

Chapter XXX

To Live or Die

September 4, 1943 – September 11, 1943

On Saturday and Sunday, the crew was given one last forty eight hour liberty. Come Monday morning everyone was back aboard. A head of steam had built up, awaiting orders to weigh anchor. At the last minute, a launch pulled alongside to transfer the mail aboard that had arrived from the States during the night.

It was Labor Day, September 6th and with another potentially dangerous mission at hand, Captain Brason gave the order to weigh anchor after three weeks in Algiers. Before long the Reprisal, surrounded by her now very familiar escorts, were in the Mediterranean heading east toward Italy and toward battle.

The ship was well underway when Yeoman Gover brought him his latest mail. There was a response from Ramona already.

September 1, 1943

Dear Sheffield

Thank you, thank you, thank you! I love it. It fits me perfectly and it looks good on me, or dare I say that I look good in it. And the silk stockings! My goodness, do you know how hard they are to come by? How did you ever do it? And if you were to by chance ask me to marry you someday, I just might say yes. I even have a white dress now, other than my uniform.

Since you're in love with me and I'm in love with you, doesn't that make us lovers? That sounds much deeper than girlfriend and boyfriend, although I do like the ring of the word girlfriend.

So that is how Morris and Simon picked up their second languages? Now that I think about it, I think you might have told me that about Morris before. What is a Mormon anyway? If the rest of them are like these two, they must really have something going for them. They're a lot like what I am trying to be. Maybe I should become a Mormon. I must say I do like being a Methodist now. I have never been anything before.

I've been attending services at the Wesley United Methodist Church on Connecticut Ave, which is not very far from my home. I have really been made to feel at home there. The rock building is much newer than your church in Roanoke. I believe this one was built about eighteen years ago. But I think yours is much more impressive.

I'm so glad that your last battle didn't go too terribly wrong. I really worry about it. I try not to mention it in my letters or dwell on it. I just don't want to lose you now that I have you. By now you are either getting ready or have already sailed. I

pray for your safety all the time. I don't want anything to happen to you. You can only tempt fate so many times. You have been lucky, or should I say blessed, so far. I'm afraid that one of these days you're going to get hit and get hit hard.

In my line of work, we see it all the time. War is so indiscriminate, it doesn't care who gets hurt or who lives or dies. Look how it took Geannie, Sandy, and Austin.

I'm sorry. I should have kept my fears to myself. But if I can't share them with the man I love, what's the point of being in love? I'm sure these things cross your mind. They have to when you are faced with it every day. If you're not mentioning it to keep me from worrying, it's not working, because I worry about it anyway.

We have already graduated a class of sailors and sent them off to the fleet. I hope you get some of them. When I have an opportunity to talk to them, I can't stress to them how important their jobs are. I can't help but wonder if one of them might save your life one day. Enough of being a worrywart. Life is too short to worry it away.

Now on to other things. Since you like discovering new things about me, what is something that you might not know? Geannie knew just about everything there is to know about me. I'm surprised that she hadn't told you everything. My life growing up wasn't really all that exciting, downright dull at times. Joining the Navy Nurses Corps was probably the best thing I ever did. It has been a good to me. That's why I've stayed with it all of these years.

There is something I need to tell you when we are together. It's not something that I want to tell you in a letter.

When you do come home, if you make a trip home to see your family, I would very much like to go with you. I really felt welcome and accepted by them. If I knew them better, I'd just go down on my own some weekend and spend some time with them. You don't have any idea what it's like having no family at all. I'm basically an orphan now since my mother died several years ago. I'm sure I have some extended family back in Oklahoma and Texas but I have no idea who they are. I'd really like to adopt your family as my own.

Let me close by telling you again that I am madly in love with you. Every spare moment is consumed with the thought of you. Knowing now that you feel the same for me has made me one very happy woman. I long for your safe return and hope for a time when we may never be apart again.

Your lover,
Ramona.

Having already put to sea, Sheffield was unable to send his response back. She seemed apprehensive in her letter. One thing was for sure, she was crazy about him. It was obvious that she would marry him in a minute. He wasn't ready to take it that far just yet, but the notion of someday was very much on his mind. He wanted to spend more time with her first.

