

Chapter XXVI

Three Little Words

June 6, 1943 – June 27, 1943

When they got back to Norfolk, Ramona checked into a hotel right next to the navy yard. It was old and kind of run down, but clean. Most importantly it was close to Sheffield. Each morning they met at the Yardarm for breakfast. Most evenings were spent together and occasionally he was able to get away for an afternoon or even an entire day while the repairs were made to the ship.

The time together was everything that Ramona had hoped it would be. In the time remaining after the trip to Roanoke, she sensed that Sheffield was warming up to the possibility of falling in love with her. As for Sheffield, he found that the love he had for her as a friend had deepened to more than that as had the tenderness and affection; it just came naturally and didn't have to be forced. He found a sense of devotion to Ramona developing although he was not ready to make a commitment to her yet. His feelings for her and their relationship still needed to mature. Thankfully, she was patient enough to allow that to happen without any pressure.

It was interesting that as his feelings for Ramona deepened that it did not change his love for Geannie. He discovered that he loved Ramona differently and for different reasons. Walt was right. One night before going to bed, he took Ramona's picture from the coffee table and placed it on his nightstand next to Geannie's. An arrangement that he was sure both women would be satisfied with.

The first half of the crew, including Yeoman Gover and Seaman Reggie Jackson, had returned from their two week leaves and the other half left. The repairs progressed and were ahead of schedule, mainly because on the voyage home the damaged areas had been cut away. One major change produced by the repairs was an enlarged officers galley. The damaged hangar catapult was removed altogether and the space on the second deck that housed the catapult equipment was incorporated into the wardroom.

One day Admiral Weston came aboard to meet with Captain Brason and the commanders of the other ships in the task force. The meeting was held in the Captain's ready room on Monday the 14th. The Admiral presented all of the commanders with their next orders. They were to sail on the 28th for the Mediterranean to provide air cover for naval units engaged in the invasion of Sicily.

The operation was scheduled to begin on July 10th. The Army Air Force had the assignment to carry out preliminary bombing missions before the invasion and would be heavily involved in the campaign. They couldn't guarantee that any resources would be made available to provide cover for the Navy offshore. That would be up to the Reprisal Air Group. In addition, they were to be available to assist offshore bombardments and ground support when called upon, although the Army Air Force was responsible for the latter. After all these years, the Army still didn't trust the Navy when it came to aviation.

Admiral Weston's task force was also to keep an eye out for the Regia Marina in the unlikely event that what was left of the Italian Navy attempted to intervene. The Army Air Force had also boasted that they could take care of them. Everyone knew that they couldn't hit a fast moving ship from fifteen thousand feet.

The task force would be the same, except the United States would not be included. Admiral Weston would be flying his flag on the Bismark. Rejoining the task force would be the Percival with her new bow. Again, the nature of their orders were confidential and only those who needed to know were to be informed, the rest would be told after sailing.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the other commanders were dismissed. The Admiral wanted to know that the Reprisal would be ready to sail. Captain Brason informed him that the repairs were complete and awaiting a final inspection. He assured him that the ship would be ready to sail and gave him a tour of the repairs. He also briefed him on the status of the air group which had been hard at work while the ship was in the yard. The Bat Team also continued to perfect their skills at night attack. Admiral Weston was pleased as he left the ship, confident that it would be vital to the success of the upcoming mission.

That evening, Sheffield met Ramona for dinner and an evening out. He sensed a need to confide in her the nature of his orders. If their relationship was to develop into what he hoped it would become, he felt that she should know.

She received the news with a sense of foreboding. Now that she had finally been able to tell him how she had felt after all of those years and they had become involved, she was afraid that something dreadful would happen to him. She still felt cursed but tried to hide her anxiety at the thought of losing him too. Sheffield still didn't know her well enough to read her face and sense her emotions.

