

Chapter XXXI

Traditions

July 4, 1951 – September 16, 1951

Ramona stopped by to take Emmett and Ellen to the Austin/Brason 4th of July picnic at the cabin. She helped them into the back seat and put his wheel chair in the trunk and headed up into the mountains. By the time they got there, most everyone else was already there, including Norma and Janet, who drove up on their own. The tradition had carried on for many, many years and now the two families had grown quite large with new additions all the time. It was beginning to be difficult to tell who belonged to who. With such a large number of people, not everyone was able to be there as they had other places to be. Nonetheless, those who went had a good time. Emmett tired out and Ramona had to leave early to take him home.

In the advanced stages of Parkinson's Disease, his cognitive abilities were impaired. His tremors had been replaced by rigidity that now affected his entire body, reducing his ability to move. Because his posture was fixed in a hunched forward position, he had difficulty breathing, swallowing, and even speaking. As difficult as life had become for him, it was difficult for his family to see him suffer so much.

Ellen on the other hand was still in fairly good shape at seventy eight, but she relied heavily on her sons and daughters-in-law to help take care of Emmett. She saw Ramona as an angel of mercy because of her special abilities. She truly had the gift of healing, but even at that, some things could not be reversed. She did what she could to make him comfortable.

At the end of the week, Ramona received a letter from Sheffield saying that he had arrived in Hawaii and that the cruise had gone well. She was indeed envious. She had a notion to drop everything and hop on a plane and join him, but then thought better of it. He also told about the men in the serviceman's group aboard the ship. She wrote back and told him about the Austin/Brason picnic and how his folks were doing.

After getting his letter, Janet, who was in the MIA Maid class presidency, got the idea for the girls in her class to write to the sailors that he had told them about and send them a care package of goodies. The following Tuesday night at Mutual, they assembled a package full of cookies and other baked goods. Then the girls drew names and selected one of the men to write to. Janet picked Private Powell.

She told him about herself and what she liked to do and how she hoped to make the track team. She thanked him for what he was doing and encouraged him to remain faithful. Hers was similar to the letters that the other girls wrote. After boxing it all up, the next day their advisor took it to the post office and sent it via airmail, in hopes that it would catch up to them while the goodies were still somewhat fresh.

Janet was healing from her latest accident a month earlier. She no longer needed her crutches and had the stitches removed. The scar was still tender and easily inflamed. She wasn't able to run and worried

about her chances of making the junior varsity track team when school started in the fall. As time passed, she worked to strengthen her leg muscles, but wasn't up to running yet

Now that they were through with all of the traveling, Norma was able to work more at the music store during the summer months. What her scholarship didn't cover, the trust fund that Samantha had set up for the kids' education would cover the rest. Still she needed the money she earned to buy clothes and other incidentals. Living at home would save her a lot of money.

Because of the war, many of the young men just older than her had been drafted, narrowing the field. Of the boys her age, Ammon Fielding and Grant Furness still competed for her attention. She was dating both of them sporadically, but the more she played hard to get, the more they competed for her affection.

She never really got over her crush on Read Rowan. Now that he was home from school, she more aggressively asserted herself in trying to get him to notice her. But she was afraid that she was doomed to the role of his best friend's kid sister. But then he started dropping by once or twice a week. He said it was to check on their cattle. But he seemed to pay more attention to her than the livestock. Could it be that he had finally noticed her?

Craig wrote home each week from boot camp. He never complained about the rigor of his training and always had positive things to say. Edith came over often, as the Brason's had long been her second family.

Ramona and the girls worked, tending the garden and taking care of the yard. The animals were in the pasture and pretty much took care of themselves. Ramona spent time reviewing Sheffield's lesson plans so she would be ready when school started. She was always on the look out for another house to buy and looking for buyers for the one she had for sale.

During the second week in July, another letter arrived from Sheffield.

Monday July 9, 1951

Pearl Harbor, Territory of Hawaii

Dear Ramona and Girls

I wish you could have been here. I know how much you love it here. Its just not the same without you. As for me, I wish I could have been home and gone to the Austin/Brason 4th of July picnic. It sounds like everyone had a good time. I'm glad that you took my folks. It sounds like Dad isn't doing very well at all. I hope he can hold on until I can come home. I'm going to write to them as as soon as I finish

writing to you.

