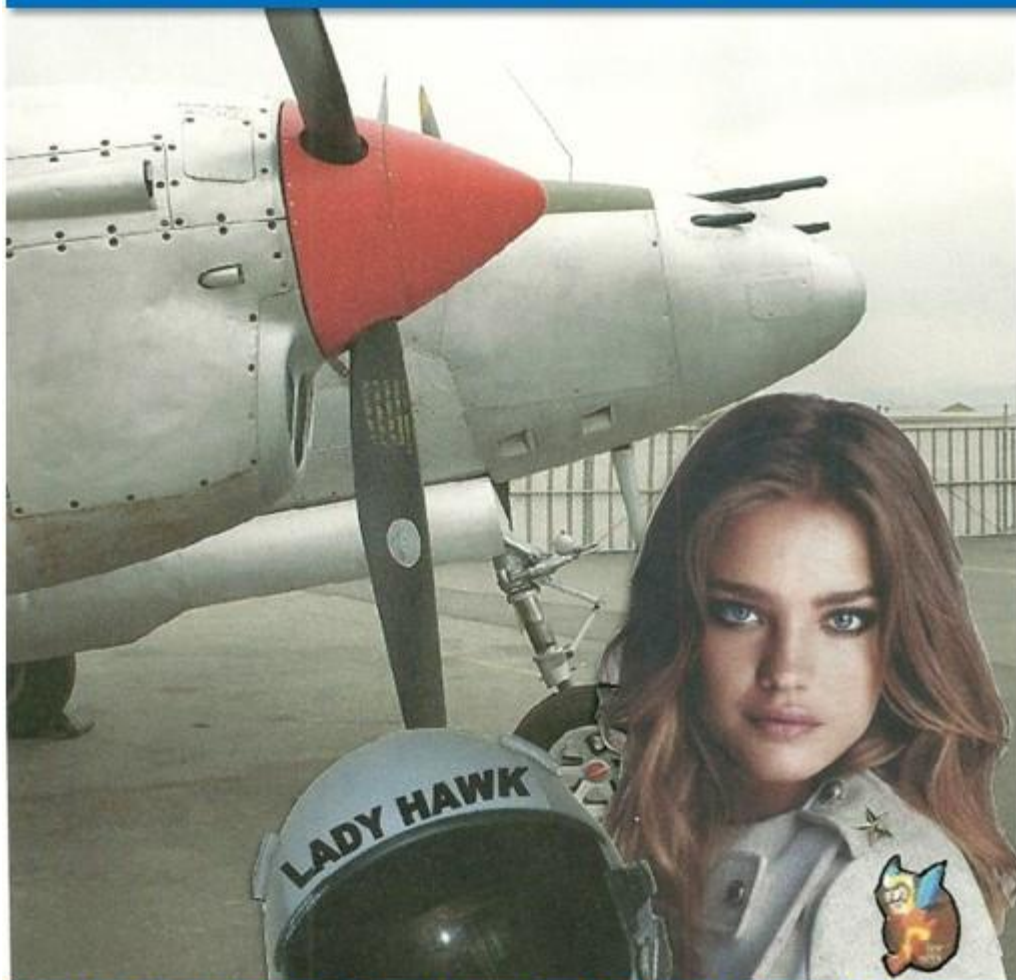


**FEMALE FIGHTER PILOT
INGRID DOWS
AN ALTERNATE STORY**



MICHEL POULIN

**FEMALE FIGHTER PILOT:
INGRID DOWS
AN ALTERNATE STORY**

A SCIENCE-FICTION / ALTERNATE HISTORY NOVEL

BY

MICHEL POULIN

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE AND SEX, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION. THE ACTIONS AND WORDS OF THE HISTORICAL CHARACTERS DEPICTED IN THIS NOVEL DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THE HISTORICAL REALITY.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is meant to be an alternate story of the road that led a young German girl, Ingrid Dows, born Weiss, to become the greatest American fighter ace of World War 2 and to then continue on to eventually become a top American military leader. It should be read as a parallel story to that told in the previously published books listed below, with its end merging with that of the main series after the end of World War 2. The dates in this novel include a 'C' following the year, denoting that the story is happening in the second parallel timeline to split from our actual timeline, Timeline 'A', following events which modified Humanity's history. Timeline 'B' split from Timeline 'A' following the involuntary travel in time by Nancy Laplante as she was transported from the Year 2012 to the Year 1940. Timeline 'C' in turn split from Timeline 'B' when an adversary of Nancy killed her in 1941 'B' but only succeeded in killing a timeline avatar, leaving the original Nancy alive, while creating a new timeline.

This novel is also meant to pay homage to the brave American women who voluntarily enrolled in the Women Auxiliary Service Pilots (or WASP) during World War 2, from 1942 to the disbandment of the WASP program in 1944. Most of the names of female aviators and ground personnel mentioned in this novel as part of the fictitious Fifinellas are the names and basic descriptions of women who were actually part of the WASP program. May their names be remembered with admiration and fondness.

OTHER BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

(All available free online at Free-Ebooks.net, or can be ordered direct via email to the author at natai@videotron.ca.)

Nancy Laplante Series

CODENAME: ATHENA
 ADVENTURES THROUGH TIME
 CHILDREN OF TIME
 TIMELINES
 DESTINIES
 TIMELINE TWIN
 FROM THE FIELDS OF CRIMEA TO THE SANDS OF MARS
 THE ADVENTURES OF NANCY LAPLANTE IN THE 19TH CENTURY
 UNITED STATES SPACE CORPS
 RAISING NANCY
 ANGEL GIRL
 AND AN ANGEL SANG
 IN THE SERVICE OF FRANCE
 THREE PROUD WOMEN
 THE GOSPEL OF MIRIAM
 A FULL LIFE
 FEMALE FIGHTER PILOT: INGRID DOWS – AN ALTERNATE STORY

Kostroma Series

JOVIAN UPRISING -2315
 THE ERIS PROTOCOL
 LOST AMONG THE STARS
 WAR AMONG THE STARS
 MIGHTY NOSTROMO
 THE FIGHTING NOSTROMO
 A NEW ERA
 NOSTROMO ON THE PROWL
 NOSTROMO LOST IN TIME

Sinner Series

SINNER AT WAR
ETERNAL SINNER
AMERICAN SINNER

U-Boote Series

THE LONE WOLF
U-900

Lenoir Series

A MINOR GLITCH
A NEW REALITY

CIA Series

FRIENDS AND FOES
A DEADLY TANGO

Odyssey Series

ODYSSÉE TEMPORELLE (in French)
SPACE-TIME ODYSSEY
ON THE ROAD TO EDEN

Nauca Series

NAUCA – DAUGHTER OF THE STEPPES
CARAVAN TO PATALIPUTRA

Standalone books

THE LOST CLIPPER
A MARS ODYSSEY
THE MAIN BATTLE TANK – STILL RELEVANT OR IN NEED OF EVOLUTION

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CHAPTER 1 – HEROINE’S FAREWELL

14:03 (GMT)

Friday, June 27, 1941 ‘C’

R.A.F. Air Station Northolt, southwest of London

England, United Kingdom

Commander Peter Stilwell patted Mike Crawford’s shoulder as they and other officers watched the Spanish Air Force transport aircraft roll towards the hangar where they were waiting in front of its opened doors.

“Be strong, Mike. We’re with you.”

The big American clenched his jaws, his face pale, but didn’t answer. Peter could see from the corner of his eye that Douglas Wilson was crying, while the normally unflappable George Townsend was barely holding his own tears in. He himself was close to breaking down as the transport aircraft, wide Red Cross signs painted on its fuselage, stopped in front of them. Air Commodore Nicholls was first to talk with the Spanish aviator who opened the side door of the plane, exchanging salutes with him before signaling to Peter and Mike to come forward. The British and the American were then invited inside, where a civilian standing beside a casket shook their hands.

“I’m Jean Rudolpho, of the International Committee of the Red Cross. I escorted the body from Berlin, on the demand of the American embassy there. I assume that you can formally identify Brigadier Laplante?”

Peter Stilwell had to swallow the lump in his throat before he could answer.

“You are correct, sir. I am Commander Stilwell, one of her assistants, while this is Major Mike Crawford, her husband.”

“My sincere condolences, Major.” replied the Swiss while looking at Mike Crawford. “I must however ask you to identify her formally now, so that I can have you sign for her body.”

On a nod from Crawford, the Red Cross man opened the casket, then unzipped open the plastic body bag lying on a bed of dry ice inside.

“My God!” whispered Peter, tears coming out of his eyes: it was too obvious that Nancy had been tortured severely before being shot in the head. Mike passed a shaking hand on Nancy’s bruised, lifeless face, then collapsed to his knees, crying shamelessly.

“The bastards! Nancy...”

Without a word, the Red Cross man presented a clipboard with a form on it and a pen to Peter, who signed the form before returning it to Rudolpho. Peter then went to the door of the plane and waved at six airmen waiting outside, who quickly but respectfully took the casket out of the plane. A small honor guard presented arms as they brought it to a waiting ambulance. Peter turned towards Rudolpho as he left the plane, dragging the distraught Mike with him.

“Thank you for escorting her body to England, Mister Rudolpho. We won't forget your kindness.”

“It was the least we could do for her, Commander. Goodbye!” replied the Swiss, obviously moved, before closing the door of the plane, which then started rolling to position itself for a takeoff.

Both Stilwell and Townsend had to help Mike to their car, so distraught the big American was. With Doug Wilson driving, they then headed back towards London. Peter waited for Mike to get back some control on himself before speaking.

“Mike, I'm sorry if I have to ask this now, but a lot of highly classified things depended on Nancy: did she give you a will?”

“Yes!” answered back the American. “In fact, she gave me an extra copy, to be given to the British government along with an attachment in the event of her death. She told me that there was a part concerning her job as the Prime Minister's Special Military Advisor. Here is that copy.”

Peter took the envelope handed by Mike, then opened it after a short hesitation. Reading twice through the will and the letter attached to it, Peter felt discouragement overtake him: what was in there would make his job much harder tomorrow at the special war cabinet meeting called by Winston Churchill. Nancy's uncommon kindness and open mindedness could well hurt her own reputation in this case. Peter knew that there was only one thing for him to do, and quickly.

“Mike, do you mind if I go see Ingrid Weiss at the Tower of London today?”

Mike looked sadly at him and tried to smile.

“I expected that, Peter: I already read my own copy of Nancy's will. I want to be present when you see Ingrid, though.”

“Understood, Mike. We will go see her at seven, tonight. I will pick you up at your apartment at a quarter to seven.”

"I will be ready." replied Mike weakly.

The rest of the trip was spent in silence. First dropping off Mike at his apartment at 24 St-James' Place, Doug Wilson then drove his two colleagues to the ministry building in Whitehall housing the Hourglass Section. Wing Commander Humphreys, Doctor Reginald Jones and Sergeant Betty Moffat stared at them the moment they walked in the closely guarded office of the most sensitive and secret government section in England. Peter spoke immediately, preempting their questions.

"Nancy is dead. I identified her body. She was also obviously tortured severely before being shot in the head. Her body should now be at the forensic department of St-Thomas Hospital. We will know more tomorrow morning."

Peter's subdued announcement brought tears to Jones' and Moffat's faces. In contrast, after bowing his head briefly, Humphreys went to his desk and grabbed a decrypted German Enigma message, waving it at Peter.

"When are you going to tell General Ismay about this?"

"Tomorrow, at the war cabinet meeting. I am going to the Tower of London tonight to speak to the main person concerned by that Enigma message, in order to find out why Nancy acted the way she did. In the meantime, I would appreciate if you would keep this under wrap."

The tone Peter used for his last sentence obviously didn't please Humphreys.

"You are trying to cover up for her, aren't you? Well, there is too much at stake here to play this kind of game: I'm going to see General Ismay now."

An enraged Stilwell grabbed Humphreys by his shirt before he could make two steps, then slammed him hard against a wall.

"Are you crazy, Commander? Let me go!" could barely say the half-choked wing commander. Instead of letting him go, Peter tightened his grip even more as he spoke in a low, dangerous voice.

"I'll be damned if I let you smear the name of a lady who won twice the Victoria Cross in combat without giving me a chance to find out about both sides of this affair. Furthermore, I don't want to hear any more doubts about Nancy's loyalty, especially when coming from a desk-bound, ex-traveling salesman like you. You shut your mouth until the cabinet meeting tomorrow. Is that clear, mister?"

Humphreys, cold sweat on his face, looked around the office, silently pleading for help. Jones, Townsend and Wilson were all looking at him with something akin to murder in

their eyes, while Sergeant Moffat, his own cryptographic clerk, was turning her back to him, typing at her desk as if nothing was happening. Even the two military policemen on duty at the entrance of the office had retreated in the hallway and were ignoring him. The devotion which Nancy Laplante enjoyed around the Hourglass Section was now clearly turning against Humphreys, who swallowed hard.

“Alright, I’ll keep quiet for the moment.”

Stilwell then released his grip and took one step back, his eyes still locked on Humphreys.

“Don’t worry about the truth, Wing Commander: whatever I find tonight will be reported in full to the war cabinet tomorrow. Now, let’s go back to work.”

Returning to their various occupations, the five officers and the female sergeant kept themselves busy until closing time but their hearts were clearly not into their work. Humphreys and Stilwell exchanged poisoned looks when the R.A.F. officer walked out of the office. In contrast, Sergeant Moffat waited until Humphreys was gone before grabbing her purse and stopping in front of Peter’s desk.

“Commander, I saw that decrypted Enigma message too. While it shocked me at first, I revised my opinion after seeing the amount of information we already have in Nancy’s database about that German. I now think that she acted purely out of kindness, to avoid unnecessary suffering to that German. For what it’s worth, I’m on your side in this.”

Peter smiled tenderly at Betty Moffat and took her hand gently.

“Betty, you do count for a lot in this office. Thanks for your confidence in Nancy.”

The mention of Laplante’s name brought back tears to the clerk’s eyes, who wiped them quickly while speaking in a shivering voice.

“When I think that, after all she did for us, some people still would try to stab her in the back...”

“Jealousy and chauvinism!” replied Peter bitterly. “It was to be expected, I guess. Betty, be assured that I will do my best to defend her name at that meeting tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Commander. I appreciate that.”

Betty then Kissed Peter on the cheek before leaving the office. His heart heavy, Peter then packed his briefcase and had a last look at Nancy’s desktop computer, sitting on a work desk in one corner of the office, before closing the door and locking it up. His briefcase in his left hand, he then walked away, his mind in turmoil.

19:04 (GMT)

Tower of London

Mike Crawford and Peter Stilwell found **Ingrid Weiss** in her small room on the second floor of Gaoler's House, studying an English conversation book. She was barefoot and wore only a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. Peter couldn't help notice how athletic the young German had become since the first time he had seen her five months ago, after she had been captured in France by Nancy, along with the rest of the staff of the Luftwaffe headquarters where she had been working as an air situation plotter. The rows of books on her small desk reminded him that Ingrid, apart from being a very beautiful teenage girl, was also a very sharp cookie. Ingrid's welcoming smile disappeared as soon as she saw the sad faces of her two visitors. Tears appearing in her eyes, she looked up at Mike, who still stood just inside the door of her room.



“No! Don't tell me that Nancy is dead, please!”

Mike nodded his head, then stepped quickly forward to hug the now crying girl. Watching closely Ingrid, Peter was convinced that her distress was not faked: Nancy's affection for her was no one-way street. He himself felt a pang of guilt at the secret attraction he had towards what was supposed to be an enemy of England. That young German made him think more and more about a teenage version of Nancy, and an even more beautiful one at that.

Mike and Ingrid finally parted after a long minute, their eyes still moist.

“How did she die, Mike? Please, tell me the truth.”

The American sat on the edge of Ingrid's bed before answering her in a weak voice, his head bowed.

“She was tortured and killed by the Gestapo, Ingrid. The Abwehr¹, on Hitler's orders, tried to deliver her but arrived too late. Her body arrived this afternoon in Northolt via Spain, escorted by a representative of the International Red Cross.”

“Could I see her, one last time?” pleaded the teenager, prompting Mike to look at Peter, who nodded his head.

¹ Abwehr: German Army Intelligence service during World War 2.

"I can arrange a visit later tonight to the forensic lab where her body is kept."

"Thank you, commander. You are a kind man."

"Ingrid," said softly Mike, as he took an envelope out of the bag he had brought with him, "Nancy included you in her will. Here is your copy, which she translated into German."

The teenager took the document, then read it carefully, occasional tears still coming out. At one point she opened her eyes wide with surprise.

"She is leaving me her savings?"

"That's right, Ingrid. That bank account is now yours, with 2,342 Sterling Pounds in it. Here is the bank transfer form. Just sign here and I will complete the paperwork tomorrow."

"But you are her husband, Mike. You are entitled to that money."

"Bunk! I don't need that money. You will, when this war is over. Besides, I intend to be with you then: I will come here at the end of the war to pick you up and bring you to the United States to offer you a new family. That is what Nancy wanted and that is what I still want."

Peter looked at both of them with unmitigated surprise.

"You and Nancy were planning to adopt Ingrid at the end of the war? That is a sweet thought indeed."

Mike simply nodded his head, unwilling to look straight at Peter: the truth was that Ingrid was already his stepdaughter, at least in the eyes of the American government. Mike had secretly obtained and given to Ingrid a certificate of adoption, listing him and Nancy as her step-parents, along with an American passport made in her new legal name: Ingrid Maria Louise Crawford. Another item in that passport which would have shocked Peter was the religion she was listed under. Officially designated until now as a Lutheran, the religion of her original mother, Ingrid had started two months ago to return to the secret religion of her dead father, Judaism. Knowing what kind of controversy and even hatred that could spark amongst the other Germans interned with her if that became known, Ingrid had been very discreet about that, praying in Hebrew and Yiddish solely in the privacy of her room at night and often flouting the food restrictions of the Mosaic Laws in order to appear as a good, typical German. Ingrid was however resolved to change that in time. Signing the bank form, she gave it back to Mike, who pocketed it before taking out of the bag he had brought Nancy's Discman and portable

radio/CD/cassette player unit, along with a small carrying case. He then gave the three items to Ingrid.

“Nancy wanted you as well to keep her Discman and portable sound system, along with her collection of musical tapes and CDs. These are now yours.”

Peter was about to protest this but Mike stared firmly at him.

“Peter, don’t get in the way of that part of Nancy’s will. It is not as if Ingrid will send the electronic parts of those items to Germany by mail. I was anyway planning after this to go see Brigadier Browning, to tell him about these appliances.”

“Alright, I will go with that, but only because it is for Ingrid. Now, before we go to the forensic lab to see Nancy’s body, could I speak to one of Ingrid’s friends, Hanna Reitsch?”

Peter’s apparently innocent question made Ingrid stiffen, alarm appearing on her face. Mike, on the other hand, appeared surprised by Ingrid’s reaction.

“What’s wrong, Ingrid? What is it with this Hanna?”

“Only me and Nancy knew the true identity of that woman, Mike.” explained the teenager without breaking eye contact with Peter. “Why do you want to see her, Commander?”

It was Peter’s turn to touch Ingrid’s hand gently.

“Ingrid, others have learned about Hanna Reitsch’s true identity and are ready to smear Nancy’s name for her protecting that woman. I must know why Nancy acted the way she did, in order to defend her name at a cabinet meeting tomorrow.”

Ingrid nodded her head, her face grave.

“Wait here, Commander. I will get her.”

While Ingrid walked out of her room, Peter sat beside Mike on the bed, emotionally drained.

“This must be the worst day of my life, Mike.”

“Welcome to the club!” replied the American, equally downcast. Both then waited in silence, lost in their thoughts, until Ingrid returned with a petite blond woman in her early thirties. The newcomer looked with dread at Peter, who stood up and offered his hand.

“Flugkapitan Hanna Reitsch, I am Commander Peter Stilwell, one of Nancy Laplante’s assistants.”

Hesitantly at first, the frail woman finally shook hands with him and spoke in a fair English.

“Pleased to meet you, commander. Ingrid told me that Brigadier Laplante is dead. How did she die?”

“She was captured following an airplane crash at sea, then tortured and killed by your Gestapo, Flugkapitan. I am here to avoid her losing her good name on top of losing her life. Could you explain to me the reasons why she protected your true identity?”

Hanna Reitsch, pale and shaken, had to sit on the bed before speaking, her voice subdued.

“I don’t know if you will understand, Commander. I myself couldn’t believe it when she recognized me early on and didn’t blow the whistle on me. Basically, she told me that, since she already knew everything of importance about me and my work as a test pilot through her historical files, it would be pointless to finger me and thus expose me to endless interrogations and harsh treatment. She was a very humane and kind person, Commander. If it can help protect her name, I am ready to testify in front of your superiors.”

Peter lowered his head in discouragement then. Nancy’s open-mindedness and generosity was nothing new to him, but to make his superiors understand how she could be kind to a German was going to be one tough sell.

“Flugkapitan, I will attend a meeting of the war cabinet tomorrow, where I intend to defend her actions as best I can. If it would be only for me, you would remain here under your cover name, with only a few high-ranking officers and politicians in the know about you. I cannot guarantee that I will succeed in protecting both her name and yourself, though. I do appreciate your offer of testifying and may take you up on that. Was there any other reason why Nancy protected you?”

Hanna, her hands pressed together, hesitated before answering him.

“Yes! I was one of her childhood’s heroines, believe it or not. I was after all the first-ever female test pilot and the first woman to fly a helicopter.”

Peter and Mike exchanged bemused looks at that confidence.

“Uh, don’t mention that little detail if you have to testify tomorrow, Flugkapitan.” said Peter. “I am now going to bring Ingrid to the forensic lab of St-Thomas Hospital, where Nancy’s body is kept. I will fetch for you tomorrow if your deposition is needed, Flugkapitan Reitsch.”

Peter suddenly found a pair of blue eyes pleading at him.

“Commander, could I come too? I owed so much to her.”

Peter contemplated for a moment the sad face looking up at him from her five feet of height, then nodded his head.

“This is most irregular, Flugkapitan, but I guess that today is not an ordinary day.”

20:12 (GMT)

Forensic lab, St-Thomas Hospital

London

Doctor Stephen Brown looked with sympathy at the two men and two women standing near him besides the examination table, where a form lay under a blanket. He then addressed the one wearing a Royal Navy uniform.

“Commander, I have to warn you that, while we have not opened up Brigadier Laplante’s body yet for detailed forensic examination, the tortures inflicted on her were horrific. Are you sure that the two ladies here want to see this?”

Brown then looked at the two women, one a mere teenager informally dressed in shorts and T-shirt, the other a petite blonde wearing a baggy two-piece fleece sports suit. Neither of the two had said a word yet, having been simply presented by Stilwell as close friends of Laplante. The commander nodded his head soberly in response.

“Go ahead, Doctor. They can take it.”

“As you wish, Commander.” replied Brown as he uncovered the head and shoulders of the body. Tears immediately came to all four visitors. To Brown’s surprise, it was the teenage girl who spoke up first after the initial shock.

“Uncover her completely, Doctor.” she said in a voice she tried to keep firm. Brown obliged and pulled away the blanket. The petite blonde choked down a horrified sob, while the young girl closed her eyes for a moment. She however reopened them quickly and examined with immense sadness the body from head to toe for long seconds. She then nodded to Brown, who then covered back the body. A tearful Stilwell shook Brown’s hand.

“Thank you for accommodating our visit tonight, Doctor. Will the forensic report be ready in time for tomorrow’s cabinet meeting at ten O’clock?”

“It will be, Commander. I will deliver the report myself during that meeting.”

Brown then lowered his voice and glanced quickly at the two women, who were being escorted out by the American officer.

“May I ask you who were those two women, Commander?”

“You can, Doctor.” replied Peter in a tired voice. “Nancy was planning to adopt the younger one, who is a war orphan, while the other is a good friend of her.”

“Commander, you have my most sincere condolences. Brigadier Laplante will be sorely missed by all.”

The Royal Navy officer shook his head angrily.

“Wrong, Doctor! Some are already trying to stab her in the back. Don’t be surprised tomorrow if you hear nasty accusations and comments about her at that cabinet meeting.”

“Who could do such a thing to her?” asked Brown indignantly. “It is obvious from the extent of her wounds that Brigadier Laplante resisted her interrogators for hours, if not for days. She deserves to be treated like a heroine.”

“Well, believe it or not but some are ready to call her a traitor.” replied Peter bitterly.

“What? Are they mad or just mean? What would make them believe such a stupid notion?”

“Doctor, if Nancy was guilty of something, it was of being too kind and tolerant for this damn time period. Keep this for yourself, but those two women you just saw are actually German prisoners of war.”

On that, Peter then left the lab. A stunned Stephen Brown now stared alone at Nancy’s battered face. Pulling up a stool besides the examination table, he then started his grim autopsy work.

08:06 (GMT)

Saturday, June 28, 1941 ‘C’

Prime Minister’s Military Secretary’s office

Home Office building, London

Peter Stilwell found Lieutenant General Hasting Ismay at his desk, working on some report. The old officer didn’t seem to have his heart in his work, though. Smiling meekly at Peter, he threw away the file he had in his hands the moment his visitor walked in.

“What can I do for you this morning, Commander?”

Putting first a pile of documents and papers on the general's desk, Peter then locked eyes with his superior.

"For me, nothing, sir. For Nancy, a lot. I need to ask a very big favor from you, sir."

10:02 (GMT)

Cabinet conference room

Prime Minister's residence

10 Downing Street, London

Winston Churchill's gavel banged three times, bringing silence to the room full of ministers, generals, admirals and various advisors and aides. Peter Stilwell was actually the lowest ranking person present, if one discounted Jennifer Collins, the Prime Minister's junior secretary tasked with steno typing the meeting's proceedings.

"I now declare this special war cabinet meeting open." said the Prime Minister in his usual gruff voice. "The main subject to be discussed is the death of Brigadier Laplante and its possible fallouts. I will first ask the honorable Sir Anthony Eden to summarize the events of the last few days."

The tall and lanky Foreign Minister nodded, then took a sheet of paper from a folder and started reading it in as steady a voice as he could muster.

"On June 23, Brigadier Laplante boarded a Lockheed Hudson aircraft of the Coastal Command at R.A.F. Northolt, with the Royal Navy base of Scapa Flow as her destination. Somewhere off the coast of Scotland, her plane encountered a very severe storm and apparently crashed in the North Sea. On the next day, we intercepted and decrypted a message from the German submarine U-47, advising its headquarters in Wilhelmshaven that it had found Brigadier Laplante on a rubber raft, nearly frozen to death. That submarine then apparently delivered her in the hands of the Abwehr in that port. From what we now know from Admiral Canaris, who contacted us via our embassy in Spain, it seems that it was actually a Gestapo team, which had ambushed the Abwehr team on its way to Wilhelmshaven, that actually took delivery of Brigadier Laplante. She was subsequently brought to a Gestapo center in Berlin, where she was tortured for a minimum of six hours and probably for a much longer period, before being killed by a gunshot to the head. Since torturing her was in direct contravention to a directive from Adolph Hitler, the Abwehr took by assault that Gestapo center with the support of

Luftwaffe troops as soon as they learned where Laplante was held, but arrived too late. Admiral Canaris, still through our embassy in Spain, then arranged for her body to be flown back to England. The body arrived in Northolt yesterday afternoon and was subsequently brought to the forensic department of St-Thomas Hospital. That's it for my report, gentlemen."

An oppressive silence followed Eden's presentation; a silence broken by Winston Churchill.

"As distasteful as the next subject is, in view of the amount of highly classified information held by Brigadier Laplante, we have to ask ourselves the following question: did she talk under the Gestapo's tortures?"

"What does the forensic report say about the state of her body, Mister Prime Minister?" asked Lord Hankey, the old civil servant in charge of the British Secret Services.

"I thought that the doctor who performed the autopsy would actually be the best person to enlighten us on this." replied Churchill, who then turned towards a bodyguard standing beside the door of the conference room. "Let Doctor Brown in!"

Most of the meeting's participants looked ill at ease as they waited for Doctor Brown to come in, with the notable exceptions of Stewart Menzies and Claude Dansey, respectively the head and assistant-head of the Intelligence Service, the M.I.6. Both men appeared cold and unconcerned, something that did not escape Peter Stilwell's attention. The tension went up in the room as soon as a tall and lean man in a civilian suit came in, escorted by the bodyguard. Taking the seat offered by Churchill, Stephen Brown listened to the whispered instructions from General Ismay before opening a briefcase and putting a file folder on the conference table, then looked around at the faces surrounding him.

"Mister Prime Minister, gentlemen, I am Doctor Stephen Brown, head of the forensic department of St-Thomas Hospital. I performed a full autopsy yesterday on the body of Brigadier Nancy Laplante. While some chemical test results are not in yet, I am confident that my report contains all the details of interest to you. I am pained to tell you that nothing was spared to Brigadier Laplante. Before being shot in the head with a high velocity, small caliber bullet which instantly killed her, she was atrociously tortured for at least many hours, maybe a day or two if there were breaks between interrogation

sessions. With the amount of pain she had to endure, she undoubtedly passed out more than once and was probably close to a cardiac failure by the time she was shot.”

“Excuse me, Doctor.” interrupted Claude Dansey. “Could you be more specific about the treatment inflicted on her? We have to assess if she could have resisted those tortures.”

Brown shot a dark look at Dansey before picking up a sheet of paper from his file folder.

“If it’s the cold facts you are after, mister, then here they are. She was flogged to the point of bleeding on over seventy percent of her body, with the heaviest concentrations of strokes on her back, chest and groin. All of her nails, both on her fingers and toes, were pulled out. Her fingers and toes were then smashed, probably with a heavy hammer. Her face showed the marks of severe and repeated beatings, both with fists and with a short leather flogger, and six of her teeth were broken or missing, while both eyes were closed shut and her lips were split open. There were extensive electrical burns on her breasts and genitals, along with 37 large, third degree burns distributed over her torso and chest, probably the result of the application of red-hot irons. Both of her feet were also extensively burned with a probable welding lamp. Finally, I can say that she was raped, repeatedly. Like I said before, she was spared nothing.”

Winston Churchill, looking sick, was about to say something to Claude Dansey when Jennifer Collins, the junior secretary, ran out of the room in tears. Churchill immediately rose from his chair and followed her, turning briefly towards the others.

“Please take a short break, gentlemen. I won’t be long.”

Churchill found Jennifer in the anteroom next to the conference room, crying hysterically while sitting in a sofa. Sitting beside her, the politician took out his handkerchief and gave it to Jennifer, who thankfully accepted it.

“That poor Nancy... she was a good friend of mine and now these cold-hearted bastards are discussing her fate as if she was nothing more than a slab of beef in a butcher’s shop.”

“Look, Jennifer, nobody is enjoying this, least of all me. We must however find out if Nancy could have given away some secrets before dying. This is critical.”

“She would never have betrayed us!” shouted the secretary, furious. “Do they assume that, because she was a woman, she was thus weaker and incapable of resisting the Gestapo?”

“I never believed that, Jennifer, and you know it. Can you resume your duties or do you want me to get Mary Miles to replace you?”

Jennifer shook her head, wiping her tears as she answered.

“I will go back inside. It’s the least I can do for Nancy.”

“Good girl! Nancy would have liked that.”

Holding the still sobbing woman by one arm, Churchill helped her back into the conference room. There, he found half the participants, led by Sir Anthony Eden, facing off the other half, led by General Menzies, in an acrimonious debate on whether Nancy Laplante had talked under the tortures. The confrontation calmed down as Churchill sat down while looking severely at the participants around the table.

“Gentlemen, Brigadier Laplante worked for me for nearly a year. If there is anything that she proved during that period, it was that she possessed enough courage for the lot of us. I see two glaring facts out of Doctor Brown’s report: first, Brigadier Laplante obviously resisted the Gestapo, as her extensive wounds clearly show; second, the Germans would not have killed her if she was in the process of giving away our secrets. With the amount of secrets she held in her mind, it would take days of interrogation to note down everything she knew, and that is if she was cooperative and didn’t have to be constantly coerced. I thus believe that Brigadier Laplante didn’t give away anything despite the worst tortures that could be inflicted on her for hours and that an interrogator probably killed her out of frustration. Does anybody here disagree with this assessment?”

“Mister Prime Minister,” said Claude Dansey, “just learning about how we can decipher the German Enigma encoding machine would have been a coup for the Gestapo. There are countless cases known of persons being tortured for weeks by the Gestapo. Surely, their interrogators would have shown lots of patience with a prisoner as valuable as Brigadier Laplante. Killing her after only a day or less would have made no sense, unless she gave away enough information to satisfy them. As Doctor Brown said himself, Laplante was probably close to death when she was shot.”

“Then the Gestapo would have stopped to let her rest and would have continued another day.” objected General Ismay. “Brigadier Laplante must have said something that infuriated the Gestapo so much that she was then shot. Maybe the shooter was a visiting, high-ranking SS officer on whom Brigadier Laplante was about to reveal something very embarrassing or incriminating. As an example, take Reinhardt Heidrich, the head of the SS security forces. Laplante and we knew that his maternal

grandmother was Jewish, something I doubt Heidrich wanted to be widely known. It would have been consistent with this sadist's ways to go watch her being tortured and to laugh at her. Brigadier Laplante may just have had the last laugh on him."

Churchill, Eden and many others nodded their heads, convinced by Ismay's reasoning. Churchill then addressed the participants in a voice full of sorrow.

"Gentlemen, in view of the facts presented up to now, it appears that Brigadier Laplante died as bravely as she lived. God knows I will miss her. She was a godsend to our cause and saved us from a lot of grief in this war. I intend to personally recommend her for a second bar to her Victoria Cross, for her incredible courage under extreme duress."

"If I may, Mister Prime Minister..." said Stewart Menzies, attracting everybody's eyes on him.

"Go ahead, General Menzies."

"What I'm going to say may shock many of you here, but I have some hard evidence with me to suggest that, instead of being decorated, Brigadier Laplante should actually be stripped of her medals and rank, for aiding and abetting the enemy."

Churchill immediately shot up from his chair, rage on his face.

"WHAT? WHAT'S THIS NONSENSE?"

Churchill's furious reply made Menzies cringe, while nearly all the other participants glared angrily at him.

"Please, Mister Prime Minister, hear me out. I am taking no joy in this, believe me. What I have are facts, not suppositions or suspicions."

"Then you better be very convincing, General." warned Churchill. The head of the M.I.6 nodded once and took a sheet of paper out of a locked briefcase, then passed it to the Prime Minister.

"This, sir, is a translated copy of a decoded German Enigma message from the higher Luftwaffe headquarters to their liaison office at the Focke-Wulf factories near Bremen. It informs Bremen that one of their test pilots, one Flugkapitan Hanna Reitsch, was being held as a prisoner of war in London but that she was assuming the identity of a simple auxiliary. That message also said to the Focke-Wulf management not to worry about us discovering her real identity, as quote Nancy Laplante was taking good care of her and was protecting her cover identity unquote. Here, sir, I must emphasize that this Hanna Reitsch is no ordinary test pilot. She has flown many of the most secret German prototypes and even received the Iron Cross from Hitler himself. This message thus

proves that Brigadier Laplante knew the true identity of the so-called Oberhelferin Fisher for months, but protected her for some unknown reasons. By that willful act, Laplante let a prime potential source of information slip from our hands for many critical months. If that is not treason, I don't know how to call it."

"But...why?" asked Sir Cyril Newall, Chief of the Air Staff, as stunned as everybody else around the table, except for Dansey, Wing Commander Winterbotham and Peter Stilwell.

"I am afraid that the answer to your question accompanied Brigadier Laplante in her grave, sir." replied solemnly Menzies. The noise of knuckles rapping on the table then made everybody look at Stilwell.

"I believe that you are wrong, General Menzies: I have both statements and witnesses to explain Nancy Laplante's actions. May I, Mister Prime Minister?"

"By all means, Commander."

Stilwell took out a number of files from his briefcase, putting them on the table as he spoke.

"First of, this business about hiding Hanna Reitsch's identity. These files in front of me contain the information on Reitsch available in the historical data files given to us by Nancy Laplante after she arrived in England a year ago. Tell me, General Menzies, how would your M.I.6 interrogators proceed with this prime potential source of information, as you called Flugkapitan Reitsch?"

"Well, we evidently don't use torture, unlike the Germans. She would be subjected to tight, non-stop questioning, using strictly psychological tricks, stress positions, sleep and sensory deprivation and so on."

"How long would you subject her to that treatment, sir?"

"As long as it takes. What's your point, Commander?"

"My point, General, is that this treatment you described, apart from amounting to mental and psychological torture, would also have been totally unnecessary in the case of Flugkapitan Reitsch."

Peter then started throwing forward on the table his files one by one as he spoke.

"This is the biographical entry on Hanna Reitsch, including her accomplishments in aviation. This is the list of characteristics of all the so-called secret prototypes she flew, along with the dates and places she flew them. This one contains the service history of the prototypes which made it to the production line. The last file describes the relations between Hanna Reitsch and the Nazi Party. We had all this information since

September of 1940, when Nancy Laplante arrived from the future with her computers and her data files. We even used some of that information to raid some critical German installations. In short, General, your goons would have destroyed mentally that woman for no good reason at all. That is why Nancy Laplante protected Reitsch's identity: to prevent unnecessary suffering to a fellow human being. Is that such a crime, General?"

"Why did she care so much for Germans?" replied Menzies, furious at letting himself be trapped like this by Stilwell. "Besides, who could swear to her true motives? You have only suppositions, Commander."

"Wrong, sir! I have a written statement from Nancy Laplante, as well as two witnesses. As for why she cared for Reitsch and other Germans, it is simple enough: she was from the future. In that future, Germany was a trusted ally of both Great Britain and Canada. Nancy actually served with German Army units during joint exercises in Europe and during an exchange tour with a German paratrooper unit. She did not despise or hate Germans the way many of us do. In fact, the only prejudices Nancy had that I know of was against racists and male chauvinists."

Many participants smiled at that last remark from Stilwell: Nancy had been widely known as a forceful feminist. With the tension in the room now lowered somewhat, Churchill spoke up.

"Commander, what is that statement you referred to and who are your two witnesses?"

"Mister Prime Minister, I was given yesterday by Nancy's husband a copy of her last will, along with a letter intended for this government. I would like to read out loud the latter with your permission, sir, along with parts of her will which are relevant to this conversation."

"Please do, Commander." said Churchill softly, then looking sternly around the table. "I will not tolerate any interruptions during the reading of Brigadier Laplante's last will and of her letter."

Peter, a lump in his throat, unfolded a few sheets of paper and started reading them aloud.

"Dear Prime Minister, this letter is to ask forgiveness for an act that may be construed as an act of treason, but one which I consider merely an act of mercy. One of the female German prisoners held in the Tower of London since Operation BACKSTABBER, Oberhelferin Katharina Fisher, is in reality Flugkapitan Hanna Reitsch, a civilian test pilot previously employed by the Focke-Wulf factories in Bremen. I

protected her identity in order to avoid her long and brutal interrogations which would have been in my mind unnecessary and cruel in view of the amount of information on her contained in my computer files. I further beg the British government to be lenient and humane with Flugkapitan Reitsch and to treat her like the other German women held in the Tower of London. My last wish to the British government is to be buried in London in as simple a ceremony as possible, instead of in Canada. I have yet to set foot in the Canada of the 1940s and consider London as my true home in this decade. I hope that the honorable Winston Churchill will find a hole in his busy schedule to do the eulogy at my burial. I would also be eternally grateful to the British government if one of the German Luftwaffe auxiliaries held in the Tower of London, Helferin Ingrid Weiss, would be allowed to be one of my pallbearers, alongside my four assistants from the Hourglass Section and Corporal Megan Thomas, a WAAF serving in R.A.F. Northolt. As I will no longer have the need for them, I wish to inform you as well that, in my last will, I give full possession to the British government of all my electronic equipment and data files presently situated in the Hourglass Section.”

At that point, Peter looked back at Churchill.

“That was the content of her letter to this government, Mister Prime Minister. I will now read excerpts from her last will which will explain further her frame of mind concerning those female German prisoners in the Tower. What that will make clear is that Nancy Laplante and her husband, Major Mike Crawford of the American embassy, were planning to adopt a young German girl at the end of the war. That girl is fifteen years old, is a war orphan and also happens to be one of the prisoners interned in the Tower of London. Her name is Ingrid Weiss.”

Many officers and ministers tensed up as he then resumed his reading.

“To Ingrid Weiss, born on September 7 of 1925 in Berlin, whom I consider as my adopted daughter for all intents and purposes, I give full possession and use of my two portable music systems and of my library of musical tapes and disks. I also give to Ingrid Weiss the content of my bank savings account, held at the Bank of Midlands on St-James Street.”

Peter looked up at Churchill again.

“That account now holds the sum of 2,342 Sterling Pounds, Mister Prime Minister. I understand that Nancy Laplante was not much of a spender, what with all the time she spent either planning or conducting combat operations. Those savings basically represent her untouched pay.”

“Damn, you could buy a nice car with that sum.” wondered Sir Newall.

“That money should be confiscated, along with those two portable radios given to that German girl.” replied wryly Claude Dansey, attracting the ire of Churchill.

“Out of the question! First off, Lieutenant Colonel Laplante has the legal right to give her money to whoever she wants. Secondly, it is not as if this Ingrid Weiss can go to the bank when she feels like it. As for the two radios, I believe that the security in the Tower of London is tight enough to prevent Miss Weiss from taking them out of there. What is it between the M.I.6 and Brigadier Laplante, Mister Dansey? First, when she arrived from the future, you wanted to confiscate all of her belongings and lock her up for life in an insane asylum, so she could not claim her things back. Now, you seem to want to destroy her reputation at all cost as she lays dead. May I remind you that she proved her loyalty on the battlefield many times and that we are now in the process of winning this war mostly thanks to her? I am not aware of any outstanding credentials on your part, sir.”

As Dansey smarted under the sharp rebuke from the Prime Minister, Churchill looked severely at General Menzies.

“From now on, I will not hear any more accusations of treason or disloyalty against Brigadier Laplante. Am I clear on this, General?”

“Very clear, sir!” said Menzies, swallowing hard. Churchill then looked at Peter Stilwell.

“You mentioned two witnesses earlier on, Commander. Who are they?”

“Helferin Ingrid Weiss and Flugkapitan Hanna Reitsch, Mister Prime Minister.”

Churchill smiled at the calm answer from Stilwell, while Menzies and Dansey turned red with indignation.

“I should have guessed so. However, their testimony will not be necessary at this time.”

Churchill was silent for a moment, looking at the table while collecting his thoughts, then spoke softly.

“I will have to disagree with one of the ultimate requests from Brigadier Laplante: I will be damned if we bury her in London without giving her the honors that she earned so hard. General Ismay, I want from you a list of suggestions about this within three days. Do not hesitate to search for the King’s advice: I know that His Majesty had a lot of admiration for her.”

“It will be done, sir.” replied soberly the old general.

“Then, gentlemen, let’s discuss now how we are going to keep using Nancy Laplante’s legacy to the best effect to win this war as quickly as possible. I’m open to your suggestions.”

13:19 (GMT)

**Office of Governor of the Tower
King’s House, Tower of London**

Brigadier Charles Browning, having just received a long telephone call from Lieutenant General Ismay, put down his receiver as someone knocked on the door of his office.

“Come in!”

Corporal Ann Myers, one of the military policewomen in charge of the 23 female German prisoners of war held in the Tower of London, then opened the door and came to attention, saluting Browning.

“Sir, Helferin Ingrid Weiss is here, as you requested.”

“Good! Let her in, then wait outside, Corporal.”

Myers saluted again, then shouted at the young German waiting in the hallway.

“Prisoner, forward...march! Left, right, left, right... Prisoner...halt!”

As soon as Myers closed the door behind her, Browning smiled at the apprehensive-looking girl and spoke to her in German.

“At ease, Helferin Weiss. I know that you asked to see me this morning but I also wanted to see you. Please have a seat.”

“Thank you, sir.” said Ingrid softly before taking the chair offered by the old, thin officer. Browning waited for her to be comfortable before speaking again.

“Ingrid, I first wanted to express my condolences to you about the death of Nancy Laplante. I knew that you were very close to each other, plus I was just told that she had been planning to adopt you after the end of the war. I am truly sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, sir. You were always a kind man.”

“My job is to ensure that you and the other prisoners are safely held and well-treated until the end of this war, Ingrid. I have no wish to be harsh with you. What I wanted to tell you is that Nancy Laplante asked in her will that you be one of her pallbearers and that, after a discussion at the highest level, you have been authorized to do so. The only condition will be that you will have to attend the ceremony in civilian

clothes. Since I realize that you have no proper civilian clothes for such a formal occasion, I am ready to let you out under escort on Monday to let you buy clothes with the money you just inherited. The burial ceremony is scheduled for next Friday, which will give you ample time to prepare.”

Some tears came out from Ingrid’s eyes at those words.

“You are most kind, sir. Do you know where Nancy will be buried?”

“Yes: beside Admiral Nelson and the Duke of Wellington, in the crypt of St-Paul’s Cathedral. The funeral procession will be led by the King and the Prime Minister. She will get a heroine’s farewell, Ingrid, as she deserves.”

Ingrid then broke down in tears, prompting Browning into leaving his chair and going to kneel besides her to console her. She was able to speak between sobs after a minute or so.

“Your government’s gesture towards her is nice, but I would have preferred instead to see Nancy return alive, sir.”

“So do we, Ingrid.”

“Sir, about my request to see you this morning, I have a favor to ask from you.”

“I will do what I can. What is it, Ingrid?”

The teenager swallowed her last sobs, then spoke in a soft, nearly whispering voice.

“Sir, what I am going to tell you must not be known by my German comrades, as I am not sure how some of them will react to it. While I am officially of Lutheran faith, the religion of my mother, my father was Jewish. He taught me Judaism, along with how to speak and read Hebrew. I also speak Yiddish, but did so only within our house or with other family members, while in discreet surroundings. Nancy’s death has deeply shaken me and I now feel the need to return to my true roots. What I am asking for is the permission to be able to go discreetly pray at a synagogue once a week, preferably on a Saturday, Sabbath day. I realize that I will have to be escorted around but if you could find one of your soldiers who is Jewish, I would be eternally grateful to you, sir.”

Truly surprised by this, Browning stared into Ingrid’s eyes, trying to gauge how sincere she was. He finally decided that she was only saying the truth and patted gently one of her hands.

“I will see if I can find someone in the Tower, Ingrid. Will you need a special piece of clothing or religious item for your prayers?”

“Only a dark shawl, sir. I was planning to buy one in the next days.”

“Then consider your request granted. I will keep you informed on when you will be able to go pray.”

A weak smile then appeared for the first time on Ingrid's face.

“Thank you so much, sir. You truly are a kind man.”

“It is nothing, Ingrid. You may go back to Gaoler's House now.”

The teenager nodded her head and got up, saluting him before leaving the office. Browning waited until the door was closed again before picking up his telephone and calling the guardroom.

“Hello, this is Brigadier Browning. Tell Sergeant Chaney to bring Oberhelferin Fisher to my office right away... Thank you!”

The petite German blonde was marched into Browning's office twelve minutes later, appearing quite nervous, something understandable in view of her now precarious status. Browning returned her salute and stared severely at her.

“Oberhelferin Fisher, or rather Flugkapitan Hanna Reitsch, do you know that assuming a false identity is enough to strip you from the protection normally entitled to under the Geneva Conventions?”

Hanna Reitsch swallowed hard, some sweat appearing on her forehead.

“Yes, sir! I am ready to take whatever punishment you deem appropriate, sir.”

“Well, we can start with one day of extra duties for being improperly dressed, Flugkapitan. From now on you will only wear civilian clothes, as you are not a bonafide serviceperson. As for assuming a false identity, the Prime Minister, after reading a plea in your favor in a letter made by Brigadier Laplante before her death, he has decided that no action will be taken against you. You will thus continue to be held here, with the other female German prisoners, but as a civilian internee. As such and in view of your rank of Flugkapitan, you are entitled to a room of your own. Being now as well the officially most senior prisoner in the Tower, I have decided that only one of the V.I.P. rooms in King's House is fit for your needs. The one I chose for you was previously occupied in the 16th century by Queen Ann Boleyn prior to her execution in 1536. Your day of extra duties will consist in sweeping, dusting and cleaning that room before you can occupy it. Do you have any questions or objections, Flugkapitan Reitsch?”

“Uh, no sir!” replied Hanna, not believing her luck.

“Then you are dismissed. Sergeant Chaney, you will take the prisoner to Ann Boleyn's room and make sure that she cleans it thoroughly before she can move in.”

“Yes sir!” shouted Chaney, who then marched Reitsch out of Browning’s office. The Governor of the Tower chuckled to himself while picking his telephone again and calling the orderly room of the Royal Fusiliers Regiment, the unit stationed inside the Tower of London.

15:02 (GMT)

Gaoler’s House, Tower of London

A young British soldier approached Ingrid as she was taking care with other prisoners of a bed of flowers on Tower Green, the grassy square in front of Gaoler’s House. The soldier, too timid to address her immediately, simply stood beside her until she noticed him and looked up from her kneeling position. After five months of internment in the Tower of London, Ingrid’s English was now quite passable.

“Yes, soldier?”

“Uh, you are Private Ingrid Weiss, correct?”

“Yes. Am I requested somewhere?”

The British soldier, a thin young man with a prominent nose and curly black hair, hesitated and looked at the other prisoners nearby, who were now starting to show curiosity at his presence.

“Yes. Could you come with me, please?”

Intrigued, Ingrid nonetheless got up and followed the soldier to the entrance of Gaoler’s House, where the British stopped and whispered to her.

“I was sent by Brigadier General Browning to escort you to the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue near here, where I normally pray. My name is Benjamin Lewinski and I’m Jewish.”

Ingrid nearly clapped hands with joy but restrained herself in order not to attract the curiosity of her comrades. She did however whisper back to the soldier, in Yiddish this time.

“May God bless you! At what time is the religious service?”

“At five O’clock. We have plenty of time. The Brigadier told me to remind you that you have to be in civilian clothes.”

“That’s alright: I will go change into a clean fleece sports ensemble. The one thing I don’t have however is something to cover my head, like a shawl.”

Benjamin smiled and produced a sealed envelope with Ingrid’s name on it.

“The Brigadier gave me this for you. It contains twenty Sterling Pounds, an advance from the Brigadier. He said that you can reimburse him later this week, when you will be allowed to go to your bank to get out some money to buy clothes for Brigadier Laplante’s funerals. I know a small store on the way to the synagogue where you will be able to buy a shawl and maybe some Jewish religious items. My father owns it.”

The malicious way the soldier said those last words made Ingrid smile widely: Benjamin seemed to be a nice young man, even if he was most timid.

“I will go wash and change quickly. Wait here!”

Benjamin had to wait only ten minutes before Ingrid came back, wearing a gray fleece top and trousers, plus a pair of black shoes. He admired her young, beautiful face for a second, her reddish-brown hair held in the back in a ponytail and her blue eyes sparkling with happiness.

“You’re perfect, Ingrid. Let’s go!”

Hauptheiferin Sara Wolf, still working with the other German prisoners on the flowerbed, had been watching the conversation between Benjamin and Ingrid and elbowed discreetly Oberheiferin Rebekka Lindeiner to attract her attention. Both women had been long recognized by their British guards as being part of a group of six hardcore Nazi sympathizers amongst the 23 female German prisoners in the Tower.

“Rebekka, there is something fishy going on with Ingrid. That British soldier seems to be leading her out of the walls.”

“A British, you said? Say a Jew instead. I can smell his type even at a distance.”

“This is weird. We better talk to Fuhrerin Manheim about this later tonight.”

They both watched as the soldier and Ingrid effectively walked out through the gate of Bloody Tower, then returned to their work, their minds still on that mystery.

Once out of the old fortress, Benjamin, who was armed with a revolver in a belt holster, escorted Ingrid up Tower Hill Street, turning north on Minories Street and following it for 400 yards before arriving at the corner with Aldgate Street. By now, it was obvious to Ingrid that many Jews lived in the area, judging by the inscriptions on the shop fronts. Turning left on Aldgate Street, Benjamin led her to a small pawnshop, gallantly opening the entrance door of the shop for her. The bearded, bespectacled man in his forties standing behind the service counter shouted with both joy and surprise at the sight of Benjamin.

“Ben! What are you doing here at this hour? Aren’t you still on duty?”

“I am on duty, father. This is Helferin Ingrid Weiss, one of the German female auxiliaries held in the Tower. I am escorting her out.”

Abraham Lewinski gave Ingrid a guarded glance and then looked back at his son, switching from English to Yiddish.

“Are you meshugeh², Benjamin? Why bring a German here, even if she is young and beautiful?”

“Because she is a Jew, father. She hid her true religion up to now in order not to attract the hostility of her German comrades. She asked my commander permission to go pray at the synagogue, so I was chosen to escort her, since I regularly go pray each Friday.”

“If she’s a German Jew, why did she volunteer to serve the Nazis? As a woman, she could not be conscripted against her will.”

“I enrolled in the Luftwaffe after my whole family was wiped out in a British bombing raid on Berlin, Mister Lewinski.” said Ingrid in Yiddish, surprising Abraham. “I was then an angry, insecure fifteen years old girl who mostly wanted to help protect her country from the enemy bombers who had killed her parents and siblings. Since I always had an interest in flying and in aircraft, I enrolled in the Luftwaffe as an air situation plotter. I joined to serve my country, not the Nazis.”

“Why didn’t you declare yourself as a Jew when you were brought here, instead of waiting until now?”

“Because I didn’t want to abandon my comrades, most of whom are no more Nazis than I am. What decided me to switch back to the religion of my father was the recent death of my adoptive mother, Brigadier Nancy Laplante. I desperately need to renew contact with God.”

Abraham opened his eyes wide at those words. Laplante’s death had been announced on the BBC radio at noon and had caused him no little grief. The Canadian time traveler had been after all their best chance at ending this war quickly and thus put an end to the suffering of the Jews in Europe. Abraham looked back at Benjamin, who answered his silent question.

“It is true, father. The Governor of the Tower confirmed to me that Brigadier Laplante was planning to officially adopt Ingrid at the end of the war. I can tell you

² Meshugeh: Crazy in Yiddish

personally that Brigadier Laplante always showed great affection towards her and was very protective of her.”

Abraham looked back at Ingrid with new respect and bowed his head in salute.

“You must be someone special to have conquered the heart of such a woman, Miss Weiss. Were you looking for something to buy here?”

“I was, Mister Lewinski. I was looking for a dark shawl, to cover my head for the prayers. I was also hoping to find a prayer book in Hebrew.”

“Those two items I have, miss.” declared Abraham before leading her to the back of the room, where used clothes were suspended on coat racks. He searched for a moment through the racks and took out three shawls, all of dark color but of varying pattern and tone.

“This is all the choice I have in shawls, miss. Which one do you like best?” Ingrid looked briefly at the three shawls before pointing at one of them.

“I will take the dark gray one. It will fit better with my present clothes.” Abraham looked with some reprobation at her fleece suit.

“They may be modest enough for praying but I wouldn’t call them exactly stylish, miss. A young beauty like you deserves better clothes than this.” Ingrid sighed and nodded her head.

“I couldn’t agree more with you, Mister Lewinski, but I have very little leeway presently on what I can wear. It was this or my Luftwaffe uniform. I suspect that the latter would not have been welcome at the synagogue.”

“I can’t imagine why.” said Abraham sarcastically. “Let’s look at the prayer books now.”

Going to a shelf unit full of used books and various other objects, he showed two books to Ingrid. One was smaller than the other and was barely bigger than Ingrid’s hand, but was beautifully decorated with gold lettering. The bigger one was easier to read but was also quite plain. Ingrid chose the smaller book, prompting a warning look from Abraham.

“This is effectively a nice book, miss, but it is also an expensive one. It is tagged at fifteen pounds.”

“And how much is the shawl?”

“I am ready to leave it to you for ten shillings, miss.”

“Then I will take both.” said Ingrid while taking out the envelope given to her by Benjamin and counting sixteen pounds. Abraham gave her a surprised look as he took the money.

“The British let you keep this much money, miss?”

“Actually, Nancy left me an inheritance. No need to pack these things: I will be using them soon.”

“As you wish, miss.”

Going to the cash register, Abraham got her change and gave it to Ingrid while smiling widely.

“Thank you for coming, miss, and welcome back to our faith.”

“Thank you, Mister Lewinski. You were most kind.”

Ingrid then left the shop with Benjamin, her prayer book in one pocket and her shawl tied over her hair. Abraham followed the couple with his eyes as they crossed the street and headed towards the nearby synagogue. He then shook his head in wonderment.

19:26 (GMT)

Gaoler's House, Tower of London

Ingrid was feeling nearly at peace with herself as she entered Gaoler's House: the service at the synagogue had gone well for her, with the congregation accepting her after a touching speech from the rabbi, who had interceded in her favor. The pain from losing Nancy was still there but now she had somewhere to go to get comfort and relief. Half a dozen of the female prisoners was sitting around a massive oak table and playing cards when she entered. Silence fell as all eyes became fixed on her. Ingrid hesitated for a moment, then smiled to the others and started heading towards the staircase. The harsh voice of Fuhrerin Greta Manheim stopped her.

“Hold it there, Helferin Weiss! Where have you been all this time outside the walls?”

Ingrid turned around to face her, answering firmly but politely.

“I was getting ready for Nancy's incoming funeral, Fuhrerin. Nancy asked in her will that I be one of her pallbearers and the British accepted to let me go. I simply got briefed on the incoming ceremony. The burial will be next Friday.”

“You are planning to attend a ceremony for an enemy of the Reich? That is...”

“That is none of your business, Manheim!” declared Hanna Reitsch, who was stepping out of the restroom adjacent to the hall and who had heard the exchange. She walked to one end of the table and stared hard at the Luftwaffe matron.

“Manheim, you try to cause more trouble to Ingrid because of this and you will have to answer to me. Brigadier Laplante may have been an enemy of the Reich but she was no enemy of the German people. Even I can see and accept that. Furthermore, she was always a fair and compassionate enemy. That is rare enough in war to warrant respect. I would be in a British interrogation cell if not for her and that nearly caused her to be branded a traitor by the British. So, cut the patriotic crap and try using your heart for once, if you have one.”

Subdued by the fierce tone of the small but energetic pilot, Manheim could do nothing but sit back and swallow her anger as Ingrid climbed the steps towards her room. She however did swear mentally to herself that the young bitch was going to pay for this one fine day.

15:14 (GMT)

Friday, July 4, 1941 'C'

St-Paul's Cathedral

London

Peter O'Neal was listening only occasionally to the eulogy presently being given by the Prime Minister. He was still trying to figure out who was the teenage girl sitting across from him and the other reporters in the Chapel of the Order of St-Michael and St-George, one of the six chapels contained inside St-Paul's Cathedral. While the crowd admitted to Nancy Laplante's funeral was small, due to the size of the chapel, it more than made it up with its composition. Apart from the royal family, most members of the cabinet were there, along with many generals and admirals. The lowest ranking persons present, not counting the reporters, were the six pallbearers. O'Neal knew four of them as being Laplante's assistants, while the young WAAF corporal was rumored to have been the first person to have met Laplante after she had arrived from the future. That left the girl in black mourning dress sitting beside Nancy Laplante's husband, Major Mike Crawford.

O'Neal was brought back to reality when the spectators around him rose to their feet, signaling that the ceremony was ending. Getting to his feet, he watched intently the teenage girl in black take her position at one side of the coffin and help pick it up from its pedestal. Preceded by the priest who had officiated the ceremony and by two choir

boys, Nancy Laplante's coffin was brought to the south transept of the cathedral, then down the stairs leading to the crypt, the crowd of mourners in tow. Six royal guardsmen in red parade uniform and a bagpipe player were waiting for them by the side of an open sarcophagus made of white marble. Peter O'Neal then realized with a shock that Laplante's sarcophagus was close to that of the Duke of Wellington, while the one containing the remains of Admiral Nelson was not far away. After the coffin was laid on supporting straps on top of the open sarcophagus, the priest said a last prayer before the bagpipe player started a moving rendition of 'Amazing grace'. That was the signal for the six guardsmen to free the straps and start slowly lowering the coffin in the sarcophagus while everybody stood at attention, with the military men present saluting. Mike Crawford, himself crying, had to support the teenage girl, who was overcome with grief. O'Neal himself had a big lump in his throat as the coffin disappeared inside the sarcophagus. While his interest for Nancy Laplante had been mostly professional, he had always admired her and had started to feel more than a little attraction towards her. The final resting place chosen for her was a most fitting one for such a person of exception, at least in his mind. He knew that some reporters still resented her strong feminist views and had tried to find fault with her in their articles. Fortunately, very few readers still believed those articles.

The last act of the ceremony was the handing over of Laplante's medals, laid on a red cushion, by the King to Major Crawford, who accepted them with tears in his eyes. The mourners then dispersed, the heavy bronze lid of the sarcophagus to be put on and sealed only later in the evening. Peter O'Neal stayed discreetly behind a stone pillar then, waiting to follow Major Crawford and the teenager, who were consoling each other by the side of the sarcophagus. They eventually left the crypt, O'Neal following them discreetly, and exited the cathedral, going to Laplante's car, a red and gold Mitsubishi Outlander 2010 which was by now well known throughout London. O'Neal ran to his car and started the engine as the Outlander was pulling out of its parking spot. To his surprise, instead of heading west towards Crawford's apartment, the car speeded eastward. With its distinctive shape and colors, the Outlander was however easy to follow and O'Neal had no trouble keeping behind it, observing a cautious distance in order not to be spotted. He was not a little surprised when the Outlander finally stopped in front of the drawbridge marking the entrance to the Tower of London. The teenage girl got out and gave a quick kiss to Crawford, then walked towards the fortified gate of

the Middle Tower, the cushion with Laplante's medals in her hands. The two soldiers standing guard there briefly stopped the girl, with one of them grabbing a telephone and talking briefly in it. The soldiers then let the girl proceed to the Byward Tower gate, where she disappeared inside the fortress. Now frankly intrigued, O'Neal got out of his car and walked to the gate of the Middle Tower, flashing a smile at the two soldiers there. He decided that playing the donkey could possibly get him some information the soldiers might otherwise not volunteer.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen! I saw by chance that young woman walk inside while bearing a row of medals on a cushion. It can't be her medals, right?" His naïve question made the two soldiers broke out in laughter.

"A German, having the Victoria Cross? Having any woman win it was already pushing it far but that would be the end of everything."

"A German? What is she doing here, in civilian clothes?" asked a flabbergasted O'Neal. The senior soldier, a corporal, gave him a derisive look.

"Don't you know that we're holding 23 female German prisoners of war here, in the Tower? That young Ingrid Weiss is one of them. She was quite cozy with Brigadier Laplante, to whom the medals belonged. In fact, if Laplante would not have been so well known for bedding men left and right, I would have thought that the two of them were lovers!"

"That young Ingrid would be one nice thing to have in bed." added the other soldier. "She's a real looker and one hell of a firebrand, German or not."

"Hey!" said the corporal in fake protest. "Don't you know that the laws of war prohibit the rape of enemy women?"

"I know that! It makes me long for the good old medieval days of rape, loot and pillage.

The two soldiers then laughed hard again. O'Neal laughed with them in order to play his role, then thanked the soldiers and returned to his car. Driving away, he stopped and parked one block away, in order to think over what he had just learned. O'Neal was fully aware how damaging to Nancy Laplante's reputation the public knowledge of her affection towards a German would be. He personally didn't object to such an unlikely affection: he was open-minded enough to accept that it could be based simply on mutual friendship and also knew how tolerant and compassionate Laplante had been. Despite the fact that this story was definitely a hot one, O'Neal decided that he was not going to publish it: Nancy Laplante's name deserved to be respected, not reviled.

17:18 (GMT)

Gaoler's House, Tower of London

Hanna Reitsch was sitting at the large table in the ground level hall of Gaoler's House, along with Gruppenfuhrerin Lisa Hartmann, Unterfuhrerin Anna Hauser and Oberhelferin Bertha Reinholdt, when Ingrid Weiss slowly entered the hall. Everybody fell silent as Ingrid approached them and put a red cushion on the table, numerous medals carefully pinned to it.

"This...this is all that is left of Nancy now." She said tearfully before sitting beside Hanna and burying her head in her arms, crying shamelessly. Hanna Reitsch caressed one of the medals, which bore the inscription 'Peacekeeping – Au service de la paix³', then hugged tenderly the teenager.

14:50 (GMT)

Friday, August 15, 1941 'C'

Hourglass Section, Home Office building

London

"You wanted to see me, Peter?" Asked Reginald Jones, sticking his head inside Stilwell's private office.

"Yes, Reginald. I need your help as a physicist to understand fully this report on the project 'Tubes Alloys'. I am afraid that physics was not my strong suit in college. Did you read this report?"

"I did, as a matter of fact. Do you want me to explain to you its main points?"

"That would be greatly appreciated. I still don't know how Nancy managed to understand all this technological stuff."

Reginald gave him a sober look then.

"Peter, she may not have been an engineer or a scientist, but she was a self-taught woman who read widely on all aspects of technology. From the speed she grasped some of my technical briefings, I also suspect that her I.Q. must have been in the high 140s. She was just not anybody."

³ Au service de la paix: 'In the service of peace' in French

“I know!” replied sadly Peter, visualizing for a moment Nancy’s smiling, beautiful face. “Please go on!”

Jones scanned the first pages of the report quickly before resuming them.

“The Canadians report that the work on the atomic reactor at Chalk River is going well, with completion expected in about a month. From there, they will immediately start producing plutonium by irradiating natural uranium, since Nancy’s data on nuclear weapons made most preliminary research work unnecessary. We saved at least two years of intensive work just there. That data also saved another year or more of bungling around on the design of the bomb itself. It seems that the first American atomic bombs made in the original history were very wasteful of fissile material. Ours will be an implosion type device with a yield of about twenty kilotons and a weight of no more than two tons, thus compatible with our actual heavy bombers. Also, contrary to the Americans, we will not pursue the uranium 235 road, which would have entailed immense efforts at separating the various uranium isotopes. To top the cake, once successfully tested, that atomic bomb design will become the core for a thermonuclear weapon with a yield of about two megatons. Again, Nancy’s data saved us a lot of work there, possibly up to eight years. Once we have those bombs in service, we will be able to dictate an end to this war on our own terms and will also gain world supremacy, whether the Americans like it or not.”

Peter couldn’t help shoot a worried look at the physicist.

“Reginald, I can’t help feel bad about keeping the Americans totally out of this project. Remember Nancy’s warnings about playing nuclear king of the hill.”

As if on cue, Stilwell’s telephone rang, making Peter pick it up quickly.

“Commander Stilwell here! ... Ah, good day to you, General Walker. What can I do for you? ... Where did it crash? ... My God! I... I will advise Ingrid Weiss right away about this... You already did? ... Thank you for telling us, sir. Please keep us informed if they find anything, sir... Thank you again, sir.”

“What was that all about?” asked Jones, alarmed by the distress on Peter’s face as he put down the telephone. “What did the American Defense Attaché want?”

“Brigadier General Walker just advised me that the plane transporting Major Mike Crawford and other officers recalled to the United States crashed in the North Atlantic yesterday. Two ships searched the area for nearly a day, without results. General Walker has already visited Ingrid Weiss in the Tower of London to give her the sad news.”

“My God, the poor girl!” whispered Jones sadly. “First Nancy, now Mike Crawford. We should go visit her and try to comfort her.”

“That is a kind thought, Reginald. However, we should let her some time to quiet down after receiving such awful news. I will visit her tomorrow evening.”

Jones was silent for a moment, then looked eyes with Peter.

“You know as well as me that Nancy was planning to adopt Ingrid at the end of the war. With Mike gone, she should be entitled to inherit the rest of Nancy’s things, including her car, that is after the end of the war, of course.”

“General Walker already has that covered, Reginald. He is in possession of a will from Mike that gives everything he had here, including Nancy’s car and electronic appliances, to Ingrid. I will however discuss that subject with Brigadier Browning tomorrow, when I will visit Ingrid.”

19:18 (GMT)

Saturday, August 16, 1941 ‘C’

Gaoler’s House, Tower of London

“What do you mean, attacked?” asked Peter Stilwell, surprised and shocked, to Hanna Reitsch as they both stood in the main hall of Gaoler’s House. The female aviator appeared embarrassed, even shameful as she answered him.

“Someone attacked Ingrid and beat her up badly last night, while she was sleeping in her room. She is now in the hospital block, across the inner yard.”

Peter could sense that she was not telling everything and stared down at her.

“Flugkapitan, you are one of Ingrid’s best friends here. I am also one of her friends, whether you believe it or not. What really happened?”

“I... I must let Ingrid tell you herself, Commander. I will lead you to the hospital.”

Walking out of Gaoler’s House and past the huge mass of the White Tower occupying the center of the inner yard of the fortress, Stilwell and Reitsch soon entered the Tower’s hospital, where a British military doctor led them to a private room. Stilwell winced when he saw Ingrid Weiss in her bed: her face was puffy, with one eye black and shut, both lips split open and with bruises all over her face. Her ribs had been bandaged, telling him that some of them had been broken or cracked. Approaching to just besides her bed, Peter whispered softly to Ingrid, who appeared drowsy.

“Ingrid... Ingrid. This is Commander Stilwell. I'm with Flugkapitan Reitsch. What happened last night?”

“She is on pain killers, Commander.” explained Hanna when Ingrid would not react at first. After repeating his question, Peter finally got a clipped answer in a slurred speech.

“Was sleeping... Didn't see who... Many, saying 'Jewish bitch' or 'dirty Jew'... I passed out.”

“Jewish bitch?” said Peter, confused. Hanna explained for him.

“Commander, I didn't know it before last night, but it seems that Ingrid is actually Jewish through her parents. Since the death of Nancy Laplante, she has been praying a lot, going out of the Tower with a military escort nearly every Friday. She kept her newfound faith secret, something that now appears to have been a wise move. Somebody however must have found out and then attacked her out of ingrained racism.”

“And you, Flugkapitan? We know from Nancy's data that you were a fervent Nazi sympathizer and a fan of Adolph Hitler. Didn't it shock you to learn that Ingrid was a Jew?”

Hanna bowed her head in shame.

“At first, yes. Then I thought about how Nancy Laplante, who was no lover of Nazis, accepted and protected me, showing a degree of open-mindedness I would not have been capable of before. Ingrid is my friend, whatever her faith is, and I intend to support and protect her in this, like many of the other prisoners.”

Peter nodded, satisfied, and then looked back at Ingrid.

“Ingrid, the voices of the persons beating you, were they speaking German or English?”

“German... at least three persons.”

“Alright, Ingrid, let us handle this now. Rest and get well soon: I will visit you again during the next days.”

Peter then led Hanna out of Ingrid's room and spoke to her in a low voice, so that the medical staff around couldn't hear him.

“Flugkapitan, if someone could attack Ingrid once, it means that this could happen again in the future, maybe with more serious consequences. Ingrid could even be killed one night by the jackals who did this. I believe that she should be moved out of the Tower of London, for her own safety.”

“But her best friends are here, Commander. She will never agree to abandon Frida Winterer, Johanna Fink, Bertha Reinholdt or Susanna Berghof, to name just a few.”

“Alright, if she has so many friends, she should not have too many enemies here then, no?”

“I know a few.” said Hanna hesitantly. “You will understand if I am hesitant to denounce a fellow German to you British.”

“I was expecting that, Flugkapitan, and can understand your reluctance. We need however to do something to ensure the safety of Ingrid in the Tower. If we can’t, then she will have to be moved. Were you planning to try to resolve this problem between yourselves?”

“That would still be the best solution for all, I believe, Commander. Brigadier Browning has given me a two-day ultimatum to iron out this problem. There is already a military investigation going on anyway. Please let me handle this my way for the next days. If we still have a problem, then I will accept whatever measures you British deem necessary.”

“That sounds fair enough to me, Flugkapitan. I will now escort you back to Gaoler’s House.”

They walked back together in silence, both preoccupied by Ingrid’s dangerous situation. They shook hands in front of Gaoler’s House before Peter left the fortress. Hanna watched him walk away, silently thanking faith for having brought such a decent man to the help of Ingrid. She then entered the old Tudor building and went to each of its four levels, shouting in each room.

“EVERYBODY DOWN IN THE MAIN HALL, NOW! GENERAL MEETING!”

Then returning to the ground level main hall, Hanna soon had the other 21 female prisoners facing her, wearing either their uniforms or informal sports gear. She scanned each of the faces slowly, gauging their attitudes. Hanna already had quite a good idea about who had been involved in beating Ingrid, but still hoped that the culprits would be honest enough to publicly stand by their bad deed. She didn’t think that Gruppenfuhrerin Lisa Hartmann had been involved, though: while being a thoroughly indoctrinated Nazi, she was not mean enough in Hanna’s mind to beat up the teenager. On the other hand, Fuhrerin Greta Manheim and Fuhrerin Grete Meissner were exactly the kind to commit such an act. She looked at them hard while speaking in a harsh, clipped voice.

“You probably all know why I called you here, so let’s not waste time. As the senior prisoner here, one of my duties is to ensure the safety of all of you. We are all Germans and we were all serving our country when we were captured. We thus have a duty to support each other while in the hands of our enemies. Helferin Weiss had understood that and had proved her solidarity with us even as she formed a bond of friendship with Brigadier Laplante, a woman I myself respected greatly. Helferin Weiss was hit hard by Laplante’s death and returned to the Jewish faith of her parents, but still stayed with us. We all know how much of a stigma being a Jew is nowadays in Germany and I won’t fault her for hiding her faith, especially since that fact did not change her loyalty towards our group. She may be a Jew but I still consider her a German loyal to her country and her comrades. She is thus worthy of our protection and support. What happened last night was nothing but a total disgrace and an act of rank cowardice. Ganging up on a sleeping teenager at night to beat her is an act unworthy of any true German. Those who committed that act now have a choice: you can either show some honesty and courage now by stepping forward and acknowledging your participation in that beating; or you can hide in this group and earn our collective contempt. First off, which ones of you knew that Ingrid was a Jew?”

Frida Winterer, Bertha Reinholdt and Susanna Berghof stepped forward without hesitation, followed a few seconds later by Mathilda Reichenberg. Hanna Reitsch looked at Reichenberg, a young Luftwaffe haupt Helferin⁴ she knew to be a member of the National-Socialist Party, like her.

“Haupt Helferin Reichenberg, did you attack Helferin Weiss last night?”

“No, Flugkapitan!”

“Ober Helferin Reinholdt, Helferinen Berghof and Winterer, did you attack Helferin Weiss last night?”

“No, Flugkapitan!” answered in unison the three auxiliaries. Hanna nodded her head, her face still stone hard.

“I believe all four of you. You had the courage to acknowledge a fact that would make you suspects in the beating of Helferin Weiss. Others in our group did not have such courage, though.”

Hanna then stared hard at Manheim and Meissner.

⁴ Haupt Helferin: German female auxiliary rank equivalent to a master-corporal

“As senior auxiliaries, I expected much better from you, Fuhrerinen Manheim and Meissner. I know for a fact that you knew about Weiss’ newfound religious faith: you swore loud enough about it for me to hear. So did you, Oberhelferin Lindeiner. If anything, you were the most venomous of the lot. Yet, none of you three had the honesty to acknowledge this in front of the group. I now give you a second chance to confess.”

Meissner looked down at Hanna with contempt.

“A chance to confess what, exactly? Jews are the enemies of the German people. I have done nothing to be ashamed of.”

Ingrid’s three best friends stared angrily at the matron, with young Frida Winterer shouting at Meissner.

“You beat up Ingrid while she was sleeping and you find nothing shameful in this? You’re nothing but a jackal, Fuhrerin or not.”

“Helferin Winterer, keep silent!” shouted Hanna. “I am the one doing the disciplining here.”

Hanna then stared back at Meissner.

“Fuhrerin Meissner, you just proved yourself to be unworthy of both our trust and of your rank. I do not intend to point you to the British, since I wish to preserve the solidarity of this group. However, I do expect you to move to one of the free rooms in the attic, away from the rooms of the others. I expect the others involved in yesterday’s beating to move up to the attic as well and to refrain from trying to intimidate the other members of our group. If anything else happens to Helferin Weiss in the future, then I will have no qualms to ask the British to move you out of this building.”

“Who the hell do you think you are, Reitsch?” shouted Greta Manheim. “You’re just a fucking civilian!”

Lisa Hartmann finally reacted, coming out of her lethargy and jumping to her feet.

“Fuhrerin Manheim, Flugkapitan Reitsch is a pilot, thus of officer status. She was also decorated by the Fuhrer himself. If I can defer to her authority, so can you. You, Meissner and Lindeiner will move upstairs to the attic tonight and will keep your peace with Helferin Weiss. Is that understood?”

The three hardcore Nazis came to attention, having no choice but to obey the senior auxiliary.

“Yes, Gruppenfuhrerin!”

Once the three women had marched upstairs to move their things, Hartmann looked more gently at Reinholdt, Berghof and Winterer.

“I will ask you three to move Ingrid’s things out of her present room, which is too close from the attic to my taste. Which one of you would be willing to share your room with her?”

All three raised their hands. Frida Winterer then stepped forward.

“Ingrid is my best friend, Gruppenfuhrerin. I will be most happy to share my room with her.”

“Excellent! Let’s do it then.”

Hanna Reitsch approached Hartmann as the other women were dispersing, presenting her right hand to the tall blonde.

“Thank you for your support, Gruppenfuhrerin. This could have turned quite ugly.”

“It still could.” said Lisa, bitter. “I never loved Jews myself but Helferin Weiss has won my respect for her courage and sense of comradeship. If she is attacked again, then I won’t have any hesitation in asking the British to move Meissner and her clique out of the Tower. In the meantime, I will ask you and the others to keep a protective eye on Ingrid.”

“You can count on me, Gruppenfuhrerin.” replied firmly the petite aviator.

CHAPTER 2 – ALONE

15:07 (GMT)

Thursday, September 4, 1941 'C'

Tower of London

England

Reginald Jones hesitated for a moment as he watched from a distance the young German woman, a teenager actually, who was sitting in a wheelchair in front of the infirmary of the Tower of London. He had seemingly done little but bear bad news around these last days and was still grieving the loss of three of his best friends and colleagues, all killed in action in Norway. He finally collected his courage and walked resolutely to the German girl, who watched him approach with some curiosity. Reginald found her most beautiful but profound sadness was also visible on her face. As well, she still bore the marks of the severe beating she had endured about three weeks ago.

“Helferin Ingrid Weiss? My name is Reginald Jones. You may not know me but I was a close friend of Commander Peter Stilwell.”

Peter’s name made a genuine smile appear on the girl’s face.

“Ah, yes! And how is Commander Stilwell these days? Is he planning to visit me soon?”

Reginald bowed his head, a lump suddenly appearing in his throat.

“I...Peter Stilwell is dead, miss. He was killed in action four days ago.”

“Dead? My god! He was such a gentleman. I am truly sorry to hear that, Mister Jones.”

From the expression on her face, Reginald decided that her grief was sincere and proceeded to give her the rest of his message.

“Miss Weiss, Peter Stilwell was one of the four main assistants to Nancy Laplante, along with Squadron Leader Douglas Wilson, Major George Townsend and me. Both Wilson and Townsend died as well in combat and I am thus the lone survivor of the group. You may not believe this but we as a group decided to safeguard your interests after Nancy died. You may be German but we know that you were adopted by Nancy, which is enough of a recommendation for us. We communicated with General Walker, the superior of Mike Crawford at the American embassy, to see what was

happening concerning the execution of Mike's last will. We found out that he left legally to you all the possessions he inherited from Nancy, including her car and her weapons, plus a few things he had owned personally. With the support of General Walker, we consulted a lawyer to see what effect your status as a prisoner of war had on your rights to inherit Mike and Nancy's belongings. That lawyer came back with a legal opinion a week ago. Essentially, he said that you are entitled to get that inheritance as soon as you are not a prisoner of war anymore."

Instead of cheering up as Reginald half expected her to do, Ingrid lowered her head, repressing a sob.

"I thank you for taking your time to help me like this, Mister Jones, but those things won't bring Nancy or Mike back to me. Besides, I am a German prisoner of war, as you said it yourself. I will be shipped back to Germany once this damn war is over, with barely more than what I am wearing now."

"Maybe you won't be shipped back to Germany, Miss Weiss. I understand that you are Jewish and that you also hold American citizenship, thanks to Mike Crawford. You could very well end up staying here or even be accepted into the United States. In either case, your inheritance could become handy."

That was when Ingrid looked up at him, tears in her eyes.

"I know that Nancy's work was very important to the British government. If you assisted her, then your time is also important. Why do you bother helping me, a German?"

"Because Nancy loved you enough to adopt you and risked being called a traitor for that," said Reginald softly. "That alone makes you worth helping."

Ingrid then broke down and cried, prompting Reginald to pass an arm around her shoulders while crouching besides her wheelchair.

"Please don't cry, Ingrid. As long as life goes on, there will always be hope. This could be your chance to start a brand-new life here or in the United States."

"How could you be so certain of that? As a German I will always be regarded as an enemy here. As a Jew I am already an enemy for some of my own comrades. Nancy and Mike were the only ones apparently able to look past my nationality. Commander Stilwell was also decent with me but he is now dead, like too many good people in this war. Again, I thank you for caring for me but it will probably bring you nothing but trouble. You are probably better off forgetting about me, Mister Jones."

Reginald reluctantly got up and withdrew his arm: he could hardly help her if she didn't want to. He was already putting his reputation and government security clearance at risk by visiting Ingrid.

"Look, miss, if you ever change your mind about this, just ask Brigadier Browning to advise me. I will always be ready to help."

"Your kindness is much appreciated, Mister Jones. Thank you again for visiting me."

Reginald didn't insist further and walked away towards the Bloody Tower gate. Brigadier Browning, who had been watching from a distance, intercepted Reginald just short of the gate, concern on his face.

"How did it go, Doctor Jones?"

"Not very well I'm afraid." replied Reginald in a discouraged tone. "She is still despondent about the loss of her adoptive parents and doesn't believe that she will be truly accepted by us. Frankly, I can't blame her for that. Even if this war ended tomorrow, most of our people would still look at her with suspicion, at best. As for being a Jew in Germany, you know what kind of treatment she will get once back in her country."

A pained look appeared in Browning's eyes as he looked at the teenager, still sitting in her wheelchair, alone.

"What a shame! She is truly a good, decent girl who deserves much better than this. The worst part is that I can't even guarantee her safety if I return her to Gaoler's House. The same rats who beat her at night won't give up until she is dead, that I am certain of. I saw that myself while being a prisoner in Colditz Castle during the First World War. Once other inmates mark a prisoner as a suspected collaborator, his life is worth little. Putting her in a cell separate from the others would only worsen her feelings of rejection and loneliness and could drive her to suicide. I just don't know what to do about her, Doctor."

"I'm at a loss myself, General. Everything now depends on her: if she keeps refusing our help, then there is little we can do for her."

