

18 - The U.S.S. *Enterprise*

By the time Cory completed his training and spent several months ferrying new aircraft across the country, it was coming up on October 1943 – nearly fifteen months since training started and nearly two years since he first enlisted. It was enough time for the most celebrated ship in the Navy to have weathered four great carrier battles in the South Pacific. Most of her pre-war sister carriers had been sunk or damaged beyond repair, yet the mighty *Enterprise* – the Big E – survived. Those battles had been fought in 1942.

In 1943 she'd actually received no damage from the enemy, but had steamed tens of thousands of miles in hostile waters, suffering the wear-and-tear that constant vigilance and training required, and sending her planes out on countless reconnaissance missions. At long last, it was time for a much needed overhaul and training for new air groups. Plus the experience gained in previous battles prompted many design changes that could make her an even more effective fighting weapon in the hands of her now battle-tested commanders. And so she'd been ordered back to the Bremerton, Washington, construction yard, via Pearl. On the way, she received the first "Presidential Unit Citation" ever awarded to an aircraft carrier, granted for "consistently outstanding performance and distinguished achievement during repeated action against enemy Japanese forces in the Pacific war area..." One of the consequences of success is that many of her best trained officers and pilots were to be transferred to new ships to assume leadership roles there. More than forty percent of the total crew would be replaced on this new voyage, and two of the new crew members were Ensigns Cory O'Brian, bomber pilot, and Spencer Tolman, radio operator/gunner.

While he couldn't say how others felt on boarding, Cory's heart almost stopped as he considered the sheer size of the venerable ship. After her refit, she was 809 feet long and 109 feet wide, and displaced over 21,000 tons of water. With a crew of more than three

thousand, the ship was like a small city, with multiple post offices, dining galleys (segregated by rank), various places for showing movies, and crew quarters in every nook and cranny of the ship. The pilots were assigned berths forward of the hangar deck, which was one deck down from the flight deck. Cory's bunk actually abutted the curved bow of the ship, and at night when he heard sounds drifting down from the flight deck he marveled that the thin steel skin he could reach out and touch extended far down and below the waterline where it kept out the water and kept them afloat. Sometimes it felt like the ship and her crew were invincible, in this giant floating armory, and other times, particularly when the 40mm Oerlikon guns were practicing right on the other side of the hull he shuddered at the thought of enemy dive bombers releasing their payload directly into his bunk if the gunners were unsuccessful in hitting them. "It's kind of crazy to think about," he said to Spencer when he came up to visit Cory's space "But when we're the ones making a dive I pray that the Japanese gunners will be inefficient, which usually they are, but when we're being attacked I want our guys to be right on target."

The hangar deck itself was about the size of a small stadium, with room to store the fighters, bombers, and torpedo, reconnaissance, and other aircraft. In some places aircraft were actually suspended from the ceiling of the hangar deck to provide more storage space. When all the aircraft were stored, it was like walking through a major air depot. When the planes were taken up to the flight deck so that the hangar deck was totally open, the crew had nearly 800 feet of running room, and basketball games and other sports were played regularly. A massive elevator moved the aircraft efficiently between the decks, and Cory and the other pilots marveled how efficiently the support crew could move aircraft about the various decks, re-fueling and repairing them, yet always seeming to get them up to the flight deck at the required moment. His role was critical, as a pilot, but without all these other men

he couldn't have done a thing. The Big E was, in reality, a big beehive of human workers who all had a part to play.

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Almost immediately after leaving port Cory and the other pilots were put on rotation to fly scouting missions to search for enemy submarines, flying the 180 degree pattern he'd drilled so many times in Florida. As frequently as conditions would permit, his group leader also drilled them on dive bombing techniques. Flying off the carrier gave a new sense of urgency to the drills, particularly since his aircraft was loaded with depth charges each time he went on patrol, just in case they spotted an enemy submarine.

Like most of the pilots, Cory was thrilled to receive one of the newest versions of Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bomber, rather than the faster but far more temperamental Curtis Helldiver. The Dauntless was a true workhorse, with the Curtiss Wright Cyclone engine developing up to 1,200 horsepower at takeoff. Cory loved the sound of the engine when it roared to life in preparation for take-off. He'd flown some of these aircrafts on his various shuttle trips, and had learned that the controls were extremely responsive, particularly the ailerons, which provided exceptional control when making a banking maneuver. The airplane was easy to control, both in level flight and, more importantly, in the thirty seconds of a high speed dive, recovering quickly on the pullout at 2,500 feet.

Of all the maneuvers that caused the adrenaline to flow, the two that stood out for Cory were catapult assisted take-offs and diving on the target. The regular reconnaissance missions were actually pretty boring as he and his gunner did their criss-cross patterns to fill out their share of the grid before returning to the carrier.