I have gotten off the ship several times while we've been here. I had Lieutenant Moncur line up a car for me and had the guys in the serviceman's group assigned to be my drivers. That way I can spend time with them without it looking like fraternization.

One day I drove out past where your beach house used to be. It has since been torn down and nice new house now sets on the lot and the one next to it. There are several other big new homes all along the cove now. In a way, its sad to see it gone, but I suppose it was for the best.

Last Thursday, I had Seaman Bates drive me up to Hale so I could attend the Temple since I was this close. Living were we do, we have to take advantage of it anytime we're near one, don't we. Patrick left me off out front and parked the car, then joined me for a session.

I wish you could have been with me. If its any consolation, Geannine was. That being the place where she made the connection with what she was looking for, I felt her presence near me the whole time I was there. I think that was probably the first time that Seaman Bates ever saw an Admiral in tears.

I have to admit, and you know this, even though I have moved on and have you and the kids, I still miss her and Sandy and Austin terribly. At least it doesn't hurt anymore. I always will until I, or should I say we, can be with them again. I know how much you loved her and still miss her too.

On Saturday evening I did what has become a tradition for me. I hosted a banquet for my staff. I had Phil book a place for us and he was able to get one of the smaller banquet halls at the Halekulani Hotel at Waikiki. In fact it was in the same room where Admiral Halsey had the going away dinner for me. Do you remember? I invited you to join me as my dinner companion that evening. It was a last minute thing and you were good enough to accompany me. Who would have imagined then that one day we'd be married.

I wanted to show my appreciation for how they pulled together as team in such a short amount of time. I included my entire staff, including the junior officers and enlisted men. Afterward, I took the occasion to thank each one of them personally for what they do.

On Sunday I attended the Oahu Stake Conference since the serviceman's branch is part of the stake. The tabernacle where we met is a beautiful chapel that was built back in 1941. I had been by it a number of times over the years and never realized what it was.

I'm sure you've been by it too. It's where Kalakaua Avenue meets South Beretania Street. It's the chapel with the large mural of Christ with upraised arms above the front door.

Janet, the men got the package that you and the girls in your class sent. It arrived Saturday and they told me that other than a few crumbled cookies, the goodies arrived intact. I know that they really appreciated them. They each are going to write back, if they haven't already. Thanks for thinking of them, that was sweet of you.

I need to close now so I Lieutenant Moncur can get this posted for me. We are making preparations for getting underway and we'll be at sea for the next ten days. There is a lot to do before we'll be ready for action.

Just know that I love you and that I miss you. I look forward to hearing from you again.

Love Sheffield

Sheffield gave Lieutenant Moncur a bundle of letters to have posted. Besides the letter to Ramona and the girls, there was one to his parents and one to Craig. The Essex pulled away from the dock and began making way through the harbor and down the channel, followed by the two undamaged destroyers that had accompanied her from San Diego.

For the next ten days, the Essex stayed out at sea, operating in an area one hundred miles south of Honolulu and one hundred miles west of Kona on the Island of Hawaii. The purpose of the exercises was to give the air group some practical combat training.

On July 10, 1951, peace talks began between the U.N. and North Korea at Kaesong. Perhaps by

the time they reached the war zone, they would no longer be needed. Combat continued while the belligerents negotiated; the UN forces' goal was to recapture all of South Korea and to avoid losing any more territory, while the Chinese and North Koreans had a similar objective.

Their target during the training exercises was the Navy's bombing range on Kahoolawe. At just under forty five square miles, Kahoolawe is the smallest of the main Hawaiian Islands. It was uninhabited and part of the island had been used as a bombing and gunnery range since 1920. In 1941 the entire island was taken over for that purpose.

Now, during this new war, carrier based aircraft played a critical role in attacking enemy airfields, convoys, and troop staging areas. To give training exercises a more realistic flair, mock-ups of airfields, military camps, and vehicles were constructed on Kahoolawe. It was there that twenty five years earlier when Sheffield first became acquainted with Harvey Morrison during similar exercises.

