

Chapter XXXVIII

Wishes

May 16, 1944 – July 1, 1944

Later in the week, after returning from Texas, Sheffield was helping Ramona with dinner when he asked, "Aren't you about eligible for some leave time?"

"Anytime now, but you aren't." she answered.

"That's true, but I have found an angle."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Well, I need to go out to Hawaii and visit some facilities and talk to some folks. I was thinking that we could turn it into a working honeymoon."

"That's a great idea. I just wish that we could have gone sooner."

"I suppose it's better late than never."

"We can stay at my beach house. How much time will I need to schedule?"

"I was thinking about the entire month of July."

"A whole month? I could do that."

"Since I'll be on official business, the Navy Transport Service will fly us over and back. It's two days over and two days back. I figure that with what I need to do out there, it would still give us plenty of time to do what we want."

"While you're busy with that, I could schedule a tour of the hospital to see if our training program is adequate for their needs, or something like that. I think that's a great plan. I was worried that we were going to be gypped out of a honeymoon."

"While we're on the subject, see what you can do about May 29th. Memorial Day is on a Tuesday this year. If we could get Monday off, we could go home on Friday evening and come home on Tuesday afternoon, after the picnic."

"I'd love to go home again. I'll have to see about that and I'll get back to you."

"Oh, and there is one other thing." Sheffield added.

"What's that, Babe?"

"I need to go to Norfolk next week for three or four days."

"Oh, what for?"

"Where going to do a sea trial for a concept that we've been working on. I'll be at sea for a few days on the Chesapeake Bay."

"That will be good for you. That cruise down to Puerto Rico sure did you a lot of good."

"This will be nothing like that, we'll just be operating about a hundred miles off shore."

During dinner and while cleaning up, they discussed all of the places that they'd like to go and the things they wanted to do in Hawaii.

The following Sunday, after services and after dinner, Ramona drove Sheffield to the Anacostia Naval Air Station for his flight to Norfolk. As he walked away, he turned around and said, "See you in the funny pages." He used to say that to Geannie every time she saw him off. Now he said it to her.

After a short flight in a Navy transport, he was picked up at the air station and driven to the dock where the Chesapeake Bay was tided up. Sheffield went aboard and stowed his gear in his quarters and joined Captain Jefferies in his wardroom for dinner.

Again, the Reprisal was on the other side of the dock, in her usual berth at Pier 7. Since he last saw them, both ships had been repainted with a dazzle camouflage scheme; consisting of navy blue, ocean gray, and haze gray. The Reprisal was once again fully operational and ready for action. Following her repairs and refit, she had been out for sea trials and carrier qualifications with her new air group. The only night capable aircraft was a detachment of four F6F-3Ns from one of the night fighter squadrons. After the forth coming exercises with the Chesapeake Bay, she was to sail for England for further combat operations in the European Theater.

As they put to sea on Monday morning, the Chesapeake Bay and two destroyer escorts, joined the Reprisal and her task force under the command of Rear Admiral Peter Gustaveson flying his flag aboard the Reprisal. The task force consisted of the same escorts that had accompanied her during all of Sheffield's travels. They were the battle cruiser Congress which had been repaired and reconstructed since being torpedoed during the Bordeaux raid, the cruisers Bismark and Alameda, the anti aircraft cruiser Syracuse, and a destroyer squadron consisting of ships with familiar names.

While aboard the Reprisal, Sheffield's perspective had been looking out from the bridge. Now as he stood on the deck of the Chesapeake Bay he saw his old ship from an entirely different angle. From slightly ahead and to port, he saw her in her majesty as she plowed through the sea at fifteen knots. The dazzle camouflage patterns broke up her graceful lines. That was the whole intent; to make her take on a different shape and direction to a distant observer.