Both looked for a moment at Ingrid before shaking hands and wishing each other a good day. On her part, Ingrid stayed outside in her wheelchair for another half hour before being wheeled back into the infirmary by a British soldier who didn't even say one word to her. The man kept his personal feelings to himself even as he thought about his family home, destroyed by a V-2 missile two days ago while his parents were inside.

23:52 (GMT)

Infirmery, Tower of London

Ingrid was rudely awakened by a tremendous explosion which severely shook the infirmery and blew in the windows facing the inner courtyard of the fortress. The frightened teenager quickly covered her head with the bed sheets as plaster from the ceiling rained down, shaken loose by the explosion. Once the worst was over, Ingrid stepped out of her bed laboriously, still impeded by her broken ribs, and put on her Luftwaffe uniform as quickly as she could. She had to dress in the dark, as main power seemed to be out at the moment. Stepping out of her room and walking out in the inner courtyard, she was confronted by a scene that froze her blood: over a hundred British soldiers were frantically sifting through debris and rubble piled around a wide crater at the spot where Gaoler's House had stood. Part of King's House had also collapsed. Her mouth opened in horror; Ingrid then saw the upper half of a human body lying maybe fifteen feet in front of her. Long brown hair was still attached to the head. Approaching the mangled remains, Ingrid suddenly recognized the distorted, bloody face of Johanna Fink, one of her best friends in the group of female prisoners held with her in the Tower of London. She had to turn away and fell on her knees, throwing up on the grass. A British soldier came to her, apparently to help her, but stepped back at the sight of Fink's remains.

"Jesus!"

The young soldier himself threw up but recovered most of his composure after a moment, gently grabbing the left arm of Ingrid, who was now crying hysterically.

"Come on, miss. You should stay away from all this while we search for survivors. I will bring you back to the infirmery."

Two female British guards soon joined them; taking over from the soldier and bringing Ingrid back to her room in the infirmery. They then left her alone and took positions outside the door of her room.

Ingrid had the time to cry herself dry of tears before someone entered her room. It was Brigadier Browning, looking shaken. Ingrid nearly jumped on him, frantic for news about her comrades.

"Please sir, tell me what happened to my comrades."

“It...it is still too early to say, Ingrid: we are still searching through the rubble.”

“Did you find any survivors yet?”

“None!” said Browning weakly. What he was not ready to tell the teenager was that he had already given up hope of finding anybody alive in the rubble, as Gaoler’s House had essentially been totally destroyed. The rubble surrounding the impact crater came mostly from the western wing of King’s House and from the defensive wall against which Gaoler’s House had been built. Right now, he could do little more than hold the sobbing girl and try to console her as best he could.

16:08 (GMT)

Friday, September 5, 1941 ‘C’

Tower of London

Ingrid now felt like an automaton, going on without thinking and simply reacting to the events around her. She had spent the whole day watching the British search the rubble from the missile strike, helping to identify the few bodies they found which were still identifiable. Most of the remains which had been found up to now were however little more than shredded flesh and bones. By now Ingrid had accepted the awful fact that none of her comrades and friends had survived. She was now truly alone, left to herself in a world which didn’t seem to care one bit about her. She revised that thought quickly: a few British and a few Americans had proven that they cared about her, even if she was a German. She was still thinking about that when a distant but still powerful explosion signaled the impact of yet another missile on the London area. Only after having swore at the ones who had launched the deadly projectile did she realize that she had reacted exactly like the British soldiers around her who were working through the rubble and debris. That in turn reminded her of something Nancy had told her once. She had described something called the ‘Stockholm Syndrome’, where a person who was kept captive or hostage for long enough could start to sympathize or even side with her captors. As disturbing as it appeared to her now, it seemed that she was effectively starting to think of the British as companions of misfortune in this war, instead of as enemies. The fact was that the British around her mostly treated her with politeness and respect, with only a few of them still showing hostility towards her.

A shout from a British soldier to his officer then attracted Ingrid towards the half destroyed West wing of King's House. She watched on with growing hope as six soldiers dug a particular spot. Her hope then turned to grief when she realized that the person they had found was dead. Half an hour later, the body was carried out of the rubble and past Ingrid, who was overtaken again by tears when she recognized the body as being that of Hanna Reitsch. The female guard watching her gently patted her shoulder as the body was carried away.

"Time for supper, Ingrid. You will feel better with a full stomach."

"I'm not hungry, Corporal Beatty."

"You will be soon enough. Come!"

Ingrid followed the guard reluctantly to the Wellington Barracks, where the troops and the prisoners alike used a large dining room. Ingrid ate slowly and without conviction as thoughts flashed around her mind. Those thoughts in turn became a resolution. By the time she was finished eating, her mind was firmly made up. What would happen next only depended on the reactions of the British. Bringing her empty plate and utensils to the dishwashing area and cleaning them, she then faced Corporal Beatty.

"Corporal, I wish to speak to Brigadier Browning."

"About what, Ingrid?"

"About my status as a prisoner of war. He will understand."

"Alright, I will pass your request up the chain of command. You will have to wait for his answer at the infirmary, though."

"I am ready to wait as long as needed, Corporal."

"Very well! Follow me!"

Going together to the infirmary, Beatty escorted Ingrid to her room first, then made a telephone call to the guardroom to pass on the teenager's request. An answer came back after ten minutes. Another fifteen minutes and Beatty was knocking on the door of Brigadier Browning's office, with Ingrid standing beside her. The old officer shouted for them to enter, which they did at a military pace, stopping in unison in front of the Brigadier's work desk and saluting him.

"Corporal Beatty, escorting Helferin Weiss as requested, sir!"

"Thank you, Corporal. You may stay outside while I speak with Helferin Weiss."

"Yes sir!"

Saluting again, Beatty then turned around and left the office, closing the door behind her. Browning looked at Ingrid in silence for a moment, then pointed at a chair.

“At ease, Ingrid. Please sit if you wish so.”

“I prefer to stand, sir.”

“As you wish. You may speak freely, Ingrid, and please stand easy.”

“Thank you, sir.” said Ingrid, relaxing her position before continuing. “Sir, a Mister Jones visited me yesterday to tell me that Major Mike Crawford had put me in his will and that I could have access to that inheritance once I was no longer a prisoner of war. You may already know that I was granted recently American citizenship, thanks to my adoption by Major Crawford and by Brigadier Laplante.”

“I heard about that.” said simply Browning, not mentioning the fact that the whole thing had been arranged in a most irregular way and without his prior knowledge. He had however come to understand and approve that gesture, as Ingrid had quickly won his own affection despite being both a German and a prisoner under his charge.

“Sir, I had time to reflect on what I was and what I wished to do after this war. One thing I know for sure is that I do not want to return to Germany. I also wish to immigrate to the United States as soon as it is legally possible, but for that I need your help, sir. Basically, I am ready to renounce my German citizenship and to promise that I will never engage in a hostile act against Great Britain from now on, in exchange for being allowed to leave for the United States.”

“I see!” said Browning calmly, keeping an impassive appearance. “And what will you do once in the United States, being a fifteen-year-old orphan?”

“I will be sixteen in two days, sir. Once in the United States, I intend to go to Montana, where Mike Crawford’s brother owns a large ranch. I plan to start a new life there, sir.”

“You seem to have thought over this carefully, Ingrid, except for one thing: what will you do if Major Crawford’s brother doesn’t want you on his farm?”

Ingrid paused for a moment: she had not considered that possibility.

“Sir, Mike has sent a number of letters about me to his brother and got at least one in return. He didn’t mention any negative response coming from his family concerning me.”

“Well, I hope that everything will turn out the way you wish, Ingrid. I will forward my recommendations to my superiors and will advise Brigadier Walker at the American embassy. I will inform you as soon as I have an answer.”

Ingrid felt as if a huge weight had just been lifted from her shoulders and smiled at Browning while straightening up.

“Thank you very much, sir! I will owe you on that.”

“You owe me nothing, Ingrid. You are dismissed!”

Ingrid saluted, turned around and left the office, to be taken in charge by Corporal Beatty. The joy she had felt when Browning had accepted to pass on her request quickly dissipated as she walked past the ruins of Gaoler’s House, where soldiers were still searching through the debris. Grief then overtook her again.

10:34 (GMT)

Sunday, September 7, 1941 ‘C’

Infirmery, Tower of London

The British Army doctor, having finished his examination of Ingrid, told her to get dressed and grabbed his clipboard, scribbling down a few notes.

“Well, there is no point for you to stay anymore in this infirmary, Ingrid. Your ribs are mending nicely but they will be sensitive for another two weeks or so. In the meantime, you are to avoid any hard physical activity which could hurt your ribs again.” Knocks on the door of the examination room then cut off the doctor, who opened it and found himself facing Brigadier Browning and a tall American officer. Ingrid having already put back on her baggy gray fleece sports outfit, he let the two visitors in, saluting Browning briefly at the same time. The Governor of the Tower nodded and smiled at Ingrid.

“So, how is our sixteen years old prisoner today?”

“I am alright, sir.” replied Ingrid, her brain kicking into high gear at the sight of Major **Kenneth Dows**, the Marine Corps Attaché at the American embassy. “Do you have news about my request, sir?”

“I certainly do.” said Browning with a grin which made Ingrid’s heart accelerate. “The Army, being leery about keeping captive a pesky minor like you, decided to drop this hot potato in the lap of the American embassy. As of this morning you are now in the care of Major Dows, who will bring you to the embassy, where you will be briefed on what’s next for you.”



“Then, I will go pack my things quickly. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, sir.”

Before Browning could react, Ingrid kissed him on the cheek, bringing an embarrassed smile on his face.

“That was not necessary, Ingrid, apart from not being proper. I do wish you the best of luck, though. Major, she is all yours.”

Both Browning and the doctor then left, leaving Ingrid alone with Dows, who smiled tenderly at the teenager.

“Well, let’s pack up and go, young girl.”

“Yes sir!” replied Ingrid, grinning. She then led Dows to her small infirmary room and pulled a duffel bag from under the bed, filling it with the few clothes she had left and putting in as well her Jewish prayer book and a small tin box containing Nancy’s medals and her own personal papers and pictures. She also carefully wrapped her Discman and portable radio/CD/cassette player she had inherited from Nancy with her clothes to protect them during transport. A black photo album was next, while the small case containing Nancy’s musical collection of tapes and CDs was last in the duffel bag.

“Do you have your passport and other papers with you or were they destroyed in the missile attack?” asked Dows, getting a nod from Ingrid.

“I have them! They are in that tin box I put in my bag. I was afraid that the ones who attacked me would rampage through my room while I was stuck in this infirmary, so I had Frida bring to me all my important stuff. I’m ready, Major.”

Ken picked up her duffel bag before she could lift it.

“You should not carry anything heavy for a while, Ingrid, unless you want to hurt your ribs again. I will carry it for you. Come: my car is parked outside the walls. Our first stop will be the embassy, where our immigration consul will brief you on your legal status.”

Leaving the infirmary, they went around the huge mass of the White Tower and were passing by the Tower Green when Ingrid stopped Ken near the crater that marked the location of the now destroyed Gaoler’s House.

“Could I take a minute to pray for my friends and comrades, Major?”

“Take all the time you want, Ingrid.” said softly Ken Dows. He himself had been deeply saddened by that tragedy, having come to like many of the young women who had died here. Once Ingrid was done, he led her out of the fortress and to his embassy

car, parked near the main gate of Middle Tower. Ingrid sighed in relief as they drove away from the fortress.

“My god, I can’t believe that I am not a prisoner anymore.”

“Well, you better get accustomed to it, Ingrid: the United States awaits you.” said Ken in a cheerful tone. To his surprise, Ingrid seemed to tense up at those words.

“What? What did I say wrong?”

“Nothing, Major. It is just that your words reminded me of something Nancy once told me about the treatment of Americans of Japanese, German or Italian blood by the United States government once it will join this war. I just hope that I won’t immigrate to the United States simply to find myself thrown in yet another prison.”

Ken couldn’t help glance at her with some reservation.

“First of, Ingrid, call me simply Ken. Secondly, I doubt that you will be bothered in any way with the kind of papers you will be holding. Our ambassador has bent more than a few rules in your favor in the last few weeks. By the way, how much did Nancy tell you about the future of this war?”

“About everything, Ken. She had absolute confidence in me.”

Cold sweat appeared on Ken’s forehead as he digested that admission from Ingrid.

“And what about the future after the war? Did she talk about that too?”

Ingrid looked at him with those big, beautiful blue eyes which helped make her so attractive.

“She did, Ken. Please don’t think that she was irresponsible, on the contrary. It is just that she knew who she could trust.”



Ken let it at that and kept silent for the rest of the trip. Parking his car in the inner courtyard of the American embassy, he then escorted Ingrid into the building, carrying her duffel bag for her. After going through a security check in the main lobby, Ken led the teenager upstairs to the immigration section, eventually knocking on the door of the vice-consul for immigration. The vice-consul, a tall and thin man in his thirties, greeted Ingrid politely and offered a seat to both her and Ken.

“So, I finally get to meet the gem who conquered Major Crawford’s heart. May I start by offering my most sincere condolences for your personal loss?”

“Thank you very much, sir. It is appreciated. May I ask what my legal status will be in the United States?”

“Your new passport lists you as a naturalized immigrant, with full American citizenship. Such a status would normally have taken a few years to obtain but derogations were made in your case with the approval of some very high authorities in Washington. Let’s just say that Miss Laplante was a person of enormous importance to us, having provided us much invaluable information and knowledge. Do you have your passport and adoption certificate with you, miss?”

“Yes, I do! One moment please.”

Ingrid then went through her duffel bag, taking out her tin box and extracting the two requested documents from it before passing them to the vice-consul, who examined them briefly before giving them back to Ingrid.

“Everything seems perfect, miss. I will now ask you to swear allegiance to the United States before I give you your citizenship certificate.”

The vice-consul then produced a bible and asked Ingrid to stand, then made her repeat with him the allegiance declaration. He followed this by signing her certificate and applying his official stamp to it.

“Here you are, miss. You are now officially an American citizen.”

Ingrid held the precious document for a few seconds before putting it in the tin box and smiling back at the vice-consul.

“Thank you very much, sir. This is indeed a great day for me. May I ask a question?”

“Go ahead, miss.”

“Well, I suppose that many people in the United States expect that their country will eventually join this war at the side of the British. If that happens, would I be allowed to join the American armed forces, even with my German background?”

The confused expression of the vice-consul told her that her question had caught him off guard.

“Uh, I frankly don’t know, miss. I do appreciate however the fact that you are willing to serve your new country. I see that Major Crawford’s confidence in you was well placed. As for answering your question, I suspect that General Walker will be better prepared than me to answer it.”

“That’s our next stop, Mister Vaughan.” said Ken Dows. “Thanks for your help.”

“It was my pleasure, Major.”

Leaving the immigration section, Ken led Ingrid to the offices of the Defense Attaché, where Brigadier General Walker was waiting for them.

“Aaah, Miss Crawford! Am I happy to see you. Please, take a seat.”

As soon as Ingrid had sat down, Walker opened a file and took a document out of it, presenting it to the teenager.

“This is Major Crawford’s last will, which has a few clauses concerning you, miss. Most of his belongings are still here in London, since they were slated to go to the States by ship after his departure. His untimely death resulted in the shipment being kept here pending the legal execution of his will. As you can see, he left you all the items that he inherited from Nancy Laplante, including her car and guns. For reasons that you may understand easily, the American government is most anxious to gain the property of most of these items, since they are advanced technology artifacts from the future. Since you are now legally the owner of these items, I am authorized to offer you a deal concerning these items.”

Ingrid understood where Walker was going and smiled.

“Beware, sir: I am a Jew, so I won’t be cheap.”

Walker faked a grimace at that.

“Ouch! I thought so. First off, are there any items listed in this will that you would not be ready to part with?”

Ingrid read the will again before answering without hesitation.

“You can have everything except for Nancy’s weapons. They have enormous sentimental value for me and I believe that they don’t really represent advanced technology anyway.”

“Hmm, true enough. You will have to go see our FBI Attaché afterwards to get possession permits for those guns, though. This said, how about a sum of 5,000 dollars for the lot, excluding the guns of course?”

Ingrid didn’t take long to make her mind: she owed a lot to Brigadier General Walker and his officers, who had essentially made possible her release from the Tower of London.

“I will be a lousy Jew for once and will accept your offer, General. May you be able to use those items to shorten this damn war.”

“Well said, miss. Major Dows will get the guns for you and arrange to get you possession permits while I prepare your money.”

“Uh, before you do that, could you answer a question for me?” said Ingrid, who then asked Walker about the possibility of serving in the American forces. Taken a bit aback, the brigadier general thought for a moment.

“Well, that would be an unusual case indeed. A German Luftwaffe auxiliary, captured by the British, who then becomes an American soldier? I suspect that most recruiters would turn you away because of the perceived security risk you would represent. Also, our forces are not as...uh, liberal as the British are presently concerning the military roles opened to women. We are still quite conservative in that aspect despite the best efforts of Nancy Laplante to make us think otherwise. Besides, we do know your real age, contrary to the Luftwaffe recruiters. Minors are definitely not accepted in the service in the States. I hope that my answer didn't disappoint you too much, miss.”

“Not really, sir. I was simply curious. When do you think that I could leave for the United States, sir?”

“How about in two days? We wanted to bring to the States as quickly as possible those items we just bought from you. You could take place in the same plane, along with Major Dows.”

Ingrid looked questioningly at Ken, who was smiling with malice.

“I got the job of escorting Nancy's items to Washington. I am also due to be posted in the Pacific, so that trip will also be my first leg on the way to my new assignment. What? You are making that face again.”

Ingrid effectively had a worried look on her face now.

“Ken, Nancy told me that most of the American forces in the Pacific will be overrun by the Japanese in the first weeks following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. She also told me that the Americans taken prisoner by the Japanese will be horribly treated, with a third of them dying in captivity.”

Walker looked in turn at both of them as Ken stared silently at Ingrid.

“Nancy Laplante told you about the future of this war, miss?”

“Yes, sir, she did. I just hope that the changes she brought will be enough to prevent most of the horrors she told me about from happening. Ken, where are you being posted?”

“To the Philippines.” he answered without thinking. The way she paled then told him to what degree she cared about him. “Look, as you said, Nancy changed many

things already in this war. Maybe the Japanese, knowing that they will lose, will not even start a war against us.”

“Maybe, but Germany was not supposed to use V-2 missiles as early as 1941 either. To each action, you can expect a counter-reaction, Ken. For one thing, if I was in charge of the Japanese military, I would drastically change the plans of attack against Pearl Harbor and would probably make it happen earlier than next December.”

By then, Walker was nearly ready to pull his hair out.

“For God’s sake, this is top secret information! How could Nancy Laplante tell you so much?”

“Sir, she discussed those things with me only when we were alone and away from other ears. She also had total confidence in me, as I had total confidence in her. She and Mike were everything to me in these last months.”

Walker shook his head in disbelief.

“What the hell! Let’s leave it at that. Major Dows, take Ingrid with you and get her guns and permits.”

“Right away, sir!”

Ken saluted Walker, and then led Ingrid out of the office.

Two hours later, having collected Nancy’s weapons and obtained the corresponding gun permits from the FBI Attaché for Ingrid, Ken took a lunch break with the teenager at the embassy’s cafeteria, following which he led her to the embassy basement and brought her into an indoor shooting range. Ingrid looked questioningly at him as he hung up a paper target to one of the traveling target frames.

“Why are we here? Do you need to practice every day?”

“No, but you do need an introduction on how to handle handguns with the arsenal you now possess. First, I will show you how to dismantle your weapons and maintain them, then we will practice a bit.”

Ingrid actually found the teaching and the shooting practice entertaining. Ken, on his part, found her to be a good apprentice shooter, showing excellent eye and hand coordination and scoring fairly well considering that this was her first time with a handgun. It was nearly four O’clock in the afternoon by the time the practice was over and Ingrid had cleaned the guns under his supervision. Packing the guns away in their special transport case, Ken added two extra boxes of .38 Special ammunition from the

embassy's reserve with the guns: Ingrid would still need lots of practice before becoming truly proficient with a handgun.

"Well, that was a productive day I would say. I can now drop you at a hotel on my way to my apartment, Ingrid. I will be quite busy tomorrow, packing my own things for my departure with you on Tuesday, so you should use the day tomorrow to shop for some decent clothes."

Ingrid, looking up at the big American, got close to him and caressed his chest with one hand.

"Why go to a hotel? Your place sounds perfect to me."

Ken was taken aback for a second: she was so young compared to him that the idea of spending the night with her felt wrong. She seemingly guessed what he was thinking and resolutely glued herself to him.

"Ken, don't be so prudish. Yes, I am only sixteen but consider me as a woman, not as a girl. I have gone through enough to earn that status. I also need company tonight, desperately."

"Ingrid, I am not sure that this would be wise."

"The hell with being wise!" she replied forcefully. "I want you, Ken!"

Not letting him time to react, she then quickly pulled her fleece top off and undid her bra, throwing both pieces on the table against which Ken was leaning. The American, having secretly dreamed of such a moment for months, found himself unable to resist her and let Ingrid undo his trousers and pull down his shorts. She smiled at the sight of his erection and started performing fellatio on him. Ken soon got into the game, fondling her small breasts and taking off the rest of his uniform. They ended up making love standing, with Ken holding a naked Ingrid in his arms while she was impaled on him. Ken was breathing hard when they finally parted, with Ingrid showing a satisfied smile as she got off him.

"God, that was good! This must not be your first time, Ingrid."

She giggled at that while putting her clothes back on.

"Oh no! So, do I get to sleep at your place tonight?"

"Hell, how could I say no now? Let me just get my uniform on and we will go to my apartment."

Twenty minutes later the couple arrived at Ken's apartment in the Paddington District. Most of the American's belongings were already packed away in boxes, ready

to be shipped back to the United States. The furniture however belonged to the building's owner, so there was actually not that much to be moved out. Putting down Ingrid's duffel bag and gun case, Ken swept one arm around him.

"My modest place. I have to say that I will regret London: I liked this city, apart from it being in the middle of a war, of course."

"Actually, from the little I was able to see of it, I wouldn't have minded living here if I would have been free instead of being a prisoner of war. I know that Nancy liked London, except for the British food."

Ken grinned at those last words: Nancy Laplante had told him more than once about what she thought about British cuisine. His smile faded quickly as the face of the Canadian time traveler came back in his mind.

"Ingrid, would you like to come with me tomorrow to visit Nancy's tomb in the crypt of St-Peter's Cathedral?"

"I would love to, Ken." said softly the teenager, herself thinking about Nancy. Her adoptive mother would have been happy to see her today, free to start a new life in a new country. That common souvenir drew Ingrid and Ken together again in a tight hug. The hidden feelings towards each other, which they had been repressing for a number of months, were now free to come out. The hug quickly became a passionate embrace, prompting Ingrid into looking up at Ken with moist eyes.

"Ken, I don't want to be alone again, ever. Do you think that I would be allowed to follow you to the Philippines?"

"Not unless you were my wife. Ingrid, you do realize in how much danger you would place yourself by following me?"

"I do! I still want to go, Ken, so that I could be with you."

CHAPTER 3 – IN THE PHILIPPINES



14:19 (Manila time)

Monday, September 15, 1941 'C'

Nichols Field military airfield, Two miles south of Manila

Island of Luzon, Philippines

Ken and Ingrid, both numb from the series of long airplane trips which had brought them to the Philippines, gladly stepped out of the PBY Catalina amphibian aircraft and looked around the airfield, which was surrounded by a dense tropical jungle to its south and by the suburbs of Manila to its north. Ingrid was immediately glad that she was wearing a light cotton dress, as the heat and humidity were nearly oppressive. As American airmen and Filipino workers took out their few suitcases and duffel bags, along with the mailbags from Hawaii, a staff car stopped smoothly besides the amphibian aircraft. Ken came to attention and saluted the Marine Corps lieutenant colonel who stepped out of the car. The senior officer returned Ken's salute before shaking hands with him and Ingrid.

"Major Dows, welcome to the Philippines! I am Lieutenant Colonel William Clement, your new boss. And this must be Misses Dows?"

"Call me simply Ingrid, sir." replied the teenager, smiling back at Clement.

"Ingrid it will be then. I hope that you will like Manila, even if the winds of war are just over the horizon."

"We already have had our taste of war in London, sir. The German V-2 missiles are quite indiscriminate about where they fall."

"So I heard. Excuse me for asking but you have a noticeable accent. Are you Scandinavian by chance?"

"I was born in Berlin, sir." calmly answered Ingrid, expecting a negative reaction from Clement. The latter looked surprised for a second but quickly smiled to her.

"Well, you should be interested to know that there are quite a few people of German descent here in Manila, including some German Jews."

"There are German Jews here?" said Ingrid happily. "Is there a synagogue here as well?"

"Uh, I believe so. I gather that you are Jewish, Misses Dows?"

"Correct, sir."

"You will have to tell your story to me and my wife tonight then. We have a little garden party scheduled to celebrate the arrival of the new Assistant Operations Officer in charge of land defenses for the Asiatic Fleet headquarters. Your trip was a long one, so let me drive you to your assigned quarters, so that you can refresh yourselves."

With airmen loading quickly their luggage in the big trunk of the staff car, Clement sat in the front passenger seat, letting Ken and Ingrid take the back seat. The staff car was soon rolling north towards Manila along a narrow road bordered by jungle on both sides. The jungle quickly made place to a collection of shanties inhabited by the poorest crust of the local population, then to more prosperous buildings made of either wood or bricks. The staff car finally stopped in front of a small bungalow situated with many similar houses along the banks of a small river. From the posh appearance of the houses and the various people living here, it was obvious to both Ken and Ingrid that this district of Manila was reserved for American officers and businessmen and their families. A few hundred yards away to the Northwest, the fortified Spanish walls of the old city, or Intramuros, were visible. Clement smiled at Ken and Ingrid while showing the bungalow.

"Your new house for the duration of your posting. It belongs to the Navy and comes fully furnished, like the other married quarters in Manila. A Filipino cook and a maid have already been assigned to your house and they have the keys to the place. The Administrative Officer will explain to you the financial arrangements tomorrow,

Major. My own house is down this street, at number 58. Could I expect both of you at about seven, in informal attire?"

"We will be there, sir." replied Ken. "Where will I be working out of, sir?"

"Fleet Headquarters main building is on the waterfront, near the Manila Hotel on Bonifacio Drive. Present yourself at the Operations Section for eight in the morning tomorrow. Let's unload your things now."

With the help of the staff car driver, their few pieces of luggage were brought inside the house, where two Filipino women greeted them. One was in her late thirties and presented herself as the cook, while the maid was much younger, being barely older than Ingrid. Both spoke broken but passable English, the cook being a bit better at it than the maid. With Clement and the driver leaving them, Ken and Ingrid were then left alone with the two servants. The first thing Ken did, followed by Ingrid, was to tour their house. The bungalow was small but comfortable and compared well to other, past military accommodations Ken had seen in the past. He, like Ingrid, was however not accustomed to having servants at his disposal, especially when they seemed as eager to do everything in the house as were the two small Filipino women now waiting expectantly for their new masters' orders. Of a common accord, Ken took the maid with him to help unpack and place their things while Ingrid left the house on foot with the cook to go buy some groceries at the nearest market. The deference of the maid, which approached servility in the eyes of Ken, was nearly embarrassing to him and he had to stop for a moment to speak to her as gently as possible.

"Look, Juanita, I appreciate very much your help but there is no need for you to act as if you are inferior to me and my wife in any way. We are both very open-minded and we wish to deal with you as equals. How much are you normally paid for this work?"

"Navy gives this much dollars per month." She said in her broken English while flashing all her fingers twice.

"That's it?" exclaimed Ken, nearly scandalized. "You get only twenty dollars a month for this work?"

"That normal pay for maid, master. Julia gets half more." replied the maid in her tiny voice, surprised by his surprise.

"First, Juanita, I want you to stop calling me 'master'. You will call me simply 'Ken', while you will call my wife 'Ingrid'. Second, while you will keep getting your basic pay from the Navy, I want you to take this as your first monthly supplement from me."

The young woman looked with incredulity at the twenty dollars Ken had just put in her hands, then smiled to him, overjoyed.

“Thank you mas...uh, Ken. You very generous!”

“You and Julia can also expect a few gifts on special occasions. Don’t take this as a request for you to do more than your normal work, though. Now, could you suspend Ingrid’s dresses in the closet while I take care of this suitcase?”

“Yes, Ken!”

Ken then opened one of his suitcases and took out his uniforms, suspending them in the left half of the bedroom’s closet. Next out of the suitcase were two medium-sized framed pictures. One was that of Ingrid while the other was an official military picture of Nancy Laplante, wearing her medals and smiling at the camera. Ken then put a smaller picture showing Ingrid in her Luftwaffe uniform and flanked by both Nancy Laplante and Mike Crawford on the dresser. Juanita’s eyes widened at the sight of Nancy’s picture.

“That Nancy, woman from future?”

“Yes. You know about her?”

“She known well here, Ken. Great woman. You knew her?”

“I met her many times in London. Ingrid was adopted by her a few months before she died.”

Ken then continued unpacking his suitcase. Juanita looked at the picture of Nancy for a few more seconds, her eyes sparkling with interest, before resuming her work. Ken did not open in front of the maid the locked case containing Nancy’s weapons and the copy of the Top Secret Hourglass Files he had brought from London, instead putting it inside the closet, behind a pair of boots.

Once the unpacking was done and everything was in its proper place, Ken moved the larger picture of Nancy and that of Ingrid with her adoptive parents to the lounge, hanging them on one of the walls. He also plugged in Ingrid’s portable radio/CD/tape player unit in the lounge, storing the CD disks and tapes inside the glass cabinet which now supported the player unit. There was already a contemporary radio receiver in the lounge but, apart from being bulky, its sound quality was probably nowhere as good as that of the set which had belonged to Nancy. The modern set was also much easier to tune than the other one, which required constant manual adjustments in order to stay on a given station. Ken used the automatic scanning mode of the player unit to see what kind of radio stations they could receive in Manila. He

actually got one local station which broadcasted in Tagalog, the local dialect, plus two American local military entertainment stations broadcasting in English. He was tuning in on the Navy station when Ingrid walked in with Julia, the cook. Both were carrying paper bags full of groceries.

“Hi Ken! How’s the unpacking going?”

“It’s done, dear! Do you need a hand with those bags?”

“I won’t say no to that.”

Leaving a few of the groceries out so that Julia could prepare supper, they stored away the rest either in the pantry or inside the bulky, limited capacity refrigerator present in the kitchen. Taking Ingrid aside, Ken then told her about Juanita’s salary and about the supplement he had decided to give. Ingrid nodded her head, visibly pleased by his initiative.

“Good move, Ken. As for doubling Julia’s salary as well, you have my benediction. My visit to the market was fairly short but it was long enough for me to see that our servants’ basic pay is a pittance. I also saw how most of the Americans in town deal with the locals: you wouldn’t believe how snobbish and arrogant some of them are.”

“Hey, not everybody can be expected to be as liberal as Nancy...or you.”

“Still. Ken, while shopping for food with Julia, I spoke in Tagalog with her and told her that I had learned a couple of oriental languages in school while in Europe. This is so you will know what excuse to give when someone will ask about my language talents.”

Ken nodded once at that, understanding what she was saying. During their long trip from London and their multiple stops on the way, Ingrid had told Ken in private about the way she and Nancy Laplante had progressively remembered their past incarnations⁵ in a way Ingrid still couldn’t explain. In Ingrid’s case, she could now remember a total of 71 past incarnations spread over 7,000 years, with her past souvenirs allowing her to speak nearly a hundred languages, most of them now extinct, but with Tagalog and Cebuano, the two main languages spoken in the Philippines, still fresh in her mind. Ingrid glanced at the two servants, who were busy in the kitchen, then lowered her voice.

“Ken, while out at the market, I was struck by how little concerned the people are here about the war. It is as if nobody is worried about the Japanese attacking us.”

⁵ To read more details about how Nancy Laplante and Ingrid Weiss remembered their past incarnations, please read my novel CODENAME: ATHENA.

“Ingrid,” said Ken in an even lower voice, “don’t forget that what we learned from Nancy about the future is considered highly classified information. I suspect that even the staff at Asiatic Fleet Headquarters doesn’t know as much as you on that subject, with the possible exception of a few of the most senior officers. I will ask you to stay discreet about this while at Clement’s garden party tonight.”

“What about my links with Nancy?”

“Those links you can’t deny, Ingrid. Just pretend that Nancy didn’t tell you anything about the future. We will talk together tomorrow about our own future plans once I have had a chance to get a feel of the situation at Fleet Headquarters.”

“If you say so, Ken. I just hope that someone apart from us here has its head above the sand.”

“Well, don’t bet on that yet, Ingrid.”

18:57 (Manila time)

Residence of Lieutenant Colonel William T. Clement

Central Manila

Rhonda Clement, even though she had been forewarned by her husband about the young age of Major Dows’ wife, stiffened when she saw through the windows of her lounge the newly arrived couple approach the front door. Young Misses Dows actually appeared to be little more than half the age of her big, muscular husband. She was however quite tall for a girl, being around five feet nine inches, and looked fit, on top of being very beautiful.

“Dear God, Bill, she doesn’t look to be more than eighteen years old.”

“I know, dear. I understand that they married just before leaving London. She is also a German Jew. Quite an interesting girl actually. There was however nothing about her in Major Dows’ file, apart from the telegram advising us about his marriage to her. By the way, her name is Ingrid.”

Rhonda Clement nodded her head, and then went to the front door to welcome the couple, smiling to them after opening the door to let them in.

“Major and Misses Dows, it is a pleasure for me to greet you to Manila. I’m Rhonda Clement.”

“Thank you, Misses Clement.” replied the man, whom Rhonda found most handsome. “May I present you my wife, Ingrid?”

“Welcome to our house, Ingrid.” said Rhonda while exchanging a hug with the young teenager. She could see already Major Dows having to keep an eye on the young officers under his command, who would be turning around his wife like bees around a pot of honey.

“Please follow me to the back of the house, where the party is taking place, so that I could serve you drinks.”

The couple followed her through the house, emerging in a large fenced yard where a handful of guests were already present, along with a number of Filipino servants. A long folding table on one side of the grass yard supported a collection of bottles and glasses, while another table supported a collection of appetizers. Rhonda insisted on serving the couple herself and smiled to Ingrid.

“What will you have, my dear?”

“A cold Coca-Cola will be just fine, Misses Clement.”

“I will have a Rum Punch, Misses Clement.” said Ken Dows.

Rhonda was secretly relieved by Ingrid’s choice: serving alcohol to a minor was still a federal offence, even at private parties. She prepared and handed over the drinks, then led the couple towards her husband, who was talking with a mature, tough-looking man.

“Major and Misses Dows, may I present you to Lieutenant Colonel John Adams, Commander of the Marine Battalion in Cavite Navy Base.”

Adams shook hands with the couple, quickly measuring up Ken Dows and noting his athletic shape and resolute expression.

“I heard that you had the chance to meet many times the famous Nancy Laplante before her untimely death, Major. Did she tell you anything about the future situation in the Pacific by chance?”

Ken nearly froze at those words: as the commander of a combat unit vital to the defense of Manila, Adams should have been briefed about the known Japanese attack plans. William Clement, who was watching him closely, saw his reaction. He also saw for a second dismay on Ingrid’s young face. Clement was thus listening and watching very carefully as Ken answered John Adams.

“She certainly did, sir. Everything she told us in London was sent to Washington by high priority courier. The headquarters here should have had this info for months now.”

“I never saw a damn thing about it, Major.” said Adams before looking at Clement. “What about you, Bill?”

Clement hesitated, glancing at Ingrid. Ken then decided that it was time to put all the cards on the table.

“Sir, my wife had extensive conversations with Nancy Laplante, who became her adopted mother before she died. She knows about as much as me if not more about the future, so you can speak without breaking any real secret.”

“I’ll be damned!” said softly Clement while looking at Ingrid. “If that’s the case, then I have to say that I received nothing on that subject, except a vague warning about a possibility of war with Japan in the next few months.”

“That’s it?” exclaimed Ken, shocked. “But we sent hundreds of pages of information to Washington. Everything from Japanese detailed battle plans to Japanese equipment specifications and performances.”

Rhonda Clement was by now growing quite unnerved and forgot for a moment that a good Navy wife should never discuss military affairs in front of guests.

“And us? What can we expect here?”

“Rhonda...” started to say her husband. Young Ingrid Dows then jumped into the fray, speaking calmly but firmly.

“Sir, if I may. I know that starting alarming rumors and circulating scary tales could be disastrous for the morale of the people in the Philippines, but keeping our collective heads in the sand won’t help either. Would you be able to defend this place better if you knew what to expect?”

“Of course I would, Misses Dows.”

“Then I will repeat two things that Nancy Laplante told me: first, in the history which Nancy knew, the Japanese overran most of the Pacific, including the Philippines; she also told me that history could be changed. She in fact said that she had already changed history by her actions in a very significant way. In short, nothing is set in concrete, sir, and we still have a fighting chance.”

Ken, who had been holding his breath, blew air out in relief: Ingrid had said just the right words. Clement nodded his head in appreciation as well.

“Misses Dows, you just gave me one big reason to keep working even harder at defending the Philippines. As for that missing info, I will certainly place a few queries about it tomorrow.”

“Sir, I may be of help on that.” said Ken quietly. “While you certainly should ask Washington about that info, I took the liberty before leaving London of making copies of the most important documents provided by Nancy Laplante about the war in the Pacific

in general and the battle for the Philippines in particular. I have that package locked away in my bungalow, sir.”

“Excellent, Major! Admiral Hart will certainly want to have a look at that information tomorrow.”

“Then, could I suggest that he also speaks with my wife? She may not know about the in-depth stuff but Nancy Laplante told her many things about this war that may not be in my package.”

“She did?” said Clement while eyeing Ingrid with both interest and surprise. “Like what kind of information, for example?”

Seeing the teenager hesitate while glancing at her, Rhonda Clement decided to step away for a while.

“If you will excuse me, I will go check on the other guests.”

Once Clement’s wife was out of earshot, Ingrid spoke while keeping her voice low.

“Actually, Nancy did tell me about the general course of the war as it happened in the history she knew. She also gave me her opinion on what should have been done and told me about the mistakes committed during the war. The primary thing about the war in the Pacific she told me was that, while the Japanese started originally the war against the United States on December 7 of this year, she expected the Japanese to change the date of their initial attack since they must realize by now that she blew the whistle on them. She in fact expected the Japanese to advance the date of their attack by a few weeks in order to throw the United States off balance.”

“Christ!” swore Lieutenant Colonel Adams. “Then we may have less than two months to get ready for them. We haven’t started to receive the reinforcements we asked for yet.”

Adams and Clement didn’t like the pained look which then appeared on the teenager’s face.

“Sir, I know that this will sound awful to you but, in the original history, the American forces in the Philippines were basically left to themselves by Washington, which had made the political decision to give every priority to the war against Germany. The forces here had to fight with no support from the rest of your Pacific Fleet and eventually had to surrender to the Japanese. What followed made Nancy particularly mad: according to her, the Japanese treated their American and Filipino prisoners with utter barbarism and cruelty and without regards to any of the usual laws of war. One third of the prisoners, including interned civilians, were starved and beaten to death

while captive of the Japanese, while the rest were reduced to mere walking skeletons before they could be liberated at the end of the war. I personally have vowed not to let myself be taken alive by the Japanese, sir.”

“Dear God!” said softly Clement, shaken to the core by her words. “Is there anything that we could do to prevent all this?”

“Nancy thought so, sir, but she mentioned only a few things in passing on the subject. She died shortly after telling me those things.”

“What did she tell you that I could use, Misses Dows?”

“Well, please don’t be mad at me for saying this but she thought that General MacArthur’s defensive strategy sucked. One big factor which played against your forces was the fact that the Japanese were not met decisively at the moment they landed. Another thing of importance was the insufficiencies in food supplies. Hundreds of tons of foodstuff were either abandoned or left behind and your forces eventually surrendered, mostly due to starvation. There were also a few other stupid mistakes done that cost you dearly, like having anti-aircraft shells equipped with fuses that could not be set to explode high enough to catch the Japanese bombers. I could go on for a while on the subject, sir.”

“That was already plenty for me, Misses Dows. I definitely want you to be with your husband tomorrow when we will go see Admiral Hart.”

Clement then turned to face Adams.

“John, the first thing you will do tomorrow morning is to check this story about short anti-aircraft shell fuses. If this is confirmed, then we will place an emergency supply request for higher altitude fuses, to be sent by air within a week.”

“Got that!” replied the Marine battalion commander in a sober tone. Somehow, he had lost his party mood by now.

13:26 (Manila time)

Tuesday, September 16, 1941 ‘C’

Headquarters of United States Army Forces in the Far East (HQ USAFFE)

Manila, Philippines

Ingrid was a little nervous this afternoon as she stood beside Ken in the company of Admiral Thomas Hart and of Lieutenant Colonel Clement, while an army major was knocking politely on a door bearing a brass plate with the acronym ‘CinC USAFFE’

engraved on it. Someone inside then shouted for them to enter and she followed Ken in, staying a bit behind him. Sitting behind a huge work desk and with a corn pipe in his mouth was **Lieutenant General Douglas MacArthur**, commander of all the American army troops in the Philippines, while two other general officers sat on a sofa to the left of the desk. Ingrid came to attention the way she had learned to as a Luftwaffe auxiliary while Ken and the others saluted MacArthur. The latter then told them to take place in chairs placed in advance for them in front of the desk and examined briefly Ken and Ingrid before looking at Admiral Hart.



“So, Admiral, what is exactly this classified information you spoke about on the telephone this morning?”

“Information from the future, General.” replied Hart while taking out a thick file from his attaché case and handing it to MacArthur. “Major Dows, sitting on my right, arrived yesterday from his previous post, our embassy in London, with his young wife. Both of them met and spoke extensively with Brigadier Nancy Laplante before her death and Major Dows actually worked as part of the liaison team which transmitted to Washington the info obtained from Laplante. Fortunately for us, Major Dows brought with him copies of the ‘Hourglass’ info relevant to the war in the Pacific. I reviewed this info with him and his wife this morning and, in my opinion, it is enough to warrant a complete review of our operational plans.”

MacArthur’s eyes narrowed as he focused on Ken and Ingrid again. The two other general officers also showed immediate interest at the news brought in by Hart.

“I do not want to be rude to the major’s wife, Admiral, but why did you feel that you had to involve her in this?”

“Because she is the adopted daughter of Nancy Laplante and has some knowledge that is not in the file I just handed you, sir.”

“If I may, sir...” said one of the generals sitting on the left to MacArthur, who nodded his head.

“Go ahead, General Willoughby.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The senior officer then looked sternly at Ingrid.

“Misses Dows, I am the intelligence officer at this headquarters and Washington never deemed appropriate to communicate to us the information originating with Nancy Laplante, even though it would have been highly relevant to help prepare our defense of the Pacific. Why would Nancy Laplante have discussed with you, a civilian, such highly classified information?”

Ingrid, who had worked in the past with general officers of the Luftwaffe, didn't let herself be intimidated by the senior staff officer and returned his stare while answering politely but firmly.

“General, that information was for Nancy no more than widely known historical data, that is for persons from the year 2012. She discussed history with me because she had absolute confidence in me and because she wanted me to learn from the lessons taught by history. She not only discussed that information with me: she also commented on it, pointing at mistakes made and at opportunities lost. I learned a lot from her and am ready to pass on to you what she told me. It is up to you to use it or not, but ignoring those lessons will cost dearly in lives, in my opinion.”

Willoughby's expression then told Ingrid what he thought of her opinion. MacArthur, who had been sifting through the file while listening, then intervened.

“Your comments and recollections will be welcome, Misses Dows. We have the whole of the Philippines to defend and I will use anything that can be useful. In fact, I see here a note about the date when we could expect a Japanese attack, signed by an Ingrid Weiss. Is that you, Misses Dows?”

“Uh, yes sir! I married only very recently and I still tend to sign with my maiden name. As for the note, I was alluding to a comment made by Nancy Laplante. In her history, the Japanese started their war with the United States on December 7 of this year. Nancy however believed that the Japanese will now attack a few weeks prior to that date, since they must have realized that their original plans were compromised by her. She also believed that, while the date would change, the attack plan itself wouldn't, or only slightly.”

“Why?”

“Because of the scope and complexity of the Japanese attack plans, sir. Japan will try to essentially conquer all of the Western Pacific, with ships and troops assigned to a multitude of targets all at once in order to achieve strategic surprise. That, in her mind, left little leeway to the Japanese military planners. Her best bet about the new date for the Japanese initial attack was a Sunday, around the end of October.”

MacArthur nodded his head and wrote a short note on a paper pad, then looked at Ken.

“Major Dows, could you resume quickly what this information is telling us about the Philippines?”

“Yes, General!” replied Ken, who then spoke for a few minutes, covering the Japanese main actions to come. MacArthur listened to him carefully, taking as well a few notes. At the end, the old general’s face had become quite sober.

“And, concerning our own actions, did Laplante make any recommendations or suggestions, Major?”

“Not in this dossier, General. However, my wife Ingrid has these details.”

While Willoughby and the major general sitting next to him stiffened with indignation at having to listen to suggestions from a simple army wife, MacArthur nodded his head and stared at Ingrid. The latter carefully chose her words as she took out of a pocket a folded sheet of paper. Nancy had not been very tender about her opinion of Douglas MacArthur, describing him as a grandstanding egomaniac who rarely listened to the opinions from others around him. She however had acknowledged him to be both a brave officer and a top strategist. The trick was going to be very diplomatic with him now.

“General, I must remind you that what I will show you comes from Nancy Laplante and constitutes no less than the collective judgment of eminent military historians and senior officers from the 21st Century who extensively studied and analyzed this war to come. Some of it is not very flattering about many senior American commanders in the Pacific, I must warn you. I wrote this last night, from the memories of my conversations with Nancy and from what I read in this information. The first point has already been discussed with Admiral Hart and concerns the fuses of our anti-aircraft shells. They are of an old model unable to reach the standard operating altitude of Japanese bombers.”

“If I may interrupt Misses Dows for a moment, General,” said Lieutenant Colonel Clement, “I personally checked that particular point and I can tell you that our anti-aircraft shells cannot reach higher than 20,000 feet, well below the operational altitude of 25,000 feet used by the Japanese bombers.”

“All of our shells, Colonel?” asked MacArthur, both incredulous and furious. Clement could only nod his head gravely.

“All of our shells, General. On order from Admiral Hart, I sent this morning an urgent request for newer fuses. Misses Dows further helped on that subject by

suggesting that we request specifically a new type of anti-aircraft fuse, the design of which was given to us by Nancy Laplante last year. They are called 'proximity fuses', or VT fuses in short, and use the same principle as radar to detect nearby aircraft and explode near them."

MacArthur glanced quickly at Ingrid before looking at the major general sitting to one side of his desk.

"General Wainwright, I want you to send today a similar request for such anti-aircraft fuses to replace all of our present fuses. I will be damned if we let such a stupid factor give a free hand to Japanese bombers."

"Uh, yes, General!" could only reply the major general, scribbling furiously on a notepad. MacArthur then took the list of suggestions and comments from Ingrid and read it quickly. He glanced at Ingrid a couple of times, visibly disturbed or irritated by a few of the points on her list, but read it from end to end before nodding to her.

"Your list will be quite helpful, Misses Dows, and I thank you sincerely for your information. Be assured that I will act on it. Do you have anything further to say before I study with my officers how to modify our defense plans?"

While Willoughby and Wainwright appeared stunned to hear MacArthur give her a vote of confidence, Ingrid secretly felt relief wash over her. Many points in her list pointed at specific errors and cases of bad judgment on the part of MacArthur himself and she had been afraid that he would have simply ignored or thrown away her list out of anger or vanity. Steeling herself, she then presented her last point, a personal one.

"General, I know that the American forces don't accept women, except as nurses, but I am a qualified military air plot specialist and telephone switchboard operator. I thus request to be able to stay here in the Philippines, even if you order the evacuation of American dependents and civilians. I request as well the privilege of being able to serve with your forces, ideally with the Army Air Corps, as a civilian auxiliary."

MacArthur, like all the other officers present except for Ken, looked at her with incredulity.

"But, how could you possess such qualifications, Misses Dows?"

Ingrid took a deep breath before letting go her last bomb.

"I was a German Luftwaffe female auxiliary before being captured by Nancy Laplante, General. I served with the headquarters of a Luftwaffe fighter division in France during the air battles of 1940."

After a moment of shocked silence, MacArthur burst out in laughter.

"The famous Nancy Laplante adopted a Luftwaffe girl? That's rich! And the British let her do that?"

"Uh, not really, General. Nancy kept that a secret and the British learned about it only after her death. She also educated me in secret during my months of captivity in London."

MacArthur eyed her for a long moment in silence, finally taking a decision.

"In view of your qualifications and of your knowledge about this war, I accept your request to stay in the Philippines in case of a civilian evacuation. I will take a decision later about your request to serve with my forces. You may now wait outside while I discuss with my officers and with Admiral Hart."

Ingrid got up at attention then, having won more than she had hoped for realistically.

"Thank you, General!"

She then pivoted on her heels and walked out in a military step, attracting an amused comment from MacArthur to Ken Dows.

"Quite a special girl you married there, Major."

"Effectively, General." replied Ken proudly. "If anything, she is following in the footsteps of her famous adoptive mother."

Once Ingrid was out of his office and the door closed behind her, MacArthur looked at Admiral Hart and his party, speaking in a voice full of bitterness.

"Gentlemen, what I am going to say will be my principal guideline for our soldiers: there will be no surrender to the Japanese. I want all our people, including the families of our men, to clearly know what to expect in the event of capture by the Japanese. As a consequence of what I just read, I am ordering the immediate repatriation to the United States of all Army dependents. I will also seek authority from Washington to have the American civilians in the Philippines repatriated as well. Admiral Hart, I would strongly advise you to repatriate your Navy dependents as well."

"I was already leaning in that direction, General. I have read myself those documents about the Japanese treatment of our men and women and was truly shocked by the barbarism of the Japanese. I will publish a repatriation order tomorrow for all the Navy and Marine Corps dependents...except for Misses Dows."

09:32 (Manila Time)

Thursday, September 18, 1941 'C'

Far East School of Aviation, airfield of Nielson Field

South suburbs of Manila, Philippines

Ingrid could barely contain her excitement as the taxi which she had taken dropped her in front of a hangar in Nielson Field, an airfield that served both as the official Manila airport and as the location for the headquarters of the United States Far East Army Air Force. Dressed in a light shirt and cotton trousers, Ingrid entered the hangar's annex which housed the offices of the Far East School of Aviation and presented herself with a smile to the young Filipina secretary manning the reception desk, speaking to her in Tagalog.

"Good morning, miss. I came to get flying lessons classes, if your school is still active, of course."

"Uh, we are still opened for business, miss," answered the secretary, surprised to hear an American speaking fluent Tagalog, "but customers have been effectively rare lately."

The secretary then got a form and presented it to Ingrid, along with a pencil.

"Could you please fill this form while I get one of the flying instructors, miss?"

"With pleasure, miss."

Ingrid had just completed the form when the secretary came back with a man in his forties who was already half bald. The man, of medium built, smiled to Ingrid and shook hands with her while presenting himself with a distinct American accent.

"Good morning, miss. I am Jack Gavin, head instructor of this flying school. So, you want to learn how to fly?"

"I certainly do, Mister Gavin. My name is Ingrid Dows and I arrived a few days ago with my husband, a Marine Corps officer just posted to Manila. As you will be able to see from my questionnaire, I already possess theoretical notions on flying and have a few hours on gliders. I must tell you in advance that I am in quite a hurry to learn to fly and that I plan to go further than a simple license for single engine airplanes. I would also like eventually to learn notions of aerobatic flying, if that is possible."

"Uh, that will all depend on how fast you will learn, Miss Dows. I must also warn you that flying lessons can be quite expensive."

"Money is no object, mister: I recently received a substantial inheritance."

Gavin nodded his head at that, satisfied: a customer with deep pockets was always welcomed at the school, especially in these rather lean times.

"Be assured that you will get your money's worth, Misses Dows. Let's see your questionnaire."

Gavin soon raised an eyebrow, impressed by Ingrid's information.

"I must say that your basic knowledge on the theory of flight and on air navigation seems to be quite solid. Your gliding club must have been run by real pros."

"You may say that." replied Ingrid, smiling. In truth, the instructors of her flying club, affiliated like all other youth clubs in Germany to the Hitler's Youths, were military pilots seconded from the Luftwaffe. "I suppose that there is a starting fee for the courses?"

"Yes, miss." answered jovially Jack Gavin, who was already liking this young woman, apart from finding her extremely beautiful. "You can pay separately for each lesson, or pay for the complete course in advance. The basic course costs 500 dollars, plus two dollars per hour of flying."

"I will pay in advance for the whole course and for the first ten hours of flying." answered Ingrid, who then took out her wallet and counted 520 dollars on the counter, to Gavin's surprise: that sum presently represented a third of the average annual salary of an American. Jack took the money and made a receipt for Ingrid, then escorted her inside the school's hangar, leading her to a small monoplane with high, shoulder-mounted wing and enclosed cabin.

"Here is the plane you will use to qualify yourself as a pilot, Misses Dows. It is a Fairchild MODEL 24, with a 150-horsepower radial engine. It can attain a top speed of 120 miles per hour and has a range of 525 miles. It is a good plane, sturdy and reliable."

"I already love it, Mister Gavin." said Ingrid, her eyes sparkling, as one of her dreams was about to come true. "When could I start flying in it?"

"This afternoon, after I have had the time to give you a detailed tour of the plane." answered Jack, amused and intrigued by her apparent hurry.

16:27 (Manila Time)

Nielson Field, Manila

Jack Gavin stared with admiration at Ingrid as she cut her engine after rolling her Fairchild under his supervision up to the school's hangar. They had just spent over three hours in the air, partly because a sudden tropical shower had delayed their landing and partly because of Ingrid's enthusiasm, who had insisted on continuing to fly.

"Well, madam, you must have been born to fly. You are the most talented student I ever had. You are sure that you only flew gliders before?"

"Positive, Mister Gavin." said Ingrid truthfully. "When could I fly another lesson?"

"Uh, that will depend on your own available time, Misses Dows."

"I still have plenty of free time, mister." answered Ingrid. Despite his promise to consider her for a position as a civilian auxiliary, General MacArthur had not contacted her yet. Ken had however warned her to be patient about that. Well, if that helped her get her flying license faster, then so be it. She was resolved not to waste any of her time here in the Philippines. God knew that time was running out for her and the other Americans in the Philippines.

17:33 (Manila Time)

Friday, September 26, 1941 'C'

The Dows' residence, Manila

"HONEY, I'M HOME!"

"I'M IN THE KITCHEN, KEN!"

Ken, in combat uniform and wearing his regulation pistol in a belt holster, crossed the entrance lobby and entered the kitchen, going to Ingrid and taking her in his arms for a long kiss. Julia and Juanita, who were helping Ingrid prepare supper, giggled while watching the young couple kiss. Apart from being generous and most kind towards them, Ken and Ingrid proved every day to be a couple deeply in love. Once he unglued himself from Ingrid, Ken smelled with delight the odor floating in the kitchen.

"What's for supper? I am starving."

"Pork fried rice. I hope that you will like it."

"The smell is already maddening me." replied Ken. "So, how was your day, Ingrid?"

"Both satisfying and terrifying. First off, though, I have good news to tell you: I passed with success my high school diploma equivalency test: I got the results today from the Santo Tomas University."

"But that's fantastic news, Ingrid." said joyfully Ken before kissing her again. "You worked so hard at your studies. And what about your flying and driving lessons?"

"My flying lesson this morning went very well, but my driving lesson didn't go as smoothly: a truck nearly smashed into my driving school's car this afternoon after speeding through a stop sign. My heart is still beating fast from the scare I got then."

"I must say that the local driving techniques are, uh, interesting." said Ken, attracting a sarcastic look from Ingrid.

"Interesting? I would say suicidal. And your day, how was it?"

"I will tell you later." said Ken in a low voice, signifying to Ingrid that he didn't want to talk about it in front of the two servants. Ingrid understood and smiled to Julia and Juanita, speaking to them in Tagalog.

"I kept you away from your families long enough. Fill your containers and go pass a nice weekend with your husbands and children."

"You are too kind, Ingrid." Replied Julia happily. Ingrid, with the consent of Ken, had taken the habit of making Julia cook a very large supper on Fridays, so that the two servants could return to their families with the surplus of food in thermos containers. This, along with the fact that the couple treated nicely the Filipinos around them and the fact that Ingrid spoke both Tagalog and Cebuano, had rendered them very popular with the locals. In contrast, some of their American neighbors were starting to find them too liberal by American standards.

Once Julia and Juanita were gone with their containers full of pork fried rice, Ingrid served a generous portion to Ken before serving herself and sitting down in front of him at the small table of their kitchen.

"So, Ken, what is going on?"

"Incompetence and racism, that's what." said Ken in a bitter voice before taking his first bite of food. "I spent the day briefing officers about the Japanese and their military equipment, using Nancy's information. I had a hard time convincing most of them that I was serious. Some of these officers still believe that the Japanese are some sort of monkeys equipped with junk weapons. What a bunch of idiots!"

Ingrid kept silent for a moment: the subject of racism in the United States had been one on which Nancy had warned her to expect.

“Does Colonel Clement know about this?”

“I told him about it before leaving the office. He promised me to shake a few of those morons tomorrow and he will also raise the subject with Admiral Hart.”

“Ken, you are doing the best you can.” said softly Ingrid, caressing his left hand.

“Maybe, but I am not proud of some of my compatriots today.” replied Ken before chasing his anger away and smiling to her. “I am sorry to be such a killjoy today, Ingrid. There is however still so much to do before we are really ready to fight the Japanese.”

“Well, if that can help your morale, I can tell you that I did my part concerning that today, after my driving lesson. Continue eating while I go get something.”

Ken followed her with his eyes, intrigued, as Ingrid left the kitchen and went to their bedroom. He nearly choked on his fried rice when she came back with a rifle equipped with a long bayonet in her hands.

“A Springfield 1903? Where did you find it?”

“In a sporting goods store here in Manila. It was supposedly used during the Great War in 1917. I also bought a good amount of .30 ammunition, plus a web belt and cleaning accessories and supplies.”

Inspecting quickly the bolt action rifle, Ken found it functional and well maintained.

“Well, even if it is officially an obsolete weapon, the Springfield 1903 is still a very good rifle with an excellent reputation for accuracy and dependability. You now have a serious weapon, Ingrid.”

“And I hope that you will find the time during this weekend to add the practice of rifle shooting to that of pistol shooting to my training, my lovely husband.”

“My God, Ingrid! Are you trying to become an infantryman or what?”

“Ken,” said Ingrid in a dead serious tone while starring into his eyes, “my past lives included seven lives as a hunter, plus four lives as a warrior. I already know how to fight. I only need to learn how to fight with modern weapons.”

10:56 (Manila Time)

Monday, September 29, 1941 ‘C’

USAFFE HQ, Manila

Philippines

"General, a group of eight enemy bombers was just signaled by the 60th Artillery Regiment. The group was seen over Fort Wint twenty minutes ago, flying southwest at an altitude of 18,000 feet and at a speed of about 200 miles per hour."

"They were spotted twenty minutes ago and we are advised about them only now? Have our fighters in Nichols Field been advised about them?"

"Uh, we don't know about that, General." answered the captain who was trying to coordinate the confused bits of information reaching the USAFFE headquarters.

"Well, find out about it, dammit!" replied in a furious tone Major General Sutherland, General MacArthur's chief of staff. MacArthur, who was letting his subordinates run this air defense exercise and was watching from a corner of the operations room, was becoming more and more impatient and unhappy as he observed the growing confusion around him. The poor captain trying to keep the large tactical map of the Philippines up to date then got another telephone call.

"USAFFE HQ, Captain Tremont!... A group of eight enemy bombers just flew over San Fernando, coming from the Northeast?... You mean that they were seen over one hour ago?... Uh, thanks!"

Tremont then shouted at his sergeant working the tactical map with two corporals.

"Eight bombers from the Northeast were seen over San Fernando at nine fifty. Plot their position and direction!"

The sergeant looked at the map for a moment and hesitated before looking back at his captain.

"Sir, I believe that those bombers are the same as the ones seen over Fort Wint, based on their speed and time observed."

The captain nearly ran to the map to check, but soon had to agree with his sergeant. Ten minutes later, another call infuriated Sutherland.

"Eight enemy bombers just overflowed Nichols Field, sir. Our fighters were caught on the ground."

"SHIT! WHAT WERE THEY WAITING FOR TO TAKE OFF?"

"Nichols Field says that they never got the warning about these bombers, General."

MacArthur finally had enough and got up from his chair, raising both arms up and shouting to be heard around the room.

“THAT’S IT! I HAVE SEEN ENOUGH! CALL AN END TO THIS EXERCISE AND HAVE ALL OUR PLANES LAND RIGHT NOW.”

He then signaled his chief of staff to approach him and spoke to him in a low but firm tone.

“Dick, I want a meeting of all the unit commanders involved in this exercise here at four this afternoon. I believe that we seriously need to shake this house: if the Japanese would have attacked us this morning, we would now be knocked down flat on the floor.”

“I am afraid that you are right, General. Our main problems are the lack of coordination and our poor communication lines. The information from our outposts often takes over an hour to get to our headquarters...when it gets through.”

MacArthur shook his head in disgust as he watched his staff trying to pass his order to stop the exercise to the units of his command. The worst part was that the Asiatic Fleet, which was supposed to play a vital role in the defense of the Philippines, had not even been involved in this exercise. Nobody in his staff had any experience with combined operations and there was not even a direct telephone line linking both the Army and Navy headquarters. Every call had to go through the civilian telephone switchboards of Manila, which were notoriously easy to clog due to the limited number of lines available.

“Dick, this can’t go on. I intend to tell the chief of signals to start laying dedicated telephone lines to link together our various units and headquarters. I want to be able to centralize all the information here so that we could command, instead of simply watching another screw-up like this.”

“But I don’t know if we have enough reserves of telephone wires in the Philippines to do that, General.”

“Then order some more wires!” replied brusquely MacArthur. “And find me someone who can better keep this tactical map up to date.”

MacArthur then left the operations room at a quick pace, leaving his chief of staff with his problems. Sutherland scratched his head, unsure how to go about his orders. He couldn’t really blame the poor Captain Tremont about today’s fiasco. Tremont had nothing to do with the deficient communications and nobody here had any experience about modern air warfare. The United States had not known war since 1918 and Sutherland, who was an ethnic German, was the first to recognize that, by present European standards, American military doctrines were obsolete, even if Washington refused to acknowledge that fact. An idea then came to his mind.

19:46 (Manila Time)**The Dows residence, Manila**

"So, my poor Ken, they made you work overtime today?" said Ingrid with a malicious tone before welcoming her husband in the lounge with a kiss. Ken gave her a tired smile after ungluing himself from her.

"You can say that again. The Army ran, or rather tried to run, a big air defense exercise this morning. Let's say that the result was not very pretty, if I can judge from what I heard at Fleet Headquarters this afternoon."

"So that's why I had to reroute my Fairchild 24 so many times this morning to avoid all those military planes flying around like mad bees. A pair of P-35 fighters even tried to intercept me, maybe thinking that I was one of the fictitious enemy planes."

"Tried?" said Ken, freezing with surprise. "Don't tell me that you managed to escape them."

Ingrid made a big grin then.

"Let's say that Jack Gavin was kind enough to let me use that occasion to test my new abilities in aerobatics. I kept my speed as low as I could while twisting around constantly. Those two P-35 finally had to get off my tail in order to avoid stalling and spinning out of control. I didn't have that much fun in a long time."

Ken could not help burst out laughing on hearing that.

"You managed to shake off two P-35 fighters, while having only 55 hours of flying in your credit? You are truly incredible, Ingrid."

"Correction, Ken: 58 hours after this morning. Besides, the flying skill level of the two pilots who intercepted me didn't impress me one bit: a very average Luftwaffe pilot would have humbled them. If those two P-35 pilots really represent the best we have in the Philippines, then I am afraid that the Japanese will eat them raw for breakfast."

Ken eyed Ingrid soberly, now very serious.

"Please keep that last remark to yourself, Ingrid: quite a few persons could cause you problems if they heard you."

"Screw them! I fully intend to keep calling things as they are."

"Well, talking about calling things up, Major General Sutherland, the chief of staff of General MacArthur, called me this afternoon. He wants you tomorrow at nine in the morning in his office. He wants to discuss with you about your experience with the

Luftwaffe. Something tells me that someone finally realized that they need to learn from a pro like you.”

“YES! THEY ARE READY TO USE ME!” shouted Ingrid, overjoyed.

CHAPTER 4 – THE JAPANESE ARE COMING

16:16 (Manila time)

Sunday, October 19, 1941 'C' (Saturday, October 18 in Hawaii)

The Dows' residence, Manila

Philippines

“Honey, I’m home!”

Julia, who was washing some rice before cooking it, giggled as Ken, busy helping her by cutting up pork ribs, shouted back towards the door to tell Ingrid that he was in the kitchen. Like most Filipinos, Julia believed in traditional values and roles. Having a wife come back from work to be greeted by her husband working in the kitchen was a notion that had made many of Julia’s friends and neighbors laugh. While amused, Julia herself did not however think less of her employer: Ken Dows, like Ingrid, was easily one of the most caring persons she had worked for. Contrary to many American men she had known before, Ken also respected her and young Juanita, not using his position of authority to abuse or harass them. That American couple was definitely a refreshing change from other employers Julia had in the past.

Ingrid, wearing a set of old combat fatigues without any insignias save for a black armband with the words ‘USAAF AUXILIARY’ in white, entered the kitchen and exchanged a kiss with Ken before dropping her backpack in a corner.

“Another quiet day in the Pacific.” she announced in English before switching to Tagalog to speak to Julia. “What do we have for supper, Julia?”

“Pork with rice and steamed vegetables, Ingrid. Are you hungry?”

“Oh yes! I will go have a shower first, though.”

While Ingrid was taking her shower, Ken reflected on their first month in the Philippines as he finished cutting the pork ribs. While life here was agreeable and easygoing, the work they had put in during the last month had in his mind helped change things enough to make a real difference. The arrival by ship a week ago of a sizeable

supply of modern fuses for the shells used by the anti-aircraft guns in the Philippines had especially done a lot to improve their chances against a Japanese attack. That same transport ship which had brought in the fuses, along with other vital combat supplies, had left Manila harbor three days ago, now loaded with Army and Navy dependents headed for the safety of the continental United States. There still weren't enough modern fighter aircraft in the Philippines in Ken's opinion but that was something he or even General MacArthur could do little about. One idea from Ingrid that MacArthur had gladly adopted was to use his older models of bombers to keep a nearly constant airborne watch off the coasts west, east and north of Manila, while keeping his modern B-17 heavy bombers ready on the ground to take off to bomb Japanese targets. With their long endurance and many pairs of eyes onboard to help scan the skies around them, the Douglas B-18 BOLO bombers were the low technology equivalents of what Nancy Laplante would have called early warning aircraft. The beaches which they expected the Japanese to use for their landings had also by now been discreetly mined and prepared for defense, while every Army unit had been kept busy with either training or with digging of defenses. In contrast to all this, Ken had realized quickly with dismay through the situation reports he saw coming from Hawaii that the main forces of the Pacific Fleet had been much less diligent in their war preparations. Apparently, Admiral Kimmel and General Short, who respectively commanded the Navy and Army forces in Hawaii, still clung to the belief that the Japanese attack would come on the original date of December 7 and thus were taking their sweet time in preparing themselves. From the little that Asiatic Fleet headquarters could pick up from the British side, the situation was about as poor in the various British and Australian bases around the Pacific as in the American bases in Hawaii. Ken had understood why after reviewing the historical notes from Nancy Laplante. The British and Australian commanders presently in place were the same myopic incompetents who, in the original history, had dismissed the Japanese as mere sub-humans to be brushed aside. With the British still giving absolute priority to the European theatre, little of their new advanced equipment had made it through to their Pacific garrisons. Thus, all the conditions were present to literally repeat history in most places around the Pacific, except for the Philippines.

Looking briefly through one of the windows of the kitchen, Ken was reminded that all had not gone as well as expected here. A number of their civilian neighbors, most of them prosperous American or European businessmen and professionals, could be seen

in their backyard or on their patio, lounging around with their families while their Filipino servants took care of their every needs and wishes. Washington had flatly refused to let General MacArthur order the repatriation of the American civilians living in the Philippines, arguing that such a move would only create unnecessary panic and economic chaos. Those same civilian neighbors had scoffed at Ken and Ingrid when the couple had tried to gently suggest that maybe their children would be safer back in the States or in Australia. They had even laughed at seeing the couple dig up their backyard to build a small but solid underground air raid shelter with the help of paid Filipino laborers. Those laborers were in fact Julia's and Juanita's husbands and brothers. If and when the Japanese would start bombing Manila, Julia, Juanita and their immediate families had been promised a place in that shelter by Ken and Ingrid.

Having finished his job of cutting the ribs, Ken washed his hands and grabbed Ingrid's backpack to bring it in their bedroom. While not a large one, it was surprisingly heavy, as it contained a gun belt with Nancy Laplante's Glock 17L 9mm pistol, lots of spare 9mm ammunition, a full water bottle with carrier and mess tins and a dozen tins of canned meat. A set of spare clothes and some hygiene items completed the list of things in the pack, which Ingrid meant to be a getaway pack in case they would have to run away from the Japanese. Ken certainly could not accuse Ingrid of not planning for the worse, a trait she had probably picked up from Nancy. He himself kept a few extra items and cans of meat in his regulation backpack and web gear, just in case, and had also stored a couple of crates containing canned food and bottles of waters in the freshly-built bomb shelter of their backyard. Ken was putting down Ingrid's backpack by her side of their bed when she entered the bedroom, coming from the bathroom. As was her habit, which had scandalized at first Julia, she was naked and had not bothered to wrap a towel around her body. Seeing Ken look at her hungrily she smiled and went to him, gluing herself to him.

"We never know, Ken: this could be our last occasion for a while if the Japanese attack tomorrow."

She then proceeded to undress him before getting a condom for him. Ken did not resist and soon got on top of her on the bed, using his tongue at first to truly excite her before penetrating her.

In the kitchen, Julia and Juanita exchanged knowing smiles as moans could be heard from the bedroom. The servants did manage to keep straight faces when Ken and Ingrid showed up in the dining room half an hour later, wearing fresh clothes. Looking at her watch as Julia was serving the food, Ingrid got up from her chair and went in the kitchen, where she filled two ceramic pots with rice and pork before calling Julia and Juanita in. The two servants came quickly enough, guessing what it was all about.

“Sorry for keeping you this late, girls. Go to your families now and thank you for your help.”

“We thank you, Ingrid.” replied Julia. “You must be the most generous employers we ever had.”

Juanita thanked Ingrid as well, and then left with one of the pots of food, humming happily a tune on her way out. From the start, Ingrid had established the custom that Julia would cook enough food for supper to have sufficient leftovers for her family and that of Juanita. The teenager thought that it was only fair to do so, since the two Filipina women worked all day for her and thus could not take care of their families in the meantime. She and Ken had even invited the two Filipino families for supper on occasion. While that had made the Filipinos happy, some of their American and European neighbors had grumbled at first about them ‘inviting some low-class locals in the neighborhood’. Ken had replied to those neighbors with clear, direct words.

After finishing to eat, the couple put the dirty plates and utensils in the sink, so that they could wash them tomorrow morning. Then moving to the lounge, Ken sank in their sofa while Ingrid selected a CD and placed it in her portable unit. Many young officers working at the CinCAF and USAFFE headquarters jumped at every occasion they had to be invited in the couple’s house so that they could listen to music from the future. With the soothing music of Enya playing on, Ingrid sat beside Ken and snuggled up to him with a moan of satisfaction.

“Ken, life with you is so sweet. I wish there wasn’t a war to sour things up.”
Ken, an arm wrapped around his young wife, played gently with her hair.

“Unfortunately, we can’t just wish it away, Ingrid. We will have to take the best out of life as we go.”

“Ken, I have a feeling of foreboding. Somehow, I believe that war is about to start here, maybe tomorrow. I want you to promise me something.”

“Anything you want, Ingrid.”

“I want you to promise me that you will not let yourself be taken alive by the Japanese. I just couldn’t live with the thought that you could be subjected to their cruelty.”

Ken looked gravely in the big brown eyes of his wife: she was dead serious about this, as the tears about to roll on her cheeks showed.

“I promise, but you will have to promise me the same thing. Just try your best to escape first, if it comes to that.”

“I promise.”

Both then looked longingly at the official picture of Nancy Laplante, hanging on the wall in front of them.

“I miss her terribly, Ken.”

“I do too. I still have you, though. Come, you should go to bed early: you have to take your shift at USAFFE HQ early in the morning. I will give you a good massage at the same time.”

03:43 (Manila time)

Monday, October 20, 1941 ‘C’ (Sunday, October 19 in Hawaii)

Operations Center, USAFFE HQ

Manila, Philippines

“Hi, guys!”

The arrival of Ingrid in the operations center attracted happy smiles on the faces of the few men on duty on the night shift: even though she was known to be married, Ingrid still made most men in the headquarters dream about her angelic face and her slender, feminine body.

“Good morning, Ingrid!” replied First Sergeant Chris Altman, who was in charge of the night shift operators. “You are early, as usual. You are well awake, I hope?”

“I had a cup of strong coffee at home before coming. So, nothing new?”

“Nothing! However, the Sun will rise only in a bit over two hours. No air activity is possible before that.”

Ingrid took off her backpack and put it down behind the small table reserved for her use, which supported a battery of field telephones and one standard commercial telephone set. She then went to the big tactical map of the Philippines, resting on four tables pushed together, to examine it.

"Who is the duty officer at this time, Sergeant?"

"Captain Foster. He went up on the roof to go smoke a cigarette."

Ingrid hid a frown on hearing Foster's name. She then went to check the meteorological information board and frowned again: even though partially cloudy skies were announced for the Philippines and Formosa, the conditions predicted for today were passable, thus making a Japanese air attack possible as soon as the Sun was up. Ingrid was still examining the meteorological predictions when a corporal from the transmissions department came in, a catastrophed expression on his face and a message in his hands. Looking around the room, he then went to First Sergeant Altman, who was the highest-ranked man present, and gave him his message while speaking in an urgent tone.

"We just received a message in clear with 'CRITIC' priority, sent by the Army headquarters in Hawaii: the Japanese are presently attacking Pearl Harbor. We had the Hawaii operator authenticate his message and he did so correctly."

Everybody in the operations center fell silent and looked at Altman, who read aloud the message.

"To all Army units in the Pacific and Far East, from Army Command in Hawaii. Japanese planes are presently bombarding Pearl Harbor and a number of our airfields around Hawaii. The first bombs fell at about eight o'clock, Hawaii time. This is not a drill. Signed: Major General Short."

As the soldiers around her looked at each other, having difficulty to believe what they had just heard, Ingrid walked quickly to the large Pacific map hanging on one wall and, using a red grease pencil, annotated it, writing a number of symbols and a date-time group over Hawaii. This done, she turned around as Altman ordered a soldier to go fetch Captain Foster on the roof. Going to him, she spoke in a low voice to the senior NCO.

"We should advise General MacArthur immediately, Sergeant."

"I know, but I must wait for the decision of Captain Foster before acting on this."

Ingrid sighed with frustration then: the fear to take an initiative, at the risk of displeasing a superior, was in her mind one of the biggest problems existing presently in the United States Army.

"Sergeant, I have no rank to lose: I will call General MacArthur now. This cannot wait."

Walking quickly to her table, she grabbed the receiver of her commercial telephone and formed the personal number of General MacArthur. The latter answered her after four rings, his voice sleepy.

"MacArthur!"

"General, this is Ingrid Dows, at the operations center. We just received a message from the Army headquarters in Hawaii: the Japanese are presently attacking Pearl Harbor."

MacArthur's voice suddenly became much firmer.

"Do we have more details?"

"Only that the first Japanese bombs fell on Pearl Harbor at about eight o'clock, Hawaii time, General."

"Very well! I'm on my way!" said MacArthur before hanging up. Ingrid next grabbed one of the field telephones on her table and called the Asiatic Fleet headquarters, situated near the docks of Manila. Getting the duty officer there, she repeated to him the message received from Hawaii. Next, she called the headquarters of the Far East Army Air Force in Nielson Field and warned it, then called her home, waking Ken.

"Hello?"

"Ken, this is Ingrid. You better get up and go to the Navy headquarters at the double: the Japanese have started attacking Hawaii and are bombing Pearl Harbor."

"Good God! Alright, I am getting up. Thanks for the warning. And Ingrid...be careful today."

"I will be, my lovely hunk. Be careful too."

Ingrid had done all that and still had to wait a few minutes more before Captain Foster, who had probably taken the time to finish his cigarette, finally showed up in the operations center, barking an order to Altman.

"Sergeant Altman, call immediately General MacArthur to inform him of this message from Hawaii."

"That has already been done, sir: Ingrid took care of it."

Foster turned around to face Ingrid, visibly irritated.

"Who told you to place that call, madam?"

"Nobody, Captain." replied Ingrid in a resolute tone. "I simply took that initiative on myself in view of the urgency of the message. I also informed the duty officer at Asiatic Fleet headquarters and the one at FEAAF headquarters in Nielson Field."

"Why did you call the Navy?" shot back Foster, nearly livid. Ingrid eyed him with near contempt.

"Why, Captain? Because we are supposed to defend the Philippines together with the Navy. Because nothing tells us if the Navy headquarters in Hawaii is not presently a pile of burning rubble. Because wars are not won with suppositions. My job is to coordinate and disseminate all tactical information from this headquarters and that is what I did. The information about the attack on Hawaii is already marked on our map of the Pacific, by the way."

She then ignored the discomfited duty officer and placed a few more calls, alerting the various regional Army commands in the Philippines.

General MacArthur entered the operations center twenty minutes after having been called by Ingrid and went straight to the duty officer.

"Captain Foster, show me that message from Hawaii."

Taking the message presented by Foster, MacArthur read it quickly and nodded once, somber.

"Captain, have all our units put on maximum alert. Even if war has not yet been declared officially, I now consider this command as being at war with Japan."

One of Ingrid's field telephones then rang, making her pick up the receiver.

"USAFFE HQ!... Very well! Thank you and keep us informed if they see anything, please."

Getting up and going to the large tactical map table, Ingrid lined up a series of wooden, plane-shaped blue plaques over the Bay of Manila.

"General, the Asiatic Fleet is scrambling right now twelve PBY amphibian patrol planes, which will go take patrol stations to the North, Northeast and Northwest of Luzon, in order to watch for the possible passage of Japanese planes."

"Excellent! We can't do less in view of the Navy's celerity, gentlemen. Have our B-10 and B-18 bombers take off as quickly as possible, without bombs but with maximum fuel, to take their predetermined patrol stations. I don't want the Japanese to be able to fly to Manila without being detected. Have also our B-17 heavy bombers ready to take off for their preplanned mission against Formosa. All our pilots and

aircrews are to stand by their planes, ready to take off in case of an attack, until further notice. I don't want a single one of our planes destroyed on the ground if the Japanese attack here."

MacArthur's orders triggered a storm of activity in the operations center, with Ingrid jumping from one telephone line to another.

After a quick breakfast at six, Ingrid returned to her post and waited for new developments. The full headquarters staff was now in place, while Captain Foster was gone, to Ingrid's relief, having returned to his normal logistics desk. Brigadier General Marshall, the command's operations officer, was now in charge of the center. Just before seven o'clock, a signals officer handed a message to MacArthur, who read it once in silence before repeating it aloud.

"Gentlemen, this is a coded message sent from the Hawaii headquarters of General Short. Quote, to all Army units in the Pacific: Massive Japanese air attacks occurred against Pearl Harbor and the airfields of Hickam Field, Wheeler Field, Bellows Field, Ewa and Kaneohe, starting at eight o'clock, Hawaii time. The attack was made in two waves and caused major damage. Seven battleships, two aircraft carriers, three cruisers and six other ships were either sunk or gravely damaged. Over one hundred planes were destroyed on the ground. The losses in personnel are estimated at over 2,000 men killed or missing. The possibility of further enemy attacks against Hawaii remains. All Army units are to go immediately to maximum alert and to consider themselves at war with Japan, end of quote."

MacArthur then looked around him, a hard expression on his face.

"Gentlemen, Japan has attacked an American territory and has killed American servicemen. According to the information brought from the future by Nancy Laplante, we can now expect the Japanese to attack the Philippines by air today. Our job, in cooperation with the Asiatic Fleet, will be to repel those attacks and to inflict as many losses as we can on the enemy. I also have the firm intention to go to the offensive, right now! Be watchful and give your maximum from now on."

As the officers and enlisted men looked at each other, MacArthur walked to Ingrid's table and grabbed the field telephone connected to the headquarters of his air force in Nielson Field.

"This is General MacArthur. Get me Major General Brereton at once... General Brereton, this is MacArthur. Hawaii just confirmed by coded message the Japanese

attack on Pearl Harbor. The losses there are unfortunately severe. Japanese planes are also probably on their way or about to be on their way to strike the Philippines. Launch immediately your B-17 bombers on their preplanned attack against Formosa. Also, have all your fighters ready to take off on five-minute notice. Once your B-17s will be back, rearm them and send them back for a second raid. How is the reassembling of the P-40 fighters which arrived by sea early this month proceeding?... I see! Do your best to speed that up and hit Formosa hard for me.”

MacArthur then hung up, visibly unhappy. Brigadier General Marshall went to see him, worried.

“Something is wrong, General?”

“Yes! Of the 81 new P-40 fighters we received early this month in disassembled state, only eleven have been reassembled to date, thanks to a lack of technicians and of specialized tools. Worse, the majority of the pilots for these P-40s are still stateside. Brereton thus has only 42 P-40 fighters ready to fly and 37 pilots qualified to fly them. Damn! We need those P-40s! Our old P-26s and our P-35s are not up to face Japanese ZERO fighters.”

“We could transfer some pilots from P-35 and P-26 onto P-40s, General.” suggested Marshall, making MacArthur think for a moment.

“That’s not a bad idea, Dick. However, the P-40 has the reputation of being a tricky plane to fly. Look at the accident rate on P-40s that our pilots here suffered. And that would in turn leave some P-26s and P-35s without pilots. Even though those two types of fighters are obsolescent, they can still be useful against Japanese bombers. We simply need more fighter pilots. Alright, Dick! Call Brereton and tell him to start transferring P-35 and P-26 pilots on P-40s as more P-40s are reassembled. Tell him to try giving at least a couple hours of flying instruction on P-40 to the transferred pilots but tell him to do it quickly. Also, I want the P-40s still in crates to be immediately dispersed away from our main airfields. I don’t want those planes to be destroyed on the ground while still disassembled.”

“Understood, General.”

Ingrid then grabbed her courage with both hands and got up, to then talk to MacArthur in a low voice.

