that awful day and had stuck by his side during the first few months after. Since then, her letters of encouragement had buoyed him up and given him encouragement. He loved her for it.

Next was his brother Walt, whose counsel and advice had steered him through rocks and shoals that laid in his course. With his guidance and encouragement he had rearranged his bookshelf and helped him to understand the emotions he was dealing with.

Most recently there was Debra Watson. She had come into his life when she was where he had been a year ago. He was able to do for her what others, particularly Ramona, had done for him. She needed the dress that he had hung on to, right when he needed to give it away. That alone was the milestone that let him know that he could let go.

There were others along the way. His good friend Commander Owen who had been his guardian. Paula Drussell who helped his see that he could enjoy the company of another woman. Yeoman Gover who had a light and a special spirit about him. Even Geannie herself had contributed to the marvelous gift. Her loving memory, the letter that he had found in her Bible, and the times that she had come to him in his

dreams.

The morning was passing quickly and he still hadn't written the letters that he had intended to write. First he answered Ramona's letter.

December 25, 1942

Christmas Day

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Dear Ramona,

As you can see, I am in Rio de Janeiro. We have been operating in the South Atlantic ever since leaving the Azores where I last wrote to you from. It has been a busy month and we have been quite successful in taking the fight to the enemy.

I received your letter and cards just yesterday and I was very happy to receive them. Yes, I did receive the picture of you. I have it on the coffee table in my stateroom. I must say, you look absolutely stunning. I had always seen you as Ramona and the beautiful person that you are on the inside, that I hadn't noticed the gorgeous woman that you are on the outside. I must say the difference between the before and after pictures is remarkable.

I still plan to make good on my promise as soon as I can get to you. I'm looking forward to our date as well. In fact I hope there is more than one. As far as your marriage proposal, if you look like you do in your picture and the pie is every bit as good as the one I remember, I would have no choice but to say yes!

Since I last wrote, a lot has happened and I don't mean in the war.

You asked about my birthday. It was an incredible day. I started in a rather blue mood, remembering the year before. It wasn't long before I had to forget pitying myself. We had found what we had been sent here to find, a notorious commerce raider that had been terrorizing the South Atlantic, and sunk her.

There were a lot of survivors that had been rescued from the water when it sank, including a number of prisoners they were holding from ships they had sunk. We were the only ship large enough to accommodate that many people so I had them brought aboard.

Among them was a woman by the name of Debra Watson and her daughter Molly. To make a long story short, her husband had been killed in a robbery here in Rio and she was taking his body home for burial. (Does that sound familiar?) The ship they were on was sunk by the raider the night before and they were among the prisoners the Germans were holding. When they came aboard they had had two ships sunk out from under them in the same day. All they had were the nightgowns they were wearing when their ship was sunk.

Seeing her need, I gave her the dress I had intended to give Geannie for our birthday last year. I'll tell you, letting go of that dress was best thing I could have ever done. I found out that I could let go.

Then that night, I had a very bizarre dream in which Geannie came to me. She was sitting on a beach somewhere, wearing the dress. She told me that she was glad that I had given it to Mrs. Watson. She needed me to let go so she could progress wherever she is. Then in end she waded out into

the ocean and turned into a mermaid and swam away.

Harmona, I can't tell you how much better I feel. I have decided to go through all of Geannie's and the kid's things that I have stored back in Roanoke and let go of it too. If there is anything of Geannie's that you want, tell me and I'll save it for you.

Do you remember the woman I told you about who accompanied me to the officers appreciation banquet before we left Norfolk? I'm thinking of asking her out when I get back to Norfolk. She seemed like a nice lady and has been through what I have.

I must tell you that you have contributed considerably to how far I have come. You were there with me right from the beginning and your letters of encouragement have been big help. I don't know what I would have done without you and I love you for it. I know what Geannie did for you when Tom was killed. Then you turned around and did it for me. Now I have have an idea of how it is to help someone else.

And now here it is Christmas Day. The ship is all decked out in lights thanks to you. When you mentioned decorating the hospital and the feeling of home it gave, I decided that we could do that. We had very nice Christmas Eve service aboard the ship last night.

I don't know how much longer we will be here or where we'll be going next. Even if I did know, I couldn't say. I can tell you this, I do hope that some how, some way, in my travels that I will cross paths with you again soon. Until then, please keep the letters coming.