Little did he know, but at that very moment eight timezones behind, Ramona was asleep in his bed in his parents house. With the long labor day weekend coming, she called his mother and invited herself to come for the weekend. Ellen was more than delighted to have her come. She too could tell that Ramona was deeply in love with her son. What better way to get know her better than to have her to herself. Between Ellen and Sarah doting over her, she developed a greater bond with the family that she longed to be a part of. Later in the day, she would join in on one of the famous Brason picnics before driving back to Bethesda.

Meanwhile, Sheffield sailed east. Vigilance was the the first order of business and the patrols were maintained. The Bat Team kept watch by night. A predawn strike on enemy positions on Sardinia was carried out on the morning of the 7th. It was curious that there was no retaliation from the Italian Air Force on Sardinia.

During the day on the 7th, the task force doubled back to the west rather than proceed into the Tyrrhenian Sea. The invasion of Italy was to take place without any softening up attacks in the hopes of keeping the enemy guessing as to the timing and location of the invasion. The purpose of the raid on Sardinia was another diversion.

Later that day as the task force was operating west of Sardinia, several unescorted twin engined Ju-88s bombers from France approached from the north. The combat air patrol, which was quickly augmented by four more Wildcats, shot down seven bombers before the survivors came in range of anti-aircraft fire. Three more were shot down by the ships' gunners. The few planes that remained dropped their bombs well off target, causing no damage. In their retreat, two more were shot down.

In late afternoon, the task force began steaming east once more. On the morning of the 8th there was another predawn attack on enemy positions on Sardinia. As the invasion force headed for the Italian mainland, eight Wildcats were sent to provide combat air patrol over the force. German air attacks continued throughout the day, sinking one landing craft.

At the same time, a powerful British task force, including the carriers Illustrious and Formidable along with three battleships, steamed through the Straits of Messina between Sicily and the tip of Italy into the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Just before six thirty that afternoon, Lieutenant Commander Cameron, the communications officer came on the bridge and handed Captain Brason a dispatch. After reading it, he nodded and said, "Patch me through."

Commander Cameron flipped a switch and handed the microphone to the Captain. "This is Captain speaking. All hands standby for an important broadcast from the Commander in Chief of Mediterranean Forces."

Sheffield nodded to his communications officer and Commander Cameron flipped another switch. After a moment of static and then, "This is General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commander in Chief of the Allied Forces.

"The Italian Government has surrendered its armed forces unconditionally. As Allied Commander in Chief, I have granted a military armistice, the terms of which have been approved by the governments of the United Kingdom, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Thus I am acting in the interest of the United Nations.

"The Italian Government has bound itself to abide by these terms without reservation. The armistice was signed by my representative and the representative of Marshal Badoglio and it becomes effective this instant.

"Hostilities between the armed forces of the United Nations and those of Italy terminate at once. All Italians who now act to help eject the German aggressor from Italian soil will have the assistance and the support of the United Nations."

When the broadcast ended, Commander Cameron switched off the radio. Cheers erupted throughout the ship, even on the bridge. The only emotion that Sheffield showed was concern as his men jubilantly celebrated what they took to mean a partial end to the war as far as Italy was concerned.

He again picked up the microphone and switched on the intercom. "May I have your attention please, may I have your attention." He paused a moment to let everyone aboard quite down.

"This is the Captain speaking. General Eisenhower's announcement is certainly reason to celebrate. However don't let it fool you into thinking that the landings tomorrow will be a walk in the park. Just because the Italians have surrendered doesn't mean the Germans have. Trust me, they aren't going to take this lying down. Overnight they can pour countless troops and planes into Italy to counteract the invasion. I suspect that over the next several days we will see an intensity of enemy attacks the likes of what we have not yet experienced. We can't afford to become complacent by this seemingly good news.

"I have confidence in the dedication and competence of every man aboard this ship. You have proven yourselves time and and again. We will certainly have the opportunity to prove ourselves again in the hours and days that lie ahead of us. May God bless each of us and this great ship. That is all. Carry on men."

At the conclusion of Captain Brason's comments, the crew had a vastly different attitude than they did only a few moments before. They knew that he was correct in his assessment of the situation.

