

Prologue

September 2, 1945 – September 16, 1945

Even though the war was over, the waters off Japan were a very busy place. Following the surrender ceremony, various elements of the Third Fleet were immediately detached to return to the States. Such was the case with the Randolph and Air Group Sixteen; Lieutenant Danny Brason was heading home. Other elements were detached to cover the occupation of Korea and China which had been held by the Japanese.

Sheffield's Task Force 38.2 remained on station, with Carrier Division Seven providing air cover night and day as the occupation forces took up positions throughout Japan. One of the main objectives was locating and liberating the numerous prisoner of war camps throughout the country.

Freed prisoners were emaciated from malnutrition and unsanitary conditions. They related tales of horror and brutality at the hands of their captors. Countless men died in the prison camps from the terrible conditions. Many others were outright murdered by the Japanese.

Two or three days before sailing for Pearl Harbor, Admiral Brason received a request from General McArthur's staff to transport as many former prisoners to Pearl Harbor as his ships could handle. He put out the word to the commanders under his command to provide as much space as possible. Captain Callister replied that he could take on three hundred and put them up in the repair hangar, just as then Captain Braosn had with the survivors from the Yellowstone and later the prisoners from the Edelweiss. The rest of the ships combined were able to make room for another six hundred.

On the afternoon of the 5th, Task Force 38.2 was detached from the Third Fleet with a "well done" from Admiral Halsey. Sheffield took his ships into the entrance to Tokyo Bay and dropped anchor just inside. The next day the ex-POWs were brought aboard the ships and settled into their quarters. They were accompanied by Army medial personnel to take care of their extra needs during the voyage to Pearl Harbor.

At eight o'clock on the morning of the 7th, the task force, now designated Task Force 16, weighed anchor and set a course for Hawaii. It consisted of Carrier Division Seven, Admiral Hyde's Cruiser Division Twenty Two, and Captain Shipley's Destroyer Squadron Fifty Nine. All except for the Monterrey, Bataan, Charlotte and Cheyenne had been together since sailing from Norfolk ten and a half months earlier.

Once the seventeen ships were at sea with their bows pointed toward the southeast, Sheffield's thoughts were of home. He was anxious to be reunited with Ramona after being away for so long, but that reunion was at least six weeks away. Not knowing what his next assignment was once he delivered his carrier division to New York City, he hoped for some long deserved time off and go home to Roanoke. Beyond that, he entertained the thought of retiring from the Navy in June after twenty five years. The war had taken its toll on him and he was ready for the new beginning that civilian life would offer. He really wanted to get back in the air and held onto the notion of flying for one of the airlines, if they would have him.

The cruise took on a holiday atmosphere as they steamed toward home at fifteen knots. There were

only routine air operations, which had been scaled back. There were no drills, exercises, or maneuvers. The guns went unmanned. Naturally, the watches necessary to the operation of the ships had to be manned.

Aboard the Reprisal, sunbathing on the flight deck during the day and movies on the hangar deck at night were the order of the day. Basketball hoops were set up in the forward hangar bay, and the forward elevator served as an arena for boxing matches. One day was set aside for track and field events on the flight deck.

One day, one of the former prisoners called on Admiral Brason. He was an extremely thin individual for having such a large frame. His face was pockmarked from sores that were beginning to heal. His eyes were hollow and sunken, yet had maintained a bright gleam.

“Do you remember me, Admiral Brason?” he asked as he saluted.

Sheffield tried to remember as he returned the salute. “No, I’m afraid I don’t recognize you.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. I didn’t recognize myself when I looked into the mirror for the first time in three and half years. I am First Lieutenant Bart Hemsley of Marine Fighter Squadron Two Eleven. You escorted us to Wake when we flew off the Big E that morning in December of forty one.”

Sheffield definitely recalled the occasion and searched through his memory for the faces and names of the twelve pilots. After a moment the image a young, robust Marine aviator came to mind. “Yes. Now I remember you. I have often wondered what became of the men of your squadron after Wake fell.”

“Well after my plane was damaged beyond repair, they gave me a rifle and I fought to hold off the Japs as they came ashore. There were too many of them and they soon overwhelmed us and we had no choice but to surrender. I sometimes thought that those of us who didn’t make it were the lucky ones.

“After two or three weeks of being crammed into an ammunition bunker, I was taken along with several others and loaded onto a ship and stuck down in a cargo hold and brought to Yokohama. During the trip, we never left the hold and had very little given to us to eat. The fact that we didn’t understand their language was no excuse for not following orders, which resulted in beatings.

“Once we reached Yokohama, myself and a few others were taken off the ship and split up among various prison camps. I don’t know what happened to rest of them. I was taken to the main camp in Nagoya where I remained until just a few days ago.”

