

Chapter XXIII

The Battle of Bear Island

March 15, 1943 – May 19, 1943

On Monday morning, all departments reported that they were ready to sail. At the very last minute, the new executive officer reported aboard and was brought to the bridge. “Commander Terrell Southridge reporting for duty, sir.” He saluted. He was a large, imposing man who looked like he could intimidate a bobcat. In his mouth was the foulest smelling cigar that anyone had ever encountered. It was even offensive to those who did smoke, but refrained from so doing on the bridge, in the captain's ready room, or anywhere in the Captain's presence. He continued, “Sorry for the delay sir, but the ____ doctor wouldn't give me _____ release to return to duty.”

As he reached out to shake the Captain's out stretched hand, he blew a big puff of smoke right in his face. Sheffield typically encountered tobacco smoke and found it very unpleasant, but it hadn't bothered him to the degree that this did. He nearly turned green and felt as if his breakfast might suddenly reappear. Fanning the air with one hand, he chokingly greeted his new first officer, “Welcome aboard Commander. It's good to finally have you with us.” He then introduced each of the men on the bridge, including Yeoman Gover.

As Commander Southridge chatted informally with those to whom he had just been introduced, a string of words as foul as his cigar smoke spewed from his mouth. Someone asked if he was married. He went on to brag that he had been married four times, to two of them at the same time. He went on to give the sordid details of an affair he was having with the wife of an officer at his last post.

During the whole time, the bridge filled with contaminated air that was unfit to breath. It was a cold morning and all of the portholes and hatches had been kept closed. Someone even pointed out the no smoking flag but he scoffed, “Nobody tells me what the ____ I can and can't do.”

Sheffield had had enough, “Commander Whithouse, why don't you to take the Commander to his stateroom. Show him around and tell him how we do things around here.”

Commander Whithouse, himself a rather gruff fellow, looked at the captain with an expression that said, “Why me?” He replied, “Yes sir. Will you follow me Commander.”

“Its been a _____ pleasure to meet all of you. I look forward to serving on this _____ tub.”

When they left the bridge, Sheffield shook his head in disbelief. “Oh brother. What did I do to deserve this? Yeoman Gover, air it out in here won't you.”

Morris opened the door leading to the wing bridge on either side which created a chilly cross breeze, which did the trick.

Capitan Brason gave the order to get underway. In a matter of minutes, the ship was out in the middle of Hampton Roads and making way for the open sea. Hampton Roads was filled with the other ships

of the task force, lead by the United States, as they all made their way into the Chesapeake Bay. Directly behind the Reprisal was the new Essex, which was on her maiden voyage. Once out in the Atlantic, the Essex and her escorts set course for her shakedown cruise in the Gulf of Paria. The rest of them set a course to the northeast, parallel to the coast.

Once at sea, Captain Brason called a meeting of the senior officers in his ready room. Someone was sent to get Commander Southridge and show him the way. All during the briefing Commander Southridge treated everyone to more of his cigar smoke and foul language. It became so unbearable that Sheffield couldn't take any more. "Commander Southridge, will you please put out your cigar?"

"Why the ____ should I, its a free _____ county. Isn't that why were fighting this _____ war."

"That's an order, Commander!" he snorted indignantly. It was a side of him the officers rarely saw. Grumbling and cursing, he dropped it on the floor and crushed it out with his foot.

"Everyone in this room knows that I don't smoke and have the courtesy to not smoke around me. Somehow it became an unspoken rule, the no smoking flag is there as a subtle reminder. Since it has been an unspoken arrangement, I have never thanked them. Gentleman, I sincerely want to thank you for your consideration. Being the Capitan has certain perks and this is one that I particularly enjoy. The same thing goes for swearing. I detest such language.

"Commander, you are free to smoke that nasty thing anywhere but around me. And in my presence you will speak as the professional naval officer that you are. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir." He mumbled.

The briefing continued and at the conclusion of the business, Capitan Brason dismissed everyone, except for Commander Southridge. "I need to apologize to you for calling you out like that in front of everyone. It should have been in private and I shouldn't have been so indignant."

What could he say but, "Apology accepted, Sir." But he did not offer an apology of his own for offending his commanding officer.

"Now, lets put this behind us." Captain Brason said. "Come with me back up to the bridge and we'll put you to work."

For the rest of the day, Commander Southridge was careful to watch his mouth. He slipped a time or two, but quickly corrected himself. Even though the urge to light up a cigar was almost overpowering, he refrained.

At the end of the day, Sheffield was worried about his new executive officer for several reasons. First was his unprofessional manners. Second was his lack of experience. In the time that he spent with him explaining the functions of the job, Commander Southridge responded that he understood but the dazed look on his face told another story. Sheffield hoped that it was just that the fact that he was new. The third

area of concern was that the commander was unfamiliar with carrier operations. Granted, his background was with cruiser float planes, but many officers with various aviation experience serve aboard carriers and have a basic understanding. As Sheffield wrote all of this down in his personal log, he concluded that he needed to give him the benefit of the doubt.

The next day, Sheffield worked with Commander Southridge during the morning watch. He had some things in his office that needed his attention. "Are you ready to take the bridge, Commander?" He asked.

