

Chapter XXXII

The USS Succor

September 11, 1943 – September 23, 1943

All through the night, as the Reprisal and her escorts steamed west, Captain Brason had a restless night. The pain from his injuries and the discomfort resulting from the traction splint kept him awake until exhaustion overcame him.

The next morning Lieutenant Crockett finally made his way to the captain's cabin. With him was Pharmacist's Mate McCormick. "I'm sorry that it took me so long to get to you. Petty Officer McCormick has kept me abreast of your condition. I have just had so many cases to take care of, that I had to prioritize them according to seriousness, not rank."

"I understand, and that is how it should be." Captain Brason replied. "So what do you think?"

"Let me take a look and see."

Lieutenant Crockett removed the bandage from his head to look at the wound. "This should heal nicely. Fortunately the shrapnel only grazed you. Any deeper, it could have been pretty serious."

Pharmacist's Mate McCormick redressed the head wound while Lieutenant Crockett unwrapped the leg wound. "This one is kind of messy. You'll end up with a scar from it. Eldon here tells me that you mentioned that you feel a tingling sensation in your leg. Is that still the case?"

"Yes, it is. It's kind of like my leg is asleep."

"I would have hoped that it would have gone away by now. I'm afraid that you might have some nerve damage. I'm sorry to say that there isn't anything I can do about that here. Once we get to Algiers, the doctors on the hospital ship can make a better determination. Let me check your broken leg."

Doctor Crockett felt the leg around the break with his hands. "It feels like they did a good job of setting the bone. Here again you'll need an x-ray. We could do it here, but our x-ray lab was demolished along with the rest of the sick bay. Now let me take a look at your ankle."

While Petty Officer McCormick dressed the leg wound, Lieutenant Crockett looked at the ankle. "It appears that the swelling has gone down a bit. It's going to take a while for the bruise to clear up. You were lucky that it isn't worse. If the elevator had been just a little lower when it hit the island, you could have lost your foot entirely."

"Now Captain, sir. I am recommending that you be transferred to the hospital ship with the rest of the wounded. They can take much better care of you than I can with my limited resources."

"With all due respect doctor, I'm bringing the ship home, even if I have to set up my bunk set up on the bridge."

"I hate to tell you this, sir, but I can't allow that. As your doctor, I have to overrule you on this one. The only choice you have is to leave voluntarily or to have Commander Terry and I declare you unfit to

command and have you relieved of duty. And that would not look good on your record. If you go voluntarily, I can grant you a medical leave of absence until you are fit to resume command or be properly relieved. Until then, you're still officially in command. Besides, I'm concerned that you could get an infection in that leg wound. If that happens, you could lose it. So which is it going to be?"

Sheffield didn't have to think about the options, it was clear to him which was the best. "Alright then, you win. I'll go voluntarily, but I have one request."

"And what is that?"

"That I can bring Yeoman Gover with me as my personal assistant. After all I have a lot of letters to write to the families of those we lost and I'll need his help."

"I think we can arrange that." Lieutenant Crockett agreed. "I'll see you once more before you're transferred tomorrow morning, but for now, I still have other patients that I haven't seen yet. If you need anything, sir, Eldon will take care of you."

"Thanks Lieutenant. I don't like it, but you're right. Now tell me how the wounded men are doing."

"Since you're the Captain, I can tell you." He spent the next several minutes reviewing the more serious cases, mostly burns, in detail. There were a lot of men in lot worse shape than he was, Lieutenant Commander Bashor, the ship's doctor, among them.

Being incapacitated put a real cramp in Captain Brason's style. He knew that Commander Terry and everyone else were highly capable of doing their jobs, but he just wanted to do his. After conducting the burial service, Hank came to Sheffield's cabin to see how he was doing and to give an update of the status of the ship.

All the rest of the day, he felt kind of useless just lying there. Reggie brought his meals. An orderly had to help him with his personal duties. Yeoman Gover came and went throughout the day as he took care of the Captain's errands. Pharmacist's Mate McCormick checked on him a couple of times. Towards the end of the day, Commander Terry came to see him again. That night, was much like the night before.

The next morning just after nine o'clock local time, the Reprisal stood into Algiers Harbor and proceeded to the dock. She was eased into a berth across the from from the hospital ship, USS Succor. No sooner than the carrier was securely moored to the dock, personnel from the Succor came aboard and began preparing the wounded for transfer. Sheffield, in the tradition of captains throughout the ages, insisted on being the last man off.