“How did you manage to survive?” Sheffield asked.

“Well fortunately for me, I used to be a pretty good sized fellow and was able to work hard. I tried to lay low and blend in as much as possible and not call attention to myself. I played football in high school and college so to keep my sanity, I would relive the games I’d played from kick off all the way through to the end of the game. At first, in mind I pictured myself playing alongside my teammates. I even remembered the faces of our opponents. As time went on, my fellow prisoners became my teammates as we played against

the Japs. That got kind of crazy.

“Then one day, American planes showed up in the sky and we knew that we hadn't been forgotten. The more raids we endured the harsher we were treated, but we knew that you were coming for us. An now here I am on your ship on my way home.

“How about you sir, how did the war fare for you?”

“The morning we returned from Wake happened to be during the middle of the attack on Pearl Harbor. I got there just in time to see my wife die. She and my kids were on their way to church when they were gunned down.”

“I'm sorry to hear that sir.”

“After taking them home to be buried I returned to the Pacific and was in on several raids on enemy fortifications including Wake and culminated with the raid on Tokyo.”

“I don't know how much damage that did, but it sure was a boost to our moral. But boy, did we pay for it for a couple of weeks after that. Any way, go on with your story sir.”

“Well from there I was sent to East Coast and took command of this very ship and spent the next year and half in various campaigns in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. We got hit from time to to time, but not like we did off Salerno, Italy. Thats how I got this bum leg. For the next year I had a nice cushy job in Washington and remarried. Then they pinned these stars on my collar and gave me my old ship and sent me to the Pacific. Now the war's over, we're all going home. Where's home for you?”

“Des Moines, Iowa. I don't know if the folks back home even know that I'm alive. I wrote to them just before we sailed to tell that I was coming home.”

“Well good luck to you Lieutenant in whatever you do with your life. Thanks for coming to see me.”

“And good luck to you sir. Thanks for the ride home.”

Sheffield's visit with Lieutenant Hemsley took him back in time to that morning nine days before the war began. When he left home that morning for what he thought was to be a routine training cruise, he was eager to get back to take Geannie and the kids home to Roanoke and safety. In his mind's eye, he could still see her as she tried to persuade him to stay just a few minutes longer. As with every time that memory came to mind, he kicked himself for not giving in to her seduction. As it turned out, the next time he saw her was just before she died.

The next year was the most difficult period of his life. Not only was he grieving for Geannie, Sandy and Austin, but he had a war to fight. His thoughts turned to the one person who had helped him the most through that difficult time; Ramona. He didn't know what he would have done without her. He attributed the fact that he got through that dark time to his faith in God and her love for him. He wasn't aware at the time, but she had been in love with him for a long, long time, knowing that she could never tell him.

It so happened that that day was September 11th. Two years to the day that he had been seriously injured off Salerno. That began another difficult time for him as he had to recover and heal from his wounds. Again, it was Ramona who got him through. Just before sailing for the Mediterranean, he realized that he had fallen in love with her. When he returned to the States, she was there to nurse him back to health and his love for her grew deeper.

He wasn't sure if he could ever love again and was happy to know that he could. Marrying Ramona had made all the difference in his life and he couldn't wait to get home to her. If only she could be waiting for him when they pulled into Pearl Harbor in a few days.

After having revisited the past and looking to the future, Sheffield's attention returned to the business at hand. Fortunately, he was no longer sending men off on missions that some might not return from. Aside from the leisureliness of this cruise he spent time in his office catching up on the reports that he had to write regarding the operations off the coast of Japan, particularly the unfortunate incident on the day the war was supposed to be over.

He also spent a lot of time with his staff who had been at his side since his promotion. They were all good capable men and had contributed immensely to their success ever since leaving Norfolk. Once they got to Hawaii, he wanted to do something to show his appreciation. He and Mace spent many hours shooting the breeze as they reminisced over the good old days in Hawaii before the war and their travels together during the war. They decided that they'd go out deep sea fishing once they got to Pearl as they had done in Rio.

And so the cruise went. On the evening of the sixth day at sea, the task force crossed the International Date Line and September 13th reverted back to the 12th. The next day, they were passing just north of Midway; through the very waters where that epic battle that had turned the tide of the war fought more than three years earlier.

The closer they got to Hawaii, anticipation grew and time seemed to slow down. Finally on the 16th they were only a day away. As nice as pulling into Pearl Harbor would be, pulling into New York Harbor would be even better because then they would be home.

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The light carriers Monterrey and Bataan were actual ships and both departed Japan on September 7th, bound for Pearl Harbor. How they got there is undermined.

First Lieutenant Bart Hemsley is a fictional character. However many of the ships returning from Japan did bring former prisoners of war with them.