"Yes, sir. Absolutely, sir."

"Good. You have the bridge Mr. Southridge."

Sheffield went below to see what Regge had for lunch. Later he went to his office. Meanwhile, on the bridge, Commander Southridge was obviously out of his league. When it came time to recover aircraft, he failed to order the ship to speed up. Obviously he didn't understand the principle. When the helmsman suggested that they go to twenty four knots, he snarled, "Don't you tell me how to _____ do my _____ job, you _____."

As a result, the incoming aircraft had a more difficult time as they came in too fast. The speed of the ship subtracted from the speed of the aircraft is the approach speed. Because of this lack of judgment, there were some harried moments on the flight deck. Fortunately, disaster was avoided. Finally when Commander Whithouse, the air officer demanded more speed, he gave the order. Commander Whithouse included the incident in his daily report, which alerted the Captain to the problem. It was just one more concern about the new executive officer.

The next morning while off Nova Scotia, a report came over the radio about a developing storm system in the area. The sea state had increased to five, with ten foot swells. Captain Brason issued the following orders: All aircraft in the air are to return to the ship and as many as possible be taken below. The sea was too rough to lash any to the overhead so those left on the flight deck were to have their engine cowlings wrapped in canvas tarps. All aircraft were to be tied down with extra rope and everything else was to be secured. And finally, all hands were to brace for rough sailing.

As the morning progressed, the temperature dropped and the wind continued to increase, which made recovery of the remaining aircraft difficult. One Dauntless failed to return. By noon, most of the ship was secured. By then the swells had increased to twenty feet with fifty mile an hour winds, with gusts even higher. If that wasn't enough, the temperature dropped further and the rain had turned to sleet. The entire task force had reduced speed to eight knots. The destroyers were particularly having a difficult time.

At one point the Bismark, which was off the starboard beam, caught a particularly high swell,

resulting in the cruiser towering above the carrier. As she began riding the downside of the swell, her screws and rudder came out of the water. The Reprisal and United States had an easier time riding out the swells because of their length and greater mass.

Through the afternoon the ferocity of the storm increased. They were caught in the middle of a Nor'easter, a massive low pressure area with characteristics similar to a hurricane. Besides the high winds and heavy sea, navigation was made difficult by poor visibility. Sleet and ice covered everything on deck. The portholes on the bridge were iced over. To compound the problem the radar antennas froze up and stopped rotating.

The storm continued into the night and Sheffield remained on the bridge. Unable to see where they were going, he kept a steady course, praying the everyone else stayed out of his way. He'd hate to cut one of the destroyers in half.

The storm began to subside the next morning. The light of morning revealed four inches of heavy wet snow on the flight deck. The task force, which had been scattered over several hundred square miles, began to regroup. The damage could have been much worse. As it was, one man was lost overboard when he ventured out to secure the tie downs for one of the Wildcats. The plane had worked loose and was tossed by the wind onto the Wildcat parked next to it, damaging both planes. Some of the sensitive electronic equipment would need to be readjusted. In the crew galley several dishes were broken when the cupboard door flung open when the ship rolled in a heavy swell.

The man who lost was Aviation Machinist's Mate 2nd Class Harold Wallenberg. Sheffield had another of those dreaded letters to write. The two damaged aircraft were taken below to the repair hangar for repairs. Sailors using push brooms began sweeping snow off the flight deck, but not before someone had built a snowman. As the task force regrouped and moved out of the storm front, the sea calmed down considerably, the clouds lifted and from time to time the sun came out. Still, there were no flight operations that day either.

On Friday the 19th, a day late, the task force steamed into Placentia Bay and dropped anchor off Argentia, Newfoundland. The bay was full of merchant ships of all kinds; freighters, troopships, and tankers flying the flags of various nations. Among the ships of the gathering convoy were their escorts, which included the auxiliary carrier Bouge and the old destroyers Belknap, George E. Badger, and Osmond Ingram.

While in Placentia Bay the storm damage was repaired and the destroyers of the task force refueled in preparation for sailing the the next day. The task force sailed ahead of the convoy of about fifty merchant ships bound for Liverpool, England. The weather had improved and flying conditions were good. Beginning with the morning patrols and continuing all day until the evening Bat Team patrol was recovered, planes

were constantly in the air.

For the first two days, no enemy U-boats were encountered. As the task force neared the limit of the reach of land based patrol planes, there were plenty of contacts. The task force operated south of the Denmark Strait in an area north of the convoy lane between forty degrees and twenty five degrees west longitude. The Bat Team picked off a U-boat on the night of the 24th. The next day, another was attacked and believed to have been damaged.

The task force patrolled amongst icebergs making their way down into the North Atlantic. At one point, the Reprisal came within five miles of one. It made a tempting target for gunnery practice. Over the next several days, seven more U-boats were attacked by planes from the Reprisal Air Group, three of which were confirmed sunk.

During the patrol, there were more problems with Commander Southridge. He openly questioned the captain's judgment and when the Captain was not on the bridge he would countermand specific orders. In addition, he bullied and intimidated nearly everyone that he crossed paths with. At six foot five inches and well over two hundred pounds, he was a large powerful man, easily the largest man aboard.