Flight operations continued until the going down of the sun, at which time the Bat Team took to the sky. All during the night, the invasion force moved into position off shore. At the same time the Germans also moved into position, more than filling the void left by their former allies.

After the evening patrol, the Bat Team was brought aboard. After a little rest, men and planes were readied for their missions early the next day. At three thirty in the morning of September 9th the landing craft began their approach to the beachhead at Salerno. On orders from Army commanders, no close air support or shore bombardment were requested, opting instead to take the beach by surprise.

That proved very unwise. German shore batteries opened fire on the landing craft, blowing them out of the water. As the morning sky lightened, the Luftwaffe began bombing and strafing the beach on an unprecedented scale.

At four o'clock, the Reprisal began launching planes and the bombardment group moved in to provide cover for the GIs pinned down on the beach. The Dauntlesses arrived over the beach and began taking on enemy artillery and tank positions, as did Army A-36 Apache dive bombers. The Wildcats in their F4Fs began strafing German machine gun positions, as did AAF P-47 Thunderbolts. With fighter planes to cover them, the cruiser float planes spotted for the bombardment.

Heavy fighting continued on the beach all that day, the Army made some headway. Off shore, cargo was being unloaded and brought ashore. A hundred miles out to sea, the Reprisal's flight deck was a very busy place. Planes were constantly coming and going. At the end of the day there were two less Wildcats, four fewer Dauntlesses, and one less Avenger. The ship itself had not come under attack that day.

That day the Luftwaffe was busy pursuing the Italian Navy, which was sailing toward allied bases in North Africa to surrender. A large task force including three battleships and several cruisers and destroyers, had sailed from La Spezia and Genoa in the middle of the night. While off the northwest tip of Sardinia they were attacked by a large attack group. The Reprisal was well out of range and unable to provide air cover. Consequently, the Battleship Roma was sunk and several other ships were damaged.

Just as Sheffield had anticipated, all that day and the next the German buildup in Italy continued as additional forces were brought down from Germany. Rome was swiftly occupied and in many instances the Germans outright attacked Italian army units before they could surrender to the allies, as they had the navy.

Throughout the day on the 10th the Reprisal air group continued to support the forces on the ground as the GIs held their ground and made some headway. The Luftwaffe only made token air attacks on the troops that day.

The first light of morning filtered through the sheer blinds that hung in the master bedroom at the cabin in the hills west of Roanoke. Sheffield opened his eyes and rolled over. The other side of the bed was

empty, but the sheets were still warm. Whoever had slept there hadn't been gone long. Geannie?

He threw his covers back and sat up, scratching his bare chest. He looked around to see his pajama top hanging over the chair in the corner. He got out of bed and wandered over to the window to look outside. Two inches of fresh snow blanketed the ground and clung to the trees.

He hadn't heard it at first, but the strains of sining wafted from elsewhere in the cabin. It was the sweetest voice, he didn't recognize the lyrics or the tune. A smile came across his face as he turned away from the window to go find the source of the sining.

The volume grew louder as he neared the bathroom. The door was shut and he stood there listening, wondering if he should knock or just go in. He put his hand on the door knob and held it for a moment, before turning it. The door opened a crack, letting the full volume of the singing out.

As he peered through the crack, he could see a mound of bubbles floating on top of the water and the back of head. The hair was blond. The singing stopped and he went to shut the door.

"Sheffield, Is that you? Why don't you come and join me?"

He opened the door and went in. That is when he saw who it was. "Ramona, its you." She was covered in bubbles and only her head and shoulders were visible.

"Who else were you expecting?" Then she invited again, "Why don't you join me?"

Sheffield stood frozen with hesitation, not knowing how to respond.

"For heaven's sake, we've been married for how long now? Its alright, you can get in."

Hesitation turned to confusion. He just stood there facing her.

"Well if you're not going to get in, I guess I'll have to get out."

Confusion turned embarrassment as she began to stand up.

Sheffield opened his eyes to find it was still dark. Even though it was dark, he recognized the surroundings of his emergency cabin just off the bridge. He had been sleeping on the bunk without a blanket. "That was an interesting dream." he commented out loud.

He got up and tucked his shirt in as he reached for the light. With the dim light he could see the clock on the wall. It was a quarter to four. The morning patrols would be taking off soon. He went over to the sink and tuned on the water and splashed his face. With his wet hands, he flattened down the hair around the edges. It promised to be another busy day. "I wonder what will come our way today?"