At the same time the Vulcan was nudged into place next to the Reprisal's port side and and was securely moored to the ship. Captain Tuggel and several of his men came aboard to inspect the damage. At the conclusion of the inspection, Captain Tuggel and Commander Terry met with Captain Brason in his cabin where he had spent the last two days. The estimate was that it would take three or four days to

remove the elevator, all remaining debris, and put temporary patches in place over the holes in the decks.

Sheffield concluded the meeting by saying, "That sounds reasonable, gentlemen. Draw up the work orders and have Yeoman Gover bring them to me for my signature." Then he added, "I am still the Captain, aren't I?"

Commander Terry assured him that he was indeed.

"I haven't felt much like it the last couple of days."

Captain Tuggle continued, "Before you can sail for home, you'll need to spend a few days in dry dock to have that hull breach fixed. The closest dry dock that can accommodate you happens to be in Gibraltar. I have contacted the British to see if it is available and if they are willing to do the work. I'm still waiting to hear back from them."

"Very good." Captain Brason responded, "Let me know what you find out. Is there anything else?"

"No sir."

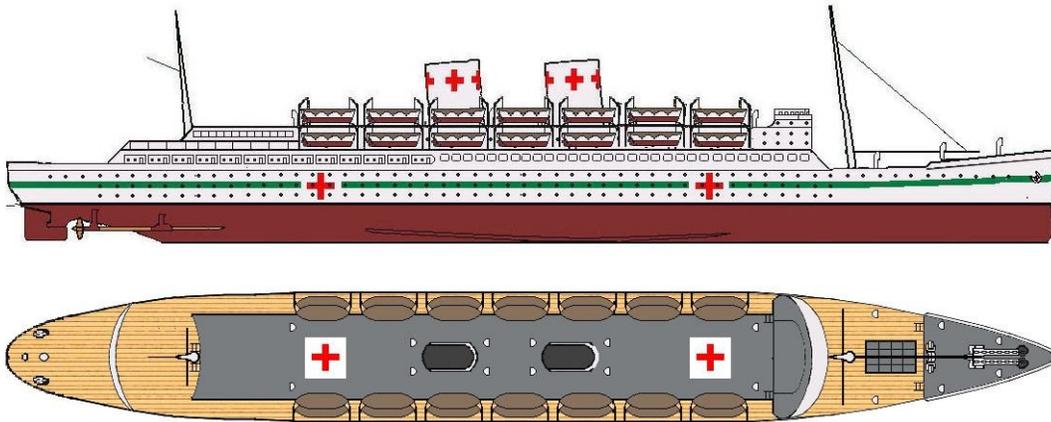
"Alright then." he concluded.

A little while later Sheffield was moved to a stretcher and carried below by a couple of orderlies. It was with great disappointment that he left the ship and the crew that he had grown to love over the last seventeen months. Once on the flight deck, he was transferred to a gurney. That's when he got his first glimpse of the damage that had been done. The outboard elevator wedged against the island structure told him just what a miracle it was that he was still alive. As they wheeled him aft, he saw first hand the gaping crater in the light deck where the bomb penetrated the ship. He was taken to the aft elevator which was lowered to take him down to the hangar deck. As he was wheeled to the quarter deck he could see the burnt out cavern of the center hangar bay. They wheeled his gurney down the gangplank and across the dock and aboard the USS Succor.

The Succor looked oddly familiar to him. He came to find out that before the war she had been the SS Hawaiian Maiden, the sister ship to the Pacific Maiden on which he had brought Geannie and kids back from Hawaii aboard.

Soon after the beginning of the war, the four Maiden Class passenger liners were taken over by the Navy for use as troop transports, however further consideration was given to the Hawaiian Maiden as a potential hospital ship. At the beginning of the war, the Navy only had two such vessels and the need for more was very apparent. The army also operated a handful of hospital ships. The Hawaiian Maiden was transformed into a floating hospital with the latest medical equipment. She was fitted with 600 beds, four operating rooms, a dental facility, an X-ray lab, a complete pharmacy, and everything else one would expect to find in the finest hospital in any major city. Manned by 175 medical staff and 200 crew members and her

conversion complete, the USS Succor was commissioned on February 16, 1943.



This marvelous ship was 553 feet long and displaced 15,550 tons gross weight; larger than both the preceding hospital ships, those that were undergoing conversion, and

those being considered. With a top speed of 22 knots, she was also the fastest.