The catapult assisted launch was required on days when the headwind was too low to enable take-off. A pilot needed lift, which was achieved by having sufficient airflow over

the wings. While the carrier could add sixteen to twenty knots from the air passing over the deck from its own forward speed, an equal amount of headwind was required. On days when they were becalmed, mechanical assistance in the form of the catapult helped boost the take-off speed in a very short distance. Extremely short, Cory discovered.

On his first assisted launch, Cory and his gunner, Joe Thompson, strapped in and then maneuvered to the proper position on the flight deck. The catapult launch was directed by the “Cat Officer,” who signaled him to cut the engine while a small brass ring was attached to the fuselage of the aircraft to hold it in place while a harness was attached to the undercarriage to link the aircraft to the hydraulic catapult. Cory thought, *Okay, this is going to be something new – you can do it!* Once he completed a final check, he spoke into the intercom to his gunner, “Are you all set back there – completely strapped in and head secure?” When he received an “affirmative,” he made sure that his own head and neck were planted firmly against the headrest, then gave a signal that he was ready. He received the signal to bring the throttle all the way forward. The engine roared with a distinctive staccato sound and the plane trembled as it pulled against the brass ring. It seemed impossible that such a small ring could hold it back against the full force of the propeller, but it did. Then he saw the officer give the signal and felt the ring release its hold on the aircraft at exactly the same moment the catapult engaged. He’d never felt anything like it in his life as his head was thrown violently against the seat, forcing him to gasp for air. The aircraft was literally fired off the deck as if from a slingshot. In less than ten seconds they were airborne. “Is that amazing!” Cory shouted gleefully to his gunner, who cheerfully agreed. It had to be harder on the gunner, facing backwards, since he was thrown against his restraining straps, with nothing to support his head.

The second most exciting experience was taking the aircraft into a dive. Typically, they would approach the target at approximately 15,000 feet. Once in the attack zone, they'd circle down to 8,000 feet, at which point the pilot would engage the dive brakes (special flaps that extended on the upper and lower sides of the wing) to slow the aircraft to the preferred airspeed of 180 knots at the bomb release point. The angle of attack was critical, and required the pilot to approach the target at approximately an 80-degree angle relative to the target, with the ideal release point at 2,500 feet. That angle assured that the bomb would go on a practically straight line into the target. Plus, such a steep angle of attack presented a very slim profile to enemy gunners, who would naturally do their best to blow the aircraft out of the sky if given the chance.

On his first practice run out in the open waters of the Pacific, Cory received the signal to go straight down from 15,000 feet. At 8,000 he engaged the dive brakes and was thrown forward against his harness as the aircraft immediately lost airspeed. At 2,500 feet, still going 180 knots, he pulled the bomb release and then immediately disengaged the air brakes, since the aircraft could not regain level flight while the fins were deployed.

It was at this point that the feeling of being on a roller coaster hit with full force. The pilot had to pull out of the dive by no lower than 1,500 feet and the arc of the airplane as it accelerated back up to 15,000 feet put at least four to five g-forces of stress on the crew (the effect of four or five times the pull of gravity when standing motionless). "Tighten your stomach muscles," Cory said to himself through clenched teeth. If you didn't, the blood would be forced down from your brain and body into your legs, and it was possible for a pilot to blackout from the pooling of blood in the extremities.

"I know, I know," he heard his poor gunner say in a tight voice. At this point, they were coming out of the arc and the pressure let up immediately. Cory laughed, "I'm sorry – I

was talking to myself, not to you. I get so excited I have to remind myself of things like that!”

“That’s alright. Any idea how we did?”

“Wish I did, but I lost sight when we started to pull up.” Later they learned that they’d had a respectable hit on that particular run. In battle, the success of a dive was measured by whether or not the target was hit. Like most of the pilots, Cory’s wasn’t that successful at first, but with each successive practice run improved. By the end of the third week at sea, with daily patrol missions and occasional practice missions, Cory and Joe, his gunner, had turned into a good team and were gaining confidence for the day when they’d face real combat. Spencer had been drilling with his assigned pilot, and they had seen each other only occasionally.

The ship pulled into port in Pearl Harbor on November 6th. “Will you look at that,” was all that Spencer could say as the ship passed Ford Island. The wreckage of the Arizona could still be seen above the waterline, and the harbor was still littered with debris from the aerial bombardment on December 7th, two years earlier.

“It’s unbelievable” Cory and Spence weren’t the only ones standing in awe at the destruction that had befallen the fleet. They were surrounded by other first timers who were looking out from the elevator portal on the Hangar Deck.