Before heading out to the bridge, he knelt beside his bunk as he was accustomed to doing, and sought for divine guidance to be with him during the course of events in the day that lay ahead. As he finished, he sensed someone just outside in the passageway. Getting to his feet, he called out, "Yes."

Lieutenant Commander Calvin Oxford, the duty officer, poked his head in and said, "Sir the first flight of the day is ready to launch."

“Thank you Commander Oxford. I'll be right there.”

After straitening his bunk and smoothing out his uniform, he headed for bridge. As he stepped onto the bridge he was handed a clipboard with some paper on it. At the top it read “Order of the Day, September 11, 1943.”

As he scanned down the top sheet, Commander Oxford commented, “Today looks about like yesterday and the day before that.”

“I sure hope you're right, Commander.”

Captain Brason stepped out onto the wing bridge. Below him on the light deck were several planes spotted for launch. Above him a three quarter moon shone down through scattered clouds. The sun wouldn't be up for another hour and half.

He stepped back onto the bridge. “What's the forecast for the day, Mr. Oxford?”

“Partly cloudy skies with a chance of afternoon squalls with light winds of ten to fifteen knots out of the northwest, sir.”

“Afternoon squalls are the perfect place for an air attack to sneak up on us, eh Commander?” Sheffield said pessimistically.

“That, or for us to hide from an attack in, sir.”

“Good point, Cal.”

Next he turned to the helmsman. “What is our current course and speed, Mr. Carpenter?”

“Course one – one – three, sir speed twelve knots.” Lieutenant (jg) Richard Carpenter replied.

“Very good Lieutenant. Stand by to bring us to three – one – five.”

“Aye, sir.”

Sheffield picked up the phone and called primary flight control. “Commander Whithouse, what is the status of the flight?”

“Armed and ready, Captain. Standing by for your orders.”

“Have the pilots man their planes, Seymour.”

Sheffield hung up the phone and gave the order, “Set course to three – one – five, at twenty knots.”

“Aye, sir” Commander Oxford responded and relayed the orders. The course change was also relayed to the rest of the task force which matched course and speed.

Sheffield stepped back out onto the wing bridge. The flight deck was coming to life as pilots and crews manned their planes. The plane captains scrambled about the aircraft making last minute checks. A few moments later, the engines began coming to life. Soon the roar of planes filled the air. As loud and deafening as it was, Sheffield loved the sound.

He stepped back onto the bridge for a report. Knowing what he wanted, Commander Oxford said,

“Course to three – one – five, speed twenty knots, sir.”

“Very good. Thank you Commander.”

Sheffield looked at his watch. It was a quarter past five. The sun would be up in one hour. Already the sky was beginning to lighten up. He picked up the phone again. “Get'em up, Seymour.” Without waiting for a reply he stepped back out onto the wing bridge to watch the show. First one, then another plane dashed down the dimly light deck and into the air. He watched until the thirty seventh and last plane left the deck.

The planes formed up in the darkness overhead and headed for their respective missions.

He lingered to watch the Bat Team come aboard. One by one they appeared out of nowhere just behind the ship and came aboard. As the last plane taxied to the forward end of the flight deck he stepped back on to the bridge.

He said to Commander Terry, who had arrived while he was watching the launch, “Good morning Hank. You have the bridge. I'm going below to freshen up and get a bite to eat.”

He left the bridge and made his way to his stateroom. He hadn't spent much time there since being at sea, except for to change his clothes and an occasional shower. As he passed the galley, he poked his head in and asked, “What's for breakfast, Reggie?”

“Hotcakes and eggs, sir. I hope you're hungry.”

“As a matter of fact, I am. Keep them hot. I'll be there in few minutes.”

Sheffield went to his stateroom and took off the uniform that he had worn for two days. He put them along with his skivvies in the close hamper and stepped into shower. Perhaps inspired by his dream, he began singing.

It didn't take him long. Soon he shut off the water, opened the curtain and reached for a towel. After getting dressed he glanced at the pictures of two women he loved that sat side by side on his dresser. He wondered if it was time to put Geannie's picture away.