In accordance to the Hague Convention of 1907 and again reaffirmed by the Geneva Convention, hospital ships were protected and were supposed to be immune from attack. In order for vessels to obtain “neutrality” as Hospital Ships, strict adherence to certain provisions had to be maintained at all times. The ships were painted overall white with a horizontal green band running the length of the ship on both sides. A Red Cross is painted on the top deck and on each side of the hull and funnel and is illuminated at night. Further more they were to travel alone. During the First World War, a number of hospital ships were attacked. So far in this war, Germany and Japan didn't always honor the Geneva Convention. The HMHS Somersetshire had been torpedoed by a German U-boat on April 7, 1942 in the Mediterranean and the Australian Hospital Ship Centaur was sunk by a Japanese submarine as recent as May 14, 1943.

Captain Brason was given an outboard stateroom from where he could look across the dock and keep an eye on the Reprisal. He had with him his only possessions that were not destroyed, his personal log and Ramona's framed photo. He set her picture on the table where he could see it. A new Hospital Apprentice Third Class recognized her as one of his instructors at Bethesda.

Morris was set up in a small cabin nearby with a bunk, a desk, and typewriter. Over the next several days he had one hundred fifty two letters to type up for the Captain's signature, one for each crewman who perished during the attack. In addition to the letters, he was there to do whatever his captain needed him to do.

Sheffield didn't have long to settle into his new surroundings. First a colored orderly came in and took his clothes away from him and proceeded to give him a sponge bath. He wasn't very gentle about it or very thorough either. When he he was finished he gave him a hospital gown to cover up with. And then it didn't cover him very good as the backside was pretty much open to the breeze. It was a good thing that he was laying on his back.

Sheffield was left alone again. With nothing other than the hospital gown, he felt stripped of everything. Stripped of his clothes, stripped of his command, stripped of his dignity, not to mention stripped of his family. For the first time in quite a while he thought about Geannie, Sandy, and Austin and how much he missed them. Then he glanced at Ramona's picture and realized that it was her love for him and his love for her that was now the source of his strength. Strength that he would need to get through the weeks and months that lay ahead of him.

His thoughts were interrupted by someone else entering his room. "Good morning Captain Brason, I am Commander Timothy Shirley, the chief medical officer on the Succor. I have assigned myself to be your personal physician while you're aboard. How are you feeling, sir?"

"Not as bad as how some of my crew must be feeling, I'm sure. Other than that, I feel like I've been hit by a freight train."

"Well, don't you worry. We'll take good care of you and the rest of your men, sir. I see by your chart that you had a compound fracture of the left femur above the knee, contusions to your head, and a badly bruised ankle. Oh and it says here that you you've been experiencing some tingling in your left leg. Did I leave anything out?"

"No that about covers it."

"Tell me about the tingling. Has it persisted?"

"Yeah, it feels like my entire leg is asleep."

"We'll check that out for you. Right now we are going to take you down for an x-ray and check you out over all. I really have to hand it your Lieutenant Crockett. He did an amazing job with what he did for everyone with no sickbay and limited supplies. Many of these men wouldn't have made it without him. He deserves a medal."

"I'll see to it that he gets one."

"Do you have any questions before we wheel you out of here?"

"None that I can think of right now, any way."

"Alright then, lets go."

Two sailor who had been standing back stepped forward. With one at either end of his gurney, they wheeled him out of the room. Over the next two hours he had his leg x-rayed, his wounds examined and redressed, his blood pressure and temperature taken, blood and urine samples collected, and who knows what else.

After all of the prodding and poking, he was brought back to his room, where he had nothing to do but wait for Doctor Shirley to come back with the results. Over the years Sheffield hadn't spent any more time in a doctors office than absolutely necessary. He thought of Ramona and how her entire career had

been spent in hospitals, on the other side of things of course. In his mind, he picked up where he left off and returned his thoughts to her.

While waiting for the results of the tests, Yeoman Gover came into the room. He had some more papers for him to sign. After signing them, he asked, "Could you draw up the papers to present Lieutenant Crockett with the Silver Lifesaving Medal? While you're at it, go talk to Commander Terry and ask him for a list of men for recommendations for recognition. I know that we have a lot of purple hearts that need to be awarded."

"Yes, sir. I'll get on it right away."

Not long after Morris left, Commander Shirley returned, saluting his patient as he entered the room. "Sir, I have some preliminary results for you. First of all, whoever set your leg did an excellent job of it. The x-ray shows that it is perfectly aligned and that it is beginning to heal. I'm going to have you fitted with a more permanent brace with wighted traction for while, at least until we can get you to a stateside hospital. It will take a good three months to heal and I don't foresee you needing to be in traction for too long. Once we get past the traction stage, you'll be fitted with a cast and can get around on crutches.