Sheffield received complaints daily about his conduct. One day about half way through the patrol he had just cause to confront his executive officer when he reported for duty with alcohol on his breath. Sheffield invited him into his office. He tried to begin with the positive aspects of his conduct, but there wasn't much to go on.

At five foot ten, Sheffield was no match for Commander Southridge's size and strength, if it came to that. He determined that as an officer, he was professional enough to restrain himself when confronted by a superior officer.

He got right to the point. "Look Commander." He wasn't one on a first name basis with him as he was the rest of the senior officers. "I've been getting reports from multiple sources about your conduct, but first I want to ask you, have you been drinking before reporting for duty?"

"Yes sir, but I assure you that I am sober and fit for duty."

"You are aware of the Navy's policy of no alcohol aboard a warship, are you not?"

"Yes sir, but nobody pays any attention to it."

"On this ship we do. I take that policy very seriously. I'm going to send the Master at Arms to your stateroom to confiscate whatever you have. You may have it back when we return to Norfolk. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir."

"Now, about your conduct on the bridge. I have overlooked some things thinking that you were inexperienced and were still learning. But now I realize that it is just your nature. For starters, I will no longer

tolerate any insubordination on your part. If you don't understand something, just come to me in private and we can discuss it, but I will not allow you to openly question my authority. Fortunately the other officers and I have solid working relationship. Such conduct undermines my authority and can cause a serious rift between myself and the officers and crew. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir."

"Now there's the issue of intimidating everyone when I'm not present. What's that about?"

"Sir. They are all a bunch of incompetent _____ and don't know their _____ jobs."

"Is that a fact. We have been together for almost a year now and I think they are the best on any ship in this or any other Navy. Perhaps I'm also too incompetent to see that."

"Permission to speak freely sir."

"Of course, Mr. Southridge."

"I should outrank you sir. After all I did graduate two classes ahead of you. If, I had been handed all of the _____ billets that have been handed to you, I'd be in command and you would be reporting to me."

"Go on."

"From your record, you have moved through the _____ ranks rather quickly without earning them. The only reason you got this command is because your _____ old lady was knocked off by the _____ Japs."

"You're right about one thing Commander. I didn't ask for this or any other job that has been handed to me, as you put it. Do you know how I got them."

"By all due respect sir, by brown nosing."

"Do you really think that?"

"Yes sir, I do. What other reason could there be?"

"I'll tell you what Admiral Halsey once told me. He said that it was because I went to work at whatever was given me and did my best without clamoring for recognition and advancement. He said that's how I got to where I am, and I'd like to believe that. You can't argue with Bull Halsey now can you?"

"No sir. So why hasn't anything come my way?"

"Do you really need me to answer that? Look at yourself and the way you interact with others. From your record, I dare say you've never been able to get along with those who serve beside you. Am I right?"

"Its pretty hard to soar like an eagle when you're stuck with a bunch of _____ turkeys."

"Have you ever considered that you're the turkey?"

The question obviously cut deep.

Before he could react, Sheffield continued, "I really believe that you want to succeed in this man's navy or you wouldn't have stayed with it all these years. Am I right?"

"Yes sir." the sting from the previous question still smarting.

"Your intentions are good, it's just your approach. Do you see what I'm saying?"

"I think so."

"If you want to soar with the eagles the first thing you have to do is recognize those around you as eagles. The second thing is to act like an eagle yourself. You start by treating everyone else as eagles too. You do want to soar with eagles don't you? You'll find no better place than among the officers of this ship."

The gruffness began to soften somewhat as he listened to Captain Brason's counsel. He said it in a non-confrontational manner unlike other conversations like this that he had with other superior officers. In his heart he believed that Captain Brason truly wanted him to reach his full potential. "I don't know where to begin, sir. If it's not too late."

"It's never too late, Commander. There is a book that my wife once recommended to me. We have it in the ship's library and I suggest that you read it, study it, and practice it. It's called 'How to Win Friends and Influence People' by Dale Carnegie published back in thirty-eight."

"By the way, I do appreciate the fact that you haven't been smoking those cigars of yours around me. I've asked you before, and now I'm telling you again to watch your language more carefully. It's unprofessional and demonstrates a lack of intelligence."

"Yes sir. I'll try sir. You're asking me to make a lot of changes. It will take some time but I'll try. No one has ever put it to me the way you have. I respect that, sir. Can we start over again. This really is a great ship."

"I'll tell you what. Take the rest of the day off and go down to the library and borrow that book and get started. Oh and Commander, have your booze ready for when the Master at Arms comes by. If there is nothing else, you're dismissed."

Commander Southridge stood up, saluted, and offered his hand. "Thank you sir."

Sheffield returned the salute and accepted the handshake.

During the rest of the patrol, Commander Southridge did make an effort to get along. He wasn't perfect by any means but he was trying. The most notable change was the respect he demonstrated for his superior officer, not simply because he outranked him but because he was superior to any other officer that he had ever served under.