The next day was another busy day for Sheffield. After meeting Ramona for breakfast, he had to hurry back to the ship for a meeting of the senior officers. He wanted to make sure everything was ready for the top to bottom inspection that was to be conducted that day.

When he returned from breakfast, he found that Commander Hank Terry, the new executive officer had reported aboard. He had been the air officer on the Ranger which had also recently began training in night operations out of Argentia, Newfoundland. At last, someone who knew his way around a carrier. There wasn't much time to get acquainted but he seemed to fit right in.

After all of the reports had been given, everything was ready for the inspection. Everything was also ready for the barbecue and banquet on Saturday. Immediately following the briefing, Commander Terry accompanied the Captain to the quarterdeck to await the arrival of the inspection team. For Commander Terry, it was the perfect introduction to the ship. He and Sheffield hit it off right from the start. There would be plenty of time to get acquainted later.

At the end of the day, the ship passed the inspection and was cleared to leave the navy yard the

next day and return to her berth at Pier 7. That evening Sheffield met Ramona for dinner and spent the evening with her.

Once the ship was back at the base, Ramona returned to the Tazwell for the last few days where she could be close to Sheffield. That afternoon he arranged to give her a tour his ship that was such a part of his life. Dressed as Commander Katmuth she was welcomed by the Captain on the quarterdeck. Instead of a hug and kiss, she greeted him with a salute, which he returned – with a wink.

He offered her his arm and began the tour. At times they were seen strolling the passageways hand in hand. By then, it was no secret that the Captain had a lady friend. Of course, no one dare say anything in their presence, but it gave the men something to talk about after the couple had moved on. She was particularly interested in her visit to the sickbay where Commander Bashor gave her a personal tour.

After seeing everything there was to see, including the bridge, they concluded the tour with dinner in his wardroom. Reggie had made sure everything was perfect. He even found two tall candlesticks somewhere that were arranged in the center of the table. After dinner Sheffield showed her his office and stateroom. She noticed that her portrait was next to his bed on the nightstand next to Geannie's. That told her a lot. After visiting for a little while, he escorted her to the quarterdeck and down the gangplank to her car.

On Thursday, work began in earnest to begin loading the ship in preparation to sail. As usual, he met Ramona for breakfast. Their time together was quickly running out. Sheffield wished that he had more time to spend with her in what remained; there was always the evenings. On Friday evening he invited Commander Terry and his wife, Teri, to join he and Ramona for dinner. This was to be a social affair, no uniforms, no rank, just a chance to get acquainted and to treat them to dinner at a nice restaurant.

Sheffield had Yeoman Gover drive him to the Tazwell to pick up Ramona. She looked great and he complimented her on how she looked. After being dropped off at the restaurant, he dismissed Morris for the rest of the evening. Once seated at their table, they didn't have to wait long for Hank and his wife. After a round of introductions, the two couples picked up their menus and decided what to have. The waiter was prompt to take their orders.

While waiting for their meal, Ramona started the conversation, "So Teri, its interesting that your name is Teri Terry. I bet you get a lot of comments about that."

"After nearly twenty years, I'm used to it." She answered.

Hank added, "There's a story behind how she came by that name. I seldom share it with anyone, but I'll share it with you. I feel that I can trust you to keep it to yourselves."

"Oh absolutely." Sheffield assured him. Ramona nodded in a agreement.

Their orders were brought to their table and over dinner, Hank shared his unusual story. He began,

“Terry is short for Terajima. You see I was born Heinrich James Terajima. Both sets of my father's grandparents immigrated to California in eighteen sixty nine following the restoration of imperial rule to Japan, a year after the shoguns were forced from power. Both of his parents were actually born in the United States and grew up as Americans, speaking only English.

“On the other hand my mother's family had settled in Germantown, Pennsylvania in the sixteen eighties, where they lived until my grandfather moved his family out to California around the turn of the century. My parents went to school together and, much to the dismay of both of their families, they fell in love. To avoid the conflict, they eloped to Nevada where the marriage laws were much more relaxed. The relationship with their families were strained at first. Then I came along and my mother named me Heinrich after her father. That softened them quite a bit. My father's family finally came around as well.

