

Charlie lay on his bunk, trying to sleep. The humidity in the air hung like an unwelcome wet blanket, encouraging sweat to seep from his body. This was the reason most of the ship's crew slept out on deck, except during flight operations. He had grown accustomed to the smell of fuel permeating every area of the ship, affecting the taste of their food. He looked forward to his air-conditioned watches as they were his only respite from the oppressive heat. Charlie also enjoyed watching flight operations. His relationship with the airdales was unique. They relied on him to keep them safe, directing their attacks on the enemy and shepherding the lost back to the ship. But he was only a radarman, an enlisted man. Charlie was in awe of their knowledge and skill. It amazed him every time he watched flight operations: the choreographed dance of the planes as they prepared to launch from his ship to pinpoint precision, blindly grabbing the arresting wire, preventing a plane from sliding into the ocean. They talked to him, made him feel special. They were of the few who really knew the impact he had on the operations of this ship. A secret shared, but never discussed with anyone.

“General quarters, general quarters,” was the call over the loudspeaker, “man your battle stations.”

Charlie jumped down to the deck, trying to pull his cloths through the stickiness. He ran to his battle station and waited for instructions. The door to the compartment opened.

“Charlie,” said Gil, “LT needs you on the set.”

Charlie was happy to be in the air-conditioned room, ready to do his job. Charlie found the CIC buzzing with activity.

“Brand,” said LT, “you have ten bogies out there. I want them tracked; nothing gets through to the ship. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” responded Charlie.

The most dangerous time for a carrier is during night operations. It was nearly impossible to identify enemy or friendly contacts. Even aircraft identification through the A-scope could be difficult during dogfights as contacts moved around the radar screen.

Just six hours ago, Charlie was on watch, helping direct his airedale friends for their raid on Kwajalein. The Lexington air group raid scored thirty aircraft kills, two damaged cruisers, and damage to a cargo ship. Now, the Japanese were again attacking at night, believing he would not be able to detect their presence.

“Contacts now bearing three two seven, range two zero miles,” reported Charlie.

“Keep an eye on them,” ordered LT. “Bearing and range every thirty seconds.” LT seemed concerned.

“Contacts holding steady on same bearing,” reported Charlie. “Range one four miles.”

The Lexington would normally open fire on targets at this range, but any anti-aircraft fire from the ship would expose her position.

Two flares illuminated the night sky. They were in trouble.

Flames jumped from the quadruple 40-mm guns as they searched the night sky for targets. Two Betty bombers fell, eight remaining. CAP downed two more bombers, six remaining.

“We now have six contacts, same bearing,” reported Charlie trying to remain calm, “four miles out.”

Ten minutes after the flare sighting, the Lexington’s stern jumped into the air.

“Damage report,” ordered Captain Stump.

“Torpedo hit, starboard side,” reported the executive officer. “We lost our steering.”

“I need that steering!” ordered the captain.

“Aye, aye, sir,” responded the XO. “Damage parties working on it!”

The Lexington settled five feet to stern, circling to port. Suddenly, smoke bombs used to provide a protective blanket during battle exploded, spreading their acrid darkness throughout the ship.

The crew braced for another hit; a feeling of impending doom raced through the crew.

“This is the captain,” Stump said over the loudspeaker, “we have been hit by a single torpedo on the starboard side. The hit ignited many of our smoke bombs causing the discomfort you are now feeling. There is no cause to worry. If there is any worrying to be done, I as your captain will do it. If God is good to us, we will go safely to Pearl Harbor, under our own power, and be back to give the Japanese more hell. That is all.”

To a man, the crew put aside any worry and worked to repair the damaged steering. Twenty minutes later, a temporary repair in place, the Lexington and her crew slipped from the battlefield on her way to Pearl Harbor.