Love Sheffield

After writing to Ramona, Sheffield wrote letters to his parents, Marie, his brothers Walt and Shenan, Freddy and Susan, and Shorty and Wilma. He also wrote a short note on a post card to Paula Drussell making good on a promise to keep in touch. By then, the morning has passed and he had lunch with the enlisted men in the mess hall. After wards, he lingered and mingled with his men and listening to what they had to say. The afternoon is spent on the bridge. He had dinner with the officers in their wardroom and again he lingered, mingled, and listened. That evening, and every evening the ship remained in port, the Christmas lights were turned on.

The next day he posted his letters which went out on the Panair flight that day. It would sure beat going by ship.

During the week in port, Sheffield took the opportunity to leave the ship. On Saturday he took his launch across the bay to the main Brazilian naval base and went aboard the destroyer Japura which in a former life had been the USS Wadsworth, Sheffield's first ship. Accompanied by his translator, Yeoman Gover, he toured the ship that took him around the world twenty one years earlier. Other than a few up grades he found it to be pretty much the same. He even remembered where his stateroom was that he shared with another junior officer. After his trip down memory lane, he took a look around Niterói, the city on the other side of the bay. On the way back to the ship, he had the coxswain take the long way around the bay, rather than directly across.

Sunday was a relaxing day spent aboard the ship. On Saturday and Sunday the ship was pretty deserted as most of the men were ashore on liberty. Aside from attending Lieutenant Fellow's service, he got caught up on his personal log and did some reading.

The week that followed was one of leisure for the most part, other than the duties that couldn't be neglected. The crew was granted time ashore in shifts, leaving men aboard to stand watch, tend to light maintenance and upkeep, restock the stores and the like. The Percival, with her temporary bow, got underway on Monday. The next day the Cutthroat left for a patrol in the Indian Ocean with orders to report to the Fremantle submarine base at Perth Australia and report for duty with the Pacific Fleet.

Sheffield took the opportunity to leave the ship on occasion during the week. On all of his previous visits to Rio, he had never been to the beach. Tuesday afternoon he spent at Ipanema Beach. During the summer holiday break, the beach was crowded with Brazilians and American sailors. That afternoon the temperature was about eighty four degrees, cooled by a soft sea breeze and the water was about seventy eight degrees. All in all, a perfect afternoon.

When he stripped down to his swimming trunks, Sheffield's became aware of how tan he had become after weeks in the tropics. The contrast between his face, neck, arms, and the top of his bald head

and the rest of him was very obvious. It reminded him of how Geannie had always wanted a nice sun tan, but could never get one, even after living in Southern California and Hawaii. She wasn't the kind of person to be envious, but she was envious of Ramona who seemed to come by one naturally.

After a good brisk swim in the ocean, he got a bottle of Coca-Cola and joined in with others watching a game of beach volley ball between six sailors from the Reprisal and six local Brazilians, four men and two women. Despite cheering for his men, the Brazilians won. They went on to play two more matches, but Sheffield diverted his attention elsewhere.

Watching the families at play, he couldn't help but wish that Geannie and the kids were with him. They had a lot of fun on the beach at Coronado and then in Hawaii. Although the sting of their loss had healed, it was only natural to miss them and recollect fond memories.

He got acquainted with a family from Rio and got into a conversation with them. He was a professor of economics at the University of Brazil in Rio. Having studied at MIT in the United States, he spoke excellent English. In fact his wife was an American from the Boston area. She particularly enjoyed with visiting with a fellow American and wanted to know the latest cultural fads back in the States. He gave Sheffield a lesson in Brazil's recent monetary crisis, the introduction of the new currency, and the problems associated with the change. Sheffield was just glad that there wasn't a test afterwards.

On Wednesday the 30th Mace met Sheffield in his wardroom for breakfast. Yeoman Gover had gone ashore and arranged for a charter boat to take them out for the day. He entered the wardroom and saluted the two officers dressed in civilian clothes. "The boat has just come along side, Captain."

"Good, good." He replied as he returned the salute. "Tell Reggie. He has made up a boxed lunch for us. He also has a cooler full of soda. I know you don't drink Coca-cola so I had him throw in some root beer. You might have to arm wrestle Commander Owen for them, they're the only thing he have that has the word beer in them."

Mace chuckled. "That's okay. You can have you're root beer. I'm fine with Coke."

As Yeoman Gover turned to leave, Sheffield said, "Oh and Morris, for heaven's sake go change your clothes. This is a fishing trip,."

"Yes sir. I'll meet you on the quarterdeck in ten minutes."

