

Chapter XIII

Staggerwing

July 1, 1947 – August 4, 1947

A month is a long time to be away, but everything in order when they got home. It was amazing how much the calves grew while they were gone. The first order of business was to unpack and put everything away. Now they needed to rest up from their vacation.

The calves weren't the only thing that had grown. The hay was ready to mow again. The next day, Sheffield had Craig help him hitch up the mower to the tractor, then he showed him what to do. Craig enjoyed driving the tractor, he liked anything with a motor. He was careful not to leave any hay standing. The alfalfa fell over the seven foot cycle bar as the tractor moved through the field. He plugged up a couple of times was all. Again the scent of fresh mown hay permeated the air around the ranch and wafted through the open windows of the house. The aroma lingered all day and into the night.

On Thursday morning, Sheffield and Craig unhitched the mower and hooked up the side rake to the tractor. Again Sheffield showed him what to do. Craig caught on fast and went to work. As the tractor moved through the field, the seven bars containing spring teeth went around and around, sweeping the loose hay to the side. Another pass up the other side left a neat windrow to dry in the sun and the summer breeze.

Sheffield was was glad that they had the ranch so he could keep the kids busy. Mike and Samantha had taught them to work, the ranch gave them something constructive to do. They even talked about getting a few chickens as well, not only to have fresh eggs but to give Janet something to be responsible for.

On Friday the 4th of July, they headed up to the cabin to celebrate with the Austins. Naturally any gathering of the Austins included Walt and Sarah. It was the first opportunity that Craig had to see Edith since returning from their vacation. It was obvious that their friendship was quickly moving into the sweetheart stage. Sheffield and Stirling talked about them. They had been friends since the sixth grade. At the time, no one could have predicted that one day, Sheffield would be his father. It was ironic, another Brason boy and an Austin girl paired up. Where their friendship and relationship might go, no one could say, but some had a secret wish.

While Sheffield and Stirling were talking about Craig and Edith, Ramona was talking to Ray. While she was on vacation he finished the house that he had been working on. She had kept him busy and he appreciated her businesses because she was always coming up with jobs for him. She liked his work and trusted him completely to the point that she didn't have anyone else bid her jobs.

She had kept him busy ever since he got out of the SeaBees and started his own business. He enlisted at eighteen, right out of high school and spent four years honing his construction skills. At twenty three years old he had become highly skilled. He was still single and was dating but didn't have a serious girlfriend yet. Everyone was always trying to set him up with who they said was the perfect girl for him.

At the beginning of the next week, the hay was ready to be baled and again Sheffield put Craig to work. He baled in the morning, and in the afternoon, they all helped haul it into the barnyard to be stacked. Janet wanted Craig to make a playhouse for her out of hay bales. So he arranged the bales so they made steps up the stack. Then, arranging the bales like giant bricks he fashioned a room complete with windows. Inside, he placed a couple of bales for her to sit on. Lastly, he laid some planks across the top and covered them with bales, enclosing the room. It was her secret hideout, even though Craig new new where it was.

Later in the week, Janet was playing in her playhouse in the haystack. In her imagination, it was a castle and she was the princess. As she climbed up to the top to survey her kingdom, a loose bale slipped out from under her, causing her to tumble down the stepped bales at the front of the stack, coming to stop about halfway down, landing on her arm. In the process, she felt her right arm break.

She laid their for a moment, too stunned to react, then the pain brought her to tears as she sat up. Coming down the haystack the rest of the way, she held her arm. It hurt real bad but as she contemplated going to the house, her tears became tears of dread for fear of being in trouble. She stopped halfway back to the house and attempted to regain her composure. Opening the door with her left hand, she came in through the back door into the family room.

Ramona was in the office by the front door looking over the costs involved in the house that she was ready to put up for sale. She heard someone rattling around in the bathroom. Whoever it was, had turned on the water. Then she heard something crash to the floor. She got up and went to see what was the matter.

“Janet, honey.” she gasped. “What happened.”

Janet was covered with scratches on her face, arms, and legs and hay was stuck to her hair and clothes.”

“I fell down the front of the haystack.” she whimpered.

“Are you hurt?” she asked as she brushed the hay from her hair.

“I’m alright.” she lied.

Ramona took a damp washcloth and wiped the scratches on her face. “You don’t look too bad. I think you’ll live.” She rinsed the wash cloth and took her right arm to wipe the scratches on it.