At the end of the patrol, the air group flew into Keflavik Naval Air Station and the task force put into Hvalfjordur, Iceland on April 3rd to take on fuel and supplies. Hvalfjordur, meaning Whale-fjord, is about eighteen miles long and three miles wide. Both the U.S. Navy and the British had established it as a base for operations in the North Atlantic. During the four-day stay, the crew was granted a well-deserved forty-eight hour liberty in two shifts in Reykjavik.

Because of the success of the Reprisal's patrol, it was determined to have the Bouge and her

escorts operate independently from a convoy rather than as part of it. The Reprisal had set the standard for future carrier based anti-submarine patrols.

The task force got underway again on the morning of the 8th and sailed into the Norwegian Sea, crossing the Arctic Circle on the 10th. Because of combat operations, the fanfare of crossing the Arctic Circle was dispensed with and the crew became members of the Order of Blue Noses. That was fine with Sheffield, who had crossed a lot of lines during his career and didn't particularly want to parade around on deck in his skivvies.

Their mission was to provide protection for the convoys bound to and from Murmansk, Russia and draw out the Kriegsmarine which were operating from Norwegian ports of Narvik and Altafjord In addition to the Graf Zeppelin, other units included the battleships Tirpitz, sister ship of the ill fated Bismark, and Scharnhorst along with the heavy cruiser Lützow, and the light cruiser Nürnberg a number destroyers, and of course, several U-boats.

On this patrol, Admiral Weston kept the task force together unlike his tactics in the South Atlantic. Like in the Bay of Biscay back in November, they would be operating within range of land based bombers flying out of airfields in occupied Norway and the combined fire power of every ship would be crucial during an air attack.

The air group flew standard combat air patrol, anti-submarine patrol and long range searches, a combat air patrol was also provided for the convoy. The Bat Team Alleycats stood guard over the convoy during the late evening and early morning hours. In the northern latitudes that time of year, the days were beginning to get longer.

In addition to the threat of air attack, there was the possibility of encountering heavy units of the Kriegsmarine. The Battlecruiser United States would be an even match with the Tirpitz in fire power, although she had less armor protection. On the other side of the coin she was faster. The United States was fresh from an overhaul and had been modernized in the same fashion as the refits the Tennessee, California, and West Virginia were getting.

Sheffield had little time to reflect on his personal life. It was obvious there would not be a relationship with Paula. He had learned a lot from the time they had together and he was definitely confident in his desire and ability to move on. The more time went by he found his broken heart was mending more and more. Of course he still missed Geannie and the kids, He always would. It was not in a sorrowful way so much as it was a sweet longing.

Again there wasn't much time to think about such things. His mind was occupied with the possible

scenarios of a potential battle. He thought through the strategies and tactics of employing the air group. So much of his energy had been diverted to the issues with Commander Southridge. He was really trying and was slowly making progress, and he still had a way of rubbing people the wrong way.

Sheffield spent most of his time on the bridge or in his emergency cabin. Yeoman Gover would retrieve things he needed from his office for him and stayed on top of the things that needed the Captain's attention. He had a knack for knowing what the Captain's priorities were and only brought things to him that needed his attention at the time. The other things could wait.

On the night of the 14th the convoy was attacked by a dozen Junkers JU 88 bombers, each carrying two torpedoes. They were not expecting any air opposition and were caught off guard when the Alleycats moved in to intercept. This was the first time that they had the opportunity to engage enemy aircraft while prowling the night skies.

During the first pass, each took out one bomber while they were too far from the convoy to drop their torpedoes. The remaining eight bombers took evasive action as they bore in on the convoy. On their second pass, the Alleycats shot down two more. The JU-88s fitted as torpedo bombers had their rear seat machine guns removed and were at a disadvantage when the Alleycats attacked from behind.

As the bombers came within range on the convoy, the formation had broken up, denying them a coordinated attack, nevertheless they pressed on. They were at the drop position when the Alleycats made their next pass, throwing the bombers off their targets. In the process three more fell from the night sky. The three remaining bombers dropped their torpedoes and began their withdraw. The Alleycats pursued and succeeded in shooting down one more, accounting for ten of the twelve German bombers. None of the six torpedoes dropped found their mark. The Alleycats triumphantly returned to the ship with the rest of the Bat Team.

Once the Bat Team was aboard they were quickly serviced and prepared for launch with the rest of the air group for a predawn raid on the Luftwaffe airfields of Northern Norway. The task force continued on a southerly course, right into the wind. At two thirty in the morning, the task force was seventy miles off the northern coast and Sheffield gave the order to launch. By three o'clock the deck was clear. With the strike group on their way, the task force reversed course and began moving away from the coast.

A half an hour before sunrise, the air group commenced their attacks on the various airfields in the area. Again, as in Bordeaux, they achieved complete surprise. The German response was unorganized and virtually nonexistent. A good number of aircraft were destroyed on the ground and some hangars and other facilities were destroyed or damaged.

The air group began coming aboard around a quarter to six. All but one Avenger from the Seahawks

returned. It was last seen going down in a wooded area. On a subsequent pass by the wingman of the downed plane, two survivors were seen near the aircraft with a squad of German soldiers moving in.