"Now for your wounds. Your head wound is healing nicely and the stitches can come out in a few days. Your leg wound is a different story. We detected the onset of an infection. If it hadn't been found in time, it could become quite serious. You might even have ended up losing you leg. As it is, we can treat it with a strong antiseptic. Lieutenant Crocker probably didn't have any available to him. That's why he was so adamant that you leave the ship for treatment. In addition, I'm going to prescribe some antibiotics as well.

"About that tingling in your leg, Lieutenant Crocker was right about nerve damage. Sometimes when there is break in the femur, such as yours, the bone will put undue pressure on the nerve, damaging the outer lining. The effects could be temporary or permanent. I hate to say it, but I'm not much of an expert on that. When we get you back to the States, I'm going to recommend that you be sent to the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland."

Sheffield's ears picked right up. "Where did you say?" he asked just to make sure he heard right.

"The National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland."

"That's what I thought you said. That would be perfect."

"Oh, and why is that, Captain?"

"Because my girlfriend is the director of nursing there. I know I'll be in good hands there."

"Well then, I'll see to it that that is where you will go. A lot of your men with burns will be going there as well."

"How is Lieutenant Commander Bashor?"

"He is pretty serious, with burns over seventy percent of his body. He's one of the worst burn cases

we have from your ship.

“I think all of your men will make it. Some of them only need treatment and can return to duty before we sail.”

“When are we sailing?”

“We're scheduled to sail the day after tomorrow on the fifteenth. We're just waiting for more casualties to come who should be here tomorrow. Once their aboard, we'll sail for New York. We should be there in just over a week later.”

“I sure hate leaving my ship here all torn up. I feel like I need to be with her.”

“Believe me, your in the right place. Once you have healed and your ship is repaired, you can take her back into the fight. How does that sound?”

“I don't know how I'm going to stand being bedridden for the next few weeks. Its only been three days and I'm about to go berserk.”

“That's why you're called a patient. You're going to get a good lesson in patience. Otherwise, you're in pretty good shape. You're blood pressure in a little low, but thats to be expected since you lost a fair amount of blood. It will build back up with time without needing a transfusion. We have to save that for the more serious cases.”

“About four times a day a nurse will check in on you and take your vitals. An orderly will help you with your bedpan and your meals will brought to you. If you need anything, just pull this chain like this.”

A red light above the chain came on. A few seconds later a lanky, freckled, redheaded nurse, who appeared to be about thirty, rushed through the door. “Is something the matter?”

“No. I was just showing the Captain how things work around here.”

“Captain Brason, this is Lieutenant Geraldine Reed. She is the head nurse for this shift in this ward.”

Lieutenant Reed, this is Captain Sheffield Brason, the skipper of the Reprisal. I'm sure you'll take good care of him.”

“Of course.” Lieutenant Reed replied. Then turning to Sheffield she said, “I'm pleased to meet you, Captain.” she extended her hand. “We'll take good care of you. You'll be up and around before you know it.”

“The Capitan just told me that his girlfriend is the director of nursing at Bethesda.” Commander Shirley informed Lieutenant Reed.

She turned to Sheffield and asked, “Oh really. What's her name?”

“Commander Ramona Katmuth. There's her picture.”

“Really, She's gorgeous, I would have never recognized her. Now this smaller picture is the Ramona that I know. I worked with her at Pearl Harbor for while just before start of the war. Just after the bombing, I accompanied some of the wounded back to the States and eventually ended up here. We were quite a

team; everyone called us Mutt and Jeff. Ramona is one of the best nurses that I've worked with. She just seems to have a natural gift for healing and she has such a tender bedside manner."

"Well then," Sheffield said, "I'll be sure to tell her that I met you."

"I look forward to getting to know you better over the next week or so. I'll be sure to take good care of you. But for now, I need to go. It was so nice to meet you Captain."

"The same here, Lieutenant."

Lieutenant Reed left and Commander Shirley said, "I need to be going too. Someone will be here to set you up in a brace and weight. Once you're squared away, the Captain would like to meet you. I'll pop back in later, okay."

"Alright." Sheffield said. "Thanks for everything, and thanks for taking care of my men."

Again, Sheffield was left to himself. He looked through the porthole at the starboard side his ship across the dock the that had been his home. After a while he drifted off to sleep.