After he left, Sheffield and Mace finished their breakfast, leaving their dishes for Reggie to cleanup. By the time they got to the quarterdeck, Morris was there, now wearing his civilian clothes and cowboy hat. He lead the way down the boat ladder to the thirty six foot fishing boat named Anabela that had tied up to the carrier. Once on deck, Morris introduced his superior officers to Domingo Villanova, the owner of the boat, his son Marcos, and his son-in-law Rogério Soares; none of whom spoke English.

Domingo was a short man in his mid fifties. Although he was only about five feet six inches, he had broad shoulders, muscular arms, and big hands. His leathery skin was bronze, partly because of his natural completion but mostly from a lifetime of working out in the sun. His dark skin contrasted with his thick head of white, wavy hair. His obvious good attitude toward life was reflected in his broad smile.

With their gear all stowed aboard, they cast off and began making their way out into to bay. Speaking through Morris, Domingo explained that that they would be going about forty miles off shore, going after swordfish. Before long, they were out in the open Atlantic, leaving the shore line behind them. During the two hour trip out, Sheffield and Mace had a good chance to visit. Morris was yacking away in Portuguese with their their hosts about who knew what, but they seemed to be enjoying the conversation.

“Geannie would have enjoyed this. I took her out sailing a number of times and she thoroughly enjoyed it.”

“Pat would hate it. She doesn't like getting out on the water. But hey, guys like you and me have salt water running through our veins.”

“In fact,” Sheffield continued, “the kids loved it too. That last summer we took a whole week and sailed around the Islands. That was great vacation.”

“My boys would like this.” Mace added. “Especially the fishing part.”

“Yeah. Have you guys done much fishing?”

“Quite a bit. How about you?”

“No. Not really. Once in a while at the lake back home is about all.”

“What about you, Morris. Have you done much fishing?” Commander Owen asked.

“I'll say. I used to do a lot of fly fishing on the Bear River back home. Mostly for whitefish.”

“Fly fishing looks like a lot of work.” Captain Brason observed. “Once several years ago we were passing through Idaho and I noticed people standing out in the river whipping the fishing line over their heads and casting it out over the water.”

“It definitely takes skill. My dad and granddad taught me when I was quite young.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a school of dolphins that joined them. For the next several minutes, they were caught up in the fascination of watching them.

Finally Sheffield and Mace resumed their visit. “You seem to be doing much better lately.” Mace observed.

“Yeah, a lot has happened and I have come to realize that I'm ready to start moving on. I can't hold on to them forever. I can see now that I'd only be holding myself back if I didn't.”

“That's probably a smart move. I can't imagine what you've been through during the last year. All I know is that you have had some pretty rough times.”

"I haven't mentioned this to you, but I'm thinking about asking Paula out when we get back to Norfolk."

"What makes you think we're going back to Norfolk? After all, the Cutthroat is heading for the Pacific. Maybe that's where they'll send us too."

"Well then, if we go back to Norfolk I just might ask her out. If we wind up in Pearl Harbor instead, I have promised Ramona a date." Sheffield said as he reached for a bottle of Coca-Cola and handed it to Mace. "She's probably helped me through this as much as anyone, if not more." he said as he opened his own bottle of Coke.

"I shouldn't say this Sheffield, but I always thought that Ramona had a thing for you."

"Nawh! Really? What makes you say that?"

"Just the way she would look at you. She used to hang on your every word and was always as close to you as she could get without being too obvious. I remember those get-togethers that we used to have on your patio. She beamed every time you raved about the baked goodies that she brought."

"Well I never noticed any of that."

"That is because you were always so enamored with Geannie. You were always like a school boy lost in the throws of first love around her."

"She was my first love, and my only love. She still is. But I think I just might be able to fall for another woman someday."

"Well, don't go rushing into anything."

"Oh believe me. I won't"

"So you think you might want to go out with Paula? Maybe Pat and I can tag along and call it a double date."

"Thanks, that would make it a lot easier for me."

"Or I could see what Madelyn is doing. Pat tells me that she has left her latest husband." Mace joked.

"Don't you dare. I'm still having nightmares over that ordeal." Sheffield laughed. "What about you and Pat? Was she your first love?"

"Oh heaven's no. She was about the third or fourth. I came pretty close to marrying another girl before I met her. She's certainly not my first love, but she is my true love."

"So what happened? With the other girl. I mean."

"I decided to enroll in the Academy and she didn't want to wait for me."

"Hey, what are they pointing at?" Sheffield interrupted. Then got up and went up forward.

Morris turned to them, "There's a school of flying fish off the port bow at one o'clock."