“Oh, my!” This time Spence wasn’t talking in the hushed tone of a few moments earlier, for as they rounded the island their attention was taken away from the defeat of two years ago to the massive armada that had replaced it. It was an awe inspiring sight to see the harbor filled with the new *Essex*-class carriers and the cruiser-hulled light carriers that could operate at fleet speed to support the *Enterprise* and the other large carriers. The new ships included the *Essex*, the second *Yorktown*, *Intrepid*, the *Bunker Hill*, and the second *Wasp* and

Hornet. The “second” ships were named after their predecessors of the same name that had been sunk in previous battles but that had earned the honor of having their name carried forward in new ships. Surrounded by the various escort destroyers that accompanied the carrier task group, it couldn’t help but convey a sense of confidence to everyone who entered the harbor.

“Kind of amazing to see all this, isn’t it?” Cory said.

“Yeah,” then, pointing at the soot and scars that streaked one of ships in the dry dock, Spencer observed, “But it’s pretty clear that the Japanese can put up a fight.” Cory nodded. It was so strange how you could be excited and scared at the same moment. More than anything in the world he wanted to get out there and do his part, yet the signs of destruction all around them showed the risk.

“All I ask is that I don’t get wounded and become an invalid,” Cory said quietly. “I guess I’m okay with death, because it’s all over. But I don’t want to go through life a cripple.”

“I don’t want to die or get crippled,” Spencer replied forcefully. “Let the Japanese die and get wounded for their country. I want to help as many of them find glory as possible.”

Cory laughed, but couldn’t entirely shake the feeling of dread. One thing was obvious – a single person didn’t matter all that much in this war. His dad had been right about that. The war would be won on the macro scale. Still, a fleet is made up of individuals, so in a way he really did matter.

His reverie was short-lived, interrupted by a call to quarters where the pilots were instructed to fly their aircraft off to land-based runways while the ship was re-provisioned.

In the interim, they'd spend a couple of weeks helping yet another new set of flight crews practice before heading out to the South Pacific.

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Once at sea, the reconnaissance flights took on even greater urgency, since it was now fully possible for a Japanese submarine to be lying in wait for a grouping the size of a carrier task force. On the first day they were scheduled to fly, the pilots in the Ready Room were startled to receive the news that they'd have to fly in radio silence – no opportunity to radio the ship for directions if they were lost, or to seek help if they got in trouble. Cory got a sick feeling in his gut, but didn't say anything. But one of the pilots asked how they'd find their way back.

“You're going to have to rely on the YE,” their flight commander said. Just to make sure, let's review the procedure.” He drew a large circle on the blackboard and then drew a series of lines from the center to the perimeter of the circle, so that it looked like pieces of pie. Each piece was approximately 15 degrees. Then he wrote a different letter of the Morse Code in each of the pieces of the pie. “When you're approaching the ship you should imagine that we're in the middle of the circle. As you enter one of the zones you'll hear the homing beacon sending out one of these Morse code letters. If you keep heading straight for us, the letter won't change. But if you drift into another segment, the letter will change, which tells you that you're no longer headed straight for the ship. By looking at the YE chart you can tell which way you've drifted and correct your course.” He looked at the group and could sense their concern, but decided against saying anything else, other than, “You'll be fine. Just be sure you're religious about getting the new codes each time you fly. We change the YE daily so that the enemy can't figure out our code and use it to find us.”

So Cory and his gunner took off the very first day out of Pearl on the first of many flights they'd make to scan the ocean for non-existent Japanese submarines. It was tedious work that hurt your eyes as you strained to see the small feather of a periscope trail or to see the underwater shadow of the sub on sunny days. In their first of perhaps four or five flights they didn't see anything except open-ocean, and the occasional dolphin. It was true for all the planes that went up. Perhaps that's why Cory and the other pilots started to relax a little bit. That was a mistake that proved disastrous for one of them.

While coming in at dusk one evening Cory found the YE and was pleased to see that he was making the approach from the correct angle, which meant his knee-top navigation had been accurate enough that he could have probably found the ship by dead reckoning. When you're a thousand miles away from the nearest land, you tend to pay attention to things like that. As they approached the ship, he saw the huge red flag which indicated the *Enterprise* was turning into the wind to accept them aboard. That's when he saw Spencer's airplane off to his port side. He waved at the pilot, who pointedly ignored him. Shad Michaels was a rather arrogant guy who didn't talk much to anyone in the officer's ready room, particularly Cory. It was pretty obvious he didn't like the fact that his gunner was such good friends with another pilot. For his part, Spencer was loyal to Shad and never said anything negative about him, even when others tried to gossip a bit.