The next thing he knew, he heard the door open ever so quietly. He opened his eyes to see it close again. "It's alright." he called out. "I'm awake, you can come in."

The door opened and in came Yeoman Gover. "Oh it's you, Morris."

"I didn't wake you did I, sir?"

"Not really. I was just snoozing. What did you find out?"

"Well, I talked to Commander Terry and he said he would put out a call for commendations and bring the list over tomorrow. He also said that he had some photographs of the damage to the ship that he thought you should see. He'll bring them over as well. I do have the paper work for the medal for Doctor Crockett for you to sign. While I was over there, I also had the print shop print up some more letterhead for you, since it was all destroyed."

"As usual, you're on top of everything. Now I have something else for you to do. I'm keeping you hopping, aren't I."

"That's what I'm here for, sir. What do you need?"

"I want you send a couple of telegrams for me. You'll probably have to go into town to find the telegraph office. Take my staff car if you need. If it survived, that is."

"Yes sir. Who are the telegrams to and what are they to say?"

"The first one is to my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Emmett Brason at 175 Franklin Road, Roanoke, Virginia. It's to say, 'Was injured will be fine. Will be at Bethesda Naval Hospital about September 23rd."

The other is to Commander Ramona Katmuth at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. You'll have to look up the address. Have it say the same thing except add, See you soon. I love you."

"I can do that, sir. So you're going to Bethesda?"

"Yeah. The doctor came to see me and took some x-rays while you were gone. It turns out that I have some nerve damage and that they can supposedly treat it there. We'll sail the day after tomorrow and should arrive New York in just over a week later."

"What else did he tell you? That is if you don't mind me asking?"

"No. not at all. We're in this together, Morris. I have a bit of infection in my leg wound that they can take care of. Someone is supposed to come and put me in some sort of contraption for my leg. After a little while they'll put me in cast and it should take about three months for my leg to heal."

"That's good news, sir. At the rate you're going, you can keep me busy that long. I'll go send these telegrams for you. Will there be anything else, sir?"

"By the time you get back, I'm sure I'll think of something. Now get going."

"Aye, aye, sir."

While Yeoman Gover was off again on another errand, two hospital apprentices brought in the weighted traction equipment. They were soon joined by a pharmacist's mate who removed the traction splint from Sheffield's leg. Together the three sailors assembled the apparatus and put his leg in it with the prescribed weight. They adjusted the bed for counter traction to prevent him from being pulled to the foot of the bed. The lower end of the bed was elevated, the mid section dropped and the upper end was tilted up slightly. A pillow was placed under his left leg and positioned to prevent pressure on the heel and lift the knee enough to prevent contact between the cable and the skin on the front of the leg.

Above the bed was the support structure for the cable and pulleys. Suspended from the overhead was a handle that he could use to pull himself into a sitting up position. It was much more comfortable arrangement than what he had endured for the last couple of days. At least now he could shave himself and it made using that blasted bed pan much easier. He was beginning to be glad that he had been forced to give up the foolish notion of staying with the ship to bring it home.

Later that afternoon he received a courtesy visit from Captain Aubrey Surrey, the commanding officer of the Succor. Captain Surrey welcomed him aboard and assured him that he and his men would be well taken care of on the voyage home.

At the end of a busy day, Yeoman Gover reported in and had accomplished all his errands. Lieutenant Reed checked on him one last time before going off duty. When his dinner was brought to him, he was happy to be able to sit up somewhat in order to eat. That night he slept much better.

After Sheffield had dozed off to sleep, it was still early afternoon in Roanoke. Emmett, Ellen, and the rest of the family were terribly concerned for Sheffield ever since Romona had called with the news two days

earlier. They had talked to her on Sunday and again that day. There was no more news regarding the ships that had been attacked off the coast of Italy by the new Nazi secret weapon.

Walt tried to keep the family calm and to hope for the best and not to expect the worst. Most seemed to take his advice. Ellen, however, was worried sick no matter how much reassurance she received from her husband and son. That afternoon she and Emmett were sitting on the front porch when they saw Willie Cummings come around the corner on his bicycle. For being a warm, caring individual, people dreaded to see him coming. You see, Willie was the Western Union delivery man. Usually the messages that he delivered contained bad news.

Too many families in Roanoke had received telegrams from the War Department, informing them of a loved one perishing in some distant corner of the world with a strange sounding name. As Willie drew closer, Ellen's heart sank and her face became ashen white. The knot in her stomach tightened as Willie stopped and got off his bike and put down the kickstand. Emmett stood up as he came up the walk.