Once out to sea, their air groups flew out and came aboard. For the Chesapeake Bay, it was once again Composite Squadron Seventy Three, which had participated in the exercises at Vieques Island. Since then, the squadron had undergone some changes and now consisted of twelve F6F-3Ns, twelve F6F-3s and nine brand new TBM-3Ds, for a total of thirty three aircraft. The purpose of the trial was to test the feasibility of around the clock flight operations. The squadron was sporting a new camouflage scheme consisting of overall glossy sea blue. This cruise was also a trial for the new paint job which was set to be announced next month. It was to be evaluated for both daytime and nighttime operations. It looked especially promising for the Bat Team.

At the moment the first plane landed, the Chesapeake Bay and her escorts separated from the Reprisal and her escorts and the trial began. From his position on the small superstructure, Sheffield watched as the planes came aboard. The night fighters were taken below and the rest were respotted for immediate launch. Relief pilots and crews, who sailed with the ship, manned the Avengers during daylight operations. Of the twenty one planes on deck, the first few were catapulted off while the rest took off on their own. Once airborne, they circled around only to be recovered a few minutes later. All day long the planes came and went, simulating the volume of take offs and landings that would occur on bigger carrier, like the Reprisal.

Also aboard were extra plane handles and deck personnel who worked in shifts. Those not on duty rested, as did the pilots and air crews. To accommodate the extra number of men aboard, quarters had to be shared. While one man was on duty, another man slept in the bunk, then they traded places. This arrangement was also part of the trial as extra crew would be required for effective around the clock operations. Bunk sharing seemed to be the best solution.

There was no need for patrols and searches. By May 1944, the eastern seaboard was fairly safe waters, as compared to only a year earlier. Although a two U-boats had been sunk the month before, the first in nearly a year. One of the destroyer escorts took up station astern and to starboard, acting as plane guard in case a plane went into the water while on approach. None did. The other destroyer escort took up station ahead, listening for any underwater activity signifying the presence of a German U-boat. None were detected.

The last plane landed around eight o'clock and the day fighters were taken below. By the time the sun set at eight twenty, the night fighters had been brought up and were spotted for launch along with the Avengers manned by the night crews. The same routine was observed all night long, the moonless night had made it all the more challenging, with only the dimly lit flight deck lights to see by. If the lights were too bright, the glare interfered with the pilots ability to make out the edges of the short flight deck. At five forty five the next morning, when the sun came up, the day crews took over again. As the twenty four hour mark passed, there was a break in operations to evaluate the process. Some kinks were identified and solutions were worked out.

Day two took the flight operations a step farther and included exercises with the Reprisal and her air group, operating about fifty miles away. The center of the engagement zone was seventy four degrees west, thirty seven degrees north, a little over one hundred miles out to sea, with the Reprisal to the north and the Chesapeake Bay to the south. The close proximity of the two forces allowed the small air group to make more sorties, again to simulate actual conditions. The night fighters were pressed into service, flown by the extra pilots.

The Chesapeake Bay was on the receiving end. During the day, the Reprisal's Air Group Forty Four had the overwhelming advantage. The Chesapeake Bay only had twenty four fighters to intercept the thirty six Hellcats, thirty six SBD-5 Dauntlesses, and fifteen Avengers. But that night, the Bat Team gave the Reprisal's four plane night detachment a run for their money with their twelve Hellcats and nine Avengers.

Everyone learned valuable lessons from the exercise. Sheffield's role was that of an observer and an advisor. He made himself available virtually around the clock, only taking time out for periodic short naps and a quick bite to eat when he could.

After the second twenty four hour period, there was another pause for evaluation. Sheffield rode along in an Avenger as the entire squadron flew over to the Reprisal for a post exercise conference. The meeting was held in Admiral Gustaveson's ready room and included the commanders of the various squadrons who had participated in the exercises.

At the conclusion of the conference, Sheffield was invited to have lunch in the Captain's wardroom with Captain Callister, Commander Terry and some of the other senior officers that had served under him. One person in particular was especially glad to see the Cap'an again, and that was Ship's Serviceman Third Class Reggie Jackson.