At any rate, Spencer saw Cory as the two aircraft passed each other and waved at him with a broad smile. Circling into the landing pattern, they headed toward the aft direction of the ship, well off the port beam. One of the greatest challenges a carrier pilot faced when landing was the fact that the engine cowling extended so far in front of him that he had very little visibility for objects out in front and below the horizon ... like the flight deck of the aircraft carrier. What that meant is that once they lined up with the ship, they were

essentially landing blind. Their only guide was the Landing Signal Officer, who was off to the left of their line of sight. To give the pilot as much visual maneuvering as possible, the ship would turn into the wind, and the aircraft would circle out to approach it from the front of the ship, while off to the port side. As they passed the stern of the ship they'd roll into a 180-degree turn that would bring them directly in line with the stern of the ship. At that point, they were lined up to see the LSO, but not the deck. The idea was that they'd follow his signals and then, at the last moment, he'd give them the 'Cut!' signal, and no matter what the pilot thought, it was his job to cut the throttle so the plane crashed onto the deck. Crash was the correct word, since there was never enough room to make an elegant landing. But when done properly, it was a controlled crash that left the airplane intact and the crew no worse for the wear. The rules of the game were that if a pilot ever failed to cut the engine, he was court-martialed and never flew again. That's how serious it was to turn control over to the LSO.

At any rate, after entering the landing pattern, Cory was trailing Spencer's aircraft as it entered the final turn. They were cleared to land just ahead of Cory. As Cory came into position he caught sight of the LSO and saw him give the usual set of signals. But the ocean was riding quite rough that day, with large swells that affected the timing of the landing.

You needed to land when the front of the ship was rising, which took some careful timing.

"He's going in pretty high," Cory said into his headset.

"Sorry, I can't see a thing." Of course Joe couldn't, but after a couple of hours at sea Cory just wanted to talk to someone.

"Oh, my gosh, he's getting a wave-off from the LSO – he must have come in too early for the swell!"

"Good, that means we'll get his spot as he does a fly around. I'm hungry!"

“Wait a minute – he’s not pulling up... What’s he doing? I can’t believe what I’m seeing, I think he’s going to try to land.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Pull up! For crying out loud, Pull up you idiot!” Cory’s was shouting, and Joe felt the backup stick that allowed him to fly the aircraft in an emergency tremble from Cory’s shaking.

“What’s happening,” Joe called out, “Are you okay?”

“They’re going to crash, they’re going to crash! Oh, God, please help them ... please help Spencer!” At that point, Joe felt himself thrown to the side of his seat as Cory abruptly followed the signal to pull up and out of the landing pattern.

“Can you see what’s going on?” Cory called out urgently. He’d lost sight of the deck as he pulled into the new pattern.

“They’re on fire and the plane slid into the crash barrier.”

“Oh, no...”

“Wait a minute, the crews are hosing it down and I see them dragging the guys out of the airplane.” Silence for a moment. “They’ve got them out! They got them out, Cory!”

Cory had to force himself to breathe, but at least it was hopeful. By this time Cory had completed enough of an arc that they both lost visual contact for a moment, and then the ship came back into his view just in time to see the deck crew shoving the burning plane over the side of the deck. It hit the water with a huge splash, which made an incredible sight as the flames of the burning aviation fuel continued to flare on the coal-black ocean even after the airplane disappeared beneath the waves. It was a haunting image.

They were now number three for landing, which was a torment unlike anything Cory had ever experienced.

“Are you okay, up there?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“It’s just that the stick is shaking ...”

Cory looked down at his right hand and saw that he was shaking violently, at least violently enough that the aircraft was trembling ever so slightly. “Sorry ... I’ll use both hands. We’re going to be okay. I’ve got to find out what happened to Tolman, so you don’t need to worry.”

“I’m not worried about you landing the plane – you could do that with your eyes closed.” Joe wanted to sound as calm and reassuring as possible. “I’m worried about your friend, too.”

“Thanks, Joe. Okay, we’re next.” He completed the banking turn to come in line with the ship, and then watched the LSO with more intensity than ever before. Even though it had become routine to take-off and land, it was obvious that there really wasn’t anything routine about it. “We’re cleared.” *Why did Michaels disobey the signals? The LSO gave him a clear wave off – why would he ignore him?* The LSO was always an experienced pilot who had a wealth of personal flight experience before ever taking this most important of positions. The lives of the pilots and crews were literally in this man’s hands because he was the only one in a position to judge the motion of the ship relative to the approaching aircraft, while keeping track of wind and speed, as well as everything else necessary to bring them in safe.

