

## Chapter XX

Paula Drussell

February 3, 1943 – February 14, 1943

On the morning of Wednesday, February 3<sup>rd</sup> the task force was just off Albemarle Sound in North Carolina. The order was given to reverse course, into the wind, so the Reprisal could send the air group aloft. Once the last plane was airborne, the task force resumed its homeward course. Two hours later they rounded Cape Henry and stood into Hampton Roads.

It wasn't long before the Reprisal was eased into her berth at Pier 7 by three tugboats. On the opposite side of the pier was the brand new Essex, which had been commissioned only five weeks earlier. At the next pier over was the British carrier, HMS Victorious. Across from her were the auxiliary carriers Bogue and Card which had been converted from cargo ships and the Chesapeake Bay, which had been converted from a seaplane tender.

Once the ship was secure, half of the crew were released for a well earned two week leave. The remainder would get their turn later. Waiting on the pier were the ever anxiously awaited mail bags. Once brought aboard and sorted, Yeoman Gover brought the Captain his mail before he left the ship.

"Is there anything else I can do for you before I leave, Captain?"

"No Morris. Enjoy your leave. What are you going to do?"

"Thank you sir. I will. I'm going home. It's a three day train ride each way but that will still give me nine days at home. I'm really looking forward to it."

"Do you have any plans?"

"Not really. There won't be much I can do. The last letter I got from home said that we have a good three feet of snow on the ground, there's probably more by now. What about you sir? Are you going home?"

"Yes, I'm planning on going home to Roanoke for a week while the ship is in the navy yard. I can guarantee you we won't have much snow on the ground, if any. Stay warm. I'll see you in two weeks."

As Yeoman Gover left the captain's office, Sheffield looked through his mail. Toward the middle of the stack was a letter from Romona. He laid the rest aside on his desk and opened her letter.

*January 30, 1943*

*Dear Sheffield*

*Well so much for that. All of the talk around here was that the Reprisal was on its way. Everyone was looking forward to it even though it was only supposed to be here for a few weeks. No one was more excited about it than me. Then we got the word that you had been recalled to Norfolk. Something about being retained in the Atlantic indefinitely. I'm disappointed. I was so looking*

forward to our arrangement.

Remember when I told you that word of what goes on in the Atlantic usually makes it over here. Well when you said that the President of Brazil was aboard your ship, you didn't tell me that it was to make you a knight. That's pretty exciting.

No, you have never mentioned your yeoman to me before. It sounds like he is a pretty impressive young man. He must be good if you skipped a rank when you promoted him. I'll bet that you can keep him busy. There is a lot for a Captain to keep track of.

Yes, I remember Mace and Pat. We had some great times on your backyard patio. Say hi for me.

Recently I have been attending the congregation downtown where you and Geannie and the kids used to attend. Some weeks, when I have to be on duty, I still attend on base. I like it there much better because there is such a feeling of family. Something that has been lacking in my life. The very first week that I attended, Pastor Robbins remembered me from when I took you by the chapel just after Geannie and the kids died. He asked me about you and told me to tell you hello.

So you caught a swordfish. That must have been exciting. They're not my favorite seafood. I always thought they were a little strong tasting. And then you went to Trinidad. You're really getting around, aren't you. It will be interesting to know where you'll be the next time I hear from you.

I too look forward to your letters. I keep every one of them. I really don't have any friends around here to speak of. That was sweet of you to refer to me as your best friend. I'm honored. I consider you to be my best friend, too. Ever since you left for the East Coast, we've been more like pen pals. That's why I was so disappointed when I heard that you wouldn't be coming after all.

I've been doing some thinking. Since your not coming this direction any time soon, just maybe there is a way for me to get to the East Coast myself. I love it here, or I wouldn't have stayed so long. But there is really nothing to keep me here. It's just a thought.