“General, I know that what I will request is completely irregular, but I have both a monoplane and a twin-engine plane flying license, with a total of 95 hours of flying. While I am not qualified as a fighter pilot, I frequented for months the greatest air aces of

the Luftwaffe in France, who taught me their tactics. I would thus like to volunteer to pilot any P-26 or P-35 which would become available.”

As MacArthur eyed her sharply, Brigadier General Marshall answered her in a categorical tone.

“That’s out of the question, Misses Dows. First, you are a civilian, apart from being a woman. Second, you already have a job to do here.”

“General,” replied Ingrid politely but firmly, “the pilots of the American Volunteers Group in China, who are flying on P-40 against the Japanese, are also considered as civilians and as mercenaries. The Filipino Army Air Corps, which possesses P-26A fighters, could always hire me as a mercenary, something which would short-circuit all the regulations of the American Army, I believe.”

As Marshall looked at her with big eyes, MacArthur burst out laughing.

“Dick, I believe that her argument would hold. If President Quezon decided to hire her as a mercenary fighter pilot and gave her a P-26, there is nothing that I could do then, except applaud Misses Dows’ sense of duty.”

“But a woman fighter pilot? That’s unthinkable, General!”

“That is actually a reality, General.” replied Ingrid. “The R.A.F. has been using women as combat pilots for over six months now, while the Soviets employ women as bomber or fighter pilots in three regiments.”

MacArthur then eyed Ingrid with a mix of admiration and pride.

“Madam Dows, I admire your combative spirit and your willingness to fight for the United States. Your husband can be proud of you. I will keep your proposition in mind but, for the moment, you are more useful to me here.”

“General, this raises a question about my present post. I am officially a civilian employee of the Army and my contract says that I was hired to work from Friday to Tuesday, on the night shift. I can’t in all conscience leave my post here at noon simply because my contract says so.”

“Are you ready to contribute voluntarily supplementary time, Madam Dows?”

“All the time you want, General.”

“Excellent! Stay at your post until four today, then come back at six o’clock tomorrow morning. I will have your pay adjusted to reflect this.”

MacArthur then walked away, leaving Ingrid alone with Marshall. The latter eyed Ingrid with contempt.

“Don’t push your luck too far, Misses Dows. If it would depend only on me, you would stay at home, like all good American housewives.”

Ingrid did not reply to that, hiding the best she could her anger and disdain for this old misogynistic fossil.

09:05 (Manila Time)

Operations center, USAFFE HQ

Manila

Douglas MacArthur, returning to the operations center after conferring with a group of senior officers in his office, saw that new symbols had been added on the wall map of the Pacific. Walking to the map, he saw that, according to the symbols, the Japanese had apparently attacked this morning Hong Kong, Thailand and Malaya, using both ground troops and air attacks. The island of Wake, in the middle of the Pacific, had also been attacked. MacArthur nodded at these developments, which conformed with the information from the future given by Nancy Laplante: it further convinced him that his changes to his operational plans following the bringing of that information from London had been well justified. Calling Brigadier General Marshall to his side, he pointed to him the new symbols.

“When did we receive those reports on Hong Kong, Thailand and Malaya, Dick? I didn’t see them.”

“Uh, we didn’t exactly receive reports on these places, General.” replied Marshall in apparent embarrassment. “Misses Dows took on her to call via the Transpacific submarine telephone cable the British in Hong Kong and Singapore, this without any prior authorization from me. As for Wake, we received a situation report from the island garrison only a few minutes ago. They were attacked by a Japanese amphibious force but were able to keep it at bay and to inflict serious casualties to it.”

Something in Marshall’s tone made MacArthur glance at him.

“And you think that she acted incorrectly by calling the British?”

“Yes, General! She completely bypassed the chain of command and contacted foreign officials without proper authorization. I thus sent her back to her home.”

MacArthur suddenly pivoted on his heels on hearing those last words, anger flaring in him.

"Did our intelligence department or our signals office warn us of those Japanese attacks on Hong Kong and Malaya before she made her calls?"

"I haven't received official reports yet on this, General, but..."

MacArthur then interrupted him, furious.

"Somebody used her initiative and intelligence to obtain vital strategic information on the situation around the Philippines and your reaction was to send her home? If she was one of my staff officers I would promote her on the spot for that initiative. What the hell were you thinking? That following regulations to the letter is more important than winning this war?"

MacArthur then turned towards the young lieutenant who was sitting at the table previously occupied by Ingrid, barking an order that all the men in the operations center heard.

"LIEUTENANT, CALL IMMEDIATELY MISSES DOWS AT HER HOME AND TELL HER TO COME BACK HERE AT THE DOUBLE!"

Returning his attention on Marshall, MacArthur pointed an index at him.

"General, from now on, I want to see initiative and common sense used in this operations center. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, General." stuttered Marshall, reddening from the barely disguised blame dished to him by MacArthur. The latter then went to the big tactical map table of the Philippines and examined the wooden symbols on it before looking at his intelligence officer, Colonel Charles Willoughby.

"No signs yet of the Japanese?"

"Not yet, General. Their planes should however be spotted soon by our bombers or by the Navy's PBYs, if they are on their way, of course."

"And our B-17 bombers?"

Willoughby pointed at a blue plaque positioned near the island of Formosa, which housed numerous Japanese bases.

"They should arrive over Formosa in about a half hour, General."

"At about the same time the Japanese should arrive here." said MacArthur to himself, thoughtful. Before the arrival of Major Dows and his priceless package of information from Nancy Laplante, he had planned to safeguard his precious heavy bombers by evacuating them to Mindanao, out of reach of the Japanese. However, the detailed reading of Laplante's info had convinced him that many of his standing operational plans had been deeply flawed. The mention in that info of the distorting

influence of Philippines' President Quezon on his strategy, influence which supposedly resulted in some disastrous decisions on his part, had embarrassed him into discreetly revising his command relationship with Quezon, making MacArthur cut the local political factor out of his strategic and tactical planning. As a result, he would not wait anymore for the Japanese to strike first before reacting, something he originally wanted to do at Quezon's behest, who was still hoping not to involve the Philippines in the coming war if it could be avoided. Stockpiled reserves of food had as a further result been moved from local Filipino warehouses and then centralized in Bataan and Corregidor, against the wishes of President Quezon. MacArthur had also given in to the recommendations of his aviation commander, Lewis Brereton, and reestablished the plans for a counter-attack on Formosa by his B-17 heavy bombers. At least, his bombers could not be destroyed on the ground now, an added plus to the benefit of striking back at the enemy.

Eight minutes later, the lieutenant sitting at the telephones table took a call, then shouted towards MacArthur.

"GENERAL, ONE OF OUR PATROL BOMBERS JUST SPOTTED A FORMATION OF ABOUT 120 PLANES APPROACHING, SIXTY MILES NORTHWEST OF LINGAYEN. THEY ARE FLYING AT 20,000 FEET AT A SPEED OF ABOUT 170 MILES PER HOUR AND ARE HEADING FOR CLARK FIELD. OUR FIGHTERS HAVE RECEIVED THE ORDER TO TAKE OFF AND INTERCEPT THEM."

"PUT HIS INFO ON THE MAP AT ONCE!" Ordered MacArthur. "LIEUTENANT, ALERT BY PHONE THE 60TH ARTILLERY REGIMENT AND THE DEFENSES OF THE MANILA BAY AND SUBIC BAY, THEN ADVISE THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE ASIATIC FLEET. GENERAL MARSHALL, ACTIVATE THE AIR RAID SIRENS ACROSS MANILA!"

Less than five minutes later, the lieutenant got another call.

"GENERAL, OUR BOMBER REPORTS A SECOND GROUP OF A HUNDRED PLANES FOLLOWING THE FIRST ONE. THE PLANES ARE CONFIRMED AS A MIX OF 'ANN', 'NELL' AND 'BETTY' TYPE BOMBERS, ESCORTED BY 'NATE' AND 'ZERO' TYPE FIGHTERS."

MacArthur frowned on hearing that.

"Damn! Over 200 enemy planes for our ninety fighters to face. That battle will be a hot one."

The news became even worse two minutes later.

“GENERAL, A THIRD GROUP OF PLANES WAS SPOTTED BY A NAVY PBY AMPHIBIAN. ABOUT EIGHTY ‘VAL’ AND ‘KATE’ BOMBERS, ESCORTED BY FORTY ‘ZERO’ FIGHTERS, ARE PRESENTLY 150 MILES NORTHEAST OF MANILA, HEADING FOR US.”

As he observed the personnel of the operations center scramble to update the tactical map, MacArthur whispered to himself.

“May God help our pilots. They will need it.”

09:34 (Manila Time)

Lead Boeing B-17D FLYING FORTRESS

14th Bombardment Squadron (Heavy)

Northeast coast of Formosa (Taiwan)

Major Randolph Masters was crossing the coast of Formosa, leading the seventeen bombers of his squadron, when his radio operator stuck his head between his seat and that of his copilot, Lieutenant Peter Stuart.

“Major, Nielson Field just advised us that close to 300 Japanese planes are presently attacking Manila and our airfields around it. Our orders are to continue with our mission and to inflict maximum damage to the enemy before returning to Clark Field to rearm and refuel for a second strike.”

“THREE HUNDRED PLANES?! Damn! We may not have an airfield left to return to. Too bad: let’s concentrate now on our objective and make those Japs pay.”

Flying in combat formation at an altitude of 7,500 meters and a speed of 450 kilometers per hour, the four-engine bombers approached rapidly their primary objective, a Japanese military airfield near Taipei. Masters, seeing no Japanese fighters in the sky nor any reaction from air defense guns, then took a sudden decision and spoke in his radio microphone.

“To all Blue Boy call signs, this is Blue Boy One. The enemy doesn’t seem to be reacting to us. We will thus go down now to an altitude of 10,000 feet, in order to add to our bombing precision. Follow me and have all your gunners ready for action.”

As he put his heavy bomber in a dive, Masters thanked the fact that most of the Japanese fighters based in Formosa must now be busy over the Philippines, something

that was now opening the way to the objective for him. His navigator/bombardier soon contacted him as he recovered from his dive at 10,000 feet.

"Major, I have the objective in sight. Make a heading correction of five degrees to the left."

"Understood, Jacob."

Making sure that his other bombers were following him as he veered slightly to the left, Masters looked nervously around the sky, searching for enemy fighters. To his relief, he saw nothing but his own bombers.

"Pilot to bombardier: I am now giving you steering control for the final bombing approach."

"Understood, Major. I now see clearly the objective in my sight. There are about fifty planes lined up along the taxiway, apparently ready to take off."

"That must be the Japanese second attack wave for the Philippines," said Masters, suddenly excited. "Cut across at an angle through those planes. Blast them to bits, Jacob!"

"Understood, Major. Effecting a correction now. Bomb release in two minutes." Those two minutes felt like an eternity for Masters. Japanese air defense guns belatedly opened a rather sparse fire against him as his squadron was about to overfly the airfield. The triumphal scream of his bombardier, along with the jump made by his plane as it suddenly was unloaded of its payload, then told him that his three tons of bombs were on their way.

"BOMBS AWAY!"

Looking anxiously downwards while turning his bomber around, Masters observed the fall of the 204 500-pound bombs released by his squadron. He screamed with joy on seeing the carpet of explosions on the ground which hit the files of Japanese bombers, followed by giant fireballs from a fuel depot hit by his bombs.

"YES! TAKE THAT FOR PEARL HARBOR, MISTERS JAPS! Winslow, contact Nielson Field and tell them that we successfully hit our objective and are on our way back."

10:03 (Manila Time)

Operations center, USAFFE HQ

Manila, Philippines

Ingrid, who had returned to the operations center barely ten minutes earlier, put down the receiver of the field telephone linking her with Nielson Field and got up, to then walk quickly to the big wall map of the Pacific. Many officers and enlisted men followed her with their eyes, fixing on the pistol held in a modern combat holster on her right upper leg. Now that the war was officially on, Ingrid had decided to openly wear her **GLOCK 17L** 9mm pistol, which she had inherited from Nancy, taking it out of her backpack and strapping it to her leg. With her pistol mounting both a holographic sight and a laser dot sight on its frame and also sporting an elongated, 20-round magazine, her weapon made for a most futuristic-looking weapon indeed. The detonations of bombs exploding in the distance, along with the heavy firing from American air defense guns around Manila, told clearly to anyone that the battle for the Philippines was now on. Taking a blue grease pencil, she drew a symbol over Formosa before going to see General MacArthur, who was observing the action from beside the tactical map table.



“General, our B-17 bombers have just hit successfully their objective in Formosa and are on their way back.”

“Excellent!” said MacArthur, happy. “In maybe four hours, if all goes well, we will be able to make another raid on Formosa.”

“General, may I make a couple of comments based on our observations to date?”

MacArthur looked at her with curiosity, while his staff officers around him appeared scandalized at seeing a woman give her opinion on a military situation to a general.

“Go ahead, madam.”

“First, the composition of the third group of enemy planes which was detected suggests that it was launched from two aircraft carriers situated to the Northeast of Luzon. Second, while the Japanese were caught by surprise by our raid on Formosa, they will not make the same mistake twice and will probably keep from now on a heavy fighter cover over Formosa. However, striking another alternate target away from Formosa may allow us to keep the element of surprise.”

"And what alternate target are you suggesting, Misses Dows?" asked MacArthur, now truly interested to hear what she would propose. The next four words from Ingrid then struck like a bomb around her.

"Nagasaki, in Japan, General."

All the officers around looked at her as if she was crazy. Even MacArthur was left stunned. She thus went on quickly before someone could shut her up.

"Nagasaki is within range of our B-17s, if carrying a reduced bomb load, General. Furthermore, the position of Nagasaki along the southwestern coast of Kyushu makes it relatively easy to spot in terms of air navigation. The material damage from a bombing raid would probably be minimal, but the psychological impact, both in the United States and Japan, would be immense. A successful bombing raid on Japanese home soil, so early in the war, would shake hard the enemy morale, while reinforcing the morale of our own public. It would also reflect well on your command and may even convince Washington to send you reinforcements. From a strategic point of view, the Japanese would be so shocked by that raid that they could very well decide to delay their planned invasion of Burma and of the Dutch East Indies, in order to redirect more forces against the Philippines."

"You want to attract more Japanese forces against the Philippines?" exclaimed in a horrified tone Brigadier General Marshall. "Are you crazy?" MacArthur then raised his hand swiftly, cutting off Marshall.

"Let her finish! I want to hear what she has to say."

"Thank you, General." said Ingrid, secretly relieved to see that she was not going to be simply kicked out of the operations center. She then looked gravely at Marshall.

"General Marshall, I am fully conscious that we will probably lose the Philippines in the months to come, save for a miracle. The Philippines are right now the only base from which we can directly strike Japan with our B-17s. Thus, we must exploit that asset to the maximum before losing it, in order to provide precious breathing time to our allies around the Pacific. Yes, we will suffer from a stronger Japanese pressure, but each week of resistance on our part will give more time to our other forces in the Pacific to prepare their defenses. In view of the strategic importance of our B-17 bombers and of the submarines and ships of the Asiatic Fleet, we should thus concentrate our defenses around our airfields and the Navy base at Cavite. If we are to lose this battle eventually, which is probable, then let's extract the most benefits possible out of that for the United States and our allies in the Pacific."

The reaction of MacArthur was to applaud her briefly before looking at his staff officers. Ingrid's deep sense of strategy and her ability to accept the bitter price of war had truly impressed him, while the horrified looks on many of his officers' faces had disappointed him.

"Gentlemen, I believe that you just have been served a lesson in grand strategy, a lesson I fully concur with. We must consider the wider strategic implications of this battle and get out the most we can from a bad situation. Once this air battle is over, I will confer with General Brereton and modify our air strategy to include strikes on Japan. Misses Dows, please follow me to my office."

"Yes, General!" could only say Ingrid. A major whispered to a colonel as she left the operations center behind MacArthur.

"This girl must be in his bed for him to listen to her like this."

MacArthur led Ingrid to his large office and closed the door behind them before going to sit behind his work desk, fixing the teenager standing in front of him.

"Misses Dows, you told me before that Nancy Laplante educated you and that you often discussed air tactics with many Luftwaffe air aces, but what I just heard was far beyond what I could have expected from a teenage girl, however intelligent she may be. Where did you get this sense of military strategy?"

Ingrid took a deep breath before answering. She now had little choice but to reveal her secret if she didn't want to lose her credibility with him.

"From history, General. In truth, I possess an experience of life spread over 7,000 years. Earlier this year, while still interned in the Tower of London, I started one night to remember my past incarnations, the same night in fact that Nancy Laplante also started remembering her own past incarnations. I know that this sounds totally preposterous, General, but I can prove it easily by speaking in a number of ancient languages I used in previous lives. I still am not sure why me and Nancy got that gift and from whom, but I believe that there must be a higher purpose to all this. As for my sense of strategy, I once yielded the might of an empire, while in another life I and 300 other Spartans made the ultimate sacrifice at the battle of Thermopylae, in order to save the rest of Greece from the Persians. I also own the ability to speak Tagalog and Cebuano to a previous life as a Filipina woman."

She then spoke a few phrases in Latin, Greek and Hebrew for good measure, to help convince MacArthur that she was not simply delusional. The latter, who knew notions of Latin and Greek, sat back in his chair, overwhelmed.

“My God! This is truly incredible, yet I would tend to believe you right now.”

“Thank you, General. Could I ask you to keep this strictly to yourself, though? Only my husband knows about my special talents.”

“I will be discreet, Misses Dows. I however sense that you want something else. What is it?”

“Only to serve my country of adoption to the best of my abilities, General. I know that I am presently most useful to you in the operations center, but officers and NCOs could eventually take my place once properly trained. You however are facing a critical shortage in fighter pilots and, once you are out of fighters, the Japanese will then be able to bombard your troops and the Philippines at will. You once said that President Quezon could legally hire me as a mercenary fighter pilot. Well, General, that is what I wish from the bottom of my heart. I know that I may not survive long as a fighter pilot, but at least I will have done my utmost to help defend my husband and the Philippines, once my country of birth. Every Japanese bomber I could shoot down would be one bomber less left to threaten my husband.”

MacArthur was silent for a long moment while starring at her, then spoke up in a sober voice.

“Very well, Ingrid. I will see what I can do about your request and will speak to President Quezon on your behalf. You may now return to your post.”

“Thank you very much, General.” replied Ingrid, coming to attention and saluting him before turning around and leaving the office. MacArthur thought over what he had just heard, then finally grabbed his telephone receiver and called the headquarters’ switchboard operator.

“This is General MacArthur. I would like to be connected with President Quezon, at the Malacanang Palace.”

19:06 (Manila time)

Main briefing room, Asiatic Fleet headquarters

Manila, Philippines

The nearly 200 Navy and Marine Corps officers packing the fleet main briefing room got up from their chairs as one when Admiral Hart entered the large room with his main staff officers.

“Please sit, gentlemen!” said Hart while walking at a quick pace to the first row of chairs, which had been reserved for him and his aides. His fleet intelligence officer, standing behind a lectern set besides a large map of the Pacific pinned to a cork board, started his briefing on a nod from Hart.

“Admiral, gentlemen, the United States is now officially at war with Japan. President Roosevelt made the announcement on statewide radio today after learning of the Japanese surprise attacks against us and the rest of our Pacific Fleet. I am pained to confirm to you that, for reasons still unknown here, the Japanese managed to take our ships and aircraft in and around Pearl Harbor by complete surprise and were able to inflict catastrophic damage to our fleet. The battleships ARIZONA, WEST VIRGINIA, OKLAHOMA, UTAH, TENNESSEE, PENNSYLVANIA and NEVADA were either sunk or badly damaged, along with the cruisers HELENA, RALEIGH and DETROIT and four destroyers. Worst of all, the Japanese were able to catch and sink the carrier LEXINGTON, while the SARATOGA was seriously damaged. Over 110 planes of all types were also destroyed on the ground and the port infrastructure and Navy installations suffered greatly. For all intents and purposes, our Pacific Fleet is now out of combat for weeks, if not months. On the same day, as we were being attacked here, the Japanese also launched assaults against Thailand, Malaya and Hong Kong. As far as I can judge, apart from the earlier than anticipated date for the start of the Japanese invasion of the Pacific, the special intelligence information provided from the files of the late Brigadier Nancy Laplante has proved to be right on the mark.”

“Then why did our fleet in Pearl Harbor let itself be caught so flat-footed?” raged Rear Admiral Francis Rockwell, the commander of the 16th Naval District. “They had access to the same information as we did and we managed pretty well today.”

“Maybe not, sir.” replied meekly the intelligence officer. “Remember that, if not for the providential initiative shown by Major Dows when he brought with him copies of Laplante’s information from his previous post in London, we would have been in the dark about the details of the planned Japanese attacks. It could be that the Fleet Headquarters in Pearl Harbor either did not receive that info or received only parts of it.”

“Gentlemen,” cut in firmly Admiral Hart, “there is no usefulness in pointing fingers around today. We are here to review what is next and what could be done. Captain

Wallace, let's see what we could expect in the near future according to the Laplante files.”

“Yes Admiral!” said Wallace, who then picked up a pointer and used it on the large Pacific map behind him while he spoke. “If the Japanese stick to their original plans, which I believe they will do for at least a while, they will continue their heavy air attacks for the next few days until our airpower is all gone. In two days, on D+2, they will land battalion-sized forces in the morning in two points in Northern Luzon: Vigan and Aparri. Another secondary landing will follow two days later, on D+4, at Legaspi on the southern tip of Luzon. On D+14, the Japanese will land their 48th Division, reinforced with two regiments of light tanks, on the beaches between Bauang and Agoon in the Lingayen Gulf. On D+16, they should land southeast of Manila, in Lamon Bay, with their 16th Division. According to the Laplante files, the Japanese will be outnumbered by us but will benefit from superior training and equipment. Before any of you jump to his feet to protest that no Jap soldier can outfight our men, I would urge you to think with a cool head on this. Nancy Laplante had the advantage of historical hindsight concerning this whole war and her information has proved countless times to be truly invaluable. Just consider the fact that she warned our navy months before her death about grave defects in our torpedoes. At the time, a number of our admirals treated that information as pure bunk, claiming that nothing was wrong with our torpedoes. Well, tests were then done on our torpedoes, just in case she could be right. Our weapons turned out to be actually nearly useless, with the defects found in them the exact same ones predicted by Nancy Laplante. That episode is by the way the reason why all our torpedoes were exchanged for improved models two months ago. So, I would advise you all to treat that information very seriously while formulating your next plans. My department will be more than happy to provide any additional info you may require in the future.”

Admiral Hart then got up from his seat and faced the spectators with a stern expression.

“Captain Wallace has my complete support on this subject, gentlemen. I intend to plan our defense based on that information and I expect all of you to consider our opponents as well-trained professionals with fanatical resolve and good quality equipment. We will thus in turn have to prove ourselves as professional and stouthearted as the Japanese if we want to win. Now, we do have a few important cards in our hands, starting with our 29 submarines. If we use our cards well, we will have a decent chance in this fight. The Fleet Operations Officer will now review our battle plans for your benefit...”

Much later, a tired and depressed Ken Dows returned home, to find Ingrid already in bed. Taking a quick shower, he then quietly slipped under the bed sheets, hoping not to wake her up. The teenager however had her eyes open when he got in bed, looking at him with apprehension.

“Ken, be frank with me: how bad did it go around the Pacific?”

“Bad enough, honey. Our fleet was basically destroyed in Pearl Harbor, either because they didn’t believe Nancy’s info or because they didn’t use it properly. We are now by ourselves in the Philippines.”

Ingrid was silent for long seconds, then kissed Ken.

“Forget your worries for the moment, Ken, and let’s not lose hope. With Nancy’s info we still have a fighting chance. That’s all we need. Come, hold me: I’m a bit cold tonight.”

Turning around on her side, Ingrid then snuggled up to Ken, spoon-fashion, then took his right hand and put it over her right breast. The warmth of her body soon made Ken relax and forget the day they had just gone through.

05:42 (Manila time)

Wednesday, October 22, 1941 ‘C’

SARGO Class American submarine USS SWORDFISH

32 nautical miles north of the coast, off Aparri, Philippines

The captain of the USS SWORDFISH grinned with anticipated pleasure as he lined up the Japanese troopship in the crosshairs of his periscope. Following that ship was a second troopship, about 600 yards behind. The voice of the weapons officer then sounded around the control room of the fleet submarine.

“All tubes loaded and ready, Captain. Fire solution ready on first target.”

“Then fire all forward tubes in quick succession, Mister Lumley.”

“Aye sir! Firing tubes one through four.”

“Firing tubes one through four, sir!” replied the torpedo chief as the noise of compressed air and a shudder marked the launch of the first of the four forward torpedoes. The three other weapons followed quickly one by one. Not waiting for the results of his first shoot, the captain then turned his periscope towards the second troopship.

“Turn hard port 180 degrees! Prepare aft torpedo tubes!”

“Turning hard port 180 degrees, sir!”

“All four aft torpedo tubes ready, sir!”

“Fire solution team...Mark! Heading, 176! Second heading...Mark! Heading, 171!”

“Fire solution ready, sir.”

“Then match bearings and shoot all four stern tubes.”

“Firing tubes 5 through 8 now, sir!”

The submarine shuddered again as the four heavy torpedoes left their launch tubes. Fifteen seconds later, the noise of four underwater explosions could be heard through the hull, making the American sailors shout in triumph: their four first torpedoes had connected with the first target. The captain was able to see in his periscope four huge geysers erupt along the side of the first troopship. That ship started to list heavily nearly immediately. Turning his periscope towards the second troopship, he waited with growing excitement for his other torpedoes to hit. To his slight disappointment, only two torpedoes hit that troopship. They were however enough to make the Japanese ship start sinking by the stern. About two miles away, the captain of the USS SWORDFISH could see a Japanese destroyer approaching at full speed towards him.

“Japanese destroyer approaching from port, distance 3,000 yards. Engines full ahead! Keep periscope depth!”

Normally, he would have dived as deep as he could while turning, to avoid the depth charges the Japanese destroyer was certainly intending to throw at him. However, the fantastically detailed intelligence which the Asiatic Fleet possessed had allowed to preposition for an ambush no less than six submarines. The Japanese were about to learn about the German ‘wolf pack’ tactic. Doing his best to ignore the incoming destroyer, the captain looked around the horizon with his periscope, trying to find another nearby target. He nearly jumped with joy when three torpedoes from another submarine hit the last troopship, breaking it in half.

“The last troopship has been hit. We will thus go for the heavy cruiser. Mister Lumley, what is the status of our forward tubes?”

“Tubes one and two are loaded and ready, Captain. Tubes three and four will be ready in one minute.”

“Very well! Turn to port, heading 085! Fire solution team...top! Heading 042, distance 2,600 yards... Second bearing...top! Heading 045, distance 2,500 yards.

"Fire solution ready, Captain."

"Fire tubes one and two!"

There was again the noise of compressed air as two torpedoes left their launch tubes.

"Tubes one and two fired, Captain! Torpedoes on the way."

The underwater noise of three explosions then made the captain turn his periscope to port, in time to see the destroyer coming at him stagger under the impact of three torpedoes.

"YES! The SCULPIN has just plugged the destroyer which was after us. Let's concentrate on that cruiser, gentlemen. Mister Lumley, are tubes three and four ready?"

"One moment, Captain... Tubes three and four now confirmed ready."

The captain then renewed his firing solution on the heavy cruiser before shooting his two last forward tubes. Out of four torpedoes, two hit the cruiser which was frantically zigzagging in order to avoid torpedoes coming from multiple directions. Four more torpedoes from another submarine then hit as well, dooming the cruiser. In total, the six American submarines of the pack off Aparri shot 37 torpedoes, sinking the whole Japanese force heading for the coast.

Nearly at the same time, another pack of six American submarines ambushed and sank with similar success the Japanese troop convoy heading towards Vigan, on the Northwest coast of Luzon. One heavy cruiser, one light cruiser, three destroyers and four transport ships went to the bottom, victims of American torpedoes.

One hour later, an even bigger success was achieved near the Palau Islands, 900 kilometers to the East of the Philippines. A pack of eight American submarines ambushed a large Japanese combat flotilla as it barely started its way towards Legaspi, on the southern tip of Luzon. Taken completely by surprise as they were still forming up their ships after leaving their harbor, the Japanese lost in less than thirty minutes the light aircraft carriers ZUIHO and HOSHO, the heavy cruisers MIKUMA and KUMANO, one destroyer, one tanker ship and five transport ships crammed with troops. The heavy cruiser MOGAMI, flagship of Vice-Admiral Kurita, absorbed the impact of four torpedoes but managed to flee under the protection of the five surviving destroyers. The MOGAMI was however severely damaged and was now condemned to long repairs in Japan. The triumphant pack of American submarines, now nearly out of torpedoes, then retired in good order towards the Philippines to rearm and then take watch positions. Air patrols

of long-range amphibians were already tasked to support them by signaling in advance the approach of any new Japanese force.

The fourth pack, counting six submarines and posted off the port of Naha, on Okinawa Island, to the Northeast of the Philippines, didn't see action that day as they waited for the Japanese convoy due to leave harbor the next day. The B-17 heavy bombers of Major Masters however did attack that day, arriving just after Sunrise from the East at very low altitude. The Japanese coastal observers, blinded by the rising Sun, were too late in giving the alert as the B-17s jumped over the coastline and rushed towards the port of Naha, imitating tactics introduced to the British by Nancy Laplante. The American bombers attacked in fact from such a low altitude that their gunners were able to shoot to their content at anything which appeared to be a worthwhile target. That same low altitude also ensured enhanced accuracy for their 1000-pound bombs. Twenty planes were destroyed on the ground at Naha Airfield by machinegun fire, while the troopships loading up combat supplies and troops in the harbor were all either sunk or heavily damaged. The damage caused by the B-17 was then amplified in a spectacular manner by the explosion of an ammunition ship docked in Naha Harbor, after it was put on fire by a bomb. The titanic explosion and fireball that ensued was clearly seen by the waiting American submarines off Okinawa, which then passed that information by radio to the headquarters of the Asiatic Fleet in Manila.

22:38 (Washington Time) / 11:38 (Manila Time)

Tuesday, October 21, 1941 'C' (Washington) / October 22 (Manila)

The Oval Office, the White House

Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

President Roosevelt, having lived through two long and difficult days, was about to leave the Oval Office to go to bed when his military chief of staff, Admiral Leahy, knocked and entered, a happy grin on his face.

"Mister President, we have just received some very good news from the Philippines. Our submarines and our B-17 bombers based there have caused very heavy casualties to Japanese ships preparing to invade the Philippines. This combined message from General MacArthur and Admiral Hart arrived less than one hour ago."

Taking the offered message, Roosevelt read it carefully while sitting in his wheelchair, a growing smile coming to his face.

“Two light carriers, five cruisers, eight destroyers and twelve troopships sunk, plus one cruiser damaged? This is fantastic!”

He then read the paragraph about the B-17 attack against Naha and pointed it to Leahy.

“Admiral, I intend to give presidential unit citations to this squadron of B-17 bombers and to the submarines of the Asiatic Fleet. These men did an incredible job.”

“In truth, Mister President, all those fighting now in the Philippines would deserve a citation. Despite being in an impossible situation, our forces in the Philippines are about the only source of good news we had in the last two days.”

Roosevelt nodded his head at that and continued his reading. The paragraph concerning the requests by MacArthur and Hart for reinforcements and extra materiel made him look at Leahy.

“I always thought that MacArthur was a loud mouth, but I believe that his requests for reinforcements are justified, especially after such successes around the Philippines.”

“Well, Mister President, I am afraid that any sea shipping would be both too late and too risky, considering the Japanese blockade around the Philippines. That leaves us with air deliveries only, but we have only a limited number of transport planes with enough range to fly from Hawaii to Manila, and those planes would have a strictly limited transport capacity.”

“Then let’s do a prioritized list of the items deemed most urgent by MacArthur and Hart and let’s establish an air bridge to the Philippines. MacArthur mentions in particular an urgent need for antitank weapons, anti-aircraft guns and shells with proximity fuses, while Admiral Hart wants more torpedoes. As for sending more fighter pilots, that should be easy to do, no?”

“Uh, not really, Mister President. We have lost a lot of fighter pilots during the attack on Pearl Harbor and we have to replace those men as quickly as possible in order to be able to defend Hawaii. Also, the next fighter pilot promotion has not yet completed its training, which will take another few weeks. If I may, despite their recent successes, our units in the Philippines are stuck in a trap and the men we may send there as reinforcements are practically condemned in advance to either death or capture.”

Roosevelt lowered his head, discouraged by these words and saddened at the idea of losing all those men of valor.

"Admiral, losing simple materiel is of no importance to me: only the men count. I want a massive air bridge towards the Philippines to be installed as soon as possible, in order to at least send there the items most urgently required by MacArthur and Hart."

"It will be done, Mister President."

15:46 (Tokyo Time)

Residence of the Prime Minister

Tokyo, Japan

"Please sit down, gentlemen. We have some grave business to discuss," said dryly Hideki Tojo to the admirals and generals assembled in the conference room of his official Prime Minister's residence, which he had occupied for less than three weeks now. Once all seated, Tojo looked around the table and spoke in a sober tone.

"Gentlemen, I will not tell you anything new by telling you that His Majesty is extremely concerned, not to say angry, at the events of the last three days. Not content to cause us heavy losses in ships and planes, the Americans in the Philippines dared strike the sacred soil of Japan itself. These Americans seem in fact to know in advance our every move, probably thanks to that damned Canadian from the future and her information. We thus must change drastically our plans if we want to avoid more nasty surprises."

"But," objected his military advisor, "if they had such good information to start with, then why did the Americans let themselves be caught the way they did in Hawaii?"

"Maybe the ones in Hawaii were idiots who ignored the warnings given to them, while the ones in the Philippines were able to use that information properly," replied Rear Admiral Ugaki, the chief of staff of the Navy. "This tells us as well not to underestimate the Americans in the Philippines. Their submarines and heavy bombers in particular must be considered as important factors in any new plan."

"At the rate things are going, are the forces presently designated for the taking of the Philippines sufficient?" asked Tojo. Admiral Ugaki, as well as Lieutenant General Homma, who commanded the invasion force for the Philippines, shook their heads, with Homma speaking first.

"I lost already over one full regiment of infantry, as well as the majority of the heavy equipment of the 16th Division, which was being loaded on ships in Okinawa when the American bombers hit there. With sixteen transport ships now gone, I don't even

have enough place left on the remaining ships to transport in one trip my 48th Division to the Philippines. I also lost a lot of planes. My aviators are unanimous in saying that the American anti-aircraft guns around Manila are extremely accurate and deadly.”

“My own aviators report the same thing about the American anti-aircraft guns.” said Ugaki. “As for my losses in ships, they are nothing less than catastrophic.”

“What about the American fighters? How dangerous are they?”

“Their pilots are brave but lack experience, while their planes are outclassed by our own fighters. They managed to destroy some of our bombers but invariably lose when facing our fighters. At the rhythm of their present losses, the American fighter planes will not be a decisive factor anymore in two weeks or less.”

“Very well. It now seems evident to me that our forces around the Philippines must be seriously reinforced if we want to respect our operational calendar and be able to seize the Dutch East Indies and its precious oilfields and refineries.”

“But with what, General Tojo?” objected Marshal Sugiyama. “All our troops are already either engaged in combat or committed to various operations.”

“My opinion would be, in view of the importance of taking the Philippines and thus deny to the Americans a base for their heavy bombers and submarines, that we should delay our invasion of Burma and assign General Lida’s 15th Army to the Philippines invasion force.”

“And the ships needed to move those troops, where will we find them?” asked Homma. All the other participants then looked at Admiral Ugaki, who spoke after a short hesitation.

“I can reassign some transport ships from our strategic reserve. Admiral Nagumo’s fleet, which is on its way back from its raid on Pearl Harbor, can also be rerouted towards the Philippines. With six aircraft carriers, that force should be able to crush Manila and its airfields under bombs in a few days. Admiral Nagumo will however have to be very careful not to expose his carriers to the American submarines. We cannot afford to lose those ships.”

“That goes without saying.” said Tojo. “Now that we have found extra forces to conquer the Philippines, we will now discuss the changes we need to bring to our plans.”

16:05 (Manila Time)

Thursday, October 23, 1941 ‘C’

USAFFE HQ, Manila, Philippines

Ingrid, her shift completed for the day and having briefed her replacement, was grabbing her backpack to leave the operations center when an American lieutenant came to her.

"Misses Dows, a Filipino Army major is waiting for you at the main entrance."

"Oh? Has he been waiting for long?"

"I don't know, madam. General MacArthur asked me to lead you to him and to make sure that you meet that major. The general also said that he wishes you good luck in your new job."

Ingrid's heart jumped in her chest at those words. Eagerly following the lieutenant, she went to the main entrance of the headquarters building, where a Filipino officer got up from his chair and went to her, presenting his right hand for a shake. Ingrid shook the hand of the man, who was much shorter than her and who then spoke to her in English.

"Misses Dows? I am Major Francisco Bandong, one of the military aides of President Quezon. Could we speak in private?"

"Certainly, Major! Let's go outside for some fresh air."

Leaving the building, Ingrid led Bandong far enough from the sentries so that they could not listen to her, stopping under a palm tree before speaking in Tagalog.

"I believe that we can now speak in privacy, Major."

"You can speak Tagalog, madam?" said Bandong, pleased. "Few Americans can say the same."

"I also speak Cebuano, Major, and know quite well the Filipino culture, especially that of the region of Mindanao."

"Even better. I am told that you have won recently your pilot's license. How many hours of flying do you have, and on what plane type?"

"I have accumulated a total of 95 hours: 52 hours on Fairchild 24; twenty hours on Lockheed 10 ELECTRA and 23 hours on Stearman biplane."

"Hum, not bad at all. You learned to fly at the Far Eastern School of Aviation, I believe?"

"Correct, Major. My instructor was Jack Gavin."

"Gavin?" said Bandong, smiling. "He was also my instructor. Do you have other flying qualifications, like experience in air navigation?"

"I have seven hours of flying on gliders in Germany, plus six weeks of ground classes on map reading, air navigation and basic theory of flight. I realize that I have no

formal training as a fighter pilot, but I must tell you that I once was an auxiliary in the German Luftwaffe. As such, I met and spoke often with some of the greatest German air aces, who were most willing to discuss in detail air combat tactics with me...with a bed nearby, of course.”

Bandong smiled at that.

“A story worthy of the adopted daughter of the famous Nancy Laplante. Misses Dows, your offer to fight to defend the Philippines has sincerely touched President Quezon. The sad truth is that we suffer a cruel shortage of pilots, a shortage that is getting worse every day. We also lost many planes but the losses in pilots are more critical now. I must warn you before going on that your odds for survival as a fighter pilot will be like those of our other pilots, meaning next to nil. Do you still want to become a fighter pilot in the Filipino Air Corps, madam?”

“More than ever.” replied Ingrid without hesitation. Impressed, Bandong stared at her for a moment, then took out of one pocket of his uniform a document, unfolding it and presenting it to Ingrid, along with a pen.

“This is your enrolment contract with the Filipino Air Corps as a fighter pilot, Misses Dows. Read it and sign it if you agree with its terms. I can already tell you that, if you ever want to fly with the American forces in the future, you will have President Quezon’s benediction to do so.”

“And under what legal status will I fly? Am I going to be considered a mercenary, like the American volunteer pilots in China?”

Bandong smiled at that and took out a small box from one pocket. He then gave Ingrid an order on a martial tone.

“Atten...hut!”

Opening the box in his hands, he took out of it a pair of second lieutenant’s rank insignias and fixed them on the collar of Ingrid’s old combat uniform.

“Lieutenant Ingrid Dows, by the authority conferred on me by President Quezon, I now commission you as an officer of the Filipino Air Corps, with the rank of second lieutenant. Now, you may sign your contract on the last page.”

Ingrid did so at once, not believing her luck: her old dream was now becoming reality. Bandong then made her sign a second copy, which he then gave to her, looking at her with a mix of gravity and admiration.

“Thank you for enlisting as a fighter pilot, Lieutenant Dows. I will now drive you to your residence, where you will have the chance to pack your essentials before I bring

you to Batangas, home of the 6th Pursuit Squadron, your new unit. The way things are going, you will probably be flying your first combat mission tomorrow, on a P-26.”

“I will do my best not to disappoint President Quezon, Major.”

“I am certain you will do well, Lieutenant. Let’s go to my car now.”

Bandong’s vehicle, a big Ford sedan of the Filipino Army driven by a soldier, got to Ingrid’s house ten minutes later. To Ingrid’s relief, her residence proved undamaged by the Japanese bombs which had been raining on Manila for two days. She however found her two servants, Julia and Juanita, in the house, along with their husbands and a total of five children. After bowing to Bandong, Julia presented herself to Ingrid with an embarrassed look.

“I am sorry for bringing my family and that of Juanita here without your prior permission, Ingrid. Our district was bombed today and our houses burned down. We barely had the time to save some clothes and other essentials before fleeing to here. Will you forgive us for this, Ingrid?”

Touched, Ingrid hugged her servant and spoke to her softly.

“My poor Julia. You have nothing to be excused for. Me and Ken would have offered you refuge any time. Use all the space you need: me and Ken only need our own bedroom. Once Ken is back, he will sign for you an authorization to live here, so that the military police doesn’t expel you.”

“Thank you! Thank you so much, Ingrid.” said Julia, bordering on tears. Bandong looked on at that scene with silent appreciation. Too many Americans would have simply told the servants to fend for themselves before throwing them out. Ingrid then presented the major to the Filipinos assembled in the lounge.

“Julia, Juanita, I present you Major Francisco Bandong, one of the aides of President Quezon. He just enrolled me in the Filipino Air Corps as a fighter pilot. I will now pack a few things before departing for my new unit in Batangas.”

The servants and their families were left open-mouthed for a moment before Julia resumed their general thought.

“Ingrid, you would have made a marvelous Filipina woman.”

“I now consider myself as much a Filipina as an American woman, Julia.” replied Ingrid, who then emptied her pockets of most of the cash money she had on her, giving it to Julia.

"Go buy as much food as you can for your two families. We don't know how long the markets will stay supplied. Buy in priority nonperishable items, like rice and canned meat and fish. Take your husband and that of Juanita with you, so they can carry the maximum of food possible."

"Thank you again, Ingrid. You are too generous." said Julia before leaving the house with the two Filipino men. Ingrid then turned to face Bandong.

"You can wait in this lounge while I go take a shower and pack up, Major. If you need anything, just ask Juanita."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Take all your time."

As Ingrid disappeared in the direction of her bedroom, Bandong looked around the lounge, noting the picture of Nancy Laplante on the wall and the futuristic portable radio on a small table. Intrigued by the radio, he approached it to examine it. Juanita smiled to him timidly.

"That radio belonged to Nancy Laplante and came from the future. Ingrid also has a collection of disks of music from the future."

"Oh? Would it be possible to listen to some of that music?"

"I don't think that Ingrid would object, Major: she lets me and Julia play discs from time to time. I will play one disk that Ingrid finds most relaxing."

A minute later, the Filipino officer was sitting in a sofa and happily listening to songs by Sarah Brightman. Juanita also served him a glass of fresh fruit juice, which he accepted with a thank you. He was listening to the fourth song of the disc when someone opened the entrance door and a man's voice shouted in English.

"INGRID, I'M HOME!"

Getting up from the sofa, Bandong faced the tall, powerful American officer in combat uniform who had just entered. He stepped forward at once to shake hands with him.

"Major Francisco Bandong, of the office of President Quezon. I met your wife at General MacArthur's headquarters and then drove her here in my staff car."

Ken cautiously eyed Bandong, having a fair idea of why Bandong would have met Ingrid.

"Major Kenneth Dows, Assistant Operations Officer at the Asiatic Fleet headquarters. I suppose that you saw Ingrid concerning her request to become a fighter pilot?"

"Correct, Major Dows. Your wife is now a second lieutenant in the Filipino Air Corps and will be going tonight to join her new unit, the 6th Pursuit Squadron in Batangas."

"On what type of fighter will she fly?"

"On a Boeing P-26A PEASHOOTER, Major. It is however possible that her squadron will soon be reequipped with Curtiss P-40 fighters."

"A P-26..." said slowly Ken, visibly not impressed. Bandong tried to reassure him at once.

"Major, the P-26 may be slow and obsolescent according to present standards, but it is extremely maneuverable and is easy to fly, contrary to the P-40."

Ingrid showed up at that moment in the lounge, wearing a clean combat uniform. She hugged and kissed Ken before looking at Bandong.

"Could you give me a minute with my husband, Major?"

"Certainly, Lieutenant."

Ingrid then went with Ken to their bedroom, returning a few minutes later with a rather sad Ken in tow. To Bandong's surprise, apart from her pistol and a large backpack, she was carrying a Springfield 1903 bolt-action rifle, a common weapon in the Filipino Army.

"I am ready, Major. I will first give my goodbyes to Juanita and I will then follow you."

The goodbyes to the maid were quick but emotional. With tears in her eyes, she planted a last kiss on Ken's lips.

"Be careful and take care of yourself, my beautiful husband."

"The same to you, Ingrid." replied Ken in a strangled voice. Watching her leave, he cried silently as Bandong's car rolled away with Ingrid inside. Once the staff car was out of sight, he faced Juanita.

"Juanita, Ingrid asked me to write for you and Julia signed authorizations for your families to live in this house. I will write and sign these tonight and will advise personally the commander of the American military police unit of Manila about it. Also, the air raid shelter in our backyard is as much for the use of your families as it is for mine and Ingrid's. If the Japanese bomb again Manila, do not hesitate to use it. There are reserves of canned food and bottled water in it, in case of emergency. Use them only if necessary but you are welcomed to them if things really sour up in Manila.

"Ken, you and Ingrid are too good." said Juanita, near tears. Ken shook his head slowly.

"No, Juanita. We simply are thankful for your loyalty and friendship. There is another last thing that Ingrid asked me to do but I will wait for the return of Julia and of your husbands for that."

Julia and the two Filipino men returned to the house half an hour later, loaded down with bags of rice and boxes full of tins of meat and fish, plus some cooking oil and salt. Ken gave them the time to put the foodstuff away in the kitchen's pantry, then repeated to them what he had said to Juanita. He then presented to Julia's husband, a short but solid man of nearly forty years of age, a heavy chrome-plated revolver in its leather belt holster, plus four boxes of bullets.

"Mateo, you were a policeman for many years before you had to leave the police force because of a wound. Ingrid is giving you this Colt PYTHON .357 Magnum caliber revolver, so that you can defend your family and that of Juanita. This gun came from the future and belonged to the famous Nancy Laplante. It can use as well standard .38 Special caliber bullets, which should be easy to find here in Manila."

Mateo took with a smile the big revolver, admiring it before looking at Ken, glee in his eyes.

"This is a most precious gift, Major. I will take good care of it. Thank you for everything that you and Ingrid did for us."

"You can thank us by surviving this war, so that we could see you again." replied Ken, who then took out a 12-gauge pump-action Remington shotgun from a gun cabinet in the lounge, along with one hundred rounds, presenting them to Juanita's husband.

"Felipe, this shotgun is now yours. Mateo can show you later how to use and maintain it. Defend your family with it."

The Filipino started thanking him profusely but was cut short by Ken, who spoke gravely.

"No need to thank me, Felipe. If you and Mateo really want to do something for me, then pray that Ingrid lives through the coming days."

CHAPTER 5 – FEMALE FIGHTER PILOT

18:46 (Manila Time)

Thursday, October 23, 1941 'C'

Batangas military airfield

Ninety kilometers south of Manila

It was dark when Major Bandong's staff car arrived at the Batangas Airfield, near the coast. Two Filipino soldiers on guard duty at the main gate of the airfield examined briefly their papers before saluting and letting them pass. The Ford sedan finally stopped in front of a long, rather decrepit wooden building. Close by, along the tree line, were two **P-26A** fighters covered with camouflage nets. Bandong stepped out with Ingrid, who insisted on carrying herself her kit and rifle, and led her inside the hut, which turned out to be the barrack for the pilots of the 6th Pursuit Squadron. A small young man with brown skin greeted them inside, saluting Bandong, who returned his salute before presenting him to Ingrid in Tagalog.



"Lieutenant Dows, this is **Captain Jesus Antonio Villamor**, Commanding Officer of the 6th Pursuit Squadron. Captain Villamor, this is Second Lieutenant Ingrid Dows, your new pilot."



"Pleased to meet you, Lieutenant Dows." said with a smile Villamor. Ingrid found him at once to be a pleasant man. She also noted with surprise the ribbon of the Distinguished Service Cross, or DSC, the second highest American medal for bravery, on Villamor's combat shirt. The Filipino pilot noticed where she was looking and smiled.

"I got it from General MacArthur this morning, after shooting down a NELL bomber and a ZERO fighter."

"Wow! That's effectively quite an exploit, especially when flying a P-26. In fact, I am quite anxious to discuss air tactics with you and your other pilots."

The pained look that Villamor suddenly showed alarmed Ingrid. Villamor then spoke in a sad voice.

"You didn't know, Lieutenant? You and me are the only pilots left in the squadron. Of the last three I had, two were killed and the last was wounded this afternoon."

Bandong then judged that the time had come for him to go.

"Uh, I see that you will have a lot to discuss together. I will thus let you in the good hands of Captain Villamor, Lieutenant. Good night and good luck in the air."

He didn't add that she would need it, something that would have been in bad taste, frankly, then left after an exchange of salutes.

Now alone face to face, Ingrid and Villamor looked at each other in silence for a moment before the Filipino pointed a camp cot in a corner which was surrounded by a mosquito net.

"If you will put down your things under that cot: it is now yours."

"Right away, Captain."

A few minutes later, as she was finishing to place her things under her cot, Villamor brought her a flotation vest, a leather pilot's helmet with oxygen mask and flight goggles and a parachute.

"These are yours, Lieutenant. Could you describe to me your flying experience and your qualifications as a pilot?"

"Certainly, Captain. Please sit down on that cot next to mine."

Once both were seated, Ingrid described herself, her flying experience with gliders in Germany, her service in the Luftwaffe, her capture and adoption by Nancy Laplante, how she had married Ken and followed him to the Philippines and, finally her piloting course and her hours flown from Nielson Field. The Filipino was particularly impressed when she described to him the air combat tactics she had learned from German aces. He finally shook his head with regret and sighed.

"Too bad that you didn't come sooner, so that my other pilots would have been able to benefit from your tactics, Lieutenant: those tactics could have saved some of them. I have to say in all frankness that the fighter tactics I learned in the United States have proved totally deficient in this war."

“First, Captain,” said softly Ingrid, meaning no malice, “I am not a member of the Luftwaffe anymore. I swore off my German nationality after what the Gestapo did to Nancy. Second, I have something even better than German tactics for you. Nancy taught me the lessons that were to be won the hard way in this war concerning air combat against the Japanese. I don’t know if the American fighter pilots present in the Philippines shared those lessons with your squadron, but I am ready to tell you about the tricks you can use to fight against ZERO fighters, starting with the ‘Thatch Weave’ defensive tactic.”

“The Thatch Weave? I never heard of that tactic, Lieutenant.”

“Well, I can teach it to you tonight, Captain.” said Ingrid, smiling. “In exchange, you can describe in detail to me the P-26 tomorrow morning.”

06:11 (Manila Time)

Friday, October 24, 1941 ‘C’

Batangas Airfield

The first thing that Ingrid did in the morning on waking up was to go look outside of the hut, to inspect visually the airfield. Many things that had not been obvious in the dark last night then became evident. For starters, Batangas was in reality a secondary field meant as an emergency landing strip and its installations were thus minimal but were adequate to support a small group of fighters or medium bombers. There were also the wrecks of many P-26 fighters along the periphery of the airfield, having been either destroyed on the ground or cannibalized for parts. About a hundred technicians and soldiers were visible around the airfield, including many men around three groups of big wooden crates hidden by camouflage nets beside the tree line. Intrigued, Ingrid walked to the nearest group of crates, which was guarded by four Filipino soldiers. Once close, she saw as well three tents erected inside the jungle nearby, from which came audible snoring. The sentries let her approach the crates, which wore inscriptions in English. Those made Ingrid’s eyes open wide.

“Damn, **Curtiss P-40E** fighters! This is a lot better than P-26s.”



Unfortunately, the sentries couldn't tell her what those dismounted fighter planes were doing in Batangas. She thus returned to the pilots' hut, where a soldier brought to her and Villamor a frugal breakfast of porridge and coffee. Jesus then told her that the P-40s had been brought to Batangas to safeguard them from the constant Japanese air attacks hitting Clark Field.

"And who will pilot those P-40s, Jesus?" asked Ingrid. "Even the American fighter squadrons are short of pilots."

"I don't know, Ingrid. Major Bandong told me two days ago that President Quezon wanted to buy some of those P-40s for the Filipino Air Corps but, with the present state of our pilot roster, that is now rather moot."

"Not for us, Jesus! Look at what you did with a P-26. Imagine what you could do with a P-40."

"Ingrid, I will probably be dead in a week or two, like you." said Villamor with brutal frankness. "Also, those P-40s are still not assembled, something that will take at least a few more days still. At least for the next few days we will have to fight with our old P-26s. Come, finish your porridge so that I can describe to you in detail a P-26."

Villamor needed less than one hour to give a detailed tour to Ingrid of one of the two P-26A fighters still operational in Batangas. The Boeing P-26A PEASHOOTER, while obsolescent, was at least a simple and robust plane which was also easy both to pilot and to maintain. It was armed with one medium .30 caliber machinegun and one heavy .50 caliber machinegun, apart from possessing wing pylons for light bombs. That actually was quite comparable to the older models of Japanese fighters in service, like the CLAUDE and the NATE. Its main deficiency was however its maximum speed, which was inferior by about 150 kilometers per hour to that of the Japanese ZERO and was barely equal to that of most Japanese bombers. That made Ingrid think seriously about that.

"Hum, with such a disadvantage in speed, we will not be able to truly chase after the enemy, which will be able to break away from the fight at will. We thus must position ourselves ahead of them and then aim with frontal shots at them if we want to be able to touch them."

"Correct, Ingrid." said Jesus. "The only other time when we will be able to catch the enemy is when a Japanese dive bomber will start a vertical attack dive. Even if we

don't manage to shoot down that dive bomber, we could at least disturb its aim and make it miss its target."

"Which is already a success for us, especially if its target is one of our B-17 bombers parked on the ground. Shooting down Japanese planes is good, but protecting our soldiers and installations on the ground is better."

Jesus smiled to her at those words.

"Ingrid, I wish that the other American fighter pilots in the Philippines be as practical and modest as you. Most of them only think about gaining personal glory by becoming air aces."

Ingrid laughed at that.

"And you think that the Luftwaffe fighter pilots were modest, Jesus? I heard all kinds of stories from them, some amusing, others terrifying."

"And you, Ingrid, what kind of stories will you be telling?"

Ingrid's smile faded, replaced by a sad look.

"I will only describe reality, no more, no less."

One hour later, as Ingrid was reading the pilot's manual of her P-26 while sitting fully equipped in her cockpit, the alert siren of the airfield started blaring. Her heart accelerating, Ingrid stowed away the manual and started her engine with the help of a Filipino mechanic. A sergeant soon ran towards Villamor's plane, where he spoke briefly with Jesus before running to Ingrid's plane, screaming over the noise of her engine.

"A LARGE GROUP OF JAPANESE PLANES WAS SPOTTED COMING FROM THE NORTHEAST AND FLYING LOW BELOW THE CLOUDS. THEY ARE HEADING FOR CLARK FIELD. THE ORDERS ARE TO INTERCEPT THEM, IF POSSIBLE BEFORE THEY GET TO CLARK FIELD. USE FREQUENCY NUMBER THREE."

"UNDERSTOOD!"

Switching her radio to the designated frequency, Ingrid then looked at Jesus, who signaled her to follow her before starting to roll his plane towards the dirt strip. Ingrid pushed the throttle of her engine and released the brakes, making her plane roll forward and following her squadron commander. The Filipino soldiers and ground technicians around the airfield waved their arms with enthusiasm to salute the two pilots as they took off. Ingrid thought then that today was one of the most important days of her life: she was taking off on her first combat mission as a fighter pilot. She then realized that this could also as well be the last day of her life.

The flight to Clark Field took more than thirty minutes, even at the maximum speed of the P-26: 377 kilometers per hour. Ingrid did not speak on the radio, listening instead to the air controller in Nielson Field as he reported the approach of the Japanese planes and was giving interception vectors to other fighter planes. About five minutes before she and Jesus arrived over Clark Field, the excited voices of American pilots which had just attacked the Japanese planes filled the radio frequency. It was however soon apparent that the American fighter pilots had gotten into big trouble, with ZERO fighters swarming over them. A radio message from Nielson Field then got to Jesus and Ingrid as they arrived over Clark Field.

"Papa One, this is Junction Box. Call sign Red made contact but is now submerged. Some Japanese bombers have broken through and are heading to Clark Field. Do your best to block their path, over."

"Understood, Junction Box. Papa One out." answered Jesus before speaking on the radio to Ingrid. "Papa Two, from Papa One, we will try solo frontal passes first, as discussed yesterday. Take the bomber to my left, then follow me."

"Papa Two understood!"

Ingrid then reviewed in her head the things she had to do. Thankfully, the P-26 was the epitome of simplicity in terms of fighter planes. In essence, she only had to take off the safety of her two machineguns. Her sight had no electronic parts, being a simple steel rod supporting a ring with a crosshair. She didn't even have to worry about being able to open her canopy if she ever had to parachute out, as her plane had no canopy, her cockpit being completely opened to the wind except for a small windshield. Her gun safeties off, Ingrid started to look at the sky all around her, trying to spot the Japanese planes. Her extremely sharp vision, which a Luftwaffe doctor had described as phenomenal, then made her see tiny trails of black smoke far ahead.

"Papa One, from Papa Two, I can see smoke trails far ahead at two o'clock. The enemy must be there."

"I see them! Follow me and then line up to my port side, out!"

Ingrid was again the first to see the enemy bombers, which were flying just under the low clouds covering the sky.

"Papa One, from Papa Two. I see the enemy straight ahead at a distance of about four miles. I count at least twelve bombers in two waves."

Ingrid watched with growing excitement the Japanese bombers approach; her index ready on the trigger of her machineguns. She however remembered the cardinal rule told many times to her by Major Adolph Galland: always look around you while in air combat, to avoid surprises. The majority of the fighter pilots killed had been shot down by enemy planes which they never saw coming. Her piercing eyes then spotted three flying dots above and behind the enemy bombers.

"Papa One, from Papa Two. I see three enemy fighters flying above and behind the bombers. I make them as three ZERO fighters escorting eight BETTY bombers."

"I see them now. You really have a good pair of eyes, Papa Two. Line up on one of the bombers for a frontal pass and fire when in range, then follow me in a dive."

"Papa Two understood!"

While keeping a wary eye on the ZERO fighters, Ingrid lined up carefully her sight on one of the Mitsubishi G4M BETTY twin-engine bombers which were approaching rapidly. She had no training in aerial gunnery, but she had lots of practice at rifle shooting, a sharp vision, excellent hand-eye coordination and had also listened to the best air aces of the Luftwaffe as they told her how to calculate a shooting deflection. With her enemy coming straight at her, part of her firing equation was already simplified. She decided to fire a long burst and to correct her aim as needed with the help of her tracer bullets. Opening fire from a distance of 800 meters and keeping her trigger squeezed, Ingrid adjusted her aim as her first tracers passed just under the bomber she was targeting. Her bullets started hitting the target after one second of firing, devastating the front of the bomber. The BETTY, which would earn in the months to come the nickname of 'flying lighter' because of the facility with which it caught fire due to its enormous, unprotected fuel tanks, suddenly turned into an enormous flying torch. Ingrid, concentrated on her firing, nearly forgot to raise the nose of her plane, avoiding only at the last second the doomed bomber.

"I GOT ONE!" she screamed on the radio, elated. She then remembered the Japanese ZERO fighters and look up and around the sky. As she could have predicted, the three enemy fighters were now diving on her and Jesus. Looking to her right, she saw Villamor's plane, which had just shot down a bomber by cutting off one of its wings.

"PAPA ONE, THREE ZERO FIGHTERS ARE DIVING ON US FROM TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH."

"FOLLOW ME IN A DIVE, PAPA TWO."

Ingrid obeyed immediately, imitating Jesus as he dove between the two successive waves of bombers. Jesus then proved that he was a fine air tactician, climbing back nearly at once to be able to shoot at the vulnerable belly of the bombers of the second wave. The three Mitsubishi A6M ZERO fighters rushing in then found their own bombers between them and the two Filipino fighters and were unable to shoot at them. Following Jesus slightly to his left and 150 meters behind him, Ingrid saw him turn his second target into a fireball. As the two P-26 were climbing behind the surviving bombers, the Japanese escort fighters, enraged at having been tricked like this, climbed after them after a tight half looping. Jesus then gave an urgent order on the radio.

“PAPA TWO, TURN PORT TOWARDS CLARK FIELD! THATCH WEAVE NOW!”

Having discussed in detail that tactic with Jesus last night, Ingrid made a tight turn to follow her leader, then, following the same general direction as him, started to zigzag, crossing repeatedly paths with Jesus but always passing just above him, while he always passed below her. The three Japanese fighter pilots, having never seen that tactic before, assumed that Ingrid and Jesus were just attempting to avoid their fire by zigzagging. One ZERO fighter quickly appeared in the rear-view mirror of Ingrid as she was reversing her turn to come back towards Jesus. Knowing that her salvation would be in the mutual protection given by the Thatch Weave maneuver, she did her best to ignore her fear and continued towards Jesus, who was also approaching her. She saw with a pang of the heart that two ZERO fighters were pursuing Jesus, with the leading Japanese pilot already firing short burst at the Filipino. Tightening her turn, Ingrid aimed at the leading Japanese behind Jesus and started firing a long burst, again aiming with the help of her tracers. The Japanese, surprised to see bullets coming from his front, missed his own target and hesitated between continuing to pursue Jesus or face Ingrid. Ingrid didn't hesitate, though, keeping the ZERO in her sight and riddling it with many bullets. The Japanese fighter then exploded into a fireball, making Ingrid scream in triumph and forcing the Japanese' wingman to veer away to avoid the debris from his leader's plane. At the same time, the Japanese pursuing Ingrid found himself under the fire of Jesus and veered off to avoid his bullets. Both Ingrid and Jesus then reversed their turns in order to continue using the Thatch Weave.

On the ground, along the outer perimeter of Clark Field, the American anti-aircraft gunners of the 200th Regiment defending the airfield had anxiously followed the

deadly ballet in the sky and had screamed with joy at seeing the two intrepid P-26 pilots shoot down three bombers and one fighter. Their battery commander then returned them to reality with a firm order.

“BE READY TO FIRE AT THE JAPANESE STILL APPROACHING. THIS FIGHT IS NOT FINISHED YET!”

The servants of the four 75 mm guns, six 37 mm cannons and six .50 caliber heavy machineguns defending this sector of the airfield quickly reacted at that order. Having the longest range, plus proximity fuses equipping their shells, the four 75 mm guns opened fire first, bracketing quickly the BETTY bombers approaching at low altitude. One BETTY, its big, unprotected main fuel tank pierced by red-hot shrapnel, turned into a flying torch, soon imitated by another bomber. With a third bomber suffering an engine fire, the Japanese raid commander decided to abandon his attack, thoroughly disgusted by the Americans' resistance, and ordered his surviving pilots to drop their bombs without aiming them. Their bombs exploded in the jungle, causing no damages or casualties. The American guns however kept pursuing the three surviving bombers as they turned around. The BETTY with an engine on fire was then hit a second time and dived into the jungle, crashing in a spectacular fireball. The two surviving ZERO pilots, seeing this, decided to abandon their pursuit of the two P-26s and turned around as well to return to Okinawa.

Ingrid, covered with sweat despite the howling wind blowing around her open cockpit, sighed with relief on seeing the ZEROs giving up. A radio call from Jesus then made her look at her fuel gauge.

“Papa Two, this is Papa One. We will have to land in Clark Field to fuel up: we don't have enough fuel left to return to our own airfield. I will contact the control tower of Clark Field. Follow me and keep your eyes open.”

“Understood, Papa One.”

Ingrid then started again to constantly turn and twist her head around, inspecting visually the sky in all directions in a manner that was going to become for her a reflex during her career as a fighter pilot. Although exhausted by her first air combat, she felt happy, having survived it and having destroying two enemy planes as well. She couldn't have hoped for more today. Ingrid then analyzed mentally her encounter, trying to single out of it lessons which could help her in her next fight. Frontal passes seemed to work well against Japanese bombers, while the Thatch Weave certainly had proven its value as a

defensive tactic. She however needed to seriously improve the accuracy of her air gunnery. While good by accepted standards, she had spent way too many bullets in only two long bursts. Correcting her aim with the help of her tracers may have worked but, in a long fight, she would have quickly found herself out of ammunition, thus becoming a defenseless target for the Japanese.

Following Jesus' plane, Ingrid soon landed with him on one of the long runways of Clark Field and then rolled towards a parking apron still littered with debris from a P-35 fighter destroyed on the ground the day before. A jeep with an orange signal panel guided them to one corner of the apron where a fuel truck and a truck full of ammunition crates were waiting for the two P-26, with also about ten men in uniform near the trucks. Ingrid braked her plane some distance from that of Jesus, to avoid giving a group of targets on the ground, then shut down her engine. She was starting to undo her seat harness when an American mechanic jumped on her right-side wing to help her. The young man looked at her with utter surprise before twisting his head around and shouting at the other men approaching Ingrid's plane.

"IT'S A WOMAN!"

"So what?" replied Ingrid, now tense. Nancy had told her many stories about the countless times she had faced prejudice in England in 1940 just because of her sex. Taking off her leather helmet and getting up from her seat, she looked at the two men standing in the back of the ammunition truck.

"I NEED TO REARM AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE. THE JAPANESE COULD STILL COME BACK."

"ER, YES MAAM!"

Stepping out of her cockpit and setting foot on her right wing, she left her pilot helmet on her seat but kept on her parachute and floating vest. She next opened the panel covering the refueling cap of her fuel tank, opening the cap as well as a half-dozen incredulous men surrounded her plane to stare at her. She then jumped on the ground to open the ammunition bins of her machineguns. A young American lieutenant approached her as two mechanics started filling the bins with long bandoleers of bullets.

"Miss, who let you fly a mission on a fighter?"

Ingrid eyed him coldly, not liking his tone.

"First, you can call me Lieutenant instead of miss. Second, President Quezon enrolled me as an officer and fighter pilot in the Filipino Air Corps. You got problems with that, Lieutenant?"

The man clenched his teeth but, having no reply to that, walked away. An old sergeant then approached Ingrid and saluted her.

"I just inspected visually your plane, Lieutenant: you were not hit once. We will finish fueling it in a few minutes."

"Thank you, Sergeant. Your men are qualified to maintain a P-26?"

"Certainly, Lieutenant! Unfortunately, all our P-26s have been shot down or destroyed on the ground in the first three days of the war."

"And how are our pilots flying on P-35 doing, Sergeant?"

The old mechanic frowned in response.

"Badly, I must say, Lieutenant. The P-35 is a piece of junk in my opinion. It is faster than your P-26 but is also less agile, less dependable and offers a bigger target while being unstable in flight. We already lost about sixty percent of our pilots and over three quarters of our P-35s in the 21st and 34th Squadrons. Of the few P-40s we managed to reassemble, three have already been lost in ground accidents: the P-40 is a difficult plane to control, especially when taking off or landing. By the way, you and your leader did a hell of a nice job up there. Which type of plane did you shoot down, Lieutenant?"

"One BETTY bomber and one ZERO fighter, Sergeant. My leader got two BETTY bombers."

The old NCO looked at her with genuine admiration.

"One BETTY and one ZERO? Wow! And you have been flying for how long as a fighter pilot, Lieutenant?"

Ingrid gave her an angelic smile then.

"Since this morning, Sergeant. If you don't believe me, just ask Captain Villamor."

The jaw of the sergeant nearly dropped on the pavement on hearing that.

"Uh, I see! I will go take care of the other P-26 with your permission, Lieutenant."

"Then I'll go with you."

Jesus jumped on the ground as the duo approached his plane and shared a happy accolade with Ingrid.

"Ingrid, you were fantastic up there. You are a born fighter pilot. We will do great things together in the air."

"I don't doubt that for a minute, Jesus. Your maneuver to catch your second bomber was brilliant."

"And the Thatch Weave worked like a charm, Ingrid."

"It sure did. Is your plane intact?"

"Yes! And yours?"

"Intact as well. Once rearmed and refueled, we will be ready to go back up."

Their two P-26s were nearly finished being refueled when a jeep stopped near Ingrid and Jesus, with an American Army major jumping out while shouting a question.

"YOU TWO ARE THE PILOTS OF THESE..."

The major was left open-mouthed when Jesus and Ingrid turned around to salute him. After a short hesitation, the major returned their salute and approached them, stopping in front of Ingrid.

"You are the pilot of one of those P-26s, miss?"

"Yes, Major! Second Lieutenant Ingrid Dows, 6th Pursuit Squadron, Philippines Army Air Corps."

"Captain Jesus Villamor, Commander of the 6th Pursuit Squadron, sir." said Jesus firmly. "I am claiming the shooting down of two BETTY bombers on my part, while Lieutenant Dows shot down one BETTY bomber and one ZERO fighter."

"You are joking, right?" replied the major, refusing squarely to believe him. Jesus threw him a mean look.

"Major, the air defense gunners and technicians around the airfield saw our fight in the air and we have also the films of our gun cameras. I can vouch that Lieutenant Dows did shoot down two Japanese planes. In fact, she saved my life up there."

"The captain is right, Major: I saw everything." then said the old mechanic NCO. "First Sergeant Jim Bradfield, Major."

The major was about to reply when a damaged P-35 fighter crash-landed in the grass besides the main runway. A second, then a third P-35 landed next in a more conventional way on the runway. Bradfield left at a run while shouting at his mechanics.

“OUR PILOTS ARE BACK, AT LEAST THE SURVIVORS. REARM AND REFUEL THESE TWO INTACT P-35 WHILE I GO SEE HOW OUR THIRD PILOT IS DOING.”

The major took that opportunity to disappear with his jeep, not daring to look an angry Jesus Villamor in the eyes. Jesus watched the jeep go away, then spat on the ground.

“A damn ground pounder will not call me a liar. Don’t worry, Ingrid: I will make sure that your air victories are officially registered.”

“That is the least of my concerns now, Jesus.” replied Ingrid. “I am more concerned about the pilot of that crash-landed P-35.”

She and Jesus watched on as an ambulance and a fire truck stopped near the crashed P-35. A number of men then jumped out and ran to the cockpit of the plane, extracting a limp form from it and carrying it to the ambulance, which then rolled away at full speed. By that time, the two other P-35s which had landed parked side by side on the apron and cut their engines. Ingrid saw one of the two pilots lower his head inside his cockpit and cry, still buckled to his seat. His plane was full of holes, especially the wings and the tail, and she could see what appeared to be hydraulic fluid leaking under the plane. The other P-35 didn’t seem to be in much better shape. Ingrid then understood with a pang of the heart that the American fighter squadrons in the Philippines were about to cease to exist, despite the bravery of their young pilots.

06:50 (Manila Time)

Saturday, October 25, 1941 ‘C’

Bay View Hotel, Manila

“ANNALEE, GET DRESSED QUICKLY! GENERAL MACARTHUR WILL DISTRIBUTE MEDALS IN CLARK FIELD AT EIGHT O’CLOCK.”

Annalee Whitmore, reporter for the LIBERTY magazine, walked out of the bathroom, attracted by the shout from her husband, Melville Jacoby, reporter for the TIME-LIFE magazine. The small, young woman was still in a bathrobe and her hair was a mess.

“How did you learn about this so early, Mel?”

“Easy: one of MacArthur’s staff officers pinned a notice on the board at the entrance of the dining room of the hotel.” answered Melville, a thin young man with brown skin. “A number of fighter pilots will be decorated for bravery. A bus will bring the

reporters from this hotel to Clark Field, with the departure from the hotel being at seven thirty. We better hurry up!”

Annalee didn't need more precisions to start dressing as quickly as she could. Like Melville, she grabbed her 35 mm camera before leaving their hotel room at a run.

07:56 (Manila Time)

Clark Field, to the Northwest of Manila

The group of reporters and correspondents stepped out of the bus once it stopped behind one of the hangars of Clark Field. They were then guided by an American Army public affairs officer to the apron in front of the hangar, where about twenty soldiers and officers were waiting, some being obviously photographers or cameramen for the United States Army. Mel and Annalee, accustomed to the obsession with personal publicity shown by General MacArthur, were not surprised to see those cameramen. What surprised them however, like the other correspondents, was the presence of a very beautiful young woman wearing a combat uniform. The couple immediately started to take pictures as the young woman and two men, including a Filipino, formed up in line in the middle of the apron, while the other soldiers and officers withdrew to a side. Annalee's heart accelerated when she understood what was going to happen.

“Mel, that girl is going to be decorated with these two men.”

“That's impossible, Annalee.” replied at once Melville. “This ceremony is supposed to honor fighter pilots. There are no female fighter pilots in the Army.” Pointing her camera and using her zoom lens, Annalee then saw something that shocked her.

“Mel, this girl is wearing a pilot's insignia on her shirt, along with lieutenant's ranks.”

Melville, now having doubts, pointed his own camera and did a double take.

“Good God, you're right! But, how...”

The arrival of MacArthur's staff car, accompanied by its usual escort jeeps and the blaring of its siren, cut him off. Photographed and filmed by the reporters and the Army correspondents, the tall general got out of his car and walked to a spot three paces in front of the girl and two men, then spoke to the reporters in a strong voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen from the press. We are here this morning to honor three brave fighter pilots who risked their lives to defend the Philippines from the Japanese. Other brave pilots unfortunately paid the ultimate price for their devotion to duty. My public affairs officer will give you after this ceremony a list of the posthumous awards authorized by me yesterday. The three fighter pilots to be honored this morning are First Lieutenant Jack Dale, of the 21st Pursuit Squadron of the United States Army Air Corps, Captain Jesus Antonio Villamor, of the 6th Pursuit Squadron of the Filipino Army Air Corps, and Second Lieutenant Ingrid Dows, also from the 6th Pursuit Squadron."

MacArthur then faced the three waiting pilots and gave a curt order.

"Lieutenant Jack Dale, step forward!"

As the young pilot stepped to a position one pace from MacArthur and saluted him, a staff officer read aloud a citation.

"First Lieutenant Jack Dale, of the 21st Pursuit Squadron, will now receive the Silver Star for his extraordinary heroism shown yesterday as he was intercepting with his comrades a large group of enemy bombers escorted by Japanese fighters. Despite the fact that the enemy had an overwhelming numeric advantage and that he was pursued by Japanese fighters, Lieutenant Jack Dale pushed his P-35 fighter among the enemy bombers and destroyed a Mitsubishi G4M BETTY bomber. Lieutenant Dale will now receive the Silver Star from Lieutenant General Douglas MacArthur, Commander of the United States Army Forces in the Far East."

The soldiers and officers present applauded as MacArthur pinned the small medal on the shirt of the young pilot, while the reporters and correspondents took picture after picture. After shaking hands with Dale, MacArthur then called forward Jesus Villamor as his staff officer read a second citation.

"Captain Jesus Antonio Villamor, from the 6th Pursuit Squadron of the Filipino Army Air Corps, was recently decorated with the Distinguished Service Cross for destroying one enemy bomber and damaging a Japanese fighter. Captain Villamor will receive this morning the Silver Star for the exemplary courage and flying skills he demonstrated yesterday at the controls of his P-26 fighter. With only one wingman in support, he attacked a group of twelve enemy bombers escorted by three ZERO fighters. Demonstrating superior qualities as a fighter pilot, he destroyed in quick succession two Mitsubishi G4M BETTY medium bombers which were going to strike Clark Field, forcing the rest to withdraw in disorder. Lieutenant General MacArthur will now give the Silver Star to Captain Villamor."

While the spectators applauded again as Jesus received his medal, Ingrid realized too well that the reporters were in reality impatient to learn what she had done to be here. Her turn in front of MacArthur finally came, with all the reporters taking photo after photo of her as the staff officer read her citation.

“Second Lieutenant Ingrid Dows, born Weiss, of the 6th Pursuit Squadron of the Filipino Army Air Corps, will receive this morning the Silver Star for the exemplary courage and flying skills she showed yesterday during her first combat mission as a newly accepted fighter pilot. As the wingman of Captain Jesus Antonio Villamor and flying a P-26 fighter, Lieutenant Dows, not content in destroying one Mitsubishi G4M BETTY medium bomber, also destroyed one Japanese ZERO fighter which was attacking her leader. Lieutenant General MacArthur will now give the Silver Star to Second Lieutenant Dows, who will also be promoted at the same time to the rank of First Lieutenant.”

As he pinned the medal on Ingrid’s shirt, then changed her rank insignias on her collar, MacArthur spoke to her in a low voice while smiling to her.

“I see that I took the right decision concerning you, Lieutenant. You can be proud of yourself. In view of the exceptional services of your squadron, I ordered that it be reequipped with Curtiss P-40E fighters. With such planes, you and Captain Villamor will have more decent chances to survive air combat against the Japanese.”

“General, I will never be able to thank you enough for the chance you gave me to accomplish my dream.”

“You can thank me by shooting down more Japanese planes, Lieutenant. I am sure that your two victories of yesterday will not be your only ones. Again, congratulations, Lieutenant Dows.”

“Thank you, General!” said Ingrid, proud as a peacock, before saluting MacArthur and returning besides Dale and Villamor. MacArthur then gave a final speech and left in his staff car, leaving the three medal recipients in the hands of the reporters. As she had expected, Ingrid found herself the center of attention of all the reporters and was bombarded with questions from all sides. She then raised both hands to demand silence.

“Ladies and gentlemen, know that I will not answer your questions if you don’t show equal courtesy to my comrade pilots. They are as deserving as me, or even more. I don’t want to be singled out just because I am a woman.”

"But you are the first known female fighter pilot, Lieutenant." shouted a reporter. "We want to know how you were able to become a fighter pilot."

Having already spoken with Jesus and Jack Dale about the undue attention she was expecting from reporters at their detriments, Ingrid again asked for silence.

"In that case, I am ready to make a statement on that subject. Then, you will have to switch your attention to my two comrades: I don't believe in personal glory seeking: I became a fighter pilot simply to help defend the Philippines. First, I was born Ingrid Weiss in Berlin, Germany, on September 7 of 1923. I met an American officer in London and married him there in July of this year. My husband is Major Kenneth Dows, of the United States Marine Corps, who is presently posted in Manila. I obtained my civilian pilot's license here in Manila. When war was declared in the Pacific, and knowing that the United States Army did not accept women as fighter pilots, I asked to join the Filipino Army Air Corps. President Quezon personally accepted my request and commissioned me as a Filipino Army officer two days ago. My mission yesterday was in fact my first combat mission as a fighter pilot."

"And how do you explain your performance in the air, miss, despite the fact that you didn't get any training as a fighter pilot?" shouted a reporter, attracting a severe look from Ingrid.

"First, mister, call me 'Lieutenant' and not 'miss'. Second, I would say that I apparently have a natural affinity for flying. Third, I had the chance to be able to discuss at length air combat tactics in Europe with confirmed air aces there and learned much from them. Now, I believe that it's the turn of Lieutenant Dale and of Captain Villamor to field your questions."

The reporters, frustrated, then had to talk with the two male pilots. Mel Jacoby, who had a very powerful visual memory and had seen nearly all the pictures taken by TIME-LIFE correspondents in this war, suddenly remembered where he had seen the face of that beautiful teenager. Approaching Ingrid, he spoke to her in a near whisper, so that the other reporters wouldn't hear him.

"Lieutenant Dows, weren't you present at the funeral of Brigadier Nancy Laplante, the famous Canadian from the future? Weren't you in fact one of her pallbearers and were seen afterwards with her now dead husband, Major Crawford?" Ingrid stiffened then, having hoped to keep hidden her connection to Nancy, connection that would have only attracted more undue media attention on her. Taking Jacoby by

one arm, she led him away from the other reporters, with Annalee the only one to follow the two of them.

"Please don't repeat this in front of the other reporters, mister. I don't want to end up been hounded down constantly and thus appear to be a simple glory seeker."

"Lieutenant, rest assured that I don't intend to blow an exclusive in such a stupid way. However, the truth will come out eventually. You might as well tell your story to a serious magazine like TIME-LIFE, rather than to some of those rags."

"And what about that woman?" said Ingrid, pointing Annalee. That made Mel Jacoby grin.

"That woman is my wife, Annalee Whitmore, of the LIBERTY magazine. I believe that I can trust her, Lieutenant."

"Oh! In that case... Yes, I was at the funeral of Nancy Laplante. I am in fact her adopted daughter. I am also a German Jew and was an orphan before being adopted by Nancy and by Mike Crawford. That is how I got my American citizenship. That is all that I am prepared to say at this time."

"That is already plenty, Lieutenant." replied Mel, smiling at the thought of the exclusive he had just secured. "Thank you for answering my questions and good luck in the air."

"Thank you, mister."

After a few more minutes of questions from the reporters, MacArthur's public affairs officer put an end to the interview session and led the three pilots away from the crowd of reporters. Ingrid was sighing with relief when a young American Army Air Corps captain joined them and spoke to her and Jesus.

"Captain, Lieutenant, could you come with me, please? General MacArthur told me to qualify you on the P-40E."

"And Lieutenant Dale?" Asked in return Ingrid. The captain nodded his head while looking at Dale.

"Lieutenant Dale will also get courses on the P-40E this morning, along with the other pilots of his squadron. There are now enough assembled P-40s to allow our remaining P-35 and P-26 to be put in reserve. Unfortunately, the word from Washington is that we cannot hope to get more fighter pilots here in the Philippines: our losses in Hawaii were too heavy and the absolute priority was given to replace our losses there. Thankfully, the weather over the Japanese airfields in Formosa and Okinawa is quite

bad and we should enjoy a respite in the air today. Once you will be qualified, you will be able to take possession of the three P-40Es now assembled in Batangas.”

Jesus smiled, happy, and looked at Ingrid with gleaming eyes.

“I liked my old P-26, but I must say that flying the P-40E will give us a much better chance in air combat against the Japanese.”

“You bet!” replied Ingrid, equally pleased. “With a maximum speed of 362 miles per hour instead of 234 miles per hour for our P-26s, and with six .50 caliber heavy machineguns, we will now be able to catch up to Japanese bombers and destroy them faster. Well, let’s not waste time and let’s follow the good captain.”

As she and Jesus were taking place in the jeep of the American captain, a big four-engine C-87 LIBERATOR EXPRESS, a cargo variant of the B-24 heavy bomber, came in and landed on the main runway of Clark Field. Looking up at the sky, Ingrid saw a formation of fifteen other C-87s which were waiting to land, flying under the low clouds. Joy and hope filled her as a second C-87 landed.