After lunch, Sheffield climbed into the radio compartment of Cowboy's Avenger for the ride back to the Chesapeake Bay. Once again, he got to experience the thrill of carrier take offs and landings, including a set aboard his beloved Reprisal. All the time that he had been in command of her, he wished for the opportunity to land on her deck. His wish had come true as he not only landed aboard "his" ship, but he got to take off from her too. The Reprisal would always be his ship.

With the exercises over, the two groups parted company and the Reprisal set out across the Atlantic with her escorts. Sheffield couldn't help but wish that he was going with them. But in a couple of days, he would be back home with his real love, Ramona.

During the third day at sea, the Chesapeake Bay repeated the operations of the first day, with Sheffield continuing his routine of sporadic periods for rest and something to eat, until the ship returned to Norfolk on Thursday morning. He managed to remain awake during the final evaluation, but before flying back to Washington later in the afternoon, he slipped into his bunk and got a few hours of sleep. Still exhausted, it wasn't difficult for him to sleep in the cramped seat on the plane as he flew back to Washington.

When Ramona picked him up at the air station, she could see that he was hungry and exhausted. When they got home he took a hot shower, the first since Monday morning on the ship, and went to bed.

On Friday morning, Ramona couldn't have budged him with ten ton crane. She called Lieutenant

Flynn and told him that Sheffield wouldn't be in that day. He didn't wake up until one o'clock in the afternoon, when Ramona came home to get ready for the trip to Roanoke. After having lunch and packing their bags and putting them in the trunk, they were on the road by two thirty. Sheffield told her about his trip and how he felt it was a success. He was still feeling the effects of not getting enough sleep, but managed to stay awake for the most part. At one point, Ramona's sining along with the radio lulled him to sleep. Wanting to get him back into a normal sleep pattern, Ramona didn't let his sleep long.

It was early evening when they pulled up in front of his parent's house, where Ellen had supper waiting for them. While Ramona helped clear away, Sheffield brought in their luggage and stashed it in their room. No more staying at separate houses.

As they visited into the evening, Emmett told him, "You'd better go see Marie. She is failing fast and probably only has a two or three weeks left at the most. She has to have someone with her all the time."

On Saturday morning, Sheffield and Ramona went to see her. She was awake and alert at the moment. It was obvious that she was in great pain. She had wasted away from the cancer to the point that she was emaciated. Her white hair was sparse and her once dancing eyes had lost their dazzel and were sunken. As he took her hand in his, he could feel her bones. Taking someone else's turn, they sat with her for a couple of hours. She was too tired to visit long.

Her voice cracked as she managed to say, "Oh Sheffield, I'm so happy for you that you found someone to fill your life with love and happiness. I'll be sure to tell Geannie that you came to see me. I wish that she could see the two of you together."

Turning to Ramona she said. "Take good care of him. He's as if he were one of my own sons."

Although she was to week to say much, she enjoyed their company. At one point, Ramona began sining to her. It seemed to be soothing and before long, she was asleep. Sheffield went out in the other room to talk to Sara while Ramona sat with her. Sarah told him how she had taken a sudden down turn and that they didn't expect her to last much longer. After a while, Stirling's wife, Mary Ann came to take her turn and relieved Ramona.

Sheffield took it easy the rest of the day, resting up from his hectic week. On Sunday, he and Ramona attended services with the Brasons. Then after dinner, they went up to the cabin to spend the night. It wasn't being used much at the time as everyone was caring for Marie. It was the first time that Sheffield had been there since he took Ramona there the year before.

During the afternoon they hiked back to the lake. Sheffield found the hike to not be as easy with his bum leg. Late in the afternoon they came back to the cabin. As it began to get dark, he built a fire and they sat out under the stars and talked. A quarter moon hung low in the western sky as the stars began to show themselves. Venus and Jupiter hovered near the moon, shining brightly. The fire and the stars made for a

romantic setting. As it got later in the evening, a chill in the air sent them inside, brining the romantic mood with them. They stayed until after lunch the next day before coming down off the mountain. The rest of the day was spent visiting with family.