Everyday for the ten days the Essex was at sea, the exercises continued except for a lull in operations on Sunday. While the air group conducted bombing missions against targets onshore, one or the other of the jet fighter squadrons played the role of the enemy defenders. Sheffield also sent the specialized night capable Skyraiders, Corsairs, and Banshees on night missions.

Exercises such as these had the added realism that comes from the danger associated with flight operations. One man aboard the Essex was killed when he got too close to the propeller of one of the Skyraiders preparing for launch. A pilot was lost when his Corsair failed to pull out of a dive and crashed into the island. In both cases, operations were suspended long enough to recover the bodies.

On Sunday, during the lull in operations, Sheffield again met with the Serviceman's Group in his Wardroom. That week, he had the assignment to bless the sacrament. On Monday, a refurbished TBM Avenger configured as a carrier onboard delivery aircraft flew out from Pearl Harbor with, among other things, a mail bag. In it was a letter from Ramona. The mail was much quicker in going back and forth than it had been during the last war.

After ten days at sea, the Essex returned to Pearl Harbor on Thursday the 19th where she remained for a week. Sheffield went ashore from time to time, but there just wasn't much to do without Ramona. He took the time to answer her letter. On Sunday he attended the Serviceman's Branch meetings ashore. After a week in port, on the 26th he took the Essex and her escorts to sea for another week of intense training.

Meanwhile back home, Ramona and the girls had yet another trip to take. That same day, they made the six hour trip to Port Deposit, Maryland where the Susquehanna River empties into the northern most tip of the Chesapeake Bay. The trip was a good opportunity for Janet to put her driver's license that she got the previous Friday to use. The purpose of the trip was to attend Craig's graduation from basic

training. Edith made the trip with Stirling and Mary Ann as they traveled together in a two car caravan.

The closest place there was to stay was in Havre de Grace, eight miles away. As soon as she had received notice of when his graduation would be, Ramona booked two rooms in the Chesapeake Hotel that dated back to 1896.

When they arrived late that afternoon, they found Havre de Grace to be a quaint little town. During the Revolutionary War, it was the hamlet of Harmer's Town. It was visited several times by the French general, Lafayette who assisted the colonists in their fight for independence. He had commented that the area reminded him of the French seaport of Le Havre. Inspired by Lafayette's comments, the residents incorporated the town as Havre de Grace in 1785. In 1789, the town was considered for the location of the nation's capitol.

According to local legend, when the House of Representatives voted on the new capital, the vote was tied between Havre de Grace and tract of land that eventually became the District of Columbia. The tie-breaking vote was cast by the Speaker of the House in favor of Washington, D.C..

Friday, the 27th was graduation day. They got up early and drove over to Port Deposit and found the Recruit Training Center, parked their cars, and got in line to be ushered into the drill hall. The graduation ceremony began with the march of state flags. A navy band performed, followed by a recruit drill team, and the recruits. Once in place, the commanding officers were introduced and inspected the drill team and honor guard. The band and drill team performed some more routines and a recruit choir sang a couple of numbers. At that point, all four hundred and thirty three recruits recited the sailor's pledge and sang "Anchors Away." Finally they passed in review as all six companies marched across the drill hall before returning to their original positions. The commanding officer accepted the recruits and pronounced them fit for duty. The state flags, drill team, and band marched out and the recruits were dismissed on liberty.

Though he wasn't there, Sheffield was proud that another Brason was continuing the naval tradition that included his grandfather, Peter Brason who had served as an officer in the Confederate Navy during the Civil War, his Uncle Rick and his nephews, Danny and Tim.

Grandpa Brason graduated from the Naval Academy in 1860 and was commissioned an Ensign in the United States Navy. When Virginia succeeded from the Union and joined the Confederacy in 1861, he was offered a commission in the Confederate Navy. He first served aboard the CSS Sumter, then the CSS Florida, and later the CSS Shenandoah. He used to tell about the twelve and a half months in 1864 and 1865 when the Shenandoah made a commerce raiding cruise, which took them around the world, resulting in the capture or sinking of thirty eight Union merchant vessels, mostly whaling ships. He was always proud of the fact that they had fired the last shot of the Civil War. It was directed at a whaler in waters off the Aleutian Islands weeks after the war had formally ended. "We never got the news." his grandfather always

said.