“HURRAY! WE WERE NOT ABANDONED AFTER ALL!”

19:54 (Manila Time)

USAFFE HQ, Manila

Douglas MacArthur felt truly optimistic for the first time in this war tonight. With Admiral Hart and some of his staff officers sitting with him and senior officers of the USAFFE in the conference room of his headquarters, MacArthur signaled to his chief of staff, sitting near him at the big table, to start.

“You can give the good news, Dick.”

“Yes, General!” said politely Sutherland before looking at a document in his hands. “The news are effectively good today, gentlemen. Washington put in place and inaugurated today an air bridge between Australia and us to satisfy our most urgent needs. A total of 27 C-87 heavy transport aircraft, each carrying four tons of cargo, landed today on our airfields. They then left immediately after unloading and being refueled. We used their return trip to evacuate to Australia over 300 of our wounded. We intend to continue using the return trips in the following days to evacuate our wounded and our non-essential personnel.”

MacArthur interrupted Sutherland then to speak briefly to Admiral Hart.

"In view of this unexpected evacuation capacity, I have given orders this afternoon to start evacuating, by force, if necessary, the American civilians still present in the Philippines. From what we know thanks to Nancy Laplante, I do not want to see American civilians eventually fall in the hands of the Japanese. British and Australian citizens will also be evacuated forcibly towards Australia."

"That will definitely be one weight less on our shoulders, General." agreed Hart. "Also, being able to evacuate our wounded will help a lot the morale of our men."

"Very true! Dick, you may continue."

"Yes, General! Those 27 C-87 brought part of the 206th Anti-Aircraft Regiment, including twelve of the new dual purpose 90 mm guns, dismounted for transport, plus 5,000 90 mm shells equipped with proximity fuses. They also brought thousands of antitank rifle grenades, which will finally allow our troops to face eventually Japanese tanks. More 90 mm and 75 mm shells will follow, along with six more 90 mm guns and essential spare parts for our planes. To avoid being caught on the ground by Japanese air raids, the transit schedules will be modified so that the planes will arrive just before Sunset and will depart the next day at Sunrise. That should allow them time to unload under the protection of the night. The air logistics senior officer who came with the first group of C-87s assured me that we could expect a minimum of 24 flights per day, depending of course on the weather."

MacArthur then interrupted a second time his chief of staff.

"Admiral Hart, we decided nearly three months ago to jointly defend the Philippines and to coordinate our defenses. I have thus decided to allocate the 206th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment to the defense of the Cavite Navy Base. Its 90 mm guns have a maximum horizontal range of eleven miles and can engage ships as well as planes. The commander of the regiment told me that a load of armor piercing rounds will be part of the coming air shipments."

"Excellent!" replied Hart, truly happy. "Then I can give you in exchange another good news, General. We are expecting tonight a small convoy escorted by the Dutch destroyer TROMP. The convoy includes a tanker ship full of aviation gasoline, another tanker ship full of diesel fuel for my submarines and a cargo ship loaded with torpedoes and aviation bombs. Two of my destroyers are already off Manila Bay, ready to guide the convoy through our minefields."

"Our B-17 bomber crews will be happy to hear that, Admiral. They hit a Japanese airfield on Hainan Island, on the Chinese coast, this morning and are going through their stocks of bombs quickly."

"And in what state is your bomber force, General?"

MacArthur's smile faded as he answered Hart.

"I have fourteen B-17s left operational, but my biggest worry is about the crews. Our pilots are exhausted and are too few, especially where fighter pilots are concerned. I pleaded with Washington to get more fighter pilots but top priority is presently going to Hawaii. Washington is ready to send us all the ground equipment and munitions that we want, but no planes or pilots, at least not for the weeks to come."

"And how are your ground defenses doing, General?"

"Our training program for our infantry is still going full steam, and I clearly indicated that no time be wasted on simple parade drill practices. Our engineers are proceeding with the fortification of the Bataan Peninsula, which has been designated with Corregidor as our place of last stand, while our logisticians are centralizing there all the food, ammunition, fuel, spare parts and medical supplies that can be collected. If the Japanese land on Luzon, we will have enough supplies to hold Bataan and Corregidor for many months and thus deny the use of Manila Bay and Subic Bay to the Japanese."

"Let's hope that we will not need to retreat to those bastions, General. However, in line with those preparations, I will make sure that, if Cavite has to be evacuated, that the 90 mm guns placed there will be moved to the Bataan Peninsula, to be used there as coastal defense batteries."

"Then, I will direct my artillery commander to select and prepare in advance suitable fortified coastal positions for those 90 mm guns."

MacArthur was silent for a short moment before speaking in a subdued tone.

"Without more fighter planes and pilots, the Japanese will eventually gain the control of the air over the Philippines. Then, the best we can hope for will be to inflict as much casualties to them as we can and to deny to them the Philippines for as long as possible."

07:49 (Manila Time)

Monday, October 27, 1941 'C'

Batangas Airfield

Philippines

Ingrid, having gone out on the porch of the pilots' hut after breakfast, looked up critically at the sky. The cloud ceiling was much higher this morning than it had been for the last two days and there may even be a chance that no rain would fall today. At least, the poor weather of the last two days had allowed her and Jesus to familiarize themselves with their new P-40Es and to fly a few hours on them. Ingrid had needed all of her innate pilot's abilities to keep control of her P-40 at low speeds, especially during takeoffs and landings. The strong engine torque of the P-40, allied to its tendency to stall without warning and drop a wing, had caused the death of many young American pilots. The P-40E, while not an exceptional fighter in any way, was however well armed and was surprisingly agile at high speeds and low altitudes, making it an excellent fighter-bomber. It however climbed slowly and its high-altitude performances degraded quickly as it went up. Despite that, Ingrid now felt reasonably comfortable with her new plane and was ready for her next combat mission. With the acceptable temperature announced for today, she suspected that the Japanese were probably going to use it to attack the Philippines again. Jesus Villamor soon joined her on the porch and also looked up at the sky.

"We should see the Japanese today, and in less than a few hours if I go by their habits. Let's go put on our flight gear, Ingrid."

Going back in the hut, which was also used as the squadron's operations center and alert lounge, they started to put on their gear. They had just put on last their parachutes when the telephone on the desk of the operations room rang. A Filipino sergeant jumped on it and answered in English.

"Sixth Pursuit Squadron, Sergeant Arcibo.... Understood, Captain!"

The sergeant then looked at Jesus and Ingrid.

"One of our B-10B bombers used as an early warning plane west of the Manila Bay just spotted a large formation of Japanese planes approaching from the Northwest. The Japanese are now 200 miles from Manila. Our bomber is however being pursued by three Japanese fighters and is trying to attract them towards Batangas."

"Tell Nielson Field that we are taking off now." ordered Jesus, grabbing his leather helmet. "Let's go, Ingrid!"

Ingrid did not need to be told twice and ran outside with Jesus. The latter then shouted at the soldiers and mechanics close to their aircraft, which were camouflaged in individual clearings made in the tree line of the jungle.

“RAISE THE CAMOUFLAGE NETS! WE ARE TAKING OFF!”

A dozen soldiers immediately grabbed long bamboo poles attached to the corners of the camouflage nets and raised them to the vertical, unmasking the front of the two P-40Es, while mechanics pushed the planes in the open and out of their hiding places. Ingrid and Jesus jumped quickly in their cockpits and started their engines after a quick check of their instruments. Only four minutes after receiving the alert call from Nielson Field, the two P-40s had taken off and were climbing in the direction of the Northwest.

Five minutes later, guided by radio calls from the pursued Filipino B-10B bomber, Jesus and Ingrid made visual contact with the antiquated bomber, which had found a second life as an early warning aircraft thanks to its long air endurance. Ingrid's sharp eyesight then spotted as well three dots just behind the bomber.

“Papa One, I see three fighters with fixed landing gears behind our B-10 bomber, probably Nakajima Ki-27 NATE fighters. Should we go for frontal passes first?”

“It sounds like a good idea, Papa Two. Take the Japanese on the left of us: I will take the one on the right. You will then cover my tail.”

“Understood, Papa One.”

Her heart accelerating, Ingrid slid to the left, away from Jesus, and took the safety off her six heavy machineguns. Ingrid knew that the Ki-27 NATE was quite similar to the P-26, but even more agile. It however sacrificed everything to agility, having no armor whatsoever and being armed with only two 7.7 mm medium machineguns. One well-placed salvo should be enough to destroy her first adversary. Calculating in advance her gun deflection, Ingrid flew to a straight frontal approach against the NATE on the left of the Japanese formation and opened fire at a distance of 600 meters, with Jesus firing at about the same time. To Ingrid's surprise, the Ki-27 coming at her was literally shredded to small pieces by her bullets, bursting into flames and disintegrating in many parts in midair. Surprised by her easy victory, she glanced at Jesus' target, in time to see it become a flying torch. The surviving NATE, flying a bit behind its now destroyed wingmen, performed a tight right turn to flee, presenting its belly and wings to Ingrid. She fired a short burst at it but missed. Her P-40E was however much faster than the NATE and she closed in on the Japanese, firing once at 300 meters behind it. The diminutive Japanese fighter then caught fire, with one wing cut off by a second short burst from Ingrid. It then entered a terminal dive while spinning wildly. Ingrid watched

the NATE fall for a moment, then formed back with Jesus, who spoke to her on the radio.

“Good shooting, Papa Two. You are becoming quite good at this. We will now head towards Manila to intercept that bomber formation signaled by our bomber.”

As Ingrid followed Jesus in a turn towards Manila, the latter called the air controller at Nielson Field.

“Junction Box, this is Papa One. Three Ki-27 NATE enemy fighters shot down off Batangas. Owl Two now safe. We are on our way to Manila to intercept the enemy bombers sighted previously, over.”

“Papa One, from Junction Box: good job! A Navy PBY just updated the position of the incoming enemy bomber force. It is now 115 miles west of Cavite and is flying at an altitude of 25,000 feet. Our PBY counted about sixty bombers, escorted by forty fighters. Our other fighters are already on their way to intercept. You are to hit those bombers before they get over Cavite, over.”

“Understood, Junction Box. Papa Two, start climbing towards 27,000 feet.”

Ingrid did not answer as she put her fighter in a slow climb, the P-40E being rather lazy at high altitude. Sixty Japanese bombers could do a lot of damage to the naval base in Cavite and she was not certain if Ken was still at the Asiatic Fleet headquarters or in Cavite. She had to give her very best to turn around that enemy raid, but would have to make her every bullet count. That meant shooting short bursts only from short range, to ensure hits on each pass.

Jesus and Ingrid arrived over Cavite as the Japanese planes started to be visible in the distance. Tails of black smoke told them that the other American fighter pilots in the air had already started engaging the enemy.

“Papa One, from Papa Two. If the escorting enemy fighters are all NATEs, then we will have a serious speed advantage on them. The NATE also loses much of its agility at speeds above 250 miles per hour. I believe that we should keep our speed to the maximum and limit ourselves to high-speed passes on the bombers while ignoring the enemy fighters, over.”

“I buy your plan, Papa Two. We will start with individual frontal passes on the lead bombers while on a shallow dive, then engage the second wave while leveling up. Protect my tail once we turn around to fall behind the bombers, over.”

“Understood, Papa One.”

Lining up in a near collision course with one of the lead bombers and pushing her P-40E in a shallow dive, Ingrid could soon identify the enemy planes.

“Papa One, I identify the enemy as about sixty Mitsubishi G3M NELL, escorted by twelve Ki-27 fighters. I don’t see the other NATE fighters signaled by Owl Two.”

“They are probably busy with our other fighters, Papa Two. We will probably be alone to deal with those bombers.”

Ingrid felt both anger and frustration on hearing that. All the American fighter pilots in the Philippines had received instructions to avoid dogfighting with Japanese fighters and to concentrate instead on shooting down the Japanese bombers. The few American fighter pilots still alive seemed to have ignored that directive...again! Concentrating back on her target, she lined up her gun sight on the nose of the bomber. The Japanese pilot saw her coming but couldn’t do a thing about it, having no forward-firing guns and not being permitted to break formation without order. The unfortunate Japanese pilot, along with his copilot and his navigator/bombardier, died in the first burst from Ingrid, shredded to pieces by the .50 caliber bullets. The NELL then caught fire and fell out in a death dive as Ingrid flew through the first wave, already lining up on the bomber which had followed her first victim. A quick look around showed her Jesus, flying parallel to her a hundred meters to her right, while eleven NATE fighters were diving on her and her leader to attempt high frontal passes. Keeping her engine power to maximum, she fired a devastating burst into the nose section of her second target, exploding the NELL. She then slid on one wing to take position to the rear and left of Jesus as the Filipino pilot started a wide high-speed turn to come back behind the bombers. Ingrid followed him, enduring a good five Gs of centrifugal force in the process and having to breathe forcefully through short intakes. Seeing through a pink haze a NATE attempting to get on the tail of Jesus, Ingrid immediately lined up the enemy fighter in her sight and fired a short burst but missed. Correcting her aim, she fired a second burst as the enemy pilot made the mistake of concentrating solely on Jesus. The Japanese pilot suddenly found himself in a cockpit full of flames, his engine and main fuel tank hit by heavy .50 caliber slugs. Ingrid did not have the time to observe the poor Japanese pilot as he fell out of his plane, transformed into a human torch. She watched Jesus’ tail as the Filipino fired burst after burst against a bomber, with the gunners of the bomber and of its wingmen replying frantically with their defensive machineguns. Jesus finally cut off the right wing of his target, sending it in a terminal spin and overcoming the rear wave of bombers with a speed advantage of 280 kilometers per hour. The enemy fighters, about one hundred

kilometers per hour slower than the P-40Es, were now being left behind despite their best efforts at catching the two marauders. The Filipino then engaged a bomber of the next wave, firing a short burst but missing, while tracers from the bombers defensive machineguns came at him and Ingrid from all directions. Jesus then swore violently on the radio.

“DAMNATION! MY GUNS ARE JAMMED! TAKE OVER THE ATTACK, PAPA TWO!”

Ingrid did not hesitate and lined up the NELL in her gun sight, while Jesus performed a barrel roll to take position behind her. Ingrid heard a couple of bullet impacts on her plane but ignored them, firing a machine gun burst which pulverized the canopy of the bomber, killing its pilot and copilot and sending the bomber spiraling out of control. She immediately switched target, aiming at the lead bomber of the formation as more bullets impacted against her plane. Her long burst swept the bomber from tail to nose along its fuselage. The enemy plane then exploded in a huge fireball, forcing Ingrid into veering away violently to avoid the debris. She immediately looked anxiously for Jesus.

“PAPA ONE, ARE YOU OKAY?”

“Affirmative, Papa Two! I am right on your tail. Keep taking care of those bombers and don’t worry about me. You are doing magnificently.”

“Thank you, Papa One! I will now take some distance ahead and then turn around for another frontal pass.”

Followed closely by Jesus and still flying at maximum speed, burning fuel quickly, Ingrid passed the now shot up and shaken bomber formation and took a lead of over two kilometers, turning around once nearly over the base of Cavite and returning with Jesus towards the Japanese bombers. She then noticed that one of the bombers had left the formation, one of its two engines on fire: the NELL must have been damaged by debris from its leader. Many fighter pilots would have jumped on that easy target to obtain a quick victory. Ingrid however had only one goal in mind: to stop as many bombers as possible from hitting the naval base in Cavite. The damaged bomber, which was dropping its bombs into the sea, was not a threat to Cavite anymore and would cost her precious bullets. She thus kept on her collision course towards the lead bomber and waited until nearly the last moment to fire her next burst from her six heavy machineguns, shredding the cockpit and right-side engine of the NELL. She jumped over the doomed bomber and immediately targeted the following bomber, which was

barely 200 meters behind its now dead leader. She missed with her next burst, having had only a fraction of a second to aim, but scared to death the Japanese pilot as she flew past the bomber from barely three meters away. Suddenly seeing Villamor's P-40 barreling down at him and following Ingrid, the pilot of the NELL lost his nerves and threw his bomber into an evasive turn to the left, convinced that Jesus was going to collide head on with him. Unfortunately for the Japanese, his uncoordinated maneuver within the tight formation of bombers made him collide with his left wingman. The two NELLs exploded under the impact of the collision, sending debris all around and damaging other bombers around them. One radial engine which had flown off one of the two bombers then hit one of the NATE fighters still trying without success to catch the two P-40s. With one wing ripped off by the impact, the fighter fell down and crashed in the sea below. Trying to shoot at a bomber of the third wave, Ingrid managed to fire only a few bullets before the firing pins of her machineguns hit empty chambers.

"DAMN! I'M OUT OF AMMO!"

"THEN LET'S GO, PAPA TWO! WE CAN'T DO MORE HERE."

What Ingrid and Jesus didn't see immediately then was that panic had swept through the surviving Japanese bomber crews. One of the enemy squadron leaders took on him to order a retreat and make his pilots drop their bombs into the sea, soon imitated by the other two bomber squadrons of the attack formation. On seeing that, Jesus burst out in a nervous laughter.

"Papa Two, I believe that we made quite an impression on those Japanese: they are dropping their bombs into the sea and turning away."

"It can't be true!" replied Ingrid, unable to believe her eyes. "Well, I will have seen it all."

The surviving NATE fighters, many now extremely short on fuel, turned around as well, following their bombers. Seeing that, Jesus spoke again on the radio, elated.

"I guess that we can throttle down now, Papa Two. How about a little victory flyby over Cavite?"

"A great idea, Papa One." replied Ingrid, nearly jumping with joy in her seat.

In the base of Cavite, the commander of the anti-aircraft guns defending the naval base had watched the air battle with his powerful binoculars and shouted with joy, like his gunners and the Marines and sailors nearby, when the bombers turned around while dropping their bombs into the sea less than five kilometers away from the base.

"OUR TWO FIGHTERS SCARED AWAY THOSE JAPS! THEY ARE ALL TURNING AWAY!"

He then saw the two P-40s which had attacked repeatedly the Japanese bomber formation slow down and form up in a tight pair before coming towards Cavite.

"OUR TWO FIGHTERS ARE GOING TO PASS OVERHEAD. WEAPONS TIGHT! WEAPONS TIGHT! NOBODY SHOOTS AT ANYTHING UNLESS I SAY OTHERWISE. SECURE THE GUNS!"

His gunners obeyed him at once, while his signalers passed the order by field telephone and radio. The Army gunners, Marines and Navy men all cheered and waved when the two P-40s passed slowly over the base, wiggling their wings triumphantly as a victory sign. The artillery commander took good note of the Filipino markings and plane identification numbers on the two P-40s, grinning as he did so: he had fully expected to be blasted to bits by the bombs from the mass of bombers coming at Cavite. Now, he and his men were going to live for at least another day, thanks to those two Filipino P-40 fighters.

19:39 (Manila Time)

Far East Air Force headquarters

Nielson Field, southern suburbs of Manila

Major General Lewis Brereton, Commander of the United States Far East Air Force, was puzzled as he reviewed with Brigadier General Clagett, the commander of his fighter force, the results of the day, which were decidedly mixed. On one hand, two American squadrons totaling at the start of the battle 22 P-40 fighters had tried to intercept the big group of enemy bombers heading for Cavite this morning but had clashed instead with over thirty escorting Ki-27 NATE fighters. The pilots of the 24th Pursuit Group had suffered heavily in the ensuing melee, losing nine of their planes and with eight more P-40s returning to their base with varying degrees of damage. In exchange, the pilots of the 24th Pursuit Group had claimed a total of fourteen Ki-27s shot down, a claim that had proved since then to be quite exaggerated, if Brereton could believe the review of the films from the gun cameras of the group. The true number of Japanese fighters shot down seemed to actually be more like six Ki-27s. The worst part was that, contrary to their orders, the pilots of the 24th Pursuit Group had not gone after the bombers, instead entering into a series of dogfights with the escort Japanese

fighters, with the nimble Ki-27s then easily gaining the upper edge over the less agile P-40s despite their light armament and lack of armor. The only fighters which had actually attacked the Japanese bomber force were two Filipino P-40s out of Batangas. However, their results were nothing like those of the pilots of the 24th Pursuit Group. Clagett had an embarrassed look on his face when he had approached Brereton with the results of the day, which included claims by the two pilots from the 6th Pursuit Squadron for a total of eleven Japanese planes shot down. The problem was that, according to Clagett, the gun camera films from those two pilots corroborated their claims. Brereton gave another skeptical look at his fighter commander.

“So, the claims of those two 6th Pursuit Squadron pilots really do pan out?”

“Yes sir! On top of the films from their gun cameras, their combat was observed by the gunners defending Cavite. The commander of the anti-aircraft artillery regiment there noted down the serial number of those two P-40s, which managed by themselves to make the Japanese bomber force turn around in panic and drop its bombs into the sea. The numbers correspond to the plane registry numbers of the P-40s flown by Captain Villamor and Lieutenant Dows. Out of those eleven victories claimed, eight are for Lieutenant Dows.”

Brereton then exploded with frustration.

“And how the hell do you explain that a rookie female pilot with no actual training as a fighter pilot could achieve such successes when our own pilots, formed at our fighter school in Arizona, barely manage to survive their own encounters with Japanese fighters? That teenage girl is making our pilots look like a bunch of flying monkeys.” Brereton regretted his words as soon as he said it. Looking apologetically at Clagett, who had stiffened on hearing the term ‘flying monkeys’, he spoke in a softer tone.

“Sorry, Henry: I shouldn’t have used those words. It is just that the fact that a teenage girl can outfight our pilots is damn hard to digest. You know what kind of reactions there would be in the United States if this became known.”

Clagett nodded slowly his head, able to imagine the political storm that some could raise by claiming this as proof that official fighter pilot training was next to worthless.

“Should we then deny the victory claims from Lieutenant Dows, sir?”

Brereton snapped his head around to stare at him with indignation.

“I wasn’t suggesting that, dammit! That girl risked her life today to defend the Philippines and she is entitled to get her proper dues. It is just that I want to know what she and Captain Villamor are doing so differently from our pilots of the 24th Group.”

After a moment of thinking, Brereton looked up at Clagett.

"Call Batangas and tell Captain Villamor and Lieutenant Dows to come here right away to talk with us. While you do that, I will go watch their gun camera films to see if there is a pattern to their successes."

"Yes, General!"

Twenty minutes later, Brereton came out of the small viewing room adjacent to the photo section, shaking his head in disbelief. Clagett, who was waiting for him back in the operations center, looked at him questioningly.

"So, what do you think, General?"

"That this girl is one deadly shot in the air, apart from being brave as hell. The number of tracers flying around or coming at her was frightening, yet she shot up those bombers like she was a flying Calamity Jane⁶. I also noticed how fast she and Villamor flew while in combat. They kept zipping around the Japanese bomber formation, never slowing down. Maybe that's the secret of their successes. Are they on the way to here?"

"They should arrive here in less than one hour, General."

"Good! One more thing before they arrive here, Henry: have the victory claims of both Captain Villamor and Lieutenant Dows officially accepted." His commander of fighters eyed him cautiously.

"Sir, you do realize that this would make Dows a double ace...our top air ace of this war. Villamor would also be an ace now."

That made Brereton freeze on the spot for a second.

"Damn! I didn't think about that. The press will have a field day on that. Well, an ace she is, Henry. We can only hope that she will continue to shoot down Japanese planes at her present rate. While we are on this subject, write down for my review tomorrow suitable award recommendations for both Villamor and Dows."

"Sir, if one of my regular pilots would have performed like Dows, only one award would be appropriate, in my honest opinion."

Brereton looked at Clagett calmly.

"Then, go for it, Henry."

⁶ Calamity Jane: Famous female adventurer in the history of the American Far West. Calamity Jane was reputed to be an elite shot.

Just before nine in the evening, Villamor and Dows arrived at his headquarters and were then introduced in Brereton's office, escorted by Clagett. Brereton was struck at once by the youthful beauty of Ingrid but didn't remark on it. He returned their salutes, then pointed at the chairs set in front of his desk.

"Please, have a seat: I asked you to come so that we could discuss the tactics you used today over Manila Bay. By the way, your victory claims were accepted officially...in full. Your personal scores thus now stand respectively at six and a half victories for you, Captain Villamor, and at ten victories for Lieutenant Dows."

Both Villamor and Dows smiled, with the girl grinning the widest.

"Thank you, General."

"I'm the one that needs to thank you both, for shooting down all those Japanese planes and for having turned away that bomber formation. I just want to know how you did it."

Villamor and Dows then exchanged a glance, with Villamor speaking to Ingrid.

"Go ahead, Ingrid: you introduced us to those tactics, so it is only just that you get to describe them to General Brereton."

"Thank you, Jesus." replied Ingrid, who then looked calmly at Brereton. "General, I don't know how much you do know about my personal background, so I will start from the beginning. Before marrying Major Kenneth Dows and coming to the Philippines with him, I was a German Luftwaffe auxiliary serving at a fighter division headquarters in France. I was able to observe first hand there the various tactics and strategies used by both the Luftwaffe and the R.A.F. Since I was fascinated by flying and often met some of the top German air aces in France, I was able to discuss at length with those aces things like air tactics, deflection aiming calculations and the rules of air combat."

Brereton, who actually knew nothing about that apart from the fact that she was the wife of an American officer, stared at her in stunned disbelief, like Clagett.

"You...you were in the Luftwaffe before? And why would such top air aces take the time to teach you all those things, if you were not a pilot?"

Ingrid smiled at his somewhat naïve question and looked at him with the sexiest, most sensual expression she could muster while answering in a mellow voice.

"Why, General, if you were a young and energetic fighter pilot, wouldn't you want to speak in private to a young and beautiful girl who is ready to listen to you as you talk and brag about your exploits in the air, with a bottle of wine at hand and a bed nearby?"

While Jesus Villamor struggled his laughter with difficulty and while Henry Claggett hid his face with one hand, Brereton was left open-mouthed. Ingrid then went on, putting back on a serious expression.

"While I learned basic air tactics and deflection shooting from those German aces, what helps me most to shoot down Japanese planes came from my adoptive mother. Please understand that I was in 1940 a war orphan, after my whole extended family was killed in Berlin by a British air bombardment. I enlisted in the Luftwaffe in order to avenge them, not because I was some kind of Nazi fanatic. Then, in January of this year, I was captured along with other German staff in a commando raid led by Nancy Laplante, the famous Canadian from the future. I was then interned with other German female auxiliaries in the Tower of London. However, Nancy Laplante and I quickly became good friends and she helped support my morale and that of my comrades with frequent visits, arranging film or music nights and dances. She and her husband, Major Mike Crawford of the U.S. Corps of Engineers, eventually decided to secretly adopt me and she started to secretly educate me, while also helping openly with my physical training. She then told me what she knew about this war and the future as it happened in her variant of history. With me being especially interested in planes, she discussed in detail with me the tactics and lessons about the air war in this conflict. I also had access to her historical files which described in detail this war and which also taught me the various strengths and weaknesses of Japanese planes. To cut this to the essential, the cardinal rules pertaining to air combat against Japanese planes, especially fighters are, first, to never engage in a low speed, turning dogfight with a Japanese fighter. Instead, you keep your speed as high as you can through the whole engagement. Second, since our planes dive better than theirs, we are to try as much as possible for diving passes, followed by a quick withdrawal, a climb back to altitude and another diving pass, using vertical combat rather than turning combat. Third, since most Japanese aircraft have little or no armor and have mostly unprotected fuel tanks, they are in general quite fragile and catch fire easily, even though they benefit from superior agility due to their light weight. A single well-placed burst will thus often be enough to down them. That same light construction also limits their diving speed. The ZERO fighter in particular loses much of its agility at speeds above 250 miles per hour and is limited to a maximum of 350 miles per hour in a dive, at which speed its thin wing aluminum skin will start ripping away and its ailerons will become impossible to move. In contrast, the Curtiss P-40 is at its best at low altitudes and high speed, where it rolls

faster than the ZERO. In terms of armament, the Japanese fighters generally have lighter armament than our fighters, while most Japanese bombers have no forward-firing defensive machineguns. During our fight this morning, me and Captain Villamor thus used as much as we could frontal passes against the Japanese bombers, while we kept our speed up and thus basically ignored the escorting NATE fighters, which were too slow to catch us or even follow us. Some may call our tactics cowardly, but I became a fighter pilot to defend the Philippines and destroy as many Japanese planes as I can, not to gain personal glory. I also will concentrate first on Japanese bombers, since they can hurt the most our troops and civilians on the ground. Well, that's it in a nutshell, General."

Brereton, who had been frantically scribbling down notes while listening to her, stared at her in silence for long seconds. This stunningly beautiful teenager was nothing like the wild child he had expected. He then looked at Jesus Villamor.

"Captain Villamor, do you have something to add on this subject?"

"One thing, General: Lieutenant Dows also taught me four days ago about a defensive tactic called the 'Thatch Weave'. We used it to good effect last Friday."

The diminutive young Filipino pilot then spent a minute describing the Thatch Weave to Brereton and Clagett, along with the results it gave in combat. At the end of it, Brereton exchanged looks with Clagett.

"General Clagett, I want you to ensure that all our pilots know about these new tactics and put them into practice. From now on, getting suckered into a low-speed dogfight with a Japanese fighter will be considered by me to be an act of incompetence and will be treated accordingly. Also, Japanese bombers are to be considered at all times to be the top priority targets."

"The word will be passed, sir."

Brereton then turned back his attention on Villamor.

"In what state are your two planes, Captain?"

"They suffered multiple hits from 7.7 mm bullets but nothing vital was touched, except for my machineguns trigger wire, which was cut, resulting in my weapons jamming. Everything will be repaired by tomorrow morning, sir. We will then have two fully operational P-40s in Batangas."

"Excellent! I will thus let you go back now to Batangas, so that you could have a good night of rest and be ready for combat tomorrow morning. Dismissed!"

Getting up from their chairs, Jesus and Ingrid saluted in unison Brereton, then walked out of his office. The graying general was thoughtful for a moment, then looked at his watch and decided to call General MacArthur. Thankfully, Major General Sutherland, MacArthur's chief of staff, was not at the USAFFE headquarters anymore at this hour and thus did not block access to his commander, like he did way too often to protect his influence on MacArthur. Instead, the duty officer at the Manila headquarters patched him with MacArthur's suite, situated in the same requisitioned hotel than the USAFFE HQ. Brereton soon had the old general on the line.

"MacArthur!"

"General, this is Lewis Brereton, calling from Nielson Field. I am happy to announce to you that we now have our two first air aces of the war."

MacArthur's tone then changed immediately, indicating instant interest: anything that could be splashed on newspapers' front pages and which could make him or his command look good was always of prime interest to him, a trait Brereton knew too well. MacArthur actually took the time to get a notepad and a pencil before speaking again.

"What are their names and their victory scores, Lewis?"

"Captain Jesus Villamor, with six confirmed kills and one damaged, and First Lieutenant Ingrid Dows, with ten confirmed kills, as of this morning. Lieutenant Dows is thus a confirmed double ace. Captain Villamor and Lieutenant Dows were responsible for turning away by themselves the Japanese bomber force which tried to attack Cavite this morning, sir. I personally reviewed their gun camera films and I have to say that both their bravery and skills in air combat were extremely impressive. I intend in particular to put up Lieutenant Dows for the Congressional Medal of Honor, while Captain Villamor deserves at least the DSC in my opinion."

MacArthur was left speechless for a moment at the other end of the line, speaking hesitantly after a good five seconds.

"Ten confirmed victories? Damn, this girl is positively Hell's on wheels."

"She definitely is, General. I just spoke in person with her and Villamor, to discuss the tactics they used. She proved to be surprisingly mature and responsible for her age, I must say. I however called you mostly because of the potential impact on the American public her exploits may cause if and when they become known. In essence, she is making most of my other fighter pilots look like incompetents, even though she never got any formal training as a fighter pilot."

"Hum, you are right about the possible reactions in the United States. However, that girl, like Captain Villamor, earned her success the hard way and saved many lives in Cavite this morning. In fact, Admiral Hart called me earlier in the afternoon to pass a big thank you from the Navy about that aborted Japanese bomber raid. I will thus inform the press representatives about this tomorrow morning; Washington's opinion be damned. I will be awaiting your written recommendations for awards and I can assure you that I will back them up to the utmost. Maybe this will convince Washington to finally send us some more planes and pilots."

"I sure hope so as well, General. Uh, what are the chances that this could convince the Army to officially accept her as an officer and a fighter pilot?"

"That is unfortunately something that would need an act of Congress and the President's approval, Lewis. You know also as well as me the kind of reactions this would get from other generals in the Army. I wouldn't hold my breath about this. Let's just count ourselves lucky to have her as a Filipina fighter pilot."

"I understand, General. Well, I will now wish you a good night, sir."

"Thank you for the good news, Lewis: I will certainly sleep better because of them. Good night to you as well."

MacArthur then put down his receiver, imitated by Brereton. The latter reflected for a moment about the conversation he just had, then left his office, intent on going soon to sleep. Tomorrow was another day with good weather announced, which meant more incoming Japanese air attacks.

10:38 (Manila Time)

Tuesday, October 28, 1941 'C'

Batangas Airfield, Island of Luzon

Philippines

Tired and drenched in sweat but happy, Ingrid jumped down from her plane after it had been pushed back in its hiding place in the jungle tree line. She then made a visual inspection tour of her plane, sighing with relief at finding no damage or bullet holes in it. Her head mechanic also smiled on seeing that.

"Excellent, Lieutenant! With no damage to repair, we will now have the time today to paint over your plane the way you wanted. How did your mission go?"

"It was a piece of cake, Felix. Our repeated high-speed passes prevented the enemy dive bombers from dropping their bombs with any precision and I was able to confirm as well that ZERO fighters lose much of their agility at speeds above 320 miles per hour. One ZERO tried to follow me in a high-speed dive at over 400 miles per hour. I then performed a barrel roll and cut my speed to get on his tail. The pilot of that ZERO was then unable to use his ailerons, which were frozen stiff by the speed, and I was able to shoot him to pieces at will. I then shot down two VAL dive bombers, while Jesus also shot down two VALs."

The head mechanic's smile widened into a grin on hearing that.

"Then, this is decidedly a good day for the squadron."

"You can say that, Felix." said Jesus Villamor, who had just approached Ingrid's plane. "Ingrid, you should paint a name or a logo on your plane. A pilot as dangerous as you must have a name on his plane."

"Me, dangerous? What about you, Jesus?"

The Filipino pilot stared at her, suddenly very serious.

"Ingrid, believe me when I say this: I never saw before you someone with such a natural talent for flying that you have. You just completed your third combat mission and I can already detect major improvements in your air gunnery, which was deadly enough on your first mission. You also control your P-40 like a pro and I doubt very much that I could win a dogfight against you. To sum up my humble opinion, you have the potential to become the greatest air ace in the whole Pacific. Hell, you ARE already our top ace!"

"I will probably never have the chance to keep that title very long, Jesus." replied Ingrid in a bitter tone. "The Filipino Army Air Corps accepted me as a fighter pilot, but the United States Army will probably never accept me as such. By American law, women are barred from combat, or even from joining the Army, except as nurses."

"Your example may well change a few opinions in the United States, Ingrid. You may actually play an even more important role here than you think, after all."

"I hope with all my heart that you are right about that, Jesus."

"Then, let's go back to the subject of your plane's name. Have you thought of a name or logo yet, or of a nickname for you on the radio?"

"Uh, not really, Jesus."

"Well, we will take care of that quickly enough." said Jesus, smiling widely before shouting in Tagalog at the mechanics close by.

“HEY, GUYS! INGRID NEEDS A NAME FOR HER PLANE. ANY SUGGESTIONS?”

Ingrid reddened with embarrassment as the mechanics enthusiastically proposed various names, many of them rather spicy ones with sexual overtones. One armorer who had started to clean Ingrid’s machineguns then shouted a name that struck her imagination.

“Why not ‘Lady Hawk’? She has the piercing eyes and sharp claws of a falcon.”

“YES! I LOVE IT!” exclaimed Ingrid with enthusiasm. Jesus nodded his head, smiling.

“That’s you alright, Ingrid. You will thus be known from now on as ‘Lady Hawk’. Raphael will paint it on your nose once our new paint scheme is done. Now, let’s go fill our mission reports.”

Much later, at the end of the afternoon, Ingrid and Jesus went to their planes, which had been pushed out of their camouflaged spots so that they could be painted, to admire the new paint scheme which Ingrid had proposed, based on some of the pictures of modern jet fighters which she had been given as a gift by Nancy Laplante. Their P-40Es were now painted all over in a sort of dirty light gray, while their national Filipino insignias and plane numbers were painted in subdued black. A false cockpit had also been painted in black on the belly of the planes, under the real cockpit, in order to fool from a distance an enemy pilot about which way they were turning. Each plane also sported a personalized logo by now. While Ingrid’s fighter bore on each side of its engine the words ‘LADY HAWK’ in big pink letters outlined in black, Jesus’ plane sported the words ‘GRAY GHOST’ in large white letters. The two pilots stood still for a long moment while admiring their planes.

“I love this!” said Jesus, grinning, while still looking at his plane. “HEY, RAPHAEL! IS THE PAINT DRY YET? CAN WE STEP ON OUR PLANES NOW?”

“YOU CAN IF YOU WANT, CAPTAIN!” replied from twenty meters away the mechanic and designated artist painter of the squadron. “JUST DON’T LET THE JAPS SCRATCH YOUR NEW PAINT.”

Jesus and Ingrid laughed heartily at that. They were about to approach their planes to do a summary check of them when what looked like a convoy of civilian cars escorted by three armed jeeps and led by a big army staff car flying a red pennant with three stars on it rolled on the airfield. Jesus had one look at the staff car and tensed up.

“Uh oh! Here is General MacArthur and his traveling public relations circus. “EVERYBODY, STRAIGHTEN UP YOUR UNIFORMS! GENERAL MACARTHUR IS HERE!”

Ingrid, like Jesus, then quickly put on her forage cap and tucked her shirt properly in her pants, then came to attention.

MacArthur’s staff car soon stopped in front of them and their planes, with an aide opening the rear door for his commander while the convoy of civilian cars disgorged an army of press photographers and cameramen who ran to form a half circle in front of Jesus and Ingrid. The two pilots saluted as MacArthur stepped out of his car, with photographers starting already to take pictures of them and their planes. MacArthur saluted back, then walked ceremoniously to them, shaking the hand of Jesus.

“Captain Villamor, I am happy to finally be able to visit you at your airfield. Your squadron has truly accomplished miracles in the air.”

“Thank you, General. Your visit honors greatly my unit.” replied Jesus, not knowing what else to say on such an unannounced visit. MacArthur nodded, then shook hands with Ingrid, smiling to her and making sure that he spoke loud enough to be heard by all around him.

“And here is our new top air ace in the Pacific, Lieutenant Ingrid Dows. You now have a total of ten air victories up to now, I believe?”

“Ten confirmed ones, General. I have claimed as well a further three Japanese planes shot down this morning, but they have not yet been officially confirmed.” MacArthur turned sideways then to smile at the reporters and photographers.

“I am sure that these new victories will be promptly acknowledged in the official records. In the meantime, I came here to bring something for you and Captain Villamor. Major Stark!”

MacArthur’s aide stepped forward and took out of a briefcase carried by a sergeant two certificates and four small boxes, handing first one of the boxes to MacArthur, who faced the reporters and spoke up. His speech was relatively short but grandiose, describing yesterday’s air battle in heroic terms which were hard on Ingrid’s modesty. He however gave as much credit to Jesus as he did to her, something she appreciated. MacArthur finally had two citations read aloud and gave to both Jesus and Ingrid their second and first DSC, respectively, then promoted Jesus to major, while Ingrid was boosted to captain, all done in the name of President Quezon. The catch was however when

MacArthur pinned on Ingrid her new DSC and then turned towards the reporters to speak to them.

"This DSC to Captain Dows is however only provisional, as I will be forwarding to President Roosevelt a request that it be upgraded to a Congressional Medal of Honor, in view of the extraordinary heroism show in air combat by Captain Dows."

As many around gasped, a reporter then shouted a remark at MacArthur.

"But, no woman has ever won the Medal of Honor, or even the DSC, General."

"Valor is valor, irrespective of who shows it, and it will always be rewarded by me." replied the old general. "As collective valor goes, I am also pleased to announce that President Quezon has decided to reward today the exceptional services in combat of the 6th Pursuit Squadron with the Philippines Presidential Unit Citation. I, as commander of both American and Filipino army forces in the Philippines, can only say to the personnel of the 6th Pursuit Squadron: well done and thank you!"

MacArthur then ceremoniously saluted the personnel of the squadron and shook hands one last time with Jesus and Ingrid before getting back in his staff car and leaving. That however left the two pilots at the mercy of the reporters. Ingrid tensed up and whispered to Jesus as the correspondents and photographers rushed at them to be first to ask them questions.

"Incoming!"

15:28 (Washington Time) / 02:28 (Manila Time)

Wednesday, October 29, 1941 'C' (Washington) / October 30 (Manila)

Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt stared with shock at the large picture on the front page of the newspaper brought by his military chief of staff, Admiral Leahy.

"A woman fighter pilot, and our top air ace to boot? How could this be?"

Lieutenant General Henry 'Hap' Arnold, Commander of the Army Air Corps, who had come along with Leahy, Admiral Stark, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox and Secretary of War Stimson, answered him with some hesitation.

"She actually enlisted with the Filipino Army Air Corps, which allowed her to circumscribe all American regulations about the non-employment of women as fighter

pilots, Mister President. She is however still an American citizen and the wife of an American officer serving in the Philippines.”

“And the top air ace part, General, how do you explain it?” replied in a critical tone the President, sitting in his wheelchair behind his desk. “We have our own Army Air Corps fighter pilots, formed and trained at great expense here in the United States, who are being decimated by the Japanese fighters and can barely hold their own. On the other hand, if I can believe this newspaper, we have a teenage girl with a civilian pilot’s license but no formal military training at all, who is chewing the Japanese and spitting them out while nearly making it look easy. What the hell is wrong with that picture, General Arnold? What do you think that the American public or the Congress will think of that?”

Arnold didn’t answer at once, being deeply embarrassed by Roosevelt’s question, which he had to recognize was a most valid one.

“Uh, Mister President, I did speak yesterday by submarine telephone cable with Major General Lewis Brereton, our air commander in the Philippines. He gave me a few details about that young Ingrid Dows, who by the way has now a confirmed total of seventeen Japanese planes shot down as of yesterday night. She actually had some prior military training and experience...with the German Luftwaffe. She is also the adopted daughter of the late Nancy Laplante, Mister President.”

Roosevelt, who had met at length Nancy Laplante during her visit to Washington last December, put down the newspaper he was holding and stared at Arnold.

“Go on, General.”

“Well, while it is true that Dows was not formally trained as a fighter pilot, she did benefit from the knowledge and experience of top German air aces serving around her in France. The main thing however, according to Brereton, is that she is applying the lessons from the future which her adoptive mother gave her concerning this war, including how to exploit the Japanese planes weaknesses to outfly them. She is also supposedly a born pilot and an extremely accurate shot in air combat.”

“So, this girl is applying the lessons and knowledge Laplante brought to us, but our pilots don’t. Is that it?”

Arnold cringed under the angry glare of the President.

“Until two days ago, yes, Mister President. General Brereton has however told in no uncertain terms to his fighter pilots to use Dows’ tactics, or else. It seems that our present fighter doctrine and tactics are nearly useless and need to be completely

revised. I have directed that such reviews be started at once, using the lessons learned in the Philippines.”

“And what about that girl?” said Roosevelt, pointing at Ingrid’s picture on the front page of the newspaper. “Up to now, the Army, Navy and the Congress have all refused to follow the example of the British, who are now employing women by the thousands in nearly every military trade and seemingly doing quite well despite of that. Could that girl, who is a legal American citizen, be enrolled in our own air corps, especially in view of her phenomenal successes?”

“Legally, she can’t, Mister President. To be completely honest, even if we somehow managed to find a way to enroll her in the Army Air Corps, she would probably end up being subjected to an intolerable level of harassment of all kind from officers resenting the idea of having female fighter pilots.”

Roosevelt, even if he didn’t like that last statement from Arnold, had to agree with him.

“So, we may have a winning ticket in the Philippines in the person of that girl, but we can’t use it ourselves because of ingrained misogyny? Great!”

“Uh, while we are still talking about her, Mister President, General Brereton informed me that General MacArthur is forwarding to you a request to award Dows the Congressional Medal of Honor, for the way she and her leader turned around a Japanese bomber formation heading towards the Cavite Navy Yards. Admiral Hart is said to be warmly supporting that award request.”

“The Medal of Honor, for a girl? Are you nuts, Hap?” exclaimed in a horrified tone Admiral Stark, the Chief of Naval Operations. Before Arnold could reply to that, Roosevelt cut him off by answering himself in a harsh tone.

“Nancy Laplante won three times the Victoria Cross, a medal that is easily an equal to our Medal of Honor, Admiral Stark. I had and still have a profound admiration for that incredibly brave and capable woman and I find your prejudiced view on this quite myopic, if not to say downright stupid. Should I remind you of the cost to the Navy and this nation of having ignored Laplante’s advice concerning the defense of Pearl Harbor? Are you again ready to prejudice the nation because you oppose the service of women, Admiral? If you do, then I will expect your immediate resignation. We have a war to win, a war that is shaping up to be both costly and lengthy, and we will need to use all the resources at our disposal, including the service of women if need be.”

“Are you considering having women serve on warships, Mister President?”

“On warships, no! But in an isolated, cocooned environment such as found on airfields, why not? General Arnold, I want you to study the question of eventually enrolling and employing female aviators, including as fighter pilots and bomber crews, like the British do, and to submit a report to me on the subject, so that I could approach the Congress with an appropriate law proposal. Consult also the Hourglass files received from Laplante last December to see what they say about military service by women. It may tell us about potential problems to watch for about that subject and how to avoid them. Admiral Leahy, once you will have received that award proposal for Dows from MacArthur, prepare a certificate for my signature.”

“It will be done, Mister President.”

“Good! Now, let’s discuss what we could do to help our men in the Philippines resist the Japanese.”

The discussion that followed proved to be both long and frustrating to Roosevelt, with little being truly decided by the end of the meeting.

20:13 (Manila Time)

Thursday, October 30, 1941 ‘C’

The Dows’ residence, Manila

Philippines

Ken’s heart accelerated when he arrived at his bungalow and found a Filipino Army jeep parked in front of it. His fatigue evaporated at once and he entered his house at a near run.

“INGRID, YOU’RE HOME?”

At first glance, he saw only Julia and Juanita and their families in the lounge, listening to a local radio station. He smiled to them briefly and was about to rush to his bedroom when Ingrid appeared to him at the corner of the hallway, smiling. She was wearing her combat uniform and Ken was able to see her new rank insignias on her collar, as well as the medal ribbons pinned to her shirt.

“A captain? And with the Distinguished Flying Cross added to your DSC?”

“Yup! General MacArthur promoted me on Tuesday, apart from giving me the DSC. I got the DFC yesterday, for shooting a ZERO and two VALs. My total in the air now stands at sixteen victories.”

Ken’s eyes glowed with pride as he glued himself to her for a kiss.

“When I think that I married our first air ace. Nancy would be proud of you.”

They then exchanged a long kiss before Ingrid took one step back and grabbed his hand, leading him towards the bedroom.

“Let’s forget the war tonight, Ken. I only have a short permission and I have to be back in Batangas by tomorrow morning. Let’s use our time well in the meantime.”

06:59 (Manila Time)

Tuesday, November 4, 1941 ‘C’

American submarine USS SARGO

On patrol 720 kilometers east of Manila, in the Central Pacific

The captain of the USS SARGO, one of the submarines of the Asiatic Fleet on patrol off the Philippines, didn’t know if he should scream with joy or cry with despair as he looked through his periscope. His radar had warned him thirty minutes ago, while he was cruising on the surface, of the approach of a large group of fast ships heading Southwest towards the Philippines. He had then ordered his submarine to dive to periscope depth, while slowing down to silent running. Now, his caution had paid off, handsomely. With his boat chief standing beside him and holding an opened ships recognition book, he inspected the long triple file of warships about to pass him.

“Exo⁷, write the following message down for immediate transmission in clear to the Asiatic Fleet headquarters, with info copy to the Pacific Fleet headquarters. Start with our actual position. From USS SARGO, have detected a large group of enemy ships heading Southwest on heading 220 at 25 knots. Made visual contact with Japanese Combined Fleet at 06:57, Manila time. Following ships identified in order of progression: battleships KIRISHIMA, HIEI, NAGATO and MUTSU heading triple file of ships; fleet carriers AKAGI, KAGA, ZUIKAKU, SHOKAKU, HIRYU and SORYU; escort screen made of heavy cruisers TONE, CHIKUMA, TAKAO, ATAGO, MAYA and CHOKAI, plus six AGANO-class light cruisers and fourteen FUBUKI-class destroyers. Repeat the message at intervals until you receive confirmation of receipt from Asiatic Fleet.”

⁷ Exo: Term used in the U.S. Navy to designate the second in command of a ship, or Executive Officer.

The Exo, like the other men in the cramped control room of the submarine, looked wide-eyed at his captain.

"My God! This is what I call hitting the jackpot, Captain. These ships must be the ones who attacked Pearl Harbor. Are you sure that you want to send this message in clear, Captain? The Japanese will know that we are here if they intercept our message."

The captain of the USS SARGO looked with a resolute expression at his executive officer.

"The Japanese will know very soon that we are here anyway. Send that message immediately and advise me the moment that we receive confirmation. This may be the most important message we will ever send in this war."

"Right away, Captain."

As his exo hurried towards the radio compartment, the captain returned his attention on the view from his periscope and gave a series of curt orders.

"Torpedo Officer, prepare all tubes for firing. Have your men ready to reload them immediately once the first salvo is fired. Turn starboard, ten degrees! Raise speed to seven knots! We will try to slip between two of the heavy cruisers of the screen, then will approach the carriers."

The next ten minutes were very tense, with all the American sailors most conscious of the risks they were now taking. The exo then returned in the control room to speak to his captain.

"Captain, the headquarters of the Asiatic Fleet have confirmed receipt of our message, as did the Pacific Fleet headquarters."

"Perfect! We will try to torpedo the SHOKAKU, then will dive to a depth of one hundred feet and let ourselves float down the lineup as the Japanese ships pass by. With all the noise from these big carriers, their escort destroyers should be unable to hear us on their sonar. Then, if we are lucky, we will attempt a second attack."

"Understood, Captain!" replied the exo, his heart accelerating.

After another two minutes, the captain judged from his calculations to be in the optimum situation for his attack and raised again his periscope. His heart jumped in his chest when he saw that the port flank of the SHOKAKU, barely 300 yards away, filled the field of view of his periscope. He then gave the order that all had been waiting for.

“STEADY ON COURSE! FIRE TUBES ONE TO FOUR!”

The submarine shuddered as compressed air ejected the torpedoes in the four forward tubes. The captain then gave the order to immediately turn 180 degrees to port and fired his four aft tubes in succession, watching the boat's compass as he did to spread out his four aft torpedoes. The last of the eight torpedoes was barely out of its tube when four powerful explosions were heard in quick succession, making the American sailors scream with joy. The captain didn't waste time in giving more orders then.

“DIVE TO ONE HUNDRED FEET! TURN PORT, HEADING 060! SLOW DOWN TO SILENT RUNNING!”

Less than a minute later, three more explosions were heard through the submarine's hull, making the captain smile with satisfaction.

“With seven torpedoes in his belly, the captain of the SHOKAKU must have one hell of a stomach ache now. Let's drift quietly down the line of Japanese ship for a few minutes, then we will go back to periscope depth to see if any ship stopped or slowed down to give assistance to the SHOKAKU.”

With the machinery noise from the big Japanese warships reverberating inside the submarine as they dispersed in one big hurry, the captain was quite certain that there was no way that the escorting destroyers could hear him on their sonar. His suspicion was confirmed when the explosions of dozens of depth charges were heard, at least a few hundred meters to his aft. He then smiled to his sailors to reassure them.

“The Japs are depth-charging blind. They don't know where we are. Torpedo Officer, how is the reloading of our tubes going?”

“Tubes one, two, five and six are now reloaded and ready, Captain. The other tubes will be all reloaded in five minutes.”

“Good! Helm, turn starboard to heading 220 but stay at present depth and speed. We will listen to see if anyone slowed down to help the SHOKAKU.”

“Aye, Captain!”

After another four minutes, the chief sonar operator's voice came on the intercom.

“Captain, I have two contacts on heading 220 which are slowing down considerably. I also have noises of steel bulkheads giving up.”

“I knew it!” said triumphantly the captain. “Any sign of a destroyer actively pinging for us?”

"Four destroyers are pinging, but they are actually sailing away from us, Captain."

"Perfect! Helm, steer to 205 and raise speed to five knots. Let's put ourselves on the port flank of the SHOKAKU and of those two rescuing ships."

After a further twenty minutes at slow speed, and guided by the reports from his sonar operators, the captain had his submarine go back up to periscope depth and anxiously looked through his optics the moment the periscope head broke the surface. He smiled at the sight that greeted him.

"The SHOKAKU is listing heavily to port and is in fact close to capsizing: it is finished! There is also one light cruiser and one destroyer alongside its port flank, probably taking on survivors from the carrier. Helm, steer to heading 352 and reduce speed to three knots. Torpedo Officer, stand by to fire all forward tubes... Steady as she goes!... FIRE ALL FORWARD TUBES!"

Again, the noise of compressed air and shudders told him that his four torpedoes had hit the water. Again, he ordered a half-turn to point his aft tubes while still watching the three Japanese ships through his periscope. He started to feel worry when the Japanese destroyer which had stopped alongside the sinking carrier suddenly broke away and accelerated while turning towards him, passing besides the still stopped light cruiser: the Japanese must have spotted his periscope. Then, as in a miracle, a geyser of water erupted against the hull of the destroyer, half raising it out of the water, while three more geysers erupted against the flank of the light cruiser. The captain whooped with savage joy at that sight.

"WE GOT BOTH THE DESTROYER AND THE LIGHT CRUISER! LET'S FINISH THE SHOKAKU! TORPEDO OFFICER, FIRE OUR AFT TUBES IN A SPREAD, NOW!"

"AYE, CAPTAIN!... ALL AFT TUBES NOW FIRED! IMPACT DUE IN TWENTY SECONDS."

The results from those four torpedoes were nothing less than dramatic. Shaken by three more explosions, the carrier SHOKAKU's list to port quickly got more severe, with the 32,000-ton ship finally capsizing and then sinking by the bow. The fourth torpedo hit the already gravely damaged light cruiser, breaking it in two, while the destroyer slowly sank by the bow. All the while, the captain took pictures with a camera through his periscope, to substantiate his victory claims and document the end of the Japanese ships. For

good measure, he fired two more torpedoes at the destroyer once his forward tubes were reloaded again, giving the coup de grace to the destroyer. The captain was all smile when he gave his next set of orders.

"Helm, steer to 220, make your speed six knots and dive to fifty feet. Once out of sight of those sinking ships, we will surface and recharge our batteries while trailing the rest of the Japanese fleet. With luck, we will be able to catch them later."

The USS SARGO was not able to catch up to Kido Butai, Admiral Nagumo's force, but it caught a day later Nagumo's resupply flotilla as it hurried to join up with the surviving five fleet carriers and their escorts. Expending his last torpedoes, the captain of the American submarine managed to sink a precious oiler ship and an ammunition ship before retiring back to Cavite for rearming and refueling. The crew was met on the Cavite docks by a thankful Admiral Hart and a crate of bourbon bottles, plus the news that they had earned a Presidential Unit Citation.

14:39 (Manila Time)

Batangas Airfield

Philippines

Jesus Villamor was sitting near his plane, on which six mechanics worked frantically to repair the damages received during the air battle of the morning over Manila Bay, when his operations sergeant ran out of the pilots' hut and shouted at the top of his lungs.

"ENEMY AIR RAID CROSSING THE EAST COAST NEAR SAN FERNANDO, HEADING FOR CLARK FIELD!"

"DAMNATION!" exclaimed Jesus, furious. "They sure chose their timing well." Turning his head towards his chief mechanic, he was going to ask him if his plane would be ready soon but the burly NCO shook his head, anticipating his question.

"No way that you can take off with that radiator leak, Captain. It will take at least another hour to repair, plus we have to replace the rudder's command cable, which was half cut by a bullet. I'm sorry, Captain, but you will have to wait out that battle."

"DAMN, DAMN, DAMN!" said Jesus, frustrated, before looking at Ingrid's plane, barely visible through the trees separating their two plane hideouts. Ingrid was already

stepping inside her cockpit to take off in a hurry. Running to her plane, Jesus arrived near her just before she started her engine.

"My plane is still unserviceable. You will have to take off alone, Ingrid."

The teenager gave him a wide smile and a thumbs up to reassure him, then started her engine. She was rolling out of her hiding spot less than a minute later and took off, followed by the eyes of the Filipino ground crews. Ingrid's crew chief watched her take off with gleaming eyes as he stood beside Jesus.

"What a girl! She is indeed a lady hawk."

Having already flown many interception missions towards Clark Field in the past days, Ingrid did not need to consult her map to navigate. Knowing that the Japanese favored approaching at high altitude, Ingrid put her P-40E in a slow, progressive climb towards its ceiling of 8,700 meters. The P-40E being a poor performer in terms of climbing, she barely had time to attain her top ceiling before coming within sight of Clark Field. By now, her attention was however on a number of black smoke trails far away in the sky to the East, which told her that an air battle was already in progress. The few American fighter planes still left in the Philippines had seemingly already intercepted the Japanese force. Ingrid thus decided to post herself above a point a few kilometers east of Clark Field, to intercept any group of bombers which would break through the American fighters. She then tried to contact the fighter controller in Nielson Field but found the frequency jammed with excited shouts and exclamations from the young pilots who were presently engaging the Japanese. Sighing with frustration at that fresh example of the typical lack of radio discipline among American fighter pilots, Ingrid finally decided to contact the control tower of Clark Field instead.

"Clark Control, this is Papa Two, over!"

"Go ahead, Papa Two." Said a male voice after her second call.

"From Papa Two: I am now five miles east of your airfield and will orbit there to intercept any Japanese bomber coming through. I will advise you if any of them show up. In exchange, could you warn your gunners of my presence, over?"

"Will do, Papa Two! How many fighters do you have with you, over?"

"I am alone, Clark Control."

There was a moment of silence on the radio before she got a reply.

"Uh, understood, Papa Two. Good luck!"

"Thank you, Clark Control. Over and out!"

Soon, Ingrid saw in the distant sky something that froze her blood.

"Clark Control, this is Papa Two, urgent message! Enemy planes now about ten miles east of your airfield. I can now see two successive waves of Japanese planes, with about one hundred planes per wave. KATE bombers are forming the first wave at an altitude of 22,000 feet, followed by a wave of VAL dive bombers at an altitude of 25,000 feet. I can also see about forty ZERO fighters at 27,000 feet. They will be over your airfield in less than three minutes, over."

She nearly heard the air controller swallow hard before he replied.

"Understood, Papa Two. We will send our personnel to the shelters. You better get out of the way yourself before being swept out of the sky, over."

Ingrid knew that the suggestion from the air controller was full of common sense: no sane pilot was supposed to attack alone 240 enemy planes. She also knew that very few senior officers would take that against her if she decided to withdraw. She however could not in good conscience let the way opened to the enemy without doing anything.

"Negative, Clark Control! I will do my best to disrupt the aim of the enemy bombers. Papa Two out!"

On the ground, an observation post of the 200th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment was observing nervously the approach of the Japanese with its binoculars and a stereoscopic rangefinder on tripod. A young American lieutenant cranked the handle of his field telephone to contact the command post of Clark Field and spoke in the receiver.

"Hello, CP? This is OP Number Three. We have two massive waves of Japanese bombers on approach from the East at over 20,000 feet, with fighters on top cover. I evaluate the enemy force at over 200 planes. The leading bombers are now three miles southeast of my position... Uh, one moment!"

Covering his receiver with one hand, the lieutenant shouted at his sergeant, who was watching the Japanese plane through binoculars.

"HEY, SARGE, THE CP IS ASKING IF WE SEE ONE OF OUR FIGHTERS ABOVE US."

The NCO, originating like most of his comrades from New-Mexico, looked around the sky for a moment before freezing to follow a single dot in the sky.

"I have it, Lieutenant! It's a P-40 and he is diving alone on the VALs of the second wave. This guy is either completely nuts or he is the bravest sonovabitch I ever saw."

The lieutenant relayed that information, less the last remark of the sergeant, getting in return a directive.

"...Understood, Major! SERGEANT, KEEP AN EYE ON THAT P-40 AND TELL ME WHAT HE DOES. CORPORAL MARTINEZ, GET ME A COUNT OF THE JAPANESE PLANES BY TYPE."

"YES, LIEUTENANT!"

The sergeant spoke again a few seconds later.

"The ZEROs just saw our P-40, with six Japs diving on him. If this guy does not leave now, he is cooked... The P-40 is now above the second wave of bombers and is turning to its right... He is lining up to fly down the left wing of the wave... He is opening fire... YES! ONE VAL IS ON FIRE!... The ZEROs are now behind him but this guy is diving hard and they can't seem to be able to follow him... POW, IN THE KISSER! ANOTHER VAL JUST EXPLODED!... This guy is a real ace! He is now turning while diving and is going towards the KATEs of the first wave, with the ZEROs still in pursuit." As his sergeant commented the air battle, the lieutenant relayed his account by telephone to Clark Field in more sober words.

"... Our P-40 is now going down the left wing of the first wave of bombers... He's firing... ONE KATE IS HIT! ITS ENGINE IS ON FIRE AND... A SECOND KATE JUST LOST A WING AND IS FALLING DOWN. Our pilot has now bagged four Japanese planes but the ZEROs must be really mad at him. He is now turning back towards the second wave and picking up speed. The ZEROs still seem unable to catch up with him... Our P-40 is now climbing and is firing again. ONE MORE VAL CAUGHT FIRE!"

"Christ!" said one corporal near the lieutenant. "One against 200 and he still managed to shoot down five Japs? This guy is incredible."

"He's not finished yet, José." replied the sergeant, his eyes still glued to his binoculars. "He is now turning back again and diving at the ZEROs pursuing him... HOLY SHIT! HE JUST EXPLODED ONE ZERO! I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS GUY!... SHIT! HE'S NOW GOT BLACK SMOKE COMING OUT OF HIS ENGINE... HE'S HOWEVER STILL DIVING BACK ON THE KATES OF THE FIRST WAVE... His engine is now clearly on fire. He better parachute out now if he wants to survive this fight... MY GOD!"

HE RAMMED ONE OF THE KATES! Both planes are now falling in flames. I don't see any parachute opening."

The artillery lieutenant, like many of his men, lowered his head in silent tribute to the brave P-40 pilot, then passed the news by telephone. The surviving ZEROs were climbing back to their original positions when Corporal Martinez announced the result of his count.

"Lieutenant, I can count 96 remaining KATEs in the first wave and 93 VALs in the second wave, plus 39 ZEROs on top cover."

The young officer passed that information along and was about to put down his receiver when he saw a parachute pop open less than 300 meters above his observation post and about 500 meters away, making the lieutenant nearly shout in his receiver.

"OUR P-40 PILOT WAS ABLE TO JUMP. HE IS GOING TO LAND NEAR US... Yes, Major! With pleasure!"

Putting down his receiver, the lieutenant blew a loud whistle towards two mounted soldiers of the Philippine Scouts who were waiting on their horses near the OP, ready to relay messages if need be.

"HEY, GUYS! FOLLOW THAT PARACHUTE AND BRING ME OUR PILOT."

"SI, LIEUTENANT!" replied one of the scouts before spurring his horse forward and leave at a gallop, followed by his comrade. In the meantime, the guns defending Clark Field had opened a dense, murderous fire on the Japanese planes, their proximity-fused 75 mm shells exploding among the KATEs of the first wave. One, two, then three KATEs were hit in succession, falling in flames or breaking up in midair before they could drop their bombs. The anti-aircraft guns were still firing at maximum rate, sending over 200 shells per minute in the sky, as the KATEs started lobbing their bombs all over the airfield. Most of those bombs however simply created craters in the ground. The light bomb load capacity of the Japanese planes, combined with the spoiling effect of the fire from the guns, helped limit the damages to the airfield. However, the bombs from the following VAL dive bombers proved more accurate and destroyed or put on fire many hangars and buildings, apart from hitting one of the fuel dumps of Clark Field. Seven VALs paid for that, shot down by the combined fire of the 75 mm and 37 mm guns and of the .50 caliber heavy machineguns of the 200th Regiment. Once out of bombs, the Japanese air armada then turned back and withdrew towards the East, leaving the shaken Americans to look over the damage to their airfield.

The young lieutenant at the OP was looking anxiously at the fires on the base when the two scouts came back at a trot, one passenger sitting behind the leading scout's saddle. The young officer hurried to them, closely followed by his sergeant, only to see with disbelief that the pilot was a young woman. The latter was wincing with pain and seemed to have been burned to her back, neck and left arm. The leading scout saluted the lieutenant before asking him a question.

"We picked up Lady Hawk, Lieutenant, but she is seriously burned. Do you want us to bring her to the infirmary of Clark Field?"

"Yes, but just a moment, please." answered the lieutenant before approaching the pilot, a beautiful teenager with reddish-brown hair whose face was now darkened by smoke.

"You were fantastic up there, miss. Can I have your name, rank and unit, so that your airfield can be advised that you are alive?"

"Captain Ingrid Dows, 6th Pursuit Squadron of the Filipino Army Air Corps, based in Batangas." answered the girl, clenching her teeth in order not to moan with pain. The lieutenant noted down that information, then came to attention and saluted her.

"Your unit will be advised without delay, Captain. Corporal, you can now bring her to the base infirmary...gently."

"Si, Lieutenant!"

19:15 (Manila Time)

Infirmary of Clark Field

Major General Lewis Brereton looked around with sadness at the crowded room of the infirmary serving the airfield. While casualties could have been much higher, the number of dead and wounded was still too much for his overwhelmed, suffering command. The pilots from the 24th Pursuit Group had done their best to stop the Japanese before they could arrive over Clark Field but had to face nearly sixty ZERO fighters. They still had managed to shoot down five of the ZEROs and eleven of the bombers, but at the cost of seven of their P-40s and four pilots confirmed dead. One of the 34th Pursuit Squadron's pilots who had bailed out was here, wounded, and Brereton had the firm intention to shake his hand, as well as the hand of another fighter pilot who had done the impossible today. He, like his aide, Captain Norman Lewellyn, came to attention and saluted as two stretcher bearers passed by them, carrying out of the

infirmary a body covered with a bloodied blanket. The general and his aide then slowly walked down the central alley of the ward, talking with the wounded and attempting to raise their morale. Brereton, who knew by sight and name the few fighter pilots left in his command, stopped finally at the foot of the stretcher occupied by Lieutenant Ralph Carey, whose left upper leg sported a wide, blood-soaked bandage. Brereton started by shaking his hand after crouching besides him, smiling to the young pilot.

"You and the other pilots of your squadron did a magnificent job today, Lieutenant Carey. What is your personal score in air combat now?"

"I have three confirmed victories, General." answered the pilot in a tired but proud voice. "I shot down one ZERO today, but his wingmen didn't appreciate. I was able to damage one but his buddy nailed me before I could finish him."

Brereton, a veteran pilot from World War One, smiled on hearing that account.

"I'm sure that you will find that Japanese again one day and teach him a lesson, Lieutenant. How is your leg?"

"The doctor told me that a 7.7 mm bullet went through the muscles of my leg but didn't touch the bone. I should be back in a cockpit in a few weeks at most, General. We will get more planes, General, will we?"

"New planes are already on their way by sea towards Australia, where we will establish a training and conversion center for fighter pilots. I have given orders so that the wounded pilots, aircrews and ground support crews be evacuated by air to Australia, for treatment and recuperation. They will then be reorganized into a new, provisional unit. You should be on your way to Darwin in two days at the most, Lieutenant."

"And her, General?" asked timidly Carey while pointing at another stretcher three meters away. "Will she also get another plane?"

Brereton looked in that direction and saw a young woman lying down on her belly, her torso bare but still wearing combat trousers and boots. A medic was busy delicately applying bandages to large burns covering her left arm, neck and part of her back. The girl was evidently suffering a lot but was clenching her teeth to keep silent, her eyes closed. Brereton looked at her for a moment before returning his eyes on Carey.

"Captain Dows will also get another plane, Lieutenant. We can't waste such a good fighter pilot. I will see you on your departure for Darwin, Lieutenant. Again, congratulation for your heroic stance in the air."

"Thank you, General." replied proudly the pilot.

Brereton and his aide spoke with two more wounded before stopping at the foot of Ingrid's stretcher. The general then contemplated the teenager, thoughtful. According to all American regulations, she should not be wearing a combat uniform and, even less, be a fighter pilot. However, she had proven the hard way that she was not only worthy of being a fighter pilot, but that she was also made of the stuff of great aces. Apart from being by far the top allied air ace in the Pacific, her seven victories of today, which had been confirmed by numerous witness accounts from gunners and observers of the 200th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment, put her total at 29 air victories. She had thus broken the old record of 26 victories held until now by the great Eddie Rickenbacker in 1917 and was now the top American air ace of all times. Her incredible courage, shown again when she had attacked alone over 240 enemy planes, also put her in a class apart. From what he had heard recently from the United States, her name was now making many around the country question the conventional wisdom that women didn't belong as combat pilots, while many Air Corps generals could be described as being in a state of near denial concerning her case. However, as much as those generals and many politicians didn't like it, she had to be employed as a fighter pilot, for the greater good of the country.

Brereton was about to speak to Ingrid when General MacArthur, followed by his usual public relations circus act, entered the infirmary. Someone then shouted an order that made the medics present come to attention. MacArthur looked with big eyes at the one who had shouted the order.

"Sergeant, this is an infirmary, not a parade square. You don't expect all these brave men to get up from their stretchers, are you?"

"Uh, no, General." answered the sergeant, embarrassed, before making himself rare. MacArthur then started to inspect the wounded one by one, talking briefly with each of them and also distributing at the same time Purple Hearts⁸, of which an aide carried a box-full, while another aide noted down the names, units and serial numbers of the recipients, so that official lists could be made afterwards. A sizeable group of civilian reporters and photographers, along with two Army photographers, were following MacArthur, taking picture after picture. Brereton didn't like this egomaniacal aspect of his commander, but he had to concede that he was a competent strategist and a strong-

⁸ Purple Heart: American decoration given to personnel wounded or killed in combat, irrespective of rank or occupation.

willed commander. Brereton saluted him when he arrived near Ingrid's stretcher. MacArthur returned his salute, then looked down at the teenager, who was still lying on her bare belly but had opened her eyes.

"Captain Dows, you would have made your adoptive mother proud today."

The compliment made Ingrid smile.

"Thank you, General. I however only did my duty, like all those brave men around me."

"Well said, Captain. How are your wounds?"

The Army doctor in charge of the infirmary, who was anxiously following MacArthur, took on him to answer.

"She sustained first and second degree burns to parts of her back, to her neck and to her left arm, General. Her burns are painful but superficial and she will be able to pilot again in a few weeks. She will however be left with some permanent scars."

MacArthur looked again at Ingrid, truly saddened to see such a brave and beautiful girl in such a state.

"Captain Dows, I suppose that you realize that, with a total of 29 air victories, you are now officially the top American air ace of all times, dethroning Eddie Rickenbacker, who had 26 air victories?"

Many of the civilian reporters, who had not realized that, scribbled frantically in their notebooks or took pictures of her. Ingrid then answered MacArthur in a subdued voice.

"I know it, General, but is the American public or government ready to accept it? Are they ready to follow the example of the British, who took the counsels of Nancy Laplante and are now using women fully in the war effort? You know that I am able to pilot a fighter only through the good graces of President Quezon, and that the American Army Air Corps would not accept me, even now."

"Many things could be arranged with some good will, Captain. For the moment, I am more than happy to have you as a Filipino Air Corps fighter pilot and I consider your services as such to be essential to my command and to the defense of the Philippines. I thus can assure you that you will get another fighter plane as soon as you are healed. I can also assure you that your incredible bravery and devotion to duty shown today will be rewarded properly. Captain!"

The aide carrying the box of Purple Hearts stepped forward, letting MacArthur fish out a Purple Heart, which he then pinned to Ingrid's pillow, near her head, before coming to attention and saluting her.

"Again, I wish you a prompt recovery, Captain."

Ingrid saluted back the best she could without exposing her naked chest.

"Thank you, General."

MacArthur, satisfied with himself, then made a last public gesture and looked at an aide while giving an order that all could hear.

"Lewis, make sure that Captain Dows gets a new combat uniform with the appropriate insignias and award ribbons. If a quartermaster refuses to give you a combat uniform for this air heroin, then you have my benediction to boot his ass."

"Understood, General!"

MacArthur then quickly concluded his visit and left with his followers, leaving Ingrid with Brereton, his aide and a pair of reporters. The man in the couple of reporters smiled to Ingrid, his camera in his hands, while the woman stood ready to take notes.

"Uh, could we ask you a few questions, Captain? I'm Melville Jacoby, of the TIME-LIFE MAGAZINE, and this is my friend Annalee Whitmore, of the LIBERTY MAGAZINE."

Ingrid winced as the medic treating her put on a new piece of bandage, then nodded her head.

"I remember you. Go ahead, Mister Jacoby."

"Well, you must realize that your case is rather exceptional, not to say unique, in American military history. It is also quite controversial in the United States. Could you tell me what makes you able to be a top fighter pilot, an occupation considered to be strictly for men?"

"Mister Jacoby, nothing makes women inapt to serve as fighter pilots, contrary to the many tired and untrue beliefs held on that subject. The Soviets presently use women as combat pilots in at least three air regiments, and even use many as snipers on the battlefield. In Nancy Laplante's time, in 2012, many air forces used female fighter pilots with great success. As for me personally, I possess a very acute eyesight, have excellent eye-hand coordination, a good sense of equilibrium and am in good physical shape. I am also said to have a rare natural talent for flying. I also learned in the past from a number of air aces in Europe, but the main thing is that I use the strengths of my plane as well as the weaknesses of the Japanese planes."

Annalee Whitmore then jumped in with a question of her own.

"Captain, why did you want to become a fighter pilot?"

"First, I love flying. I started flying on gliders at the age of twelve and was hooked on flying at once. Second, being a fighter pilot means to be able to fly the fastest and best performing planes in existence. Thirdly, as a fighter pilot, I am in a position which allows me to defend thousands of persons from enemy bombers and fighters. That last reason, more than anything else, motivates me to give my best in the sky of the Philippines."

"Captain, many in the United States, including my own editor, say that it is immoral to let a woman fight, that women are too precious for the country to be risked on the frontlines." said Jacoby, trying to elicit a reaction from her. He was not disappointed, as Ingrid shot him a sharp look and raised her tone of voice.

"I'm too precious to be risked on the frontlines because I am a woman? And what do you think about all those young men here in this infirmary? That their lives are not as equally precious? Go tell such a stupid thing to the mothers of these men and you will see what they will tell you. Excuse my choice of words, but their asses are as precious as mine in my eyes. What is truly immoral is to demean the death of a man compared to that of a woman. Look at this man to my right! Take a picture of me and him, both on our stretchers, and publish it while asking which one of us is more precious in the eyes of the parents of that young man."

Even Brereton was shaken as he looked at the young American, who was at most twenty years old and was covered with bloody bandages. Seen under that angle, many arguments against the military use of women became questionable, to say the least. The other wounded men in the infirmary were not saying a word then while staring at Ingrid, some with grave expressions, others looking grateful. Mel Jacoby then took multiple pictures of Ingrid and of the young soldier. For good effect, Ingrid also added to the dramatic flair of the pictures by holding the left hand of the soldier while smiling gently to him. Once his photos were taken, Mel thanked Ingrid and left with Annalee. Brereton nodded in approval at Ingrid.

"Captain Dows, I think that you just nailed one of the realities of war in a way I am not about to forget. I will await with impatience your return at the commands of a fighter. Good night and good luck."

Ken was next to show up forty minutes later, mad with worry. Nearly running to her stretcher, he kissed her passionately before speaking.

"My God, Ingrid! You really scared me today."

Ingrid smiled to him, trying to reassure him.

“And you think that I was not scared up there, faced with all these Japanese planes?”

Ken then eyed with sadness her burns, now covered with bandages or antiseptic cream.

“What did the doctor say about your wounds, Ingrid?”

“I got first and second-degree burns, but they are superficial and will heal in a few weeks. General Brereton told me that I am going to be shipped to Australia for treatment, along with other wounded pilots. General MacArthur also visited me and promised me another fighter plane, apart from giving me a Purple Heart. By the way, I now have 29 confirmed air victories and beat the old record held by Eddie Rickenbacker. You are now married to the top American air ace of all times.”

Tears rolled on Ken’s cheeks as he kissed her again.”

“Just being married to you makes me proud, Ingrid. Let me just go find a combat shirt or a T-shirt for you: you should not stay bare torso like this.”

“Why not?” replied Ingrid, a malicious smile on her lips. “I haven’t heard any complaints yet about that here.”

A concert of laughs and of spicy comments from the other patients made Ken smile. He then wiggled an index at her.

“You don’t need to raise the morale of the other wounded that way, my young perverted wife. I won’t be long.”

By the time Ken returned a few minutes later with a green T-shirt given by one of the medics, he found Major Jesus Villamor and Major Francisco Bandong at the foot of Ingrid’s stretcher, speaking to her. Jesus gave a sober look at Ken.

“We came as soon as we learned where Ingrid was. I took the liberty to bring with me her backpack, filled with her things from Batangas, along with her rifle.”

Ken nodded with appreciation as he eyed the Springfield 1903 lying beside the stretcher, along with a combat web belt supporting its bayonet and ammunition pockets. He then noticed a bit late the GLOCK 17L pistol which Ingrid was still wearing in its holster on her right upper leg.

“I approve of anything that can help her defend herself, Major Villamor. Thank you for coming, you and Major Bandong.”

The latter smiled politely while presenting him a large parcel wrapped in brown paper.

"President Quezon was greatly relieved to learn that your wife is alive, Major Dows. He sent me to bring to your wife these two going out uniforms of the Filipino Army, specially tailored to fit your wife. He also told me to deliver this envelope, which contains your wife's next three months of pay, in American dollars. She may need that money in Australia."

"Please thank in my name President Quezon for his consideration, Major Bandong." said Ken before accepting both the parcel and the envelope. He then gave the envelope to Ingrid, who pocketed it at once, revealing briefly her bare breasts in the process. A concert of admiring whistles greeted that, making Ken smile as he presented the T-shirt he had obtained for her.

"I believe that it is time for you to put this on, my beautiful temptress of a wife." Ingrid, grinning, got up on her knees and slowly put on the T-shirt, attracting more whistles. The doctor in charge of the infirmary arrived as Ken was putting in Ingrid's backpack her new Filipino uniforms after first taking out of it a fresh combat shirt.

"Major, be advised that your wife will be transferred tonight to the Sternberg Military Hospital in Manila for more elaborate treatment. From Sternberg, she will then be evacuated by air towards Darwin the day after tomorrow, in the early morning."

"Thank you for informing me, and for treating Ingrid, Doctor." Ken then planted a last kiss on Ingrid's lips.

"I will bring you a few things in Sternberg to bring with you to Australia, including your portable radio and music collection: it should help your morale during your recovery."

"Thank you, Ken. I wish that I could stay here with you."

"Just come back at the controls of a fighter plane and you will make me happy, Ingrid. Take care of yourself."

"You too, my dear Ken."

Ingrid then looked at Villamor and Bandong, who were about to leave with Ken.

"Thank you for visiting me, Jesus. Major Bandong, tell President Quezon that I will return as soon as I can to continue defending the Philippines. Thank him as well for his consideration towards me."

"I will pass the word, Captain Dows."

Once they were gone from the infirmary, Ingrid grabbed the fresh combat shirt left by Ken and pinned to it her rank insignias, as well as the medal ribbons for her DSC,

Silver Star, DFC and her new Purple Heart. She finally pinned on the left chest her insignia of fighter pilot. The young wounded soldier to her right watched her do that, then spoke in a weak voice.

“Captain, thank you for having spoken the way you did to those two reporters.”

“I only said the simple truth, Corporal. We are all equal in the eyes of God, after all.”

The young corporal, like many of the other wounded, nodded at those words. Without realizing it, Ingrid had just made herself be accepted as a combat comrade by many men who previously thought that she didn't belong here.

06:31 (Manila Time)

Thursday, November 6, 1941 'C'

Clark Field, Philippines

Ken pressed cautiously Ingrid against him, careful not to touch her burns under her combat shirt as they stood beside the C-87 heavy transport aircraft which would fly her and the other wounded to Australia.

“Be back quickly and in good health, Ingrid. I already miss you.”

“And be careful yourself, my beautiful husband. I will think of you every day while in Australia.”

After a last, long kiss, Ken let her go with regret and grabbed her backpack to help her carry her things in the plane. Ingrid, on her part, grabbed her kit bag and slung her rifle on her right shoulder. Her pistol, as well as her web belt with bayonet and ammunition, were already around her waist. The couple was walking towards the access door of the C-87 when the noise of an approaching siren made them and the other passengers of the plane turn their heads to look at an approaching convoy of staff cars and jeeps. Ingrid was the first to see the red pennant with three silver stars floating from the bumper of the leading staff car.

“It's General MacArthur! Don't tell me that he is traveling so early in the morning just for me.”

“It seems so, Ingrid.” said Ken quietly as MacArthur's car stop in front of her. The couple came to rigid attention and saluted when the USAFFE commander stepped out. They were soon surrounded by civilian and military photographers as MacArthur stopped in front of Ingrid and returned her salute.

“Captain Dows, according to Army regulations, I should be the one to salute you first and I am sorry to hold this ceremony in such an improvised way. Know that I received a message from President Roosevelt awarding you the **Congressional Medal of Honor** for your heroic actions of last Tuesday. I am happy to have been able to catch up to you before your departure for Australia.”



While filmed and photographed from all sides, MacArthur took a small box from an aide and took out of it a medal shaped like a star with five points and suspended from a long sky-blue ribbon bearing white stars. He then clipped carefully its ribbon around her neck.

“Captain Ingrid Dows, of the 6th Pursuit Squadron of the Philippines Army Air corps, I am bestowing on you in the name of the President and the Congress of the United States the Medal of Honor, for extraordinary bravery and intrepidity well above the call of duty while engaged in active combat with the enemy. Congratulations, Captain Dows!”

Ingrid, her heart now racing, swallowed hard.

“Thank you, General! This makes me very humble indeed.”

“A fighter pilot, humble? That can’t be!” joked MacArthur, making the others around him laugh. “You can be truly proud of your exploits, Captain. Come back quickly from Australia at the commands of a fighter, so that I can watch you shoot down more Japanese planes. Good trip and good luck.”