“Owww!” Janet wailed.

Ramona knew instantly what was wrong as her arm was crooked and didn’t feel solid.

“Owww!” Janet wailed again.

“You’re not so fine after all. You’ve got a broken arm.”

“I’m sorry Mom. I didn’t mean to.” She let her pent up tears flow freely. “Please don’t be mad at me.”

“Oh Janet, I’m not mad at you.” She said as she hugged her, trying not to hurt her arm. “We need to take you to the doctor and get it set.”

Being a nurse, Ramona had an assortment of first aid supplies on hand, including a sling. She put it around her neck to immobilize the arm and proceeded to clean the rest of the scratches. Ramona loaded her into the car and took her to the doctor to have it set and a cast put on. Janet was still worried that Ramona would be upset with her, but the concern melted away when they stopped by for an ice cream cone on the way home.

When they got back from the doctor with her arm in a cast and a sling, Sheffield and Craig had just returned from the Austin Lumber yard with the material to build a chicken coop. Janet was confident that her mom wasn't upset with her, but she wasn't sure how her dad would react. She was relieved that he to reacted with kindness and sympathy. He gave her a hug and said, "You'll have to let it get better so you can take care of your chickens."

Sheffield had been thinking about having his own plane ever since Harvey mentioned the surplus planes available from the military. He made a few telephone calls and learned more about it. It turned out that there were several at the Norfolk Naval Air Station awaiting disposal, so he arranged to take a tip and have a look for himself. Ramona told him that she'd split the cost with him from some of her recent earnings.

Anticipating flying home in his own plane, he took the train to Norfolk. From the depot he made his way to the air station. He showed his credentials at the gate and was allowed in and was directed to the surplus officer, Lieutenant Commander Judd Jolson, at a small hanger in a remote corner of the base.

Outside the hangar, a number of planes were parked awaiting disposal. We went in and introduced himself to Commander Jolson and explained the purpose of his visit. The Commander took him out to have a look at what was available. Most of the planes were trainers and utility aircraft, but there were a few combat aircraft as well.

"Are they serviceable?" Sheffield asked.

"Yes sir, absolutely. Everything you see here is ready to fly. Anything that isn't gets sent to the scrappers. So what do you have in mind, Admiral?"

"I see some Stearman 75s over there. I've spent a quite a bit of time in them. Call me old school, but there is just something about the rush of the wind around me in the open cockpit. Now that 's flying."

Commander Jolson took him over to have a closer look. Sheffield looked them over and selected one still in the yellow training colors. He looked it over good on the outside and got up on the wing to have a look in the cockpit.

"Would you like to take'er up?" Commander Jolson asked.

"Really?"

“Sure. I wouldn't expect you to buy a used car with out taking for a test drive. Why would buying a plane be any different?”

Sheffield climbed down off the wing and Commander Jolson lead him back into the hangar and outfitted him with some flight gear, including a leather helmet, goggles, and a parachute. Sheffield put it on and returned to the plane. He climbed in and strapped himself in and started it up. It ran great as he throttled it up to have a listen.

Commander Jolson removed the wheel chocks and motioned for him to taxi over to the auxiliary runway. A moment later, he was poised and ready for take off. Once the signal was given, he let his feet off the brakes and again experienced the thrill of taking flight. Soon he was airborne and gaining altitude over Chesapeake Bay. As he climbed higher, he banked around and flew over Newport News and out over the Virginia countryside.

His flying time had been few and far between over the last few years. Each time he took to the air, he was reminded that he was at home up there. He became one with the flying machine as he put it through some maneuvers. While caught up in the excitement, the thought occurred to him, “How am I going to share this with my family? I can only take them up one at a time.”

It occurred to him that buying a plane such as that would be a selfish thing to do. As he thought about it, he banked around and headed back to the air station. He made his approach and was given clearance to land and was soon he has back at the surplus hangar.

“How was it?” Commander Jolson asked.

“She's a great plane and handled well, but do you have something that will hold say five people?”

“Have I got a deal for you. Follow me.”

Sheffield followed him into the hangar. “We just got in a Beechcraft GB-1 that had been used as a liaison transport. My men have it serviced but we haven't moved it outside yet.”

Sheffield stood before the GB-1, which was the Navy's version of the Model D17S Staggerwing. “I've flown one of these before.” Sheffield said. “Its a great plane. Fast and quite maneuverable.”