Sheffield picked up the binoculars hanging around his neck to get a closer look. In a few minutes they were right in the thick of them as they came toward the boat. Two or three of them landed right in the boat. Domingo picked one up to show his guests. Its a tubular body was about eight inches long with a large tail and pectoral fins. He explained through Morris, "They jump out of the water and uses these winglike fins to catch the air and flip their tail

back and forth to 'swim' through the air."

The fish's color was quite interesting. It was iridescent blue above and white below. The fins were pink and the boarder edges were white with a white spot where it connects to its body.

Morris translated, "After getting up to about thirty kilometers an hour," he interjected, "or roughly eighteen miles per hour," he continued translating, "then they jump out of the water and fly through the air for three to twelve meters." Again he interjected, "Thats from ten to forty feet."

Domingo continued explaining and Morris interpreted. "We're close to where we'll find the swordfish. They're what are scaring the flying fish this direction."

After traveling a little farther, Domingo shut off the engine to let the boat drift. Meanwhile Marcos and Rogério broke out the fishing gear and bait. They only had two rods for swordfish, which are specialized and strengthened as swordfish are quite large. The bait they had brought was large chunks of mackerel, herring and squid. The flying fish that landed in the boat would make excellent live bate. Marcos showed Sheffield how to bate his line and Rogério helped Mace. Before long their lines were cast and their poles were secured. Typical of fishing, it became a waiting game. Swordfish typically swim alone or in very loose schools, separated by as much as thirty feet from from the nearest swordfish.

Morris joined Domingo, Marcos, and Rogério in trolling for whatever they could catch. Before long, they began to have some success.

After about a half an hour it became obvious that Domingo had brought them to the right spot. He pointed out the dorsal fin of one breaking at the surface. Then another breached the surface on the other side of the boat. It was a beautiful sight that demonstrated the power of these magnificent fish.

While waiting Sheffield broke out the box lunch they had brought. He invited Morris to take break and join the. Reggie had packed more than enough for the three of them. There was fried chicken, potato salad, baked beans, and hard rolls. No sooner than they began eating, Sheffield's line took a hit. Morris gathered up the food and put it out of he way so it wouldn't get ruined in the ensuing struggle. Domingo coached, Morris translated, and Mace was ready to assist in reeling it in.

Swordfish are vigorous, powerful fighters. Once hooked it dove quickly and the reel began screaming. Sheffield quickly strapped himself into the harness to keep him from being pulled overboard. Domingo told him to lock the reel and give the rod a quick jerk to set the hook. At that, the battle began. He fought the fish by raising and lowering his rod while reeling in an effort to bring it in. Everyone else on board yelled encouragement, even if it was in Portuguese. All eyes were peeled, waiting for the first glimpse of the fish, which



breached the surface once. After several minutes, the fish began to tire as Sheffield reeled it in closer to the boat.

Domingo handed Mace a flying gaff, which was a long pole with a hook attached to a rope, for pulling the fish alongside the boat. He explained through Morris what to do with it. As the battle neared its end, Sheffield managed to reel the fish in close enough for Mace to gaff it. With no fight left in it, Mace and Morris brought into the boat. After a round of handshakes and pats on the back, Sheffield was able to relax and take a good look at his catch.

A rope was looped around its tail and it was hoisted up to be measured and weighed. At eight feet three inches long and weighing two hundred and eleven pounds, it was an average swordfish. About a third of its overall length was its sword. Sheffield had Mace take a picture of him with his catch with Geannie's camera.

Once the excitement had passed, they returned to their lunch. Domingo and his sons also broke out their meager lunch. Sheffield motioned for them to join them as there was plenty of food.

It wasn't until early afternoon when Mace got a bite. After a similar fight, he ended up with a slightly larger fish. Sheffield took a picture of Mace with his fish. Marcos, and Rogério set about gutting the fish which made for some happy seagulls as the entrails were tossed over the side.

By mid afternoon, Domingo had made enough of a catch of an assortment of fish, that they began the trip back to Guanabara Bay. It had been the adventure that Sheffield and Mace had hoped for. Morris was just happy to be along for the ride. The experience was enough for the three Americans and the three Brazilians to bond. All the way back they swapped stories. Domingo told some whoppers. Some of them were bizarre enough to actually be believable.

It was late afternoon, toward evening when the Anabela tied up alongside the Reprisal. A work detail

was quickly organized to manhandle the two swordfish aboard the ship and down to cold storage on the fourth deck. The butchers would cut them up later.