“When I was born, I favored my mothers side of the family in my appearance. About the only Japanese features I ended up with was a dark completion and slightly slanted eyes, which happen to be blue, if you hadn't noticed. Growing up half German and half Japanese presented its challenges, even though I was all American, with absolutely no loyalty to the lands of my ancestors. After I turned eighteen I changed my name to Henry, which is English for Heinrick, and shortened Terajima to Terry. I was always known as Hank anyway. Ever since I did that, no one has known the difference.”

“Fascinating. No wonder you want to keep that to yourself. Ramona here is half German and quarter Indian. I don't know what the other quarter is. Do you Ramona?”

“Not really. All I know is that my grandfather's name was William Douglas.”

“So,” Sheffield asked, “How did you get into flying?”

“I'd always been fascinated by flying so while in college, I took flying lessons and got my pilots licenses. After I graduated, I heard of a start up company in Boise, Idaho called Varney Air Lines who had a contract with the US Post Office to carry air mail. I landed a job with them and moved to Idaho and began flying Stearmans around the Pacific Northwest. It was a lot like the pony express of the old west.

“I met Teri in the post office in Spokane, Washington where she worked as a postal clerk to put herself through school. We were married about a year and half later. During those early years, we had four kids; two boys and two girls.

“Since then the company went through several mergers and ended up as United Airlines. Over the years I went from flying the mail in a Stearman to flying passengers in a twin engined Douglas DC-3s.

“Immediately after Pearl Harbor, the navy created the Naval Air Transport Service and needed pilots with experience in DC-3s. I wanted to do my part in the war so I volunteered. Fortunately for me, they didn't bother to delve into my ancestry and background that much. There's no telling what would have happened if they found out that I was half Japanese. As it was, my parents were forced to leave California and moved to

a relocation center in Southern Idaho. At least it is close to Teri who still maintains our home in Boise. We have to be careful that no one connects the dots.”

“So you still live in Idaho, Teri?” Ramona asked.

“Yes. Before reporting for duty here, he got to come home for a couple of weeks. When he had to leave, I came with him and will go back after the ship sails.”

“Where are you staying?” Ramona asked.

“In a hotel.”

“Me too.” Ramona answered. “I’m sorry Hank, please continue with your story. Its quite fascinating.”

“So because of my years of experience, I was commissioned as Lieutenant Commander, with wings, and went straight to work flying out of Alameda. There were only a handful of planes available and they were organized into a squadron and again because of my background and experience, I was the squadron commander.

“On one of my first flights was an officer on Admiral Halsey’s staff flying across country with the bodies of his wife and two kids who were killed at Pearl.”

Sheffield and Ramona looked at each other in disbelief and then back at Hank.

“What? That was me.” Sheffield said.

Hank didn’t know what to say, except for, “That was you?”

“I’ll tell you my story when you’re through with yours.”

“Yeah, I’ve got to hear this.” Hank continued, “Anyway, after about six months, the Navy wanted me to become a ‘real naval officer’ so I was sent to Officers Training School for six weeks and then another six months of seamanship and navigation training. After that I was assigned to the air department on the Ranger, As things turned out, I eventually became the Air Officer and a few months later was promoted to Commander. And now here I am.”

By then they were most of the way through dinner. Sheffield then told a condensed version of his own story which included his relationship with Ramona during dessert. Later Hank and Teri took them to their hotel where they visited into the evening and got better acquainted. By the time they drove Ramona back to her hotel and Sheffield back to the ship, the two men had bonded into a trusting working relationship and forged the beginning of a good friendship, much like his relationship with Mace.