MacArthur gave her the small box containing a pair of undress ribbons for the CMOH, then took one step back and solemnly saluted her, to which Ingrid saluted back. MacArthur then went back in his car and left with his escort of cars and jeeps. Ken then hurried to the plane with Ingrid, putting her things inside and kissing her one last time.

‘Take care, my love.’

His heart heavy, Ken left the plane and walked away to a safe distance. He watched as the big transport started its four engines one by one and then started rolling towards the main runway with other C-87s. He waved with his hand as the heavy transport took off and turned South, towards Australia.

“Fly, my beautiful angel! Fly!”

CHAPTER 6 – DARWIN

17:25 (Darwin Time)

Thursday, November 6, 1941 'C'

Consolidated C-87 LIBERATOR EXPRESS

On approach to Darwin, Northern coast of Australia

Ingrid, numb from nearly ten hours of flying in the noisy heavy transport aircraft, woke up slowly when Helen Cassiani, one of the two army nurses escorting her and the eight other wounded in the C-87, gently shook her up.

“Captain Dows... Captain Dows, we are about to arrive in Darwin.”

“Uh, thanks, Lieutenant.” managed to say Ingrid before taking a deep breath to wake up. She then looked through the small window near her seat and saw that they were approaching a large bay in which dozens of ships were anchored. A small town and a port, along with two airfields, were also visible on the coastline. As she was observing the semi-arid landscape, souvenirs from nearly 700 years in the past came to her mind. Back then, she had been a nomadic aborigine man named Djanggawula who had lived with his tribe in the region south of Darwin. Djanggawula had lived to the old age for the time of 52 and had been the father of four children before dying from an infected wound during a hunting expedition. Ingrid whispered a few words in Wagiman, a dialect of the Ginwinyguan tongue which Djanggawula had spoken.

“The time of dreams is back...”

The C-87 soon approached one of the two airfields, whose dirt and gravel strips were bordered by a sparse vegetation. The facilities at the airfield appeared to be minimal but the mass of planes and materiel cluttering the field made her swear.

“The idiots! They haven’t learned a thing.”

Juanita Redmond, the second army nurse aboard who was sitting near her looked at her with confusion.

“What do you mean, Captain?”

Ingrid gave a bitter look at the small, young and beautiful Latino woman.

“What I mean is that the ones in charge of this airfield seem to have learned nothing from the Japanese raid on Pearl Harbor, Lieutenant Redmond. Look at all those transport aircraft, lined up wingtip to wingtip. A single Japanese fighter could destroy them all in one pass. And all this materiel, fuel and equipment stacked like sardine cans in the open: a few bombs and everything would go up in smoke.”

Juanita, a young woman beautiful enough to become a Hollywood star, was silent for a moment as she stared at Ingrid. The teenage fighter pilot had quickly become a legend around the Philippines, with her phenomenal abilities as a fighter pilot allied to a beauty which made most of the soldiers and sailors dream about her. Many officers and soldiers had mocked at first the idea of a female fighter pilot. Their derision had however turned quickly to disbelief, then to respect as Ingrid accumulated air victories at a dizzying speed.

“But, if the attack on Pearl Harbor showed what the Japanese could do, then why would the commanders in Darwin fall for the same trick, Captain?”

“Because they are idiots or incompetents, or both.” replied at once Ingrid, who was getting more furious by the minute as she looked at the close to twenty four-engine transport planes lined up as if on parade on the airfield.

Her plane finally landed third out of the 25 C-87s back from the Philippines. It then rolled to a parking apron where a long line of ambulances was waiting. Ingrid got up with relief from her seat but waited for the other eight wounded, lying on stretchers, to be carried out before grabbing her backpack, kit bag and rifle and stepping out, careful not to rub her still very sensitive burns. An Australian Army doctor and a number of nurses and medics, along with two officers of the Royal Australian Air Force, or RAAF, were waiting near the ambulances to sort out the fifty or so wounded Americans who had arrived. Ingrid, standing near the end of the line, caused a small commotion when the Australians saw that she was a woman. One of the RAAF officers went to her at a near jog and stopped before her, detailing her with growing disapproval.

“What are you doing, carrying a rifle and a pistol, miss? You...”

“First, Lieutenant,” replied Ingrid, cutting him off in a cold voice, “call me Captain, not miss! Secondly, I am a commissioned fighter pilot of the Filipino Army Air Corps and have the full right to carry weapons. Now, stuff your rear echelon asshole act and get lost! I am here to have my wounds treated, not to waste time with men like you.”

"How dare you call me a rear echelon asshole?" started to protest the Australian, not believing her. Ingrid then cut him off again.

"Because you are one, compared to me and all these wounded men, Lieutenant. Now, I believe that you owe me a salute."

The Australian, furious, swallowed his pride after a look at her rank insignias and at her medal ribbons and saluted her, then turned around and walked away. Now in a really bad mood, Ingrid continued to advance with the line, arriving finally in front of the Australian army doctor, a major. Ingrid saluted her after putting down on the ground her kit bag and coming to attention.

"Captain Ingrid Dows, 6th Pursuit Squadron, Filipino Army Air Corps, reporting for treatment, sir!"

The major, amused as well as surprised, returned her salute before looking briefly at the medical file which Helen Cassiani handed him.

"Hum, first and second degree burns to the back, neck and left arm. Your case, while painful, does not require urgent or intensive treatment. You will then be treated here at the infirmary of the station, rather than on the hospital ship MANUNDA, anchored in the port. You can get in in the fifth ambulance with your things, Captain."

"Thank you, Major."

Ingrid then carried slowly her things to the designated ambulance, joining there three other walking wounded Americans. One of them, a young anti-aircraft gunner with an arm in a sling, smiled at her as she climbed inside the ambulance.

"You sure plugged that big loud mouth, Captain."

"Let's say that he asked for it, Corporal. How serious is your wound?"

"Just a few pieces of shrapnel in the arm, Captain. I should be back to my gun in a couple of weeks."

"That's the spirit, Corporal." said Ingrid, smiling. The doors of the ambulance were then closed and it rolled for only a couple of minutes before stopping in front of the airfield's infirmary. Entering with her things the wooden building, with a medic helping her by carrying her kit bag, she was greeted by a captain of the Medical Corps who was ready to treat her first. She however stopped him with a sign of the hand.

"I can wait, Captain. Take care of these men first, please."

Favorably impressed by her attitude, the young military doctor had Ingrid and two of the other wounded sit down in a small waiting room, admitting first the young gunner with the wounded arm in his examination room.

Ingrid's turn came after about forty minutes. Nearly asleep on her chair, she left behind her rifle and two packs and entered the examination room, where the doctor and a nurse were standing beside an examination table.

"If you can please remove your shirt and then lie on your belly on the table, Captain."

Ingrid obeyed readily, revealing that she was not wearing a bra under her combat shirt.

"Excuse me for not wearing a bra, Doctor, but my back is too sensitive to stand straps."

"I understand, Captain." said softly the Australian doctor. "You may now lie down."

Ingrid lay down as asked and did her best not to wince as the doctor, helped by the nurse, removed her bandages and inspected her burns. The doctor then gave his verdict a few minutes later.

"Your burns will leave a few permanent but faint scars but should heal without a problem, unless infection sets in. I will now remove some pieces of burned skin, in order to minimize scarring, but will first give you some morphine for the pain."

"NO! No morphine, please, Doctor!"

"Are you sure, Captain? This will be rather painful."

"I don't like the idea of losing control of my mind, Doctor. I will clench my teeth instead."

"As you wish! If you change your mind, just say so."

The doctor then tried to relax her by talking with her while starting her treatment.

"So, Captain, how did you get those burns?"

"I had to jump out of my burning P-40 fighter over the Philippines, Doctor. I had time to destroy seven Japanese planes before that but there were just too many of them."

The nurse, like the doctor, was left open-mouthed for a second before speaking excitedly.

"You are the famous Lady Hawk, Captain?"

"Well, famous may be too strong a word, Nurse."

"Not at all! Do you know how many of our pilots are jealous of your score? They all wonder how you do it. Some even say that your scores are boosted for propaganda purposes."

“Well, you can tell those pilots that, if they want to learn something about air combat, they are welcomed to come talk to me. As for the doubters, screw them! I...OUCH!”

“I told you that it would be painful, Captain.” said the doctor. “You better clench your teeth for the next few minutes: I’m starting the serious things now.”

Ingrid didn’t answer, closing her eyes and tightening her jaws to avoid screaming from the pain. The doctor then reassured her after about fifteen minutes, having applied new bandages.

“Here you are, Captain. We are done for the day. The nurse will now bring you to your bed in the ward. We are sorry if we don’t have private rooms but the nurse will pull curtains around your bed to give you some privacy. We will change your dressings once a day, until your burns start healing and the risk of infection will pass. You will then be able to handle light duties, but it will be a month or two before you can pilot a plane again.”

“A MONTH OR TWO?! But, that’s an eternity for me and for the Philippines. My husband is still fighting there against the Japanese and we need all the fighter pilots we can get. The Japanese could have taken the Philippines in two months. Can’t you be more optimistic in my case, Doctor?”

The army doctor hesitated, eyeing her before answering.

“Alright, I will do my best to speed your return to combat, Captain. Everything will however depend on how your burns will heal. If infection gets in...”

“I understand, Doctor. Could I start exercising soon, by running or doing calisthenics?”

“We will see in a few days, Captain Dows. You can now put your shirt back on. Nurse, could you show her to her bed?”

A few minutes later, Ingrid was putting down her things besides a bed in a small ward, with the nurse pulling a curtain around the bed, which also had a mosquito netting and was near a window. She looked through the window for a few minutes, examining the airfield around the infirmary. The field personnel seemed busy refueling and servicing the C-87s which had arrived from the Philippines, while another group of transports were being loaded up at what Ingrid considered a lazy pace. Exhausted by her long air trip and her wounds, she put away her rifle and luggage in the nearby locker, then got down on her belly in the bed and went to sleep in a few seconds.

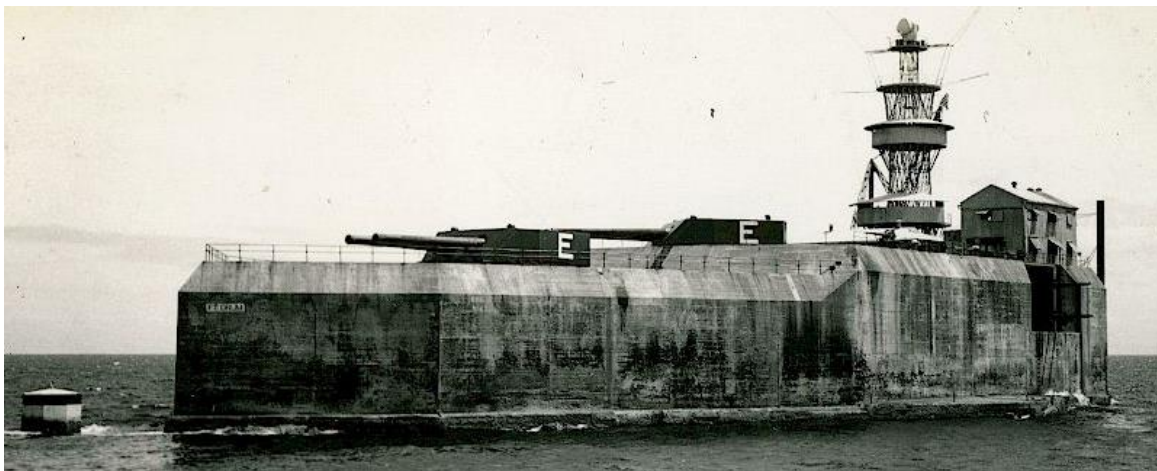
03:47 (Manila Time)

Sunday, November 9, 1941 'C'

Observation tower of Fort Drum

El Fraile Island, Entrance of the Manila Bay

Philippines



The corporal of the 59th Coastal Artillery Regiment serving as one of the watchmen in the observation tower of Fort Drum stiffened when he spotted a dark mass about ten kilometers to the West. Adjusting the focus on his rangefinder, he soon had a clearer image of the unknown ship, which was nearly invisible in the dark.

“LIEUTENANT, I HAVE AN INTRUDER ABOUT SIX MILES AWAY, ON HEADING 275.”

The duty officer of the tower of Fort Drum, also known as ‘The concrete battleship’ because of its unusual construction, pointed his own rangefinder in the said direction and looked through his optics for a few seconds before shouting orders to his watchmen.

“ENEMY MINESWEEPER IN THE BAY’S ENTRANCE! WATCH FOR MORE INTRUDERS!”

As the watchmen, now fully awake, were scanning slowly the waters of the bay with their binoculars and rangefinders, the lieutenant picked up the receiver of the telephone linking him with the command post of the fort.

“Hello! ... This is Lieutenant Fullner, in the observation tower. We have spotted an enemy minesweeper in the entrance of the bay, about six miles away at heading 275. The minesweeper is going at slow speed and seems to be opening a path through our minefields. My men are now looking for more possible enemy ships... Understood, Major!”

Fullner then hung up and was about to shout an order to the two men manning the big sixty inch-diameter projector situated on a platform above his head when a watchman shouted a warning.

"LIEUTENANT! TWO OTHER MINESWEEPERS ARE FOLLOWING THE FIRST ONE ON BOTH FLANKS, ABOUT 200 YARDS BEHIND THE FIRST SHIP. THEY MUST HAVE SWEEPED THROUGH AT LEAST HALF THE DEPT OF OUR MINEFIELDS BY NOW."

"SHIT! GIVE ME A NEW AZIMUTH AND DISTANCE FOR THE LEADING MINESWEEPER!"

"THE AZIMUTH IS NOW 278, DISTANCE 9,200 YARDS, SIR! THEY ARE HEADING EAST AT ABOUT SIX KNOTS."

The young artillery lieutenant picked his telephone receiver again and passed that information in an anxious tone, then asked a question.

"Should I light up our projector now, sir?"

"Negative! Wait until our guns are trained on target and ready to fire. I will give you the order when we are ready."

"Understood, sir!"

Fullner hung up again and resumed his observation, this time with binoculars. The Moon was at its last quarter and the Japanese ships had been observed nearly at the maximum distance possible in the present light conditions. The two big armored turrets which constituted the main armament of the fort, each one housing two huge fourteen-inch guns, then started pivoting to point their barrels at the three intruders. Fort Drum was unique as a coastal defense fortress by being armed with battleship gun turrets. It also looked like a battleship, having been built around a rocky reef which had been razed first and then wrapped in a concrete shell up to ten meters in thickness, making it nearly invulnerable to ship guns. However, the builders of the fort had not built it with air attacks in mind, something that had become too obvious during the last three weeks, with Japanese bombers flying over Fort Drum with impunity.

The first shot of the battle was fired by one of the fort's three-inch guns positioned on the roof of the fortress, which sent a star shell high in the sky to the West. Fullner smiled ferociously when the light from the shell, now floating down under a parachute, made the three enemy minesweepers fully visible. The second shot came from one of the six-inch guns installed in casemates around the base of the fort. The

heavy shell zipped just above the deck of the leading minesweeper, creating a geyser of water 200 meters past it. The four big fourteen-inch guns of the fort then opened fire, blinding for a moment Fullner and his watchmen with their departure flashes. More gun flashes then lit up the night as the heavy guns of Corregidor, Fort Hughes and Fort Frank, which also defended the entrance of the bay, opened fire as well. Despite the hurricane of shells fired at them, the crews of the Japanese minesweeper showed suicidal courage and continued sweeping a path in the minefields as if on an exercise. Fullner was watching this, awaiting the first hit on the minesweepers, when a series of flashes on the horizon made him snap his head. His heart missed a beat as he understood that an enemy battle fleet, probably made up of battleships or heavy cruisers, had just opened fire. Rushing to his telephone, he called again the command post while expecting to hear soon the screeches of incoming heavy shells.

“MAJOR, A LINE OF ENEMY COMBAT SHIPS JUST OPENED FIRE ALONG THE HORIZON. I CAN COUNT AT LEAST TEN HEAVY SHIPS.”

“TEN SHIPS?!” exclaimed the gunnery officer. “Shit! Give me an azimuth and distance on the lead ship.”

Fullner looked through a nearby rangefinder while still holding the receiver and was passing on the first reading when the howl of a heavy shell came in. He only had the time to crouch down before he and the other occupants of the tower, which was made of an open lattice of steel girders and was not armored, were drenched by the spray of water from a series of near misses. He finally looked back in his rangefinder and gave a new reading, then shouted an order at his watchmen.

“EVACUATE THE TOWER! TAKE SHELTER INSIDE!”

As his men scrambled down the steel stairs, Fullner kept updating the azimuth and distance to the leading enemy battle unit. As the six-inch guns of the fort continued firing on the enemy minesweepers, the two main turrets pivoted again, aiming at the lead battleship and soon firing a salvo of four fourteen-inch shells. Fullner then observed their fall and gave a fire correction. Fort Drum's main guns were firing their fifth salvo when the lead enemy minesweeper started sinking, reduced to a blazing wreck by multiple impacts from medium guns. A fourteen-inch shell fired by the Japanese battleship KIRISHIMA then hit the northwest face of the thick concrete shell of the fort, exploding and digging a crater in it but not penetrating all the way. Fullner was shaken but not wounded by the powerful blast and kept giving aiming corrections to the main turrets. Utterly terrified but resolved to stay at his post, the young officer did not have

the chance to witness the first hit on the KIRISHIMA before a fourteen-inch shell exploded against the base of the tower, shredding him to pieces.

Ken Dows was running towards his trench, which was facing the sea and was part of the defensive perimeter of the Cavite Naval Base, when he saw the hit on Fort Drum. Jumping in his trench, he took place behind the field telephone installed below the sandbag parapet and looked around him. His Marines were reacting quickly and were also occupying their trenches. The artillerymen of the 200th Regiment were already at their post, pointing frantically their 90 mm guns towards the sea as the coastal guns of the bay's forts continued exchanging fire with the Japanese heavy ships. The American forts were however over thirty kilometers away, while the Japanese ships were another twelve kilometers behind, so he could only see the flashes from gun departures and shells exploding. Ken finally decided to make a tour of the trenches of his company, which he had taken command of three days ago, after his predecessor had been killed by a Japanese bomb. The sea battle was still raging when he returned to his trench half an hour later.

06:41 (Manila Time)

Command bridge of the Japanese battleship NAGATO

Off the entrance to Manila Bay

Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku lowered his binoculars for a moment as the big sixteen-inch guns of his flagship fired another salvo, shaking the 43,000-ton battleship. The battle, which had started with a rather slow exchange of fire due to the darkness, was now heating up seriously. To date, his four battleships and four heavy cruisers, which had rounded up the northern tip of Luzon during the night and sailed down the Filipino coast to the entrance of the Manila Bay, had only suffered minor damage from a few shell hits. The American mines cut adrift by the now sunk three minesweepers had by now ample time to float away, carried by the currents, thus opening the South Channel for his ships. It was now time to get down to serious business.

“Signal to Admiral Kondo on the KIRISHIMA: turn East and lead the battle line through the path in the minefields.”

“Yes, Admiral!”

Yamamoto then observed, apparently impassive, as his eight heavy units steered towards the entrance of the bay in a long single line. In reality, the robust and tenacious resistance from the American forts had made him nervous. With the Sun now up, American bombers could now take off and attack his fleet, while the American submarines were also a major worry. However, by forcing his way inside Manila Bay, he could then systematically destroy with ship gunfire the naval installations in Cavite and the airfields of Nichols Field and Nielson Field. That job had initially belonged to the bombers of the Imperial Army and Navy, but the unexpectedly tough resistance of the American fighters and anti-aircraft guns had bitten big holes in the Japanese air units, with many air regiments having to be withdrawn from combat in order to be reorganized and reequipped, having lost sometimes up to two thirds of their planes. Taking the Philippines, apart from costing him dearly in ships, planes and men, was also upsetting mightily the overall strategic plans of Japan, forcing the reassignment of many ships and units to what was looking more and more like a bottomless pit. As the NAGATO was turning in sequence, Yamamoto gave another order.

“Launch our seaplanes number one and two. Have them take positions to spot and correct our incoming fire against Nichols Field and Nielson Field.”

Less than six minutes later, as the line of Japanese ships was entering the cleared path in the minefields through the South Channel, two of the Aichi E13A seaplanes of the NAGATO were catapulted from the battleship and climbed into the sky, flying first to the South to avoid the dangerous anti-aircraft guns protecting Cavite.

Things became critical as the Japanese fleet sailed through the South Channel, passing between the American forts defending the bay. The American heavy guns only had rudimentary fire control systems and were mostly of old manufacture, things that had hurt their long-range accuracy. Now, however, the American gunners had daylight to help their aim, while their targets were within six kilometers of them. Despite the heavy fire from the 72 Japanese guns of sixteen, fourteen and eight inches in caliber, the eighteen old guns of fourteen, twelve, ten and six inches replied with a persistence that was to their honor. Some of the American guns were also mounted on retracting mounts, disappearing after each shot, time to reload and be raised again, thus making them very difficult to take out with direct fire. The Number One main turret of the KIRISHIMA was suddenly hit in its rear plate by a fourteen-inch shell from Fort Drum as it was pointing the opposite way, at Corregidor. Yamamoto saw a gigantic flame burst

out of the stricken turret before it flew off in the air as a titanic explosion rocked the battleship. The KIRISHIMA, which was leading the battle line at a speed of 27 knots, wobbled in the water and started at once to sink by the bow. Apparently out of control, it started as well a wide turn to starboard, its forward half hidden by a cloud of black smoke. Yamamoto, containing his fury, gave a curt order to his signals officer.

“TRANSMIT BY FLAG AND LAMP IMMEDIATELY: FOLLOW ME AND CONTINUE TOWARDS CAVITE.”

“Hay!”

As the NAGATO took the lead, Yamamoto examined the KIRISHIMA with the help of his binoculars and clenched his teeth: the forward half of its hull was ripped open over the fifth of the ship's length, where its first main turret had been. The KIRISHIMA then received two more hits, this time in its superstructures. With its command bridge now on fire, the battleship was practically condemned. Yamamoto then had a minute later the small consolation to see one of the main turrets of Fort Drum be destroyed by a direct hit from a sixteen-inch shell. The other guns of the fort however kept firing, despite dozens of impacts on its concrete shell. A warning shouted by a nearby watchman then made his head snap around.

“LARGE FORMATION OF HEAVY ENEMY BOMBERS IN SIGHT!”

Running to the port open bridge wing, Yamamoto pointed his binoculars at a big group of planes seemingly coming from Clark Field. Despite the distance, he identified them as being B-24 LIBERATOR heavy bombers, the most recent type of American bomber in service. There was close to thirty of them. For a moment, Yamamoto feared for his fleet. He then noted the strange conduct of the bombers, which flew in a long file instead of forming attack waves. Furthermore, the B-24s were apparently trying to stay away from his ships, heading due South instead. Yamamoto was confused by that for a moment: Japanese bomber crews which would act like this would be promptly executed for cowardice. The truth then brushed his mind and he walked quickly to one of the heavy, high-powered optical scopes of the bridge, pushing away the sailor manning it and pointing the scope at the planes. He swore loudly after a few seconds and looked at one of his aides.

“Commander, these planes are not bombers: they don't have defensive turrets. Come here and identify their exact type.”

The officer, a naval aviator, hurried behind the scope and looked for a few seconds before looking with surprise at his commander.

"You are right, Admiral! These planes are C-87 LIBERATOR EXPRESS, a transport variant of the American B-24 bomber. What could they do here in such numbers?"

"Transport in reinforcements and critical supplies, of course!" replied Yamamoto while following the planes with his eyes as they flew southward. "What kind of range do they have, Commander?"

"Uh, about 4,500 kilometers, according to our intelligence, Admiral."

"Thus, enough to come straight from Australia, right?"

"The Americans are operating an air bridge between the Philippines and Australia?" said the aide, now understanding. Yamamoto nodded his head slowly.

"It seems so, Commander. I want you to follow visually those planes and to find their exact heading, so that we could later find out where they come from exactly. Then calculate how much they can carry on such a distance. Even if this raid does not succeed, at least we will have learned something important today."

"It will be done, Admiral."

A geyser of water from a near miss then sprayed the occupants of the open bridge, reminding Yamamoto that he had a battle to lead.

Ken Dows watched with growing worry the approach of the Japanese battle fleet, which was still exchanging salvos with the surviving guns of the American coastal forts. The lead battleship hit thirty minutes earlier was now sinking near Fort Drum, but that still left three battleships and four heavy cruisers which were about to come within gun range of Cavite. Ken revised his opinion when he saw the turrets of the lead ship pivot towards him and fire. He looked at the artillerymen near his trench, standing behind their 90 mm guns and protected only by sandbag parapets.

"BATTLESHIP SHELLS ON THE WAY! HIT THE TRENCHES!"

The gunners didn't have to be told twice, diving head first in their own nearby trenches. The terrifying screech of incoming heavy shells passing overhead froze Ken's blood in his veins for a moment as he crouched down in his trench. Thankfully, the first salvo of shells landed in the water in front of the Cavite docks, causing no damage. Ken knew however that this was only a start. A joyful shout then made him look up at the sky.

"OUR BOMBERS ARE COMING!"

Ken effectively saw an attack formation of twelve B-17 bombers approaching the Japanese fleet at high altitude. He watched with hope their attack as the Japanese

ships kept shelling Cavite and its harbor. One heavy shell finally hit its mark, exploding in the middle of barracks near the docks. Another twenty or so big caliber shells exploded inside the naval base before the B-17 dropped their bombs. To Ken's disappointment, none of the bombs made a direct hit. They however forced the Japanese ships to zigzag, which completely threw off their shooting against Cavite. Ken, who took that occasion to inspect visually the damage to the naval base from a distance, suddenly saw a submarine which was coming out of the harbor while diving.

"But he's mad! Either he will be pulverized by the Japanese or he will get stuck on the bottom."

The Japanese shellfire soon resumed, making him forget about the reckless submarine commander. Still harassed by surviving American coastal guns, the Japanese units proceeded in systematically destroying the installations of Cavite as the Marines could only watch, helpless. A big storage tank full of aviation gasoline erupted in a spectacular fireball, raining burning fuel all over the base and starting many fires. As Ken was about to write off the base as finished, one of the Japanese heavy cruisers was rocked by four enormous geysers erupting against its flank in quick succession. Ken screamed with joy when he understood that the submarine which had left the harbor had just torpedoed the cruiser. Without destroyer escort and with his ships inside a bay that severely restricted ship movements, the Japanese admiral probably decided that the game wasn't worth it anymore and turned around his ships, all of which were already damaged to various degrees. That did not stop a battleship from being soon hit by two torpedoes. Contrary to the heavy cruiser, though, it managed to sail out of the bay with the other five surviving Japanese units after a last exchange of fire with the coastal forts. Ken nervously wiped off sweat from his forehead, happy to be still alive. Many Americans had however died today, while the installations of Cavite were devastated. Looking with his binoculars at the Japanese heavy cruiser that was now sinking inside the bay, he saw a number of lifeboats and rafts being put at sea. Looking at his second in command, a young captain in his twenties, he gave a few orders in a firm voice.

"We will disperse our men along the coastline, in order to stop or capture the Japanese sailors coming from that sinking cruiser. Tell the men to be wary if attempting to take prisoners: the Japanese are likely to resist or even to commit suicide. Our men will shoot first and ask questions later: I don't want to lose men on this. I will take the first and second platoons with me in trucks. You stay here with the rest of the men to hold our positions."

"Yes, Major!"

Calling forward the light trucks of his company, Ken mounted with 65 of his men in them and led his small convoy along the road which followed the southern coastline of Manila Bay, stopping at intervals to drop his rifle squads at eight points chosen by him close to the location where the Japanese cruiser had sunk. Staying with his last squad, Ken arrived at a beach six kilometers from Cavite as two life rafts overloaded with Japanese sailors were approaching the coast. At least twenty Japanese were aboard the rafts, with many more holding to them and pushing them towards the beach. Jumping out of his jeep, Ken ran to the shore, his rifle in hand and followed by nine Marines, while one Marine manned the machinegun mounted on his jeep. Arming his Browning AR-41 assault rifle, Ken deployed his rifle squad in extended line along the beach and shouted in Japanese at the sailors, now about a hundred meters away, using one of the phrases he had learned from Ingrid.

"SURRENDER OR DIE!"

"NEVER!" Replied at once in a defiant tone a young Japanese officer. Ken shook his head slowly, having hoped for a more reasonable answer. His next words were in English, to his Marines.

"THEY ARE REFUSING TO SURRENDER. SLOW FIRE, ONE BULLET PER TARGET. TAKE YOUR TIME AND SHOOT TO KILL!"

His Marines, finally able to let out their rage and hatred contained for weeks now against the Japanese who had been bombing them nearly every day since October 20, obeyed him without hesitation. Doing as if at a firing range, they aimed carefully their shots and started killing the Japanese sailors. Ken also started firing, shooting first the officer who had answered him and feeling no remorse as he shot bullet after bullet.

20:19 (Manila Time)

Operations center, Japanese battleship NAGATO

170 kilometers northwest of Manila

South China Sea

While showing an impassive face, Yamamoto felt discouragement and sadness fill him as he read the casualties list for the operation while standing near the big chart table, observed by his staff officers. Lost during the attack on Cavite were the battleship

KIRISHIMA and the heavy cruiser SUZUYA, with the battleship Hiei seriously damaged by two torpedoes and now on its way to Japan for repairs under the escort of two destroyers. All the other ships of his force, including his own flagship, had suffered various degrees of damage from the gunfire coming from the American coastal forts. Worse, his battle squadron had been ambushed by three American submarines during its withdrawal, losing the heavy cruisers ATAGO and MAYA, which had absorbed a total of eleven torpedoes. Over 4,000 of his officers and sailors were now dead or missing, including two of his best squadron commanders, Vice Admiral Kondo and Rear Admiral Kurita. For that price, he had been able to inflict severe damage to the Cavite Naval Base and to the coastal forts. However, his ships had been unable to fire on Nichols Field and Nielson Field, as his two spotter seaplanes had been shot down by a solitary gray P-40 fighter. He could only characterize this operation as a costly failure. Raising his nose from the list of casualties, Yamamoto looked at his aviation staff officer.

"Commander Kawaguchi, what are the results of today's air raids on the Philippines?"

The officer carefully chose his words, not wanting to appear defeatist.

"Three raids were launched today, Admiral: one against Clark Field, one against Nichols Field and one against Cavite. In the three cases, our planes encountered American fighters and anti-aircraft gunfire but were able to drop their bombs on target. Our losses in all three raids were light."

"Light, Commander? What is light for you?" asked Yamamoto in an irritated tone. "Our carrier squadrons are now down to 65% of their original strength and our stocks of bombs on our carriers are dwindling rapidly. Despite all this, the Americans still find a way to send up fighters to intercept our bombers."

"But the Americans have only a handful of fighters left, Admiral. A few more raids and there will be none left."

"And what tells us that they won't get more fighters, probably via Australia? Talking about that, were you able to find out the probable destination of those transport planes we saw in the morning?"

"Yes, Admiral! Those C-87s were most probably heading to Darwin, on the northern coast of Australia. Darwin is by far the Australian airfield and port nearest the Philippines and would constitute a logical base for an air bridge."

"Are you thinking about attacking Darwin, Admiral?" asked the captain of the NAGATO. Yamamoto nodded in response.

“This may prove necessary, Captain. That air bridge is the sole external source of supplies for the Americans in the Philippines, who had been firing thousands of anti-aircraft shells in the last weeks. Without that air bridge, they will probably run quickly out of shells, something that would make our bombing raids much easier. The same could be said about the stocks of torpedoes for the submarines of the Asiatic Fleet, which are a curse upon our fleet. If we could cut that air bridge from Australia, then the Americans will quickly run out of ammunition, spare parts and medical supplies.”

“But that would delay further our invasion projects for the Dutch East Indies and Burma, Admiral.” objected the army liaison officer attached to Yamamoto’s staff. “We have already redirected much precious resources from those vital objectives in order to take the Philippines, and we still haven’t landed troops there.”

Yamamoto threw a cold look at the colonel.

“And what would be the chances of success for the invasion of these territories if the Americans are permitted to keep control of the Philippines, Colonel? Do you want to have to explain to His Majesty the Emperor why the Americans still can bomb Japanese home territory with their B-17s? The American submarines in Cavite and their heavy bombers in Clark Field are too much of a long-range threat to our forces and to Japan itself. We must eliminate those threats! In my opinion, Burma is a secondary objective for us. The oil fields of the Dutch East Indies are however of prime importance to us. I will thus counsel to the Prime Minister to launch a limited invasion of the Dutch East Indies, centered on the oil fields, while keeping the Philippines under sea and air blockade. Before any landings in the Philippines, though, I want to cut that air bridge from Australia.”

Yamamoto then looked around the chart table at his staff officers.

“Are there more objections or suggestions? No? Then I will send tonight a message to Tokyo, asking for its approval of the plan I just outlined. You are dismissed, gentlemen.”

20:56 (Manila Time)

Operations center of the Asiatic Fleet

Manila, Philippines

Like Yamamoto, Admiral Hart had to deal with his lot of bad news and with a long list of losses, mostly in Cavite. As for the army, the gunners of the coastal forts had

suffered severely, even though they had made the enemy pay a heavy price for their incursion. However, despite the 860 American soldiers, sailors and airmen killed today, Hart still could legitimately consider this battle as a victory. Another victory, in a sense, was the fact that the air bridge with Darwin was still operating, with 32 heavy transports having landed just before Sunset, loaded with over 120 tons of munitions and vital spare parts, including 36 precious torpedoes for his submarines, which had done such a stellar job today. Equally important was the fact that those 32 transport planes were going to be able to evacuate most of the men seriously wounded in the Japanese attack. This was alleviating a major subject of concern for him and General MacArthur. This medical evacuation route also did a lot for the morale of the men, who knew that they would not be stuck, wounded, at the mercy of a Japanese invasion. After a last glance at his charts, Hart then gave his orders for tomorrow.

"Gentlemen, I want the torpedoes received tonight to be loaded as quickly as possible on our submarine tenders and in our submarines presently in Cavite. Our submarines presently at sea, except for the TARPON and SCULPIN, will continue to patrol Filipino waters and to harass the Japanese ships they find. As for the TARPON and SCULPIN, once fully rearmed and refueled, they will leave tonight for the Japanese home waters and take ambush positions off Tokyo Bay, to wait there for any Japanese warship of value. To sink their ships so close to home should keep the Japanese focused on us. As for Cavite, I want our stocks and equipment there dispersed out of the base as much as possible, to make them less vulnerable to bombardment. I will send another message to Admiral Stark tonight, asking him to send more submarines from Pearl Harbor to support the TARPON and SCULPIN off the Japanese coast."

"And our surface fleet, Admiral?" asked a staff officer.

"Our two old cruisers and our destroyers will stay in reserve for the moment. Even with the recent heavy enemy losses, they are still not up to engage the Japanese fleet in decisive combat. Finally, I want our seriously wounded men to be evacuated by air tomorrow morning. I want a list of replacement personnel made quickly as well and sent to Washington. Our ranks are already way too thin to my taste."

"More fighters and bombers couldn't hurt either, Admiral." said a commander, making Hart nod at that.

"Amen to that, Commander."

09:08 (Darwin Time)
Tuesday, November 11, 1941 'C'
Infirmery of RAAF Station Darwin
Darwin, Australia

"Well, I have the pleasure to announce to you that your burns seem to be healing without signs of complications, Captain Dows. I now consider you medically fit for light duties. However, it is still too early for you to pilot a plane, especially a fighter. You may now dress."

"Can I start exercising again, Doctor?"

"Moderately only, and doing nothing that could infect your burns. Quick walks or on the spot calisthenics are acceptable. I will write down a medical chit to certify that you are on light duties."

"And how much longer will I have to stay in Darwin, Doctor?" asked Ingrid, who was becoming bored to death. The Australian Army doctor thought over his answer for a moment.

"I suppose that a two-week medical leave period in Melbourne or Brisbane would help your healing...and your morale. I will talk to the commander of your transport group, Colonel Sneed: technically, he controls all the American personnel here in Darwin."

Instead of encouraging her, the mention of Sneed discouraged Ingrid. She had earlier tried to convince the old colonel, who had no combat experience in his whole career, to disperse his planes and supplies to at least make them less vulnerable to air attack. Sneed's response had been that there was not enough space around the airfield to properly disperse his planes, which was partially true. Sneed had also given at the same time the impression to Ingrid that he didn't take her seriously.

"Yeah! He could very well send me to Tasmania if he could."

The doctor smiled at that, knowing how Sneed was.

"Well, at least you wouldn't have to constantly turn down the advances of drunk soldiers in Tasmania, Captain. Now that you are better, I will transfer you in the room used by Nurse Watkins, so that you could finally have some privacy. You can free your actual bed right now."

Once out of the treatment room, Ingrid moved her things to the room of the head nurse, then changed into a loose-fitting sports outfit of T-shirt, shorts and running shoes. Buckling around her waist the fanny pack she had inherited from Nancy, she put in it her Discman CD player and connected it to a pair of light headphones, then went out to the back of the building, where she would be partially out of sight. Playing one of her favorite CDs, she started doing stretching and warming up exercises before starting the serious workout. Despite her attempts at being discreet, she soon attracted within twenty minutes a growing crowd of admirers. Finally having had enough of the lecherous looks from about sixty Americans and Australians watching her exercise, Ingrid stopped for a moment and shouted at the men around her.

“DON'T YOU HAVE ANYTHING ELSE TO DO? THERE IS A WAR TO FIGHT, IF YOU HAVEN'T NOTICED. DISPERSE NOW BEFORE I CALL IN THE MPs!”

Some of the men did walk away then, but many others stayed, grinning like idiots and refusing to leave. Swearing to herself about the poor level of discipline on this airfield, Ingrid finally decided to walk away. Thankfully, none of the men followed her and she started on a quick-paced walk around the airfield. As she had covered about one third of the length of the perimeter and was passing near the piles of supplies haphazardly dropped in one corner of the airfield, she saw between the widely spaced small trees a nearly naked man with dark skin who was looking at her with apparent curiosity. Slowing down her pace, then stopping for a moment, she took a chance and shouted out in Wagiman to the Australian aborigine.

“Hello! My name is Ingrid. Can you understand me?”

The man, looking surprised at first, then smiled and answered her in a dialect close enough to Wagiman for her to understand.

“You speak the tongue of a nearby clan, white girl. How come?”

“I once spent some years in this region in the past.” answered Ingrid, basically saying the truth. “What is your name, friend?”

“Gwandwiligin!”

Ingrid then approached the aborigine and gave him a sign of friendship.

“In the past, the aborigines I knew called me Djanggawula. You may call me that way if you wish so: it would please me.”

“Then Djanggawula it is. Are you staying here for long?”

“Only a few more days at the most. Is your camp very far from here?”

"My hut is about an hour's walk from here. I was returning to it after hunting and gathering some food for my family. You are welcomed to come visit it."

Ingrid looked at the old canvas bag slung across the chest of the aborigine: it contained a few roots and wild berries. There was also a young kangaroo suspended in his back, probably killed with one of the three primitive javelins he held in one hand.

"I would be happy to meet your family, Gwandwiligin. Lead the way."

Walking behind the aborigine, Ingrid waited to be hidden from the airfield by the trees, then stopped briefly to take off her T-shirt, tying it around her waist before resuming her walk with her torso bare, happy to be able to freely soak some sunrays. The aborigine man took that in stride and didn't ogle her, since female aborigines did not wear tops in the bush.

"You are indeed not a typical white girl, Djanggawula."

"Not one bit, friend." replied Ingrid, smiling maliciously.

Ingrid returned alone to the airfield more than three hours later, feeling good about having been able to get back in touch with her old aborigine roots. The head nurse intercepted her the moment she entered the infirmary to wash and change herself.

"Captain Dows, Colonel Sneed called an hour ago to say that he wanted to see you in his office."

"Did he say what it was for?"

"Don't know! Uh, I have been looking for you for a while now. Where were you, Captain?"

"Me? I was in the bush, doing a walkabout."

Leaving the mystified nurse there, Ingrid went to take a sponge bath, in order not to wet her bandages. Once washed, she put on a clean combat uniform, buckling as well her pistol belt around her waist to remind the men around the station that she was a combatant, and not simply a pretty toy for their entertainment. Walking out of the infirmary, Ingrid adopted a quick step along the dusty road leading to the airfield's headquarters, ignoring the male stares she attracted on the way. She smiled to herself while thinking at the reaction of all these men if they ever learned that she was only sixteen, and not eighteen as her official military file and her passport stated.

She found the American section of the headquarters boiling over with activity, with clerks and officers doing their best to coordinate and administer the airlift program

for the Philippines with the few resources available in Darwin and the rest of Australia. Ingrid didn't envy their job, which was a nearly impossible one. In contrast, the Australian part of the headquarters looked like a retirement home, with a few officers and NCOs sipping calmly on tea cups while seemingly accomplishing as little as possible. That same lazy, careless attitude was in fact reflected throughout the various Australian units and services in and around Darwin, as if the war didn't exist. Colonel Sneed's aide, a young and sympathetic captain of the Air Corps, greeted her with a big smile.

"Aah, Captain Dows! I will go tell the colonel that you have arrived."

Ingrid needed to wait for less than a minute before being introduced in Sneed's office, which was cluttered with piles of papers, files and other documents. She came to attention and saluted in front of Sneed's desk.

"Captain Dows, 6th Pursuit Squadron of the Filipino Air Corps, reporting as requested, sir!"

Sneed returned her salute while glancing at her pistol.

"At ease, Captain. After seeing you last Friday, I sent messages to ask what to do with you once you were declared fit. Now that the doctor has declared you fit for light duties and suggested that you take some medical leave, I can tell you that Brigadier General Julian Barnes, newly arrived in Australia, is now the commander of all American units in the country. He arrived in Brisbane with a convoy originally destined for the Philippines and transporting reinforcements and equipment, including a number of disassembled P-40 fighters and A-24 dive bombers. General Barnes has ordered that all American pilots, aircrews and ground crews available in Australia, including those on medical leave, be sent to Brisbane, to help in the assembly of his planes and then to fly them in a succession of humps to the Philippines. You and two other wounded pilots from the Philippines who are convalescing will go to Brisbane and report to General Barnes, to get new orders from him. You will leave on a C-87 tomorrow morning for Brisbane, along with a group of wounded men due to be returned to the United States by ship. My aide, Captain Manning, will give you the details of your trip, along with your travel orders. Do you have questions, Captain?"

"None, sir! Thank you very much, sir!" replied Ingrid, happy.

"In that case, dismissed!"

Ingrid saluted him again, then left his office and went back to see again Captain Manning, bending over his desk and looking tenderly at him with her big blue eyes.

"My good Captain Manning, I am told that you have the details and papers about my trip to Brisbane tomorrow morning."

Manning, melting under her smile, handed her a large envelope.

"Certainly, Captain Dows. Here is your itinerary, your travel claim and your mission order for Brisbane. Is there something else I can do for you?"

Ingrid flashed him a warm smile before answering.

"Unfortunately, no: I am married."

Manning became as red as a tomato as Ingrid took the envelope and left, while the other officers and clerks around him broke out in laughter. Once out, Ingrid started walking at a relaxed pace to return to her room. Looking up at the blue sky, she saw the condensation trail of a solitary plane overflying the station at high altitude, coming from the North. Intrigued, she followed the trail with her eyes for a moment, doubt and suspicion growing in her mind. Deciding to make sure, she ran back to the headquarters building and went to see Manning again, worry showing on her face.

"Captain Manning, do you have a pair of binoculars here that I could borrow for a moment?"

"Why, Captain Dows?" said the aviator, surprised by her request. "Did you see a kangaroo?"

"No, a suspect aircraft overflying the station. Do you have binoculars here? This could be important."

Manning hesitated for a moment, then got up from his chair and went to an equipment locker, taking out a pair of heavy, powerful artillery binoculars of the model used by air observers. He gave them to Ingrid, then followed her outside, curious. Pointing the binoculars at the plane still overflying the station, Ingrid swore violently after a few seconds.

"SHIT! THAT'S A JAPANESE RECONNAISSANCE FLOATPLANE!"

"Are you sure?" Said Manning, unable to believe her at first. Ingrid nodded her head.

"Positive! I make it as an Aichi E13A JAKE floatplane, a model often carried on Japanese heavy cruisers. Here, look for yourself!"

Manning took the binoculars and looked up for about ten seconds before speaking while still observing the plane.

"I am not very good at plane recognition, but this is definitely a floatplane, with one engine and two floats."

He then turned his head towards the nearby headquarters building and shouted out loud.

“SERGEANT RITTER! BRING ME A PLANE RECOGNITION MANUAL, ON THE DOUBLE!”

By the time that the NCO ran out with a recognition manual in his hands, the plane above them did a slow turn and retraced its steps, but on a parallel trail to the first one.

“He’s doing a photo-reconnaissance run.” said Ingrid as Manning flipped through the recognition manual to the page on the Aichi E13A. After a second good look at the plane, Manning nodded his head, his expression hardening, before handing the binoculars to his sergeant.

“Sergeant, look at that plane and confirm to me that this is indeed a JAKE floatplane.”

The NCO looked up for a few seconds, glancing a couple of times at the recognition manual to check some features, then looked with alarm at his officer.

“Shit! This is indeed a JAKE, sir. What could it mean?”

“That a Japanese naval strike force, possibly one that includes carriers, is approaching Darwin to attack it.” answered Ingrid, glum. “According to the history as known by Nancy Laplante, the Japanese attacked Darwin, using a number of fleet carriers and devastating the airfields and the ships moored in the port. Colonel Sneed must be told about this.”

Manning then took a quick decision and started running towards the entrance of the building while shouting at Ingrid and his sergeant.

“STAY THERE AND CONTINUE OBSERVING THAT PLANE! I’M GOING TO GET THE COLONEL.”

Less than two minutes later, Manning was coming out at a run, followed closely by Colonel Sneed. Ingrid gave the binoculars to the latter while pointing at the plane, which had turned again for a third pass.

“We have a JAKE Japanese reconnaissance floatplane overhead, Colonel. It has been flying racetrack patterns and came from the North, sir.”

Sneed didn’t say a word at first, looking through the binoculars as Ingrid spoke again.

“The JAKE is the only single-engine floatplane with two floats in service in the Pacific area, sir. Furthermore, no allied floatplane with one engine and two floats exists, except for the French Latécoère 298, which is not in service in the Pacific. All other allied floatplanes either have one float only or have two engines.”

"Damn! You're right, Captain Dows." said Sneed after consulting the recognition manual and taking a last look at the plane, which was now turning again, this time flying away. "The JAKE is usually carried on Japanese cruisers or seaplane tenders. According to this manual, it has a range of over a thousand miles, which means that there is at least one Japanese cruiser within 500 miles of Darwin."

"I strongly suspect that there is a lot more approaching us right now, sir. According to the history known by Nancy Laplante, the Japanese attacked by air Darwin, using a number of fleet carriers, and bombed the hell out of this airfield and the port area."

Sneed looked at Ingrid with a mix of surprise and curiosity.

"How would you know that, Captain Dows? The information from Nancy Laplante was kept highly classified."

"She was my adoptive mother, sir." said in a sober tone Ingrid, making the men around her open their eyes wide in surprise. "She educated me and passed on to me her knowledge of the future...and of this war. We can now expect in the next few days, maybe as soon as tomorrow morning, a massive Japanese air attack by carrier-borne planes."

"But there are no fighter planes here and only a few machineguns for air defense. Even around the port, we have only the guns on the ships there to defend against air attacks."

"I know that too well, sir." replied Ingrid, sounding bitter. "We can thank the carelessness and lack of planning of the Australians for that. They have been officially at war for two years now and they still act here as if they are at peace. The only thing we can do on our part is to disperse as much of our planes and equipment as fast as we can, to minimize the damage from an attack on Darwin. If the Navy commander in the port could be convinced to take similar precautions, so much the better, sir."

Sneed looked up at the departing Japanese plane, which was now heading North-northeast.

"His heading is roughly 030. Its ship must be somewhere around the Sea of Ceram, possibly even further South than Ambon. You have experienced Japanese air raids for weeks in the Philippines, Captain Dows. What is your best guess for the timing of a Japanese air raid on Darwin following this reconnaissance flight?"

Thanking mentally the fact that Sneed was showing common sense and was not dismissing her warning, Ingrid answered after thinking for a few seconds.

"My bet is that the Japanese will approach further during the night before launching an attack at dawn, either tomorrow or the day after. We should thus expect them in the mid-morning, time for them to get here from their carriers. The Japanese normally try to fly their ultimate reconnaissance missions on an objective within a day or two of a planned attack, sir."

"Then, we have little time to lose." replied Sneed in a firm tone before looking at Manning. "Captain, call the airfields at Batchelor and Parap and tell them to get ready to receive a large number of C-87s. We are going to disperse our planes before the night, once they are loaded up for their next run to the Philippines. We will also move as much of our stocks of fuel to those fields as time permits, plus will disperse what's left here."

"Can I help, sir?" asked Ingrid, making Sneed look at her, thoughtful, before he nodded his head and smiled to her.

"You certainly can, Captain. You can follow me around and use your experience of combat with the Japanese to counsel me on how to prepare this airfield for an air attack."

"What about the port, sir?"

Sneed's smile faded then.

"Unfortunately, I have no authority on the American ships moored in the port. The best I can do is to warn them about this Japanese reconnaissance flight. We also will have to prepare to receive our planes now on their way back from the Philippines. Let's get inside: we have a million things to do and quite a few messages to send to pass the warning around."

To Ingrid's fury, but not to her surprise, the Australian commander and the RAAF staff of the airfield all but ignored the warning passed by Sneed, discounting it as 'misidentification of some allied plane'. Worse, the local commander refused to lend the help of his men to the efforts at dispersing the American planes and equipment presently on his airfield, calling it a waste of time and effort. The Australian Navy officer in charge of the port of Darwin proved as skeptical and unhelpful, declaring rather summarily that no Japanese fleet had been signaled anywhere near Australia or even the Dutch East Indies. As for the few American ships present in Darwin, mostly transport or support ships, they took their cues from the Australian port commander, deciding that his opinion was worth more than the one from an American army commander. Adding to Ingrid's fury, and also to that of Colonel Sneed, was the fact that the Australians on the airfield,

on top of refusing to help, also mocked the Americans running around them and working to disperse as much equipment and supplies as possible before the next morning. The return from the Philippines of the 26 C-87s which had departed at dawn from Clark Field added to Colonel Sneed's worries, as the hundred or so American wounded aboard them had to be treated quickly. After a telephone conversation with Brigadier General Barnes in Brisbane, Sneed and Barnes decided to refuel the C-87s on arrival and send them with the wounded still on board directly to Brisbane for treatment. Barnes, as overall American commander in Australia, was able at the same time to convince the American ships in the Darwin harbor to raise anchor and sail out during the night. When Sneed told Ingrid that she would be sent to Brisbane with the wounded about to arrive from the Philippines, she refused politely, pointing out that there were many men in Darwin who were more seriously wounded than her. Sneed nearly ordered her then to get on one of the planes, but one look at her resolute face and to her Medal of Honor ribbon convinced him to respect her request to stay until the more seriously wounded could be evacuated first. The C-87s already present in Darwin were loaded up with priority supplies for the Philippines and departed for Clark Field two hours after the passage of the Japanese floatplane, a factor which helped calm somewhat the worries of Colonel Sneed. Once the planes which had returned from the Philippines had been refueled and had departed for Brisbane, leaving the airfield in Darwin nearly empty of planes, Sneed then concentrated his men's efforts on dispersing the most dangerous or vulnerable supplies stacked around the airfield, with the priority put on the ammunition and fuel. Those were trucked to short distances off the airfield and dumped in small, well-spaced piles under camouflage nets around the bush. Ingrid, despite of her wounds, worked all day and night, helping Sneed's men as much as she could, notably by helping prioritize the movement of planes, equipment and supplies. By the time that the Sun rose the next day, a Wednesday, Ingrid was exhausted and covered with sweat and dust. She however refused to go get some sleep, feeling that the Japanese attack was imminent and not wanting to be caught napping then. There was anyway a lot still left to be done, with thousands of tons of supplies still littering the airfield and needing to be dispersed.

Ingrid was having a cup of coffee and a quick late breakfast when the faint noise of distant planes approaching the airfield made her come out of the headquarters building to look up at the sky. Her blood froze in her veins when she spotted over 150

planes approaching from the Northeast in multiple V-shaped waves. She ran up the steps of the headquarters entrance while shouting.

“THE JAPANESE ARE COMING! SOUND THE ALERT!”

While the Americans inside started moving at once, the few Australian officers and airmen present in the building simply looked at each other in indecision. Only the noise of distant explosions coming from the port area finally made them move, but not in the way Ingrid had hoped. Instead of using their telephones to alert the various sections of the airfield and to have the air raid siren sound the alert, the Australians ran out at once, heading for the bushes to go hide there. In Nancy’s history, this disgraceful scramble to safety and the subsequent exodus of most of the Australian servicemen in Darwin to other towns to the South would be sarcastically called ‘The Great Darwin Handicap’. Swearing on seeing this, Ingrid took on her to run to the nearby empty watch tower and climbed it, turning the handle of the alert siren once on top. The sinister owl of the siren at least made the other occupants of the airfield take shelter, even though there was little else that could be done about the incoming Japanese planes. The Japanese planes were nearly overhead when Ingrid decided that it was time for her to climb down from the watch tower and find a shelter. As she was running towards a shallow ditch parallel to the main road around the airfield, she saw the Australian doctor and his few nurses and medics still in the process of taking the wounded out of the infirmary. Changing direction, she ran to the infirmary and entered it as Nurse Watkins also went back in to get another patient.

“Let me help you, Nurse Watkins.”

The Australian senior nurse smiled briefly on seeing her, nodding her head and pointing at a patient who was trying to walk out by hopping on his one good leg.

“Then help support that man, Captain.”

“Got it!”

Taking position to the left of the patient, so that he would not touch her burns on her left arm, back and neck, Ingrid made him put his hand on her right shoulder and escorted him out of the infirmary and towards the roadside ditch, where the other patients were taking cover. Once the man was safely down in the ditch, Ingrid ran back into the infirmary and grabbed her backpack, kit bag and rifle and ran out again to the ditch, dropping her things in it and crouching down as the first bombs, dropped from high altitude by Nakajima B5N KATE carrier-borne bombers, started to fall on the station. The few Australian planes on the airfield, along with two American C-87s immobilized for

repairs were quickly bracketed by 250 kilo bombs and burst into flames one after the others, while the piles of supplies and equipment still left in the open were also hit. A few bombs also cratered the two landing strips, making them temporarily unusable. One bomb hit a corner of the headquarters building, blowing open the façade and killing the servants of one of the two only anti-aircraft machine guns on the station, which occupied sandbagged positions on each side of the headquarters building. To the indignation of Ingrid and of Chief Nurse Watkins, who was looking in the same direction, the two servants of the remaining machine gun then ran out into the bush, abandoning their post.

“The bloody cowards!” spat out the Australian nurse, furious. The sight of the machine gun, left without servants, was too much for Ingrid, who got up on her feet, her rifle in hand, and started running towards the machine gun, 150 meters away.

“WHERE ARE YOU GOING, CAPTAIN?” shouted Watkins. “COME BACK!” Ingrid didn’t answer her, continuing her sprint while ignoring the bombs exploding around her and the station. Climbing over the sandbag parapet of the machine gun position and leaning her rifle against the sandbag wall, she inspected quickly the machine gun, a .303 caliber Vickers mounted on an anti-aircraft tripod: it had a full belt in place and four more boxes of ammunition lay near it. Knowing that she could do nothing about the KATE bombers, which flew too high for her machinegun, she waited for the VAL dive bombers to start their attacks, her two hands on the firing handles of the Vickers. She was still waiting when Lieutenant Dave Carey, one of the American wounded still in Darwin, entered the sandbag position, limping as quickly as he could with a tight smile.

“I thought that you could use a loader, Captain.”

Ingrid smiled tenderly to him, appreciating his courage.

“In that case, open these ammunition boxes and prepare them for loading, Lieutenant.”

The first VAL bombers started diving two minutes after the KATE level bombers had finished dropping their bombs. Most of the planes parked on the station were now burning or were damaged, while a number of buildings had been hit. Thick columns of black smoke were also rising over the port and harbor area, where bombs were still exploding. Ingrid was furious at these sights, for many reasons: for the losses in lives and materiel, which were bound to impact on the precious air bridge with the Philippines; for the stupidity and incompetence of many Australian and American officers in Darwin

and, finally, for the fact that, after being officially at war for two years already, Australia was still so unprepared and careless that Darwin could find itself under attack with no fighters or anti-aircraft guns, or even ground troops, to defend such a strategically important location. That she had to man herself with the help of another wounded American the sole machine gun left to defend the station only added to her bitterness. She however did her best to control her rage and keep a cool head, knowing that she would soon be in what Nancy would have called a target-rich environment and would probably become quickly herself a prime target for the Japanese. Looking around her, she saw an Australian Avro ANSON twin-engine coastal patrol aircraft sitting less than fifty meters away from her, apparently still mostly intact. That plane was bound to attract a dive bomber or two, so she prepared herself to greet warmly any Japanese plane that would dive on that ANSON. Effectively, a pair of VALs quickly dove on the Australian plane, one behind the other. Because of the limited range of her weapon, Ingrid had to wait until the Japanese dive bombers were at an altitude of 800 meters before opening fire, after the first VAL had just released its bomb and was starting to raise its nose up. Firing short bursts, Ingrid made the VAL fly through her lines of tracers, but without apparent results, while the Japanese' bomb exploded just besides the ANSON, flipping it upside down and destroying it. The VAL then passed right above Ingrid as it came out of its dive, giving her a chance to fire a long burst at its belly from less than 300 meters, pressing on the trigger until her machine gun went silent, short of bullets.

"NEW AMMO BELT!" she screamed to Carey, while opening at the same time the breach cover to expose the feeding claws of the weapon. In her haste to reload her Vickers, she did not see the VAL on which she had fired on continue its dive at a slight angle, its pilot killed by one of her bullets. The explosion which resulted from the crash of the dive bomber finally attracted her attention and that of Carey.

"MY GOD, WE GOT HIM!" shouted Carey, jumping with joy. Ingrid smiled as well but reminded him that there was more to do as she cocked twice the breechblock of her machinegun in order to load a fresh round in the weapon's chamber.

"One down, 149 to go! Let's serve our next customer now."

Those words quickly cooled down the enthusiasm of the fighter pilot, who then got ready with another belt of ammunition as Ingrid pointed her machine gun at the second VAL, which had already flown over them. The pilot of the second VAL, seeing that he had lost his leader, performed a tight turn at low altitude to return over the station and look for the ones who had shot his leader down. Ingrid didn't fire then and stayed immobile, to stay

unnoticed as long as possible and take the VAL pilot by surprise. The latter, his vision partly blocked by his big Mitsubishi Kinsei 44 14-piston radial engine, didn't see the small silhouette waiting for him. With a target coming at him in a straight line and at low altitude, Ingrid's aim was greatly simplified and she fired a long burst into the nose of the dive bomber. The VAL suddenly turned into a flying torch; its forward fuel tank pierced by many bullets. Its pilot and rear machine gunner were still screaming with pain while burning alive when the VAL crashed on top of the already ruined Avro ANSON.

Despite her joy at having shot down two VALs, Ingrid concentrated her attention on the Japanese planes still flying over the station, ignoring the enthusiastic screams coming from the Americans and Australians who had taken cover in the nearby roadside ditch. With her position situated near the headquarters building, she soon had two ZERO fighters speeding directly towards her, apparently intent on strafing the building behind her.

"Uh, Lieutenant Carey, you better stay down behind the parapet now: this will become really exciting very soon." said Ingrid in a tense voice. The ZERO fighter, with its two 20 mm cannons and two 7.7 mm machine guns, vastly outgunned her but she still had a slight chance to survive against one ZERO. Against two ZEROs, she was now nearly as good as dead. Her stomach knotted by fear and feeling her hair rise on her head, she concentrated her full attention on the two approaching fighters, adrenaline flooding her veins and experiencing tunnel vision as well while hyperventilating. The two ZEROs, flying side by side, opened fire well before she did, strafing the headquarters building and turning it into a sieve. She heard many bullets whistle by her, with more bullets impacting against the sandbags of the parapet. One 20 mm cannon shell even exploded against the outside base of the parapet, but its fragments didn't penetrate the double rows of sandbags. Firing only at the last moment, as the ZEROs were about to overfly her, she aimed at the nose and belly of the leading ZERO. The Japanese fighters were then past her, leaving Ingrid to wonder how she could still be alive. Taking a deep breath to chase her fear, she looked at the ZEROs which were now flying away. Only then did she see that she had hit her target, with the leading Japanese fighter now trailing black smoke.

"WE GOT HIM!"

Ralph Carey, still hiding behind the parapet and severely shaken by his close call with death, got up with difficulty on his one good leg and patted Ingrid's shoulder.

"Captain, I would follow you in Hell if need be."

Still breathing fast and as tense as an iron bar, Ingrid looked around her and saw that all the Japanese airplanes were now turning around and regrouping before leaving in the direction of the Northeast. She had to sit down on top of her position's parapet, her legs shaking, as she realized how close to having been killed she had come. Carey also sat beside her and took out a pack of cigarettes from one pocket, offering one to Ingrid.

"Cigarette, Captain?"

"No but thanks, Lieutenant. I don't smoke."

"Even after such a moment?"

"It's tempting, but no. Damn, I was never as scared as I was during the last minute."

"The same for me, Captain." replied Carey before looking around him at the ruined airfield. "The Japanese sure gave this station a beating this morning. There must be dead and wounded men everywhere. Thank God that you did alert us to that scout plane yesterday, though. Imagine if this airfield would be still full of C-87s."

"Then, our air bridge to the Philippines would be history, Lieutenant. Still, we will have to repair the landing strips before our C-87s returning from Clark Field can land here. Let's go see how the other wounded are faring."

The duo barely had time to get up on their feet before Colonel Sneed, accompanied by four of his staff officers, including Captain Manning, arrived at a run, their uniforms covered with dust and dirt. To Ingrid's surprise, Sneed saluted her first, his eyes fixing her with admiration.

"Captain Dows, you just gave us an incredible demonstration of courage and cool-headedness. Be assured that Brigadier General Barnes will hear about this. Lieutenant Carey, I also intend to mention your heroic conduct today."

"Thank you, Colonel." said softly Ingrid. "Unfortunately, I'm afraid that this airfield is now a complete shamble."

"You are too right about that, Captain." said Sneed, nodding his head, before looking at Captain Manning. "Captain, find out if a radio or a telephone is still working inside the headquarters building. We must warn General Barnes in Brisbane and General Brereton in Manila about this Japanese raid. Tell them that those planes came from carriers and that Darwin Airfield is presently out of service. Major Cuccinik, tell Batchelor and Parap airfields to be ready to receive our C-87s when they will arrive this afternoon from Clark Field. Lieutenant Hughes, take a jeep and go see in what state are

the port and the ships moored in the harbor. I want a list of the damages and losses there. Captain Simpson, you will be in charge of the rescue operations here. From what I was able to see up to now, it seems that we can't count on our Australian comrades for nothing here. I will try to find Wing Commander Griffith in the meantime, to liaise with him."

"Can I help with something, Colonel?" asked Ingrid. Sneed nodded his head at once.

"Yes, you can, Captain. Find the men and equipment still available around the station and have repairs started on the two landing strips. Find out at the same time how much aviation fuel is still left intact around the station."

"Will do, sir!" replied Ingrid, saluting Sneed. The latter was about to return her salute when he froze and looked down at Ingrid's right armpit.

"Uh, did you have a hole in your shirt before this attack, Captain?" Ingrid, surprised, looked down at her armpit and was shocked to see the hole that a 7.7 mm bullet had made in her shirt just under her right armpit, having missed her by a few millimeters.

20:41 (Brisbane Time)

Friday, November 14, 1941 'C'

Reception lobby of the Lennon's Hotel

Corner of George, Ann and Adelaide Streets

Downtown Brisbane, East coast of Australia

"Hey, Jim, stop ogling that magazine! I would like to look at that babe too."

"But I'm reading the article to see what they say about her tactics against the Japanese." protested Lieutenant Jim McAfee, of the 16th Bomber Squadron (Light), getting a sarcastic reply from his squadron mate, Lieutenant Bob Ruegg.

"Yeah, that's why you have been looking at the same picture during the last minute? The one that shows her bare torso and lying on her belly?"

One of the four pilots looking at the copy of the TIME-LIFE MAGAZINE over the shoulder of McAfee, who was sitting in one of the sofas of the hotel's reception lobby, then took his defense.

"Hey, we also want to read the article."

Captain William Hipps, commander of the 16th Bomber Squadron, smiled in amusement at the exchange while reading the latest edition of the main daily newspaper in Brisbane. Since he and his men had arrived by sea five days ago with the convoy escorted by the cruiser PENSACOLA, they had been working hard to reassemble their Douglas A-24 dive bombers, which had made the long sea trip across the Pacific in giant crates. The opportunities to relax and change their minds at night were however fairly limited in Brisbane, save for the pubs and clubs where they could go drink. Hipps had however made abundantly clear to his men that he expected them to be sober and fit in the morning. Flirting with the local girls was a risky activity, in view of the jealous attention with which Australian men guarded their wives and daughters. That mostly left reading or listening to news of the war in newspapers and on the radio. The news from the Philippines were regularly featured in the news, while the Japanese attack on Darwin was on all the lips. However, few details were known publicly about that attack, thanks to official censure.

As McAfee finally handed his magazine to Bob Ruegg, a group of American pilots and aircrews entered the hotel lobby at a tired pace, escorted by Major Hicks, an officer on the staff of Brigadier General Barnes. Hipps and his men had seen such processions twice already and understood that those aviators were arriving from Darwin with a new lot of wounded. McAfee, who was already regretting having given his magazine to Ruegg and was watching the newcomers enter the lobby, nearly strangled up with surprise when a beautiful teenager in combat uniform entered, carrying a rifle, a backpack and a kit bag. He then smiled with contentment as he followed Ingrid with his eyes.

“Hey, guys, forget the magazine: the real deal is here.”

Hipps, like the rest of his men, watched with intense curiosity as the teenager went to the reception desk with the rest of her group. Bandages were visible on her neck, sticking out of her shirt’s collar.

“My God! She’s even more beautiful than on this picture.” exclaimed a bit too loudly McAfee, deciding Hipps in reminding something to his men.

“Calm down, guys! This girl is married to an officer of the Marines who is presently fighting in the Philippines. She also has the rank of captain and is a recipient of the Medal of Honor, so please show her respect and courtesy.”

"But her rank must not be for real, Captain." protested Samuel Dillard. "She's in the Filipino Army, not the United States Army."

That got him a warning look from Hipps.

"She got her rank of captain directly from General MacArthur, who is our theatre commander, Dillard. You want to discuss that point with him?"

"Uh, no, Captain."

"Good! Now, I believe that it is quite late already and that we have a lot of work to do tomorrow, so I counsel you to go up to your rooms and go to bed, gentlemen."

His pilots obeyed reluctantly, commenting between them about what they had seen of the girl. McAfee however made sure to grab the magazine left on a table by Ruegg before going up to his room.

After leaving her two pieces of luggage and her rifle in the small room with private bathroom assigned to her, Ingrid followed Major Hicks to the door of a room on the highest floor of the hotel. Knocking on the door and waiting for a response, Hicks opened the door after hearing an answer, leading Ingrid in the room and coming to attention, imitated by Ingrid.

"General, Captain Dows here has just arrived from Darwin and is carrying a report from Colonel Sneed for you."

Brigadier General Julian Barnes, an old and experienced aviator, got up from behind his desk, which was actually a simple folding table set up in the lounge of his suite, and returned their salutes. He couldn't help be shocked by the young age of the beautiful girl wearing the rank insignias of a captain. She however wore as well a fighter pilot's wings insignia and the ribbons of the Medal of Honor, DSC, Silver Star, DFC, Purple Heart and the Presidential Unit Citation, or PUC. This was definitely no ordinary girl.

"At ease! Show me this report, Captain Dows."

"Here it is, General." replied politely Ingrid while stepping forward and taking out the envelope she had brought from Darwin. Barnes took and opened the envelope, taking out a document counting a few pages and sitting back to read it. Ingrid stayed quiet and still as Barnes read. The old brigadier general finally shook his head in disgust.

"This could have turned into a true disaster if not for your timely sighting of that Japanese scout plane, Captain Dows. However, the lack of warning or even of proper

response from the Australians is simply inexcusable. Are the Australians in Darwin this incompetent?"

"If I may speak frankly, General." said Ingrid while coming to attention. Barnes eyed her with interest.

"Go ahead, Captain."

"General, this fiasco is due mainly to serious deficiencies in the warning and command system of the Australian Air Force, including the total lack of radar stations, fighter planes and anti-aircraft guns, slow and non-secure communications lines and, especially, a confused and inefficient chain of command. Colonel Sneed covers that last point in detail in his report, General."

"Did he show you his report, Captain?"

"Actually, General, he asked me to help him write the section containing the details about the Japanese attack on Darwin Airfield."

"I see!" said Barnes before rereading that part of the report. He finally put down the document and looked again at Ingrid.

"Did Colonel Sneed show you his report in its entirety, Captain?"

"No, General! Only the part concerning the Japanese attack and the probable causes of the failed response."

"Well, he mentions you by name at the end of his report and recommends that you be assigned to the reassembly of the P-40 fighters we brought by sea, then that you help conveying them to the Philippines via the Dutch East Indies. Know however that the few fighter pilots that I have here are mostly inexperienced and never saw combat. They seriously need in my opinion some serious extra training. You will thus take charge of those fighter pilots and teach them all you can about how to fight the Japanese. These pilots are lodging here in this hotel, like the pilots and aircrews of the 27th Bombardment Group, which arrived here with 52 Douglas A-24 dive bombers. Major Hicks will introduce you to these pilots tomorrow morning. Report to him at eight tomorrow morning, in Room 607, in combat uniform. Dismissed!"

Ingrid, happy to see Barnes show confidence in her, saluted him and pivoted on her heels, then walked out. Barnes signaled Hicks to stay and spoke to him once the door closed behind Ingrid.

"What do you think of her, Major?"

"That she looks even younger than I expected, General. She however appears competent and surprisingly mature for her age."

"Hicks, know that the last page of Colonel Sneed's report is actually an official letter of recommendation for a medal: he wants a Silver Star for her. According to what he wrote, it seems that this young girl amply deserved it. Here, read!"

Hicks took the letter and read it quickly before looking back at his superior with wide eyes.

"This girl is positively incredible. The DSC wouldn't be too much for what she did in Darwin."

"Yeah, and she already won it in the Philippines. Girl or not, we just can't waste such talent, especially now."

08:14 (Brisbane Time)

Saturday, November 15, 1941 'C'

Reception lobby of the Lennon's Hotel

Brisbane, Australia

The 58 pilots in combat uniform were waiting in a corner of the hotel lobby, ready to receive their instructions for the day from Major John 'Big Jim' Davies, the commander of the 27th Bombardment Group, when Major Hicks showed up with Ingrid close behind him. With all eyes now on Ingrid, Hicks exchanged a salute with Davies and spoke to him briefly in a low voice before departing, leaving Ingrid besides Davies. The latter signaled Ingrid to join the other pilots, then spoke up in a firm voice.

"Gentlemen, I would like to introduce to our group Captain Ingrid Dows, also known as 'Lady Hawk', from the Filipino 6th Pursuit Squadron. She will work with us to help reassemble our A-24s and P-40s loaded on the MEIGS, then will act as air combat instructor for the few lost fighter pilots in our midst."

Davies let the few laughs caused by his joke quiet down before continuing.

"As you know too well, despite three days of intense efforts, there is still a lot left to do before our first plane is finished assembling and is ready to be tested in the air. We will thus report again this morning to Captain Gunn, at Eagle Farm Airfield. The fighter pilots in our group will work under Captain Dows on the P-40s, while we will concentrate on our A-24s. Two buses are waiting at the main entrance to bring us to the airfield. Let's move, people!"

Ingrid waited to be next to last, just ahead of Major Davies, to board the first bus, wanting to avoid having wandering hands rub against her body. Davies noticed that and gave her a reassuring smile.

“Don’t worry about my men, Captain: they can behave when they want to.”

“Men will be men, Major.” replied Ingrid with a slight smile, not wanting to antagonize him. “As for me, I’m no virgin myself, so I will try to minimize temptation...on both sides.”

A number of young pilots around her then faked indignation at her incendiary declaration, while Davies rolled his eyes.

17:25 (Brisbane Time)

Lennon’s Hotel, Brisbane

Ingrid was exhausted, covered with sweat and dust and was famished when she entered the hotel lobby with the other pilots. She was however happy, first for having helped assembling a P-40F fighter at Eagle Farm Airfield, second for having had the chance to meet there an old friend she had known in the Philippines. Paul Irvin Gunn, a small 42-year-old man with a moustache, had been a commercial airline pilot in the Philippines and had first met Ingrid when she had started taking flying lessons at Nielson Field. Now, Gunn wore the rank of captain and was in charge of assembling the planes brought by ship to Brisbane. Gunn, who had traveled with Ingrid in her bus back to the hotel, patted her right shoulder once in the lobby.

“My wife and kids are due to meet me here before going to a restaurant for supper. It would really please me if you could join us.”

“I would be most happy to, Paul. Let me just go up to my room to shower and change first.”

When she reappeared in the lobby 35 minutes later, Ingrid was wearing her adjusted going out uniform of the Filipino Army, plus was carrying a regulation black purse, making the men present in the lobby stare hungrily at her. Paul, who was waiting with his wife Clara and his four young children, simply smiled in amusement on seeing her.

“You will always have an effect on the men around you, Ingrid, whatever you will wear.”

"Thanks for the compliment, Paul." said Ingrid before sharing a hug with Gunn's wife. "I'm happy to see you again, Clara."

"Me too, Ingrid. You certainly made a name for yourself in the last few weeks."

"Hey, I was simply defending myself. The Japanese have the bad habit of constantly flying across my sights."

Paul Gunn broke out in laughter on hearing that.

"Ingrid, you are the gutsiest girl I ever met."

"You should have met my adoptive mother: compared to her, I am positively lame."

Paul's smile faded as a dreamy expression came on his face.

"Nancy Laplante, the most extraordinary woman to ever be. I would have loved to meet her, just to speak with her of course."

"Of course!" replied Clara Gunn in a sarcastic tone. "Well, let's find a good restaurant now: the kids are famished."

Walking out of the hotel with the Gunn family, Ingrid went with them to a small restaurant on George Street. It was now a bit past six in the evening and the Sun had just set. They also quickly found that it was the closing hour for the bars and pubs, judging by the number of drunk Australians circulating on the sidewalks. Paul Gunn instinctively put one arm around his wife's shoulders to discourage possible advances from drunken men. On her part, Ingrid kept her right hand close to the opening of her service purse, which contained her telescopic steel baton and her compact GLOCK 26 9 mm pistol inherited from Nancy. Their group however made it without incident to the restaurant, where they took a table in the half full dining room. A loud speaker was broadcasting some music from a local radio station, helping to give the place a more relaxed environment. The Gunns and Ingrid promptly chose from the menu and placed their orders, then started conversing together while they waited for their food. They were served twelve minutes later and were starting to eat when the music on the radio was interrupted by the voice of an announcer.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we regret to have to interrupt briefly our musical program in order to pass a special news bulletin. The Australian High Command has announced that the Japanese have attacked this morning the Dutch East Indies and Timor, with sea landings in Medan, Batavia, Fretan, Wetan, Kendari, Bali, Ambon and Kupang, plus

making airborne landings around Palembang. The Dutch colonial forces are however resisting the invaders with determination and are causing them heavy losses.”

“In clear language, the Dutch were taken by surprise and are fighting a rear-guard action.” said Ingrid in a low voice as the music resumed. Clara Gunn looked at her with shock.

“You don’t think that the Dutch are able to repel the Japanese?”

Ingrid shook her head, her face somber.

“No! The Japanese naval and air superiority is too great for that. Unfortunately, the Japanese just achieved two important things: they will now be able to exploit the oilfields and refineries on Java and Sumatra and, at the same time, they shut down to us the airfields of the Dutch East Indies. Paul, what is the range of the A-24?”

“About 450 miles with a full load of bombs, or 1,100 miles without bombs.”

“Hum, that means that our A-24s could not get to Kupang or Ambon, the two points closest to Darwin, and come back, even without bombs. Has someone in General Barnes’ staff realized yet that the A-24s and P-40s that we are reassembling here are essentially useless because of their short range? We don’t have access anymore to the Dutch East Indies airfields which would have allowed our aircraft to get to the Philippines by a series of staging points, while our planes don’t have enough range to hit those same airfields, which will soon be used by the Japanese to hit Australia.”

Paul Gunn swore quietly when he realized that Ingrid was right.

“My God! That leaves us with only a handful of medium and heavy bombers able to attack the Japanese and with nothing to reinforce the Philippines. But we can’t simply let these planes dismantled and do nothing with them, Ingrid.”

“No, but their utility is now limited to the direct defense of Australia and nothing else, unfortunately, unless we find a way to augment dramatically their range, something I strongly doubt.”

Paul, his mind struck by Ingrid’s verdict, thought furiously about how to circumvent that problem, eating absent-mindedly during the rest of the meal. Embarrassed for having caused Paul to neglect his family, Ingrid did her best to distract Clara and her four children, telling them stories about her flying. Paul was still absorbed in his thinking when the group returned to the hotel after supper. Saying goodbye to the Gunns, Ingrid then went to her room and took off her uniform to be more at ease. Sitting at the small desk of her room, she started writing a memo addressed to General Barnes, with the firm intention to give it to him first thing in the morning. Her memo done, she went to

bed but had problems falling asleep, haunted by the thought that she and the other pilots were wasting their time with inadequate planes. What the American forces needed in the Pacific were planes with really long range, not light bombers which would need four stopovers just to get from Brisbane to Darwin. Unfortunately, Washington seemed unshakeable about its doctrine of giving absolute priority to the European front, at the expense of the Pacific front. The A-24s and P-40s in Brisbane would thus have to do.

09:26 (Brisbane Time)

Sunday, November 16, 1941 'C'

Temporary headquarters of the United States Forces in Australia (USFIA)

Lennon's Hotel, Brisbane

Brigadier General Julian Barnes swore in frustration as he examined his map of the Pacific Southwest and of Australia, with Ingrid's memo in his hands. He had no choice but to agree with her: the dive bombers that he had brought from the United States, along with over 800 men of the 27th Bombardment Group, were now effectively good only for local defense. The Dutch liaison officer in Brisbane had unfortunately confirmed the bad news about the Japanese invasion of the Dutch East Indies and had told him that the Dutch forces wouldn't be able to resist for more than a week. He couldn't even send his planes to the Philippines by stages anymore. Discouraged, Barnes looked at his staff officer in charge of aviation matters, Major Hicks.

"Well, I'm afraid that the Japanese truly screwed us up this time. Apart from gaining the oil wells of Java and Sumatra, they also cut off our route to the Philippines. Now, only our C-87 transports can make it to the Philippines. Unless we can improve dramatically the range of our A-24s, they will be stuck in Australia. Captain Dows is right: we need B-17s, B-24s and P-38s here in Australia. If not, Washington will have to try to slip a sea convoy loaded with planes to the Philippines, with the real risk of seeing that convoy be intercepted by the Japanese fleet."

"What about Dows' suggestion to reload our planes on our transports and sail immediately for the Philippines, while the Japanese fleet is busy invading the Dutch East Indies?"

Barnes was silent for a long moment, debating what was one of the most difficult decisions of his career. The worst part was that he did not really have the authority to take such a decision by himself. However, waiting for a decision from Washington on

this would take many precious days and would close the window of opportunity that he had now. Fully realizing that he could end up in front of a court martial if he ever lost his convoy at sea, Barnes took a deep breath and signaled his signals officer to approach him.

“Captain MacNamara, write a coded message destined to General MacArthur in Manila, CRITIC priority and TOP SECRET. Put as well Admiral Hart, of the Asiatic Fleet, as info recipient, but nobody else, especially not Washington or Hawaii.”

“Uh, understood, General.” replied MacNamara, realizing that his superior was probably about to overstep his authority. He was not disappointed when Barnes started dictating his message.

“To General MacArthur, from Brigadier General Julian Barnes, Commander USFIA in Brisbane. Following the Japanese invasion of the Dutch East Indies, the A-24 and P-40 planes brought to Australia by sea are now out of range of the Philippines. Pursuant to the directives of the War Department, which places the highest priority in reinforcing our aviation in the Philippines, I have thus ordered that the planes and materiel unloaded from the PENSACOLA convoy be reloaded aboard their transport ships, so that the convoy could secretly sail to the Philippines as quickly as possible. I am hoping to push my convoy through while the majority of the Japanese fleet is still occupied around the Dutch East Indies. The window of opportunity is however very limited and your authorization is requested in the shortest possible time, to allow me to send my convoy as soon as possible. The utmost discretion on this subject is also required, as any security leak could endanger the convoy. I await with impatience your directives. Signed, Julian Barnes, Brigadier General. Add as an annex an abbreviated list of the materiel and planes contained in the convoy and the list of ships in the convoy, along with the planned route to the Philippines. Encode it and send it as fast as you can, Captain.”

“Right away, General!”

Barnes then turned to face Hicks.

“Major, stop immediately any unloading work off our ships and have everything which was already taken off put back aboard our transports. The planes already assembled will be transported whole, as deck cargo. Be discreet about those orders, though: I don’t want those damn Australian newspapers or radio stations to announce publicly our impending departure.”

“Understood, General!”

Next, Barnes looked at his Australian liaison officer.

“Major Somerville, I want you to put an official gag on the radio stations and newspapers in Australia, especially those in Brisbane, to prevent any rumors or speculations about our convoy which could put our men and ships at risk. Also, tell your damn stevedores to stop working to rule: we are at war, if they haven’t understood that yet.”

“Uh, I will do my best, General.”

08:33 (Manila Time) / 10:33 (Brisbane Time)

Office of General MacArthur

USAFFE HQ, Manila

Philippines

“General, you have a message with CRITIC priority from Brigadier General Barnes, in Brisbane.”

Douglas MacArthur, who was discussing with Admiral Thomas Hart their respective situations facing the Japanese, took the message handed by an aide and thanked the junior officer before starting to read. Hart saw him soon smile as he read.

“Some good news, General?”

“Possibly, Admiral. Brigadier General Barnes, in view of the Japanese invasion of the Dutch East Indies, which just cut off the air transit itinerary between Australia and the Philippines, has ordered the PENSACOLA convoy to be reloaded with the planes and materiel already landed in Brisbane. He is asking my permission to send the convoy to Manila, while the majority of the Japanese fleet is still busy around the Dutch East Indies. Barnes just proved that he has both guts and initiative. My God, this could really work, if he acts quickly.”

“What exactly is transported by that convoy, General?” asked Hart, instantly interested. MacArthur handed him the message while answering him.