All morning and into the afternoon, the task force sailed further north, out of range. Reeling from their losses, the German's didn't mount another air attack on the convoys for several days. With the immediate threat of air attacks alleviated, there was still the constant threat from U-boats. Two days later, one was spotted on the surface closing in on the convoy. A trio of Avengers were dispatched and were credited with sinking it. Another U-boat stalking the task force was sunk by the Gordon the next day.

The Luftwaffe didn't attempt another night attack until the next convoy was passing by on the 19th. This attack was made by eighteen JU-88s, more than the Alleycats could handle. After claiming six bombers, they had to disengage over the convoy to avoid friendly fire from the escorts who couldn't see who they were shooting at. That night five ships of the convoy were torpedoed and sunk, including a British destroyer at the cost of three more bombers.

After that convoy was safely out of range, the task force again moved south in an attempt to draw out the Kriegsmarine. On the night of the 20th, the task force itself came under attack by nine JU-88s. The Alleycats claimed three more before the ships of the task force opened fire. Captain Brason ordered his gunners not to fire. Doing so would have lit up the carrier for the enemy bombers to home in on. The task force was credited with downing four others. The remaining bombers were driven off without pressing their attack.

The next day, the long range search revealed that the Germans had not taken the bait and the task force withdrew to the west. Once out of range they changed course to the south and arrived at British Navy base at Scapa Flow in Scotland's Orkney Islands on the 22nd to resupply. The crew were given twenty four hour liberty passes to go ashore in limited numbers as not to overwhelm the small town of Kirkwall. Sheffield got off the ship for an afternoon just to put solid ground under his feet for while. The task force remained through the 28th, which included Easter Sunday.

Two days later on the 30th the task force had recrossed the Arctic Circle and continued north. On the 2nd of May they took up station in the waters east of Jan Mayen Island and began providing cover for another Russia bound convoy. On the 4th a distress call was received from the westbound convoy stating that they were under attack from Stuka dive bombers. Given the position of the convoy, they could have only come from one place; the Graf Zeppelin had finally come out of hiding.

Admiral Weston led the task force east to close the gap, but that day they were unable provide any assistance. As a result, ten merchant ships were sunk and several more were damaged. The next morning the Reprisal was in range and sent eight Wildcats to provide air cover. The long range search was sent out with hopes of finding the Graf Zeppelin.

At mid morning, the convoy was attacked by a dozen Stukas and eight Me 109s. The Wildcats engaged the Stukas, shooting down three before they were engaged by the Messerschmidts. During the ensuing dogfight, two Wildcats and three Me 109s were shot down. In the meantime the remaining Stukas got through to sink six more merchant ships and damaged nine others.

Around noon, the long range search reported sighting the Garf Zeppelin one hundred and eighty miles from the Reprisal's current location. About the same time, Radar picked up contact sixty miles out. A pair of Wildcats were sent to investigate and found it to be a Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condor long range reconnaissance plane. They easily took care of it, but not before it radioed that it was under attack by American carrier based fighters, enough to alert the Germans that the Reprisal was nearby.

With word of the sighting of the Garf Zeppelin, Capitan Brason had the Reprisal turn into the wind and began launching the strike group which consisted of eighteen Dauntlesses, six Avengers, and eight Wildcats. Once the strike group was away, the relief anti-submarine patrol and combat air patrol were sent aloft. With the flight deck clear, the morning patrols were brought aboard. Assuming their presence was known, four more Wildcats were readied and held in standby to supplement the combat air patrol on station.

An hour and forty five minutes after the strike group set out, they came across what the Reprisal had been sent to find. The Garf Zeppelin was escorted by two cruisers and five destroyers. From the bridge Sheffield listened to the radio chatter as the strike group went to work. First was the excitement from the fighter pilots as they engaged the Me 109s defending the enemy carrier. In the process it sounded as if a half a dozen Messerschmidts had been shot down. On the other hand, it appeared that four Wildcats had been lost.

Next over the radio was heard the calm voice of Lieutenant Commander "Snoops" Elder, the commander of Bombing Eleven as he gave the word to push over and commence their dives. It sounded as if the anti aircraft fire was moderately heavy but somewhat inaccurate. An unidentified voice called out emphatically, "I'm hit! I'm hit!"

Evidently Commander Elder's bombs found their target as someone called out, "You got him Skipper!" For everyone on the bridge of the Reprisal it was more like listening to the play by play account of a baseball game on the radio. Everything happened so fast that it was difficult to figure out exactly what was a happening. It sounded like there were two more hits on the carrier and possibly one on an accompanying cruiser. In the process, it became obvious that at least one more Dauntless was lost. The last to engage were the Avengers, with one pilot claiming a hit. In a few short minutes it was all over. Commander Elder was heard gathering the strike group back together for the flight home. Then directly addressing whoever was listing aboard the ship, "Enemy carrier dead in the water, on fire, and listing."

While operating about sixty miles southeast of Bear Island on Wednesday May 5, 1943 the Reprisal was awaiting the return of the strike group. Radar on the ships of the task force kept picking up surface contacts just over the horizon. Aerial surveillance identified them as a pair of large icebergs, not the Tirpitz and Scharnhorst as first suspected.