While Sheffield was occupied, Ramona had plenty of time on her hands. Sometimes she drove around exploring the area. She spent a day at Sandbridge Beach, enjoying the ocean. Sandbridge Beach is a four and half mile stretch of beach at the southern end of the city of Virginia Beach, situated much like the the Outer Banks of North Carolina, with the Back Bay of the Currituck Sound to the west and the Atlantic Ocean to the east. It was relative remote and a therefore quite laid back compared to the Virginia Beach

oceanfront. It made her miss Hawaii and her beach house.

Some of her time was spent window shopping, taking advantage of some bargains that she ran across. Since Teri was in the same situation, the two of them got together to do things. In the process they got to know each other as well. But each morning began with breakfast with Sheffield and each evening was spent with him. Once in a while Sheffield was able to get away for an afternoon and on a couple of occasions for the entire day.

Saturday, June 19th was the enlisted mens barbecue, held on the flight deck. A USO troop of six women were brought aboard for the entertainment, the same women who had entertained them back in October before their first war cruise.

Captain Brason talked to the crew, recapping their accomplishments in the year since the ship had been commissioned and encouraged them to keep up the good work because much would be expected on the upcoming cruise. He paid tribute to those who were lost and mentioned the sobering reality that more were likely to be lost before they returned. Ending on a positive note, he reminded them what it was all about and assured them that the struggle was definitely worth it.

After his remarks he mingled freely with the men. Many of them he now knew by name, others he recognized. They all admired and respected him for his leadership style and fairness. The vast majority of them were fiercely loyal to him and would follow him anywhere he lead them and do whatever he asked of them, even if it was the last thing they would ever do.

Rather than watch the show from the wing bridge as he had done before, he stayed with the men and had a front row seat for the show. This being their return performance, the women presented a different show than before. At one point one of them came down off the stage and took the Capitan by the hand and led him up on the stage, sitting him in a chair in the middle of the stage. As they sang, they danced around him, taking their turn sitting on his lap. One of the women even removed his hat and kissed him on the top of his bald head, leaving a bright red lipstick mark. The number ended with a woman on each knee, one on each arm, and the other two behind him, one of them with her arms draped around his neck.

Sheffield was a good sport about it and hammed it up, much to the delight of the men who roared their approval at the conclusion.

During the afternoon, he got ready for the Officers Appreciation Banquet. Dressed in his formal dinner uniform consisting of black trousers, white shirt and bow tie, and white waist coat, he had Yoeman Gover drive him to Tazwell to pick up Ramona. He arrived just a little early and she wasn't quite ready. She answered the door wearing a white blouse and tie over her slip and white rayon hose. She had spent the afternoon at he beauty parlor getting her hair done along with some extra pampering that she treated herself to.

After inviting him, they chatted while she slipped on her white a-line skirt and sat down on the bed to put on her white pumps. Sheffield helped her on with her white single-breasted jacket with two patch style breast pockets and two bellow type side pockets, her rank on the shoulders. She looked herself over in the mirror as she closed the jacket with the three golden Navy buttons.

Sheffield produced a gardenia corsage which he pinned to her collar opposite of her ribbons. He knew how much she loved gardenias. Likewise she pinned a boutonniere to his uniform. To finish her uniform, she slipped on a pair of white gloves and put on her white visorless service cap. She looked especially lovely, a fact which Sheffield acknowledged. Before going out the door she grabbed her purse.

When the Captain's staff car pulled up in front of the Peacock Ballroom in Virginia Beach, Yeoman Gover got out of the car and opened the door for the captain. He in turn offered his hand to his date and helped her out of the back seat, where she had been seated beside him. Upon entering the building they went to the banquet room where the event was to be held. Their arrival was timed to be after everyone else was present and in their seats. The arrival of the captain was announced and everyone stood, the officers at attention. Many of them were accompanied by their wives or dates, a few attended stag. Being a formal affair, Commander Terry lead out as all of the officers saluted in unison. Captain Brason returned the salute and asked that everyone be seated. He and Ramona took their seats at the head table next to Commander and Mrs. Terry.