His stateroom was pretty sparsely decorated after removing the sentimental items that he needed to help him through those earlier times. They were safer at home. He would hate for something to happen to them.

Leaving Geannie's picture where it was, he left his stateroom and went to the wardroom for breakfast.

“Did you have sweet dreams, sir?” Reggie asked as he poured him a cup of coffee.

“As a matter of fact I did.”

“I'll be right back with your breakfast, sir.”

By the time Sheffield finished his coffee, Reggie set before him a stack of buttermilk pancakes covered with maple syrup and topped with two eggs. “I'm afraid that we're running low on fresh milk, sir.”

Reggie said as he set a tall glass of milk on the table.”

“Thanks, Reggie, it looks delicious.”

“Enjoy your breakfast, sir. If you need anything, just call me.”

Sheffield took a bite of his pancakes. All through breakfast, he reflected on the dream that he woke up to. He pondered what being married to and living with Ramona would be like.

“Thanks Reggie, that was good as always.” Sheffield said as he poked his head into the galley on his way to his office. Sitting at his desk, he went through some paperwork that he had been putting off. Yeoman Gover interrupted him, “Excuse me sir, but here are your log entries for the last three days. I have them all typed up and ready for your signature.”

“Thanks Morris.” he said reaching for them. “I don't know what I'd do without you.”

Yeoman Gover stood on the other side of the desk while the Captain signed them without reading them. He didn't need too. He trusted that everything was in order, they always were.”

“There you go, Morris.” He said handing them back. “Is there anything I should know about?”

“No, sir. Everything is in order. Should something come up, I'll let you know immediately. I'll go file these in the log.”

As Yeoman Gover turned to leave with the stack of papers, he went to close the door behind him.

“Thats alright, leave it open please.” Sheffield turned his attention back to what he had been doing. Not having stayed caught up the last few days, it took him about an hour to go through it all. Then he opened his personal log and began catching it up.

He was only only about halfway through what he wanted to write when the intercom in his office crackled to life. “Captain Brason, can you come to the bridge, please.”

Sheffield closed his log and rather than leave it behind, he tucked it under his arm and took it with him, hoping to finish it later.

With proper protocol, the officer of the deck announced his presence as he stepped through the hatch onto the bridge. “What's going on?” he asked.

“Sir, radar has picked up a snooper. Two Wildcats have been dispatched to investigate but it has been popping in and out of that cloud bank off to the north.”

“Any idea what it is?”

“Its a Focke-Wulf 200 Condor, sir.”

“Thats interesting. Thats the first time that we have seen one of them in the Mediterranean. Do you think they've seen us?”

“Most likely, sir.”

“Well then, gentleman, I think we can expect trouble to come looking for us in the next couple of

hours. What else is going on out there?"

"The pilots of the ground support missions report that the Army is making making progress on the ground. Our planes have been pounding enemy artillery positions. So far the fighters over the fire support ships have not made any contact with enemy aircraft, but those over the transports have tangled with a few ME-109s. They have shot down two with no losses in return."

"Very good. Can we spare four Wildcats to bolster our own combat air patrol?"

"No sir. They're all pretty much committed right now. Except for the Alleycats."

"Good. Have four of them readied and placed on standby. "I think we're going to need them before the morning is over." Captain Brason took his seat in his chair and resumed writing in his journal, leaving the men on the bridge to do their jobs.

Several minutes later he was interrupted, "Sir, Radar has lost contact with the Condor."

Sheffield closed his log and got up out of his seat. "Let's be ready for them, pass the word to standby for general quarters. Lets get the ship ready ahead of time. Whats the status of flight operations?"

"The next flight isn't scheduled to launch for another half an hour."

"Are they ready?"

"Yes, sir. They're spotted for launch and are on standby."

"Get them off the deck as soon as possible. And send that section of Alleycats up with them."

"Yes sir."

"As far as the remaining planes go, we can either fuel them and get them ready for launch and hope we don't get caught with them on deck. Or we can have them drained of fuel and have all ammunition unloaded. Based on those choices, I believe the latter will be faster. What's the status of the repair hangar?"

"Its empty at the moment, sir."

"Good. Have as many of the Bat Team planes that will fit stored there. I want them out of the way so we can act quickly in re-servicing the next flight when we're ready to send them up."