And Michaels didn’t take his wave-off! Cory wanted to swear, and he felt a bitter bile come up in his throat. *Spencer better be okay or I’ll beat that guy to a pulp.* As they settled on the deck and caught the second arrester cable (which means a good solid landing) the fear he felt for Spencer was mingled with righteous indignation and anger at his pilot. As

they screeched to a stop, Cory threw open the canopy and started to bound out of the aircraft before the propeller even stopped turning. This brought a savage remark from the flight deck officer, but he didn't care. He raced to the tower and shoved his way down the narrow staircase towards the Infirmary. The adrenaline must have been flooding his system, because when he thought about it later he realized he couldn't recall anything about his trip from the Flight Deck to the Infirmary, several decks below at midships. When he got there, he burst in shouting, "Where's Ensign Tolman!" That got him dirty looks from some of the medics, but he didn't much care because about halfway in the room he saw Spencer sitting up in the middle of a bed, his body covered in grime and soot. "Spence!"

"Quiet!" One of the medics shushed him. "You can't be in here."

"But that's my best friend – is he okay?" The medic looked up at Spence, who gave him a sign that he'd like to talk to Cory, if he could. "He's going to be okay. If you'll be quiet you can have a couple of minutes with him, but then you've gotta get out of here."

"Thanks," and Cory jogged over to Spencer's bed. He realized that he'd probably broken a couple of dozen rules to get here, but he had to see what happened. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. Burned pretty badly, but I'm okay." Spencer was very subdued.

"That Michaels didn't take the wave-off. The arrogant piece of crap thinks he's good enough to blow off an LSO. If he'd have hurt you I'm afraid I'd have killed him."

"It's too late, Cory..." Spencer's eyes watered, and he had this stricken look unlike anything Cory had ever seen in another human being.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean ... I mean he's dead. His seat tore loose when we hit the crash barrier, and it killed him."

“Oh, dear God! I am so sorry, Spence. I’m so sorry.” Now Cory wanted to crawl in a hole. No matter how much you didn’t like a guy, you didn’t want something like this to happen.

“We were doing fine, and then all of a sudden he acted confused and said into the intercom, “I’m supposed to pull up, but we’re going too slow – I don’t think I can do it. The next thing I know there’s this tearing sound and suddenly I’m being thrown around the cockpit like a rag doll in a dog’s mouth. Then we crashed into the barrier, which pretty much knocked me senseless. But then I saw the flames start up. It was awful, Cory. I shouted to Shad, but I didn’t hear anything. Then I started tearing at my restraining belts, because the heat was starting to sear my face and I was sure that the canopy was going to melt. That’s when I felt somebody pulling me from the cockpit...” Spencer gulped hard and took a drink of water. Then calming himself down, “It was just awful ... I was so scared...” and then he started sobbing. “And he died. He was my pilot, and he died...” Cory sat down next to him and pulled Spencer to his shoulder. “I’ve never had anybody die, Cory. I don’t know what to do...”

“It’s okay. It’s bad, but it’ll be okay. I don’t know how.” Now Cory felt tears on his cheeks. “I’m sorry, Spence...” *I’m so sorry...*

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Spencer was laid up for the next two weeks while his arm and burns healed. Cory and Joe continued their reconnaissance missions, always loaded with depth charges, just in case. A new wrinkle was added in the second week in that in addition to their regular patrols, they started practicing night landings again. All the new pilots had previously qualified for night landings on land, but that was a long time ago and it was very different out in the vast expanses of the Pacific, knowing that there was no solid earth as a backup landing spot if

they got lost. On his first approach, Cory set the plane down a little harder than he liked, catching the first arrester cable and jerking to a sudden stop well short of the crash barrier. On the one hand, that meant a good landing. In his own mind, he wondered if he were a little gun shy because of what happened to Shad and Spencer.

Still, after a few days of flying, the accident pretty well disappeared from his thoughts, and once again he found himself passing the rather boring hours at sea with idle thoughts. To keep his mind occupied, he played mental word games, or even an occasional golf game. He'd been a caddy in the summers during his junior and senior year at high school, which entitled him to play an occasional round at no charge. It was a game he enjoyed, for much the same reason he liked skiing, in that it was a matter of personal performance that you always worked to improve. Plus, he liked being out in the sun talking with the other caddy's as they worked their way around the course. Occasionally, he and Joe would talk, but not too often. Joe was a quiet person, fairly tall with dark hair. In some ways he reminded Cory of his brother-in-law, but Joe was far more reserved. They'd been assigned randomly, and if he'd had his choice he would have picked someone more talkative, but Joe was solid, and that's what mattered.

When he received the wake-up call on Friday morning at 0:500 he grumbled. The early morning flights were always the worst, particularly if you had to cover the eastern horizon, because the sun was always coming straight into your eyes. Plus, sleeping in his narrow bunk was never very satisfying – he always worried that he'd fall out. Still, he was lucky to have a bunk. Down in the Mess Hall where more than 700 enlisted men slept in hammocks, it was inevitable that somebody would fall out, with the usual release of profanity before he crawled back into his net.