I haven't mentioned my mystery man to you lately. Things are looking up with him, but I still don't think he has a clue as to how I feel about him. Its so frustrating to be in love with someone who isn't in love with me. Oh, I know that he thinks fondly of me. I really think that if he really knew how I felt about him, that he would fall in love with me, At least thats my hope and

dream. I think one of these times I'm going to have to hit him over the head with a club to get his attention. What do you think I should do?

Love Ramona.

After reading her letter, he wrote back.

February 3, 1943

Norfolk, Virginia

Dear Ramona,

I thought it was supposed to be a secret that we had orders to the Pacific. I guess it doesn't matter now. As far as being retained in the Atlantic indefinitely, I haven't heard anything about that. I just go where they send me.

We just got in this morning and when the mail was brought aboard, your letter was with it. It's good to hear from you again so soon. It looks like we'll be here for a few weeks anyway. I'd like to take a week and go home. That is one nice thing about being homeported in Norfolk. It is close to home.

Would you really consider requesting a transfer? You love it there. You've got your beachhouse and your mystery man. You asked me for my advice. You should bake him one of your pies! If that doesn't get his attention, then you'll just have to hit him over the head with a club.

Now that I'm back in Norfolk, I'm going to ask out the woman that I told you about. I have no idea where it might lead. I'd just like to get to know her better. I'm going to start out with something nice and easy like a double date with Mace and Pat. Mace talked to Pat about it when he

called her this morning. All I have to do is ask her out.

I've never asked a girl out before. Can you believe that. With Geannie it was just a given. I command a ship with close to three thousand men on it, asking someone to dinner shouldn't be too hard. I have to confess, I'm scared to death.

I thought of having my secretary arrange it for me. He takes care of all of my appointments. But I realize that would be bad form. Some things a man just has to do on his own, this is one of them.

In fact, as soon as I finish this letter, I'm going in to town to take care of some personal business at the bank. She happens to work there and my plan is to ask her then. Wish me luck. I'll tell you all about it next time I write. That and my trip home.

With love, your best friend,

Sheffield

Once he had sealed the envelope and addressed it, he took it down to the post office himself. His staff car had been unloaded and was sitting on the dock waiting for him. Since his trusted driver was gone, he enlisted the service of another crewman to drive him downtown to take care of his business.

As he entered the bank, he saw Paula behind one of the windows. Although her line was slightly longer, that is the one he got into. She hadn't seen him as she was busy with the customers ahead of him. She was surprised when she looked up and called, "Next." to see Sheffield standing on the other side.

"Hello Paula." he said.

"Sheffield! It's so good to see you. I heard that your ship came in this morning. I hoped I'd see you. I just didn't think it would be so soon. How are you? You look great."

"Thanks. It's good to be home. It's good to see you, too. You look marvelous."

"Why, thank you. So what can I do for you today, Captain?"

Well, I have several uncashed paychecks that I need to deposit. Oh, and while you're at it, can you take Geannie's name off of the account."

"That's a pretty big step. The last time you stood at my window you weren't ready to do that." she said as she took his checks and noted the transaction. "Would you like some cash back?"

"No, but I would like to exchange some Brazilian and British currency. Well, a lot has happened since I last saw you. I wasn't ready to take her name off then, but I am now."

"I don't know that I've ever seen Brazilian currency before." Paula commented as she counted it out and looked up the exchange rate. "By the way, I got your post card from Rio da Jenerio. Thanks for thinking of me. It made my day to get it. I'd love to go someplace like that someday. Is there anything else I can do for you?" she asked as she handed him his cash.

"As a matter of fact there is." He paused, gulped, and mustered his courage. "Would you like to go out with me?"

"Why I'd love to. When?"

"Either Friday or Saturday night."

"Either one would work. What do you have in mind?"

"Well I brought home some fish that Mace and I caught in the South Atlantic and Pat's going to fix it up for us. I'd like for you to join me. Then after dinner we could all go out to a picture show. Should we say Saturday?"

"So its a double date? That sounds fun. Saturday it is. I haven't gone out since I accompanied you to your banquet last fall. My daughter Evelyn thinks its time that I started dating. She also thinks that its time that I let her start dating."