Having been an lieutenant aboard the Shenandoah, when the war was over they were considered pirates. To avoid prison and execution, the officers fled to South America. His grandfather went to Rio de Janeiro where he hid out for the better part of a year before being granted amnesty and returned home to Fairfax, Virginia.

Uncle Rick had graduated from Annapolis in 1897, and as an Ensign served aboard the battleship Indiana at the Battle of Santiago during the Spanish American War. As Lieutenant junior grade he sailed around the world with the Great White fleet aboard the old Missouri from December 1907 through February 1909. As a lieutenant aboard the Connecticut, he participated in the battle of Vera Cruz in 1914 where he led a company of Bluejackets in the fighting ashore. Later as a Lieutenant Commander, in 1917 he sailed to England aboard the Florida which participated in war patrols in the North Atlantic during the First World War. Having served aboard battleships during his entire career, he scoffed when Sheffield wanted to become a naval aviator saying that he would be throwing his career away. He retired from the Navy as a captain after twenty five years in 1922 and settled in New Orleans where his wife was from.

For the entire two hours the recruits stood at attention, except for when they were marching. At first they couldn't pick Craig out because they all looked alike in their uniforms. It wasn't until he walked up to them that they finally recognized him. He had always been a muscular young man because of wrestling, but he had bulked up even more.

Together they left the base and had lunch at the hotel. Craig informed them that since he had his automotive maintenance degree that he had been slated to be a mechanic, working on officers staff cars and jeeps and trucks. When they found out that he already had experience working on the Staggerwing, they reassigned him to be an aviation mechanic. Because of his previous education and experience he skipped the Airman Recruit rating and went straight to Airman Apprentice. He had orders to report to the Memphis Naval Air Technical Training Center at Millington, Tennessee on Monday morning for five more weeks of advanced training. Then he could come home and start school. He would receive his assignment upon completion of the advanced training.

That afternoon they all drove down to Baltimore. Ramona and the Girls rode with Stirling and Mary Ann so Craig and Edith could have some time to themselves. That night they stayed at a hotel in Baltimore near the main train station. They got three rooms, one room for Ramona and the girls, one for Stirling and Mary Ann, and one for Craig and Edith. It was the only night that they could spend together during his twelve weeks of training, and they wanted to make the most of it. On Saturday morning they saw Craig off at the station and said their goodbyes before driving back to Roanoke.

Things settled down again for Ramona and the girls. It had been a busy summer and time was

rushing by. July slipped into August. Craig wasn't there to celebrate his twentieth birthday on the 4th. Five days later was Edith's twentieth birthday. About every week or ten days Ramona received a letter from Sheffield. He had returned to Pearl Harbor on the 3rd and said that they would be sailing again on the 9th, this time for Tokyo.

During the second week in August, Ramona had to go into the high school for a half a day of teacher meetings in preparation for the coming school year. Also that week, Read Rowan came over one day and mowed the hay and raked it the next. He sure didn't mind having a break when Norma took him a tall, ice cold glass of lemonade. A few days later he came back to bale it and put it in the stack. He had Janet drive the tractor while he stacked it on the wagon while Ramona and Norma picked up the bales and sat them on the wagon. His hopes of avoiding being drafted became a reality when his farm deferment came through. For all the times that he came around, he still hadn't asked Norma out.

She did go out at least once a week with either Ammon Fielding or Grant Furness and occasionally someone else. Ammon was headed for BYU in Utah so he wouldn't be around. Grant was going to stay around and attend Roanoke College right there in Salem and major in business administration. She liked going out with them for something to do, but didn't really have the feelings for either one of them like they had for her. She still held out hope that one day Read would ask her out.

Even though it was just Ramona and the girls, they still participated in their usual family past times. Only now when they went out to a movie, they didn't have to go to Sheffield's westerns. They went to musicals like "On Moonlight Bay" starring Doris Day and "Show Boat" or romantic comedies like "People Will Talk" with Carey Grant. They were surprised to see Ruth Ann as an extra in a scene in one of the movies that they attended.

Sheffield arrived in Tokyo Bay on the 16th of August and the Essex dropped anchor, not far from where the Missouri was anchored when he attended the surrender ceremony. The first thing he did was to get a letter off to Ramona telling that he was in Japan and that the voyage was uneventful other than conducting training exercise and that his orders were to sail again two days later on the 18th.