As the Lexington secured from general quarters, the captain again addressed the crew. “This is the captain,” began Stump. “I have received a message from the admiral complimenting me on my seamanship and leadership of this crew. When we left Boston for the battlefield, we were all strangers, civilians with no experience or business aboard a battleship. Today, I responded to the admiral, ‘Thank You, Negative.’ Today, you became a crew, my crew. A fighting force destined for greatness. I am proud to call each of you my crew and I would sail to Hell and back, without stopping to load any ice. That is all.”

Every man beamed with pride, basking in the praise from their captain. The Lexington made Pearl Harbor for emergency repairs, and sailed on to Bremerton, Washington, for full repairs.

47 KAWAGUCHICO, JAPAN

Hadaki opened the door to his childhood home, full of anticipation for the warm welcome he expected to receive. Yet, concern about the actions of his *haha* during the visit from his *otosan*'s commanding officer consumed him. Why would his *haha* betray him? He would soon have his answers.

“*Kon'nichiwa!*” called Hadaki.

Yoshi bounded around the corner into Hadaki's arms, followed closely by his *haha*.

“Oh, my *musoko*,” cried his mother, “how I have missed you. I will make you lunch.”

“Tell me you are home to stay,” pleaded Yoshi.

“No,” Hadaki said sweetly, “I can only stay for lunch and then I must return to my unit. Now, please go and play while I talk to our *haha*.”

“OK, I will go,” said his sister sadly. “I want to show you my new doll later.”

“I look forward to seeing your doll,” Hadaki said.

Yoshi left the room, and Hadaki turned to see his mother placing rice into a bowl, topping it with dried fish.

“We have missed you, my son,” said his mother trying not to cry. “I have worried every day for your safety.”

“I was on Guadalcanal,” Hadaki said tersely, “fighting with my unit. Bringing honor to my family and then . . .” His voice trailed off.

“What?” asked his mother, empathetically.

“They took me off of the island and brought me to Tokyo.” Hadaki's anger grew.

“Oh?” his mother said demurely, placing the bowl before her son.

“I met my father’s commanding officer,” Hadaki’s tone was more direct. “He said you told him I enlisted. Why would you betray our family?”

“Betray?” Hadaki’s mother was now growing angry. “You left us here. You are my firstborn; your place is here with us. What should happen if you die? I will lose everything! Your family will lose everything!”

Hadaki stopped chewing.

“Oh, my mother,” Hadaki said emotionally, “I would never leave you here alone if it was not vital. I serve our emperor. Remember, our ancestors told me I must serve.”

“Our ancestors will not be here to save our family farm if you die,” said his mother tersely.

“Your fears are unwarranted, Mother,” Hadaki said. “They transferred me to a training post here in Japan. I am no longer in danger.”

Hadaki held his mother as she cried.

“You will still bring honor to our family, my son,” wept his mother.

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A fresh snow blanketed the wandering prairie, sheltering her fertile soil from the grips of the early winter frost. Charlie struggled to push down his emotions still raw from the attack on his beloved ship. The perilousness of war became very real to him that night. Even though he was in the CIC, protected from the terror suffered by the crew, it reminded him of the tenuousness of life. His dreams, love, what he still wanted to accomplish. As he gazed out the window of the train, geometric crystalline frost encroached his view of the scenic North Dakota landscape, enticing him to daydream. The bright brittle blue sky caused him to squint, sundogs creating magical rainbows beside the morning sun. He immediately thought of Lilly, and a sense of calm enveloped him like the blanket of snow outside his window.

What would he tell her about the war? He wanted to protect her from the reality of his choice to serve. To her, he was a hero. Charlie knew he was just a man, answering a higher call from God and his country, nothing more. Yet, the danger he just faced caused him to realize, for the first time in his life, he may not survive the war. He was not invincible. Ongoing repairs to his ship showed America's resolve to stay the course, to win the war at all costs. For America, there was no choice. To him, the torpedo changed his life forever.