Willie's work had taken its toll on him. His once warm smile became a halfhearted facade, his quick step had been reduced to a shuffle. He simply handed Emmet the envelope and said, "Good day, Mr. and Mrs. Brason."

Emmett took the envelope and returned to Ellen's side while Willie remounted his bicycle and rode off. They stared at each other for a moment before Emmett opened the envelope and removed a single slip of paper. Before reading it to Ellen he quickly scanned it's contents. A broad smile came across his face as he shouted, "He's alright and is coming home!"

"Tell me, what does it say?" Ellen asked impatiently.

"It says, 'Was injured will be fine. Will be at Bethesda Naval Hospital about September 23rd' He's going to be just fine. See I told you. Evidently he wasn't hurt too bad"

"You don't know how relieved I am that he's still alive." Ellen exhaled all of her pent up anxiety. "It sounds like he was hurt enough to be sent home to a hospital."

Then Emmett suggested, "Bethesda is just a little better than two hundred miles away, maybe we could take the train and go see him."

"That would be wonderful." Ellen replied. "But right now I'm going to go call Walt and Shenan to give them the news."

"While you do that, I'll go next door and tell Marie. I know that she has been worried too."

Ramona was getting ready to leave for the day. It had been difficult for her to concentrate on her work all day. At the last minute, someone from the mail room brought her a telegram from Western Union. Anxious for any kind of news she ripped open the envelope and quickly read the first line, "Was injured will

be fine.” Relief swept over her to know that he was alive. “Thank you, God.” she prayed.

Then she read the next line, “Will be at Bethesda Naval Hospital about September 23rd.”

“He’s coming here!” she shrieked. She had to reread it just to make sure that her eyes weren’t playing tricks on her. Then it occurred to her that his injuries were severe enough to require stateside hospitalization. She also knew that Bethesda was where they sent men with more serious injuries requiring specialized treatment. The thought left her concerned for him but at least he would be where she could take care of him.

A smile came across her face as she read, “See you soon. I love you.” She quickly got her things together and left her office. She practically floated out to her car, which had to drive itself the little over three miles home.

The first thing she did when she got home was to call Ellen with the news. As they talked, they shared their collective relief. She had come to be very comfortable talking to Ellen, as the two of them had begun to build a close bond. After all, Ramona longed to be her daughter-in-law. She offered to put Ellen and Emmett up in one of her spare bedrooms when they came to see Sheffield, an invitation they gladly accepted.

For the first time since the being injured, Sheffield had a good night’s sleep. The next morning, Commander Shirley came to see him and to see how the traction equipment was working out. Satisfied that it was working properly he asked if the tingling was still a problem. He was concerned when Sheffield told him that it was.

A while later, Lieutenant Reed called on him during her rounds. As she was taking his vital statistics she asked, “So how do you know Ramona?”

“She and my wife were best friends.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, is your wife no longer in the picture?”

Sheffield paused before he answered her. “No I don’t mind. She was killed almost two years ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that Captain. What happened?”

“We were living in Hawaii where I was stationed. As it became obvious that the we would soon be at war, we began discussing having her and the kids move back home. We had everything set. I was granted a leave after returning from an upcoming mission and I was going to bring them home. The morning that I returned, I was flying into Ford Island when we got caught in the attack. My plane was shot down but I managed to make my way back to Pearl Harbor. Just outside of the main gate, I found my wife’s car all shot up. I rushed to the hospital where Ramona came out of nowhere and took me to my wife just before she died.”

Lieutenant Reed listened in stunned silence. "Oh. That was your wife. That means that I worked on your son, trying to save him. I'll never fore get it. He was in pretty bad shape when they brought them in. First I checked your daughter and found that she was already dead. I turned my attention to the boy in an attempt to stop the bleeding. He had already lost a lot of blood and his wound was so severe that he was failing fast. I wouldn't give up but there really wasn't much that I could do. When his heart stopped and he took his last breath, I had to leave him and move on to the next patient. I felt so bad. Later Ramona told me that his mother died too. She was devastated."

"Than you Lieutenant for doing what you could to save my son. I know that you did all that you could.

"Anyway, over the next few days, Ramona was there for me and helped me get things ready to bring them home. She was a true friend. To make a long story short, after she was transferred to Bethesda she looked me up when I got back from a cruise. We've been seeing each other ever since and things have gotten serious between us. I can't wait to see her again."

"Golly, isn't that something." Lieutenant Reed commented. "Everything looks good, sir." she said as she noted it on her chart. I'll check back with you later, alright."