“A complete dive bomber group of 52 Douglas A-24s, forty P-40s, an aviation depot and forward maintenance unit and three field artillery regiments. Here, you are an info addressee.”

Hart, reading quickly the message, hesitated on seeing the extremely limited list of addressees.

“The Pacific Fleet headquarters and Washington are not getting this message? But Barnes is risking a court martial if he loses his convoy after sending it like this without higher authorization.”

“A good leader knows when to take an initiative without wasting time to ask for authorization, Admiral. Barnes just proved that he is one of them. I will immediately answer him to tell him that he has my authorization to send the PENSACOLA convoy on its way to Manila as soon as possible. What could your fleet do to help this convoy arrive in one piece, Admiral?”

Hart thought his answer for a moment before replying.

“It is true that Japanese ships are somewhat rare around the Philippines these days, while the intensity and frequency of the air raids have gone down quite a lot, thank God! I can move a few of my submarines to sweep down and cover the proposed route of the convoy, to chase away any Japanese ship which could spot the convoy. The unloading of the convoy once in Manila harbor will however take many days, during which those ships will be very vulnerable to air attacks. This is a risky bet indeed.”

“All bets worth taking are dangerous, Admiral.” said MacArthur in a firm voice. “You may start sending your submarines. On my part, I will make sure that everything is done in Manila harbor to expedite the unloading of this convoy once it gets here. God, what I could do with three full artillery regiments.”

20:17 (Brisbane Time)

Wednesday, November 19, 1941 ‘C’

Brigadier General Barnes’ office

Lennon’s Hotel, Brisbane, Australia

“At ease, gentlemen...and lady!”

Ingrid, like the fourteen other fighter pilots ordered to show up in Barnes’ suite, adopted a relaxed position and waited in silence as Barnes reviewed a message in front of him on his work table. Barnes finally looked up from the message and examined the young pilots lined in front of him.

“I know that you are all busy packing up your things for your departure at sea tonight, but I just received this message from General MacArthur which concerns you directly. As you already know, the men of your group were sent to Australia as reinforcement for the various pursuit squadrons in the Philippines, with a secondary

mission to deliver forty P-40F, our latest model of the P-40, which were brought aboard the PENSACOLA convoy. As such, you had not been assigned yet to a specific squadron and had no commanding officer, nearly all of you being fresh out of the fighter school in Luke Field and having also completed the P-40 conversion course. Well, this message from General MacArthur assigns you finally to a squadron and a commander. You will now be part of the 17th Pursuit Squadron, a provisional unit, and your commander will be Captain Dows, a veteran and air ace from the Philippines.”

Barnes watched carefully the reactions of the male pilots at his last sentence, expecting objections from them at being put under the command of a woman. While he saw some surprise and skepticism on a few faces, none of them was stupid enough to protest a decision coming from a lieutenant general. Satisfied, Barnes continued.

“Other fighter pilots who had been wounded in the Philippines and then sent by air to Darwin for treatment will accompany you on the convoy. While still considered as convalescing, those whose healing is considered advanced enough are being sent back to their respective squadrons in the Philippines, where they will complete their medical recovery and then will be given new fighter aircraft out of the lot of P-40s transported by the convoy. Twenty of the P-40Fs in the lot are however reserved exclusively for the use of the 17th Pursuit Squadron and of the 6th Pursuit Squadron of the Filipino Air Corps.”

Seeing Ingrid smile on hearing his last words, Barnes looked at her and nodded his head once.

“You will certainly be happy to learn that Major Villamor is still flying from Batangas and shooting down Japanese planes on a regular basis. It seems that two of his original squadron pilots who had been wounded in combat are now fit again to fly. Four of the twenty P-40Fs I mentioned earlier will go to the 6th Pursuit Squadron, along with sets of spares, while you will keep the remaining sixteen P-40s for your squadron, Captain. Once you are in the Philippines, with your planes assembled, your squadron will operate from the airfield in Batangas, which is still the home of the 6th Pursuit Squadron. The facilities there are limited, but Batangas has the advantage of having been mostly ignored by the Japanese, since only a single plane was using it. In advance of your arrival, General Brereton has ordered that an engineer unit improves the facilities of the airfield as discreetly as possible, in order to avoid unwanted attention from the Japanese. Another advantage is that the 6th Pursuit Squadron, while it was down to only one pilot and one plane, still has a full complement of ground servicing and

support crews familiar with the P-40. Your ground echelon is thus already in place and ready to receive you. You will all travel on the MEIGS, which will carry the twenty P-40s assigned to you. Now, this leaves me with only one more last thing concerning you. Squadron, ATTEN...HUT!"

As the fifteen fighter pilots came to attention, Barnes got up from behind his work table and, grabbing a small box on his table, approached Ingrid, stopping one pace in front of her.

"Captain Ingrid Dows, of the Filipino Air Corps 6th Pursuit Squadron, I am happy and honored to award to you your second Distinguished Service Cross, for your heroic actions in defending Darwin from Japanese air attack on November twelve of this year." Barnes then opened the small box and took out a DSC with oak leaf cluster, pinning it to Ingrid's combat shirt, above her left breast pocket. Taking a step back, he saluted her, with Ingrid proudly saluting back. The brigadier general then looked at the male pilots in the room, giving them a sober, nearly severe look.

"Gentlemen, never let the youth or sex of your new squadron commander fool you about her abilities as a fighter pilot and officer. I have had to deal with hundreds of young pilots in my career and I can say with confidence that few of them ever showed abilities as high as those demonstrated to date by Captain Dows. Listen to her and obey her without reserve and you will be able to hurt badly the Japanese in the air. Well, that is all that I had for you, gentlemen and lady. You are dismissed to your rooms. Captain Dows, please stay for a moment more."

Now somewhat nervous, Ingrid, stayed at attention while the fourteen male pilots left the room. Barnes then spoke to her in a friendly tone.

"Captain Dows, many people in the United States are disturbed by the fact that you are a fighter pilot, even though you are officially part of the Filipino Air Corps. They will most probably be even more disturbed to learn that you are now the commanding officer of a United States pursuit squadron. Know however that I am not part of that crowd. You amply proved your valor in combat and showed intelligence and initiative, which I appreciate a lot. I know however that your lack of formal military training as an officer is putting you at a severe disadvantage in terms of filling the administrative duties a squadron commander is normally expected to accomplish. I have thus assigned to you and your new squadron two experienced officers, one an administrative officer, the other a logistician. You will also have with you Captain Paul Gunn, who will act as your

maintenance officer. These three officers, along with eight clerical, signal and logistical NCOs, will travel with you on the MEIGS: you will thus have ample opportunity to get to know them. Here is a copy of the message from General MacArthur naming you commander of the 17th Provisional Pursuit Squadron, plus a mission order signed by me. Do you have questions, Captain?"

"Only one, sir. Since I am now in command of a United States pursuit squadron, does that mean that the United States Army is ready to accept me officially as an officer and a fighter pilot, sir?"

That brought a pained look on Barnes' face, who answered her in a soft voice.

"Unfortunately, no! I realize how stupid and illogical this could appear to you, but you are still officially considered simply as a Filipina officer in temporary command of an American unit. Present Army regulations still prohibit women from serving, except as nurses. I was made to understand that the President himself is trying to change that, but it would technically take an act of Congress to officially change those regulations. That could still take quite some time."

Ingrid hid as best she could her bitterness and kept her voice tone neutral.

"I will still do my best to serve the United States and the Philippines, sir."

"That's the spirit, Captain." said Barnes, smiling to her. "Good luck in your new command, Captain. I am sure that you will accomplish great things."

"Thank you, General!"

"You are welcomed, Captain. Dismissed!"

Ingrid saluted Barnes, then turned around and left his suite, her heart beating at an accelerated pace: fighter squadron commander at the official age of eighteen, after only a month as a fighter pilot. The fact that she was in reality only sixteen only added a spicy touch to her situation.

01:29 (Brisbane Time)

Thursday, November 20, 1941 'C'

Army transport ship USAT MEIGS

Brisbane harbor

Having dropped her things in the small cabin assigned to her on the big transport ship, Ingrid went out on the forward weather deck to look at the lights of Brisbane as the ships of the convoy started peeling off the quays. The MEIGS, like the other ships of the

flotilla, were in complete blackout condition, contrary to the city of Brisbane, which seemed to have no worries at all about possible Japanese air or sea raids. Seeing Paul Gunn leaning against the deck's railing, near one of the P-40F which had been assembled at Eagle Farm Airfield and was now firmly tied to the deck under a protective tarp, Ingrid went to lean on the railing next to him. She immediately noticed his sober expression.

"You are missing your family already, Paul?"

Gunn nodded slowly his head while still contemplating the city's lights.

"I do, Ingrid. My greatest fear is to never see my wife and kids again. I am now leaving them alone here in Brisbane, without any guaranties that I will be able to return to them."

"Paul," said softly Ingrid, "I am certain that they have as much confidence in you as you do in them. You just need to have confidence in yourself. You and your family will survive this war, I am sure of that."

Gunn turned his head to look at her, thoughtful.

"Ingrid, you are truly a girl apart. On one side, you have the beauty and youth of a teenager, on another the wisdom of an old traveler who has seen everything. In comparison to you, your pilots look and sound like rambunctious kids. Where does this incredible maturity of yours come from?"

Ingrid hesitated before answering him: Paul Gunn and his family had quickly become some of the best friends she and Ken counted in Manila and she had full confidence in the veteran aviator. The secret she kept was however a big one. She finally decided that, if she could reveal her secret to General MacArthur, she could do the same with a good, trusted friend.

"Paul, I am an old traveler who has seen everything...for over 7,000 years."

As Gunn looked at her with total incomprehension, she took a few minutes to tell him how she and Nancy had suddenly and simultaneously started to remember their past incarnations, mentioning in passing her past life as a young woman from Mindanao who had died over 500 years ago. Despite being thoroughly shaken by Ingrid's revelations, Gunn seemed to believe her nearly at once.

"I always wondered how a young German teenager could have learned in Europe two obscure dialects like the Cebuano and the Tagalog. And you don't know why you and Nancy Laplante got to remember your past incarnations?"

"Paul, don't laugh, but I think that it was a gift from God. As for the why, I don't know. I however intend to use this gift to help the ones around me...and to better understand our Japanese enemies. I was a Japanese geisha in the 9th Century and lived then at the imperial palace in Kyoto. I can speak and read Japanese fluently, plus dozens of other languages and dialects, most of them now extinct."

Gunn stared at her in silence for a moment before speaking quietly.

"Ingrid, even without this capacity to remember your past lives, you are still an extraordinary girl. None of your lives could have prepared you to become the ace fighter pilot you are today."

"Thank you, Paul." said Ingrid, flashing a tender smile. "You are yourself a man that I am proud to call a friend. Between friends, I have another confidence for you, a confidence that you must absolutely keep to yourself."

"Uh, let's see: you are an angel from Heaven?"

"Not really. In reality, I am sixteen years old, not eighteen. I lied to the Luftwaffe recruiters when I volunteered to become an auxiliary just before my fifteenth birthday."

"Good God! Sixteen and already wounded once in air combat. That is nearly obscene."

"What is truly obscene is this damn war and its collection of atrocities." replied Ingrid as she watched the heavy cruiser PENSACOLA glide silently past the MEIGS.

08:42 (Brisbane Time)

Forward weather deck of the USAT MEIGS

Coral Sea

Ingrid, wearing a combat uniform and with her pistol strapped to her upper right leg, had assembled her pilots, her ground support NCOs and her three support officers on the forward deck, near a tarp-covered P-40F, wanting to introduce herself and each other. She flashed a charming smile as she started her introductory speech.

"Welcome all to the 17th Provisional Pursuit Squadron, gentlemen. For those of you who don't know me yet, I am eighteen years old and was born in Berlin, Germany. I became an orphan in 1940, when a British bomb killed my whole extended family during a bombing raid on Berlin. I then enrolled as an auxiliary in the Luftwaffe, out of a desire to avenge my family and to help protect my country. If any of you is tempted to think that I joined the Luftwaffe because I was a convinced Nazi, then don't! I was actually a

German Jew, something I kept secret from my recruiter, thus have absolutely no love for the Nazis. My future adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante, then captured me, along with many other Germans, during a raid in France last January. Eventually, she and her husband, a major in the United States Army Corps of Engineers, adopted me and I was finally pardoned by the British, who then let me leave for the United States after the death of both Nancy and her husband. I have thus been orphaned twice. Before leaving London, I married a major of the Marine Corps and followed him to his new post in the Philippines. My husband Ken is a big, tough guy standing six foot two. You thus may look and dream, but you can't touch."

A concert of laughs greeted her joke. With the atmosphere now more relaxed, she went to more serious things.

"For those who are wondering how a young girl without any formal training as a fighter pilot could become the American Ace of aces, there are three factors to explain that. First, flying comes naturally for me. Second, during my time as a Luftwaffe auxiliary, I was able to frequent some of the greatest German fighter pilots serving in France. Those German aces were in turn more than happy to describe in detail to me their air combat tactics and to teach me the theory of deflection shooting, with of course a bottle of wine and a bed handy nearby."

Exclamations of amusement and false indignation met that declaration, with the young pilots facing her obviously envious of those German aces.

"Third, and most importantly, Nancy Laplante educated me in secret while I was still interned by the British, teaching me about the future, this war and combat planes, including Japanese planes and their strengths and weaknesses. This last point, more than anything else, will be primordial for your future successes against the Japanese. I know that you all learned the standard air tactics of the Army Air Corps during your fighter pilot course. You can however take those tactics and throw them in the garbage can: against the Japanese, these tactics will only get you killed in short order."

One of the young pilots immediately raised a hand to ask a question.

"Why do you think that Army air tactics are inadequate, Captain? Our instructors at fighter school were experienced, competent aviators."

"I don't doubt it, Lieutenant. However, those instructors probably never saw real air combat in their career, since the last time the United States flew combat missions was in 1918, a full generation ago. More importantly, they never flew against the Japanese or their planes. I saw quickly over the Philippines the results of those

standard Army tactics against the Japanese: our pilots got wiped out in short order. If you don't adjust your tactics to use the weaknesses of the Japanese planes, then they will eat you raw for breakfast. When I speak about Japanese weaknesses, don't think that I mean to say that the Japanese are bad pilots. Nothing could be further from the truth. The pilots that you will face are very well trained and experienced, most of them having fought over China for years. Their planes are also excellent in general terms, even though they have some significant weaknesses. What you heard in the United States about the Japanese being inferior pilots and their planes and equipment being junk is nothing but racist, xenophobic nonsense. Tomorrow, I will start giving theoretical lessons on the Japanese planes and tactics, where I will cover in detail the dos and don'ts of air combat against them. Now, about a point that I hope I will not have to repeat to you. In Batangas, you will be working closely with Filipino ground crews and soldiers and at least one Filipino pilot. You will treat those men with the same respect as you would American servicemen, as I will not tolerate any racist attitudes or remarks from you."

Seeing one of her pilots make a face at that, she stared hard at him.

"Do you have a problem with that, Lieutenant Simpsons?"

That lieutenant, a man in his late twenties with red hair and freckles, stiffened.

"Uh, no, Captain!"

"Good! Now, before I give you the dismiss so that you can go rest until tomorrow morning from your days of hard work in Brisbane, I will present you the three officers in charge of support and servicing for our squadron. Captain Paul Gunn, an old hand from the Philippines, will be our maintenance officer and also the second in command of this squadron. He will be assisted by Staff Sergeants Andrew Rockford and Tony Rizzuto and by Technical Sergeant Bill Smith. Lieutenant Ernest Wakefield will be our administrative officer and will be helped in his functions by Staff Sergeant James Burton and Corporal Bill Ashton. Finally, we have our logistics officer, Lieutenant Peter Shmelling, who has Technical Sergeant Timothy Allen to help him out. Rounding up our squadron are two signals specialists, Technical Sergeant Arthur Woods and Corporal Matthew Rowlin, who brought with them from the United States two long range radios of the latest model. That is all for the moment."

Letting her pilots disperse, Ingrid retained around her for a moment her three support officers and eight NCOs to speak to them in a relaxed tone.

"Gentlemen, you were assigned to this squadron to help me run the administrative and support side of it and, frankly, I need you badly in that respect. I may be a top ace in the air but I know nothing about United States Army administrative and logistical procedures and regulations. I will thus count heavily on your expertise to run the squadron. Also, I will be most happy for you to teach me as we go about those regulations, procedures and administrative rules. So, don't be surprised to see me hang around when you will be doing your paperwork. Please don't take that as a sign of personal interest in your male bodies."

Her joke made the eleven men around her laugh for a moment. Ingrid then pointed at Paul Gunn.

"Paul, we already have three P-40s fully assembled and parked on the deck. Our trip to Manila will take about twelve days. Could we assemble more planes in the meantime? Do we have the tools for that?"

The aviator and mechanical genius thought for a moment, while also looking at the three giant crates occupying the forward deck of the transport, along with the three assembled P-40 fighters.

"Well, the convoy brought a full complement of tools and the deck cranes of the MEIGS will facilitate a lot our work in lifting and assembling large parts, but it will all depend on the weather during our trip. Sunny days and calm seas would certainly help, contrary to our arrival, when we will want overcast skies and rain to discourage Japanese air raids while we unload the ships of the convoy. My answer would be yes, Ingrid. Count about three days of good weather to assemble each extra plane."

"Excellent! We will thus start assembly work tomorrow morning. The men not working on plane assembly will be painting the already assembled fighters in the paint scheme I and Major Villamor had adopted. It is actually a camouflage pattern from the future."

She spent a moment describing that paint scheme to the men around her, attracting a slow nod from Paul Gunn.

"An interesting paint scheme indeed. I am curious to see the final result."

"It works very well in air-to-air combat, I can tell you that, Paul. Well, since it is going to be a nice, warm sunny day, I think that I will go change into an appropriate attire to soak some sunrays. Feel free to do the same, gentlemen. Lieutenant Wakefield, would you mind if I start learning with you this afternoon about Army administrative regulations and procedures as it pertains to a squadron commander?"

"No problem, Captain. I will have my various forms laid out for you."

"Then I will see you after lunch. You are dismissed, gentlemen."

The convoy was nearly out of sight of the Australian coast when Ingrid and most of her men showed up on the aft deck in either bathing suits or army shorts, ready to get some suntan. Ingrid, who had climbed on deck wrapped in a bathrobe and wearing sandals, created a near riot when she took off her bathrobe, revealing a tiny (and perfectly indecent for the time period) bikini which barely hid anything of her young, slender but feminine body. She faked surprise at the shocked looks she drew.

"What? I had this bathing suit copied in my size from a model which belonged to Nancy Laplante, my adoptive mother from the year 2012. This isn't even the most revealing bathing suit I have. You should see what a thong bikini looks like."

"That thong bikini, you are planning to wear it during the trip, Captain?" asked one of her younger pilots, who was plainly showing his physical reaction to her. Ingrid gave him her most innocent smile.

"Of course! What is the point of owning a bikini and not wearing it? Patience, though, Lieutenant."

She then chose a spot on the deck that was out of sight of the watchmen on the ship's bridge and laid down a large towel before getting on her back to enjoy the Sun. Her men soon imitated her, surrounding her in strategic fashion and throwing occasional, not so discreet glances at her. She smiled at that and whispered to herself in German.

"Ingrid, you are indeed a bad girl...but Nancy would approve."

16:28 (Manila Time)

Tuesday, December 2, 1941 'C'

Army transport ship MEIGS, Manila harbor, Manila Bay

Philippines

Ingrid felt pure triumph as the crowd of Filipino dock workers waiting on the docks of Manila harbor to unload the convoy greeted the ships with loud cheers, with the MEIGS slowly approaching one of the quays of the port. Despite a tense, risky trip marked by the destruction of a Japanese destroyer by an American submarine along their route, the convoy escorted by the heavy cruiser PENSACOLA had finally arrived in

Manila Bay, safe and sound. Now, they just needed enough time to unload the precious cargo contained in the seven transport ships of the convoy and let the ships go out again before the next Japanese air raid. Thankfully, the weather this afternoon was heavily overcast, with dark clouds announcing rain sometimes during the night and also possibly tomorrow as well. In order not to present a concentrated target, the ships of the convoy had split into two widely dispersed groups between Manila harbor and the Cavite naval yards, with the PENSACOLA staying in the middle of Manila Bay, its boilers kept under pressure and ready to use its guns to defend against any Japanese attacks. Four of the old destroyers of the Asiatic Fleet were also cruising inside Manila Bay, ready to lay protective smokescreens if need be. Paul Gunn had accomplished miracles during the trip, with a total of seven fully assembled, painted and ready to fly P-40F fighters now sitting on the decks of the MEIGS, while nine assembled A-24 dive bombers sat on the decks of two other transport ships. From what Ingrid knew of the actual state of what was left of the American air fleet in the Philippines, just those sixteen assembled warplanes would be enough to make an immediate difference locally. While still a dangerous threat, the Japanese air forces had somewhat slackened their efforts against the Philippines in the last couple of weeks, having suffered very grievous losses themselves and being probably in bad need of reinforcements. Maybe, hoped fervently Ingrid, the Japanese would find themselves overextended with all their new conquests around the Pacific and would give up on taking the Philippines if they suffered too many casualties. She was however realistic enough not to be willing to bet on that.

The sight of long lines of trucks, including dozens of flatbed semi-trailer trucks which would be ideal to transport the giant aircraft crates of the convoy, encouraged further Ingrid. It seemed as if all the trucks in Manila had been requisitioned in advance of the convoy's arrival, along with thousands of extra dock workers. Somebody had done his homework in the logistics section of General MacArthur's headquarters. Leaving her fourteen pilots with Lieutenant Ernest Wakefield, her administrative officer, Ingrid went with Paul Gunn to the boarding ramp as soon as the MEIGS was tied alongside one of the quays. The captain of the ship was already there and greeted with her an American major of the logistics branch who was the first to climb aboard. The major saluted the ship's captain while presenting himself.

"Major Reading, from the USAFFE headquarters. I have been tasked to organize the prompt unloading of your ship, Captain. General MacArthur is particularly

anxious to have the warplanes you have aboard unloaded as quickly as possible. I have flatbed trucks ready to carry your plane crates to our various airfields.”

“I am happy to see how well prepared you are, Major. The first priority will be to lift off my decks the seven fighters already assembled, in order to be able to open my cargo holds. Captain Gunn and Captain Dows will help you with that task. I also have a number of pilots and aviation support personnel to transport to Batangas airfield and to Nielson Field.”

“I have two buses lined up for them and their baggage, Captain. They may come down as soon as they are ready. As for the planes already assembled, they will be towed across downtown Manila, but the Filipino police has already cleared all the obstacles along the way.”

“Including Bonifacio and Rozas Boulevards, Major?” asked Ingrid, suddenly excited. The logistics major seemed confused by her question.

“Uh, yes! Why do you ask, Captain?”

“Because these boulevards, which follow each other, form a wide, long straight line nearly two miles long, Major. If no electrical or telephone wires are in the way, we could then take off with our seven P-40s already assembled directly from downtown, instead of having to tow them all the way to Batangas and Nielson Field.”

“You want to take off from downtown Manila, Captain?” exclaimed the incredulous major. Ingrid nodded in response, being most serious.

“Yes, Major! That would save over six hours of towing for my planes, which could suffer some damages if towed to Batangas. I only need a jeep to go inspect quickly those two boulevards in order to ensure that there are no wires or other obstacles for our planes. Paul, are you ready to pilot the second P-40 in line?”

“Of course, Ingrid!” replied without hesitation Gunn. “Go do your reconnaissance while I direct the lifting of our fighters off the ship.”

“Excellent! Would you have a jeep or car to spare, along with a driver, Major?”

“You can borrow my own jeep for your reconnaissance, Captain. It is right there on the quay, near the bow of this ship.”

Excusing herself with the major and with the captain of the MEIGS, Ingrid ran down the gangway and along the quay to Reading’s jeep, jumping in it and explaining to the corporal driving it what she wanted to do. The driver nodded and started his engine, then maneuvered around the long lines of waiting trucks and started rolling towards the

main boulevards cutting through downtown Manila. Ingrid was satisfied to see that Filipino policemen were already posted at each intersection along those boulevards, ready to block the traffic the moment the convoy of planes would pass. All the vehicles which were normally parked along those same boulevards had also been moved away by the police, with large panels indicating temporary parking prohibitions on each side of the boulevards. Checking the odometer of the jeep, Ingrid was pleased to find that more than a mile of absolutely straight boulevard was free of any overhanging wires or poles which could impede the taking off of her fighters. Returning to the MEIGS, Ingrid ran back on the ship to collect her luggage and rifle, putting them in the bus that was about to drive her personnel to Batangas. By then, five of the seven reassembled P-40s were already on the quay and were being hooked with A-frame towing bars to light trucks. Selecting her five most experienced pilots on top of Paul Gunn to pilot the fighters which would take off from downtown, she then went back down on the quay and jumped in the cockpit of her P-40F, painted in her trademark gray camouflage scheme and with the words 'LADY HAWK' and 29 small Japanese flags painted on each side of the nose. The huge crowds of Filipinos lining up the streets between the docks and the downtown boulevards cheered her wildly as her plane started being towed towards Bonifacio Boulevard. Feeling like a million dollars, Ingrid got up in her cockpit and returned the salutes and wishes of good luck.

Douglas MacArthur, who had just arrived in the suite of the Manila Hotel which served as his residence for him, his wife and his young son Arthur, was suddenly attracted towards his balcony by the noise of approaching aircraft engines. Taking his three-year-old son in his arms, he went out on the balcony, just in time to see a P-40 fighter accelerating along Bonifacio Boulevard and towards his hotel. The plane took off 200 meters before the hotel and started climbing, zooming past his balcony, level with MacArthur. The old general shouted out in joy on seeing the name painted in pink and black on the nose of the P-40.

"YES! SHE'S BACK!"

His wife Jean Marie ran out of the bathroom of the suite and onto the balcony as a second P-40 flew past with a roaring engine noise, its wing tip barely eight meters away from the balcony.

“But these pilots are completely crazy, General!⁹ You should have them sent to a court martial.”

“On the contrary, my dear.” replied MacArthur, smiling widely, just before a third P-40 swept by the balcony. “These pilots deserve the Air Medal for showing initiative and allowing their planes to be at their airfields faster. This is also great for Filipino public morale. Look at the people in the street: they are wild with joy.”

Little Arthur then clapped his hands, excited, as a fourth P-40 flew by, making his father grin to his mother.

“You see? Arthur agrees with me.”

⁹ Despite being married to Douglas MacArthur, his wife Jean Marie only called him ‘General’ instead of using his first name, as their intimate relationship was not very good.

CHAPTER 7 – PHILIPPINES BASTION

15:37 (Manila Time)

Friday, December 5, 1941 'C'

Batangas Airfield, Philippines

When Ingrid landed back in Batangas with five of her pilots and with Jesus Villamor and another Filipino pilot, she found Major General Lewis Brereton waiting for them near the servicing area. Her heart jumped in her chest when she saw as well a Marine Corps major whom she knew very well, waiting besides Brereton. Controlling with difficulty her excitement, she made her P-40F roll towards the cut in the jungle which served as her plane's hiding place when on the ground, making her fighter pivot on the spot at the last moment. Once her engine was shut down and her propeller had stopped turning, a dozen Filipinos quickly pushed the P-40F inside its hideout, then draped back the camouflage net covering the front of the jungle cut. Ingrid jumped down from her plane as Brereton, two of his aides and Ken approached with Paul Gunn. As Gunn started inspecting her plane, looking for possible battle damage, Ingrid saluted Brereton, then took off her leather helmet, uncovering her reddish-brown hair mated with sweat.

"Good afternoon, General. What may I do for you?"

Brereton returned her salute and smiled to her.

"Nothing special, Captain. I simply wanted to visit my newest fighter squadron. How did your mission over Manila Bay go?"

"Very well, General. We intercepted 27 BETTY medium bombers which were escorted by fourteen Mitsubishi A5M CLAUDE fighters as they were overflying Corregidor, heading for Cavite. We started our attacks with frontal passes against the bombers, followed by high-speed strafing passes. Their escort fighters were essentially helpless, being ninety miles per hour slower than us. Their armament of two 7.7 mm machineguns is anyway totally inadequate against the P-40. I shot down four BETTY bombers, plus one A5M CLAUDE which was threatening one of my pilots on those first passes. My pilots shot down on their part a total of seven BETTY bombers, while Major Villamor shot down two bombers and one fighter. His wingman, Lieutenant Peraltas, shot down one bomber. The pilots of the remaining thirteen bombers then lost their

nerve and dropped their bombs in the waters of the bay before turning around. Their escort fighters tried to cover their retreat by a last frontal attack against us, but that proved to be a very costly mistake for them. Apart from losing badly the gunnery duel, they lost a further four fighters and allowed us to speed past them and catch the bombers for a last strafing pass against their unprotected bellies. We then shot down a further five bombers before running out of ammunition and having to break the engagement. My squadron will thus be claiming a total of fifteen BETTY bombers and four CLAUDE fighters, while Major Villamor and Lieutenant Peraltas will be claiming a total of four bombers and two fighters. Some of us got hit by a few 7.7 mm bullets but we all were able to fly back without problems.

Brereton's smile turned into a grin on hearing this.

"Twenty-five enemy planes shot down against no losses? I love this exchange rate. I will make sure that your gun camera films are looked at favorably. So, where is your personal score at now, Captain?"

"With the five bombers and two fighters I shot down today, my score now stands at 39 victories, if today's kills are confirmed, of course, General."

"Impressive indeed! And how did your pilots perform overall? Did they follow your instructions about how to engage Japanese planes?"

"They now do, General. One pilot ignored my orders on Wednesday and got in a turning dogfight with a ZERO fighter, but was shot down and killed for his troubles. I believe that the lesson then sank in fully with my other pilots."

"I see!" said Brereton, his grin fading away. "So, how many pilots and planes do you have operational right now?"

"If my planes didn't sustain any serious damage today, then I can count on a total of fourteen pilots, including me, and eight P-40F fighters assembled and operational. Seven more P-40s are still in the process of being assembled. Major Villamor, on his side, has one wingman and two assembled P-40, plus one P-40 left to be assembled. May I ask you how our other fighter squadrons are doing, General?"

Ingrid didn't like the way Brereton's enthusiasm then cooled down at once.

"I had to replace the commander of the 21st Pursuit Squadron yesterday, after he ignored again my directives and insisted on using our old tactics, engaging the enemy escort fighters rather than the bombers. That cost us three pilots and four planes."

What Brereton didn't say to Ingrid was that, on personally investigating that fiasco, he had learned that the then squadron commander had told his pilots that he quote 'would

be damned if he was going to follow tactics advocated by a girl and fight like a coward' unquote. Apart from losing his command, that had also earned that idiot a bullet in the leg and an extended stay in hospital. He then came to the main reason of his visit, not wanting to delve further on the problems of his fighter command.

"Well, Captain, thanks to your success today, the ships of the PENSACOLA convoy were able to finish unloading without losses and will sail out of Manila Bay tonight, under cover of darkness. General MacArthur is said to be totally ecstatic about all the equipment and supplies brought by the convoy, starting with the planes. This brings me to the subject of our new dive bombers. I would like to discuss with you and Major Villamor how to coordinate your actions and those of the 27th Bombardment Group. If operating alone, our 52 A-24 dive bombers would be cut to pieces in short order by Japanese fighters, so I intend to engage them only if escorted by fighters. This will in turn mean using different tactics than for pure interception missions."

"I agree, General. Let me just check on my pilots and planes and I will be with you shortly. May I propose that you go have a cup of coffee in our ready room in the meantime?"

"A good idea, Captain. I will be waiting for you and Major Villamor there."

As Brereton went to see briefly Jesus Villamor before going to the ready room, Ken approached Ingrid and took her in his arms for a long, passionate kiss, making the Filipino mechanics around them smile. They finally parted with regret, looking into each other's eyes.

"God, it felt like a long time without you, Ken."

"And life felt quite empty without you during those long weeks, Ingrid. How are your burns now?"

"They are mostly healed by now. I don't need to wear bandages anymore and I mostly don't feel them either. I will however have a few light scars left for life on my back and left arm."

"I will consider them as marks of your valor, my beautiful wife. General Brereton told me that I will be able to bring you home after your briefing, so that we could have an evening and night together. I will in turn bring you back to Batangas in the early morning. Julia and Juanita are also dying to see you again...for different reasons than me, of course."

Ingrid giggled at that.

"I imagine so, my dear Ken. Uh, you do have condoms left at home? Now would be a really bad time for me to become pregnant."

"Somehow, I suspect that General Brereton would skin me alive if I get you pregnant now."

"Right! Well, let me go check out on my pilots and planes. You may go have a coffee with the general and his aides in the meantime. That will give you time to imagine all kinds of new ways to abuse my body tonight, my lovely hunk."

She exchanged another kiss with Ken, then left him to walk towards her planes and pilots. Ken sighed while admiring her bum as she walked away: living away from such beauty had been hard indeed.

08:42 (Manila Time)

Monday, December 8, 1941 'C'

Command bomber of the 11th Air Fleet

7,500 meters above Lingayen Gulf

West coast of Luzon, Philippines

Major General Minagumo Shoji, Commander of the 11th Air Fleet of the Japanese Imperial Army, based in Formosa, had not flown a combat mission since his last mission over China as a colonel, three years ago. At his actual rank level, he was not supposed to fly combat missions anymore. However, the low state of the morale of his aviators, hit hard by the heavy casualties suffered in seven weeks of ferocious combat over the Philippines, requested that he showed the example in order to boost the motivation of his pilots. If he could believe the reports from the other army air fleets involved with the Philippines campaign and those of the navy air units in Formosa, his fleet had not been the only one to suffer heavily. The campaign to reduce the Philippines in view of an eventual invasion was proving more costly every day, with the Americans showing incredible tenacity and toughness. The Imperial High Command in Tokyo was starting to ask pointed questions about the reasons for the lack of success of the air campaign against the Philippines, questions which Minagumo could not answer truthfully without losing face. He had been particularly mortified when his intelligence officer had told him that the top American air ace in the Philippines was a woman. A WOMAN!! Some of his officers had laughed at that notion then, but their laughs were now quite forced. That was when Minagumo had decided to lead the next raid against the important American

airbase of Clark Field. He had managed by scrapping the bottom of his drawers to assemble 61 Mitsubishi Ki-21 twin-engine medium bombers, escorted by 43 of the new Nakajima Ki-43 HAYABUSA fighters, which had started to replace the inadequate Ki-27. Minagumo had however his doubts about the new Ki-43, which had the same weak armament of two 7.7 mm machineguns as the Ki-27 and still no armor, even though it was much faster and about as agile. Minagumo raised his head to look up at his escort fighters, flying high above his bombers, as they were less than 130 kilometers away from their objective. Up to now, his armada had not been attacked yet, thankfully, and he then concentrated his attention back towards the Filipino coast, visible through the dispersed clouds. What he could not know was that one of the American surveillance radars had detected his planes half an hour ago, while a coastal observer had him in sight right now and was passing his observations to Manila by telephone.

The first sign of trouble was when Minagumo got a radio message from the commander of his escort, saying that four American fighters were diving on his fighters from the back. Looking up, Minagumo saw two of the Ki-43 turn into flying torches, with the rest dispersing and turning around to try to pursue four speedy dots apparently intent on getting in the back of his bombers. Suddenly more nervous, Minagumo watched carefully the sky around him, trying to spot any other enemy planes. Unfortunately, the Sun was still low on the horizon and was blinding him when he looked to his front and left, while a thick cloud formation blocked part of the sky ahead of him. He suddenly saw something move in front of him, emerging from the clouds. Focusing his old eyes, he felt his heart accelerate when he finally made out ten small gray dots, deployed in a long extended line and coming directly at him. Activating his microphone, he shouted an urgent warning on the radio.

“AMERICAN FIGHTERS DEAD AHEAD ON A COLLISION COURSE. TIGHTEN THE FORMATION AT ONCE!”

He barely had time to complete his message before the canopy of his cockpit exploded under the impacts of dozens of .50 caliber bullets, killing Minagumo, his copilot and his radio operator. Out of control and with one engine on fire, the bomber entered a terminal spinning dive as the gray P-40F which had shot at it flashed by, already firing another salvo at the bomber following behind the command plane. Six other bombers of the first wave either exploded or turned into flying torches, while three bombers of the second wave experienced the same fate. The attacking P-40s continued on at full

speed, then performed wide turns to come back in the rear of the bombers. The escort fighters, at least those not chasing the four first P-40s which had attacked them, tried to dive on the P-40s but, their controls hardened by their high-speed dive, were unable to correctly aim their fire against the American fighters. The Japanese pilots all missed their targets and further had great difficulty turning around to follow the Americans, being close to their maximum allowed diving speed. The flimsy structures of the Ki-43, lightened to provide maximum agility at low and medium speeds and with no armor or even self-sealing fuel tanks, then came to haunt their pilots. Outrunning the Ki-43 fighters by a hundred kilometers per hour and the Ki-21 bombers by 160 kilometers per hour, the P-40s raced after the bombers while staying a bit below them, where the defensive armament of the Ki-21s was the weakest. With each bomber now having only a single 7.7 mm machinegun able to shoot at the American planes, the Japanese gunners fired their guns frantically but without apparent results. The P-40s then raised their noses and climbed at shallow angles as they were about to pass under the bombers, peppering their vulnerable bellies at a rate of close to eighty .50 caliber bullets per second per P-40. Eight more SALLYs fell in flames or exploded in that pass. The ten P-40Fs, pursued by the slower Ki-43 HAYABUSAs, doubled the remaining bombers and went on for four kilometers before turning around for another frontal pass in extended line. The pursuing Ki-43s, which would later get the allied nickname of 'OSCAR', were the first to absorb the bullets from that second frontal pass. Their flimsy structures and thin aluminum skins ripped open like paper under the heavy bullets, while their two medium machineguns didn't do much impression on the sturdy, well armored American fighters. Three of the Ki-43 disintegrated or exploded under the fire of the P-40Fs, the rest having to turn around yet again as the American fighters sped by, ignoring them and going at the bombers. The first four P-40s which had initially attacked the Japanese escort fighters then came in turn on the rear and under the bombers to shoot at their bellies, while the ten other P-40s performed frontal firing passes. That process was repeated three times, with fourteen additional SALLYs falling down in flames. The surviving bomber pilots then panicked and dropped their bombs over the Filipino jungle before turning around to return to Formosa. With the escorting Ki-43s still not having shot down a single American P-40, a further three bombers fell before the P-40s, out of ammunition, turned away, still going at top speed. To add insult to injury, the Japanese escort fighters then realized as they returned with the bombers to their bases in Formosa that they had burned too much fuel while trying to catch the speedy P-40s. Over half of

the Ki-43s ran out of fuel before they could land, crashing all over Formosa, while a few more had to literally glide in to land at their bases.

The intelligence officer of the 11th Air Fleet, who was anxiously waiting for the return of the bombers, looked on with growing horror and sorrow as only 23 of the 61 Ki-21s which had left for the raid on Clark Field returned to land, some evidently seriously damaged. He then ran to the first bomber to stop on the parking apron and nearly jumped on the pilot when the latter climbed down from his plane.

“Where is General Minagumo? Where are all the others?”

“Dead! All dead!” replied the pilot in a shaking voice, obviously suffering from a nervous shock. “Gray ghosts ambushed us and played with us and our escort fighters. The HAYABUSAs couldn’t do a thing to stop them.”

“Gray ghosts? What type of American fighters attacked you?”

“Curtiss P-40s completely painted gray. They flew so fast while shooting at us that our fighters could not catch them. One of the Americans was their female ace: I saw the words ‘LADY HAWK’ painted in pink on the nose of one of the P-40s.”

The intelligence officer was silent for a moment, severely shaken by those news. Of the 117 bombers which the 11th Air Fleet counted originally in its roster at the start of the war against the Americans, only 23 were now left, despite the periodic arrival of new planes and crews. Their air fleet would now have no choice but to withdraw from combat in order to be fully reequipped and reorganized. The intelligence officer later learned that the surviving squadron commander of the escort fighters for that raid committed ritual suicide to atone for the failure of his unit, with many of his fighter pilots following his example.

09:19 (London Time)

Friday, December 19, 1941 ‘C’

Prime Minister’s official residence

10 Downing Street, London

England

Winston Churchill felt as much depressed as he was in a bad mood. Despite the fact that the Germans had finally been thrown out of Norway, that victory had cost Great Britain dearly in both lives and materiel. Many, including himself, then had to reevaluate

their optimistic views about the state of the war in Europe and about the military capabilities left to the Germans. As for the war in Asia and the Pacific, the situation there was nothing less than disastrous for the British Empire. Hong Kong had fallen over a month ago, while Singapore had surrendered to the Japanese just yesterday, with over 80,000 British, Australian, Indian and Malaysian soldiers killed or taken prisoner. Even more than the loss of all those soldiers, the taking of Singapore, which had been flaunted as a supposedly impregnable fortress, marked an enormous loss of prestige for the empire. The only good news out of Asia was the fact that the Japanese had yet to launch their feared invasion of Burma. Churchill however couldn't thank that to any British feat of arms, but rather to the heroic and unexpectedly pugnacious resistance of the American forces in the Philippines, which sucked in the Japanese reserves in planes and ships like a vacuum cleaner.

Shaking himself out of his dark thoughts, Churchill concentrated again his attention on the situation report given to him and his war cabinet by his military secretary, Lieutenant General Hasting Ismay. Ismay was now describing the situation of the American forces in the Philippines and that of the Japanese forces surrounding them. Something that Ismay said then attracted his curiosity.

"Did you say that the Japanese air operations against the Philippines just slowed down, General? Why would that be?"

"Mister Prime Minister, our intelligence experts believe that the Japanese are in the process of regrouping and reequipping their air groups in Formosa and Okinawa, which have sustained severe losses in the last two months. According to our estimates, the Japanese have lost up to now more than 500 planes of all types over the Philippines."

"Ouch! The Americans must have many fighters left there to cause such losses."

"Uh, not really, Mister Prime Minister. The last report sent by General MacArthur to Washington five days ago stated that he had a grand total of 27 operational P-40 fighters left in the Philippines."

"That's all?" Exclaimed Churchill, incredulous. His ministers, admirals and generals sitting around the conference table were as surprised as him, with the chief of the R.A.F., Air Chief Marshall Charles Portal, objecting at once.

"But that's impossible! The Americans must be grossly overestimating the Japanese losses."

Ismay, apparently certain of his numbers, answered him calmly but firmly.

"First, Air Chief Marshall, a good part of the Japanese losses in planes is due to the Americans air defense guns, which are using shells equipped with proximity fuses. While expensive to produce, those fuses have proven to be extremely efficient. Second, the few American fighter pilots left in the Philippines seem to have found the right tactics against the Japanese. Their top ace in the Philippines, or anywhere else as a matter of fact on the Allies side, now has a claimed total of 58 air victories, nearly all on P-40."

"More than our own best air ace? And what does that pilot do to get so much out of his P-40? The P-40 is not exactly what I would call a superior fighter aircraft. Our own models of P-40 have performed rather poorly against the Germans."

Ismay then smiled slightly, intriguing Portal.

"It is curious that you should mention the Germans now, Lord Portal. That pilot was until five months ago a German female auxiliary of the Luftwaffe held by us in the Tower of London. She was then pardoned by us and married an American officer before following him to the Philippines. That Ingrid Weiss, now named Ingrid Dows, is in fact the adopted daughter of Nancy Laplante, who secretly educated her before she died. It seems that Captain Ingrid Dows has put Laplante's lessons to good use."

Churchill couldn't help burst out in laughter then.

"The adopted daughter of Nancy Laplante, the American Ace of aces? That's a real good one!"

The Prime Minister then became serious again.

"Let's get back to the main subject, General Ismay. Can the Americans still stop an amphibious invasion by the Japanese in the Philippines?"

"That is doubtful, Mister Prime Minister. Most of the American ground troops in the Philippines are Filipino conscripts who are poorly trained and equipped. Against those, the Japanese have four divisions of hardened veterans. With the fall of Singapore, the Japanese will now have even more troops available to attack the Philippines. I am sorry to say that, however heroic the American resistance has been to date, that resistance is approaching the breaking point. On top of that, with the Japanese naval blockade of the Philippines, any evacuation by sea of those American forces will be nearly impossible, while the actual air bridge with Australia has a strictly limited tonnage capacity. Like our troops in Hong Kong and Singapore, the Americans

in the Philippines are basically condemned in the long run to either die or become prisoner of the Japanese.”

Churchill lowered his head, saddened by these words.

“More brave men who will be lost. When will we see an end to this damn war?”

14:05 (Tokyo Time)

Saturday, December 20, 1941 ‘C’

Underground conference room, Imperial palace

Tokyo, Japan

“His Majesty, the Emperor!”

On the announcement of the military aide of Emperor Hirohito, all the ministers and officers present and standing around the conference table bowed deeply as Hirohito entered the room and took place on an elevated dais facing one extremity of the table. Once the Emperor, wearing a ceremonial kimono, was kneeling on his cushion, the aide gave the permission to be seated. The Keeper of the Imperial Seal, Lord Kido, who spoke for the Emperor, then opened the meeting.

“Honorable ministers and officers of the Empire, we are here to respond to grave concerns that His Majesty has developed about the state of the war in general and about our campaign to take the Philippines in particular. We have now been at war with the Americans and their European allies for exactly two months now. Yet, after all that time, not a single army soldier has set foot yet on the Philippines, while the invasion of Burma has been postponed indefinitely. His Majesty is also deeply disturbed by the heavy casualties suffered around and over the Philippines, casualties which have upset many other operational war plans. His Majesty thus seeks your counsels about what to do concerning this sad state of affair.”

Many generals and admirals lowered their eyes, taking this declaration as the harsh rebuke it was. General Tojo, as both Prime Minister and War Minister, was the first to reply to Lord Kido, careful not to address the Emperor directly.

“We indeed have failed in our duties by not being able to invade yet the Philippines, but the American resistance there has been way more tenacious than expected. In particular, and in stark contrast to the other enemy forces around the Pacific and Asia, the American forces in the Philippines reacted very swiftly to our attacks and apparently used to the full the information brought from the future by the late

Canadian time traveler, Nancy Laplante. Our attacks around the Philippines thus didn't benefit from the factor of surprise, resulting in heavy losses to our forces. Those unexpected losses have in turn forced us to reroute the forces slated for the Burma invasion and direct them towards the Philippines."

"How heavy precisely have been those losses around the Philippines, Prime Minister?"

Tojo then made a short sign of the head to the Chief of Staff of the Navy, Admiral Nagano, who then started to read from a paper in his hands.

"Since the start of hostilities around the Philippines, the Navy has lost up to now in that theatre of operations one fleet carrier, two light carriers, one battleship, seven heavy cruisers, three light cruisers, eleven destroyers and 21 transport or tanker ships. Many more ships were also damaged to various degrees and needed extensive repairs. A total of 243 Navy planes, either carrier-borne or land-based, were also lost."

The next to speak was the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Sugiyama, who read in turn from his own list.

"Army losses to date around the Philippines amount to 176 aircraft of all types, plus one infantry regiment, which was lost when its transport ships were sunk."

There was a moment of silence as the Emperor, in appearance still impassive, digested those numbers with difficulty. Lord Kido then asked another question from the list prepared by Hirohito.

"In view of this, His Majesty wishes to know when the first Japanese soldier will be setting foot in the Philippines."

General Sugiyama hesitated before answering, noting that the question had been 'when' and not 'if'.

"Unfortunately, it is difficult to say when we will be able to land our first troops in the Philippines, as we have not yet won control of the air over that territory. The American fighter forces in the Philippines, which seemed until recently to be close to collapse, have apparently received substantial reinforcements from Australia in the last three weeks."

The Emperor then surprised everyone by asking himself a question on an acerbic tone.

"Can't the army set troops ashore in the Philippines, even if we do not possess complete air superiority?"

Tojo took on himself to answer the Emperor, bowing deeply as he did.

"Your Majesty, our valiant soldiers are ready to face any odds and to die in your honor. Having prior control of the air would however limit greatly our losses on landing."

"Yet, our sailors and our aviators are presently dying around and over the Philippines, while our soldiers are waiting for more favorable conditions, Prime Minister." Tojo, like all the army officers present and many of the admirals, paled on hearing what amounted to an accusation of cowardice coming from the Emperor, one of the gravest insults possible. To utter such words, the Emperor must indeed have reached the end of his patience. However, if one looked at the facts, his statement was basically true, something that only made the rebuke even more stinging. There was only one answer left for Tojo to give to that. He bowed deeply again to the Emperor and made a pronouncement, basically writing off the alternate war plans he had in mind before coming to the conference.

"Our soldiers will be setting foot in the Philippines before a month has passed, Your Majesty."

Hirohito didn't say a word, instead nodding his head once before getting up. All present immediately bowed low until he was gone. The assembled generals, admirals and ministers then looked at each other, stunned and unsure what to do next. Tojo looked around him and gave the officers a curt order.

"Gentlemen, I expect to see in a week your updated plans for a landing in force in the Philippines within four weeks."

02:36 (Manila Time)

Sunday, January 04, 1942 'C'

Batangas Airfield

Island of Luzon, Philippines

For some reason, Ingrid couldn't get to sleep tonight, something bothering her in the back of her mind, as if someone was watching her. There was of course no one present in her small cubicle in one corner of the hut lodging her pilots. Raising the mosquito net surrounding her camp cot, she got up and quietly put on her combat uniform and her boots before going to the office of the duty signaler, who was trying to fight against his fatigue by reading a book while sipping on a cup of coffee. The Filipino sergeant, taken by surprise on seeing her, was about to get up at attention when Ingrid made a sign for him to stay in his chair, talking in a low voice to him.

"I am just going to take some fresh air outside, Sergeant. Please continue reading your book."

"Uh, yes, Captain!"

Going out on the hut's porch, Ingrid looked up at the Moon, which was a full one tonight. The outside air was actually far from being fresh, since the Filipino climate could be described as between hot and humid to even hotter and more humid. However, a wind coming from the nearby sea helped make the temperature bearable. Looking towards the sea, which was visible from her airfield, Ingrid suddenly felt her blood freeze: her piercing eyesight, helped by the light from the full Moon, showed her what seemed to be an entire fleet of warships deployed in the Batangas Bay. Not a single shot from either guns or firearms indicated that a battle was either happening or was imminent. Running inside the hut, she grabbed a pair of binoculars from her squadron's office, then ran back on the porch and examined in more detail the warships filling the bay. She quickly swore to herself after a few seconds of observation: those were not American warships. Worse, she could now see what looked furiously like landing barges heading from those ships towards the shore. How could they have arrived here without being spotted and signaled? The Filipino 41st Division was supposed to guard the town of Batangas and its port area. Running back inside yet again, she grabbed telephone and called the command post of that division. To her growing fury, nobody answered her despite her letting the telephone ring a dozen time. Brutally hanging down the receiver, she took a deep breath to calm down, then grabbed the receiver of the direct telephone line between her airfield and General Brereton's headquarters, in Nielson Field. This time, a man answered her after two rings.

"FEAF HQ, Lieutenant Marmont!"

"Lieutenant, this is Captain Dows, from the 17th Provisional Pursuit Squadron, in Batangas. Tell General Brereton at once that a large enemy fleet is visible in the Batangas Bay, with landing barges about to touch the shoreline. I can see them from my airfield but nobody in the town of Batangas seems to have reacted to this yet, while nobody at the 41st Division's command post is answering the phone. I suspect that the local Filipino forces are either asleep at the switch, drunk or both. Please pass my warning to USAFFE HQ as well. I... Wait one!"

Now seeing a bright glare high in the sky outside after hearing a number of cannon shots, Ingrid ran back on the porch, to find that a number of para flares were now

suspended over the town of Batangas, illuminating the town in their harsh glare. Then, the front line of warships erupted in heavy gun flashes.

“SHIT!”

Running back inside, Ingrid barely had the time to pick the telephone again before a string of powerful detonations reverberated through the night.

“FEAF HQ, the enemy fleet has just opened fire on the town of Batangas. Get me General Brereton on the line at once!”

“Uh, give me a minute, Captain: I will transfer you.”

While waiting for the officer in Nielson Field to transfer her, Ingrid shouted out as loudly as she could towards the dormitory where here pilots and ground personnel were sleeping.

“EVERYBODY UP! A JAPANESE FLEET IS IN BATANGAS BAY AND IS NOW BOMBARDING THE TOWN OF BATANGAS. I SAY AGAIN: EVERYBODY UP! THE ENEMY IS HERE!”

Jesus Villamor, who was sleeping next to the squadron’s office, soon ran into the office, still groggy from sleep, as loud explosions rocked the nearby town of Batangas. Ingrid, who was still waiting for General Brereton to come on the line, spoke at once to Jesus.

“An enemy fleet is deployed in the Batangas Bay, with landing barges about to reach the shoreline. I tried to alert the 41st Division’s command post but nobody answered the telephone there. I am now waiting to get General Brereton on the line. I am afraid that we may well have to urgently evacuate our airfield before enemy cruisers start bombarding us. Can you make our men haul ass while I speak with Brereton?”

“I’ll take care of that. Jesus, what a screwup!”

As Jesus Villamor ran into the dormitory, shouting out loud to finish waiting everybody there, Ingrid finally heard the voice of General Brereton on the line.

“Brereton here! What is going on, Captain?”

“Sir, a Japanese fleet is now in the Batangas Bay and has just started bombarding the town of Batangas, while landing barges should now be reaching our shores. The 41st Division did not answer my telephone calls when I tried to alert their command post. I am afraid that our surveillance and warning system just failed, spectacularly. With enemy troops about to land only a few miles from my airfield and with the town under cruiser gunfire, I am afraid that my squadron and the 6th Pursuit

Squadron will have no choice but to evacuate our airfield at once, before naval gunfire squashes us. I thus request your permission to evacuate Batangas Airfield, sir.”

Brereton, understandably shocked by this, took a few seconds before replying with a question.

“What is the strength of the enemy fleet now in the Batangas Bay?”

“It was hard to evaluate in the dead of night but I would estimate it at three to four heavy cruisers, half a dozen light cruisers and a good dozen destroyers, plus over twenty support ships, sir. There is little that my P-40s could do against them without the support of dive bombers, especially at night.”

“Alright! Load what you can on trucks and evacuate towards Nielson Field while flying your P-40s by air. I... one moment!”

Ingrid then heard Brereton having an animated conversation in the background for a few seconds before the general came back on line, sounding even more shaken now.

“We just got reports that the Japanese came in at night and are now making surprise landings around San Fernando, in the Lingayen Gulf. It seems that our troops there have also been taken totally by surprise.”

“Well, it seems that the Japanese finally learned from their past mistakes, General. If they manage to take a solid foothold in both San Fernando and in Batangas tonight, then I am afraid that we will be truly fucked.”

“I am afraid that you are right about that, Captain. For the moment, the most important is for you to save your planes, your pilots and your ground servicing crews. Make it quick before the enemy decides to start flattening your airfield with heavy caliber shells.”

“We will proceed as fast as possible, General.”

“Then, good luck to you and your men, Captain.” said Brereton before hanging up. Putting down her own receiver, Ingrid then ran into the dormitory, where she grabbed Jesus Villamor’s right arm to get his attention.

“The Japanese are also landing in San Fernando, in the Lingayen Gulf. General Brereton has authorized us to evacuate towards Nielson Field. We will need as many trucks and drivers as we can get in order to at least save some of our stocks of spare parts, fuel and ammunition. As for our planes, General Brereton told me to fly them to Nielson Field.”

“Fuck! What happened to our early warning system? Was everybody asleep tonight?”

“More like exhausted after more than two months of combat, Jesus. It also appears that the Japanese have finally learned some lessons during those months: instead of telegraphing their moves by launching repeated preliminary air bombardments, they chose to come in quietly and at night, to then land troops without naval gunfire or air bombardment preparations and under the cover of darkness, when our planes can do little.”

“You may be right but this still leaves us royally screwed, Ingrid. I will let Captain Gun organize and lead the land evacuation towards Nielson Field, while I will prioritize what must be taken away first. I want you to lead our planes and pilots and fly to Nielson Field, where you will get ready to strike back at the enemy.”

“Will do, Jesus! Good luck to you and don’t stay here too much longer: I can smell burnt powder already.”

Less than twenty minutes later, with a convoy of trucks being frantically organized for the loading of spare parts, fuel and ammunition, Ingrid took off with the twelve operational P-40s of her squadron, to then head North towards Nielson Field and Manila. Unfortunately, she had to abandon one P-40 in Batangas, its engine being under repair. She would gladly have taken the occasion to attack and strafe the Japanese landing barges she could see in the bay, off the town of Batangas, but realized that most of her pilots were not experienced enough in night flying and night air attacks to do so without risking to lose many of her precious fighters. She thus had to swallow her pride and fly away from Batangas without engaging the enemy.

Despite the fact that Ingrid’s squadron and that of Jesus Villamor managed to evacuate Batangas successfully and to reestablish themselves in Nielson Field, those surprise Japanese night landings proved to be deadly blows against the American defenses of the Philippines, while the mostly poorly trained and equipped Filipino troops forming the majority of the ground defense units proved unable to significantly oppose the Japanese veterans swarming out of their beachheads in Batangas and San Fernando. The fight for the Philippines then turned into a ground battle of attrition that the Americans and the Filipinos couldn’t win in the long run. After only two more days, mostly spent on escort missions for A-24 dive bombers, in which many American planes were shot down by enemy ground fire, Ingrid and Jesus ended up commanding the remaining fourteen fighters in the Philippines, with that number diminishing gradually as

the days went by. Flying up to seven missions a day, Ingrid and her small band of pilots soon were near utter exhaustion. Three days after the Japanese landings, on January 7, the B-17 heavy bombers still remaining in the Philippines had to fly to Australia, while the air resupply bridge, which had done so much to support the American resistance, was discontinued. Aboard one of the last C-87s to fly off from Clark Field was Admiral Thomas Hart and the members of his staff, who was transferring his flag to Darwin, in Australia. With all his ships and submarines at sea and with the naval base in Cavite mostly in ruins, Admiral Hart had no reasons left to stay in the Philippines. However, before leaving, he transferred his Marine Corps units, including the one to which Ken Dows belonged, under the command of General MacArthur. As for Douglas MacArthur, he then did one of his typical publicity stunts by publicly promoting Ingrid to the rank of major, supposedly to reward her high standard of leadership in combat. While about everybody agreed that Ingrid deserved her new promotion, it was seen in reality by MacArthur's critics as an attempt by him to gloss over the precarity of his command's situation in the Philippines and to raise the morale of his troops.

17:37 (Manila Time)

Thursday, January 8, 1942 'C'

The Dows' house, U.S. Navy married quarters district

Manila

Having come to Manila at General Douglas MacArthur's request, who had then pinned the rank insignias of a major on her combat shirt, plus a new Distinguished Flying Cross medal, Ingrid had decided to go visit her house in the district of Manila where the houses reserved for American officers and their families were. Once stopped in front of her house, Ingrid told the Filipino driver of her jeep to wait for her, then stepped out of her vehicle and walked at a quick pace to her front door and knocked briefly on it before opening it while shouting in Tagalog.

"JULIA, JUANITA, IT'S ME, INGRID!"

Young Juanita, who had been in the lounge with her husband and two little children, was the first to come to her at a near run, warmly hugging and kissing her on the cheeks.

"Ingrid, it is so nice to see that you are still well."

"And it is a pleasure to see you again, Juanita. Could you get all of you in the lounge? I have important things to say to you all."

“Right away, Ingrid. JULIA, COME TO THE LOUNGE WITH YOUR FAMILY: INGRID NEEDS TO SPEAK TO US.”

It didn't take long for Julia, who also hugged and kissed Ingrid, and her family to join the other Filipinos in the lounge. Positioning herself in a corner of the lounge and facing the nine Filipino men, women and children, Ingrid then spoke to them in a friendly but sober voice.

“My dear friends, I came to pick up a few personal souvenirs of high value to me, like the pictures of Nancy Laplante and of me with my two adoptive parents. I also came to warn you about things to come and to give you a few counsels and directives. First off, know that, despite what you may have heard on the official radio stations, the outcome of this war for Manila is grim indeed. From the information about this war given to me by Nancy Laplante, who was quoting historical information from the Year 2012, the Japanese will occupy Manila in the coming weeks, then will take the whole of the Philippines in the next few months. I can tell you from my own perspective that, while I am resolved to continue fighting for the Philippines until the bitter end, I already believe that we can't win, unless the United States sends us strong reinforcements, something that I don't believe will happen. Thus, this house and the rest of Manila will soon enough be occupied by the Japanese and I can assure you that they will not be tender in their occupation. This house and other residences previously occupied by American officers will be especially targeted by the Japanese, who will either burn them down or, at the minimum, loot them. Anybody they will find in them will be either chased away, arrested or killed. You are thus not safe here anymore, my friends. Mateo, Felipe, do you have relatives who live away from Manila, ideally in a small rural village or isolated plantation, relatives who would accept to receive you and shelter you?”

Mateo, the forty-year-old husband of Ingrid's cook and an ex-police officer, answered her first.

“One of my brothers has a small farm some sixty miles east of here, near the coast. I am sure that he would accept to shelter my family.”

“Can you call him by phone and warn him that you may come to his farm?”

“I can: he does have a telephone and the region he lives in has not been bombarded by the Japanese, due to the fact that there are no valuable targets there.”

“Excellent! Your pickup truck is still working properly?”

“It is old and battered but it still can roll, Ingrid.”

“Good!” said Ingrid before looking at Felipe, the husband of Juanita, her young maid. “And you, Felipe, do you have relatives or friends living away from Manila and who would be willing to shelter your family?”

“My grandparents certainly would take us in their farm, Ingrid. They in fact live close to where Mateo’s brother has his farm. However, I have no car or truck to carry my family.”

Ingrid, having anticipated this a long time ago, nodded her head and started walking towards her bedroom.

“I could arrange something about that, Felipe. Just give me a second to retrieve something out of my bedroom.”

Going to her bedroom, Ingrid searched through a drawer of her night stand and took out two official Filipino government forms before returning to the lounge, where she showed the forms to Felipe.

“These are two copies of a government form meant to officialize the sale or transfer of a motor vehicle. I will now fill this in your name as the new owner of my used Dodge convertible and will then sign it, along with you. With it, you will be able to evacuate your family to safety. Officially, you bought my car for 110 dollars. In reality, you owe me only a hug.”

Felipe and Juanita, overjoyed, came at once to her and exchanged emotional hugs and kisses with Ingrid.

“Ingrid, you are the best person I ever met.” said a weeping Juanita, making Ingrid smile to her.

“Juanita, you and all of the rest of you here are good people who deserve my help. Now, once me and Felipe will have filled and signed these forms, I will have something else for your two families.”

Taking a couple of minutes to fill and sign the forms with Felipe, Ingrid then gave him one of the copies before taking out of a shirt pocket a thick envelope and opening it. She then distributed the 400 American dollars in cash it contained in four equal parts between Felipe, Juanita, Mateo and Julia.

“Please accept this money as emergency funds while you will be away from Manila, my friends. I won’t need that money while fighting out of the jungles of the Philippines. You, on the other hand, will need to support your families during the hard

times to come. Use some of that money to buy extra provisions of food before leaving Manila. Also, split between your two families the emergency reserves of canned food, rice, flour and bottled water we kept in our bomb shelter in our backyard.”

“And when should we leave Manila in your opinion, Ingrid?” asked Mateo, not believing his luck. Ingrid then threw him a sober look.

“Today! The sooner you will be out of Manila and on the way to your relatives’ places, the better. Start packing your things now and load them in your cars, along with the supplies from my bomb shelter. I will then escort you in my jeep up to the eastern limits of Manila, in order to prevent any Filipino or American checkpoint from stopping you or taking away your money and supplies. While you pack, I will myself gather the few things I want to bring with me and will also call the military police station to inform them that I am closing my married quarters residence.”

Julia looked at Ingrid with tears in her eyes.

“Ingrid, you are a true angel! May God protect you while you will fight the Japanese.”

Some forty minutes later, Ingrid and the Filipinos left the house in a three-vehicle convoy after she had locked up her residence, then rolled eastward out of Manila. On their way, Ingrid had her convoy stop briefly at a gas station, then at a small groceries store, in order to let the Filipinos fill up their car tanks and fill a few spare gas cans, plus buy some extra provisions. When buying those provisions, Ingrid further helped the families of her cook and maid by using most of her remaining cash money to pay for them, in order to allow to keep as much cash as possible with them. Her presence actually proved useful when her convoy was stopped at the limits of Manila at a checkpoint manned by American military policemen and soldiers who appeared to Ingrid to be treating rather heavy-handedly the passing Filipino civilians. Before she passed through the checkpoint with Mateo and Felipe’s cars, Ingrid threw a severe look at the American MP sergeant in charge of the checkpoint.

“Sergeant, the Filipinos are our allies and part of our duties as American soldiers is to protect them, not to treat them like second-class people. Stop bullying them and use courtesy and consideration with the people who will pass here. Understood, Sergeant?”

"Uh, yes ma'am!" could only say the MP sergeant while coming to attention and saluting her. Ingrid returned his salute, then signaled to Mateo and Felipe to roll forward to where she stood. She the share last hugs and kisses with the two Filipino families.

"Our roads split here, my friends. May you survive this war and stay healthy. Go and drive to safety! I will myself have to return to Nielson Field now. Good luck and have a safe trip, my friends."

"We love you, Ingrid!" said Julia as Mateo's car started rolling away, closely followed by Ingrid's old car, now driven by Felipe. Ingrid waved at them for a last time, tears in her eyes, then sat back in her jeep and looked at her driver.

"Time to go back to Nielson Field, Carlos."

"Yes, Major!"

Her driver waited until he had turned around and had rolled some distance from the checkpoint before giving her a grateful look.

"Thank you for showing such generosity and regard towards us Filipinos, ma'am: too many Americans tend to treat us as second-class people."

"I know, Carlos. Racism is still a disease which is ingrained in too many Americans. Unfortunately, it will still take many decades for that to change."

With the Japanese advancing towards Manila from both the North and the South and with many Filipino troops, poorly trained, poorly equipped and too often poorly led, often retreating without firing a shot, Douglas MacArthur soon had no choice but to transfer his headquarters to the fortress island of Corregidor, at the entrance of Manila Bay, and to declare Manila as an open city, in order to save it from Japanese bombardments. Ingrid, forced with her squadron to abandon Nielson Field on January 12, withdrew on orders from Colonel George, who had replaced General Brereton, who was now in Australia, to a rudimentary airstrip in the Bataan Peninsula, with a convoy of trucks carrying her mechanics, spare parts, tools and reserves of fuel and ammunition. Thankfully for the Americans and Filipinos who retreated to Bataan under Japanese pressure, the peninsula had been fortified and prepared for a long occupation as soon as September of 1941, before the start of the war in the Pacific, with large stocks of supplies and ammunition stored inside tunnels dug with explosives in the hills of Bataan. The seven operational P-40Fs remaining to Ingrid thus found ample provisions of fuel, ammunition and food in the tunnels dug next to the small auxiliary airstrip on which she landed with her fighter aircraft near the small naval station of Mariveles. With all the

fighters of the Filipino Sixth Pursuit Squadron having been lost by now, with Jesus Villamor being its only surviving pilot, Ingrid's 17th Provisional Pursuit Squadron was now, with a handful of surviving A-24 dive bombers of the 24th Bombardment Group, all that was left of the American air forces in the Philippines. Thankfully, the 90 mm and 75 mm anti-aircraft guns and the heavy machine guns which had defended Cavite, Clark Field and Nielson Field, had been moved in time to take positions around Bataan and Mariveles, to defend the peninsula from both air and sea attacks. One surviving Army artillery regiment also was able to retreat to Bataan and was now providing some precious fire support to the American and Filipino soldiers defending the peninsula. Part of those soldiers defending Bataan was Ken Dows and his unit of marines, who now benefited directly from the air support provided by his wife and her pilots.

17:56 (Manila Time)

Thursday, January 22, 1942 'C'

Mariveles Airstrip, Bataan Peninsula

Island of Luzon, Philippines

Ingrid, tired and dripping with sweat, got out of her cockpit and stepped on the right-side wing of her P-40F before jumping down on the ground. A small army of mechanics then came forward to perform maintenance on her plane and to refill her fuel tanks and ammunition boxes as she walked at a tired step towards the sandbag bunker which served as the command post for her squadron. With only five P-40s still operational, his aircraft mechanics were now in excess compared to the number of planes to be maintained and repaired but, rather than transform them into full-time infantrymen, like what many other squadrons had done on orders from General Wainwright, the second-in-command of General MacArthur, Ingrid was using them to accelerate the maintenance work done on his precious fighter aircraft, which allowed her in return to multiply the number of missions flown per day and thus augment the impact her squadron made on the battle well above the level which would normally be made by six planes. However, even more than the stress and fatigue from the numerous combat missions and from the intermittent enemy air bombardments, the forced diet she and her men were enduring in order to make their reserves of food last for as long as possible was starting to sap her strength.

Pulling aside the double set of black curtains and mosquito nets covering the entrance of the bunker, Ingrid gave a tired smile to Jesus Villamor and Paul Gunn, both sitting at one of the two small tables in the bunker and reviewing maintenance reports and lists of spare parts.

"Hi, guys! The Japanese now have five tanks and two OSCAR fighters less on the front of our First Army Corps. I can also say that our P-40s are still king of the air at low altitude and high speeds. The Japanese forgot about that and I had to remind them about that fact."

"And your plane, Ingrid?" asked Paul Gunn, who was responsible for the maintenance and repair of their precious planes.

"No damage or bullet holes visible. As for the Japanese planes, they are getting quite rare these days. We must have gutted their aviation regiments during the last couple of months."

"I won't complain about that last point." declared Jesus before passing a piece of paper to Ingrid. "Here is the list of pilots who will take the relay tomorrow for our next missions, Ingrid. You will thus be entitled to a day of rest, you lucky girl."

Ingrid made a sarcastic smile as he read the list. Now having an average of two pilots per available plane, she could now afford to conduct rotations, like in the case of her mechanics.

"I believe that I will instead continue to train our men in jungle warfare and in shooting practice during the day: they still need that training."

Paul Gunn didn't laugh at the notion that a woman could train men in infantry fighting: what he knew about her past incarnations, as well as the expertise Ingrid had shown on the terrain, made him take her very seriously about that subject. However, many others around the American forces and the command echelon in Bataan had laughed at that, refusing to believe that Ingrid could fight on the ground with her men. Only the desperate tactical and strategic situation they were all in had made them ignore something that would never have been tolerated in the United States. Taking off a piece of tissue covering a mess tin, he presented the tin and a spoon to Ingrid.

"Your supper is served, O My Queen."

Ingrid, who was positively starving, took only a second to look at the content of the tin before starting to eat while staying on her feet. Jesus also gave her a cup of water, which she used to wash down the rice with tuna of her supper.

"Tomorrow, I will try to find a few plantain trees or other wild fruits and roots, in order to supplement our diet, while leading a jungle patrol." said Ingrid as she was finishing to eat her meager meal. "How are our stocks of spare parts doing, Paul?"

"We still have enough parts to maintain our remaining planes for another month, if we don't suffer some major battle damage in the meantime. However, we have only two spare engines left."

"We will do what we can with what we have." Replied Ingrid in a resigned tone, before going to grab a bottle of quinine in order to swallow her daily dose of anti-malaria pills, then washing them down with water. Malaria was a very serious medical problem in the Philippines and too many soldiers still refused to take their quinine pills because of the bitter taste and secondary effects of that medication. As a consequence, many American soldiers were now suffering from periodic bouts of malaria, something that had a major impact on the efficiency of General MacArthur's forces. In contrast, Ingrid had forced from the start her men in taking their quinine pills, preaching by example. As for the Japanese, Ingrid knew from the information from the future provided by Nancy Laplante that they were suffering as badly than the Americans from malaria and from other tropical diseases.

"Well, I am going to go wash before the mosquitos come out in force tonight. See you tomorrow, guys!"

"See you tomorrow, Ingrid!" replied in unison Villamor and Gunn before she walked out of the bunker. Jesus watched her go with a dreamy expression, then spoke to Paul while keeping his voice low.

"What a girl! Too bad that she is already married."

"She is indeed a very beautiful girl." added Paul, smiling. "However, even more than her beauty, she is an incredible fighter pilot and a very competent squadron commander. I wonder what the American public would say if it could see her performance here: there are still so many idiotic comments running about her in the States."

"The public would refuse to believe it and would scream 'propaganda'." replied Jesus. "President Quezon took one of his best decisions ever by accepting her as a fighter pilot in our Air Corps. It was also a very good deal: 71 Japanese aircraft shot down by her in less than three months. I wonder when the United States will finally accept women as fighter pilots in its Army Air Corps."

"Probably never!" replied Paul in a bitter tone.

05:28 (Manila Time)

Friday, January 23, 1942 'C'

Mariveles Airfield, Bataan

"Major! Major! Please wake up: you have an urgent call from Mariveles."

Ingrid, who had been sleeping on her camp cot surrounded by a mosquito net and set in her small tent, opened her eyes and saw the faithful Sergeant Aquino, her squadron clerk, bent over her.

"Uh, what is it, Sergeant?"

"Urgent call from Commander Bridget, at the Mariveles Naval Station, Major. He needs reinforcements to repulse a Japanese force that landed in our sector."

Waking up in a hurry, Ingrid jumped out of bed and grabbed her combat uniform's pants and boots, then started dressing up. She didn't take the time to lace up her boots or to put on her combat shirt over her bra, instead grabbing her shirt and pistol belt before running out of her tent and rush towards her command bunker. It was still night and nobody would notice her present state of dress before she got to the bunker. Grabbing the receiver of the field telephone linking her bunker with the nearby naval station, she spoke while starting to put on her shirt.

"Major Dows speaking!"

"Dows, this is Commander Bridget. We have a big problem at the Logonskawayan Point: a few hundred Japanese landed there during the night and then advanced stealthily up to the heights of Mount Pucot. They are now a mere mile from the naval station and I need all the men you could send me to help repel them. More Japanese landed at the Quinauan Point but other units are taking care of them. What can you send me without compromising your air operations?"

Ingrid thought about that for a second before answering him.

"I can lead out a hundred men. Where exactly do you want me to go?"

There was a noticeable pause before Bridget, a naval aviator, answered her in a hesitant tone.

"Uh, you don't need to lead your men in combat in person, major. You could..."

Ingrid interrupted him, irritation in her voice, having easily guessed the real reason for his hesitation.

"I command these men and I will lead them into combat, Commander. Where do you want me?"

Bridget hesitated for a second time then before responding.

"Go to the base of Mont Pucot, on the coastal road one mile west of the naval station, where you will join Lieutenant Pew's platoon. Lieutenant Hogan's platoon will advance on Mount Pucot from the South. When could you be in position?"

"We will be there in half an hour, Commander. We have our own trucks."

"Perfect! Once there, you will place yourself under Lieutenant Pew's orders."

That was when Ingrid had enough of that misogynistic clown and raised her voice.

"Commander, I clearly outrank Lieutenant Pew and command a force three times his force's size. I know that I am a woman but, if we follow the same stupid notion you are going by, I wouldn't even be a fighter pilot. Finally, you are talking to a Medal of Honor recipient, so could you forget your prejudices and have confidence in me for a change?"

Bridget, who was very conscious of Ingrid's combat exploits as well as his own rather lackluster career, finally gave up.

"Very well, Major. Coordinate your actions with Lieutenant Pew but lead your men to the best the tactical situation will permit."

"Thank you, Commander. I will be in position in thirty minutes."

Putting down the receiver, Ingrid then looked at Sergeant Aquino.

"Sergeant, wake up Lieutenant Mahoney and the men of Group Alpha and tell them that we are going on an urgent ground combat mission. They must be ready to leave in less than fifteen minutes."

"Right away, Major!"

As Aquino ran out of the bunker to wake up the men of Group Alpha, which was composed of the half of the squadron not actively working on air operations for this day, Ingrid returned to her tent to finish dressing and equipping herself. She transferred her pistol and its holster to the canvas belt supporting her rifle ammunition clips, her bayonet and her water bottle, then put on a small backpack containing two days of rations, some extra ammunition and two extra water bottles. She also took a compass, a rudimentary map of the area of the Bataan Peninsula and a flashlight with red filter lense before grabbing her Springfield 1903 rifle and going to the assembly point of the airfield. Her men, a mix of aircraft mechanics, repair technicians, clerks and pilots, came one by one,

to be inspected at once by Ingrid, who concentrated on the amount of ammunition, water and food they carried and on inspecting their weapons, which was a mix of rifles, pistols, revolvers and a few rare sub machine guns. She had already taken some time during the last days to teach them the basics of jungle fighting and of shooting, which was more than could be said about the collection of Navy sailors passing off as infantrymen these days. The squadron's chief cook then distributed on orders from Ingrid some extra tins of fish or meat to each man, while Ingrid made sure that all the water bottles were full and that everyone had a few quinine pills with them. Finally, she had everyone unroll their shirt sleeves and buttoned up their collars and made them smear some mud on their faces and hands as an improvised camouflage paint. Once satisfied that her men were ready, she had her 94 men climb aboard five of the trucks of her squadron and, climbing in the cab of the lead truck, signaled her convoy to roll.

She soon arrived after a short trip along the coastal road at the foot of Mount Pucot, in reality a 200-meter-high hill covered with a dense vegetation. About twenty Navy men, a mix of simple sailors, technicians and clerk, were waiting there under the command of a young Navy lieutenant whose nervousness was immediately apparent to Ingrid. First making her men jump down from their trucks and telling them to get under cover in the jungle, she went to Lieutenant Pew, who came to attention and saluted her.

"Major, I must say that I am happy to see your men here."

"And I would appreciate if you stopped saluting me in plain view of possible enemy snipers, Lieutenant." replied Ingrid on a firm but neutral tone. "What do we know about these Japanese who landed during the night?"

"That they chased away the men manning our observation post atop Mount Pucot, ma'am. Landing barges were also seen in the process of sailing away from the Longoskawayan Point."

"So, we have an indeterminate number of Japanese soldiers atop this hill. It will be still dark for a bit more than half an hour. Let's use the darkness to at least climb part of the way up this hill. Once we will see the enemy, we will deploy in a skirmish line along the slope and will continue our climb."

"And if the Japanese fire on us?"

"We will return fire and will then go forward by tactical leaps, using fire and movement. With this dense jungle, our shooting will have to be done at short ranges only. The speed of our reactions will be primordial. Are your men ready?"

"Er, yes, Major!"

"Then, we will form four parallel single files, with a minimum of ten paces between files and five paces between men. There will be no talking and no smoking: the incandescent tips of lit cigarettes can be seen from very far at night. Let's move!"

Intimidated by the quiet authority and assurance shown by Ingrid, Pews then passed her orders to her band of sailors and clerks, lining them up in single file before starting to advance up the slope, with the platoon led by Ingrid on its right flank. Two other platoon-sized lines of aviators and mechanics followed on Ingrid's right flank as the small force entered the dense jungle and started climbing the hill. Using her compass, Ingrid kept her force on the correct heading to the top while walking at a moderate pace, knowing how hard it was to advance at night in a jungle without getting disoriented or lost. She still had to remind a number of times, using a low voice, to her platoon leaders to stay within sight of her own file and to respect their distances.

They were still halfway up the slopes when the Sun rose. Seeing that the density of the vegetation continued to give her a good cover, Ingrid decided to continue advancing in platoon-size files, rather than deploying her men in a long extended line which would be very difficult to control in such a jungle. Walking cautiously while holding her rifle, which had its bayonet fixed on it, pointed and at the ready, Ingrid visually searched the jungle, trying to spot any Japanese soldier who could be hiding in it. She and her men were less than a hundred meters from the top of the hill when she saw some movement ahead. Signaling to her men to imitate her, she stopped and crouched low, using a thick tree as cover. Looking to her right, then to her left, she was irritated to see that Lieutenant Pew either had not seen her sign or had ignored it and was continuing his advance. She thus growled an order in a low voice.

"Halt and take cover!"

The NCO following Pew heard her and patted on Pew's shoulder to attract his attention. The young lieutenant stopped immediately and looked at Ingrid.

"What do we do now, Major?"

"You keep quiet and do as I do. I believe that I saw some movement ahead of us. Deploy your platoon into section files."

To Ingrid's exasperation and anger, Pew passed orders at a near shout, becoming clearly audible to anyone around.

"PARKER, IRVING, DEPLOY YOUR SECTIONS ON EACH SIDE OF MY SECTION. WE WILL..."

Two rifle shots interrupted him, making him throwing himself behind the cover of a young tree. Ingrid, having located by sound the approximate origin of those rifle shots, signaled to her men to follow her, then started marching quickly in a half crouch, her rifle pointed, while using to the maximum the cover of the surrounding trees. A third rifle shot directed at Pew, who was still hiding behind a tree, then helped Ingrid to better define the position of the enemy soldiers. She thus corrected her heading and slowed down her pace while rising her rifle to her right shoulder, ready to fire. Her past lives' experiences as a hunter and as a warrior, many of them spent in jungle environment, helped her in spotting first the two Japanese soldiers who had fired on Pew. Both were very close to her, within thirty meters ahead and slightly to her left, and were hiding behind the trunk of a dead tree. Stopping and putting one knee on the ground, Ingrid aimed at the head of the nearest Japanese and fired her rifle. Not waiting to see if the Japanese fell down or not, she immediately worked up her rifle bolt to load a fresh cartridge in the bore of her weapon. Her second shot resonated as the surviving Japanese was looking with shock as his dead comrade, the back of his head having exploded under the impact of Ingrid's bullet. That Japanese then got her second bullet right inside his mouth, which had opened from the fear and surprise of finally seeing Ingrid, dying before he could point his rifle at her. Ingrid, knowing that there was now no sense in staying quiet, shouted out loud to her men.

"DEPLOY IN SKIRMISH LINE AND RUN TO THE TREELINE, THEN TAKE FIRING POSITIONS!"

Having confidence that her men would react quickly and properly to her orders, she took the time to chamber a fresh round in her rifle, then started running up the slope, her rifle pointed. Once at the treeline, she knelt behind a large tree and looked left and right to see where her men were now. Her three platoons of aviators and mechanics were now deployed along the treeline and using the cover of trees to start firing at the Japanese holding the ridgeline of this part of Mount Pucot. However, the sailors of Lieutenant Pew were still a good fifty meters behind the line of airmen, advancing only with what could charitably be called excessive caution. Having had enough by now of the navy men's tactical incompetence, Ingrid decided to continue on with only her airmen and shouted more orders down their extended line.

"FIRST PLATOON, PREPARE TO CHARGE THE RIDGELINE WITH ME. SECOND AND THIRD PLATOONS, YOU WILL PROVIDE COVERING FIRE FROM THE TREELINE. FIRST PLATOON, CHAARGE!"