Commander Bashor, the master of ceremonies, paid tribute to the Captain and acknowledge his companion, Commander Ramona Katmuth. Captain Brason then addressed the officers in a similar manner as he had the crew earlier in the afternoon. Following his remarks, Commander Bashor proposed a toast with a speech of appreciation on behalf of all of the officers. They too held him in high regard and he knew many of them personally. Finally, Lieutenant Fellows said Grace and dinner was served.

After dinner, the officers mingled and visited informally before being invited into the main ballroom where the dancing was already in progress. One of the lesser known orchestras was playing, but they did an excellent job of performing the popular dance numbers. Sheffield and Ramona danced most of the evening, except for a few mixers. Everyone, including the civilians, seemed reluctant to cut in on the Navy Captain dancing with the Commander. Sheffield found Ramona to be a very good dancer and light on her feet. Being eight inches shorter than him, the top of her head came to his chin.

At times they danced close and barely moved their feet as they gently swayed in place to the music. Other times they cut loose when the tempo demanded. Knowing that this was their last evening together, they made the most of it. At one point they went outside and wandered down the boardwalk until they found a park bench looking out over the ocean. For a while they simply listened to the surf.

“Just look at that moon.” Ramona remarked. “Its so full tonight, except for along the the one side.”

She pointed with her finger as if she could reach out and touch it.

Actually, last night was the full moon.” Sheffield said matter of factually.

“Look how it shimmers across the ocean, leaving a path of light right to us.”

“I arranged for that just for you. I love the way your hair shines in the moonlight.”

“And I arranged that just for you.”

The moonlight got in their eyes as they gazed into each others faces. Finding themselves pretty much alone, he took her in her arms, looked down into her eyes. “I love you.” he said for the first time. “And I mean more than as a friend.” Then he kissed her.

Those were the three little words that she had longed to hear. She melted into his strong arms and nearly evaporated into his bosom.

Sheffield continued, “I am beginning to fall in love with you. The last few weeks have been the best time of my life since the war began a year and a half ago. That day my life was forever turned upside down. But you have set it right side up again for me.”

“I wish that we didn't have to go our separate ways tomorrow. But I have to go to my new job and you have to go back to sea.”

“I don't know how long I'll be away, but at least when I get back, you won't be all that far away. We can pick up from right now.”

“I'm going to miss you, but I promise to write. It might take a while for my letters to catch up to you, but be assured that they'll be on their way.”

“And I'll write back when I can. Just like before.”

Eventually they returned to the ballroom and danced and enjoyed the music a while longer, before signaling to Yeoman Gover that they were ready to go. The car was waiting for them at the curb, with Morris standing beside the open back door. Before having him drive to the Tazwell, he had Morris take them by the ice cream shop where they shared a malt.

Sheffield accompanied her to her room, where she invited him in. She took off her jacket and tossed it aside. Then she kicked off her shoes and loosened her collar and sat down on the sofa in her hotel room. “Sit down a moment.” she invited.

“Alright. Yeoman Gover can wait a little longer. I think he has something to read.”

“What you said back there on the park bench. You really mean it don't you?” she asked,

“Every word.” he said. “It has taken me a while to realize it but I think I have been feeling that way for a little while now. This time that we have had together has really shown me how deeply I care for you. And I have come to see how much that you have loved me all along. If there were ever to be an award for patiently waiting, it would have to go to you.”

"It has been worth the wait." Then she hesitated. "Now that I have you, I worry that I'm going to lose you too. I have this fear that you're going to sail off and won't come back."

"For what its worth," he said trying to ease her fears, "the love of a woman has brought many a man home from war. Until now, I didn't have that. I love you and that will pull me through."

"You know what they say about absence makes the heart grow fonder." he said. "I'm sure that by the time I come back, that I'll love you even more." Then to validate his words, he kissed her. The affection he showed her was accentuated with passion.

Ramona had to say, "If you don't leave, I might not want you to."