The train pulled into Union Station in Little Rock; no military band played the national anthem. No cheering crowds met him as he left the train. This was just fine with Charlie. On the way to his house, a few people recognized him, asking how he was doing and about his time overseas. He turned the corner onto his street, and the pace of his stride quickened. The door flung open, and his sister ran toward him at full speed. Charlie dropped his seabag, preparing for the hug he expected would knock him to his knees.

"Charlie!" she cried. "How I have missed you!"

"I have missed you too, sis," Charlie said, fighting back the tears. "I sure missed your cooking!"

Doris Ann kissed him all over his face. "You must be exhausted," her voice still high-pitched.

"Come in and relax!"

"Sounds great," said Charlie. "It has been a long train ride from Seattle."

"Is everything alright, Charlie?" she asked. "You are not hurt, are you?"

"No," Charlie assured her, "I am fine. My ship is having some work done to her."

"Work," Doris Ann said, concerned. "Is your ship hurt?"

They gave the crew strict instructions not to disclose anything to their families about the attack on the ship or why she was in dry dock.

"Uncle Sam decided I needed some time with my family for Christmas," Charlie lied.

Doris Ann gave Charlie the look. She always knew when he was telling her a story, but she also knew there were things he could not tell her until this awful war was over.

Doris Ann cooked Charlie's favorite meal, and they retired to the front room to catch up.

"Before you ask, sis," Charlie began, "there are things I cannot tell you about what I do or where I have been. I am under strict orders not to talk about the war."

"Who wants to talk about war?" Doris Ann lied. "I want to talk about love," she said, elongating the "ove" in her best Arkansas drawl.

"You mean Lilly," Charlie said coyly.

"Yes, I mean Lilly," Doris Ann chided. They laughed.

"As I told you in my letters," Charlie said, "I met her on the train ride out west for school. We really hit it off, talked almost twenty hours straight!"

"Sounds promising," said his sister.

"I went to Dallas to see her before I came home last time," Charlie confessed.

"Really," Doris Ann said, slightly annoyed.

"I spent the day with her," Charlie said, his voice trailing off. "What a day."

"Wow, Charles," his sister said.

Charlie perked up. His sister only used his given name when he was in trouble.

"I have never heard you speak of a girl like this," she said sweetly. "You must really be hooked."

"I guess I am," Charlie confessed.

Doris Ann smiled sweetly. Her marriage was in two months and she would miss having her brother there to celebrate. They stayed up late talking about everything, but mostly Lilly.

48 DALLAS, TEXAS

After spending Christmas with his family in Arkansas, Charlie took the train to Dallas where the Hopes offered him a room in their home until he returned to his ship.

“Charlie!” cried Lilly as she ran across the platform.

Lilly stopped just short of Charlie. Charlie beamed.

“I missed you so much,” Charlie said, tears forming in his eyes.

“I was so worried I would never see you again!” Lilly began to cry.

Charlie took her in his arms and kissed her deeply, his mind capturing every detail of the moment, the smell of her hair, the warmth of her skin, and the feel of her lips against his. He knew now he could make it home from the Pacific. He had to. Time stopped for Charlie, the passion of the moment overwhelming his senses, causing all thoughts to vacate. He was deaf to the noise of the platform, consuming the love pouring into his soul.

“I am so glad to see you again,” said Mr. Hope.

Charlie broke his embrace, dazed. A welcoming hand reaching for his, he struggled to gain control. “Thank you for the invite, sir,” summoned Charlie, still dazed.

“We are happy to have you,” said Mrs. Hope, taking over the conversation to protect the moment.

Charlie offered his hand to Mrs. Hope, only to find a welcoming embrace.

Twenty minutes later, they walked into the Hope home. Charlie looked at the Christmas tree in the front room and felt a sense of dread filling his stomach. The Hope Christmas tree was nine feet tall and was the most beautiful he had ever seen. Glass ornaments adorned the aromatic pine tree as silver tinsel shimmered like the North Dakota snow. How could Lilly ever be happy with a man like him?