But when radar reported the approach of a large number of aircraft sixty five miles to the southeast, there was no mistake as to what they were. Captain Brason calmly announced, "Get those four Wildcats in the air." A moment later, their engines sputtered to life and soon the first one was racing down the deck and into the air, followed one at a time by the other three. As they formed up with those already in the air, the fighter director gave the bearing, course, speed, and altitude of the incoming attack.

His next orders were for the ship to increase to full speed and to sound general quarters. The men down in the boiler rooms opened up the fuel valves. As the boilers heated up, more steam was produced, turning the screws at their maximum. As the incoming attack drew closer, the ship surged ahead to thirty two knots. The rest of the ships in the task force increased speed to keep up and stay out of her way.

Within ninety seconds of the order to sound general quarters, all stations were manned and ready, whether it was the numerous gun mounts that ringed the ship, the several damage control parties and medic stations throughout the ship, the engineering spaces, or whatever it was. Each man had a post and a duty to fulfill. They all knew their jobs and were ready. This was only the second time since the ship had been commissioned that she faced such a threat. The first time was in the Bay of Biscay back in November. That time they had got lucky. No one knew what fate held for this day. They were about to get what the air group had just given the Garf Zeppelin.

As the combat air patrol engaged the enemy aircraft, again the speaker on the bridge gave the play by play as the twelve Wildcats tore into the eight Me 109s, eighteen Ju 87 Stukas and the six B5N Kates with German markings. On the initial encounter the Wildcats broke through the Messerschmidts, shooting down three at the cost of one Wildcat. In the time that it took the Me 109s to regroup, the Wildcats took care of five Stukas. Captain Brason and others watching through binoculars from the bridge could see fiery trails streaking into the icy waters of the Norwegian Sea. If they were lucky enough to survive having their plane shot down, they wouldn't last long in the frigid water.

As the leading elements of the attack came within range, the five inch guns of the ships of the task force opened fire, each with a deafening crack. The chorus of guns belching fire, smoke, and projectiles immediately reached a sustained crescendo. Black puffs of flak erupted in the sky ahead of the advancing planes. The radar controlled gun directors did their job with accuracy as more planes fell from the sky.

As those who survived the onslaught of the Wildcats and the shrapnel of exploding anti-aircraft shells had to face the fire from the vast number of forty millimeter gun barrels trained on them, each spewing one

hundred twenty rounds per minute. More planes fell from the sky.

As the remaining ten Stukas pushed over into their seventy degree dives and came screaming down, as a last ditch effort the twenty millimeter gunners sprayed their paths with lead and incendiary bullets knocking down two more. Eight reached the release point.

Captain Brason watching them come, waited for the moment just before he estimated that they would release their bombs to give the order for evasive maneuvers. The giant ship began to twist and turn through the water like a rattlesnake slithering through the sand.

The first bomb fell into the water and exploded in the ships wake, sending water high into the air. Seconds later, the second bomb erupted in the water ten yards abeam the bridge, showering the superstructure and raining down in the outboard wing bridge. The detonation jarred the ship's hull. The third bomb fell into the sea twenty yards ahead of the ship off the port bow. The fourth Stuka took a direct hit before it could drop its bomb and plunged into the sea off the starboard quarter.

The planes came so fast and Sheffield attempted to evade each one. In avoiding the stricken plane, the turn proved advantageous to the next plane. He watched as the five hundred fifty one pound armor-piercing bomb detached from the underbelly of the fifth Stuka at fifteen hundred feet. He ordered another quick turn back to starboard. It was too little too late.

The bomb smashed through the flight deck on the centerline just seventy five feet forward of the bridge. It continued through the armor plating of the hangar deck, through the officers galley on the second deck, and exploded in the officers quarters on the third deck. The force of the blast shot upwards through the path of the projectile, starting fires on the hangar, second, and third decks.

With thick smoke pouring through the hole in the flight deck, Captain Brason kept his focus on the remaining five planes still diving out of the sky. Over the next thirty seconds, the sixth Stuka exploded three thousand feet above the surface and pieces and chunks fell into the sea. Four more bombs went off in the water around the carrier.

As the last Ju 87 leveled off, the six Kates were approaching, three on either forward beam in a classic pincher torpedo attack. The three to port were riddled by four Wildcats and never made it to the drop position. Those to starboard flew on through a hail of anti-aircraft fire. First one, then the second succumbed to the intense accuracy of the carrier's gunners as well as those on the Bismark off the starboard quarter. The third pressed on and dropped its torpedo and made its escape.

The torpedo track sped toward the carrier at forty knots. Had the ship remained on course the torpedo would hit amidships. Captain Brason ordered one final evasive maneuver in a hard turn to port. At high speed, the rudder responded quickly and the carrier heeled into the sharp, sudden turn. As the bow swung around the ship was on a parallel course with the torpedo, which sped by close aboard to starboard.

The surviving German aircraft retired from the battle and reformed for the flight back to the Garf Zeppelin, not knowing that there may not be a place to land except for in the sea.

Meanwhile the battle to fight fires on three decks was being fought. On the hangar deck, the forward dividing curtain was lowered to cordon off forward hangar bay. In addition, all of the openings to the outside were also closed in an attempt to starve the fire of oxygen. The damage control team was able to quickly contain that fire.