Memorial Day dawned with the treat of rain. It was quite blustery when they went to the cemetery to decorate the graves and it started to rain as they were ready to leave. Rather than setting up for the Brason Memorial Day picnic in the front yard, it was moved to the hall in the church.

It had been exactly a year since Ramona met the family, now she was fully immersed in the family and claimed them as her own. The gathering wasn't as large this year. Walt's son, Tim had been deployed to Morocco with his blimp squadron. Emmaline had had six months to grieve since loosing Seth. She and her daughter were there as were Sylvia and Curtis. Shenan's son, Danny, had also been deployed with his squadron aboard the new Yorktown. His wife, Melissa and their daughter, Christina, were with her family. She was expecting their second child in November. Joe and Adelle were there. They were also expecting a baby in September. Ruth Ann and Delbert were also there.

Ruth Ann brought a sailor with her. "Ever since Morris broke her heart, she has latched onto just about every uniform that comes her way." Shenan confided in Sheffield.

Sheffield told him, "I'd worry if I were you. I know what the one thing that most of them have on their mind is, and its not good."

"I know, thats what concerns me. This is the third one she has gone out with, that we know of. When they go back, it doesn't take her long to find another one. Before this one it was a marine and the one before that was an airman. They seem polite and nice enough when she brings them around. Its what they do when their alone that scares me. I'm afraid that she's the one leading them on. I've talked to her and all she said was 'I'm a big girl now, I can know what I'm doing.' She insists that she's behaving herself. I just wish she would just listen to her mother and me."

While Sheffield was talking to Shenan, Ramona had a good visit with her favorite niece, Emmaline, about how she was doing. Taking care of her daughter gave her something to focus on. She was almost a year old now. "You're fortunate to have her, she's a living reminder of your husband. " Ramona said as she bounced Carrie on her lap. "I have always wished that I was able to have children of my own."

"I wish that Seth could have held her just once." Emmaline sighed. They talked for quite a while and it seemed to comfort the young widow.

After the picnic, it was time for Sheffield and Ramona to get on the road and head for home, arriving in the evening. Come Wednesday, Sheffield returned to his office to digest the information gleaned during the trial and to prepare for their upcoming trip to Hawaii. Ramona had her leave scheduled and they were both looking forward the trip.

On Saturday, the 3rd of June, Sheffield took Ramona out for her forty first birthday. For starters, he presented her with a necklace and matching earrings. Then he took her into Washington for dinner and dancing. Sheffield arranged with the waiter to bring out a small cake with a candle in it for desert. With childlike excitement, she made a wish and blew out the candle.

“What did you wish for?” Sheffield asked.

“You know that I can't tell you that. If I did, my wish wouldn't come true.”

The following Monday brought news of the allied invasion of Normandy, across the English Channel from England. Sheffield learned that the Reprisal had launched a diversionary attack on German targets along the Atlantic Coast from within the Bay of Biscay the day before. Since then, she had been contributing air support in the same way as she had done during the Italian campaign.

The news the following week hit close to home. On Tuesday evening, the 13th. Ramona answered the telephone, “Hello.” ... “Well hi Dad, how are you?” She had taken to calling his parents Mom and Dad since she didn't have any parents of her own. ... “Oh we're just fine.” ... “Yes, he's right here. Just a second.”

Handing the telephone to Sheffield she said, “Its for you, Babe. Its your Dad.”

Sheffield took the receive and said, “Hi Dad. What a surprise.” ... “Oh dear. When?” ... “Uh huh. Whens the funeral?” ... “Saturday? Yeah that will be great.” ... “Probably Friday evening.” ... “Okay Dad. We'll see you then. Take care, bye.”