Grabbing his pail (there were no sinks on the ship to shave or clean up in), he made his way to the “head” (the washroom and toilet) where he filled his pail with good, clean, water. The first step was to blast the pail with the steam jet to heat it, then to brush one’s teeth in the clean water. Next, you lathered up and sponge-bathed the vital areas. Finally, you climbed into the unheated shower to rinse off. Even though there were no restrictions on how much fresh water the men could use, everybody did their best to conserve, with the cold showers doing their part to encourage conservation. The fresh water had to be distilled from ocean water, which used up energy and time.

After a quick breakfast Cory and Joe met up at the briefing, where they learned they’d be flying the eastern quadrant on the grid.

“What was that, O’Brian?”

“Uh, nothing, Sir!”

“Out with it. I heard you say something under your breath.”

“Uh, I was just wondering, Sir, if it was me or Ensign Thompson that aggravated the C.O.? Something we did in childhood, maybe.”

“Meaning ...”

“Meaning, Sir, that we’ve had the eastern quadrant four out of the last five mornings. Kind of unlikely that we’ve sailed over the top of the Japanese subs, so not a lot to see. Of course, the sunrise is beautiful, Sir, even if it does hurt your eyes!”

“Ah! Got up on the wrong side of the bed, did we O’Brian? Oh, wait, there’s only one side you can get out of the bed. The thing is, O’Brian, we thought we were doing you a favor – letting you fly a little closer to home each day. I’m sure your mother would be pleased...” Everybody laughed. Calling someone a mother’s boy was always a good shot,

and since Cory's personal habits were already suspicious it was sure to land an extra hard blow.

“Why, thank you, Sir. I hadn't realized that was your motive. I'll be sure to write to her about it in my next letter, mentioning you by name!” That brought another laugh from the group, and evened the score.

“Fine. Now, unless there are any other totally useless comments or questions, I suggest you gentlemen go look for some Japanese submarines. We're heading west where they don't want us, so chances are increasing by the hour that they're out there. Good hunting!”

Climbing the steps to the Flight Deck Cory heard a familiar voice, but one that he hadn't heard for a couple of months. “Nice comeback, O'Brian. Glad to see you're still in one piece.” Cory turned in astonishment to see Jack Wilson, the fighter pilot. “Jack? Where did you come from? I looked for you when I first got on board, but your name wasn't on the roster. I felt bad, because I always kind of enjoyed hearing how much better fighter pilots are than bombers. With Bob Hope off in Europe you were the next best thing.”

“Very good, O'Brian. It's a complicated story, actually. When I got to Bremerton they changed my orders to ship out on another carrier. But apparently the *Enterprise* decided I was indispensable, because they ordered me to transfer over this week to beef up your fighter protection. Apparently they're worried about you boys.”

“I'm glad to hear that – I won't have as many sleepless nights now, knowing you're on my wing. I'll bet the captain starts listening to old 78's in the evenings now, secure in the knowledge that the ship is fully protected in the capable hands of Ensign Wilson.” Jack laughed and Cory could tell that he was genuinely happy to meet up again. That pleased Cory, somehow. While he admired all the fighter pilots, he didn't really bond with any of

them. But Jack was a regular sort of guy and it would be good to have another friend on board. Joe caught up to them at that point.

“So we’re off to greet the sun, I guess,” Cory said.

“Probably for the rest of the darn war,” Joe muttered.

Cory winced. “Yes, the ‘Big Mouth’ of the ‘Big E’ has likely secured that prize for a long time. Sorry, Joe.”

“Actually, it’s not such a big deal for me, since I’m facing backward on the outbound leg, and the sun is pretty much up by the time we come back. So it’s you who pays the price.”

“I think I like this guy,” Jack said cheerfully. “Didn’t really think I’d ever like a gunner, but he’s alright. Oh, there was that other one, your pal. What happened to him?”

Cory explained what happened to Spencer, which of course sobered the discussion pretty quickly. It was alright, though, because by this point they’d reached the flight deck, and each had to go their separate ways. Cory waved cheerfully as Jack mounted his plane, then climbed aboard his Dauntless, somehow feeling great and looking forward to getting up in the air.

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After an hour out-bound it was time to turn the sweep and begin working their way back to the ship. As usual, they’d spotted nothing but whitecaps. “Your turn for squinting,” Cory called back cheerfully.

“Thanks.”

“Wow, you’re unusually talkative this morning ...”

“Can it, Cory. I’m trying to figure out how to resolve general and special relativity since Einstein hasn’t gotten around to figuring it out yet.”

Cory burst out laughing. “Oh, my. Well, far be it from me to interrupt a genius at work.”

“Thanks ... Hey, wait a minute do you see that?”

“See what?”

“At 08:00 and about 200 yards back.”

Cory turned and looked back. He didn’t see anything. “My brow still hasn’t unfurrowed from the sun enough to be of much use. What do you think it is?”