The crew was given a twenty four hour liberty pass, with half the crew ashore at a time. Sheffield spent a day ashore himself. It was so different than it had been in 1922. The war had left the city in shambles. Sheffield was somewhat responsible for some of the damage during the the final weeks of the war. But now, six years later, a new city was rising from the ashes of war. New buildings had been built and others were going up. Many of the damaged buildings had been repaired or were in the process. Still, there were piles of rubble everywhere, marking the place where buildings once stood. During his brief time ashore he didn't have time to see very much.

The one thing that he did notice was that the people seemed to welcome their former enemy into their city and their country. But that was only superficial. Their congenial demeanor was influenced by the fact that they were ordered to be so by the postwar government. After all, they were a nation occupied by their conquerors.

The Essex and her escorts got under way on the morning of the 18th and put to sea. Enroute to rendezvous with Task Force 77, they had to go around a massive typhoon to the south, which caused heavy swells. On the night of the 20th and 21st, the ship encountered particularly rough seas. At fourteen minutes after midnight the ship rolled twenty five degrees. In the process, anything that wasn't secured in place went flying. Sleeping men were dumped out their bunks onto the deck. Even Admiral Brason found himself on the deck. He called up to the bridge to find out what had happened. The storm caused only minor damage to the forecastle and some bruised seamen.

On the 22nd the Essex rendezvoused with Task Force 77 and Sheffield reported for duty with Vice Admiral Harold G. Martin, the commander of the 7th fleet aboard the USS New Jersey. At that time, Sheffield assumed operational command of the task force, which included the carriers Bon Homme Richard and Boxer. The Princeton, which had been on station was relieved by the Essex and sailed for the West Coast.

The Bon Homme Richard, which had been in his carrier division off Japan, once again fell under his direct command as part of Carrier Division One. Unlike the Essex, the Bon Homme Richard was still in her original configuration, looking just as she did when Sheffield last saw her off the coast of Japan during the last war. She had been decommissioned in January of 1947 and recommissioned in January, the same day as the Essex. The Boxer had been commissioned too late to participate in the Pacific War was also in her original configuration. She flew the flag of the commander of Carrier Division Three.

In addition to the three carriers and one battleship, also present were the heavy cruisers Helena, Toledo, Los Angeles and a horde of destroyers. Their mission was to support UN ground forces in Korea who were advancing north of the thirty eighth parallel. Immediately upon arrival, the Essex joined the other two carriers in launching air strikes against enemy positions.

The next day, bad weather resulting from the lingering affects of Typhoon Marge forced air operations to be canceled after losing a Corsair from the Essex that got separated from the flight leader over Wonsan Harbor and was never heard from again. Once the weather cleared, combat flight operations resumed.

On the 25th, Sheffield received a special request from the Air Force to provide escort to a flight of B-29s on bombing mission over the extreme northeastern tip of North Korea. The Army Air Force had been difficult to deal with in the last war, but for the most part Sheffield always seemed to work well with them.

Ever since they were split off from the Army in 1947, they had become even more difficult to deal with. However, they found themselves in a bind.

Their target that day was the railroad yard in the City of Rashin. They couldn't go around and come in from over Russia so they had no choice but to fly through North Korean airspace and their jet fighters didn't have the range necessary to escort them. To solve their dilemma, they turned to the Navy. Admiral Martin ordered Sheffield to comply with their request.

The thirty five B-29s took off from their base in Okinawa and were met by a flight of twelve Banshees and eleven Panthers from the Essex. In two previous attempts, the Air Force had failed to neutralize the rail yards. This day, with cover from the Navy, they succeeded in smashing their target without any interference from Mig fighters and the mission went off smoothly.

Over the next several days, Task Force 77 continued flying missions against enemy targets, only to be interrupted by replenishing or bad weather. Ships came as and went as they were detached for other purposes. The Boxer was detached to return to Yokosuka for a rest. When she returned the Bon Homme Richard got her turn. The battleship, cruisers, and destroyers similarly came and went as they were detached for rest or shore bombardment duty.