“Marie?” Ramona asked as Sheffield hung up the telephone.

“Uh huh. She died this morning. The funeral is Saturday.”

“Well I guess we'll be making another trip home then won't we?”

The next little while they discussed plans for making the unexpected trip to Roanoke. Fortunately it was scheduled as not to interfere with work.

On Friday afternoon, Sheffield and Ramona each left work a couple of hours early and came home to get ready to leave. They had most everything already packed, so it wasn't long before they were on their way. When they pulled up in front of his parents home, there was no place to park, as mourners and well wishers had gathered at the Austin Mansion for Marie's viewing. After driving around the block a time or two, the car that had blocked Emmett's driveway had left, allowing them to pull in.

They went in to quickly change and freshen up and went next door to the Mansion. Geannie's Uncle Ben and her cousins Morris, Collin, and Josephine had come from Lynchburg. Sheffield hadn't seen them since Geannie's funeral. Most of Marie's grandchildren were there, except for those who were away with in the military. Many friends, neighbors, and acquaintances were coming and going all evening. Because of the prominence of Senator Austin, they knew a lot of people and many of them came to pay their respects.

When it came their turn, they were shocked at how much she had wasted away in the two weeks since they had last seen her.

Sheffield fit right in with the Austins as much as he would have if Geannie were still alive. He had always been part of their family and always would be. Ramona was at his side and was introduced to so many people that after the first few, she didn't even try to keep track of their names. Not knowing the Austins all that well, Ramona stayed close to either Sheffield or Sarah. After the throng of visitors subsided, Sheffield and Ramona stayed at the Austin Mansion until late in the evening.

At the funeral the next day, Sheffield and Ramona were invited to gather with the family prior to the funeral. Marie had always been so proud of Sheffield in his uniform, so he chose to wear his dress blues. With Ramona also in her dress blues, they made a handsome couple and really stood out; almost to the point of feeling self-conscious. Sheffield had been asked to serve as pall bearer, along with Charlie, Winslow, Stirling, and two of Marie's grandsons.

Walt, who was officiating, called the family together for the family prayer and the closing of the casket. He then lead the family into the chapel, which was filled to capacity as was the hall directly behind the chapel. Walt was followed by Charlie, Winslow, Stirling, and Sarah and their families. Sheffield and Ramona fell in behind them with the extended brining up the rear.

The service began with Walt's invocation and opening remarks. A quartet of granddaughters sang "Rock of Ages". Then Emmett paid tribute to the life of this noble lady. Who better to do so? Emmett had been her next door neighbor and close friend for fifty years. Not to mention, he had been her pastor more the majority of those years. In his remarks he said something about her relationship with each of her five children, including Carolyn, who had only lived for three months, and Geannie, both of whom had preceded her in death. He was also sure to include Sarah who Marie had raised as her as her own after her mother died.

The church choir then sang "How Great Thou Art" and Walt concluded the service with a very touching sermon about life and its various stages. The years of innocence and dependence of a small child. The years of learning and independence of an adolescent. The energy and enthusiasm of youth. The uncertainty and zest of a young adult. The confidence and industry of adulthood. The wisdom of old age. He then talked about how death opens the door to the next stage of life. In closing, the congregation sang "Abide With Me", followed by Walt's benediction.

Several cars made up the funeral procession that went to the cemetery for the internment. Emmett and Ellen rode along with Sheffield and Ramona. Naturally, she was buried next to Charles, her husband of forty four years. On the other side was her baby, Carolyn. Just behind them were Geannie, Sandy, Austin, and Charles Emmett. Also nearby was her sister, Martha, and her husband Bill, who was Charles' brother,

who were Sarah's parents.

Sheffield and Ramona joined the family and friends for a luncheon at the church. Sheffield had a good visit with Geannie's family and everyone he talked to was happy for him that he had remarried and were very warm and gracious to Ramona.