“I don’t know, because I’ve never seen anything like it before. But it kind of looks like what I imagine a submarine feather would look like.”

“A submarine – okay, we’ve gotta be careful and do this right. If there is something there, we don’t want them to see us until we’re ready to drop on them. I’m going to keep flying straight for another twenty seconds and then I’ll bring her into an easy port turn. You keep sighting in on the spot and tell me if I’m heading in the right direction. I’ll go off to their starboard side so you can see out of the canopy.”

Most of the time the pilot and gunner acted as full partners. But in battle the pilot was in charge, and so it was natural for Cory to make the decisions and issue orders. At the appropriate time, he brought the Dauntless around smoothly. The problem is that they were now west of the target, which meant they were easier to spot through their periscope (if there was a target). Still, this was the most excitement they’d had since entering the Navy, so it was worth the time to check it out. As they approached the spot where Joe thought he saw the feather, Cory caught a brief glimpse of a small white line in the water, and beneath it what looked like a large shadow, or stain in the water.

“Do you see it?” Joe called out anxiously.

“I do it see, it partner. And I believe we have ourselves an enemy sub. Prepare for attack. With that Cory applied full throttle to gain altitude so he could come down on the sub at the proper attack angle. At maximum altitude the shadow was just a faint outline, but that made sense if they’d spotted the plane, which was very likely, and were now diving to get out of its way. Acting on sheer impulse, which had been schooled through countless practice runs, Cory started into the dive, applying the airbrakes at the appropriate moment, and zoomed in on the spot at more than 180 miles per hour. He mentally calculated the forward movement of the ship to determine when to release. The question was how much depth the Japanese sub could gain in the time it took for him to make the release. “Hey Einstein, here’s what I think we should do – care to confirm my thinking?”

“Don’t need to – been doing it all along. I think you’ve got it perfect.”

Not bad to be complimented by Einstein himself!

There was nothing like the feeling of a dive. The aircraft acted in sympathy with gravity, instead of against it, and the combined effect of the weight of the aircraft and the power of the engine pulling them forward gave you the “almost out-of-control” feeling of a fast run on the ski slopes. Cory loved it. Plus, in a dive the engine cowling was out of the line-of-sight so he could actually see what was going on directly in front of him. As the ocean zoomed up he waited, waited, waited, then squeezed on the release and felt the depth charges drop free of the aircraft. They were programmed to splash into the water, then float down to the pre-determined depth before exploding. They didn’t actually have to hit the submarine to disable it, since the concussion of all the displaced water caused by the explosion was often enough to rupture the hull, even from a distance. Of course the closer the explosion, the greater the chance of damage. As soon as he released the bombs, Cory pulled back on the stick to initiate the climb-out. Suddenly, his vision started to go dark.

“Squeeze the Stomach” he shouted as he got up to a safe altitude and then rolled the aircraft so they could see the depth charges go off. Just in time he saw the first of four giant water spouts erupt from the surface of the ocean as the exploding gas of the charge made its way to the surface. All the water that boiled up and out of the ocean represented the volume of water displaced by the gas, and if there was a sub under there it was almost certain that it had been given a good tossing about. Cory watched jubilantly as the other three charges went off. They were staggered in their discharge because each had been programmed to go off at a slightly different depth. That way, if one missed because of an incorrect depth setting, one of the others was likely to hit closer to home.

“Think we hit anything?”

“I don’t know,” Joe replied. “I’m pretty sure there was a sub there, and we had to hit pretty close to where it was. I wish the stupid thing would send up some debris or something.”

Me too. “Let’s circle for a few minutes just to make sure.” At this point, Cory didn’t want to use his radio since their very presence would tell the submarine commander that the *Enterprise* was in the vicinity, and he didn’t want to do anything to give away the ship’s position. In fact, he planned to fly in a diagonal away from the sub relative to the ship’s position, just so it couldn’t estimate their direction of travel in case it survived and happened to come back up as they departed.

“What do you suppose that stuff is?” Once again, Joe had been the first to spot something.

“I don’t know, let’s go down and take a closer look. Cory dropped into a shallow dive and crossed over a black patch on the water.”

“That’s gotta be oil,” he shouted cheerfully. “And since I don’t think there are any oil wells out here, we must have hit something!”

“I agree. Of course we don’t know if we killed it, or just hurt it. Either way, that was great shooting, Cory. Congratulations!”

“Wow – our first sub. But it’s because of your eyes, Joe. You oughta get those things insured!”

“I might just do that, Joe said cheerfully.” Apparently, the Special Theory of Relativity had been forgotten for awhile.