Ingrid then got up and ran full tilt towards the top of the hill while zigzagging, in order to ruin the aim of any Japanese who would try to shoot her. A machine gun then opened fire from the top of the hill. However, the covering fire from the rifles of two of Ingrid's platoon was enough to at least affect the accuracy of the machine gunner, who had to keep his head low while shooting. One bullet zipped by her head as she was about to get to the crest of the hill but she then fired back at once, downing one of the three Japanese soldiers manning the machine gun position. Rifle fire from the men of the First Platoon then killed another machine gun servant. The lone surviving Japanese, who had been trying to push the dead gunner off his machine gun, belatedly grabbed his own rifle and stood up, aiming at her, only to be shot dead by Ingrid. She then ran towards the machinegun position while shouting out loud to her men.

"THE MACHINE GUN IS OUT! LET'S ROLL THE ENEMY'S FLANK, MEN! CHAARGE!"

The 22 men of First Platoon following her at a run, Ingrid sprinted towards the dozen or so Japanese soldiers still deployed in shallow foxholes along the ridgeline, at the same time as she worked the bolt of her rifle again while holding its butt against her right shoulder. The Japanese, forced to keep their heads mostly down due to the covering fire provided by two of her platoons, saw her come too late, with only three of them turning their rifles towards Ingrid. They were however promptly gunned down by the men charging with her, with one of the Japanese killed by Ingrid's next bullet. Not having the time to reload her rifle, Ingrid charged the nearest Japanese soldier still alive while screaming with utter ferocity, her bayonet pointed.

"SPARTAA!"

The Japanese she was charging was actually a young officer holding a katana saber in one hand and an 8 mm pistol in the other hand. His 94 Shiki Kenju pistol then confirmed its mediocre reputation of abysmal design and very low production quality by jamming when the Japanese officer tried to shoot Ingrid down. He barely had time to throw away his useless pistol and grab his katana with both hands before Ingrid's bayonet pierced his heart, going through his torso and sticking out of his back. Projected backward by the force of the impact, the Japanese officer fell on his back, dead. Ingrid, stepping with one boot on his chest, then quickly pulled out her bayonet, then continued her charge

forward. Already taking steady casualties from the rifle fire coming from the treeline below them, the few surviving Japanese then panicked and tried to run away. Ingrid then stopped dead in her track and worked her rifle bolt while shouting more orders.

“FIRST PLATOON, SHOOT THEM DOWN! SECOND AND THIRD PLATOON, CEASE FIRE AND JOIN US ON THE RIDGELINE!”

With the fleeing Japanese mercilessly gunned down in seconds, her remaining 72 men quickly joined her on the top of the hill, with Ingrid then directing them.

“FIRST PLATOON, FACE WEST AND COVER THE HILLTOP APPROACH TO THIS POSITION. SECOND PLATOON, FACE EAST AND COVER THAT SIDE OF THE HILL. THE REST, SEARCH THOSE DEAD JAPANESE AND GRAB ANY MAP OR DOCUMENTS ON THEM, PLUS THEIR WEAPONS, AMMUNITION, WATER BOTTLES, RATIONS AND FIELD SHOVELS. BRING THE LOT TO ME AND PILE THEM UP SEPARATELY BY TYPE.”

Inspecting the Japanese she had shot, she found one of them to be still alive and immediately stabbed him in the heart with her bayonet before searching him, attracting a horrified look from Lieutenant Pew, whose men were only now getting on the hilltop.

“You are not taking prisoners, Major?”

“No! This Japanese was too seriously wounded and he would anyway have preferred death over capture.”

Ignoring Pew, Ingrid took the folding entrenching tool carried by the dead Japanese and gave it to one of her mechanics, an old NCO in whom she had full confidence.

“Master Sergeant Marti, take the other shovels you will find on those dead Japanese and start immediately digging foxholes along this hilltop to establish a defensive line facing Southeast. More Japanese could try to retake this position.”

“Understood, ma’am.”

“Lieutenant Mahoney, check for casualties on our side.”

“Right away, Major.”

Ingrid then looked with a critical eye at Lieutenant Pew and his sailors. The navy men had tried to make their white uniforms less visible by soaking them in some kind of chemical but had only managed to turn them a dirty yellow which was visible from afar. They were thus now simply moving targets for any shooter with a minimum of training. Calling Pew to her, she then gave her some quick instructions.

“Lieutenant, you and your platoon will stay here and hold this position against any enemy counter-attack. I already gave orders to start digging foxholes facing

southeast. Your men will continue that digging and will occupy those foxholes once completed. Make sure that your men don't walk in the open and that they don't smoke at night or speak loudly, in order not to reveal your positions. Do you have a radio with you?"

"I have, Major."

"Then call Commander Bridget and tell him that we are on top of Mount Pucot and that we took out an enemy platoon position. Tell him as well that I will now split my men into two groups, in order to sweep the length of the hilltop, while you will hold this position. Send that message now."

Ingrid's next move was to go search the body of the Japanese officer she had killed. She was quickly rewarded by finding a map of the area with markings on it, plus a field notebook with writing in Japanese. Her satisfaction grew when she noticed the bulky radio backpack lying close by in the foxhole that officer had been occupying.

Checking out the radio, Ingrid found that it was still functional and was actually switched on. Quickly taking off her small backpack, she attached it to the Japanese radio backpack, then put it on and put its headset harness around her head. Now able to listen on to any Japanese radio traffic which could be transmitted in the local area, she started studying the marked map and notebook taken from the dead officer, while her men started forming piles nearby with Japanese weapons, ammunitions, rations, water bottles, entrenching tools and field gear. A mere minute after putting on the Japanese radio backpack, she heard a voice speaking Japanese in the earphone of her headset.

"Green Dragon, this is Nakashima One. I have lost contact with one of my sub-units, which may have been taken out by the enemy. When do you expect to be at my location, over?"

The response, also in Japanese, was much weaker in strength, showing to Ingrid that it came from some distance away. However, what was said then grabbed her full attention.

"From Green Dragon, we heard a heavy exchange of fire from the general area of your sub-unit. I have thus accelerated my pace and should be at your position in less than one hour. In the meantime, hold your position at all cost, over."

"Nakashima One, understood, out!"

Her mind working at full speed, Ingrid associated what she had just heard with what she read on the map and notebook she had captured. Taking a decision, she then called her

four platoon commanders to her for an impromptu orders group, speaking to them as soon as they were assembled around her.

"Gentlemen, I just heard a Japanese radio transmission from a force on its way to Mount Pucot. It announced to the unit holding Mount Pucot that it would be here within one hour. We will thus have to act fast to prevent the enemy from reinforcing its hold on Mount Pucot, something that could seriously threaten our naval station in Mariveles. Lieutenant Pew, you and your men will stay here and hold this position while my other men will go take the rest of the ridgeline. There will be no retreat from this present position."

Pew, who was being stared at hard by Ingrid, meekly nodded his head then in response.

"Understood, Major."

Ingrid then looked at her three other platoon leaders.

"Master Sergeant Marti, you will take your group and have them carry our wounded and dead down to the trail where we came off our trucks, so that they could be quickly brought to our first aid station. Lieutenant Mahoney and Lieutenant Strauss, your platoons will follow me towards the main enemy position overlooking our naval station and will take it. I however want the three armorers in Lieutenant Strauss' platoon to stay here and man the Japanese machinegun we just captured. All of our men who were armed only with handguns up to now will each grab a captured Arisaka Type 38 rifle and as much 6.5 mm ammunition as they can carry in order to rearm themselves. Before we split, we will redistribute among us the captured Japanese grenades, equipment, rations and water. God knows how limited our own stocks were. Get to it, men!"

Next, Ingrid used the backpack radio carried by her own signaler to call her airfield in order to have trucks come forward to pick up her three wounded and two dead men. With that done, she went to inspect the machine gun she had captured, a Nambu Type 11 'light' machine gun in 6.5 mm caliber.

"So, how are you doing with this thing, guys?"

Her head armorer, Staff Sergeant Rafael Manolo, gave her a critical look.

"Please excuse my language, ma'am, but this machine gun is a piece of junk! I never saw such a poorly designed weapon in my life. First, it is fed from a sort of feeding hopper in which you have to put five-round clips of 6.5 mm ammunition for rifles. Second, the bullets must be lubricated by this oil bottle on one side of the feeder before they enter the chamber, something that invites jamming via the free entrance of dirt and sand through the hopper. Thirdly, it weighs twice as much as it should be for its caliber

and size. I wonder how the Japanese have managed to win so many battles with such shitty weapons.”

What Ingrid or Manolo couldn't know was that the Nambu Type 11 light machine gun would be named after World War 2 as 'the worst ever machine gun in History'.

“I agree with you, Sergeant, but can you make it work?”

“Yes ma'am!”

“That's all that I need for the moment. You will be free to throw it away after this battle.”

“Thank you, ma'am!” said the armorer with a big smile, making Ingrid chuckle.

A few minutes later, after their cook, Corporal Garamon, had issued to each man their share of captured Japanese rations and after she had spoken a few words of encouragement to her three wounded men, Ingrid gave the signal to move out, leaving behind Lieutenant Pew and his sailors, plus Sergeant Manolo's machine gun team. Knowing that the other Japanese position was no more than 500 meters to the Southeast, Ingrid walked as silently as she could while not being too slow. However, with 58 men with little experience of jungle fighting following her, it was like a mouse advancing quietly while followed by a dozen elephants. That soon frustrated her to no little degree but she knew that she couldn't blame her men for this: they were not trained infantrymen after all and most of them had never seen a jungle from up close until a couple of months ago. She thus resigned herself to be only reasonably quiet but cut the speed of her pace and signaled her men to walk while bent forward, in order to offer the smallest targets possible to the Japanese. After a half-hour of advance through a dense vegetation, Ingrid started to see the sea and the Mariveles naval station between the trees to her left. Understanding that she now had to be close from the Japanese position, she signaled to her men to stop and lay low before continuing alone, disappearing from them through the trees. After going forward by some sixty meters, Ingrid started to hear Japanese voices speaking in a low volume. Slinging her rifle across her back, she got down on all four and pulled out her Glock 17L 9 mm pistol and, switching on its holographic aiming sight, continued her advance at a near crawl. After a bit over five minutes of advancing on all four, Ingrid had to stop behind a tree: she could now see between the branches and leaves two Japanese soldiers sitting behind a dead tree some twenty meters ahead of her, conversing in low voices while looking from time to time in her direction. Thankfully, they didn't see her, as the mud covering her face

and hands made her hard to see in the semi-darkness created by the jungle canopy overhead. Looking past those two Japanese, she then saw another twenty or so Japanese soldiers who had their backs to her while looking at the naval station, some 1,500 meters away, along the shoreline of Manila Bay. Now knowing where the enemy was, Ingrid slowly and cautiously retreated back towards her men, first at a near-crawl, then at a crouch.

Lieutenant Strauss, kneeling behind a tree, greeted Ingrid with evident relief.

"God, am I happy to see you back in one piece, Major."

"Thanks, Lieutenant, but keep your voice low: the Japanese position is less than a hundred yards away. Some twenty men with a machine gun are observing our naval station, while two soldiers are guarding their flank, fifteen paces to the northwest from the main group. Follow me all in single file and, please, try not to make any noise. The first man who will speak during our approach march will get my boot up his ass. Pass the word...quietly!"

Strauss, amused by her crude language, turned around to speak in a near whisper to the man behind him.

"Total silence from now on: the enemy is less than a hundred yards from here. Pass the word!"

Once all of her men were ready, Ingrid guided them towards the right for about fifty meters, then turned left to start following the ridgeline at a bit lower level than its crest. She herself walked slowly, in order to give a chance to her men to walk without making too much noise. By the standards of a hunter, her group was proving to be still too noisy but she had to recognize that they were trying to do their honest best. Counting her steps, Ingrid stopped once she estimated to be in the back of the enemy and faced her men, who were understandably nervous and tense, their hands gripping their weapons. She then went down the line of men and took position once down in the middle of it, a couple of paces to their left. Signaling to them to follow her and to have their weapons at the ready, she then started to go up the gentle slope, walking at a half crouch. She covered some thirty meters before going down her knees and hands, with her men then imitating her, while slowing down further her advance. She soon arrived within sight of the Japanese main position, to find out that she had gone past them by a few meters, which was still not bad considering that she had navigated blind through a

fairly thick jungle. Crawling to a large dead tree trunk lying parallel to the axis of the Japanese position, she took a firing position behind it and, holstering her pistol, grabbed her rifle and pointed it at the Japanese but didn't fire yet, wanting to give time to her men to also take firing positions behind the dead tree. However, a mechanic, in his haste to get to the cover of the dead tree, made a branch crack, which in turn made the Japanese react and nervously look at their back. Ingrid didn't waste time by swearing at that and shouldered her rifle while shouting an order.

"FIRE AT WILL!"

Fired upon from a distance of less than twenty meters by three times their own number, the Japanese didn't stand a chance, managing only to fire a couple of hasty, inaccurate shots before being shot down to the last. The two Japanese posted to their flank didn't survive much longer, as they rushed without thinking right into a hail of bullets. As Ingrid rushed forward with her men to check if all the Japanese were dead, the Japanese radio she was carrying suddenly came alive.

"Section Howa, this is Green Dragon. What is happening, over?"

Ingrid swore to herself on hearing that the transmission quality was excellent, which could only mean one thing: that this Japanese group calling itself 'Green Dragon' was close by. Pointing the Japanese machine gun lying in the captured position to Lieutenant Strauss, Ingrid urgently shouted new orders.

"THE JAPANESE ARE CLOSE TO HERE, TO OUR WEST. PUT THIS MACHINE GUN IN POSITION BEHIND THAT DEAD TREE WE JUST USED, TO COVER THE WESTERN SLOPE. LET'S DEPLOY IN A DEFENSIVE SEMI-CIRCLE, QUICKLY!"

As her men hurried to take fighting positions and to move the machine gun, Ingrid picked up the two boxes containing the ammunition clips for the Nambu Type 11 and brought them to its intended new location. Instead of using her rifle for this coming fight, she took place behind the Nambu Type 11 and shouldered its butt after verifying that its feed hopper was filled with 5-round clips. She then looked at the Filipino corporal crouched directly to her left.

"Corporal Niñoi, you see how this feed hopper is full of ammo clips? I want you to keep feeding more clips in it in the same way those are, using the clips from those two boxes. Be careful not to put them in the wrong orientation. Understood?"

"Got it, ma'am."

Ingrid then looked left and right while speaking in a low voice.

"Nobody moves or fires before I fire this machine gun. Aim well each of your shots: the enemy could prove to be quite numerous. Also, be prepared to throw grenades if the enemy charges us."

Some movements among the trees at her front, about ninety meters away, along with the noise of branches being cut or broken, soon attracted her attention. Now as tense as a piano wire, Ingrid slowly pointed her machine gun at the nearest silhouettes. Knowing that the Japanese favored close combat and bayonet charges, she decided to fire when she saw a group of three Japanese soldiers, one of which seemed to be an officer accompanied by a man carrying a bulky radio backpack. Aiming carefully at the officer and his radioman, who followed right behind him, she fired a five-round burst which downed both Japanese and triggered a volley of rifle fire from the American and Filipino soldiers. Despite having lost a good dozen men to the first American salvo, the remaining Japanese replied quickly, with their volume of fire showing to Ingrid that they heavily outnumbered Ingrid's men. Firing short, aimed bursts at a rapid rate, Ingrid did her best to shoot down the Japanese who were the closest, thus the most dangerous for her men, as bullets continuously zipped by her ears. The corporal who was feeding her machine gun was killed by a bullet to the head as he was refilling her weapon's feed hopper for a third time, then fell dead over Ingrid, impeding her firing. The Japanese, who had been moving forward by short tactical jumps from tree to tree, then chose that moment to launch into a savage charge while screaming at the top of their lungs.

"BANZAI!"

Ingrid pushed away the body of her assistant loader and managed to fire three more bursts before she had to grab her rifle and get up to face two Japanese soldiers running directly towards her. She killed the first Japanese with one shot fired from the hip before she had to use the bayonet hooked to the muzzle of her rifle to deflect away the bayonet of the second Japanese, who was aiming at her belly. Now reliving the same kind of fight in which Megaron, her Spartan past incarnation, had died in 481 B.C.E. at the Battle of Thermopylae, she used her bayonet-tipped rifle as if it was a spear. Stabbing the Japanese facing her in the stomach and viciously twisting her blade in his belly, she then kicked him with her left boot, projecting him down on his back, before facing another Japanese and charging him while screaming ferociously.

"SPARTAA!"

The Japanese, surprised to be facing a woman, froze for a moment on hearing her scream, a moment that was fatal for him, with Ingrid's bayonet tip piercing his throat and penetrating to his vertebrae. Taking the time to quickly look around her, Ingrid saw with alarm that her men were being swamped by the numerically superior Japanese, who also were much better trained into close combat. She thus didn't have the luxury to take the time to continue fighting with her bayonet if she wanted to save her men. Letting drop her rifle on the ground, Ingrid quickly got her pistol out of its holster and switched on its laser dot sight, then started firing as fast as she could aim it with her laser dot sight. Her modern pistol, with its extended, 20-round magazine, then proved to be the ideal weapon for such a close combat fight, the Japanese having started their assault with empty rifles, relying solely on their bayonets. Those Japanese now had to choose between charging her with bayonets pointed or taking the time to reload their rifles while close to American or Filipino soldiers. Ingrid shot down first the Japanese soldiers closest to her, then switched to the Japanese who were the most threatening to her men. The death of a Japanese officer, shot dead by Ingrid as he was charging her with his katana saber held high, then apparently broke the morale of the surviving Japanese, who turned away and started to flee at a run. Ingrid then shouted orders at her men while continuing to fire her pistol.

"CONTINUE FIRING! KILL AS MANY OF THEM AS YOU CAN BEFORE THEY COULD WITHDRAW AND REORGANIZE FOR A SECOND ATTACK."

One of her fighter pilots then jumped behind the captured Japanese machine gun and added its fire to that of Ingrid, completing the Japanese' rout. Many of Ingrid's men who had lost hope and had been close to run away then gathered their courage on seeing her example and also resumed firing at the retreating Japanese. Less than a third of the original Japanese force, which had easily counted over 200 men, survived to run into the jungle and disappear in it.

Her heart beating hard and nearly hyperventilating, Ingrid took the time to put a fresh magazine in her pistol, then holstered it and went to pick up her rifle. Next, she anxiously looked around her to count how many of her men were still on their feet. Her heart sank when she saw that only two-thirds of her men were still in fighting shape, with the others either lying still or moaning with pain while on the ground. Both saddened and enraged by her losses, she didn't waste time and gave out a series of orders.

"Lieutenant Strauss, take six men and hold a defensive line with that Japanese machine gun, in case those Japanese would reorganize and come back for a second attack. The others will give first aid to our wounded. I will take care of the Japanese lying around here."

Going to the Japanese officer who had charged her with his saber, she grabbed the katana, along with its scabbard, after verifying that he was dead. Ingrid then methodically checked the Japanese lying around her position, some of whom were moaning and moving. She finished off with her katana those Japanese still living, watched by her aviators and mechanics, shaken to see such ferocity in a woman. She also went to the officer and radioman she had killed at the start of that fight, searching them and grabbing a map, a saber and a radio backpack, to then return inside her position. Her next move was to go see her wounded men and her dead. A total of fourteen of her men were now dead, with another ten wounded to various degrees. One of the wounded Filipino, an aircraft mechanic, was actually in a critical state and was in great pain, with a deep stab wound to his belly. With tears coming out of her eyes, Ingrid knelt next to the Filipino mechanic and gently caressed his face.

"Don't lose hope, Manuel: we will get you to the naval station, where you will be treated."

The man, realizing that he was dying, slowly shook his head.

"I am done, ma'am. Take care of the others instead. Please tell my wife and my children that I was thinking about..."

A spasm of pain then interrupted him, with his eyes rolling up and becoming still after a few seconds. Ingrid started sobbing while still holding the mechanic's head in her hands. Forcing herself to regain control after a few seconds, Ingrid then got back on her feet and went to check her nine other wounded, to make sure that the maximum was done to help them.

With her other men administering first aid to the wounded as best they could with what little they had, Ingrid called her signaler to her side and grabbed the handset of the radio pack he was carrying, then called the naval station in Mariveles to send a short situation report and to ask for both reinforcements and medical assistance. She became positively enraged when Commander Bridget only gave her vague promises about doing his best to find and send some help.

"Listen, Commander, and listen well! I have on top of Mount Pucot fifteen of my men dead, plus nine more who are wounded. If those wounded don't get medical care quickly, they will die and your empty promises will do nothing to help them. I saved your bacon today and did the job you asked me to do, with my men paying the price for it. It is now your turn to get off your ass and to do something more than giving me a bunch of 'maybe'."

"Watch what you say, Major: you are dangerously close to insubordination." Warned Bridget, his voice threatening. "Continue like this and I will have you relieved of command."

"In that case, you are welcome to come on top of Mount Pucot to relieve me, Commander, but don't come without reinforcements or medics, out!" Ingrid then changed the frequency on her radio, switching to that of her squadron and calling her command post, where Jesus Villamor answered her.

"Send your message, Lady Hawk."

"Fantasma, I need you to send to me as quickly as you can two trucks with nine stretchers and twenty men to carry wounded. If you could get the services of a few medics or nurses and one doctor, it would be most appreciated. We have nine wounded men to evacuate. We unfortunately suffered as well fifteen men killed while repelling an attack by well over 200 Japanese soldiers who tried to take my position on top of Mount Pucot, over."

There was a delay of a few seconds as Jesus Villamor got over the shock of hearing those bad news.

"Fantasma, understood. I will send the trucks and stretcher bearers at once. They will then bring your wounded directly to the medical station in Mariveles."

Giving back the radio handset to her signaler, Ingrid walked quickly to her captured machine gun, which was served by Lieutenant Strauss.

"Lieutenant, I will take your place at the machine gun. Take the men you will need to carry our wounded down to the coastal road, where two of our trucks will come to pick them up and carry them to the Mariveles medical station. Once our wounded will be rolling, come back here with your men: another Japanese attack is still possible."

"I'm on it, Major." promised Strauss while getting up on his feet to let Ingrid take place behind the machine gun. Fifteen minutes later, Strauss and eighteen bearers left the position, carrying their nine wounded on improvised stretchers made up of ponchos

fixed to bamboo poles. Now left with only 35 able-bodied men to hold her position, Ingrid checked that her machine gun was loaded and prepared mentally for the worst.

22:16 (Manila Time)

Wednesday, January 28, 1942 'C'

Mariveles Airfield, Bataan Peninsula

Ingrid, dirty, tired and famished, was greeted by a joyful hug from Jesus Villamor when she entered the command bunker of her squadron, her improvised infantry unit having finally been relieved a few hours earlier by a regular infantry battalion after six days of hard jungle fighting.

"God, was I ever scared for you, Ingrid!"

Only then did he noticed the Japanese saber she was carrying slung across her back.

"You got yourself a war trophy?"

"A war trophy which cost me a total of 24 dead and fifteen wounded in six days of combat, Jesus." replied Ingrid in a bitter tone before sitting at one of the two tables in the bunker. Taking out her field notepad, she ripped one of its pages off and gave it to Jesus.

"Here is the list of our losses we suffered during the fighting for the Longoskawyan Point. Our wounded are presently being treated at the field hospital in Cabcaban. How are we doing, aircraft-wise?"

"We lost one P-40 when it had to do a belly landing after being damaged during a ground attack mission. Thankfully, Lieutenant McCallum got out of it without wounds but we now have only four aircraft still operational. Paul Gunn has already started to strip that crash-landed P-40 from all its parts which can still be used."

"Good old Paul! He could do about anything with a piece of mechanic. Anything else?"

"Uh, just one sealed envelope to your name, which arrived two days ago from the sector command post. Here it is."

Ingrid became suspicious as she took the envelope, worrying that it could contain some bad news. That idiot of Bridget had after all threatened to relieve her of command but had never showed up in person in the frontlines. Opening the envelope and reading quickly the single page letter in it, she suddenly broke down in violent sobs, attracting at once an alarmed Jesus next to her.

"Ingrid, what is it?"

"Ken... Ken is dead!" only managed to say Ingrid before letting go the letter and cover her face with her hands, unable to speak further. Badly shaken, Jesus picked up the letter and read it: it announced the death of Major Kenneth Dows, killed on the 25th during the fighting to retake the Quinauan Point.

"My God!" could only say the Filipino pilot.

CHAPTER 8 – BY ORDER OF THE PRESIDENT

**08:16 (Washington Time)
Thursday, February 26, 1942 'C'
The Oval Office, The White House
Washington, D.C., U.S.A.**



President Franklin Delano Roosevelt

felt in a sour mood this morning, mostly thanks to the collection of bad news concerning the war. The reading of the front pages of the biggest circulation national newspapers did nothing to light up his day.

“Our troops in the Philippines under siege and starving?!” he read on the front page of the Washington Post. After reading quickly part of the article attached to the top title, he grabbed the copy of the New York Times which was part of the routine pile of daily newspapers his secretary put on his desk every morning. The front-page title of that newspaper didn’t help his mood either.

“Our soldiers in the Philippines abandoned?!”

As he skimmed the first pages of the New York Times, he froze on seeing a fairly large picture, accompanied by a number of smaller pictures and by a half-page of text.

“A woman is fighting in the frontlines in Bataan?” Roosevelt read. The larger picture showed Ingrid Dows, posing in front of her P-40 fighter aircraft during better days, while the smaller pictures showed her in a jungle setting, armed with a rifle and a pistol, looking dirty and tired while leading an eclectic-looking file of armed men, both Americans and Filipinos, along a jungle trail. A separate picture and article under that article showed General MacArthur decorating Ingrid Dows while she and her men stood at attention in some jungle clearing.

“General MacArthur giving the Silver Star to young Major Ingrid Dows, for having led a bayonet charge against the Japanese during the fighting around Bataan...”

Roosevelt, shocked and surprised by that sentence, read carefully that whole article, then examined one of the pictures attached to that article, which showed an emaciated Ingrid Dows wearing a dirty and partly ripped combat fatigue uniform. Her expression

was a mix of exhaustion and sadness, but also of resolve. Having read enough, he used his intercom to call his military assistant, Admiral Leahy, telling him to come to the Oval Office. The old Navy officer showed up within a minute, his own office being next door to the Oval Office.

"You wanted to see me, Mister President?"

"Yes, Admiral. Take a look at the morning copy of the Washington Post and, particularly, of the New York Times, and tell me what you think of their front-page articles. There is also a disturbing article on page three of the New York Times copy." Leahy briefly glanced at both newspapers before nodding his head and looking at Roosevelt.

"I have already read both of those newspapers earlier this morning, Mister President. My opinion is that those articles could severely hurt the morale of the American public."

"Do these articles depict a true picture of the situation in the Philippines, Admiral?"

"They unfortunately reflect the reality of our situation in the Philippines, Mister President. While our troops there are inflicting severe losses to the Japanese forces which invaded the Philippines, they are raked with diseases, are at half-rations and are about to run out of ammunition, despite having previously accumulated large stocks of supplies and ammunition inside caves in the Bataan Peninsula. The level and ferocity of the fighting there has exceeded anything we could have imagined and our men are burning through their ammunition fast. On the other hand, the Japanese Army is suffering as badly from diseases, primarily malaria, and is equally tired and starving, while it is suffering very heavy losses in that jungle fighting."

"What about that article about young Ingrid Dows fighting in the jungle and leading bayonet charges against the Japanese? Is what that article said true?"

"I don't know if what the New York Times is saying about Major Dows is true or not, Mister President. I would have to inquire about that with the Army Headquarters. However, pictures rarely lie and the pictures taken of young Ingrid Dows, armed and dirty in the jungles of the Philippines, probably reflect the truth about her situation. However, the American public won't like one bit the idea that a young woman is fighting in the frontlines of the Filipino jungle, especially in view of how our legislative project to allow women into the Army is still blocked in Congress by the delaying tactics of many representatives from states in the South."

"Their arguments are pure bullshit and hypocrisy!" exclaimed Roosevelt with unusual brutality. "How could they still say that women are totally unfit for combat, especially in view of this New York Times article."

"Again, Mister President, I cannot swear to the veracity of what that article said. I will however contact General Marshall on this subject right after this."

"Admiral, have you thought about the reaction of the American public if that brave young woman would end up being killed in ground combat or, worse, end up being captured alive by the Japanese?"

That question made Leahy pause and look down at the picture of Ingrid on the front page of the Washington Post, looking young, beautiful and radiant in front of her P-40.

"That would be nothing less than a disaster in term of our public relations, Mister President, as much if not more than the capture or death of General MacArthur."

"Can we still evacuate them from the Philippines, Admiral?"

Leahy took some time to respond to that. When he did, his expression was most sober.

"Possibly, Mister President, but I doubt that either of them would accept to leave the Philippines, thus abandoning the men who are under their respective commands. Despite what the forked thongs are saying about MacArthur, calling him 'Dugout Doug', he is a brave, combat-proven officer. His present job is to command the more than 90,000 American and Filipino soldiers still fighting in the Philippines, not to play the infantryman in the frontlines. Yes, he is vainglorious and tends to rub people the wrong way, but he is no coward and he cares about his men. He will probably refuse to abandon his men in the Philippines. As for Major Ingrid Dows, she is a young woman with incredible courage and character and is a recipient of the Medal of Honor. Everybody agrees that she is devoted to her men and I just can't see her accepting to leave her men behind, especially after just losing her own husband during the recent fighting, Mister President."

"How could they refuse an order straight from Washington?" exclaimed Roosevelt. "They are in the Army and must obey orders, no?"

"Not Major Dows, Mister President." replied Leahy. "Don't forget that she is still simply a Filipino Army officer on exchange with our Army Air Corps and that Congress is still refusing to give her the right to join the ranks of the U.S. Army, Mister President."

"What a crock!" muttered Roosevelt before tapping with one index the article on Ingrid in the New York Times. "Why not show this article to those imbeciles in

Congress, to show them how their arguments against women in the Army are empty and hypocritical?”

“That could actually work, Mister President. As for attempting to evacuate General MacArthur and Major Dows from the Philippines, I will discuss with General Marshal and General Arnold about how this could be done. I will keep you apprised about what we will come with, Mister President.”

“I will be waiting impatiently your report on this, Admiral.”

12:20 (Manila Time)

Sunday, March 01, 1942 ‘C’

Malinta tunnel complex, fortress of Corregidor

Manila Bay, Philippines

Douglas MacArthur was having lunch with his wife, his young son, with Filipino President Quezon and his wife and with Colonel Charles Willoughby, his intelligence officer, while ignoring the noise from the heavy caliber Japanese shells which exploded at intervals at the surface of the mountain covering the Malinta underground command complex. He was also doing his best to keep the conversation on anodyne subjects and thus avoid talking about bad news in front of his wife and son. His chief of staff, Major General Richard Sutherland, then walked into MacArthur’s private dining room, a message in his hands, and went quickly to his table, where he presented it to MacArthur while saluting him.

“Top Secret message for you from Washington, General.”

Acting with deliberate slowness, MacArthur took that message and read it. However, he couldn’t hide resentment and anger appear on his face as he read its content, which had been signed by General Marshall, the commander of the U.S. Army. His wife, like President Quezon, noticed his change of attitude.

“What is it, Doug?”

MacArthur wiped his mouth with his napkin before answering his wife and a neutral tone.

“General Marshall is ordering me to be ready to be evacuated from the Philippines by air with a limited number of other people, in order to avoid possible capture by the Japanese.”

"But... your soldiers and my soldiers: that would mean abandoning them, General." pointed out Manuel Quezon, who evidently didn't like that possibility. MacArthur nodded his head at those words.

"Exactly, President Quezon, and it is why I have the intention to tell Washington that I am refusing to obey such an order. I am responsible for my soldiers and I have the firm intention to stay with them. If there is any evacuation, it will be only for our own families and for our wounded soldiers."

He then reread the message, concentrating on a particular paragraph.

"General Marshall also wants that I order young Major Ingrid Dows to leave the Philippines, citing the worries of President Roosevelt concerning the possibility that she could be captured by the Japanese. What a bunch of hypocrites! On one side, those politicians in Washington are saying that women are inapt for military service. On the other hand, they now worry about the fate of a woman who has already won the Medal of Honor and two DSCs but who is still being refused entry into the U.S. Army. Do they really think that Major Dows, who recently lost her husband at the hands of the Japanese, will accept to be evacuated, thus abandoning her men? I can already predict what this girl will say about that...and I would approve her response. General Sutherland, you have visited recently our frontlines around Bataan. What is the general opinion of our troops about this girl?"

Sutherland, who was an ethnic German, like Ingrid, took the time to measure his words before answering MacArthur. He originally had been dead set against the idea of using a woman as a fighter pilot. However, Ingrid's repeated exploits in the air had made him gradually reconsider his opinion about that subject.

"General, I don't believe that I am exaggerating by saying that young Major Dows has become a legend among our troops, especially after the way she has led her men in vicious infantry battles in the jungle during last month. Her men would be willing to die for her, while she has the reputation of never abandoning a single one of her men."

"I believe so as well. Well, I believe that this will save me from wasting my time by asking her to leave." declared Douglas MacArthur on a final tone while getting up from the table. "If you will now excuse me, President Quezon, Madam Quezon, I will go send a firm response to this junk message from Washington."

As he had expected, the refusal he sent to Washington had the effect of a bomb at the War Department and at the White House. When he received the message with

the reaction of Washington to his refusal, two days later, it was to be confronted with a direct order from the President himself, ordering him to obey under pain of ending in front of a court martial. Bitter but also understanding that he had no choice left to obey, he gathered his principal staff members in his office, in order to start planning that evacuation operation.

09:47 (Manilla Time)

Thursday, March 5, 1942 'C'

Bagac Sector, lines of the American 91st Infantry Division

Bataan Peninsula, Philippines

Ingrid had trouble believing her eyes when she arrived with her men at the improvised field command post of the 91st Infantry Division, situated near the western coastal road of the Bataan Peninsula. None other than General Douglas MacArthur in person was standing near the entrance to the hut sheltering the command post. Even more, he was accompanied by President Manuel Quezon, two senior military aides, four American military policemen armed with Thompson submachine guns, two U.S. Army cameramen and a small band of civilian reporters and photographers. Walking to MacArthur, she stopped at attention in front of him and saluted him: if there was a Japanese sniper around, that Japanese wouldn't need to be a genius to figure out by himself that MacArthur was a so-called 'big cheese'.

"Major Ingrid Dows, 17th Provisional Pursuit Squadron, reporting, sir!"

MacArthur returned her salute, then looked her up and down and also looked at her men, with their disparate, dirty and ripped uniforms.

"Where is your unit based right now, Major Dows?"

"Our tents are less than a hundred yards from here, General. Since losing our last aircraft, we have been forming part of the local defense force for the division's headquarters."

"And how many men do you still have in your squadron, Major?" asked MacArthur while examining with sadness Ingrid's emaciated body and her uniform, which was a near rag. Ingrid answered back in a tired voice.

"I have left with me five pilots, not counting myself, plus three other officers and 114 NCOs and soldiers, General. We lost our two last fighter aircraft in an enemy artillery bombardment five days ago."

"Could you please have your men line up, Major? I and President Quezon would like to inspect them. Then, I will speak to your unit."

"Certainly, General! Just give me a minute."

MacArthur patiently waited while Ingrid lined up properly her men in three ranks, with two steps between each rank, then came forward with President Quezon to inspect the ranks of the American and Filipino soldiers, Ingrid close behind him and with the cameramen and civilian reporters taking pictures during the inspection. Both him and Quezon proceeded slowly, taking the time to talk briefly with each man and to shake hands with them. Once that was done, MacArthur and Quezon returned in front of the hut, with the former then speaking up in a loud voice while filmed.

"Lady and gentlemen of the 17th Provisional Pursuit Squadron, let me tell you first that, whatever happens in the future, the name of your unit will be covered with glory. You accomplished the impossible many times already and saved the lives of thousands of our soldiers, sailors and civilians, thanks to your bravery and skills in air combat. Your unit has accumulated by far the largest number of enemy aircraft destroyed compared to any other pursuit squadron in the U.S. Army in this war. You also distinguished yourselves in ground combat on many occasions, even though you had not been formally trained for ground combat, while being lead by a truly exceptional young commander. To waste such expertise would be nothing less than criminal."

Ingrid tensed up on hearing those last words, not liking at all what they implied. MacArthur then continued his speech.

"A limited personnel evacuation from the Philippines has been ordered by Washington and then planned by my staff in Corregidor. That evacuation will touch all our aircrews, the technical and administrative officers of our aviation units, our Army and Navy nurses, our crypto specialists and some other specialists and senior staff officers, plus as many of our wounded as it will be possible to evacuate. The evacuation will be by air, with transport aircraft starting to arrive tonight in Mariveles. Those of you who belong to the personnel categories I named will have until four this afternoon to pack up their things, before being driven by trucks to the Mariveles Airfield."

"But, General," objected at once Ingrid, "what will happen to my ground crews, to my mechanics and my technicians?"

"I am sorry, Major, but they will have to stay in Bataan and continue to fight with our other soldiers." answered MacArthur, who was truly sorry about that. He saw Ingrid's face harden before she came to attention and spoke in a strong, clear voice.

"In that case, General, I must refuse to obey your order to evacuate. I will stay here with my men...all my men!"

The other American pilots and officers of the squadron then imitated Ingrid one by one, refusing to be evacuated without their Filipino ground crew personnel. MacArthur mentally wished then that a few generals and politicians he knew in Washington be here to see this, to understand what was true military comradeship. He then took out of a pocket the last message received from President Roosevelt.

"Major Dows, believe me when I say to you that I also wanted to stay here in the Philippines, in order to fight to the bitter end with our soldiers, sailors and airmen. However, the President didn't leave me any choice for me and you to obey his formal order to be evacuated."

"The President in person ordered that I be evacuated? Why me in particular? Because I am a girl? That's bullshit!"

That last remark of hers attracted a few cringes in the crowd of reporters, but not from MacArthur, who replied in a calm voice to Ingrid.

"You realize that refusing a direct order from the President of the United States could get you in front of a court martial, Major?"

"Which court martial would that be, General? One from the same army which is still refusing to accept women and which won't accept me as an American fighter pilot? And this for refusing to abandon my own men in the middle of combat? It would be those generals in Washington who should be court-martialed for gross incompetence and moral hypocrisy, sir."

Those words struck hard Douglas MacArthur, who shared the same opinion as her on that subject. As for the reporters present, they frantically scribbled down Ingrid's abrasive reply.

"The charges would actually be about refusing a direct order from the President, Major. If you still refuse to go, then the MPs accompanying me will put you under arrest and you will then leave the Philippines in handcuffs."

What followed shocked everybody around MacArthur, except the latter and President Quezon, who had anticipated such a reaction. Ingrid's right hand got closer to her holstered pistol and undid its retaining strap, while her men firmed up their grips on their

own weapons. The MP captain in charge of the military policemen present gave a questioning look to MacArthur, who made a gesture for him and his MPs to relax, then spoke to Ingrid in a friendly tone.

“Major, your sense of loyalty to your men and your devotion to the defense of the Philippines are truly admirable. Since you are technically an officer of the Filipino Army Air Corps, I will now let President Quezon speak.”

The old Filipino President then stepped forward and spoke as loud as he could while looking Ingrid in the eyes from six paces away.

“Major Dows, you showed admirable devotion and love to my country by asking to become one of our fighter pilots and this at a desperate time for the Philippines in this war. Since then, you never made me regret my decision to accept you as a fighter pilot, on the contrary. You are admired and loved by all of us in the Philippines and my wish is to see you continue fighting the Japanese where you can be the most effective: in the air. I also wish the same for Major Jesus Villamor but, unfortunately, Washington’s evacuation list didn’t include any Filipino officer or specialist, only me and my wife. However, I spoke with General MacArthur about this, who then proposed that, since Major Villamor wouldn’t be evacuated by air tonight, he should then be allowed to lead the Filipino personnel of your squadron out by boat from the Bataan Peninsula tonight, to be stealthily brought to the opposite shore of the Manila Bay, north of Manila, where they would disembark and then make their way to the hills and jungles northeast of Manila. They would then conduct from there a prolonged guerilla campaign against the Japanese and harass them while continuing to fight for the Philippines. Before your men will go out by boat, they will be given by General MacArthur extra supplies of food and ammunition in order to continue that fight. I am now imploring you, men of the Sixth and Seventeenth Pursuit Squadron, as President of the Philippines, to accept that opportunity, so that your squadron commander could leave the Philippines with her conscience at peace about your fate here.”

As Ingrid hesitated and as her Filipino squadron members looked at each other in indecision, MacArthur threw a severe look at the civilian reporters present around him.

“That last information about Major Dows’ Filipino personnel forming a guerilla unit is not to be mentioned to anyone else, gentlemen. Those of you who will publish details about this will be prosecuted for treason and for divulging classified information. Do you understand me, gentlemen?”

The reporters present could only nod and agree to that. Jesus Villamor, standing behind and to the right of Ingrid then spoke to her.

“That is acceptable to me, Ingrid. Go and continue fighting in the air for us.”

The other Filipinos in the squadron then spoke up in turn, all urging Ingrid to go. Emotionally overwhelmed by this, Ingrid started sobbing and fell on her knees, where she cried her grief. Her men reacted by surrounding her in order to comfort her, with the army cameramen and civilian photographers recording that emotional moment. Themselves deeply touched by this scene, both MacArthur and President Quezon also went forward to comfort Ingrid, but waited until all of her men had time to speak with her. Jesus Villamor and President Quezon finally helped a still distraught Ingrid to get up, then hugged her tight, with Quezon speaking softly into her ear.

“You will always be a national heroine for us Filipinos, Ingrid. Make us proud and go to the United States, so that you can continue the fight for us.”

“I...I will go then, but I promise you all that I will return for you.”

When Ingrid showed up with her American officers at the airstrip in Mariveles, it was to find a mixed group of about sixty men and women waiting with their meager belongings under the shadow of trees growing close to the dirt runway. Ingrid, with her backpack, kitbag, rifle and captured Japanese sword, looked in comparison to be one of the best equipped present. Her eyes were however still red from crying when she had said her last goodbyes to Jesus Villamor and her Filipino ground crewmen, who were themselves preparing to leave Bataan by boat to go across the Manila Bay and disappear in the jungle and hills northeast of Manila. At least, General MacArthur had filled his promises to them and had them rearmed and reequipped to the best standards still possible, so that they would start their long-term mission on the best footing possible.

Ingrid joined up on arrival with a group of 23 American Army and Navy nurses, two of whom she knew well thanks to her previous evacuation trip from Clark Field to Darwin. Juanita Redmond and Helen Cassiani looked her up and down with sadness, noting her dirty, ripped combat uniform, her disheveled hair and her emaciated face.

“My God, Ingrid, you look terrible.” said softly Helen Cassiani.

"that's because I feel terrible, Helen. I am being forced to abandon my men and to leave them behind. I would have much preferred to stay and continue fighting with them."

"I understand you, Ingrid." said Juanita, the small Latina beauty, while lowering her head. "They forced us to abandon our patients when they were needing us the most. Do you have an idea on how they will evacuate us and by what route?"

"General MacArthur told me that a plane will come tonight and fly us out, probably to take us to Australia. The problem with that is that the strip here is way too short for a C-87, the only cargo plane with enough range to get from here to Australia." An Army Air Corps major then came out of the airfield's command bunker and asked them all to assemble around him, so that he could speak to them.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am Major Julian Kingsley, tasked by General MacArthur to arrange your evacuation to Australia. At around eight o'clock tonight, two transport aircraft will land here under the cover of the night and will unload first a priority load of supplies for our troops here, including medical supplies, before loading you aboard. General MacArthur and his suite will also go in those aircraft after coming here from Corregidor by patrol boat. Our two cargo planes will be refilled with fuel, then will fly you to Brisbane. Once in Brisbane, you will all go through a full medical evaluation and will be treated as needed. Once that is done, you will each be given new instructions concerning your next posting, on top of getting special permissions signed by General MacArthur, which will allow you to recuperate from your months of tough fighting. Military air transportation will be provided to that effect to bring you to the United States, so that you can see your families there. Do you have any questions at this time?"

One of the senior nurses then raised a hand high.

"Uh, are there restrictions on baggage weight, Major? I have a big bag full of letters from my patients to their families in the States."

The major then made a reassuring smile to the nurse.

"Do not worry about that point, Captain: the two C-142 which will land here, on top of being able to use very short dirt strips and to have a very long range, also possess a huge cargo capacity. Your bag of mail will easily fit aboard."

Ingrid was next to raise her hand to ask a question.

"Major Kingsley, I never heard before about the C-142. Is that a new model?" Kingsley nodded once at her question.

"The Fairchild C-142 GLOBEMASTER just entered service and incorporates the latest technology in terms of cargo aircraft. The Japanese probably never encountered one before. Well, if there are no more questions, I will invite you to wait with your kits under the cover of the trees behind the bunker: let's avoid as much as possible to attract the attention of the Japanese on this airfield before your departure."

After a frugal supper composed of one tin of meat or fish per person and a few hours of waiting, the sound of powerful piston engines approaching made all heads pivot towards the night sky.

"Here they are!" said with a smile Paul Gunn. Despite her visual acuity and excellent night vision, Ingrid could not spot the planes, so dark was the night.

"I hope that Major Kingsley has prepared some lights in order to mark the strip. To land in such darkness won't be easy."

As if Kingsley had heard her, six jeeps parked at wide intervals and off the strip lit their headlights, while one jeep parked before the start of the strip also switched on its headlights, clearly illuminating the dirt strip. The eyes of Paul Gunn, an experienced transport pilot, opened wide, like those of Ingrid, when the first C-142 touched the ground close to its start while flying at an astonishingly low speed.

"My God! Look at that big beast, Ingrid!"

"Big is the word." replied Ingrid while following with her eyes the huge four-engine aircraft now rolling and slowing down the dirt strip. The plane had a big but relatively short central fuselage with a rectangular section, a pair of long, straight wings attached atop the fuselage and supporting four big radial piston engines, plus a double tail attached by long pylons to the inner pair of engines. Eight large pairs of wide wheels were attached to the sides of the fuselage, making it lie low over the ground, thus rendering the loading and unloading of cargo and passengers easier while giving to the plane an exceptionally low ground pressure. Large, deep trailing edge flaps were deployed for landing, in order to augment the lift provided by the wings. Instead of slowing down to idle, the four engines of the C-142 instead roared back to full power, pushing a dust storm ahead of them as they rapidly slowed down.

"Reversible pitch propellers!" shouted out Ingrid. "Nancy must have helped in the conception of this plane. And look at that extensive flaps system, Paul."

"I will have to pay myself a few hours of piloting in that big baby." said Gunn in a dreamy tone while watching the C-142 pivot around after coming off the runway and

having rolled to the parking area. The jeeps stationed along the strip closed off their headlights as soon as the second C-142 had landed a mere minute after the first one, returning the small airfield to obscurity. Only the flashlights of a few men then stayed on to guide the pilots of the C-142 to the parking spots assigned to them. Trucks loaded with fuel drums then approached the two big aircraft as soon as they shut down their engines, while more trucks, which were empty, rolled to position themselves behind the cargo planes. Major Kingsley walked quickly to the men and women waiting to board the two aircraft, going to General MacArthur and stopping in front of him while saluting him.

“General, we will be ready for you to board as soon as the loads of medical supplies will have been taken off. The fueling should take about thirty minutes.”

“Excellent! I will now go say a few words to the other passengers before we will board.”

Leaving his wife and son for a moment, MacArthur then went to face the men and women in uniform waiting a few paces away, looking at them with a sober expression.

“Ladies and gentlemen, today we are being forced to leave the Philippines and leave behind tens of thousands of brave men. Some in the United States will say that you fled while abandoning others and will blame you for that. In reality you are only ensuring that your hard-earned experience can be used to help us continue the fight and eventually return to the Philippines to liberate it. I will come back to the Philippines! You will also come back to the Philippines! With luck, our comrades will still be resisting the Japanese when we will return. Always think about them and dedicate your future efforts in this war to them. In the meantime, rest, recover your full health and teach what you have learned here to a new generation of soldiers, aviators and sailors who will help chase the Japanese out of the Philippines.”

CHAPTER 9 – REST AND RECUPERATION



13:50 (Midwest Time)

Sunday, March 15, 1942 'C'

Havre train station, Montana

U.S.A.

Ingrid shivered when she stepped out of the train which had brought her from San Francisco via Portland. It was close to the freezing point but the strong wind further helped chill her after all her months spent living and fighting in the Philippines. Thankfully, she had been given on arrival in San Francisco a warm, sheepskin-lined aviator's leather jacket and boots, plus a winter cap and gloves. New kit had been provided as well to her after her arrival by air from Australia. She nearly immediately got stared at by everybody present around when she transferred her kit from the train to the station's platform, thanks to the tan Army uniform with trousers she was wearing and to the Springfield 1903 rifle and Japanese Katana saber she had with her. Next, she went to get a luggage cart and loaded her backpack, kit bag, saber and new foot locker on it. With her rifle slung from her right shoulder, she pushed her loaded cart inside the train station's waiting room, where about twenty travelers were either waiting for their train or had just disembarked from the same train as her. A young sailor sitting on one of the

benches hesitated when he saw her, eyeing the rank insignias of a major on the epaulettes of her leather jacket, then got up and saluted her.

“Good day, ma’am!”

“Good day, Sailor!” replied Ingrid, returning his salute while going towards the public telephones fixed to a wall in one corner of the room. She couldn’t tell if it was her officer’s rank insignias or her rifle which attracted the most whispered comments and exclamations on her passage and, frankly, she didn’t care. She had been stared at as if she was a Martian since her arrival by plane from Australia, and had to explain countless times, sometimes forcefully, how a young woman could end up being in military uniform. She had also been looked at crossly for having the temerity as a woman to wear trousers and had even been refused service once in a restaurant because of that. As for what she had already witnessed since her arrival in the U.S.A. about racism, simply thinking about it made her blood boil.

Fishing out a small notebook from one pocket, she opened it and read a telephone number which she composed on one of the public telephones after dropping a dime in the telephone’s slot. A woman’s voice answered her after two rings.

“Hello?”

“Good afternoon! Am I at the Crawford’s Nest Ranch?”

“Yes, you are, miss.”

“Oh, goodie! This is Ingrid Dows. I just arrived at the Havre train station and should arrive soon at your ranch by taxi. I hope that you did receive the telegram I sent from San Francisco two days ago?”

“Yes, we received it, Ingrid.” said the woman, her tone now enthusiastic. “We will be most happy to have you at our home during your leave period. By the way, I’m Joan Crawford, the wife of John, your uncle. We are really anxious to greet you, Ingrid.”

“And I am anxious to meet you all. I will see you in a short while, Joan.”

Happy to have been able to contact the family farm of her late adoptive father, Mike Crawford, Ingrid pushed her luggage cart out of the train station, emerging on the front porch and going to the taxi waiting station. She looked around her with curiosity at the small town of Havre, Montana, situated 72 kilometers to the South of the Canadian border. It was an important relay along the railway which linked Seattle and Portland, on the American West Coast, to St-Paul, in Minnesota. It had no more than maybe eight thousand inhabitants and most buildings visible were at most two-story-high. While the

air was cold and crisp, the sky was a nice blue and had barely any clouds in it. Going to the first of two taxis waiting in front of the train station, Ingrid bent down and knocked on the side window to attract the attention of the driver, who was reading a newspaper.

"Excuse me, sir. Could you open your trunk, please?"

"Sure, miss!" answered promptly the taxi driver, who then stepped out and went to the rear of his car, opening wide the huge trunk of his vehicle. He started loading her things in it but hesitated when he saw her rifle and saber.

"Uh, you are in the Army, miss? I thought that women could not enlist, except as nurses."

"They still can't, mister. I am actually an officer in the Philippines' Army Air Corps."

The taxi driver then realized who she was and opened his eyes wide.

"Are you the famous Lady Hawk, our Ace of aces in the Pacific?"

"...Or anywhere else." replied Ingrid, smiling. "Could you drive me to the Crawford's Nest Ranch, on Road 234?"

"With pleasure, miss. I know that ranch well. Get in!"

The driver closed his trunk, then went to sit back behind the wheel and started his engine as Ingrid sat on the rear bench seat. Driving away from the train station, the taxi driver looked in his mirror and started speaking in a jovial tone.

"So, this is your first time in Havre, miss?"

"It is. Montana seems to be a beautiful place."

"That's a fact, miss. You are planning on staying for a while in Havre?"

"I have three weeks of leave, then I will have to report to Washington. I however fully intend to use those three weeks to get back in shape and sleep out all my accumulated fatigue."

The driver looked at her with solicitude through his rearview mirror.

"It must have been really hard times for you in the Philippines, miss."

"It was hard for everybody, mister. We also lost a lot of good men there."

"I am sorry to hear that, miss. So, where is your air victory count at now, miss?"

"I have 72 confirmed air kills, mister." answered Ingrid, who didn't want to talk about that subject more than needed.

"You definitely earned your leave time, miss. They are not going to send you behind a desk, or on a war bonds tour after this, I hope?"

"Hopefully not!" said Ingrid. "Besides, I am still technically a Filipina officer and they can't force me to take a position with the Army here unless I accept it. If they try to bury me in Washington, then I will go back by my own to the Philippines."

"I sincerely hope that these paper-pushers in Washington will see your real worth, miss."

"Thank you, mister! I certainly hope so as well."

About fifteen minutes later, the taxi drove off the main road and took a private gravel road which led to the buildings of a large ranch, stopping finally in front of the main building, a large two-story wooden house with a steep roof and dormer windows in the attic. The driver stepped out to help Ingrid take out her things from the trunk and carried her foot locker for her up to the main entrance door, where Ingrid paid him, leaving him a sizeable tip.

"Thank you very much for your help, sir. Keep the change."

"Thank you, miss. Have a good vacation."

The driver then left as a tall woman close to forty opened the front door and invited Ingrid in with a big smile, three young teenagers behind her.

"Welcome to the Crawford's Nest Ranch, Ingrid. I am Joan Crawford and this is three of my five children: Sylvia, Helen and Steve. Please come in."

Young Steve volunteered at once to carry Ingrid's rifle, making the latter smile in amusement.

"Boys will be boys!"

"You got that right, Ingrid." replied Joan with a smirk. "It is not loaded, I hope?"

"God no! My ammunition is locked up in my foot locker. Besides, I will take off the bolt and store it separately, along with my handguns."

"You have handguns with you?" asked Joan, her tone more cautious now. Ingrid nodded, herself becoming serious, as she carried her backpack and foot locker inside.

"I have four of them, which I inherited from Nancy Laplante, but they will be kept disassembled during my stay in your ranch. Is your husband home?"

"No! He went out on horseback with my oldest son, Patrick."

Those words awakened some old souvenirs in Ingrid's mind, making her look dreamy for a moment.

"Horse riding... I would love to do some of that in the days to come. It would be a fine way for me to change my mind from the war."

"You know how to ride, Ingrid?"

Ingrid didn't say that she had been riding horses in at least a quarter of her past 71 incarnations, instead smiling to Joan.

"I do, Misses Crawford."

"Then, you will find plenty of horses here for that. And call me simply Joan, instead of 'Misses Crawford'. Uh, I am not familiar with army rank insignias. What is your rank, precisely?"

"Major! I was promoted by General MacArthur a few weeks ago, in the Philippines."

"A major? Goodness! You are quite high ranking for a girl your age. Uh, wait a second! Didn't Mike say in a letter that you were fifteen last year?"

"He must have made a mistake, Joan." replied Ingrid as calmly as she could, hiding her sudden tension. If her true age became known, then her career as a fighter pilot would be abruptly put on hold, maybe permanently. "I was seventeen when he adopted me. I turned eighteen on September of last year. Mind you, it will be a while still before I could legally drink alcohol."

"As if the law ever stopped teenagers who wanted to drink." replied Joan, forgetting her passing doubts about her age. "Well, let's go up to the room I reserved for you upstairs. You will also be able to wash up if you want as well before the men are back. My oldest daughter, Marilyn, should be back as well by supper time: she went to visit a neighbor."

The group went to the upper floor, where Joan introduced Ingrid into a fair-sized bedroom with a very comfortable-looking bed.

"Here you are, Ingrid. We will now let you unpack at your convenience. There is a bathroom with a tub at the end of the hallway, to the right. Take all your time."

"Thanks, Joan."

Joan then left the room with her children, closing the door behind her. Now alone, Ingrid looked around her and went to the window, which gave a splendid view of the Bear Paw Mountains to the South, which were presently covered with snow. She sighed with relief, already feeling her accumulated stress from the war starting to evaporate.

16:52 (Midwest Time)

Crawford's Nest Ranch

Havre, Montana

John Crawford, tired and cold, announced himself in a loud voice as he entered by the back door of his farmhouse.

"WE ARE BACK AND FAMISHED, JOAN!"

Joan, who had been preparing supper in the kitchen with Helen and Sylvia, answered at once in an ironic tone.

"You guys are always famished when you come back from work. By the way, Ingrid Dows arrived three hours ago and is anxious to meet you."

"Goodie!" exclaimed Patrick, a tall, strong and handsome boy of sixteen. "Is she as beautiful as on the pictures sent last year by Uncle Mike?"

As Joan gave him an amused smile, Ingrid appeared in the door to the lounge, smiling to Patrick.

"Judge by yourself, Patrick."

Patrick opened his mouth in admiration as he detailed Ingrid, who was wearing a fresh going out tropical uniform which had been tailored to fit her slender body. His father had to discreetly elbow him in the ribs then, whispering to him as well.

"Show some restraint, Son: you are nearly drooling."

John then stepped up to Ingrid, offering his hand for a shake.

"Hello, Ingrid. I am John Crawford, Mike's brother, and this is my eldest son, Patrick."

"Pleased to meet you, John. You too, Patrick."

John didn't miss the way Ingrid's eyes sparkled as she detailed quickly his son Patrick while shaking hands with him. As for Patrick, it was too obvious that he had immediately become enthralled by the beautiful teenager. Joan then spoke, smiling at the scene.

"Why don't you guys go up and wash before supper?"

"A good idea, Joan." replied John, before looking back at Ingrid. "We won't be long, Ingrid."

He then noticed the rank insignias on her shirt collar and hesitated.

"You are a major?"

"That's right, John. I was a squadron commander in the Philippines and General MacArthur promoted me as we were fighting the Japanese invasion. I will be happy to talk more about that later."

"I sure am looking up to that, Ingrid. See you in a moment."

When John came back down, he found Ingrid in the lounge with seventeen-year-old Marilyn, his eldest child. Marilyn appeared excited as Ingrid was plugging in a small portable radio. One look at that radio told him at once that it had not been produced in this decade, or even in this century. Marilyn then turned her head towards him, grinning in excitement to him.

"Ingrid has a collection of music on discs from the year 2012 with her, Dad. I can't wait to hear some of it."

"I certainly wouldn't mind listening to it after supper. Is it quite different from today's music, Ingrid?"

The teenager laughed as she thought about the comparison.

"It is truly from another world, John. Some of the styles of music in 2012 don't even exist yet, while most styles from today have gone totally out of fashion. There are good and bad songs, like today, but Nancy had a fine taste in music and she edited out the stuff she found too crude or vulgar from her music selection. Should I put on some soft, soothing music during supper time or should I wait?"

"Let's wait, so that we then could all enjoy it to the most."

That answer obviously disappointed Marilyn, but she didn't protest, instead going slowly through a small case containing dozens of small plastic laser disk holders, looking at the pictures or list of titles on them. Ingrid, her portable radio now set up, tuned it to the first station she found with a speed and easiness that amazed John.

"This technology is truly marvelous: normally, it takes me a good half minute to tune well to that station, yet you did it in seconds."

"It has an automatic scan and tune mode. Electronics and computers were two of the technical fields which had advanced the most quickly in the decades following this war."

Those last words brought a somber air on John's face.

"Talking of the war, did Nancy Laplante tell you how long it will be and how it will end, Ingrid?"

"She did speak to me extensively about the war, but you must understand that the war she knew is not the war we are now living."

"Uh, I don't understand."

It was Ingrid's turn to look most serious.

"John, this World we live in, including ourselves, is only a parallel copy of the World Nancy came from. When she involuntarily traveled to the past and ended up near

London in September of 1940, her arrival and subsequent actions basically split time, creating a new history parallel to the original historical line. From then on, her actions and those of others reacting to her progressively modified the history of this timeline compared to that of the original one. As an example, in the history known by Nancy, there was no such thing as a young female fighter pilot ace fighting in the Philippines. The only thing that Nancy was pretty sure about this version of the war is that we will eventually win it. How long it will be or how exactly it will go is still to be determined.”

“Us, mere copies of other selves? That’s quite hard to swallow, Ingrid.”

“It certainly is, John. Nancy didn’t tell that to many people, precisely because it is so unsettling. Like she told me once, the best we can do is to live our lives as if we are the only timeline in existence. Being copies doesn’t make us less human...or less real.”

“I’ll buy that, Ingrid.”

“SUPPER IS READY!” shouted at that moment Joan from the kitchen, making John sigh.

“Ah, at last! I could eat a horse. Let’s go sit down at the dining table.”

There was soon two adults and six teenagers, including Ingrid, sitting at or serving around the long dining table. John pointed four empty chairs around one end.

“We normally have four ranch hands to help with herding cattle and collect hay, but two of them have gone home to their families for Winter, while two others have decided to enlist in the army. With Patrick and Marilyn still in high school until Summer, it makes for quite busy days for me at the ranch for a few months.”

“Oh, but I would be delighted to help out, Uncle John.” volunteered at once Ingrid with enthusiasm. “It would be a perfect way for me to change my mind from the war and to get back in top physical shape.”

“But you do look in shape, Ingrid.” objected Joan Crawford, making Ingrid smile and shake her head.

“Not by the standards of Nancy Laplante, Joan. Yes, I am lean and mean, but I need to build up further on my cardio-vascular capacity and on my muscle mass. It may not look like it, but flying combat missions as a fighter pilot demands lots of stamina and quite a lot of raw muscular power. Inhaling oxygen also burns up energy very fast.”

“Oh, I see!” said Joan, who then started filling plates with chicken, potatoes and green peas. She then distributed the plates around the table, serving Ingrid first. Once

everybody was served, she sat down and let John do a short prayer for the meal before they started to eat. Ingrid closed her eyes in delight as she ate her chicken leg.

“This beats Spam any day.”

“What’s Spam?” asked eleven-year-old Sylvia, making Ingrid laugh.

“A place where Spam is not known? I must be in paradise. Spam is a sort of tinned meat of low quality which is too often on military menus, especially in the field. Its composition is often a mystery, even to the military cooks who prepare it.”

“Yuck! I already hate it.”

Ingrid, like John and Joan, laughed at that.

“A very sensible reaction, Sylvia. So, Marilyn, what are you planning to study once in college?”

“Photography and journalism. I love photography and have already my own camera and a small photo lab I installed in the attic. And you, Ingrid, what will you do after the war?”

Ingrid’s smile faded somewhat then and she answered in a subdued voice.

“I am not sure yet, Marilyn. It will depend if the United States accepts me or not as a fighter pilot. Right now, I am still considered a Filipina officer, with no career status with the United States Army other than as a so-called foreign exchange officer.”

“But,” objected Joan, “you said that you were going to go to Washington after your leave period is completed. You don’t know what they will do with you then?”

“That is correct, Joan. They may just turn and send me on a war bonds tour, in which case I will refuse at once: I didn’t become a fighter pilot just to be part of a traveling circus. With my husband Ken killed in combat in the Philippines, I am now strictly on my own.”

John then gently patted one of her hands.

“Ingrid, you will always be welcome here at the Crawford’s Nest Ranch.”

Ingrid couldn’t help shed a tear then, deeply touched.

“Thank you, Uncle John. It means a lot to me.”

From then on, the talk at the table stayed on mundane subjects or on the business of the ranch, in deference to Ingrid’s emotions. Once the empty plates were gathered and put in the kitchen’s sink, the family gathered with Ingrid in the big lounge of the ranch house to listen to her radio. Ingrid chose a CD out of her collection and put it in the CD reader unit, then smiled to the Crawford family.

"I will put on first some soft music, so that I won't upset stomachs after supper with some of the more phosphorous songs in my collection. This disk is a mix recorded by Nancy of some of the most beautiful diva soft songs of her time, like Sarah Brightman and Enya. I hope that you will enjoy."

With the first song starting to play, Ingrid went to sit beside Patrick in a sofa and looked at the Bear Paw Mountains through one of the windows of the lounge as the Sun was about to set. With the soft music playing, she felt her months of accumulated stress and painful memories starting to fade at last.

10:10 (Midwest Time)

Monday, March 16, 1942 'C'

First Street, Havre, Montana

Having parked his Ford pickup truck in front of the largest clothing store to be found in Havre, John gallantly opened its door for Ingrid, who then entered the store and looked left and right at the racks of clothes on sale. She had come dressed in her tan Filipino going out uniform for two reasons: first, it was standing policy in the United States that military personnel on leave go around in uniform during this time of war; second was the fact that Ingrid's civilian wardrobe was presently nearly non-existent, she having been forced to abandon her civilian wardrobe when the Japanese had invaded the Philippines, with her only civilian attire left being one of the gray fleece track suits she had worn while being held in the Tower of London. She had thus stated the wish to be able to buy new clothes, with John Crawford then offering to drive her into town today. Thankfully, while flying out of the Philippines with her and General MacArthur, President Quezon had given her an envelope full of American cash money, representing her next three months of military pay from the Filipino Army Air Corps. The fact that, in contrast, the U.S. Army had not been ready to offer her some financial help and still wasn't had not impressed her one bit.

Followed by John Crawford, Ingrid started going around the racks of women's clothes on sale, checking at the same time their prices: she simply had no idea about the cost of living in the United States. While clearly more expensive than in the Philippines, she found the prices here in Havre to be fairly reasonable and within her budget. She was looking at pairs of jeans for women, which would be practical for horse riding around

the Crawford's ranch, when a fat woman who was looking at dresses a few paces away looked crossly at her military trousers.

"Don't they issue skirts to go with female uniforms, miss?"

Having already heard too many stupid, ignorant remarks since her arrival in the United States about what 'proper' women should wear, Ingrid gave the matron a less than friendly look.

"First, you may call me 'Major' instead of 'miss', madam. Second, this is a regulation uniform and I will wear it proudly whenever I will want to."

Seeing that John Crawford, a big, beefy man, was now eyeing her in a very unfriendly way, the matron then decided to go check other racks of clothes on the opposite side of the store. Ingrid, shaking her head, looked at John as she went on with her clothes selection.

"Is this thinking about women being badly considered if they wear pants common in the United States, Uncle John?"

"Unfortunately yes, Ingrid. The general American attitude about social aspects of life is still quite conservative pretty much all over the country. However, with the people around Montana often riding horses, for a girl to wear jeans trousers is considered quite normal, so go ahead and buy a couple of them for yourself. You may also want to buy a couple of female jeans jackets to go with them, plus a pair or two of cowboy boots and a hat."

"All good suggestions, Uncle John: I will heed them."

After nearly an hour spent looking around the store and selecting pieces which attracted her and proved to fit her, Ingrid went to the cashier to pay for the small pile of clothes she had selected. The old man at the cashier, who was probably the store owner, opened his eyes wide on seeing the ribbon of the Medal of Honor atop other combat ribbons on the left chest area of her military shirt.

"The Medal of Honor? With the DSC, Silver Star and Purple Heart in addition? How could you have earned such prestigious medals, miss, er, Major?"

From the fact that the old man had been able to correctly identify both her medals and her rank insignias, Ingrid guessed that he had to be a military veteran, so answered him most politely.

"By shooting down a total of 72 Japanese planes over the Philippines and then fighting the Japanese in the jungle for close to two months, mister. I am known as 'Lady Hawk' in the Philippines."

Instead of scoffing at that, like too many Americans had done recently, the man in his fifties responded to that by smiling widely and shaking her hand vigorously.

"The famous Lady Hawk here, in Montana? Are you from this state?"

"Er, no! However, the family of my late adoptive father, who died in a plane crash, is from Havre. This is my uncle, John Crawford."

"Yes, I saw you in my store a few times in the past, Mister Crawford." said the store owner while also shaking John's hand, then looking back at Ingrid.

"Uh, may I ask what your proper name is, Major?"

"My name is Ingrid Dows and my husband was a Marine Corps officer. I suppose that you are a veteran from the Great War of 1914?"

"Correct, Major. I was wounded to a leg then and has had a slight limp ever since. While trench warfare was bad enough, I suppose that jungle warfare could be even worse, what with all those tropical diseases and bugs found there."

"Jungle fighting is indeed like Hell, mister. Thankfully, I now have three weeks of leave to recuperate from it. So, how much do I owe you for all this?"

The store owner quickly added up the price tags attached to the items selected by her, finally announcing the total to her.

"It would normally add up to 51 dollars and forty cents, Major, but I routinely give a ten percent discount to military personnel visiting my store, so it will be 46 dollars and 26 cents for you."

"Oh, thank you so much, mister! You are a gem!" said Ingrid happily before counting that sum in cash and giving it to the store owner. Thanking him one last time after the owner had put her new clothes in a pair of large paper shopping bags, Ingrid then left the store with John and looked left and right at the other stores along First Street before asking a question to John.

"Uh, do they have a gun store in Havre, Uncle John?"

"If we have a gun store in Havre?" said John, smiling. "Of course we do! We are in Midwest, ranch country, after all. While you won't see people going around town with guns at their belts, about everyone around here owns at least one gun. Follow me!" As she followed John down the sidewalk, with John helping Ingrid by carrying one of the bags of clothes, she asked him another question.

"Do you think that I will be able to find some .50 caliber Action Express ammunition at that store, Uncle John?"

John Crawford frowned on hearing that, mystified.

"Fifty Action Express? You own an elephant hunting rifle, Ingrid?"

That made Ingrid giggle in amusement before explaining herself.

"What I own is one of the four handguns I still have from Nancy Laplante: a gold-plated Desert Eagle in .50 caliber Action Express. In 2012 it was the most powerful handgun in existence in the World, save for some cut-off variants of bolt-action rifles passing off as handguns. I actually fired a few rounds out of it in the Philippines, along with my late husband Ken, but the amount of ammunition I have left for it is quite limited."

"Uh, I doubt that you will find that kind of caliber around here, Ingrid. At worst, a gun shop owner could always specially produce some for you if you provided him a couple of rounds as examples, but that could cost you a pretty penny. Mind you, I wouldn't mind trying a couple of rounds out of your big gun. What else do you have as handguns?"

"I used as my main combat pistol in the Philippines a Glock 17L 9 mm pistol, with which I killed over thirty Japanese soldiers. I also have a compact Glock 19 9 mm pistol for conceal carry, plus a Ruger Mark II .22 caliber long rifle pistol, which I use for practice shooting. I had as well a Colt Python revolver in .357 Magnum but I gave it to the husband of my Filipino cook before leaving the Philippines, so that he could defend his family from the Japanese."

"Decidedly, you will have to show me your arsenal once back at the farm. I do know a place near the farm where we could safely do some shooting practice. Would you like to practice your pistol and rifle shooting during your leave period?"

"Oh yes! I would love to do that, Uncle John."

"Please, just call me 'John', Ingrid. Aah, here we are: the 'Havre Firearms' store."

Entering together the gun store, John then went to the sales clerk standing near the cashier and passed to him the two bags full of clothes, so that they would not be suspected of having put in them some items while looking around the gun store. The sales clerk readily put the bags behind his counter, as this was a regular arrangement with his customers, with Ingrid then asking the man a question.

"Do you have some 9 mm Parabellum ammunition for pistols, Mister? I would also need some .22 caliber Long Rifle ammunition."

"We do have quantities of both of those calibers, miss. How much of each caliber would you need?"

"I believe that 300 rounds of 9 mm Parabellum and 400 round of .22 Long Rifle should do nicely, sir. If I need more for my shooting practice, I can always come back and buy more of them."

"That you effectively can do, miss." said approvingly the sales clerk before opening a drawer containing dozens of boxes of cartridges and taking out boxes of 9 mm and .22 LR ammunition, then putting them on his counter near the cashier. Ingrid was about to pay for those cartridges when she remembered something.

"Damn! I was about to forget: I will also need some ammunition for my Springfield 1903 rifle. Could I get a hundred rounds of .30 caliber, please?"

"Certainly, miss!" replied the sales clerk with a smile before fetching five twenty-round boxes of .30 ammunition and putting them down on the counter, next to the other boxes of bullets. Paying for the ammunition, Ingrid then let John carry the heavy cardboard box in which the clerk put her boxes of bullet.

After going out of the gun store, John led Ingrid back to his pickup truck and put her purchases behind the bench seat of the cab, then got in with her. As they were driving through the town and heading back to the ranch, Ingrid spoke up softly.

"John, I have been thinking about my Desert Eagle pistol. As a gun which personified Nancy, it has an enormous sentimental value for me. However, it is also a weapon which could tempt many people in stealing it, as it is gold-plated and is a truly unique piece. I still don't know what will happen with me or even if the American government will let me continue to pilot fighter aircraft. However, if they do let me, I also could be sent to various places where I would worry about my pistol being stolen. Would you accept to safeguard my Desert Eagle by keeping it for me at your ranch after my leave period will be finished?"

"Of course I would, Ingrid."

"Then, I will show it to you once at the ranch: it is a truly superb weapon."

Half an hour later, they arrived at the family ranch, where John parked his pickup truck in the garage attached to his farmhouse and then helped Ingrid carry her things

inside and up to her room. There, she unlocked the padlock securing her foot locker and took out her four handguns, spreading them on top of her bed so that John could examine them. John's eyes grew wide on seeing the Desert Eagle .50AE pistol.

"Wow! What a beast! It is also beautiful. I can understand your fears about someone stealing it at some military base or camp: gun collectors would pay a fortune to get this pistol."

"Well, my problem with it is not only about it possibly attracting thieves: it is also the fact that, in this war, it is simply not a practical weapon for me to carry. First, it is very heavy and bulky and would be of little use to me on a battlefield, as my two 9 mm pistols have proved a lot more useful to me. Second, I have only a limited amount of ammunition for it, with prospects to get more rather scant. While I positively love it, I definitely prefer to leave it here, in your ranch, during this war. Once the war is over, then I will come to take it back."

"And what do you intend to do after the war, Ingrid?"

Ingrid hesitated for a moment before answering John.

"That will depend on if the U.S. Army will accept me as a fighter pilot or not, John. If they don't, then I may just stay here and work for you as a ranch hand, if you would accept me as your employee."

"Are you kidding, Ingrid? You are now family to me."

17:18 (Midwest Time)

Friday, March 27, 1942 'C'

Crawford's Nest Ranch

Havre, Montana

Patrick, standing on the back porch of the family house, watched Ingrid approach with John at a trot, returning from a tour of the ranch's fences. Even after only nearly two weeks of vacation, Ingrid already looked much better and her skin had acquired a nice tan under the Montana Sun, while daily morning jogs and horse rides had helped her build up her endurance. To everyone's amazement, she had turned out to be an incredibly skilled horse rider, as if she had been born in the saddle, something that had pleased John and which he had used to the utmost, with Ingrid proving more than good enough to replace one of his departed ranch hands. Ingrid had also proved to be skilled in all the traditional chores of a farm, from milking cows to caring for chickens, thus

helping greatly Joan as well. For Patrick, those two weeks had inflamed a hidden but intense desire for the beautiful and athletic redhead teenager. Unfortunately, the newspaper he held in one hand could soon very well take her away from Montana, but Joan had insisted that she needed to see it at once.

The two riders first went to the barn of the ranch, to take the saddles off their horses and feed and water them. Patrick, buttoning up his coat first, went as well to the barn to meet them, finding Ingrid already taking the saddle off her horse. He let her finish that job before approaching her with his newspaper.

"How was your day, Ingrid?"

"A real pleasure, Patrick. The air is so pure here in Montana and the landscape is beautiful. Riding around is a delight to me."

"I'm glad to hear that, Ingrid. Uh, I bought in Havre the morning edition of the Washington Post, after coming out of class. I believe that you should see the article on the front page."

He then handed the newspaper to Ingrid, who eagerly grabbed it and scanned quickly its front page. An instant grin appeared on her face as she read.

"The President has signed an executive order permitting the enrolment of women in the Army?"

She then read carefully the article, her grin slowly fading into an indecisive scowl.

"Damn! This says little about the conditions under which women will serve, apart from specifying that they must be single or without children under their charge and must be eighteen or over and fit. The Army says that it is still studying those terms and conditions of enrolment, but that the order excludes the Navy."

She then looked with discouragement at Patrick.

"It could still be a while before those paper shufflers in Washington make their minds. It could be a long wait for me before I could put on an American uniform."

Patrick didn't reply to that, wishing mentally that such wait would mean that Ingrid would stay longer here in Havre.

11:07 (Midwest Time)

Tuesday, March 31, 1942 'C'

Crawford's Nest Ranch

Young Helen, answering the doorbell for her mother, opened the front door to find herself facing a tall Army officer, with an official Army staff car waiting in front of the house.

"Uh, yes? What can I do for you, mister?"

The officer smiled down at the fourteen-year-old girl, who was a good head shorter.

"Good morning, miss. I am Captain Edward Bollins, from the office of General Arnold, in Washington. I am here to bring an urgent message to Major Ingrid Dows. She is still here in this ranch, I hope?"

"Yes, she is, sir." replied Helen, her mind kicking in overdrive. Seeing that a driver was waiting in the staff car, she pointed him to Bollins. "You might as well get your driver inside, mister: it is cold and I will have to find Ingrid for you. You could both have a cup of hot coffee while you wait in the lounge."

"That sounds like an excellent idea, miss." said the captain before turning around and shouting at his driver.

"CORPORAL, SHUT DOWN THE CAR AND COME INSIDE!"

"YES SIR!"

The shouts attracted Joan from the laundry room. Sizing up the officer, she invited him inside, along with his driver, and took their coats while telling Helen to go get Ingrid. She then invited her guests to go sit in the lounge, then hurried to the kitchen to prepare cups of coffee. Ingrid, wearing dirty jeans and a wool pullover, showed up in the lounge four minutes later. Bollins and his driver got up and saluted her, to which Ingrid came at attention.

"Thank you, Captain. Please excuse my present appearance: I was milking the cows in the barn. So, you are sent by General Arnold?"

"Correct, Major. I have a plane waiting at Havre Airport to bring you to Washington, where General Arnold wishes to speak with you tomorrow morning."

"Is it about enrolling me in the Army Air Corps, Captain?"

"I believe so, Major. I understand that he wishes as well to discuss with you the enrolment and training program of our future female aviators."

Hope and joy rising in her, Ingrid looked at Joan, who was entering the lounge with a coffee service tray.

"Joan, I will have to leave for Washington today with these gentlemen. I am going to wash up, change and pack."

Joan looked surprised at first, then smiled to Bollins.

"It is close to lunch time, Captain. I would be most happy to invite you to eat here before you leave with Ingrid."

"That is a fine thought, madam. I accept with pleasure."

"Then, have some coffee first, to warm you up."

As Joan took care of Bollins and his driver, Ingrid ran upstairs and undressed, then went to the bathroom to have a quick shower. Forty minutes later, she was back down in her Filipino going out uniform and with her personal belongings. By then, the whole family had been alerted to her imminent departure, with John, Patrick and Marilyn gathering around her in the dining room. She looked at them all soberly, speaking softly.

"My dear friends, I do not know yet where I will end up or when I will be able to come back here. Just know that I will always cherish the souvenirs of my stay here. Marilyn, my radio and CD player unit, along with my laser discs, are irreplaceable. I may be sent to some jungle camp or other god-forsaken place and I don't want to have them stolen or damaged. I would thus like to let them here in your care until I can return to pick them up. If I don't return from the war, then I want you to keep them."

"Please, don't say this, Ingrid. You will come back from the war, I am sure."

Ingrid then gave Marilyn a pained look.

"I would like to think the same, Marilyn. Unfortunately, I am in a specialty where the survival rate of the average pilot is measured typically in weeks, or in months at best. Please, take care of my radio and discs, whatever happens."

Tears then appeared on the cheeks of Patrick, who then ran out of the dining room without a word. Guessing what it was about, Ingrid excused herself with the others and ran upstairs, finding Patrick in his room, crying while sitting on the edge of his bed. Going to him, Ingrid crouched in front of him and gently took his face in her hands, forcing him to look into her eyes.

"Patrick, you don't need to cry because I am going."

"But...you may never come back." he replied in a strangled voice. She nodded to that and spoke even more softly.

"Patrick, I know that you were falling in love with me. You are a nice, kind boy and I am flattered by your love, but I must go and serve my new country. You will have to be strong and to be patient. I promise to send you letters regularly, though."

"I...I would like that very much, Ingrid."

"Good! Now, you better freshen up before going back down: your eyes are all red. Come!"

Making him get up from his bed, she led him to the bathroom and used a small towel to wash quickly his face, then kissed him and smiled to him.

"There! Feel better? Let's go back down now."

The others didn't ask or remark about what happened upstairs when they came back down, with Joan instead sending them to the lounge while she and Helen finished preparing dinner. Sitting on a couch facing Captain Bollins, Ingrid gave him an innocent smile.

"So, Captain, how is official Washington, or for that matter the public at large, reacting to the President's executive order permitting the enlistment of women?"

Bollins paused before answering, the question being a hotly debated one. Ingrid then nudged him a bit.

"Don't be afraid of saying things as they are, Captain: I realize that you don't make the opinions around Washington and I have a rather thick skin."

"Very well, Major. To be truthful, the talk around the officers' mess is quite heated on that subject, to say the least. Most senior officers think that the President is out of his mind for wanting to enlist women. I will not piss you off with the type of arguments against using women which are floating around Washington: I am sure that you heard plenty about that before."

"That is quite correct, Captain. I managed to become a fighter pilot in the Philippines solely because the situation was so dire there, not because I was asked to become one. But go on, please."

"Please don't take this badly, Major, but many in Washington still don't believe your successes in the air as a fighter pilot. Some media commentators, without being specific, also allude that you are basically a fake and could not do what was claimed publicly. However, General Arnold, through the reports from General Brereton, knows exactly what you did in the Philippines, which is why he is so anxious to meet with you. The way you developed new air tactics especially interest him. He told me to tell you that he will welcome any ideas you could present him about new tactics and doctrines which you may have learned from your adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante."

"Then, I shall pen some thoughts on paper for him in advance during our trip to Washington. In fact, many things I saw in the Philippines made me wish I could have

changed them. Our biggest failings by far are in joint operations and tactics: this stupid inter-service rivalry between the Army and Navy has already cost us dearly in terms of duplication of efforts and lack of coordinated action. Fortunately for the Philippines, General MacArthur and Admiral Hart jointly decided from the start to coordinate their efforts against the Japanese, something that actually saved us more than anything else in my opinion. Too many people seem to forget that they are wearing an American uniform, and not simply an Army or Navy uniform.”

Bollins nodded and took a sip of his coffee before making a remark on a polite tone.

“You are quite right about that, Major. If I may say so, while you look indeed very young, you do not speak like what I would have expected from a mere teenager.”