During the second week in September, an onboard delivery Avenger from Japan brought among other things, the mail. When Lieutenant Moncur brought Sheffield his, there was a letter from Ramona. It read:

September 5, 1951

Dear Sheffield

It was good to hear from you, as always. I'm glad to know that you are safe and well. From what I hear in the news, the peace talks aren't going very far. I do hope that one way or another the war wraps up soon so you can come home..

It has been busy around here the last few days. Craig completed his advanced training last Friday the 31st and came home the next day. He and Edith wasted no time in getting moved down to Blacksburg. She found an apartment for them near the campus. He hardly had a chance to breathe before they moved in on Saturday. She had their things together ahead of time and it was just a matter of hauling them down in the pickup and setting up their apartment.

He starts school on Wednesday. He has decided to change his major from automotive mechanics to aviation mechanics to go along with the training that he just received. He also wants to enroll in their Navy ROTC program. He figures

that if he's going to be in the reserves, he might as well eventually become an officer. I can't blame him there. He also has it in his head that he wants to try out for the wrestling team. I told him that he's biting off more than he can chew. I suggested that he take one or the other.

He has been assigned to Reserve Attack Squadron 872 that is stationed at Oceana, in Virginia Beach. His weekend drills are the fourth weekend of every month. He has to report in by 6:00 on Friday evening and is through around the same time on Sunday. So that won't be too bad, particularly since you told him that he could use the Staggerwing to get back and forth.

With all that he has going on, he won't have time for a part time job. By changing his major, the Navy has agreed to pay half of his tuition. He still has a good share of Samantha's money left, so he won't need to work. But Edith has a job lined up working in department store.

The Labor Day picnic went well. We had pretty much all of the Brasons there, except for you and of course Ruth Ann. When Joseph came to pick up the kids, he still hadn't heard anything from her. Neither have Shenan and Emily.

Your father wasn't well enough to come this year. He stayed home while your mother came for only a little while. She didn't want to leave him alone for too long.

Then yesterday, I went into school for a half a day to get ready for today. The first day of class went better than I had expected. I must admit, I was nervous about it. But I had subbed for you enough that I fell right into it.

Its nice being in the same school as Janet. I can't believe that she's a sophomore now. She's a bit nervous about the try outs for track. She's not at her fastest yet, but I think she'll do alright.

Neither can I believe that Norma is freshman in college. She too started school today. She came home all excited about it this afternoon. I don't know how Craig's first day went, I haven't heard from him yet.

Anyway, I think this will work out fine. With only three classes, I still have plenty of time to look in on your folks and do my things. I just put an ad the paper listing another house for sale. Ray just finished with it last week and the next one should only take him a couple of weeks before its ready too. Things have been moving around here, it shouldn't take long for them to sell.

There are a lot houses being built too, so people are looking to sell their existing homes. They sell pretty fast too as new people are moving in all the time. It is really beginning to grow around here. The branch is growing too. Just

since you have been gone there have been two new families move in.

The missionaries have had some success lately. Do you remember when you talked to Bill Casper here a while back? Well he and Marge are seeing the elders now as well.

People are always asking me how you're doing and I tell them that you are doing fine. They ask me how I'm getting along without you. Roger has seen to things around the ranch and I don't have to worry about a thing. I don't know if he's sending Read over to check on things or if he's coming over on his own to check on Norma. If he is, he's being awful slow about it because he still hasn't asked her out. She seems to be satisfied for now with the attention that she's getting from him.

Let me close by telling you that I love you and I miss you. I remember you in my every prayer. I pray that God will keep you safe and bring you home to me.

Love, Ramona.

Sheffield quickly wrote back to Ramona and the letter was on the Avenger when it was launched for its return flight to Japan. When it took off, it was just another in a continuous string of takeoffs and landings that occurred day in and day out. Sheffield and his staff were busy managing the air operation of the three carriers in the task force. He received his orders from Admiral Martin. In turn, he and his staff figured out how to best fulfill them and passed specific assignments on to the carriers and their air groups. They in turn worked out the specific details and passed them on to the individual squadrons.