"You really don't get out much do you. Tell Evelyn that you are going to start dating when I come by for you at six o'clock. Will that give you enough time to be ready?"

"Yes, six o'clock will be fine. I look forward to it. So I'll see you Saturday evening. Good day, Sheffield."

"Until Saturday then. Good bye, Paula."

Sheffield turned to leave and Paula called, "Next." to the person standing behind him.

Sheffield heard the lady who had been patiently waiting in line behind him say, "I wouldn't mind a date with him myself."

After concluding his business, Sheffield had his driver return him to the ship. There were some things that he needed to do to ready for the inspection of the ship the next day. Later, in the evening he called home to tell them that he had just returned to Norfolk and that he would be home on Monday for a week.

Three officers from the Navy Yard boarded the ship the first thing on Thursday morning and met with

Captain Brason, Commander Owen and Lieutenant Commander Conrad Eaton, the engineering officer. During the meeting, the ship's officers outlined the things that they knew that needed attention; repairing the ruptured fuel bunker and fixing the dent in the hull were at the top of the list. After the meeting, the six men conducted a top to bottom inspection of the ship that took all day. In the process, the men from the navy yard saw first hand what needed taken care of and several other items that could use some attention were added to the list. All day Friday was spent on paperwork. Work orders had to drawn up, reviewed, and signed. In the end it was determined that the work would take ten days.

On Saturday morning the ship made preparations to get underway, even though it was a short trip up the Elizabeth River. At the same time the HMS Victorious was also making preparations for getting underway. Sheffield wished that he would have had an opportunity to have gone aboard before she left to see how the British do things. Even though he was glad to be home, he and most of the rest of the crew were envious of the Victorious; she was heading for the Pacific.

As the Victorious steamed out into Hampton Roads and pointed her bow seaward, the Reprisal slowly steamed up river to the navy yard. She was eased into the dry dock and once secured to the dock, the coffer dam was closed behind her and the water was pumped out. Soon her keel settled on the blocks on the bottom of the dock.

Once the ship was out of the water, Captain Brason, Commander Owen, and Commander Eaton along with the officers from the navy yard got their first look at the damage caused to the hull by the dud torpedo. They inspected the hull in general, as well as the propeller shafts, the propellers, and the rudders.

While in dry dock, the crew remained aboard. They would get in on a lot of the work that was to be done while the other half of the crew were on leave. The attitude was, "Oh well. They get in on the work of resupplying the ship and getting her ready to sail again."

Since Saturday was the day of the big date, Sheffield let Mace go early so he could go home and help Pat get things ready. Sheffield was a little apprehensive as he got ready. After his shower he shaved, even though he had shaved that morning. As he splashed on his Old Spice he hoped that Paula would find it as aromatically pleasing as Geannie did. As he put on his dress blue uniform, he remembered how Geannie loved to be seen with him in uniform. As he turned out the lights and shut the door of his stateroom, it was as if he heard Geannie say, "Have a good time, Flyboy."

Sheffield had his driver take him to Paula's house to pick her up. Paula was sitting in the kitchen taking the last drag of a cigarette. Evelyn answered the door. "Good evening Captain Brason. You look dashingly handsome this evening."

"Why thank you Evelyn. You look lovely."

"You remembered my name?"

"Of course. Who could forget a gorgeous dame like you."

Evelyn giggled.

Sheffield teased, "Forget your mother, how'd you like to go out with me."

Evelyn blushed. "You didn't bring flowers? A gentleman caller is always supposed to bring flowers." she insisted.

"You'll have to forgive me Evelyn. I'm pretty rusty at this sort of thing."

"I understand. I'll forgive you this time, but the next time you take Mom out, don't forget." Then she leaned close and whispered, "She loves daisies."

Just then Paula came out into the front room wearing a black dress with white flowers and a pie in her hand. Sheffield turned his attention to his date. "Paula, You look lovely." he complimented.

"That funny." Sheffield commented. "I remember you to be taller than this."

"That's because the last time," she said holding out her foot, "I was wearing heels."