He next turned his attention to Yeoman Gover who had been taking notes on the orders just given for the log. Petty Officer Gover, will you please take this to my emergency cabin?" He handed him his personal log and stepped out onto the wing bridge to watch the launch of the next flight.

Scanning the sky, clouds had gathered in around the task force with patches of blue showing through. "This could be good or it could be bad." he said out loud to himself.

After about half of the flight had been launched, Sheffield was summoned back into bridge. "You might want to hear this sir. Its from our planes over the bombardment group. They are encountering German bombers closing in for an air attack."

"Switch it on"

The speakers on the bridge portrayed an audio account of what was taking place. At first it was just the usual fighter pilot chatter. What has heard next while the enemy bombers were still three miles out proved most unsettling.

“Holy cow! Did you see that? That bomber just launched a projectile of some kind and has turned around.”

“_____! Look at that thing go. It's trailing a flame.”

“There goes some more. The planes are turning back.”

“Lets go get'em.”

“Did you see that! One of those things just missed that cruiser.”

“We're gaining on the _____.”

“Watch out for those tail guns.”

“_____ that other cruiser just erupted like a volcano.”

As the fighters closed in on the bombers, the focus shifted back to the bridge as the officer of the deck asked. “What just happened?”

“It sounds like they used some sort of guided bomb.” Captain Brason answered. “How are the preparations going? I'm afraid that we can expect a similar attack.”

“Well, there are only a few planes from this flight to take off. The planes below are being emptied of fuel and ammo. The only problem would be the timing of the return of the planes that are currently out on missions.”

“Whats the status of the ship?”

“Mostly secure, sir. Once we go to general quarters the water tight hatches will be closed.”

While the discussion on the preparations and readiness of the ship continued, it was interrupted with the news that they were anticipating. “Radar shows unidentified aircraft bearing two – seven – zero, range sixty five miles out at eighteen thousand feet, heading straight for us.”

“Ready of not here we go. Sound general quarters. Alert all returning aircraft to stay clear.”

As the alarm sounded, the half of the men not already at there battle stations rushed to be where they needed to be. Water tight hatches slammed and were dogged shut, sealing off the compartment from any flooding that might occur from battle damage. Sheffield, along with those on the bridge, donned his blue-gray kapok life jacket and put on his blue-gray steel helmet in preparation for what was coming.

Reports came from all over the ship of stations being manned and ready to Commander Terry at his post below decks. After receiving the final report, he called up to the bridge that all stations were manned and ready. The fighter director sent the eight Wildcats including the four Alleycats, racing off to engage the

oncoming enemy air attack. Tense moments of silence throughout the ship awaited the onslaught. On the bridge, Captain Brason and others scanned the sky with binoculars trained on the clouds that obscured their view.

“Helmsman, make way for those clouds off to the north. Bring us up to twenty four knots.”

A moment later, the bow swung around, heading for the clouds, and straight for the on coming enemy.

“Well soon know if that was a wise or fooling move.” Captain Brason remarked. As the ship came about on her new course, the entire task force followed suit.

The first word from the flight leader of the Combat Air Patrol reported that the enemy formation now thirty miles out consisted of a dozen Dornier Do 217 twin engined bombers escorted by eight Focke-Wulf Fw 190s. The Fw-190s were superior in performance to the carrier planes. The Wildcat however could turn tighter. In either case the combat air patrol was matched plane for plane with the incoming 190s.

At twenty miles out the German fighters took on the American aviators in one on one dogfights, allowing the bombers to continue on. The Do 217s split into two groups and maneuvered into position on either flank of the task force, similar to a torpedo attack, only they remained at eighteen thousand feet.

Once they were within range of the five inch guns, they were still in the clouds. Trusting the radar controlled gun directors, they opened fire, throwing bursts of flak into the sky.

From the sound of things on the intercom, two 190s had been shot down at the cost of one of the precious Alleycats. It was impossible to know how many bombers had been stopped by anti-aircraft fire.

The Reprisal was still three miles from the cloud cover when five bombers emerged from the clouds. The forty millimeter guns opened fire. To the gunners, it appeared that they had repelled the attack as the bombers turned away.