He hopped up onto the lower wing and opened the door and entered the cabin. The luxurious cabin was trimmed in leather and mohair, a silk-like fabric made from the hair of the Angora goat. The best feature of all, it held up to five passengers. Two in the front and three in the back.

After sitting at the controls a moment, he emerged from the cabin and stepped off the wing. He stepped back and looked it over. Its unusual design was quite ascetically pleasing. The Staggerwing was unique in the fact that the lower wing was farther forward than the upper wing. The way the upper wing was arranged gave a good upward view from the front seats.

He walked around to the front and ran his hand over one of the blades of the two bladed propeller

that was powered by a 450 horsepower Pratt & Whitney R-985 Wasp Junior radial engine. It had a maximum speed of 212 miles and hour and cruised at 200. At a rate of climb of 1,500 feet per minute and could reach a service ceiling of 25,000 feet.



With a minimum take off distance of 600 feet and a minimum landing distance of 750 feet, it could easily land and take off from the one thousand foot runway that he envisioned along the highway. With a range of 670 miles, he could take his family places.

He stooped down to have a look the retractable landing gear. Then he circled clear round the plane looking it over closely. It was painted in the tri-color camouflage scheme with the star and bar

national insignia on the top of the outside edge upper left wing and on the bottom of the right wing and on either side of the fuselage.

“Did you say that she was ready to fly?”

“Yes sir. Let me get some men to push her outside.”

Commander Jolson had three men drop what they were doing and wheeled it out of the hangar. Sheffield shed his flight gear and left it just inside of the hanger door. He climbed back into the cabin and invited the Commander to join him. Once they were both seated, Sheffield checked the instrument panel before starting the engine. “It’s quiet.” he commented.

“This particular plane,” he said “had been equipped with extra sound proofing. Its as quiet as riding in a Cadillac.”

Again Sheffield taxied over to the auxiliary runway and waited for clearance to take off. Momentarily he was given the word and started down the runway. Once he was airborne, he retracted the landing gear and began to climb.

“She flies like a Cadillac too.” Sheffield said as he gained altitude.

“This particular aircraft, “ Commander Jolson explained, “rolled off the assembly line in 1940 and was immediately pressed into service by the Navy. She was well used but never abused.”

“How much would she cost me?”

“When it was new, it went for between fourteen and seventeen thousand. The current models are selling for twenty nine grand. Figuring depreciation, I can let you have this one for three thousand dollars.”

“Is that all?” Sheffield was surprised. “I figured it would be between five thousand and seventy five hundred. Why hasn’t anyone already taken it?”

“When we get one in, they go fast. You're the first one to come in since we got it. So what do you think?”

“This isn't what I came looking for, but its perfect for what I really want. I'll take it.”

“Good choice, Admiral Brason.”

By the time they closed the deal they were out over the Virginia countryside. Sheffield banked around to return to the air station.

Commander Jolson continued, “There's just a little more we wanted to do to it before we listed it for sale. If you can wait until tomorrow afternoon, we'll have it all ready for you.”

“That's fine. I wanted to go and visit my old ship tomorrow morning any way.”

“Which one?”

“The Reprisal. I understand she is in the navy yard for upkeep.”

“Really. You were on the Reprisal.”

“I was her first captain and later in the Pacific she was my flagship. What about you, Commander? Where did you serve during the war?”

Commander Jolson explained that he had been with the patrol squadrons. The rest of the way back they talked about their naval careers. Once they were back at the hangar, arrangements were made to meet again tomorrow at one o'clock to complete the deal.

Sheffield found his way to Freddy's office at the Navy base. He had called ahead to tell him that he would be in the area. Freddy had invited him to stay the night with he and Susan. He had a little business to finish while Sheffield waited and when he was done, he took Sheffield home with him.

Over dinner they visited about told times and got caught up. Freddy told him about the two cruises to the Mediterranean with the Reprisal. She was still his flagship, even though she was in the yard. He said that in October they were scheduled for a deployment to the Caribbean and South Atlantic, with a port calls as far away as Cape Town, South Africa. Freddy planned on retiring in another year, giving him thirty years in the Navy. Sheffield told them all about his new family and what he'd been doing.