The report was received on the bridge that the hangar fire was under control. The damage control party on the flight deck had planking brought up from below and began patching the ten foot hole in the flight deck. The damage control party on the third deck reported that fires in the officer cabins had been contained and work was progressing on bringing it under control.

There was no word from the damage control party on the second deck. Captain Brason called down to Commander Southridge at his battle station and directed that he go find out what was happening with the fire in the area around the officers wardroom. Commander Southridge had made some clear progress with his behavior over the ensuing weeks. He went out of his way to stand behind Captain Brason in a dramatic change of heart. He was still arrogant and rubbed people the wrong way, but he finally got the idea of what it meant to be part of a team.

When Commander Southridge arrived at the officers wardroom, he found the damage control party trapped inside with no way to escape. The end of a girder from the overhead had crashed to the deck at an angle after they had gone in to fight the fire. Not only had it trapped them but it also choked off the fire hose. The fire was just about to engulf them when the Commander arrived.

Without hesitation Commander Southridge stooped down and hefted the searing hot girder onto his shoulder. With a loud grunt he stood up, raising the girder. His massive body held it up long enough for the fifteen men of the damage control party to make their escape. Once the last one made it out, his strength gave out and he collapsed with the girder pinning him down as the fire engulfed him.

When he didn't report back to the bridge, Sheffield called down on the intercom to see what was going on. A member of the damage control party answered the intercom and related the ultimate tale of bravery and heroism in which Commander Southridge given his life.

Stunned, Captain Brason didn't have time to reflect on what had just happened. The planes of the strike group were retuning from their attack on the Garf Zeppelin and with a gapping hole in the flight deck, they had no place land, except for in the icy water.

Smoke was no longer pouring from the hole as it was now venting through the openings on the sides of the forward hangar bay. The carpenters were patching it as quickly as they could. The beams had to be cut to length and fitted into place. At the same time the machinists were welding support structures in place.

All the time, the attack group circled the carrier in a holding pattern, their fuel gages dropping lower by the minute.

Once the damage control party had been rescued by Commander Southridge, they were able to resume fighting the fire in the officers wardroom and contain it. The battle continued long after the attack was over. Fortunately the damage didn't put the ship in danger of sinking.

Finally, the flight deck was open for flight operations and the air group began coming aboard. The last plane to land only had a half a gallon of gas in its tank. Five Wildcats, three Dauntlesses, and one Avenger failed to return from the attack on the Graf Zeppelin. Their crews were unaccounted for and presumed lost. In addition, three Wildcats from the combat air patrol were also lost.

When fires were finally all put out, they were finally able to access the damage. The hole in the flight deck had a temporary patch that allowed it to be used. The burned out forward hangar bay was unusable with a large hole in it. The upward force of the blast had bucked the deck upward. In addition to the planes lost in action, half of the spare Wildcats and Dauntlesses which had been stored in the forward overhead were destroyed.

The officers wardroom had been completely gutted. The machinery for the catapult on the hangar deck which was housed in an adjacent compartment was destroyed. The catapult was not that practical and hadn't been used since ferrying the B-25s to North Africa. The damage to the third deck where the bomb detonated was also quite extensive. Over two dozen officer cabins that housed two men each were completely demolished.

The toll among the crew was twenty seven dead, including Commander Southridge, and forty one wounded. Their injuries were mostly from being hit by flying shrapnel and burns. Of the injured, five men were in serious condition. Three of which were not expected to live. In addition, nine pilots and nine airmen were also unaccounted for and presumed dead.

That afternoon, the Reprisal was detached from the task force along with the Syracuse and the destroyers Gordon and Nash with orders to return to Scapa Flow. Meanwhile, the United States along with the Alameda and Bismark and the destroyers Watson, Archer, and Kirkman set out to look for the Tirpitz and the Scharnhorst which were believed to be at sea.

As the Reprisal began her return to Scapa Flow, Captain Brason maintained a combat air patrol above the ship as they were still in range of land based bombers from Norway. The anti-submarine patrol was maintained as well. Once the sun went down, the Bat Team assumed their patrols.

The officers who were displaced by having their quarters destroyed were put up in temporary quarters in the repair hangar, just like the survivors from the Yellowstone and the German POWs from the

Edelweiss had been. All of the officers had to use the enlisted men's mess hall until their ward room could be restored.

The next day was the solemn occasion of burring the dead. Two more men died from their wounds overnight. Captain Brason had the heart wrenching responsibility of writing twenty nine letters. The most difficult was the one for Commander Southridge. He had come so far since reporting aboard the ship and began to show promise. As he went through his personal effects he got a little better feel for the man who was so misunderstood. The only next of kin that Commander Southridge had was an estranged daughter who was a student at the University of Michigan.

In his letter to her, he told her that deep down he had a spark of good and decency in him. He mentioned his first encounter with him and how he had began to change. He told her that she should be proud that he died to save others. He put the letter with his personal effects, which included several pictures of her through the years.