Sheffield and Mace each forked over some Brazilian currency to pay for the charter. Sheffield also gave them a significant tip, just as Geannie had always insisted. Between that and their catch, Domingo did very well that day.

The next morning, Sheffield was summoned to Admiral Weston's flag ship. The task force had orders to sail in three days, on Monday the 3rd. They were to cover a small Brazilian landing force that was going to occupy Trindade and establish a small seaplane base for six of the newly arrived Catalinas. The base was to also be the home port for two Javari class submarine chasers that been transferred from the U.S. Navy. Rounding out the force was a four hundred and fifty foot troopship that had been converted into a makeshift seaplane tender.

Once this force was in place and safe from the treat of U-boat attacks, the task force was to patrol to the north, eventually arriving at Recife. The timing of their orders allowed enough time for celebrating the new year. Brazilians are famous for throwing a big party. New Years Eve in Rio was next only to mardi gras. Hundreds of American sailors joined in the revelry in the streets and on the beaches to welcome in 1943.

Sheffield wasn't in the mood for celebrating the arrival of a new year. He temporarily slipped back into mindset of missing Geannie and preferred to keep to himself. However he felt obligated to attend a formal social event hosted by Rear Admiral Augustin Beaugard, the commander of the US Naval Operating Base at Rio. If he would have had some female companionship, it might have been different. He realized that Geannie was missing from his life for good but that didn't mean that he would have to forgo the companionship of a good woman. Geannie had filled that need in his life for as long as he could remember. No one could ever take her place, but someone else could certainly fill the void. He felt so incomplete on his own. He had a lot to offer and in return had is own needs that needed to be filled. The war wouldn't last forever and the day would come when he would leave the Navy.

He had Yeoman Gover drive he and Mace to the Cassino da Urca where the event was held. The evening included dinner and a show to be followed by socializing. The casino was located in the upscale neighborhood of Urca in the South Zone of the city at the base of Sugarloaf and first opened in 1933. While his passengers attended the banquet, Morris went to a picture show in the casino's movie theater.

The banquet was held in a closed off section of the main seating area. First came the speeches and toasts. In the process, Sheffield was singled out for the successes that the Reprisal had accomplished in the

South Atlantic.

Following dinner, the curtain was opened so those in attendance could watch the show. At the time Eros Volúsia, billed as Brazil's top dancer, was the main attraction accompanied by a dance troop and musicians. Although trained in ballet, her dance style was influenced by her Portuguese, native, and African descent. But the dances that made her Brazil's outstanding dance artist came straight from the jungles of the Congo. Her dark complexion, statuesque body and moves always captivated her audience. In addition to dancing, she also appeared in a number of motion pictures, the most recent being Abbott and Costello's Rio Rita. But more important to the twenty eight year old Eros was her work with Brazil's Ministry of Education. Toward the end of the show, Sheffield saw Morris slip in the back. When it was over, Sheffield thanked his host and excused himself from what the rest of what New Year's Eve had to offer. Mace on the other hand stayed.

Once back aboard the ship, Sheffield's reflective mood continued. As he looked ahead to 1943 and beyond, he didn't want to spend the rest of his life alone. But how to go about finding someone? Not just anyone, but one who could truly love him and he them. He never had to search for the true love that he found in Geannie. She had been handed to him as a gift from God who sent them into this world together. He never had to seek her out for she was always there.

That evening as he contemplated these things, he reread the letter that Geannie had written just before she died and tucked away in her Bible where he found it months later. After giving it some serious thought, he made a new years resolution. If it took more than the coming year, so be it. The war would not give him much opportunity to do much about it, but he could do what he could when he could. In his mind, he already had two possibilities that he wanted to pursue, if the opportunity presented itself. Unfortunately, he didn't have much control over where he would go during the next year.

If by chance, he found himself back at Pearl Harbor, if only briefly, he wanted to see Ramona. She was such a good friend. Could it ever be more than that? On the other hand, if he made it back to Norfolk he would like to get to know Paula Drussell better. Once Debra Watson had chance heal, she might be a possibility. Perhaps in his travels, someone else would be placed in his path. There was one other possibility. If he did not survive the war, just maybe Geannie was right and there would be a way for them to be together again.

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Eros Volúsia was as described, based on an article in the September 21, 1941 issue of Life Magazine, which featured her on the cover. The Cassino da Urca was one of Rio's premier casinos and night clubs until it closed in 1946. References in Portuguese suggest that Eros performed there.