That evening Sheffield called Ramona to tell her about what he found. She was more excited about the idea when he told her what he was getting. She remembered the Staggerwing that he had checked out in Hawaii for their getaway to Kona the year before. She said, “This will be the best of both worlds. You can go flying anytime you want and you can take all of us with you.” She also said that she would go to the bank in the morning and put fifteen hundred dollars in his account.

The next morning, Freddy took Sheffield to the Norfolk Navy Yard to revisit his old ship. The last time he had seen her was when they parted company in New York City in October of 1945. She had received a face lift just after that, having a funnel cap added to her stack, the gun tubs on super structure

and the flight deck fore and aft of the super structure had been removed, both the navigation and the flag bridge had been expanded, and she had received a new foremast. After that refit, was when Sheffield was offered the chance to delay his retirement and take her to the Mediterranean. He declined and that's when Freddy was promoted to Admiral and took command of the task force built around her. Now, she was in dry dock again for upkeep.

After the tour, Freddy took Sheffield to lunch and then to the surplus hangar for his one o'clock appointment with Commander Jolson. They had finished detailing the plane and it was ready to go. The paperwork was ready and all it needed was his signature. Sheffield made out the check and signed the forms and the plane was his.

He took off and headed for home. Again, he became one with the plane as he went through every maneuver he could think of. The plane performed magnificently and it didn't seem to care that he had a bum leg. Sheffield was like a kid on Christmas morning as he looped and rolled, climbed and dove. He was back where he felt at home and now, he could go there anytime he wanted.

He buzzed the house a couple of times to get everyone's attention. On his last pass, he could see them out in the yard waving at him. He rolled down the window and waved back. He pulled up and came around to line up with the pasture and came in for a landing. He taxied up close to the house and shut off the engine.

Ramona followed the kids out to the plane. As they drew near, Sheffield opened the door and emerged from the cabin onto the left wing. "What do you think?" he asked.

"I think its great." Ramona said.

"Can we go for a ride?" Janet begged.

"Sure." Sheffield said.

Janet began to scramble up onto the wing the best she could with her arm in a sling."

"Let you mother get in first."

Janet stepped back and Sheffield held his hand out to Ramona and helped her onto the wing. She stepped through the hatch which was very similar to a car door. It was the only way in or out. Directly behind it was a hatch that opened upward. Behind it was a storage compartment and access to the rear fuselage. Ramona made her way to the front passenger seat on the left side of the plane. There was only one set of controls so the only thing before her was a few dials on the control panel. At the moment the wheel was folded over in it's stowed position in front of the passenger seat to give the pilot room to get in and out of his seat. The floor was carpeted and the leather covered seat was cushioned and very comfortable. Next, Sheffield got in and sat in the pilots seat and slid it forward and folded the wheel over in front of him.

Once they were situated, Sheffield called over his shoulder, "Okay Norma, you're next, then Janet,

and Craig, you're last.”

She climbed onto the wing and into the rear of the cabin and slid over to the left side of the bench seat. Craig helped Janet up onto the wing and she got in next to Norma. Craig got in last and shut the door behind him. There was plenty room for all three of them, in fact, three adults would fit. Directly behind them was a curtain that separated the cabin from the storage compartment, allowing access to it.

“Alright, everybody, put on your lap belts.”

“This is really comfortable.” Ramona said. “How is it back there? Are you comfortable?”

“This is just like being the car.” Janet said.

“Listen to this.” Sheffield said as he started the engine.”

“My, its quiet.” Ramona observed.

“Okay, here we go.” Sheffield taxied out into the pasture for the take off run. In a moment, they were in the air. Sheffield banked around to the left so they could look down at the house. Janet said, “The animals look like toys.”

As the plane climbed higher, Ramona turned around and asked, “Are you alright Norma?” Remembering the issue she had when they flew to Hawaii and her bout of seasickness on the boat.

“I think I'll be alright.”

Sheffield took them alongside the mountains to the north and circled around to the east of Roanoke. “I can't believe how nice this is.” Ramona said. “I thought you'd bring home some old beat up two seater with open cockpits.”

“I did look at Stearman pretty seriously, but then it occurred to me that I needed something that would fit all of us. They just happened to have this. It was used to haul around the Commander of the Atlantic Fleet and his staff.”

“No wonder its in such good shape.”

“I don't think its ever been left outside. I was told that it was well used but not abused.”

“You'll want to take good care of it too. You ought to build a shed or something to park it in. I'd bet Ray could build something for you.”