She took her coat from the hook by the door and Sheffield helped her put it on. "Shall we go?"

"Yes." she answered. She turned to Evelyn and reminded her, "Take good care of Jillian and clean up after supper. Brent should be home from the ball game around ten thirty."

"I will Mom. Have a good time. Bye"

Sheffield let Paula step through the door first and he closed it behind him. He might not have been in a dating situation for a very long time but he remembered how to be a gentleman. Geannie had trained him well. He offered his free arm, the pie in his other hand, and escorted her to his car. He opened the door and helped her in and handed her the pie. He went around and got in other side. She slid over to sit next to him, holding the pie on her lap; a far cry from the void between them the last time they did this.

Pat and Mace had dinner just about ready when Sheffield and Paula arrived. He took the pie and helped her out of the car and dismissed the driver. Mace greeted them at the door and took their coats. After some some small talk and some last minute attention to details, Pat announced that dinner was served. Sheffield helped Paula with her chair and then took the chair opposite from her.

Spread before them was a scrumptious meal of baked swordfish, marinated in lemon juice, white wine, soy sauce, garlic, ginger, grated lemon rind and black pepper. Complementing the main dish were baked red potatoes, steamed carrots, broccoli, and cauliflower, white wine and 7 Up for Sheffield. According to Pat, Coca-cola would have contrasted with the white wine.

Pat asked Sheffield to tell the story about catching the fish. She wanted him to tell it rather than Mace because she was trying to let him impress Paula. Sheffield didn't realize it, but she was using the same carefully thought out tactics that Geannie had employed when they had Ramona and Tomcat over for

dinner.

During dinner he noticed that she was no longer wearing her wedding ring either. Sheffield talked about going home to Roanoke next week. Paula asked him to say hello to her cousin, Samantha Taylor if he happened to see her. She told him that Samantha was five years younger than her. The last time she saw her was at Gary's funeral.

For desert, Paula brought a banana cream pie. Sheffield made a mental note to himself that it wasn't nearly as good as the pies that Ramona makes. Oh, it was good alright, just not as good. He complemented her on how good it was. After dinner, they went see Casablanca, starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, at the Colley Theater located at 1507 Colley Avenue in downtown Norfolk.

They selected the center of the fifth row with Paula and Pat seated between Sheffield and Mace. When Ilsa, played by Ingrid Bergman, walked into Rick's Café and asks the piano player, "Play it, Sam. Play 'As Time Goes By.'" Paula instinctively took Sheffield's hand. When he glanced at her and caught her eye, she nervously smiled. Embarrassed, she let go. Later, during the scene where Rick confronts Ilsa in the empty café and refuses to give her the letters and she threatens him with a gun, Sheffield had his arm resting on the back of Paula's seat. He became aware of where his arm was as Ilsa confesses her love for Rick. During the one of best movie kisses ever, he squirmed as he removed his arm. Paula timidly glanced at him. Again they made eye contact, ever so briefly.

At the last moment, when Rick made Ilsa board the plane to Lisbon with her husband, Sheffield noticed Paula daub her eye with her hanky when Rick told Ilsa that she would regret it if she stayed, "Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life."

The picture ended with Rick walking off into the fog and the lights came on. Sheffield helped Paula put on her coat. Always the gentleman, he offered his arm and escorted Paula out of the theater to the Owen's car. On the ride home, they sat side by side in the backseat and had a relaxed conversation about the movie. Pat kept Mace engaged in conversation as not to interrupt the budding relationship.

When they stopped at Paula's house Sheffield, who was sitting by the door, got out first and extended his hand to Paula as she slid over. He helped her out and again offered his arm to escort her to the door. It was a chilly February night as they talked briefly at the doorstep. "Thank you, Sheffield I had a wonderful time." she said as she took him by one hand in both of hers.

"So did I. May I call on you again when I return from Roanoke?" he said as he put his free hand on top of her hands.

"I'd like that very much." she said. "Only next time, lets ditch our chaperons."