The air operations took their toll on the air groups as aircraft and sometime their pilots were lost to either enemy action or operational accidents. One case in point, on September 3rd, a Panther from the Essex flying armed escort a for reconnaissance plane over Songjin was hit by anti-aircraft fire. While trying to regain control, the pilot collided with a pole that sliced off about three feet of the Panther's right wing. The pilot was able to fly the plane back to friendly territory even with the loss of the aileron. Ejecting from the aircraft was his only safe option. He planned to eject over water and await rescue from a Navy helicopter, but his ejection seat was blown back over land. He was picked up by a jeep and was subsequently returned to the Essex by the rescue helicopter that had been dispatched to pick him up him.

Upon his return to the ship, Sheffield had the pilot brought to meet with him. Ensign Neal A. Armstrong was new to the squadron and only been assigned prior to sailing. Admiral Brason commended him for the way he handled his damaged aircraft and living to tell about the ordeal. Sheffield took a liking to Ensign Armstrong and said that he had a great future ahead of him.

Ensign Armstrong was one of the lucky ones. Another case in point was quite unfortunate. Several days later on the 16th, a damaged Banshee that had been involved in a midair collision attempted an emergency landing .

Holding his breath, Sheffield watched from the flag bridge as the jet's wheels touched the deck and bounced. It sailed over the all of barriers and crashed into several aircraft parked on the starboard forward end of the flight deck and exploded. Yellow and orange flames shot into the air, engulfing planes, men and everything in the path of the burning aviation fuel. Thick black smoke billowed into the air. The fire spread quickly and was compounded by exploding ordnance.



From his vantage point, he watched the firefighters, wearing asbestos suits, as they approached the fire, pouring water into the inferno. Steam mixed with smoke rose high into the air. Captain Wheelock brought the ship around so the prevailing wind wouldn't spread it any farther down the flight deck. As the fire was brought under control, the damage control parties sprung into action. This was the very reason that he had insisted on the stringent training exercises during their time in Hawaii.

The fire was eventually brought under control but the damage had been done. The pilot and six other men were dead, including Seaman Jared Martin from the serviceman's group. In addition to the dead, twenty seven other men were injured. Besides the casualties, not only was the plane involved in the crash was destroyed but so were four parked aircraft; two Banshees and two Panthers.

Damage to the ship included fifteen hundred square feet of the deck that was charred, the catwalk was destroyed along with two twenty millimeter anti-aircraft guns, and the starboard catapult was put out of commission. The Essex would have to put in at Yokosuka for repairs.

In his report, Sheffield highly endorsed an idea that was being tossed around. The concept was that the landing area of the flight be angled to port. If an accident, such as the one the Essex had experienced were to occur, the plane would not endanger aircraft parked on the forward end of the flight deck.

With his flagship out of action, Sheffield transferred his flag to a carrier that had joined the task force only a few days earlier. He and his personal affects were loaded aboard one of the ship's two

Dragonfly helicopters. It was his first ever ride in such a contraption. When he touched down, he felt as if he had come home.

The carrier that he transferred to was none other than the Reprisal, on loan from the Atlantic Fleet, on her second Korean deployment. When his flag was struck on the foremast, he formally commandeered her into Carrier Division One.

Since he had last seen her at Norfolk Navy Yard, she completed her refit in December 1949 and made a shakedown cruise in the Western Atlantic where she received storm damage to her foc's'el. After returning to Norfolk, her entire foc's'el was enclosed, as with the Coral Sea, with only her bow gun mounts exposed. During all of her modifications, she still wore the out dated pre-war abbreviation, RSPL, on the aft end of the flight deck. As the captain, Sheffield insisted that it not be removed when the ship was commissioned and it became a tradition that had carried on ever since.

When the war broke out in Korean, she was three months into Mediterranean cruise when she was ordered to proceed through the Suez Canal and to the West Pacific for her first tour off Korea. Now she was back for her second tour, and Sheffield was once again part of the ship that has been such a big part of his life.

Once he was transferred aboard, his staff boarded a destroyer that pulled along side the Essex and were brought over to the Reprisal. Once they were situated, they resumed their job in directing air attacks against the enemy.

* * * * *

The story of Ensign Neal A. Armstrong is true. He later became the an astronaut and was the first man to walk on the moon.

The crash aboard the Essex actually happened. Once the fire was put out and the debris was cleared away, she resumed flight operations. She was detached three days later for repairs.