“That's just what I was thinking. I'll have to talk to him about it.”

The flight path took them around to the south of Roanoke and along the hills to the south. Looking down, Craig said, “Look, there's the Rowan place.”

Sheffield went on up and around and made his approach from the west and lined up with the pasture. “I'd also like to have Danny put in a landing strip for me.” After a twenty minute ride, they were back in the pasture, next to the house.

“Dad, will you teach me to fly?” Craig asked as he opened the door.”

“Sure, if you'd like.”

Over supper they talked about all of the places they could go in it. Ramona suggested taking Shenan and Emily down to see Ruth Ann.

That evening, Sheffield called Shennan and Danny and asked them to come over on Saturday to see what it would take to build a landing strip. He also called Stirling and Ray and asked them to come over to see what it would take to erect a small hangar.

The next day the plane sat where was. On Saturday, his brother and brother in law and their boys came over. Shenan had brought his surveying equipment and took a look. Danny said he would need to dig it down a little and bring in some gravel. They suggested that it be built up a little higher than grade level for drainage.

Ray said that he had built a lot of hangars in the Seabees. They were inexpensive and easy to assemble. Stirling said that he could get the material. With a thirty foot wing span, it would have to be at least thirty six feet wide. Danny added that he could level off a place for a concrete slab to set it on. Shenan surveyed that too. By the time they were done, they had it all staked out. They each said they 'd see what it would cost and get back to him next week.

Once their businesses was done, they wanted a ride. Danny, a pilot himself, got in the front passenger seat while Shenan, Stirling, and Ray got into the back seat. It was just a little cramped for three grown men. Once in the air, Sheffield told them the story of how he found it and the deal that he got. That got Danny's attention. He wanted to look into getting a plane of his own.

Sheffield and Craig suspended their work on the chicken coop and spent the next two or three days putting up another fence fifty back from the road. First they went to town and bought some steel fence posts and some barbed wire. Next they borrowed a post pounder from Roger Rowan. They set the posts and then stretched five strands of barbed wire.

While working on these projects together, Sheffield and Craig talked about a host of things. Sheffield was looking for the opportunity to have “the talk” with him. He wasn't particularly excited to have the conversation and didn't know what he'd say when the opportunity presented itself.

Craig mentioned how he was looking forward to his birthday and being able to drive at night because he wanted to take Edith to a movie.

Perhaps this was the opening that Sheffield was looking for. “You really like her a lot don't you?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“What do you mean, 'I guess'? For guessing, you sure spend a lot of time with her.”

Craig paused what he was doing and answered, “Yeah, I really like her a lot.”

“Its quite obvious.” Sheffield replied. “It also obvious that she likes you an awful lot too. Edith is a

good girl and I like her a lot too, after all she is my niece. Sterling and I talked about the two of you at the Fourth of July picnic up at the cabin.”

“Oh yeah, what about?”

“Just how the two of you have become quite an item. He can't think of anyone he'd rather have her be with than you.”

“Really, that's good to know.”

“And I told him that I couldn't think of anyone that I'd like to see you with. But...”

That got Craig's attention. “But what?”

“Well its just that your still pretty young.”

“Oh you think so?” Craig asked almost defensively. “What about you and Aunt Geannie, or Stirling and Loraine?”

“You've got us there, Craig.”

“Yeah and it turned out alright didn't it.”

“Yes it did. The point is that we just want you to take things slow and easy. We don't want to see you kids get into trouble.”

“We won't.” Craig assured him.

“I trust you, Craig. But let me ask you something?”

“Yeah, whats that?”

“Do you remember the day we spent at Waikiki Beach?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“Do you remember that group of girls in bikinis?”

Craig blushed.

“They were some very beautiful young ladies, weren't they? I might be old enough to be their father but I'm not too old to know what a pretty girl looks like.”

“So you saw them too?”

“Um huh. Your mother and I saw that you were watching them. Don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with taking a look. If you don't look once, you're not a man. But if you look twice, well you're on shaky ground and the third time is just pure lust. I'd say you had one very long look and they were giving you plenty to look at. It was pretty exciting wasn't it? I know what its like to be a sixteen year old boy. At that age your hormones can really get pumping and if you're not careful they can do the thinking for you.