"Alright then. Good night Paula." He shook her hands and with his top hand reached for the doorknob and opened the door for her.

“Good night.” she said as she let go of his hand and walked through the door, closing it behind her. Sheffield hurried back to the warm car and got in. “Well?” Past asked.

“We've agreed to go out again when I get back.”

“Ohhh.” Pat cooed.

“And the two of you aren't invited.”

“That's even better.” She agreed.

Mace took Pat home and dropped her off and then took Sheffield back to the ship. As he got ready for bed, he was pleased with how the evening had gone. It was much more relaxed than when she accompanied him to the officers appreciation banquet as his “dinner companion”. This this time they were both willing to call it a date.

When Sheffield got off the train in Roanoke it was definitely colder than it was in Norfolk. He wasn't used to the cold after being in the tropics. Emmett was waiting for him at the depot when the train pulled in at 12:15. When they got home, Ellen had lunch waiting. It was some of her famous chicken and noodle soup, with homemade noodles, left over from Sunday dinner the day before, so the flavors had a chance to blend. Chicken noodle soup is always better the second day.

As they visited over lunch, he mentioned his date with Paula. His mother wanted to know all about her. Sheffield told her what he knew about her and concluded with, “I really don't know all that much about her, we're just getting to know each other.”

“Well,” Marie said, “I'm sure she's a lovely girl. We're so glad that you're finally able to start seeing other women. Aren't we Emmett?”

After lunch and getting his stuff squared away in his room, he decided that there was no time like the present to get started on what he had come to do, so he changed into a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt. First, he went next door to see Marie. Every time he saw her lately she seemed to be getting more frail; after all she was now seventy five. The difference since he was last home in September was obvious to him. As they visited she brought him up to date on the Austin Family.

Sheffield spent the rest of the afternoon taking inventory of the things in storage to see what all was there. It was trip down memory lane as went through box after box. As he picked things up to examine, he realized that the last hands to touch it were Geannie's when she packed it up fourteen months earlier. By the end of the afternoon he had a good idea what was there. He had to think about how he wanted to go about sorting through things and what to do with it.

That evening his brothers and their families came for dinner, at least those of their families who were still in the area. They noticed a marked difference in his well being. Over dinner he told of all the places that

he had been since he was last home. He talked of the Azores and the Battle of the Bay of Biscay and his encounter with Emmaline's husband, Seth, who was with the Marine Raiders. He described crossing the equator and discovering his secretary and all about him. Shenan's nineteen year old daughter, Ruth, wanted to know, "He sounds charming. Can you fix me up with him, Uncle Sheffield." He went into detail about Rio da Jenerio and his adventures in the south Atlantic, including the Edelweiss and Mrs. Watson. He told them of receiving orders to the Pacific and then being recalled. He concluded with his date with Paula on Saturday night.

"I know gal I can fix you up with." Shenan's wife Emily remarked.

"I don't know." Sheffield said. "I don't want to get carried away here."

Emily persisted. "Her name is Freda, She's simply adorable. You really should take her out."

"I've never heard you mention her before." Shenan wanted to know, "Where do you know her from?"

"You know, the gal at the court house that files the property descriptions from the surveys that you do. When I take them to her, she always so sweet and pleasant."

"Oh," Shenan said, "Now I know who your talking about."

Turning to Sheffield he remarked. "She's quite good looking. I'm surprised that someone hasn't grabbed her her up."

"I don't know." Sheffield said warily.

"Will you at least think about it?" Emily begged.

He agreed to think about it, mostly hoping that she would drop the subject.

After dinner, Walt pulled him aside and asked him to stop by his office when he had a minute for another of those visits that he was so good at.

The next morning, Sheffield began in earnest to sort through things. There were two obvious things to do with it; keep it or pass it on to someone else. The third option, throwing things away, was taken care of by Jeannie when she packed it up. Most of their household items fell into the keep category. He realized that he would not always be living aboard the ship. His next assignment could very likely be ashore and he might need it to furnish an apartment. When the war was over and he retired from the navy he would need them then for sure.