On the 8th the Reprisal and her escorts returned to Scapa Flow where she remained over night. The next day, they set out for Liverpool. On the afternoon of the 10th the Reprisal steamed up the mouth of the River Mersey and docked at the Birkenhead Shipyard across the river from Liverpool. The first thing the next morning workmen came aboard and began making temporary repairs, which mainly dealt with the making the hangar usable again.

Sheffield took the opportunity to leave the ship and rode a train the seventy miles to Sheffield, England, the ancestral home of his mother's family. His great grandfather, Peter Sheffield left Sheffield in 1830 when he was a young man. He and his bride boarded a ship in Liverpool and sailed to America and settled in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

Sheffield visited the parish cemetery and found several generations of the family buried there. It wasn't hard to track down some distant cousins. A second cousin of his mother was particularly happy to see him. She was the self proclaimed genealogist of the Sheffield family and had devoted her life to gathering the family history. Sheffield told her what he knew of his great grandfather and his family in Virginia. In return she gave him a hand copied chart detailing the family line back to 1587. He wished he could have spent more time there but he had to return to the ship.

A British reconnaissance plane reported to have seen the Graf Zeppelin berthed at a back-water wharf in the Parnitz River, two miles from Stettin, Germany. Obviously, it didn't sink but the photographs showed that it was heavily damaged and would be out of action for a long, long time, if it was ever to be repaired and returned to service.

On the morning of the 17th the Reprisal was pulled away from the dock and got under way for the return trip to Scapa Flow and arrived there the next day. When she dropped anchor, the rest of the task

force was waiting there. They never did find the Tirpitz and Scharnhorst.

On the 19th they were joined by the Battleships South Dakota and Alabama and the destroyers Ellyson, Emmons, Rodman, Macomb, and Fitch which had come to relieve them. They brought with them orders for the task force to set sail the following day for Norfolk. In addition to new orders, they brought with them several bags of mail. Once it was brought aboard and sorted, Yeoman Gover brought the Captain his mail which included a long anticipated letter from Ramona.

April 28, 1943

Dear Sheffield

It has been a longtime since I have written and I apologize. I received your last letter some time ago. I have been meaning to write but there has been a lot going on around here. There was a major shake up in the organization of the hospital and I was placed in charge of training new nurses and had to come up with the training material. I spent nearly every waking hour for six weeks putting it together. Then I had to train the instructors.

I'm sure you know what all is involved with something like that. I remember when you came up with the training plan for Admiral Halsey. I'd come over to see Geannie and you'd be working on it at home.

Still that is a poor excuse for not writing. Just when I thought I was going to get a break, something that I have had in the works for sometime now came to fruition. I only hinted to it in my last letter because I didn't want to say anything until I knew whether or not it would work out and now it has.

Since you're not coming this way anytime soon, if I'm going to collect on that date that you have promised me, I figured out a way to get to you. Sometime back I put in for a transfer after all the years that I have been here, and it just came through!

I have just been promoted to Commander, the highest a rank a girl can get in this man's navy, and I will be the new Director of Nursing at Bethesda Naval Hospital, just outside of Washington D.C. I have two weeks to wrap things up here and then I have six weeks to report for duty; two weeks to get moved and a thirty day leave.

I think I'll try to sell most of my belongings so I don't have to worry moving it. I think I'll keep my beach house, at least for now anyway. I'll fly to the west coast on the 10th of May and then onto Washington. First I'll find a place to live and set up housekeeping. Then I don't know what I'll do with the

rest of my time. I'll tell you this, I can sure use a break.

That's only a little over 200 miles from Norfolk. If you happen to be in port, I'll be sure to come and see you. Maybe we can finally have that date. I haven't heard anything about your whereabouts lately.

So how are things with this Paula you were telling me about? It sounds like you're not sure about where it might be going. I believe I'm ready to let my mystery man know how I feel about him after all of these years. I'm not sure how he will take it. Wish me luck.

As soon as I get settled, I'll let you know where I am. If you were to write back to me before then, send it care of Bethesda Naval Hospital.

Love Ramona.

* * * * *

The storm encountered off Nova Scotia is fictional

The convoy that sailed from Placentia Bay on the 20th was actual and did comprise of the Bouge and her escorts.

The story behind the battlecruiser United States is the same as that of the Congress referred to in the Raid on Bordeaux.

The German ships Tirpitz, Scharnhorst, Lützow, and Nürnberg along with a number destroyers and U-boats were actually operating from Narvik and Altafjord at the time.

There were no Arctic convoys between March and August of 1943. The convoys referred to are all fictional.

The construction of the German aircraft carrier Graf Zeppelin was on and off again and finally canceled for good on February 2, 1943 when she was 95% complete. In April 1943 *Graf Zeppelin* was towed to Gotenhafen, then to the roadstead at Swinemünde and finally berthed at a back-water wharf in the Parnitz River, two miles from Szczecin (then known as Stettin). On 25 April 1945, just as the Russians entered Stettin, she was scuttled in shallow water to prevent her from being captured by the Soviets.

The Battleships South Dakota and Alabama and the destroyers Ellyson, Emmons, Rodman, Macomb, and Fitch actually did arrive in Scapa Flow on May 19, 1943.