“One time when I was about your age, Geannie and I snuck away from Sunday School. I took her up into the bell tower were my Dad's assistant minister caught us making out, as kids call it now days. We never intended to anything either, but if we hadn't of got caught, its hard to say what might of happened.

Can I ask you a personal question?"

"I guess. What?"

"Have you kissed Edith yet?"

A shy smile came across Craig's face and he looked away.

"I promise, I won't say anything to anyone." Sheffield assured him.

Craig turned back to face his dad and admitted, "Yeah, a few times."

"Did you feel something that I can only describe as electricity?"

"Yeah, whats that all about anyway?"

"It means there is something there, some call it chemistry. You know that I dated Samantha's cousin, Paula, for a little while. When I kissed her, there wasn't anything there. That's how I knew we weren't getting anywhere. But when that spark is there, you know that you're onto to something. Its pretty exciting isn't it. But as exciting as it is you still have to keep it special, otherwise it might become ordinary and loose its meaning."

"I get it." Craig said.

"The thing I'm getting at Craig is, did either of your parents ever have 'the talk' with you?"

"What do you mean by 'the talk'?"

"You know, about sex."

"Yeah I know. I just wanted to hear you say sex. No, they didn't, but I've figured out a few things on my own, mostly things I've heard in the locker room."

"Yeah, I'll bet. I've heard some of those things too. Believe me, thats not where to get it from. Let me ask you this, do you know what a woman looks like?"

"Of course I do, they're everywhere."

"I mean naked. Have you ever seen a woman without clothes?"

Again Craig turned away. "Just pictures of famous art and statues."

"Thats okay, Craig. Theres nothing wrong with that. Thats just the facts of life. Its the real thing that can get you into trouble. There's a reason that we keep ourselves covered up and thats because that kind of exposure is only meant for a husband and wife. Just like kissing, it keeps their relationship alive and special, something just between the two of them. If people went around showing themselves off to just anyone, there wouldn't be anything special about it. Trust me, if you hold off and wait until someday when you're married it will be so much more special. Promise yourself that, alright."

"Okay. I will."

"And that goes for sex, too. Sex is a very complicated matter. It brings a lot of excitement and at the same time a lot of emotion and responsibility. For one thing, it is an expression of love meant only for a

husband and wife. I've seen too many times what happens when a guy and a girl get ahead of themselves. Ruth Ann is a good example of that. Instead of elevating themselves to something wonderful, It dumps them into a pit of misery, sorrow, and unhappiness. Second of all you've got to be ready for the responsibility that comes with it. You do realize that that where babies come from don't you?"

"That's one of the things that I had figured out."

"If you don't mind, tell me what else you've figured out so I can set the record straight."

For the next little while they talked about some very specific things. Sheffield did it in such a manner as to not let it become vile or disgusting. Some of the notions that Craig had did need to be corrected. In the end he had a healthy understanding of the facts of life; hopefully enough to dispel any curiosity that needed explored on its own.

When they were done, Sheffield said, "I'm glad we had this talk. I have to admit that I was as nervous going into it as you were. I told Ramona that she was better able to handle it, but she said that you would take it better from me than from her."

"That's for sure. That would have been award. I'm glad that you were so open with me. That means that you trust me with the things that you've told me. Don't worry, I won't let you down."

"I know. And more importantly I know that you won't let yourself down."

From there they went on to talk about other things as they worked together and the bond between them grew even stronger. That evening he reported to Ramona that he had had 'the talk' with Craig.

"How did it go?" she asked.

"Very well, I must admit. It went better than I ever expected it to."

"So what did you talk about?"

"Well, that's just between him and me. But I will say that he took it very well. He's a good young man and he'll do the right thing."

"Fair enough. I don't need to know the details. I'm proud of you for having the courage to do it. I'm sure that you did a better job of it than I ever could have done."

"Now it's your turn, Sweetheart."

"What do you mean, Babe."

"I'm talking about Norma. After all, she's at that age too. If they didn't talk to Craig about it, you can bet that they didn't talk to her either. Fortunately you've got a while before you'll need to talk to Janet."

"Don't worry, I'll have 'the talk' with Norma."

Over the next couple of days they finished the fence. Once the area for the landing strip was cordoned off, Danny came over with his road grader and carved out a groove thirty feet wide and a

thousand feet long. While he was there, he scraped out a base for the hangar. With that done, Ray had the concrete poured and left it to cure. Meanwhile, Danny began hauling in gravel with his dump truck, which took several loads.