"You're right." he said getting up and putting on his jacket. "I will see you in the morning before you have to go. I'll be here at the usual time." he said putting on his hat.

"I'll be ready and waiting." She said as she got up to see him out the door.

There was one more embrace, one more kiss, and the final good nights.

The next morning, Sheffield found his way over to the Tazwell. They had breakfast and attended services together at the local Methodist congregation were they attended together the week before. After lunch, Ramona returned him to the base and they said their final goodbye. They had packed an lot into three and half weeks, despite Sheffield's busy schedule. They had made the most of it.

Ramona got on the road for the drive to Bethesda and Sheffield returned to the ship. He went to his stateroom and got out his logbook and wrote about the marvelous transformation that had taken place. He closed his entry with, "As good as it feels to know the love of a woman, it feels equally good to love her in return. I think just maybe there will be a future for us to look forward to. Only the future will tell."

That evening, Ramona telephoned just to let him know that she had made it home alright. They didn't talk long. Before saying goodbye, Sheffield wished her well when she reported for duty the next day.

Sheffield didn't have much time dwell on the new state of being in his life. By Tuesday the ship was nearly ready to get underway. On Wednesday Sheffield took her to sea for two days of carrier qualifications with the air group, which was back to full strength.

While at the air station the aircraft had been repainted with the new tricolor camouflage scheme. The upper surfaces were now sea blue, the sides were intermediate blue, and the lower surfaces were insignia white. And in compliance with another directive, the national insignia on the top of the upper left wing and the bottom of the lower right wing was removed. Both directives had been issued earlier in the year, but took time to implement due to the pace of operations dictated by the war. They did however retain the letters R S P L in white arranged vertically on their rudders and the squadron number on the side of the planes, which had long since disappeared from the squadrons in the Pacific.

During the rest of the week, the final preparations for getting underway were made. On Sunday

night, Sheffield called Ramona. She was excited to hear from him, knowing that it would be the last time in a while. She told him all about her week and her new job. "It is all administrative," she said. "I have three women, each Lieutenant Commanders, under me, one who directs the nursing staff, one who is responsible for training nurses, and one who is responsible for training sailors to be Hospital Apprentices and Pharmacist's Mates. I spend most of my time either preparing for a meeting, attending a meeting, or reviewing reports. I miss the personal contact with with the patients. At least when I was the staff director in Hawaii, I went on rounds occasionally."

"Well, Sheffield said. "When you need break to clear your mind, go make the rounds or sit in on a class. That will do two things, it will help relieve the pressure on you and it will help you stay in touch with whats going on."

"That's great advice," she said. "I think I'll have my assistant schedule time for me to do that on a regular basis. Rather than just sit in on a class, maybe I'll teach one."

"That reminds me, I have to tell you about my assistant. Now I know how much you depend on Yeoman Gover. Mine is Yeoman 2nd Class Wanda Eager. She's a WAVE, naturally. I don't know what I would have done without her."

"I know what you mean. Morris keeps me in line and doesn't let anything get past me."

Changing the subject, Ramona asked, "So I guess you're all ready to sail tomorrow."

"First thing in the morning. I wish that you were here to see me off."

"So do I, but the time that we had together was more than I had hoped it would be. When you get back, we'll have to arrange to get together again. At least it isn't that far. Maybe you can come and see me next time."

"Perhaps. There are a lot of places in and around Washington that I'd love to show you. Either way we will meet up someplace."

"Until then, I guess we'll have to depend on the mail, won't we." Ramona concluded.

After talking about other things, Sheffield said, "We've probably talked long enough, I guess we'd better say goodnight."

"I don't want to, but I suppose you're right. Goodnight Sheffield. Take care of yourself and don't go get yourself hurt. I love you."

"Oh, I'll be alright. But if I did, I know a pretty little nurse who could patch me up. Good bye, and I want you to know that I love you."

As Ramona placed the received back on its cradle; those three little words were resounding in her ears.

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