Aside from the household things and a few items of highly sentimental value, the rest, especially their clothes fell into the pass along along category. He did set a side a few things for Ramona. There was nice vase that she had given them and a book that she had loaned to Geannie that he put aside for her as well.

Sheffield worked on it for two days. The whole time Emily was pestering him to agree to go on a blind date with this Freda. She even enlisted the help of his mother, who finally convinced him to give in.

Emily was thrilled and evidently so was Freda. He could take their car and was to pick her up at her apartment on Friday evening.

In the meantime, on Wednesday when he was just about finished, he took a break and went next door to the church and found Walt in his office. He told him that he wanted to let Marie and Sarah have the first pick of things, then the rest of both families. Anything left over he wanted Walt to see to it that it ended up with people who needed it.

While Walt had him, he talked to him about his state of emotional well being. He could tell that he had come a long ways. Parting with the things that belonged to Geannie and the kids was a major step, so was being willing to start seeing other women. He cautioned him to take his time and not rush into anything.

On Thursday afternoon, Marie and Sarah went through the stuff and selected what they wanted. Some of Sandy and Austin's clothes looked like they would fit Sylvia and Curtis. That evening the rest of the Austins and Shenan and his family gathered at the Austin Mansion to pick through things. When they were done, there was plenty of clothing and other things for Walt to put into the hands of people from his congregation who were in need.

With that out of the way, Friday should have been a day to relax but he was nervous about his blind date. He tried to find ways out of it, without outright lying. When she answered the door, she was indeed very attractive. But he hadn't been there two minutes when he knew that he was in trouble. All the way to the restaurant, during dinner, and even during the movie, and on the way home she talked incessantly with a heavy southern accent.

She talked about her five cats, how she hated her job and wanting to get out of Roanoke. She went on and on about herself, the things she liked, the things she loved, the things she disliked, and the things she hated. It turned out that she was eight years younger than Sheffield and had four older sisters. She went on about how she just loved soldiers and how brave they were. She wanted to know what it was like in the army and how many Germans he had killed, but didn't wait for an answer, like all of the other questions she asked.

All during the picture show she wanted to cling to him. He slumped down in his seat hoping to slip into a whole. At one point, the man behind them had had enough and leaned forward and said, "For crying out loud lady, shut the hell up." She kept on talking and Sheffield slid further down in his seat. When he took her to her doorstep she held on to him like she didn't want to let go of him. When she finally let go, she kissed him as if they had been going together for a long time. The only good thing about that was that she couldn't talk and kiss at the same time. Finally the cold got to her and she let go to open the door. She asked if he would like to come in. He told her that he didn't think that was appropriate on a first date. To which she said, "Okay. Thank you. I had fun, good night."

Sheffield had a headache as he drove back to Shenan's place. Emily asked "How did it go? Did you have fun?"

He answered, "Do have a loaded revolver so I blow my brains out?"

"That bad?" Shenan asked. Then he turned to his wife, "See, I told you to leave things be." He turned back to Sheffield, "Come on little brother, let's take you home."

On the way home, he rehearsed the excruciating ordeal saying he would rather endure abandoning a sinking ship in shark infested waters. When he got home, his mother wanted to know how it went. She got the same story.

Saturday was a relaxing day for Sheffield. On Sunday he attended church services and he visited with Michael and Samantha Taylor and mentioned that he had gone out with her cousin Paula. He was gratified to see someone in the congregation wearing one of Sandy's dresses. Having sorted through things and giving away what he couldn't use was extremity gratifying. After Sunday dinner with his folks, he caught the two o'clock train back to Norfolk. His staff car was waiting for him at the station and took him back to the navy yard and to the ship.

\* \* \* \* \*

Although Casablanca had premiered on November 23, 1942, it wasn't released until January 23, 1943.

In late December 1942, HMS Victorious was loaned to the US Navy after an American plea for carrier reinforcement. After a refit at the Norfolk Navy Yard in January 1943, Victorious left in February for the Pacific.