"Thank you Geraldine. Do you mind if I called you Geraldine?"

"Actually sir, I'd like it if you called me Gerry. Except for when Doctor Shirley is around. He doesn't like it when we get too personal with our patients."

"I'll try to remember that. I feel as if we already have a personal connection. You can call me Sheffield, except for when Commander Shirley is a round, that is."

During the day, Captain Brason had a string of visitors. Naturally, Yeoman Gover was in and out all day.

Petty Officer Reggie Jackson came to say goodbye and to wish his Cap'an well. He told him that it had been a pleasure serving him and he thanked him for the respect and dignity that he had extended toward him. Captain Brason told him that it wasn't goodbye but "see you later." He had every intention of returning.

Commander Terry also came to see him as well. His visit was part business and part social. Hank gave Sheffield an update on the repairs that were to get underway later that day. He also brought the photographs of the damage. Sheffield studied each of them thoroughly. Lastly he came to the pictures of the outboard elevator wedged against the superstructure. One in particular showed the crumpled wing bridge with the elevator against it. Sheffield studied that one for a long time. "All I can say is that I had to have a guardian angel looking after me. I should have been killed."

"You almost were, remember."

"You can't tell me that there is not a God in Heaven. That's the only reason that I'm alive today."

Hank agreed and changed the subject. "Captain Tuggel got word back from the Brits. They are just finishing a job and can take us in the first of next week. We should be ready to sail the week after that and make Norfolk around the first week in October. The air group can meet us there and be hoisted aboard for the trip home."

"That is good news. We'll both be in dry dock about same time. I can rejoin you once I'm cleared to return to duty. You can take care of things until then. I know you'll do a good job, you have so far."

"Thank you, sir." Hank continued, "Here is the list of recommendations for commendations and medals that you asked for. Attached are the details for each one."

"This is quite a list, Hank. I'll go through it and with Yeoman Gover's help, we'll have something by the time you make it back to the States. That should give me something to do."

From there, their conversation turned social and the two friends visited for several more minutes. In parting, Hank said, "Take care of yourself. I'll come up to Bethesda when we get back and fill you in on everything."

"You do that. And take good care of my ship. I'd hate to see anything else happen to it or any more of the men."

"I'll do that. Until then." Hank saluted.

Captain Brason saluted, then winked and said, "See you in the funny pages."

One by one, all of the senior officers came to see him and to wish him well. Several of the officers and even some of the enlisted men did the same, among them was Seaman Simon Ballard. His most distinguished visitors that day were General Eisenhower accompanied by Admiral Hewitt and Admiral Weston who came to see him after inspecting the damage to the ship.

While Sheffield's visitors were coming and going, several more wounded men that had just arrived were brought aboard. Of the six hundred beds available, five hundred seventy nine were filled. In addition to the men from the Reprisal and other Navy personnel, including wounded from the cruiser Savannah which suffered the same fate the same day. However the majority aboard were soldiers who had been evacuated from Salerno.

Wednesday morning, the 15th, found the Succor underway, steaming west through the Mediterranean. That first day at sea Yeoman Gover kept busy typing up letters to the families of those who had been killed. Rather than the personal handwritten letters, this was more practical since there were so many. Captain Brason dictated the basic format, allowing Morris to personalize each as needed.

For the most part it was pretty restful day. Doctor Shirley called on him as he was making his

rounds. Nurse Reed popped in at various times during the day. Towards late morning while Gerry was with him, he asked her to prop him up and hand him his personal log. He had a lot of catching up to do.

At midmorning on Thursday, the Succor transited the Straits of Gibraltar into the Atlantic Ocean for the thirty two hundred nautical mile voyage to New York. That day and every day after were pretty much the same as the day before.

That same day on the other side of the Atlantic, Ramona received his letter explaining what had happened. Finally, her worst fears were put to rest. Seeing the severity of wounds that the hospital receives, she had imagined all sorts of horrible things, from burns to amputations. That evening, she called Ellen and read his letter to her.

About the only excitement on the voyage occurred on Friday morning east of the Azores. Sheffield noticed that the ship had stopped, dead in the water. There hadn't been anything to indicate that they had been torpedoed or collided with something. Not being on the bridge or able to see what was going on drove him crazy. Boredom had set in and he was feeling restless anyway. Finally after just over two hours, they were underway again.

Sometime after that, Gerry stopped in on her rounds. Eager to find out what had been going on, after greeting his new friend he asked, "Why were we stopped?"