Having heard what happened to the cruisers of the fire support group, Captain Brason knew differently. He ran out into the open on the bridge wing with his binoculars. The incoming projectiles were not hard to spot with the trail of fire spouting behind them. “Are these things self propelled?” he wondered. As he watched them approach, their behavior was more that of a controlled glide. He answered his own question, “That flame must be so an observer aboard the bomber can track them and control their glide.”

As the bombs drew closer, he was better able to predict their path and began calling out orders for evasive maneuvers. He saw one of the bombers go down in flames. Immediately one of the missiles he was watching lost control and tumbled into the sea. He observed two more that were obviously targeted on the



carrier. The ship twisted and turned to throw off the glide bombs that drew ever closer. Every turn of the ship was matched by the bombs.

Another bomber went down in flames and the bomb it was guiding fell into the sea in the carrier's wake fifty yards astern. A split second later, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the destroyer Percival explode. He couldn't take his eye off the bomb that now seemed to be aimed for a point right between his eyes. In the process he didn't see the two halves of the destroyer laying on their sides begin to quickly sink between the waves.

Sheffield was now able to watch the approaching projectile with the naked eye. He gave one last order, "Hard to port!"

As the rudder began to respond the bomb took a nose dive and smashed into the flight deck on a forward trajectory just inboard from the center line and just behind the stack. The point of impact was only eighty five feet from where Sheffield was standing.

The three thousand pound missile continued its trajectory right through his stateroom, penetrating the the armored hangar deck, smashing through the uptakes on the second and third deck. The seven hundred pound warhead detonated in the refrigerated stores on the fourth deck.

The entire ship shuddered at the blast deep within her bowels, at the same level as the waterline. Men were thrown from their feet, including Captain Brason. He jumped to his feet and looked over the edge of the wind bridge to see smoke and flame belching from the crater in the flight deck. At that instant, he could feel the ship slowing. "The blast must have snuffed out the boilers." he reasoned.

He was correct.

An instant later, a secondary explosion rocked the ship. This one from the bomb storage magazine directly below the refrigerated storeroom. The explosion blew out through the hull directly below the outboard elevator, allowing seawater into the ship, dowsing the unexploded bombs.

The upward and forward force of the explosion caught the underside of the elevator, ripping it from its supports along the side of the hull. The last thing Sheffield saw, besides his entire life flashing before his eyes, was the elevator hurtling toward him. At the very last split second he dove through the open hatch into the bridge.

Sheffield stood above his lifeless body which lay prostrate on the deck. His helmet had been knocked askew and blood was oozing from the side of his head. Then he noticed that his left leg, with a compound fracture, was wedged between the hatch and the bulkhead. In that instant he sensed that he wasn't alone.

"Curly." she said softly.

He looked up from the pitiful sight below his feet to see Geannie standing beside him in radiant beauty. "So this is how it ends. I suppose that you have come for me."

"That depends, Curly."

"Do you mean that I have a choice?"

"Do you remember when we were both twenty and you were at the Academy and I was at Hollins. Remember how I had come down with the influenza?"

"How could I ever forget that. I thought I lost you before I really had you."

"As I lay at death's door in my own bed, I found myself standing above my body. My Grandmother Austin came to me and took me to you. Do you remember praying at the altar in the chapel, pleading for twenty years with me. Next she returned me to my bedroom where my parents and yours were praying over me that my life be spared.

"She told me that because of the faith of those pleading for me that I had a choice. I could either go with her into the next world or I could remain in mortality for another season. I chose to stay."

"How come you never told me about that?"

"Because I wasn't permitted to remember it. Just as you won't remember this, if you should choose to stay. To help you decide I have someone here that you should see."

Just then three other beings drifted, as it were, down through the overhead and stood beside Geannie. Sheffield had to look closely at each one of them. "Sandy! He exclaimed.

"Yes Daddy, its me."

He looked at the young man standing next to Sandy. "Austin? Is that you? You look so grownup and mature."

"Yes Dad. Its me. You see my spirit is in the form that my body would have grown to if I would have lived."

Then in disbelief he turned to the other young man. "Charles Emmett. I never got to see you during your brief life. I have always regretted that."

"I know Father. Its alright. I came a little earlier than you expected and you weren't able to be there. I know that you loved me, and I have always been proud to be your son."