During that time, Sheffield and Craig finished the chicken coop. After it was finished at the end of the week, they went and got eighteen Rhode Island Red hens and two roosters, along with some feed. During the day, the chickens roamed around the barn yard and at night they roosted in the chicken coop. Broken arm or not, it was Janet's job to gather the eggs in the evening and bring them in. At first there weren't very many eggs, as expected, but with a little time there were sure to be more.

During the next week, Danny came back with his road grader and leveled out the runway and packed it down. Meanwhile Ray put up the steel frame for the hangar. Using Danny's loader, he lifted the girders into place. Then he attached the large sheets of corrugated steel to the walls and the roof. The last piece to go into place was the large rolling curtain for the door. By the end of the week everything was finished and the plane was parked inside.

While all of this was going on, Ramona sold another house and had bought another one for Ray to fix up along with an apartment building with four units that already had tenants living in them. She had really gotten into her new career and was amazed at the income that her investments were bringing in. The best thing about it was that it only took a little time each day, most of which she could do at home, leaving the rest of time to take care of the kids.

Sheffield had been looking forward with anticipation to his thirty year class reunion, as it would be the first one he would be able to attend. He missed his five year reunion in 1922 because he was on his world cruise, but Geannie was there. They both missed their ten year reunion in 1927 because they were living in San Diego. Geannie did attend their twenty year reunion, but Sheffield was in Norfolk organizing his newly commissioned squadron.

He got out his high school year book that he hadn't looked at in years. He wasn't at the yearbook party because he was already at the Academy. Geannie had picked it up for him and had his friends and classmates sign it for him. So many of them he hadn't since graduation, even though many of them still lived in the valley.

The reunion was held at the Hotel Roanoke on a Saturday evening. As he entered the ballroom, he searched the crowd for faces that he recognized. In thirty years people change. Finally he saw Walt and Sarah who were visiting with Bill and Marge Casper. Sarah and Bill had both been in the Roanoke High School Class of 1917. He and Ramona made their way to where they were and joined them.

He might not have recognized many of them, nearly all of them recognized him. After all, he was the

hometown war hero. Fortunately, everyone was wearing name tags, so he could put names with faces as he mingled and visited with his old classmates. Almost everyone knew what happened to Geannie, but many were not aware that he had remarried so he introduced Ramona to them. There were a couple of people who knew nothing of his naval career, or that he and Geannine had got married, or what happened to her. It was interesting that some of the more popular kids hadn't gone very far, but some of the more unlikely kids had gone on to be quite successful.



During the last week of July, anticipation mounted for the arrival of the piano. It should arrive any day now.

Ramona had checked around and found a piano teacher for the girls in Salem. Norma could start immediately, but Janet would have to wait for two or three weeks until she got her cast taken off.

Then on Thursday, the twenty fourth of July, Ramona received a call from the train depot saying that a crate had arrived for her. Sheffield and Craig took the pickup into town to get it. At the depot, they were directed to back up to the

loading dock where three men loaded it into the back of the pickup.

On the way home, Sheffield wondered how they would get it unloaded. When they got home, he put the tailgate down and backed up to the back porch as close as he could get. There was a bit of a gap over the steps, so he and Craig retrieved the planks that had held up the roof on Janet's playhouse. It took all five of them to push, pull, and slide it out of the pickup.

Once it was on the porch, Sheffield pried the crate open, revealing the packing around the piano. Once all of that was removed, pushing it through the back door into the family room wasn't too difficult. Once in place, it looked as if the house was built around it. It just belonged there.

Norma was a bit rusty, but she sat down to plunk out a tune. It was way off tune. In shipping, it had been jostled around enough to become out of tune. Ramona called a piano tuner in Roanoke and arranged for him to come out and tune it up but he couldn't come until Tuesday.

Norma in particular couldn't wait. On Tuesday the man came out as promised. By the time he was done, the thirty year old piano was producing rich, vibrant strains. Sheffield said that it sounded just as good as it did when he got it for Geannie. The piano tuner found the story behind it fascinating, especially when Sheffield told him how much he had paid for it. He explained that it was a Wing & Son Walnut Style 23 Upright Piano and according to the serial number, it had been built in 1917. On Thursday, Norma resumed

piano lessons.