One person he was very happy to talk to wasn't actually a family member but someone they had adopted, as it were, by virtue of working for the Austins. And that was Murry Puchesky. "It's good to see you again, sir." Murry greeted his former captain. "I didn't get a chance to talk to you at your wedding."

"Is good to see you too, Murry. How have you been?"

"You'll be pleased to know that ever since I came Roanoke that I have stayed out of trouble. Thanks to you, I have straightened up and turned my life around."

"I'd say the credit is your's, Murry."

"Oh, no sir. It was you. If you hadn't dealt with me as you did, I'd still be in the Navy going from brig to brig. What you said to me took a while to sink in, but after getting into trouble again as soon as I got out of the Navy, I realized that what you said was true. It took being dishonorably discharged to find honor. It was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. I wish I would have listened to you after the first time you threw me in the brig. But I seem to have to learn things the hard way.

"Thank you again to referring me to the Austins. They gave me good job and treat me well. I'd never think of doing anything to lose their trust, nor yours. That's something I've never had before."

"I'm glad that you're doing so well. I knew that deep down you had it in you. Throwing you in the brig was the least I could do, after all you did try to set my ship on fire."

"And don't forget that rampage I went on in Praia da Vitória. It took me a while to pay the Navy back for the mess I made."

"That's all behind you now Murry. You have your whole life ahead of you. I'm confident that you'll do just fine."

"Thank you for your confidence in me sir. I heard what happened at Salerno. I'm glad to see that you are doing better."

"Thank you. I'm stuck with this thing." he said holding up his walking stick. "And who is this lovely young lady?" he said to Maxine as he gave her a hug.

"Hi Uncle Sheffield, its good to see you."

"So how did the two of you get together. Don't tell me. Let me guess. The lumberyard, right?"

"That's right Uncle Sheffield. He kept finding reasons to come into the office and eventually, he got the courage to ask me out."

"And how are you?" he asked as he stooped down to be on Virginia's level. "How old are you

sweetheart?”

Virginia shyly held up three fingers, but didn't say a word.

“She's kind of shy.” Maxine apologized.

He turned to Murry and said, “She's a very special young woman, you should keep her.”

“We have talked about getting married, but nothing official, yet.”

Just then Ramona joined in. “This is my wife Ramona. She had to hit me over the head to get my attention, but I'm sure glad that she did.”

“Ramona, this is Murry Puchesky. He was a member of my crew. We got to know each other in a rather special way.”

“Yes we did. It's nice to meet you Commander Brason.” Murry said. “So how did you meet the Captain?” Ramona went on to give a brief a brief explanation before taking leave of Murry and Maxine and going on to visit with others.

On Sunday, Sheffield and Ramona attended services. As usual several friends and acquaintances stopped to talk top them. They didn't see Bill and Marge Casper, but the Taylors visited for moment. They then had dinner with the Brasons before driving back to Washington. They had got around a lot recently with a trip to Texas and two visits to Roanoke.

The next two weeks were spent in anticipation of and preparation for their trip to Hawaii and their long awaited honeymoon. Sheffield organized himself for the things that he wanted to accomplish and Ramona came up with reason for visiting the hospital. More importantly the talked about the places they wanted to go and the things they wanted to do on their honeymoon.

Neither one had ever had a much of honeymoon with their previous marriages. Right after he and Geannie were married, other than a brief stay at the cabin, he had to leave on a nine month world cruise. Ramona and Oliver spent their wedding night in cheap hotel and she and Tom managed a weekend get away before they both had to report for duty the first of the following week. She had always wished she could have had a nice honeymoon trip. Now that wish was about to come true.

Even though they were in their forties and had been married for six months, they approached their honeymoon with the excitement and anticipation of a couple half their age. The night before they were to leave, they had their bags packed with everything they would need for a month, including uniforms. After a good nights rest, they put in their last minute things and called a cab to take them to the airport.

* * * * *