* * *

This turned out to be the best and the worst day of Joe and Cory’s partnership. When they returned to the ship and reported their action, a number of interesting things happened. First, the ship went to General Quarters, with all lookouts put on highest alert. Second, the carrier’s destroyers tightened their protective outer shield while the task force picked up speed and increased their zig-zag pattern. Third, the number of reconnaissance flights were increased, which was received with moans in the wardroom. And fourth, while they were congratulated for their action, their flight leader had to inform them that they couldn’t be credited with a hit since the sighting was so tenuous, and unconfirmed by any other boat or aircraft.

“That’s alright, Sir. We’ll get credit when the war’s over and it becomes clear that this sub never made it back.”

“You’re really full of yourself, aren’t you O’Brian?”

“Actually, we’re not, Sir. I don’t know if we disabled them or not. They may have pumped the oil just to make us think they were hurt. But at least in my mind there was a sub,

and we drove it down. When that's all the action you've ever seen, it makes you feel pretty good.”

The Lieutenant Commander nodded. “You did well – both of you. At least now we know we're in range of their subs. It's been easy sailing up to now.

That was the good part of the day. The bad part came just moments later when they were descending the over-steepened stairway in the conning tower. Joe was coming down after Cory when he slipped on a step and came tumbling down on top of Cory. Cory fell to the deck below, about to make a sarcastic remark when Joe let out a yelp of pain. Cory looked up to see him dangling from the ladder, his arm twisted between two of the rungs, with blood streaming down his sleeve.

Cory shouted for help and jumped up to help Joe extricate himself. Joe was doing his best not to cry, but the pain was obviously intense. As Cory lifted Joe's arm free of the stairwell, which required him to actually lift Joe's body to take the pressure off his arm, Joe let out a yelp of pain. Once free, he settled him onto the deck. Joe's face was white from the pain, and before he could say anything his head dropped off to the side. He'd fainted.

“Oh, boy. Okay, do I wait for help, or just get him to the Infirmary as fast as possible?” He was talking out loud, but there was no one to hear him. Usually this stairwell was like an overcrowded highway, but not now. They were all alone. Cory decided he had to move fast, so he gently lifted Joe up and over his shoulder and started to work his way down to the next level. It was tough enough by yourself, but the weight of two of them made it even worse. Fortunately, when he reached the next landing, a couple of enlisted men came around the corner and immediately helped Cory get Joe down to the Infirmary. The doctor on duty took one look at Joe and said, “Looks like he's going to be grounded for awhile.” It

was frustrating to think that you could survive all the risks of flying on and off a moving ship at sea, only to be put out of action by a slippery step. But there it was.

That afternoon, their flight leader came down to check on Joe, who was awake by now, a bit drugged up from a mild dose of morphine and wearing a new white cast. He was pretty glum. Spencer was there, as well, having been returned to the Active Duty roster two days before. After trying to cheer Joe up, without much success, Commander Mercer turned to Spencer and said, "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you, too, Tolman." Spencer's face immediately clouded up.

"Sir?"

"Well, with Mr. Thompson out of commission, I'm afraid that the only spot we have for you is to fly with O'Brian." That took Spencer by surprise – a pleasant surprise. But before he could respond, Mercer continued. "I know it's a lot to ask, but unfortunately the Navy only has so many pilots and, with a war on and all, this is what it's come down to."

"Well, challenging times call for extraordinary sacrifice, Sir. I guess it's the least that I could do for my country."

"Oh, no ... it's the most ... believe it's the most, Mr. Tolman. The Navy is grateful." Spencer did his very best to suppress a grin, but Mercer kept a perfectly straight face.

Cory grunted. "Nice ... really nice. If you two are done having your fun, maybe somebody would like to ask me what I think about this!"

"Stand down, Ensign O'Brian. The Navy doesn't require your opinion."

"Yes, Sir!" Cory said crisply. With that, Lieutenant Commander Mercer turned on his heel and exited the room, holding his bluff perfectly to the end.

Cory did his best to continue to act wounded, particularly since Joe looked even more miserable now. It's hard to be made "redundant" as the British like to say. Still, inside, Cory was happy. The reconnaissance flights wouldn't be nearly so boring now.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Tolman. I look forward to sharing a cockpit with you." Then to Joe, "Maybe this will give you the time you need to reconcile gravity and the time-space continuum while you're laid up, Joe. Of course you'll have to take the Heisenberg uncertainty principle into account when contemplating the quantum physics involved."

Even in his dazed state, Joe looked up in astonishment, "Am I hallucinating, or did you just describe the problems between Einstein's writings on relativity and quantum mechanics?"

"You're hallucinating ... you should get some sleep."

Joe nodded, as if both his head and his arm hurt.

Once outside, Cory whispered to Spencer, "He's already in shock. Why make him consider the thought that a pilot has actually studied something serious. It could send him over the edge!"