"Here's what Doctor Shirley told us. It was kind of tense at first. A Nazi U-boat surfaced off our port bow and signaled for us to stop. Captain Surrey had no choice but to comply. They pulled along side and the sub commander demanded that we treat some wounded men aboard or he'd torpedo us.

"Captain Surrey explained that under the Geneva Convention, that we were bound to treat anyone, regardless of what side they were on. With help from some German sailors a half dozen wounded men were brought aboard and treated from a variety of injuries that they had received during an attack on their boat.

"After the last man was treated, they were taken back to their submarine. Commander Shirley sent with them the necessary medicine to see them back to their base in France. They went on their way and we got underway again ourselves. Pretty exciting, huh."

"I'd say." Sheffield agreed. "It's a wonder they didn't torpedo us anyway."

"That would have been awful. Do you remember when I told you about accompanying some of the wounded back from Pearl Harbor? Well the second day out, we were nearly torpedoed. It was the scariest thing I'd ever been through. If it wasn't for a naval officer who was aboard, we'd have been hit for sure. Because of some quick thinking on his part, the ship was saved."

"That's an interesting story. So you were on the Pacific Maiden?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

“Let's just say that I've heard that story before.”

Gerry paused. “You were there too, weren't you. I'll bet it was you. Am I right?”

Sheffield shook his head in acknowledgment. “Yes, I have to admit, that was me. That was the ship that I brought my wife and kids back to the west coast aboard. The captain wanted my help getting them through submarine invested waters. Besides I needed something to do to keep myself occupied. When the lookout spotted the torpedo wakes, I just did what I had been trained to do. It was nothing really.”

“Nothing? You're too modest Captain. You saved an entire ship load of women, children, and wounded men from certain peril.

“I had no idea that you and I had so many connections. It makes me wonder where else we might have crossed paths.”

“It's hard to say. It really is a small world, especially in the Navy, isn't it Lieutenant.”

“Well, Sheffield I need to continue on my rounds. I'll stop by again before my shift ends.”

“I'll be right here. I doubt I'll be going anywhere.”

The rest of the voyage was uneventful and the time seemed to pass slowly. Boredom and impatiences seemed to be the rule of the day. Morris kept busy typing letters, but it didn't take Captain Brason long to sign them. He filled his time with reviewing the recommendation list for commendations. A lot of men really deserved some sort of recognition for their efforts in fighting the fires and damage control that resulted from the bomb blast. There were acts of heroism in rescuing shipmates from burning compartments. Others acted courageously in brining the fires under control of kept them from spreading.

Each day he insisted on an a status report on his men that were with him. He wrote notes of encouragement to as many of them as he could and had Morris deliver them for him. Some of them had improved immensely while others had a long difficult time ahead of them. A few of them would be maimed for life, Lieutenant Commander Bashor for one.

As for Sheffield, the stitches in his head wound had been taken out. The infection in his leg wound had been cleared up and the wound began to heal. Commander Shirley told him that it would leave a rather nasty scar. His femur continued to mend but he would need to remain in traction for quite a while still. As for the tingling in his leg, it still persisted. The hope was that the doctors at Bethesda could alleviate the nerve damage. The swelling around his ankle had gone away and the bruising had diminished considerably.

Morris and Gerry spent much of their off duty hours with Sheffield, keeping him occupied. Sometimes one or the other would read to him from fairly recent magazines from the states. Morris went to the ship's library and brought him some books to read. The three off then spent one evening playing board games.

Commander Shirley overlooked the fact that Lieutenant Reed had become too personally involved

with one of her patients. They spent a lot of time talking. She was a good listener. Sheffield told her about how his feelings for Ramona had developed and how he had fought against them in the beginning. He told her about giving in to them and letting them grow and bloom naturally.

He shared with her some of the key points that had pointed him in the direction that he was to pursue. One was the letter from Geannie that he found in her Bible, others were the dreams that had, his visit with Harvey Morrison, and lastly, the miracle of Ramona's picture. He even told Gerry that one day he wanted to ask Ramona to marry him. Gerry listened as Sheffield poured out his heart. He found that by so doing, it served to solidify his feelings for Ramona even further.

Then on Thursday September 23rd, twelve days after the attack, the Succor stood into New York Harbor. From the porthole in his stateroom he could see the Statue of Liberty as they glided past. Before long, the ship tied up to the dock and the voyage was over.

* * * * *

The USS Succor, Captain Aubrey Surrey, Commander Timothy Shirley, and Lieutenant Geraldine Reed are all fictional.