"So," Sheffield asked, "I can go with the four of you right now?"

"That's right, Curly."

"What are we waiting for? The four of you are my entire life."

"Before you decide, I have to show you something else. Take my hand, Curly."

In a blur of time and light she took him to a place he didn't recognize. It was a darkened bedroom half a world away where it was still early morning. They were standing over a woman as she lay asleep in her

bed. Sheffield recognized her as she rolled over.

“Ramona.” he moaned.

“She loves you very much, you know. She has loved you for a very long time. She was in love with you when she knew that she couldn't have you. And now that she has you, she is terrified that she will lose you. Just like how your faith and prayers kept me here, hers can keep you here.”

“You knew how she felt for me?”

“Yes.”

“It sure came as surprise to me when she told me. “

“And now you have fallen in love with her too, haven't you?”

“Yes. That doesn't bother you?”

“No, because I know that you can be happy for the rest of your life. We need to get back now, I just wanted you to see her before you decide.”

In instant, traveling through time and light, they were again hovering above his body. Three men, using a support structure from the overhead, pried the hatch open enough for Yeoman Gover to pull him free. All around, as if through a sheer veil, he saw the destruction that was happening to his ship.

“What's it like, where you are?”

“I can't begin to describe it to you. It is a place of peace and tranquility. There is no strife or suffering. I have learned so much and I'm finally beginning to get some answers to all of my questions.”

“It sounds wonderful. Why wouldn't I want to go.”

“This life and this world can be wonderful too. Do remember how wonderful our lives were together. It was heaven on earth wasn't it?”

“Yes, it was.”

“You can have many, many years ahead of you like that married to Ramona. The two of you can grow old together and watch your children and grandchildren grow up.”

“How is that possible? You know that she can't have any children.”

“Curly, you'd be amazed a how things can come about.”

“What do you want me to do, Geannie?”

“That isn't up to me. In my world the next few decades will be as the blink of eye. You can join me now, or join me then, it is all the same. If you choose to stay, let me remind you won't remember any of this.”

“I'm still in love with you and have missed you so much. Now after a year and nine months, I have the opportunity to go and be with you and the kids. Yet at the same time, in the last three months, I have fallen in love with Ramona and want to spend the rest of my life with her. And here you are, giving me the opportunity to do that. I just don't know what to do. I wish I had more time to think about it.”

“Don't think with your mind but follow your heart. You don't have time to think. Your life is slipping away and there will be no going back. I'm still in love you too Curly and I always will be. I want you to be happy, whether it is with me now or with Ramona for the rest of your long life ahead. Either way, one day we will be together again.”

“Say, why does Yeoman Gover have his hands on my head like that? I can't quite make out what he's saying.”

“He's making it possible for you to return to your body. You need to make up your mind now, Curly. Which is it going to be?”

* * * * *

General Eisenhower's announcement is quoted from the New York Times dated September 9, 1943.

During World War I I the Germans developed a guided anti-ship glide bomb called Fritz-X. The only Luftwaffe unit to deploy the Fritz-X was Group III of Battle Wing 100 employing the medium range Dornier Do 217 bomber. Fritz-X was first deployed on 21 July 1943 in a raid on Augusta Harbor in Sicily. A number of additional attacks around Sicily and Messina followed, though no confirmed hits were made.

On 9 September, the Luftwaffe achieved their greatest success with the weapon while the Italian fleet was underway to surrender to the Allies. The Italian battleship Roma, flagship of the Italian fleet, received two hits and one near miss, and sank after her magazines exploded.

The American light cruiser Savannah was hit by Fritz-X at 10:00 a.m. on 11 September 1943 during the invasion of Salerno, and was forced to retire to the United States for repairs. A single The bomb passed through the roof of "C" turret and exploded in the lower ammunition handling room. The blast tore a large hole in the ship's bottom, opened a seam in her side, and blew out all fires in her boiler rooms. Savannah lay dead in the water with the forecastle nearly awash and took eight hours to relight boilers and get underway for Malta.

Savannah's sister ship, Philadelphia, had been targeted earlier that same morning. While it is often believed the ship was hit, in fact the bomb just missed the ship, exploding about 15 yards away with minimal damage.