With the airstrip project completed, there was only one thing missing. Sheffield had two three hundred gallon gas tanks brought out and set up. One in the barn yard for regular gasoline for the tractor and vehicles and one next to the hangar for aviation fuel. Now he was all set.

He had been so busy getting things in place that he hadn't had time to do any flying, but Ramona did arrange for him to take Shenan and Emily down to see Ruth Ann. By then it was the first of August and they hadn't seen her since the middle of May. On Friday morning, Sheffield pulled the plane out of the hangar and had it fueled, serviced, and ready to go. Ramona had their bags packed and stowed them in the plane.

When Shenan and Emily got there, their luggage was also placed aboard the plane. After some last minute instructions to the kids, who could fend for themselves for a few days, the four of them got in the plane. As Sheffield headed down the gravel runway into the west, it worked perfectly. It was much smoother than the pasture had been. After a stop in Nashville they went on the rest of the way to Denison. When Sheffield approached the ranch, he found that Harvey had also put in a landing strip.

It was a joyous reunion for Shenan and Emily with Ruth Ann. Her baby was now four and half months old and growing. It was also good to see Harvey and Marcella again. Of course Sheffield showed off his plane to Harvey and Joesph and took them up in it. He told Harvey about what he had done with his little ranch and invited them to come up sometime. Three days later, on Sunday afternoon, they made the return trip and found all well at home. The kids had everything in order and gotten along just fine.

The next day, August 4th, was Craig's sixteenth birthday. To celebrate, he wanted to go to the Pizza Joint. Edith joined them as well. Afterwards they all came home for cake and ice cream and when it came time to open his presents, one in particular really stood out.

When Norma handed him a rectangular package about fifteen inches long, she said, I think you'll really like this, its all you've been talking about since Hawaii."

He quickly ripped it open to see what it was. "Thanks Norma!" he exclaimed as he found it to be a wooden model kit U.S.S. Shangri-La. "I didn't even know they had such a thing. Where did you get it, anyway?"

"I happened upon it at the five and dime store. I'm glad you like it."

"Boy do I." he said as he got up and made his way to her and threw his arms around her. I can't wait to put it together."

After his birthday party, as planned that evening he took Edith to a movie. She was only five days away from her sweet sixteenth birthday, but everyone suspected that she had already been kissed. Sheffield kept his promise and didn't let to on anyone, not even to Ramona, that he knew that she had.

That evening, Sheffield and Ramona stayed up to make sure he got home alright, even though

Craig was a very responsible young man. They were in bed when they heard him come in and invited him into their bedroom and Ramona asked him about his evening.

After visiting for a moment, they told him goodnight and sent him up to his room. After he left, they continued their conversation as they lay next to each other in one another's arms. From out in the family room, they heard the strains of the piano.

"Why is Norman practicing the piano this time of night?" Ramona asked.

"That isn't Norma. That's someone who is very, very good." Sheffield answered.

"Who can it be then?"

Sheffield went to get up to go investigate, but it quit. In an instant, Geannie was standing at the side of their bed. They both sat up in utter amazement. Although the room was dark, she was clearly visible as if she was illuminated by a light emanating from within her. The radiance made her auburn hair to appear almost as a flame of fire and her green eyes shone as bright as emeralds. She wore a sky blue gown with an empire waist with a white sash tied in a bow under her bust, with the ends flowing downward. It had three quarter length flared sleeves and the hem line came to just above her ankles, revealing her bare feet, which were a few inches off the floor.

"I'm glad to see that you got my old piano back." Geannie said. "I'm even more thrilled to see the two of you together and that you have your own family now."

Neither Sheffield nor Ramona could respond, as surprise bound their tongues.

Then she looked directly at them with an intensity that seemed to penetrate flesh and blood and said, "I have come to tell you that I have found what I had been looking for all of those years, but before I can have it, I need you to find it. You'll recognize it when it finds you."

Before they could respond, Geannie had vanished as suddenly as she had appeared.

* * * * *

The term "making out" dates back to the late 1940s and referred to prolonged, passionate kissing. For the episode of Curly and Geannie kissing in the church bell tower, see Remembering Geannie chapter 1.

For the story of when Sheffield bought the piano, see Remembering Geannie, Part I, Chapter 7 "Pushing the Limits"

In 1946, Monogram Models issued a number of balsa wood ship models, including the Shangri La. The episode where Craig got to go aboard the Shangri La is in the previous chapter.