“There is an explanation for that, an explanation that I will give in person to General Arnold. If he is to become my new commander, then he deserves to know about me.”

Since Bollins couldn't understand what she meant and not wanting to talk about this in front of the others, Ingrid excused herself with the Crawfords and led the captain to the laundry room, where she closed the door behind them before speaking.

“What I am going to tell you now and to General Arnold later was known only by General MacArthur, to whom I confided my secret.”

Ingrid then spent two minutes to tell Bollins about the souvenirs of her past incarnations, concluding with a sentence while looking the captain in the eyes.

“If General Arnold doubts this and wishes to test me on that, then tell him that I am ready to meet any group of historians or archaeologists and then speak or write in the ancient languages that I know. I can tell you that I can speak and write at a minimum Latin, Attic Greek, Ukrainian, Polish, Russian, Romanian, Occitan, Hebrew, Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese, Arabic, Persian, Norse, Old Gaelic, Tibetan, Sanskrit, Dravidian, Ionian Greek, Elamite, Chaldean, Aramaic and Old Egyptian. I can also speak but not read many more languages: most of my past incarnations were not well educated or were illiterate.”

Bollins was left speechless for a moment, his face pale as he stared back at Ingrid. He finally nodded and spoke hesitantly.

“I...I will pass the word to General Arnold, Major Dows.”

“Excellent!” Said Ingrid, becoming jovial and patting his shoulder. “Then let's go see what Misses Crawford has prepared for lunch.”

Leaving with Captain Bollins after lunch was harder than expected for Ingrid. The two weeks she had spent in Havre had been the first time in months that she had felt part of a family. She was also sad to leave Patrick, whom she found to be a truly nice boy and whose obvious pain to lose her hurt her. She however had a destiny to fulfill, one more in a 7,000-year history of destinies, some fulfilled but many more cut short or ending in tragedy or disillusionment. By the time that they arrived at Havre Airport and took place in the Lockheed C-60A LODESTAR twin-engine transport plane which had brought in Bollins, Ingrid's mind had turned to her incoming meeting with General Arnold. Recollecting to the best of her excellent memory what she had learned from Nancy and what she had seen and experienced in the Philippines, plus adding her own personal thoughts, she started scribbling down notes, with the firm intention to type them into a proper memorandum once in Washington.

08:50 (Washington Time)

Wednesday, April 01, 1942 'C'

Offices of Lieutenant General Henry 'Hap' Arnold

United States Army Air Force headquarters

Washington, D.C.



Having had time to speak first with Captain Bollins, **Henry Arnold** eyed Ingrid critically as she was introduced in his large office by his secretary: she either was a fraud, like many already believed, or she was a most extraordinary person who could prove to be a tremendous help to him and to the nation. However, her accomplishments in the Philippines could not be denied without a lot of bad faith and were enough by themselves to make her most valuable. Getting up from behind his desk, Arnold saluted her first, acknowledging her as a recipient of the Medal of Honor, then went around his desk to go shake her hand. He was immediately struck by her great beauty and tender age for her rank.

"I can't tell you how happy I am to finally be able to meet you, Major Dows. I have heard many good things about you from General Brereton and even from General MacArthur, who told me that he would take you back as a fighter pilot and squadron commander any day."

"I am flattered, General."

"I'm just stating facts, Major. Uh, about what you said to Captain Bollins, know that I may in the near future take you on your offer to be tested. If you are what you say you are, then you will only become more precious to me and the nation than you already are."

"General, I am only a lone fighter pilot among many. I am no more precious than any of the hundreds of thousands of young men presently serving."

"I like your modesty, Major, but your valor in combat and your inspired leadership entitled you to some well-earned praise. You think completely outside of the box and, right now, that is what I need. But please, let's sit down and talk."

They then took place on separate sofas facing each other across a low coffee table. Arnold discreetly admired her svelte silhouette, well molded by her tailor-fitted Filipino going out beige uniform, her huge blue eyes and her angelic face framed by reddish-brown hair falling to her shoulders. He had to say that a less scrupulous or gentlemanly commander would probably be most tempted to abuse her, something that was actually one of the problems he was trying to prevent.

"Let's not waste time by turning around the pot, Major. The main reason you are here this morning is because of the President's executive order allowing the enlistment of women in the Army and Army Air Corps. You will be the first but not by far the only woman to be enlisted, which brings me to the second reason you are here. An aide of mine, assisted by Jacqueline Cochran, the famous aviatrix, has already studied the question of how to employ women in the Army, especially as aviators and ground crews, and presented me recently with a report of their findings, conclusions and recommendations. Now that I have you here, I would like to get you to review that report and add to it your own ideas, if you have some to present on the subject."

"I do have many ideas and suggestions on that subject and on others, General. I took the liberty during my trip to Washington to write down a few things which went through my mind about the possible organization and training of female aviators, rules about how to employ them and protect them from abuse while respecting their rights and also about joint tactics and doctrines. I typed up my notes in proper memo format last night. Here is what I came up with, General."

Arnold eagerly took the four-page document given by Ingrid and started reading it. He nodded a number of times in appreciation, finding in the document many points already recommended by either his aide and Jacqueline Cochran or mentioned over a year ago

by Nancy Laplante during her visit to Washington. There were also many points which were completely new to him and which particularly attracted his attention.

"This idea of yours of composite air units, with a mix of fighters, bombers, transports and other types of aircraft, is quite interesting, Major. Such units could be very useful in isolated, dispersed locations like in the Pacific area. It could also solve one of my main problems I am facing about enrolling and using women, which is basically how to ensure their efficient use without dispersing them around in small groups and thus making them vulnerable to abuse or harassment. By combining many female squadrons of various types in one group or wing and placing them under the command of a female officer, this would all but prevent any such abuse or harassment." Arnold then looked up from the document, staring into Ingrid's eyes.

"You would be the perfect commander for such a composite unit, Major. You are combat-proven, are an effective leader and have the open mind to make such a novel unit work. What do you say to that, Major?"

"That I would be thrilled to command such a unit, General." said Ingrid, not having hoped for this much. "If that is the case, then could I suggest that this composite unit also includes some helicopter sub-units as well? Nancy told me a lot about helicopter characteristics and operations, along with their tactical doctrine, but I have yet to see a single helicopter with the American forces in the Pacific. Yet, such units could prove invaluable, as long as the machines available have enough range. Another type of aircraft which would be useful in the Pacific would be an electronic reconnaissance and airborne radar platform."

Arnold gave her a puzzled look, stunned by the extent of her knowledge on things that were supposed to be highly classified and were known by only a limited number of people.

"Your adoptive mother did tell you a lot of things, Major." That brought a malicious smile to Ingrid's lips.

"Even more than you think, General. About this composite air unit, would you mind if I later prepare a proposed organizational chart for such a unit?"

"I would actually appreciate that a lot, Major. I don't want to reflect badly on my present staff officers, but none of them are really comfortable with anything that is not accepted Army Air Corps doctrine, if you see what I mean."

"I fully understand, General. About the terms of service for women who would enlist, have any been decided on by now?"

"Me and General Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, have already discussed that subject, armed with the report made by Colonel Maxwell and Miss Cochran. Any woman enlisted in the Army or Air Corps will enjoy the same terms of service and benefits as a regular male recruit. Enlisted women will have full military status, equal pay and equal authority to that of male soldiers of similar rank and seniority. They will have to be eighteen years old or over, be physically fit and be either single or married without children in their charge. In the case of married women, they will have to obtain the permission of their husband to enlist. They will serve in mostly segregated units or sub-units under the command of female officers, to avoid possible cases of harassment and abuse. Some positions in those units needing experience and special qualifications will have however to be filled by men, at least at first, since there is no such thing right now as a female sergeant-major or a female senior ordnance specialist."

"What if a case of sexual harassment or abuse, or even rape, occurs, General? In Nancy's history, women who complained about such abuse or reported being raped were too often treated like the guilty ones or laughed at, with their attackers being covered up by the chain of command in order to avoid embarrassment to their unit."

"Actually, Misses Roosevelt, the First Lady, came up with a most original idea, Major. Basically, chaplains will make sure that this doesn't happen."

"Chaplains, General?" said Ingrid, utterly surprised. Arnold chuckled at her reaction.

"Yes, chaplains. Any case of complaint of sexual harassment, abuse or even rape will bypass the normal chain of command once above the level of the most senior female officer available in that unit or formation. It will instead go up through the chaplain chain of command and, if the complaint is deemed valid, will end up directly in Washington, where a mixed male and female Judge Advocate General board under my direct supervision will treat that case. Also, during the basic and specialist training phase of female recruits, chaplains attached to their courses will supervise the training to ensure that male instructors and commanders do not abuse their powers. Nancy Laplante did tell me about such abuses happening in her history and I had no problem believing her about that, Major. The last thing that I need is to have scandals and charges of abuse or rape impact on our war effort. To return to the terms of service of female recruits, all the Army and Army Air Corps trades will be opened to them except for the infantry, armored units, field artillery and combat field engineers. Women will however be allowed to serve as anti-aircraft artillery gunners within female formations

and as airfield construction specialists, on top of serving as fighter pilots and as crews aboard bombers, reconnaissance and transport aircraft. I intend at first to send female units and sub-units of the Army Air Corps exclusively to the Pacific Theatre, in order to evaluate their effectiveness and adjust their employment doctrine before eventually sending female units to the European Theatre. As you may know already from newspapers, the Navy has flatly refused to enlist women anywhere, except as nurses.”

“I read about that and expected it, General. From what you have told me up to now, I am quite happy about the proposed terms of service for women. As you saw in my memo, I would propose that the first batch of women to be recruited in the Army Air Corps contain as much as possible women who are already qualified in civilian life as pilots, aircraft mechanics and the like, with such women skipping the need to attend basic flying or mechanical training. As for the women qualified as clerks, cooks and other trades widely occupied by women in civilian life, I believe that recognizing their training and expertise should be self-evident. You must have seen some male clerks who were rather crummy at typing, General.”

“Oh, I have seen a lot of them, Major, believe me. If this could reassure you about this business of enlisting the right type of women, I am planning to put you, along with Miss Cochran, in charge of recruiting our first batch of women across the country. My initial goal is to enroll enough women at first to fill the ranks of one overseas air combat unit of at least group size, plus six or more squadrons in the United States charged with ferrying newly-built aircraft to their assigned bases. A number of female administrative support units will also be formed to serve the needs of higher headquarters, both in the United States and overseas. This way, we will be able to free the most men possible for actual combat duties.”

“And after the war, General? What will happen to all those women? Will they be able to keep serving?”

Arnold hesitated for a moment before answering her.

“To be totally frank, Major, this is as much a political issue as it is a military one. However, I fully intend to support the retention of female veterans of the Army Air Corps under the same conditions as male veterans, unless Congress orders otherwise.”

Ingrid nodded, both reassured and satisfied.

“Thank you, General. That is much appreciated. I have one last question to you about the enrolment of our first women. Will I be allowed to recruit any woman volunteer, anywhere in the United States and in Hawaii?”

"What do you mean, any woman anywhere, Major?" asked Arnold, suddenly suspicious. Ingrid kept a straight face while looking directly into his eyes.

"I mean that I would like to be able to enroll women irrespective of their race or ethnicity, General. I know that the Army segregates black soldiers at present, but since female units will already be segregated on the basis of sex, then further segregation should be unnecessary in order to satisfy the present rules. Be assured that I am more than ready to ensure that no objection or negative attitude towards non-white female recruits will come from within my unit, General."

Arnold stared at her in silence for a long moment as he debated her request, then gave a tentative answer.

"I will talk with General Marshall and Secretary of War Stimson about that, Major. Your argument makes sense, but this question could be very sensitive politically."

"I understand, General. Thank you again for your open-mindedness."

"I will welcome anything that helps the effectiveness of the Army Air Corps, Major. Right now, we have an acute shortage of pilots and aircrews, while I know thanks to Miss Cochran that there are at least a few hundred qualified female pilots with lots of flying experience around the United States. Another thing, and this specially concerns you and your future combat command, Major. I fully intend to use your unorthodox thinking about air tactics and doctrines, along with your knowledge of future doctrines which you have learned through your adoptive mother. The unit you will form and command in combat will be in a sense an experimental one and I hope that you will be able to develop and prove new tactics and doctrines which could then be adopted by the whole Army Air Corps. I will thus give you wide freedom in how you prepare and lead your future command to war. I will also use your unit to test in combat some of our newest planes and systems and will make sure that your unit gets a high priority on equipment and materiel. You spoke earlier about helicopters and electronic reconnaissance planes. Well, Nancy Laplante did introduce us to those concepts and we did initiate the development and production of a number of new types of aircraft based on her suggestions. It will only be fitting that her adopted daughter get to test those same aircraft in combat. Your female unit will not be saddled with hand-me-down planes and materiel, Major."

Ingrid felt immense joy and pride at those words: things were going much better than she had dared to hope.

"I promise you that you will not be disappointed, General."

“Excellent! Then, let’s start all this on the right step. Get up and stand at attention, Major!”

Arnold got up as well and grabbed a bible lying on the coffee table.

“Please raise your right hand, Major Dows, then repeat after me: I, Ingrid Dows, swear to serve and defend the United States of America and its constitution, so help me God.”

Ingrid repeated the swearing-in formula, then shook hands with Arnold, who smiled to her.

“Welcome into the United States Army Air Corps, Major Dows. You may look very good in your Filipino uniform but I’m sure you will look even better in an American uniform.”

After making her sign her enrolment contract, Arnold then led Ingrid out of his office and handed her to Captain Bollins, who was told to guide her through the complete administrative induction process and also to have her kitted out. This took the rest of the day, with Ingrid ending up getting that evening a room at the officers’ mess complex in nearby Fort Myers. The next day, she met with Colonel Robert Maxwell, who was slated to be the initial commander of the so-called Women’s Division of the Army Air Corps, and with Jacqueline Cochran, who had also enlisted as a major and would become responsible for the running and administration of the female units engaged in training or aircraft ferrying in the United States. Maxwell proved to be for Ingrid an agreeable surprise, being both a competent, decisive and open-minded senior officer with plenty of experience as an aviator and administrator. As for Jacqueline Cochran, Ingrid was warm enough with her but remembered what Nancy had told her once about Cochran’s ambition and her tendency to serve her own interests first. After a lengthy conversation and exchange of ideas, the trio decided on the procedures for an initial recruitment campaign, with Cochran promising to use to the fullest her contacts with the female aviator’s association of the Ninety-nines, which counted the most experienced female flyers in the United States. While Cochran and Maxwell started setting up the concrete measures of that recruitment campaign, Ingrid worked on thinking over and producing a proposed organization chart for her future combat unit, helped in that by Maxwell, who gave her pointers about the types of servicing and support units and sub-units which already existed in the Army Air Corps, providing her with examples of tables of organization and equipment. That saved Ingrid a lot of time, who was able to present

on the following day, Wednesday, her proposed unit organization chart to General Arnold. Arnold studied it in silence for a long moment, with Ingrid waiting nervously waiting for his verdict. The graying general finally looked up from the document, his expression neutral.

"This is indeed quite an unorthodox unit, Major, but that is what I was expecting from you. Its mix of sub-units and equipment type is interesting and should in fact satisfy the air support needs of most individual senior commanders in the Pacific. I approve your proposed chart as is. Do you have a proposed name or designation for your future unit, Major?"

"Yes, General! I wish to call it the 99th Composite Air Group, 'The Fifinellas'."

"The Fifinellas?" said Arnold, smiling in amusement. Ingrid nodded her head.

"Yes, General! It is the name of the mascot adopted in Nancy's history by the female aviators enrolled as auxiliary pilots by the Army Air Corps. I have a picture of the logo of the Fifinellas here with me."

Ingrid then took out of her briefcase a thick black binder and opened it to the first page, which, like the other pages, contained inside a plastic transparent holder. A large color picture was centered on it, showing a cute winged female figure wearing the goggles, helmet and leather jacket and boots of an aviator. A few words were printed under it in bold letters, which Arnold read aloud.

"To my beloved Ingrid, from Nancy."

"This binder was a gift from my adoptive mother. So, what do you think of that logo, General?"

"I like it! You have my permission to have it registered officially, along with the proposed name and unit designation of your air group. Uh, what is contained in that binder, Major?"

"A most precious gift from Nancy, General." said solemnly Ingrid while turning the first page. "It is a glimpse in the future of aviation."

Arnold nearly felt his knees give up as blood rushed to his brain at the sight of the color picture of the fantastic jet aircraft on the second page. Ingrid then started turning slowly each page of the binder, each showing a different aircraft.

"Sir, my ultimate dream is to make such aircraft possible and to put them into United States' service in the years to come. Right now, we have a war to win and I fully intend to devote myself to that end, but I later hope to help make that dream become a reality."

19:28 (Washington Time)

Saturday, April 04 1942 'C'

Official residence of Lieutenant General Arnold

Fort Myer, Arlington

Henry Arnold's wife got close to her husband and whispered to him as their military steward let in another two civilian men and led them to Arnold's private lounge.

"Henry, who are all those graying civilians you have invited tonight? I never met them at any official reception before."

"That is understandable, dear: they are either historians, linguists or archaeologists, not government bureaucrats or politicians. These two should be the last of them. I will now go talk to them briefly. If Major Ingrid Dows shows up in the meantime, just escort her to my private lounge."

"Dows, the young female fighter ace? First, a bunch of old goats, then a teenage girl? This meeting of yours sounds most strange, Henry."

"Because it is a strange meeting, dear." replied maliciously Arnold before kissing her quickly and going up to his private lounge. He found there a steward in the process of serving tea or coffee to the nine men sitting around on sofas and easy chairs. None of the men was less than forty in age and most looked like the academicians they were. Arnold politely dismissed his steward once he had finished serving his guests, then closed the door behind the steward and faced the civilians. One of them gave him an inquisitive look then.

"At first, getting an invitation from you made me quite curious, General. Now that I see that you invited as well other fellow historians and archaeologists to your house tonight, I am downright puzzled. I didn't know that you were so interested in history, General."

"Actually, to be totally frank, I have only a passing interest in history, Professor Holtz. You are actually here to help me answer a question about something that has troubled me for the last few days. A young officer will soon show up here at my invitation and I will then ask you to test that officer about her historical knowledge and linguistic skills. That is why I asked you to bring specimens of writing in various languages, both modern and ancient. Don't be afraid to test her about extinct languages in particular. Before you ask why, I must first caution you that what will be said here

tonight will be considered a military secret. I will thus ask you not to discuss it later with other colleagues.”

“You are frankly intriguing me, General.” said Holtz. “If that young officer of yours is so good with ancient languages and history, then it is a pity she is not a professional historian.”

“She’s actually too busy being a fighter pilot to work in a museum or a university, Professor. Please keep very discreet about this, but this officer pretends to remember her past incarnations, along with the languages she spoke and the skills she practiced in the past. This sounds fantastic, I know, but you are here at my invitation to help prove or disprove her claims. Please be polite with her even if you think at first that she may be a fraud and give her the benefit of the doubt, unless she clearly shows up to be lying.” The assembled academics and historians looked at each other with incredulity and surprise before one of them protested to Arnold.

“You can’t be serious, General. Many people in past decades pretended to remember past incarnations, but they all were eventually proven to be frauds. The concept of incarnation itself is disputed by most true scientists.”

“As I said before, I know that the concept is hard to believe. However, I have a teenage girl who outsmarted in terms of tactics many senior officers who were vastly more experienced than her and also led magnificently in combat a squadron of pilots who were all older than her. She also openly showed that she could speak an ungodly number of present languages, including two obscure Filipino dialects. In turn, she said to me that she could speak such languages as Sanskrit, Old Egyptian, Aramaic, Elamite and Norse, among others.”

The men sitting around Arnold looked at each other again, now much less dismissive. That was when someone knocked on the door of the lounge. Arnold hurried to the door and opened it, revealing his wife standing in front of a teenage girl in uniform.

“Major Dows is here, Henry.”

“Thank you, dear. You may come in, Major.”

Watched with a mix of curiosity and skepticism by the civilian men sitting around the lounge, Ingrid took the chair offered by Arnold and sat, then looked calmly around her before smiling slightly and nodding to Arnold.

“I see that you took me on my offer to be tested about my incarnations, General.”

"I hope that you will not be offended by that, Major. There is a lot resting on your shoulders and I prefer to know as well as I can my officers, as well as their true potential."

"I am not offended one bit, General. If anything, I wish to be taken seriously by the men around me. This could be one way to gain respect despite my young physical age. If you decide after tonight to advise other senior commanders about my abilities, then I have no objections to that, General."

Ingrid then returned her attention on the assembled civilians and started speaking in a measured tone.

"Gentlemen, let me present myself. My name is Ingrid Dows, born Weiss in Berlin, Germany, in 1923. I gained the ability to remember my past incarnations only recently, in early 1941. I was then a German prisoner of war held in London and had become very attached to Nancy Laplante, the Canadian time traveler from the year 2012. She had just taken the decision to secretly adopt me when, one night, me and her started simultaneously to remember our past incarnations. It came like an avalanche of images, words and feelings, one past incarnation after the other, always in regressing chronological order. Within two months, we both had reached the point where our mind had gone back to our first incarnations ever on Earth. Mine was as a Semitic nomad woman named Amdirra, who was born and died in the Sumerian Basin 7,000 years ago." One historian, clearly skeptical, then cut in with a question.

"And do you have an explanation for how you and Miss Laplante got to remember your past incarnations, miss?"

"First, you may call me 'Major', not 'miss', sir. Second, I believe that it was a gift from someone very powerful, someone who has no physical form and is pure spiritual energy. Call it 'God' if you want, I and Nancy called it 'The One'. As for why me and Nancy, I could only say that The One must have chosen us for some purpose that is still unclear to me. Now that I am here, you may start testing me, gentlemen."

With Arnold grabbing a notepad and a pen, like most of the assembled historians and linguist in the lounge, Holtz opened the question period by presenting himself.

"Major Dows, I am Professor Richard Holtz, curator at the New York Metropolitan Museum. I am also considered an expert in ancient European languages and history. What European languages, both modern and ancient, can you speak?"

With the other men ready to scribble on their notepads, Ingrid concentrated before answering calmly.

"In terms of European languages alone, I can speak and write German, French, English, Yiddish, Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, Romanian, Occitan, Latin, Greek, Castellan, Norse, Attic Greek, Ionian Greek and Celt. I can also speak but not write Oïl Frankish dialect and Koïne. You may test me in any of those languages if you wish so." Holtz, still skeptical, then asked her a series of questions about her past European incarnations, each asked in a different language. Every time, Ingrid answered him without hesitation and in the same language, showing clear fluency in it. After ten minutes or so, and with General Arnold already quite shaken, Holtz looked up from his notepad, his face pale.

"She was able to speak fluently in Latin, Greek, Castellan, Occitan, Celt and Norse. She also answered correctly my questions about the periods of history her incarnations lived. Professor Weizmann, I will let you the floor concerning Semitic and Middle East languages and history."

"Thank you, Professor Holtz." said the Middle East specialist, who then eyed Ingrid cautiously before starting to test her languages skills. He took much longer than Holtz, ending up testing Ingrid in more languages and also making her read and even write in a few languages. At the end, Weizmann had to wipe cold sweat from his forehead.

"General, your young major can speak Hebrew, Yiddish, Aramaic, Arabic, Persian and what I believe to be Ancient Egyptian and Phoenician. She was also able to read and write in Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyph, Sumerian cuneiform and Phoenician." Now getting excited rather than skeptical and seeing Ingrid as a possible source of priceless historical knowledge, the other specialists nearly tripped over each other to question Ingrid. Arnold had to restrict their questions to those proving the ancient language abilities of Ingrid in order to avoid an all-night session. After over two hours of a memorable exchange, the specialists announced to a stunned Arnold that they could certify that Ingrid could speak a minimum of 37 languages and dialects, most of them obscure or extinct. Asking politely Ingrid to leave the lounge for a moment, Arnold then collated the lists from the historians and linguists before asking them one question.

"Gentlemen, in your professional opinion, could anyone know all these languages without the benefit of remembering their past incarnations?"

"No, General!" answered at once Richard Holtz. "Learning one such old language alone is the business of years, if not decades. Your major clearly knows even more languages than we were qualified to test her on. Such knowledge would take centuries to acquire. This girl is truly a treasure trove of historical knowledge, General. You are sure that we could not borrow her services for a while?"

"Uh, unfortunately you can't have her. We have a war to win at the moment. Well, gentlemen, you have been very helpful to me tonight. Thank you for accepting to come."

"It was a true pleasure, General." replied Weizmann. "This was a fascinating experience indeed. If I may remark on it, I hope that you realize that, apart from knowing all those languages, your young major also has the cumulated life experiences of all her past incarnations. She has in fact thousands of years of life experience in her. Your oldest general would be a mere young brat in comparison to her."

Arnold was struck hard by those words, not having realized that by himself.

"I must say that I didn't think about that, Professor Weizmann. Thank you for pointing it to me."

Arnold then accompanied his guests to the main door and wished them goodbye. Closing the main door, he turned around and eyed Ingrid, who had been waiting patiently in the reception lounge, standing by a window and looking outside. She in turn looked at him from the corner of her eyes as he approached her, finally pivoting to face him with a sober expression.

"Before you say anything about what you heard tonight, General, please understand that those past memories are just that, memories. There is only one personality controlling me now, and it is that of Ingrid Dows, a young major under your command. I do not deserve any special treatment, nor do I ask for any. I only want my due for the merit I may earn by my actions, General, no more."

Arnold nodded at that, pleased by her modesty. Still, it was hard for him not to look at her as a person of exception and to treat her as a subaltern rather than as a superior being.

"Your modesty is refreshing, Major. Many others would not hesitate to use such a talent for their own profit."

That made a malicious smile appear on Ingrid's pulpous lips.

"It could have been effectively much worse in others, General. Just imagine General MacArthur having my gift."

"Oh God!" could only say Arnold while grimacing.

CHAPTER 10 – THE FIFINELLAS

08:20 (New York Time)

Monday, April 20, 1942 'C'

Army recruiting center, New York City

State of New York, U.S.A.

Even after having read the statistics from Jacqueline Cochran on the number of women holding pilot licenses in the United States, Ingrid was surprised by the size of the crowd of women now filling to near capacity one of the halls of the army recruiting center she had reserved for three days. Prominent

newspaper ads in bold letters and prime time radio announcements had been running for six days now, offering all women with experience in piloting, aircraft maintenance and other trades of interest to the Army Air Corps to show up at specific locations and dates across the United States. For today and the two next days, female volunteers from the New York and New Jersey states could show up in New York to enlist. To ensure a good response, General Arnold had authorized the immediate reimbursement of all travel expenses of the candidates, whether they were accepted or not, with paid return tickets and pocket money for those who would be refused for whatever reason. Captain Ernest Wakefield, whom Ingrid had managed to grab back as her administration officer, had taken care of the arrangements for the recruiting campaign, helped in this by Captain Peter Shmelling, her old logistical officer from the 17th Pursuit Squadron, who had also been recuperated by Ingrid. She had not been able to gain back the services of Paul Gunn, who was now part of General MacArthur's staff, but she had found a real pearl in the person of Captain Vance Hemmingsworth, a bear of a man with a jovial character and a long experience in aircraft maintenance. Hemmingsworth would in turn be helped by Master Sergeant Jack Vicenza, the designated chief mechanic of the group, and Master Sergeant Harry Coyle, the chief armorer, in interviewing and selecting



the candidates for the positions of aircraft mechanics and other ground support technicians.

Ingrid, wearing an army female uniform, which included a pair of trousers fitted for women, decided to start without delay in view of the rapidly filling hall. She thus stepped forward and addressed in a strong voice the more than 500 women present.

"Welcome to this recruiting session of the Army Air Corps, ladies. I am Major Ingrid Dows, the designated commander of the future 99th Composite Air Group. As you may already know from the advertising campaign which attracted you here this morning, we have many posts to fill, both flying and non-flying. Whatever the specialty you are seeking, however, once you are accepted you will be wearing the uniform of the United States Army Air Corps and could then be shipped to any number of locations, including frontline airfields. You will then serve at the least until the end of the war, unless you are liberated first for medical or disciplinary reasons. You will most probably suffer through privations, harsh living conditions and lack of sleep. You may fall sick from tropical diseases, be wounded or even be killed, either accidentally or through enemy action. All that will be in the service of your country and that will be your ultimate reward. For those of you who want to serve but are not ready to kill an enemy, either directly or indirectly, for reasons of religion or conscience, know that I will respect your choice and will not think less of you. You will then be registered as conscientious objectors and will be offered positions in the United States connected to training, administrative support or ferrying of new planes. For those who came here with the sole goal of quote killing Japs unquote, then leave now! I want people who will fight to protect and serve the United States, not simply out of hatred or racism. For those of you who will not be accepted, mostly for medical reasons, then you will be given money to pay your way back home. As bitter as this could be if it happens to you, you will still be able to keep your head high, as you showed yourself ready to serve the nation. With all this said, we will now start the selection process. At the end of each row of benches in this hall is a sign showing a list of various specialties, be it as pilot, aircrew, combat support, technical trades or administrative trades. I will ask you once I am finished speaking to take place in the appropriate rows. Lastly, you were all given a form listing all the specialties opened to women in the Army Air Corps and asking you to write down your qualifications, experiences and the type of specialty you want to fill. Make sure to fill that

form before me or one of my assistants interviews you. You may now shuffle places, ladies.”

It took a good five minutes for the women to sort themselves out in separate files. While there were more than enough candidates sitting in the rows for pilots and aircrews to satisfy Ingrid, they were easily outnumbered by the women wanting to join administrative and logistical trades, while the ones interested in technical support and maintenance were a clear minority. Vance Hemmingsworth, a big man with wide shoulders and a barrel chest, whispered in Ingrid’s ear as they watched the women change seats.

“It looks like I will have much less candidates to interview than you, Ingrid.”

“Yes, I see that. I’m afraid that we will not have a choice about employing a number of men with our ground crews. Well, let’s start!”

Ingrid then walked to the first candidate waiting in line to become a combat pilot and smiled to the pretty woman of about twenty.

“Please follow me, miss.”

Entering with the woman in one of the small offices connected to the waiting hall, Ingrid made her sit in front of a small desk, while she sat behind the desk. Taking the recruitment form filled by the woman, she read it quickly while the candidate looked on nervously, prompting Ingrid into giving her a reassuring smile.

“No need to be nervous, Miss Luttrell: everything will be fine.”

“I’m sorry, Major. It is just that flying is what I love the most. However, I can’t fly rented planes anymore since a flight interdiction was imposed on all private aircraft across the country.”

Ingrid nodded while continuing to read the information on the form.

“Hum... 246 hours on light monoplanes, private pilot’s license... Are you willing to kill men, Miss Luttrell?”

Ingrid had asked her question in a cold, impersonal tone, to judge Virginia Luttrell’s reaction. Instead of being scandalized by it, as many American women would be, she answered in a firm voice while looking Ingrid into her eyes.

“For my country, yes, Major!”

Ingrid then wrote a few words on the form before ripping off one of the carbon copies and putting it in her ‘out’ basket. She then put the top copy in a green folder, which she gave to Luttrell, getting up and shaking her hand as well.

"Welcome in the training program for female fighter pilots, Miss Luttrell. You can now go upstairs to be medically examined. If you are found physically fit, you will then be sent with the other accepted candidates to a basic military training camp."

Virginia Luttrell, who had got up like her, nearly crashed back down on her chair as emotion washed over her.

"My God! I was thinking that you were about to send me back home."

"Sorry to have scared you like that, miss. I am certain that you will do well as a fighter pilot. If, however, you are deemed medically unfit to become a fighter pilot, would you then be ready to accept another type of specialty?"

"I will serve any way I can, Major."

"That's the spirit! You may proceed upstairs now."

"Thank you so much, Major!" replied happily Luttrell before walking out of the office.

The second woman Ingrid interviewed was close to thirty and dressed elegantly. Ingrid again read quickly the form filled by the candidate.

"Suzanne Humphrey, 27 years old... 390 hours of flying... Private pilot's license and flying instructor's license, plus license for seaplanes... Works as flight instructor in Roosevelt Field... Participation in air races and air shows. Not bad at all, miss."

"Thank you, Major."

"I see here that you applied with the British Embassy to join the R.A.F. Why?"

"Because I wanted to contribute as a pilot to the war effort and because the Army Air Corps didn't accept women...until now."

"And why ask to become a fighter pilot rather than a bomber pilot or a transport pilot?"

"Major, I believe that I am good in aerobatics and I want to use my talents to the most in this war."

"And would you be ready to fire on an enemy plane or ship, knowing that your action could kill or hurt men?"

"Yes! I am not a very good shot but I can learn."

"I effectively believe that you can, Miss Humphrey. I approve you as a fighter pilot candidate. Bring this file upstairs, where you will get a medical exam. Good luck, Miss Humphrey."

The third woman to be interviewed by Ingrid was tiny, standing barely 155 centimeters, and was clearly in her thirties, a rather old age for a potential combat pilot. The reading of her form however impressed Ingrid. Betty Huyler had been flying for fourteen years, accumulating nearly 1,400 hours of flying. She had also been the president of the 'Ninety-nines' until last year, when she had been replaced by Jacqueline Cochran. Betty was actually applying to become a transport pilot. Ingrid did not hesitate and scribbled on her form, keeping a copy for herself and handing the original to Betty in a green folder while smiling to her.

"I am sure that we will end up serving side by side in the Pacific, Miss Huyler. You may proceed upstairs to pass your medical exam."

"Thank you, Major! I am looking forward to fly with you."

Ingrid continued to interview candidates at a fast rhythm, spending on average less than five minutes per woman. She was thus able to interview 43 women before lunch time, refusing politely in the process two women she found way too fragile physically to support the rigors of combat. Sandwiches and juices were then distributed to the remaining candidates who were still waiting. Ingrid ate with the candidates to support their morale and distract them with tales of combat in the Pacific. After only thirty minutes for lunch, Ingrid then started again to interview candidates. The fourth candidate she saw after lunch was a woman near thirty with curly black hair cut at the neck. She was not really pretty, without being ugly, but she looked resolute and Ingrid liked her instantly. She did a double take on seeing the form filled by Teresa James: she had accumulated a total of 2,254 hours of flying and earned a living as a flying instructor and as an air show pilot. She even had a show nickname: Spin Lady. She was also married to a B-17 bomber pilot. Ingrid smiled to James, both impressed and amused.

"Well, I see why you want to become a fighter pilot, Madam James. Maybe one day you will escort your husband's plane during a mission."

"That would indeed be ironic, Major."

"Indeed! Well, your qualifications would render jealous any male candidate. I will thus not insult you with more questions. You may now go for your medical exam."

A bit before six in the afternoon, Ingrid went to speak with her three captains and two master sergeants assisting her, to see the results to date.

"Well, guys, to date I accepted fourteen fighter pilots, 27 bomber pilots, 19 transport pilots, 22 ferrying pilots, eight navigators and 21 air gunners for bombers and transport planes. How are you doing on your side?"

"I got a total of 33 women already qualified in maintaining aircraft, plus nine potential flight engineers." answered Vance Hemmingsworth. "I however also have a total of 87 enthusiastic volunteers ready to learn and having at a minimum a high school diploma, plus some mechanical aptitudes."

"I will take them!" replied Ingrid at once. "The way this war is lining up, we can't afford to be choosy. And you, Ernest?"

"Me?" said with a grin the administrative officer. "I am buried under a mound of secretaries, clerks, telephone operators, archivists, cooks and others, all grossly overqualified by Army standards. I even have a few heavy truck drivers and two taxi drivers in the lot, plus seven female police officers."

Master Sergeant Harry Coyle sighed on hearing that.

"I wished that I had a surplus like you, sir. Up to now, we haven't got a single girl qualified on explosives or munitions."

"Maybe we will find such girls in places like Texas or Oregon, where there are big prospecting and mining industries which use a lot explosives." suggested Ingrid. "Are you ready to continue for a couple more hours after supper, guys?"

"Why not?" answered Peter Shmelling. "These girls were patient enough to wait all day in this hall. We might as well try to pass all the ones remaining before closing shop for the night."

"Then, we will all go eat, then will return here to continue until we empty this hall. With the type of response we got here today, I suspect that a crowd will be waiting for us in Chicago on Thursday. There are a lot of armament and chemical factories around Chicago. You may just hit the jackpot there, Master Sergeant Coyle."

20:02 (Los Angeles Time)

Tuesday, May 12, 1942 'C'

Best Western Hotel, downtown Los Angeles

California

Having shed her U.S. Army regulation necktie and uniform jacket in order to relax, Ingrid was sitting in the sofa of her hotel room and reviewing the list of candidates

her team had recruited today in Los Angeles when someone knocked lightly on her door. A bit surprised, as she was not expecting anyone at this hour, she nonetheless got up from her sofa and went to the door, unlocking it and half-opening it to see who wanted to see her. She immediately recognized the tall and dashing man facing her: it was **Howard Hughes**, the famous billionaire, aviator and aircraft builder.



"Mister Hughes? To what do I owe the honor of your visit?"

"The honor is mine, to finally be able to meet such a great pilot and Medal of Honor recipient like you, Major Dows. To answer your question, I came because of your recruiting campaign for female volunteers for the Army Air Corps. Before you object by saying that I am not a woman, a rather obvious fact, I came to intercede on behalf of two very good female friends of mine who want to join your unit but are afraid that their present employer in Hollywood would block them under the excuse that they signed a long-term contract with their studios."

"Well, your friends don't need to be afraid anymore about that, Mister Hughes: my directives from General Arnold specified that the wish to enroll in the Army Air Corps supersedes any work contract obligation, and he insisted on 'any work contract'. Unfortunately, today was the last recruitment day my team was doing in Los Angeles, as we will leave for San Diego tomorrow morning."

"That's alright, Major: my two friends came with me tonight. They didn't attend today's recruitment session because they were afraid that showing up in public would create quite a public raucous."

"I understand. Your friends are here, in this hotel?"

"Yes, and not very far."

Howard Hughes then half turned and signaled to someone down the hallway.

"You may come in, ladies."

Ingrid opened her door wide, letting in Hughes and waiting for the two announced women to get to her door. Her jaw nearly dropped on the floor when she instantly recognized the two famous actresses who then entered her room.

"Miss Katharine Hepburn? Miss Hedy Lamarr? I can't believe this!"

"You better believe it, Major." replied at once the headstrong Katharine Hepburn, who was wearing slacks rather than a dress. "Both I and my friend Hedy want to serve

the United States in this war but need to break loose from our respective contracts with MGM.”

Closing the door of her room and locking it, Ingrid pointed her bed to Hughes and the two women.

“My hotel room is rather small and on the economical side, so I can only offer you my bed to sit on while we speak. Tell me what are your qualifications or skills which could interest the Army Air Corps and in which specialty you would like to serve?”

After exchanging a quick glance with Hedy Lamarr, **Katharine Hepburn** spoke first.

“Well, for starters, I am an athletic woman who likes sports and enjoy open air activities, like hunting and skeet shooting. I am in fact considered an expert shot with a rifle and a shotgun. Also, my good friend Howard has been giving me private piloting lessons for two years now and I gained my pilot’s license two months ago on monoplane and have accumulated 98 hours of flying to date. Hughes also often gives me rides in his planes and even took me up recently in one of his helicopters, which he has just started to build for the Army.”



“Hum, I may just have the ideal job for you, Miss Hepburn. How about as air gunner on a helicopter? You may even become a copilot/gunner on one of the attack helicopters which will be part of my air group inventory.”

The actress sucked air in as her eyes went wide open, with a big grin then coming to her face.

“But that would be great! Hell, sign me in right away.”

“In a minute, Miss Hepburn.” said Ingrid, amused. “Let’s first hear what your friend has to say. So, Miss Lamarr, what qualifications or skills do you possess which would interest the Army Air Corps? And I am not talking about your physical beauty.”

Hedy Lamarr sighed at that last remark from Ingrid.

“Well, my beauty is about the only thing that men have accepted to see in me up to now. They all think that I am some kind of brainless doll. While I don’t have a formal high-level education, I am self-taught, have a vivid imagination and am a bit of an inventor.”



“What she is not saying,” interjected Howard Hughes, “is that she is actually a certified genius. She is the co-author of a patented brevet on radio frequencies.”

“It is called ‘Secret communication system’ via frequency spread spectrum, Howard.” corrected Hedy Lamarr, who then took a document from her purse and gave it to Ingrid. “Here is a copy of the patent in question, Major.”

Ingrid read quickly that document before looking up at Lamarr with frank admiration.

“You know what, Miss Lamarr? According to what my late adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante, frequency hopping was a common encryption system for secure communications in 2012, the year she came from. However, she didn’t tell me that you were the one who invented that concept. Uh, I believe that you speak German, as you were born in Austria, correct?”

“Correct! I also speak Yiddish.”

Ingrid nodded her head at that and spoke to her in Yiddish.

“So, you are an Austrian Jew, Miss Lamarr? Know that I was a German Jew before becoming an American citizen through adoption. Alright, what would you say to become an electronic warfare officer, miss? I could use your quick mind and understanding of encrypted communications aboard one of my flying command and control aircraft.”

“I would be quite happy in such a position, Major. I have seen what the Nazis did in my native Austria and don’t even dare think of what the Japanese are doing to the populations they enslaved around the Pacific. I want to serve in order to help defeat that tyranny.”

“And you will have an opportunity to help in that while in my air group, Miss Lamarr. Welcome to the 99th Composite Air Group, the Fifiellas, ladies.”

09:48 (California Time)

Sunday, May 17, 1942 ‘C’

Manzanar relocation camp

370 kilometers Northeast of Los Angeles

California

Vance Hemmingsworth, like Ingrid and Master Sergeant Jack Vicenza, who was driving the military bus they had signed for in March Field, near Los Angeles, looked with dismay at the huge guarded camp sprawled around the arid desert ground. Dozens of

wooden barracks were lined in long rows, surrounded by a barbed wire fence and eight guard towers. Armed military policemen stood watch in the towers and at the camp's main gate.

"And they forced whole families with children to relocate in this hole?"

"Yes, they did, Vance, thanks to a presidential executive order and to the bigotry of too many Americans." replied Ingrid, her tone bitter. "All the Japanese-Americans in the West Coast area have been relocated to such camps on orders from Lieutenant General DeWitt, the Army commander for the West Coast area. Just this camp is supposed to be holding close to 10,000 civilian men, women and children."

"Ten thousand, in such a small camp?" exclaimed Jack Vicenza, a big and powerful man who had a heart of gold. "They must be crammed like sardines in there."

"We will soon see by ourselves, Master Sergeant." said Ingrid. "Drive up to the main gate and stop, to let me speak with the MPs on guard."

"Yes, Major!"

Vicenza rolled to less than four meters from the main gate before stopping, with Ingrid then stepping out of the bus. She was met nearly immediately by a MP sergeant who hesitated before saluting her.

"What is the nature of your visit, Major? We were not informed about any official visit today."

"What do you mean, not informed, Sergeant?" said Ingrid, feeling her blood boiling up. "I sent an advisory message about our visit over two weeks ago."

"Well, I haven't seen it, Major."

"Well, we are here now, Sergeant. I will go speak with the camp commandant."

"Uh, if it is about transferring some of the internees, Major, then you will need an authorization signed by General DeWitt for that."

Getting quickly pissed, Ingrid stared hard at the MP sergeant, rising her voice.

"I have with me a mission order countersigned by General Marshall, Sergeant. I don't believe that your precious General DeWitt can overrule him. Now, where is the commandant's office?"

"Uh, it is in the second building to the left after you enter, Major."

"Thank you!" said tersely Ingrid before getting back in the bus and telling Vicenza where to go. They rolled forward as soon as the MPs opened the main gate, stopping again in front of a wooden building with a sign announcing it as the camp's

command center. This time Ingrid grabbed the large briefcase containing her recruitment forms and office supplies before leaving the bus. Vance Hemmingsworth also grabbed a similar briefcase and followed her inside, where a surprised military clerk and a civilian secretary greeted them. The camp commandant, a major of the California National Guard, came out of his office on hearing Ingrid's voice as she spoke to the secretary. The man proved mild-mannered and polite, shaking hands with Ingrid and Vance as he presented himself.

"Major Ziegler, Camp Commandant. What may I do for you, Major Dows?"

"Two weeks ago, I sent an advisory message directly from the offices of Lieutenant General Arnold in Washington, telling the headquarters of the 6th Army to warn you that I would be visiting your camp on this date, in order to possibly recruit women here for the Army Air Corps."

"But we never got that message, Major."

"I see! You must have at the least seen or heard the advertising in newspapers and on the radio about our recruiting campaign, Major Ziegler."

"We have, but we never imagined that you would come here to recruit personnel for the Army Air Corps, Major Dows."

"And where do you think that you could find the most women able to read and understand Japanese, Major? We need such linguists for our signals and electronic warfare sections, preferably some who are also familiar with radio procedures. Here is my mission order authorizing me to recruit women anywhere in the United States, irrespective of race or ethnicity. As you can see, it was signed by General Arnold and countersigned by General Marshall. Now, where would it be possible to meet and interview the women who could be interested to join?"

"The camp theatre would probably be the best place for you, Major Dows: it is centrally located and has a large room with plenty of benches."

"That will do. Do you have a public announcement system on which I could be heard from the whole camp?"

"We do! In fact, we use it every day to pass all kinds of general information or directives. There are loudspeakers in every barrack."

"Excellent! Could I use it for a moment?"

"I see no problem with that, Major Dows. This way, please."

Ziegler led Ingrid to a small room which appeared to be used as the communications center of the camp, with two radios and a telephone switchboard in it. He powered on a separate system and presented a microphone to Ingrid.

"You just need to push the button at the base of the microphone and everybody in the camp will hear you."

"Thank you!"

Ingrid then thought over her message for a moment before activating the microphone and speaking into it.

"Attention, everybody! This is Major Ingrid Dows of the Army Air Corps speaking. A meeting will be held in half an hour in the camp's theatre, in order to recruit any female volunteer who would be ready to serve with the Army Air Corps in this war. Any volunteer, with or without usable skills or experience, will be welcomed to enlist, as long as she is eighteen years of age or over, is physically fit and is single or without children in her charge."

Ingrid then shocked more than one of the Americans present by repeating her announcement in fluent Japanese. She finally gave back the microphone to Major Ziegler, who was looking at her open-mouthed.

"Thank you for lending me the use of your P.A. system, Major. Could someone please show us where the theatre is?"

"Uh, I will guide you, Major Dows."

Ingrid didn't have big expectations about recruiting crowds of Japanese-American women into the Army Air Corps, especially in terms of women with pilot licenses. She and Vance Hemmingsworth were however agreeably surprised to soon see about thirty young women starting to file into the theatre. Ingrid distributed recruitment forms at once to them and explained a few things to the internees before going to sit behind a small folding table to receive her first candidate. She was a rather small but very pretty young woman with almond eyes and distinctive oriental traits. Ingrid did a double take on reading the information scribbled on her form.

"You were working as a radio intercept specialist for the Army in San Francisco, helping decrypt Japanese encoded messages? And they let you go?"

"They didn't let me go, Major: they booted me out of the intelligence center I was working in, supposedly as a security risk, then shipped me here with my family." replied

Mary Takahashi with a pure California English accent tainted by bitterness. "Can you really enlist us and thus allow us to serve the United States with honor, Major?"

Ingrid gave her a resolute look.

"Miss Takahashi, know that I was born in Berlin, Germany, and that until less than one year ago I was a German prisoner of war held by the British in London. Yet, here I am. If that army unit in San Francisco was stupid enough to part with your services, then I will consider that my gain and their loss. What other qualifications do you have which could be useful to the Army Air Corps, Miss Takahashi?"

"Well, I do have a college diploma as a radio repair technician and I worked in my father's radio repair shop...until we were forcibly relocated and he lost both his shop and his house, that is."

Ingrid gave a sober look at Mary Takahashi, who evidently had a lot on her heart, and for good reasons.

"Despite all that, are you still ready to serve the United States faithfully and to the best of your abilities, Miss Takahashi?"

"Yes, I am, Major!"

"Then consider yourself enrolled in the Army Air Corps as a signals specialist. You will depart this camp in our bus, once we have finished interviewing all the volunteers here. Go pack your personal belongings and come back here after, with your luggage."

"Thank you, Major. By the way, six other girls here were from my old radio monitoring and decryption center."

"They got rid of seven qualified Japanese linguists and radio listening specialists?" exclaimed Ingrid, having difficulty in comprehending such stupidity. Mary Takahashi shrugged her shoulders.

"Hey! Who said that racists had to be intelligent, Major?"

Ingrid ended up departing Manzanar Camp in the afternoon with her bus nearly full. That visit in retrospect proved a masterstroke, as it provided her future air group with nearly all the trained radio operators and intelligence specialists Ingrid needed. Topped with Jenny Kawena, a Japanese-Hawaiian young woman who had worked as a cryptanalyst and linguist of officer-level civilian rank at a Navy intelligence center in Honolulu, the girls of Manzanar were going to do just fine. As for the feared lack of women qualified on explosives and ordnance handling, the visit in the Chicago area, with

candidates also streaming in from Detroit, had much alleviated that deficiency. Master Sergeant Harry Coyle was able there to enlist literally dozens of women who had been working for over a year on ammunition assembly lines, putting together shells and bombs, filling them with explosives and also assembling their intricate fuses. More women came from weapons assembly lines, where they had similarly been producing parts for weapons, assembling them and test-firing them. From the eagerness of those women to enlist, Ingrid was able to deduce that they had not been treated with much respect by their male supervisors in most plants. She also found out that most of them had been paid ridiculously low salaries for the work they did, to the point that their army salary as simple privates was at least as much as they had done in their previous workplaces. The visit in San Antonio, Texas, had for its part provided a pearl in the person of Sally Nolan, an adventurous young woman with degrees in mechanical and civil engineering who had been working for a mining company, maintaining their heavy rolling equipment and roads. Ingrid's only disappointment, but not a surprise for her, was the visit to Atlanta. There, the old-fashioned attitudes of the South about traditional roles for women had drastically cut down the number of candidates who showed up. Still, Ingrid could call her recruiting tour a great success.

15:29 (Washington Time)

Monday, May 25, 1942 'C'

Office of Lieutenant General Henry Arnold

The Pentagon, Arlington

Virginia

Henry 'Hap' Arnold raised his nose from the report he was reading and looked at Ingrid with incredulity.

"You were able to enroll 245 pilot candidates, each with a minimum of 200 hours of flying time, plus another 352 with over 100 hours? That's incredible!"

"I also got a total of 3,681 candidates qualified for the positions of aircrews for bombers or transport aircraft, or for various maintenance, logistical and administrative positions. Even with some attrition, which can be expected during the training, we have more than enough women to fill our immediate needs. I however strongly suggest that any surplus candidate not be simply returned home: whether we like it or not, we will suffer casualties in the Pacific and will need periodic reinforcement. As already

suggested by Jacqueline Cochran, we should establish a training base dedicated to the formation of female personnel, General. That would do a lot to cut on the feared sexual abuse and harassment.”

“I agree, Major. In fact, I already have my eyes on a small airfield in Sweetwater, Texas, for that purpose. It can easily be enlarged and the weather there is ideal for flying. By the way, I noticed that you have already presented names for the senior positions in your air group.”

“Yes, General! I based myself on the flight experience of those women, their strength of character and their leadership potential.”

“Very well, Major. I must say that you have done a fantastic job up to now. It is now time to start training your girls and turn them in proper aviators and Army Air Corps specialists. As promised before, we will not waste time by forcing your girls to take basic courses in subjects they are already qualified on. Besides, we cannot afford to waste time now.”

The tone used by Arnold for his last sentence alarmed Ingrid, who stiffened in her chair.

“What do you mean, General? We did weaken the Japanese a lot in the Philippines, no?”

Arnold hesitated before answering her.

“It is true that Japanese losses around the Philippines were heavy. However, we recently lost a big advantage on them when they completely changed their codes and radio procedures. As a result, we can’t anymore decipher their radio traffic or even analyze their pattern. We suspect that this is related to another blow to us in Europe. The Germans managed to recently capture in Norway, before they were forced to retreat back to Germany, documents which showed them that we could decipher their ENIGMA-encoded traffic. They then changed all their codes and encrypting equipment and the whole ULTRA program is now basically useless because of that.”

“My God! Nancy told me that ULTRA was possibly the greatest asset we had in this war against Germany.”

“It actually was, Major. To return to the Pacific, our own successes around the Philippines have led the British to think that they didn’t need any more to reinforce their positions in Asia and India. They even withdrew a few naval units from the Indian Ocean and have greatly cut the shipping of war materiel to Australia, which is now forcing us to try to compensate for these cuts despite our own deficiencies in the area.”

"So, we bleed to help the British in the Pacific and we get spat in the face in return, General?" said Ingrid, anger flaring in her. Arnold nodded his head, seemingly aging in his chair under the worries.

"It gets worse, Major. The Germans, before withdrawing from Norway, were able to capture many examples of the modern weapons introduced in British service and there are indications that they are adapting quickly those new technologies to their own weapons. We seemingly also made a major strategic mistake by refusing to help the Soviets."

"But, General, you know like me the kind of long-term threat Stalin represents for the future of Europe. He is a monster and has proved that he can't be trusted."

"I agree with you, Major, and I also think that Stalin got what he deserved. Our problem is that, without our shipments of war materiel, the Red Army found itself short of many types of weapons and equipment at a critical moment. The Russian Winter saved Moscow in January, but the Germans have since pushed back the Red Army on nearly all fronts. Keep this to yourself, Major, but the oilfields of the Caucasus were just taken intact by the Germans, via surprise airborne assaults. Hitler now has all the oil he wants, plus huge resources in iron, coal and non-ferrous metals. The President has ordered that this piece of news be kept confidential, in order not to hurt the American public morale. As a consequence of all this, the military situation of the British has worsened noticeably in Europe in the last months and Prime Minister Churchill has pleaded with President Roosevelt to get even more help from us. The President agreed and has ordered those shipments of troops, aircraft and materiel to England be increased, with corresponding cuts in our shipments to the Pacific. This leads me directly to the case of your female air group, Major."

Ingrid stared at Arnold, all ears, as the general continued.

"These developments have in a way played a crucial but discreet role in convincing many members of Congress not to fight the President's executive order allowing female enrolment in the Army. The Congress, like the President and the Chiefs of Staff, including me, now realizes that we could be in for a very long and costly war, especially in Europe. Don't take this badly, Major, but sending female units to the Pacific will raise less protests from the British than if we send male units, which are in high demand in Europe. Be reassured, though: I have no intention of simply shipping your women to the Pacific and dump them there as a simple stopgap. You will get our latest planes and equipment and you will be free to fight the way you think, using your own

tactics, as long as you fulfill the basic missions given to you by your theater commanders. Your future accomplishments and sacrifices will be recognized and acknowledged publicly, and that is a promise from the President himself, who by the way now knows about your past incarnations. Lastly, I have two pieces of news which will impact on your unit. First, the British are planning for an attack and landing in Denmark, with the support of substantial American forces, for this summer, which means that more of our newly formed units will be sucked into the European Theater. Second, the Navy has convinced the President, against my advice, to launch an amphibious offensive in the South-west Pacific Theater, to ensure the protection of our lines of communication with Australia. This operation is slated for the July or August period and will need all the air support it can get. I fully intend for your air group to be part of that effort. In fact, I promised to General MacArthur, whose forces are in support of the Navy and Marines operation, that he would get your unit in time for that offensive. I have thus ordered that the training of your women be done as speedily as possible, by cutting out most of what you would call the 'chicken shit'."

"General, If I may raise a point about the training of my women, my experience in the Philippines has showed me that, in the Pacific, air units must be ready to defend by themselves their airfields from Japanese ground attacks. I thus insist that all my women get at least some basic training on how to shoot, maintain and operate infantry weapons and that they all receive an individual long arm, apart from regulation pistols or revolvers. They should also learn how to dig themselves in and build field fortifications."

Arnold smiled at her words.

"That's funny, Major: General McNair, in charge of training for the Army, visited me three days ago to discuss with me the training program for your women. He then insisted that they get the same basic individual training program than that of any other Army recruit. I believed that you just validated his point."

Arnold then got up from his chair, imitated by Ingrid, and went to shake her hand.

"My aide has your mission order to go join your pilots on the basic military orientation course for officers in Orlando, Florida. Train your girls well and turn them into tigers, Major."

10:27 (Midwest Time)

Friday, July 31, 1942 'C'

Tarmac of Luke Field, Arizona

General Arnold came to attention and saluted as the graduates from Fighter Pilot Course 42-E marched in parade order past the V.I.P. stand on which he stood. Ingrid, having acted as an instructor on air tactics and aerial gunnery for the course, stood behind him with the other instructors, all male, of the course. Despite her pride at seeing all of her 31 women graduate from the course today, Ingrid's joy was tempered by the bad news that had come from the Pacific during the last two months. Still deprived of precious intelligence information because of the changes to the Japanese codes, the American Navy had fought two major sea battles with the Japanese, losing in May in the Coral Sea and ending up in a bloody draw off Midway in June. Midway had been saved from being taken by the Japanese, something that would have been strategically catastrophic for the United States, but at the cost of two precious fleet carriers sunk and a third one damaged. American shipyards were now working overtime to make up those losses, but it would take months to rebuild the strength of the Navy in the Pacific. Despite her grim thoughts, Ingrid still smiled to Teresa James, who was leading the parade as the top student of the course. Ingrid could hear some of the whispered remarks and comments from the spectators, a majority of them being parents of the graduating pilots. The fact that six of the top ten students of Course 42-E were women had disturbed quite a few spectators and press photographers and reporters present. In fact, the lowest ranking woman candidate still placed 68th out of 96 students who were graduating, a still respectable performance. In truth, the average male candidate, with less than 200 hours of flying time even after five months of training before joining this course, was at a severe disadvantage compared to the average women from the future 170th Fighter Squadron, 'The Witches', who had on average around 900 hours of flying time before they arrived in Luke Field.

The official part of the ceremony now completed; General Arnold left the V.I.P. stand with the commandant of the fighter school. He however slowed down while passing in front of Ingrid and whispered to her.

"I must speak to you after this, Major. Go now to my staff car and wait for me there."

As Arnold was walking away, Major Garret Jackson, Commanding Officer of the 544th Training Squadron in charge of Course 42-E, looked at Ingrid, intrigued.

“Why would General Arnold want to see you in his car like this?”

Ingrid gave him a cold look: Jackson had been polite but reserved towards her during the course, obviously not approving of women fighter pilots.

“First, it is certainly not for what some would like to imagine, Major Jackson. Second, that’s strictly General Arnold’s business.”

She then walked away from the other instructors, following Arnold from a distance and arriving with him at his parked staff car after a minute. Arnold stayed outside of the car to speak to her, something she appreciated: it would be more difficult now for others to insinuate things. There were already too many nasty and completely false rumors about Ingrid and her female pilots, rumors circulated by reporters too happy to create supposed scandals in order to boost their newspapers’ copies. Arnold had in fact to get his driver to politely get rid of a photographer that was a bit too insistent in prowling around the staff car with his camera at the ready and his ears up. Arnold then took a large envelope from inside his car and gave it to Ingrid, eyeing her gravely.

“I told you in April that I would probably need your pilots sooner than later, Major. Well, I now have mission orders for you and your air group.”

Ingrid looked back at him with shock.

“But, General, we still have to get our aircraft and qualify on them, then we need to train together as a unit for at least a few weeks before we are ready for combat.”

“You will have two weeks to qualify on P-38N at the Lockheed’ Burbank plant, where you will directly pick up your planes. Then, you will go to Muroc Field, a secluded airfield in the California Desert, where you will discreetly organize, train and finish equipping your air group. Then, by the end of August, your air group will depart for the South Pacific, mostly by sea, and establish itself in Espiritu Santo, in the New Hebrides, from where you will provide air support to our incoming operation in the Solomons.”

“The Solomons... Guadalcanal.” said softly Ingrid, making Arnold nod his head.

“I see that your adoptive mother has indeed told you much about this war, Major. Yes, you will support our amphibious invasion of Guadalcanal, which is now more than ever in need of all the air support it can get in view of our recent losses in aircraft carriers. For this, your group will truly have the best we can provide, Major. While your fighter squadron will be equipped with the new P-38N LIGHTNING, your 177th Medium Bomber Squadron will get a new attack variant of the B-25 MITCHELL, the B-25NG.

Your 117th Transport Squadron will itself be our first squadron to be fully equipped with the new Fairchild C-142A GLOBEMASTER heavy transport aircraft, and you will have as well a composite helicopter squadron and a reconnaissance squadron, the 171st Reconnaissance Squadron, with a photo-reconnaissance variant of the P-38N and two pre-series prototypes of the airborne radar variant of the C-142, the EC-142E WAVEMASTER.”

“That will indeed do a lot to help us do our job in the Pacific, General. Now that I know where my group is going, could I request from you a blanket requisition order and a special budget so that I can have some special tropical kit and materiel produced or bought directly from civilian suppliers? My experience in the Philippines has shown me that the standard kit list of the Army Air Corps is poorly adapted to the tropical conditions of the South Pacific.”

Arnold only thought her demand over for a couple of seconds before agreeing to it.

“Keep me informed about that new equipment and how it impacts your operations in the Pacific, Major, so that I could eventually make them standard equipment for our other units in the Pacific. A blanket requisition authorization and a supplementary budget of 300,000 dollars will be awaiting you in Muroc Field. You will also get your individual small arms there: I have given orders to the Quartermaster of the 6th Army to let you have about whatever you want, within reasonable limits. By the way, talking of the 6th Army: you may be happy to hear that General Marshall was quite displeased on learning that Lieutenant General DeWitt had unilaterally decided to overrule the mission order to you authorizing you to enroll women anywhere in the country. General DeWitt has since been posted to Alaska.”

“Good for him!” said Ingrid, smiling with contentment before becoming serious again. “Uh, under whose command will I be once in Espiritu Santo, General?”

“You will be under the direct command of Rear Admiral John McCain, Commander of Aircraft South Pacific, designated as Task Force 63 for the operation in Guadalcanal. I will make sure that he understands what you could do with your new planes and will request that he does not keep you in a straightjacket over there. He however seemed like a reasonable, competent man to me, so you should not have problems serving under him.”

“Well, General, I was married to a Marine, after all.” replied Ingrid with a slight smile.

“True! Tell your girls to pack quickly, Major: a cargo aircraft from the 117th Squadron will come at two this afternoon to pick you up and bring you to Burbank. They are waiting for you in the South Pacific.”

At a little before two in the afternoon, as promised by General Arnold, a huge and powerful Fairchild C-142A GLOBEMASTER showed up, landing in a surprisingly short distance on the main runway of Luke Field and then taxiing to the tarmac where the women of the 170th Fighter Squadron were waiting with their personal kit. Ingrid grinned on seeing that Betty Huyler was at the commands of the giant transport aircraft, waving at her from the cockpit. The four-engine aircraft then pivoted around to present its rear cargo ramp to the waiting women, displaying at the same time the female flying gremlin insignia of the Fifinellas proudly painted on its twin vertical stabilizers. The rear ramp then came down, letting the excited female fighter pilots climb inside the huge cargo bay with their luggage. Ingrid was met inside by Betty, who shook hands with her.

“You must be proud to pilot such a plane, Betty.”

“Indeed!” replied the petite aviatrix in an enthusiastic tone. “The Fairchild C-142A GLOBEMASTER is a truly astounding plane with some tremendous capabilities. Nancy Laplante helped design it via her recommendations and suggestions, so you can be particularly proud about that.”

“I am, Betty. We will be able to do some astounding work with your C-142s in the South Pacific. Well, let’s take off and go to Burbank. I am anxious to see what Lockheed has for us.”

She saw well enough for herself two hours later, after her C-142 had landed on the runway servicing the Lockheed production plant in Burbank, California. She had seen pictures of the Lockheed P-38 LIGHTNING before, shown to her by Nancy Laplante, but the planes she saw lined up in a separate area had some strikingly different features from what she remembered. As a tall and thin test pilot from Lockheed named Tony LeVier was leading her and her group towards the fighter planes assigned to her air group, she could see those differences in more detail. For one thing, the cockpit, instead of being in the rear half of the central nacelle, now occupied the nose section, reversing its original position with the machine guns. The cockpit also had a modern-looking teardrop-shaped, clear bubble canopy. There were eight heavy .50

caliber machine guns, instead of four machine guns and one 20 mm cannon, and those were now positioned with their ammunition bins behind the cockpit, with their barrels flanking the pilot on each side. It radically changed the look of the central nacelle on the P-38 but, as far as Ingrid could see, that change provided a much better view forward and down to the pilot, whose side vision was not blocked anymore by the inner wing sections and the two piston engines. The wings themselves were also different, deeper at their roots and with a thinner profile. Ingrid understood that Nancy had probably directed a redesign of the wing profiles, in order to get rid of the severe aerodynamic compressibility problems in speed dives experienced by P-38s in Nancy's history. Those problems had their roots in a poor understanding at the time of airflow dynamics around a wing at speeds approaching Mach one. The other visible difference was the larger diameter, four-blade, paddle-like propellers. Overall, the final product looked exciting as hell to her, while her female pilots seemed as well to like what they saw. Once near the first P-38N, Tony LeVier turned to face the 32 female fighter pilots and patted the fuselage of the fighter plane.

"Ladies, I present you the first production batch of the new model of the Lockheed P-38 LIGHTNING, the N model. It has not seen combat yet but it should make quite an impression on the Japanese...and on the Germans. This model has its origin in December of 1940, when the Canadian time traveler, Nancy Laplante, visited us in Burbank and made all kinds of suggestions and proposals. At the time, our original model P-38 was already quite a revolutionary aircraft but Miss Laplante showed us ways to make it even better...much better in fact. As a result, our P-38D model, which had been our standard production model up to then, gave way to the P-38N on our production line. Your new mount has two of the new Allison V-1710-77 engines, each rated at a maximum continuous power of 1,595 horsepower and at a war emergency power of 1,875 horsepower, which gives this baby a top speed of 432 miles per hour on military power at an altitude of 25,000 feet, or 450 miles per hour on emergency power. Those engines power new, four-blade propellers of a larger diameter than the original ones, which give to our P-38N a climbing rate that is simply incredible. Our prototype went up from standing takeoff to 20,000 feet in five minutes flat."

Tony LeVier then paused as most of the female pilots swooned about how fast their future planes were. After a moment, he moved to the muzzles of the four heavy machine guns visible on the starboard side of the central nacelle.

"You also have a total of eight .50 caliber heavy machine guns, each provisioned with 550 rounds, as your main armament, more than enough to shred any enemy plane to pieces with a short burst. Added to that, you have six wing pylons and one belly pylon for fuel drop tanks or a mix of drop tanks, up to 4,000 pounds of bombs, or rocket pods. Those rocket pods can be either for six five-inch rockets or sixteen three-inch rockets in pods. These rockets are by the way of a brand-new design, thanks again to Miss Laplante."

Seeing Ingrid smile at that, LeVier in turn smiled at her and spoke softly.

"I was told that Nancy Laplante was your adoptive mother, Major Dows. She was a truly great woman and I regretted very much her passing."

"Thank you, Mister LeVier. You are most kind."

"You are welcome, Major. Now, to continue on the P-38N, it has a range on internal fuel and with 4,000 pounds of bombs of 750 miles, or of 2,200 miles with drop tanks and no bombs. This, plus the fact that you have the inherent safety of two engines, makes the P-38N the ideal fighter aircraft for the Pacific, with its long distances over water. The P-38N also incorporates many more new technologies and features, like fully transistorized radios and electronic equipment, forward-looking infrared cameras for night and bad weather flying, powered ailerons, dive airbrakes and a simplified fuel management system."

"Excuse me, but what are those infrared cameras you just spoke about, sir?"

Asked one of the pilots, Gertrude Meserve.

"Well, FLIR cameras, as they are also called, are nifty new gadgets which give you a color picture of objects and their backgrounds according to their respective temperatures. You can thus see their heat signatures, even at night and through fog or clouds. You could even see a man in the middle of a forest with your FLIR cameras. I must caution you however that this technology is still highly secret and must not be discussed in public or with reporters. Normally, this FLIR technology would not have appeared for a good thirty years at the least, but we now have it, thanks again to Miss Laplante."

As her female pilots commented excitedly about that, Ingrid mentally thanked Nancy: she may be gone but she had time to truly put her mark on this war. Now with this new fighter aircraft equipping her unit, she was going to be able again to strike hard at the Japanese.

16:11 (California Time)

Thursday, August 20, 1942 'C'

Temporary hangar of the 99th Composite Air Group

Muroc Field test and training center, California

Ingrid was directing a group critique on the latest bombing practice by her fighter and bomber pilots when a convoy of trucks stopped in front of their hangar, with Captain Peter Shmelling and Master Sergeant Harry Coyle climbing down from the two lead trucks. Shmelling and Coyle then presented themselves to Ingrid, saluting her.

"Major, we have the weapons and ammunition sent by train from the Sharpe Arsenal, along with six instructors who will teach our personnel about our new individual weapons."

Her interest poked at once, Ingrid eyed the six NCOs coming down from the trucks before looking back at Shmelling.

"So, what did we get, Peter, assault rifles?"

Her logistics officer shook his head at that.

"Sorry, Ingrid, but the Browning AR-41 is still reserved in priority for our infantry units. We however got something quite interesting in my opinion: M2 and M2A1 .357 magnum caliber carbines. They were especially designed for second line personnel and are both light and very handy. We also got a large quantity of Colt Shooting Master revolvers in .357 magnum, which I was told is now the standard sidearm of the female members of the Army Air Force."

"Wait a minute, Peter! I thought that the .357 magnum cartridge was from the future, after this war: Nancy had a .357 magnum revolver with her when she arrived from the year 2012."

Peter made a malicious smile at her question.

"Wrong, Ingrid! An American hunter designed the .357 magnum round in 1936 and it has been manufactured for the commercial market ever since. However, I was told that our carbines were originally due to be chambered for a new .30 caliber round but that Nancy Laplante strongly counseled us to instead chamber it in .357 magnum. The armorers at the Sharpe Arsenal told me that, when they made comparative ballistic tests between two M1 carbines chambered respectively for the .30 round and the .357 magnum round, they found the .357 magnum round to be superior to the .30 in terms of muzzle velocity, muzzle energy and penetration. The .357 magnum also had the big

advantage of using a round which was already in production in the U.S.A. The U.S. Army then decided to adopt the M2 carbine, a selective-fire variant of the M1, and the M2A1, a M2 with folding stock, in .357 magnum caliber as the new Army personal weapon for second-line troops like drivers, clerks and signalers, and for crew-served weapons operators. In order to keep commonality of ammunition around the second echelons, the Army then decided to adopt the Colt 'Shooting Master' .357 magnum revolver with a four-inch barrel. That revolver is now as well the standard sidearm of Army aircrews and pilots."

"Well, I'll be..." could only say Ingrid, not having expected this but also being quite pleased with this state of affair. "And what else did you get in terms of heavy weapons for our group?"

"I was able to convince the personnel of the arsenal to allot us a number of heavy and medium machine guns for our air group 'airfield defense sections'."

"Very well! Let's take a look at those carbines and revolvers."

Accompanied by Shmelling and Coyle, Ingrid went to the first truck and had two weapon crates taken down and opened on the tarmac. One of the army weapons instructors took out two small rifles, one with a fixed wooden stock, the other with a folding steel stock.

"These weapons were produced by the Inland Manufacturing Division of General Motors and actually are evolved, selective-fire models of the original M1 carbine design intended initially for production, Major. The carbine with fixed stock is the M2 carbine, while the one with the folding stock, meant for your pilots and aircrews, is the M2A1. Both are selective, semi-automatic and fully automatic fire weapons and are fed by a 30-round box magazine. With its stock folded, the M2A1 has a length overall of only 25.5 inches, or 35.6 inches with the stock extended. The M2 weighs a mere 5.5 pounds, a good four pounds less than the Garand M1 rifle or the Browning AR-41 assault rifle. Both models can also accept bayonets. Those carbines, while having less range than a typical rifle, still have more range and penetration than submachine guns and should be ideal for your female personnel and particularly for your pilots and aircrews, Major."

Taking the M2A1 presented by the instructor, Ingrid examined it with interest, liking at once its lightness and short length, especially with its stock folded. With such weapons, and with the aircraft and ground equipment the air group now had, her women would be well equipped for the fighting ahead of them in the Pacific. With the special tropical

equipment she had been able to buy directly from civilian manufacturers, thanks to the special supplementary budget allotted to her unit by General Arnold, her women would as well be able to live and work in better conditions in those tropical jungle conditions than if equipped with Army standard issue kit.

13:52 (Washington Time)

Monday, September 7, 1942 'C'

Office of Lieutenant General Henry 'Hap' Arnold

U.S. Army Air Force headquarters, Old Executive Building

Washington, D.C.

Being told by his secretary that Colonel Robert Maxwell, the commander of the Women's Division of the Army Air Corps, wanted to see him, Arnold told her to let him in and got up from behind his desk to go shake his hand. However, the frustrated expression on Maxwell's face told Arnold at once that something was wrong. Maxwell still stopped at attention in front of him and saluted him, to which Arnold saluted back before asking him a question.

"Is something wrong, Colonel? You don't look happy."

"That's because I am not happy, General. In fact, I am furious and that is not because some of my women screwed up. I just spoke with Admiral King's operations officer, whom I intended to inform that the convoy carrying the 99th Composite Air Group had left San Francisco for Espiritu Santo two days ago. That Navy Captain Browning then told me that there was no space for our women in Espiritu Santo and said that the airfields there are still under construction and already full of other aircraft. When I proposed that our air group could instead land in Efate or Noumea, he again said that there were no facilities for our women there."

Arnold, not liking this one bit, then eyed Maxwell critically.

"Did you tell this Captain Browning that we were sending our 99th C.A.G. to Espiritu Santo in order to support our marines on Guadalcanal and to relieve the Japanese pressure on them?"

"I did, sir, but he wouldn't budge about his refusal to greet our women in either Espiritu Santo, Efate or Noumea. If I could say, sir, I had the distinct impression that the real reason for the Navy to refuse to house our women in those bases has more to do with the sex of our aviators rather than with a lack of facilities there."

"I see! Don't have our convoy rerouted yet, Colonel: I will call at once Admiral King and try to iron out this problem. Thank you for informing me of this, Colonel Maxwell."

Maxwell doubted very much that the notoriously irascible Chief of Naval Operation would show sympathy towards the women of the 99th C.A.G. or would be ready to accommodate them: apart from having an explosive character, Admiral King was also known to have very little regards towards women in uniform, having publicly pestered against President Roosevelt's executive order allowing American women to serve in the military. Still, he saluted Arnold before pivoting on his heels and walking out of Arnold's office.

Returning to sit behind his desk, Arnold then picked up the receiver of his telephone and called the office of Admiral King, with whom he was connected with after a few seconds.

"King speaking! What can I do for you, General Arnold?"

"Admiral, one of my senior officers just spoke with your operations officer, Captain Browning, with the intent to inform him that the convoy carrying my 99th Composite Air Group had left San Francisco two days ago, heading for Espiritu Santo. My officer was then told that there were no facilities available for our air group in either Espiritu Santo, Efate or Noumea, and that our air group would have to operate from somewhere else. Admiral, I made this new air group rush through its training and equipping in order to send as quickly as possible some extra air support to our marines in Guadalcanal, who frankly could use any help they could get right now. Surely, your commander in the South Pacific could find some place to lodge and allow to operate my new air group, so that they could support our marines."

When King answered him, Arnold could nearly hear and feel the contempt dripping from his voice.

"General Arnold, you are perfectly free to waste your planes and equipment on a bunch of women in uniform who want to play 'Amazons of the air' but I have no intention of allowing my naval bases in the South Pacific to be turned into giant bordellos by mixing a few hundred young women with my sailors and marines. Let them find another place to land than my naval bases."

King then cut the line rather brutally, leaving an angry Arnold to look at his own receiver for a moment before putting it down. Thinking for a few seconds, he then got up and

walked out of his office, heading towards the nearby building housing the headquarters of General Marshall, the powerful commander of the Army. The new complex slated to replace the collection of buildings in downtown Washington presently housing the various American military commands, to be called 'The Pentagon', was still under construction and Arnold wished that the work could be further accelerated. Trying to coordinate a war from a dozen separate buildings dispersed around Washington didn't help one bit.

Some eight minutes later, he was introduced into the office of General George Marshall and saluted him at attention, then exchanged a handshake with the commander of the U.S. Army.

"So, Henry, what do you have for me today?"

"A problem of Army-Navy cooperation which could result in the utter wasting of a fine aviation unit, General." answered Arnold, who then took a couple of minutes to explain what was happening. He was a bit surprised to see that Marshall didn't show surprise on hearing about that problem, simply nodding his head once while speaking in a disgruntled tone.

"I was kind of expecting this, Henry. I believe as much as you do that those women of the 99th Composite Air Group, who are led by our top air ace, could provide some precious air support to our marines on Guadalcanal. When I think that a big part of our marines' problems was caused by the Navy itself, when our fleet precipitously withdrew, taking the supply ships carrying the equipment and provisions for our marines with it, and this after losing a night battle which our ships should have won."

"But, General, our women are due to arrive in the South Pacific in ten days. If not in Espiritu Santo, Efate or Noumea, where are they going to go? If they go to Australia, then they will be out of combat range of Guadalcanal and will find themselves useless."

"Please remind me of the distances between Guadalcanal and our various bases in the South Pacific and Australia, Henry."

Arnold took out from a shirt pocket a small notebook and opened it, then read a few numbers.

"Espiritu Santo, our nearest base from Guadalcanal, is some 560 miles from it, while Efate is 800 miles from Guadalcanal. Noumea is a good 980 miles away, which would be placing it at the limit of the range for our fighters and medium bombers, and

this without counting the extra fuel one would expend in combat against the Japanese. As for Australia, Brisbane is over 1,300 miles away from Guadalcanal, while Townsville, on the Northeast coast of Australia, is still a good 1,100 miles from Guadalcanal. General, Australia just won't do: Guadalcanal is out of combat range from Australia for our combat airplanes. If our air group can't find a place to operate from which it would be close enough to Guadalcanal, then we will have wasted that air group, through no fault of our female aviators."

Marshall shook his head, disgusted by the utter stupidity of the prejudice shown by the Navy.

"I am afraid that I will have to go speak with the President about the Navy's attitude. We shouldn't let our marines die just because of such stupidity. I will keep you informed about any progress on that front. Thank you for informing me of this, Henry."

"My pleasure, General." said Arnold before saluting Marshall and then leaving his office.

Once alone, Marshall called the office of Admiral Leahy, the President's military assistant, who authorized and coordinated all the visits of military officers to the President. First explaining to Leahy the reason he wanted to speak with President Roosevelt, Marshall then asked the old admiral to book a meeting appointment with the President, or at a minimum to speak with him on the telephone. Leahy's immediate answer to him was that President Roosevelt was too busy to be bothered with something as trivial as a unit's basing location and that there was effectively a shortage of space and facilities at the various bases of the South Pacific Command. Marshall then tried to insist, underlining the precious air support the 99th Composite Air Group could provide to the marines in Guadalcanal, as long as they could use an airfield close enough to the Solomon Island, but Leahy didn't budge and politely hung up on Marshall. Utterly frustrated, Marshall also hung up and thought for a moment while sitting behind his work desk. Finally taking a decision, he called in his duty signals officer and dictated two messages for him to prepare for his signature.

"Major, please write down these two messages, to be prepared at once for my signature, with 'Secret' security classification and 'Immediate' priority. The first one will go to General MacArthur, at the Southwest Pacific Area of Operation headquarters in Brisbane, and will inform him that a convoy carrying the personnel, planes and equipment of the newly formed 99th Composite Air Group, led by Major Ingrid Dows, is

on its way to the South Pacific but was refused by the Navy access to its bases in Espiritu Santo, Efate and Noumea. I have thus decided as a consequence of that Navy rejection to assign the 99th Composite Air Group to his command, to be employed in the most efficient manner in the Southwest Pacific Area of Operation. Major Ingrid Dows is to be given a wide liberty of action, as she has been tasked by General Arnold to experiment new tactics and test new equipment in combat. General MacArthur is to acknowledge receipt of this message and is to forward any questions he will have about the 99th C.A.G. to the offices of General Arnold in Washington. The second message is to be sent as 'Secret', 'Immediate', to the commander of the naval convoy carrying the 99th C.A.G., telling it to reroute to Brisbane, where the 99th C.A.G. will put itself under the command of General MacArthur. That's it, Major."

The duty signals officer, who had seen combat in the Philippines, looked with incredulity at Marshall.

"The Navy would refuse the help of a whole combat air group, General? But everybody in the Pacific is screaming for more planes and pilots."

"I know, which makes the Navy's refusal to host this air group just because it is made of women even more stupid, Major. Hopefully, General MacArthur will be able to fully exploit that air group in his own command area. Hell, by all logic and geography, the Solomons should be part of the SWPAO, not of the Navy's South Pacific area. I know that MacArthur was a big supporter of young Major Dows, so I have high hopes that he will greet her air group with open arms."

CHAPTER 11 – SOUTHWEST PACIFIC AREA OF OPERATION

16:35 (Eastern Australia Time)

Friday, September 18, 1942 ‘C’

Grand Headquarters, Southwest Pacific Area

Eight floor of AMP Building, Downtown Brisbane

Australia

General Douglas MacArthur was working at his desk in his office on the eight floor of the AMP Building, which housed his headquarters, when he heard a sort of commotion coming from the anteroom occupied by his secretary and military aide. Intrigued, he got up from his chair and went to the door of his office, opening it. He was about to ask what was happening when he saw that both his secretary and his aide had their heads stuck out of windows and apparently looking at something outside. He also heard what sounded like an aircraft propeller turning at idle. Now curious as well, MacArthur went to the window where his secretary was and looked out through the window, to see what had attracted her attention. He then saw something he had heard about before but had never seen in person: a helicopter. It was fairly small, about the size of a fighter aircraft and was in the process of flying down slowly towards a nearby parking lot, which was nearly empty at this hour on a Friday afternoon. Two details about that helicopter then caught his eyes: it had two rotors mounted one over the other on a common vertical drive shaft; it also had no tail rotor. His secretary then noticed him and smiled excitedly to him.

“Have you ever seen something as strange as this, General?”

“I believe that it is called a helicopter, Misses Sotherby. I heard about them but this is the first time I see one. It looks quite nimble, I must say. From its markings, it is certainly an American one.”

“From where could it have come, sir?” asked his aide, an army captain.

“Since we don’t have helicopters in Australia and since such machines typically have a short range, it must have come from a ship near the coast. The passengers from this thing most probably came here to see me. I will ask you to go down to the reception lobby and greet those visitors before bringing them up to me, Captain Jenkins.”

“Yes sir!”

As his aide hurried towards the elevators, MacArthur kept watching the helicopter as it landed smoothly in the vacant parking lot. Remembering that his aide kept a pair of binoculars in one drawer of his file cabinet, MacArthur went to get them and returned to the window, in time to see one person step out of the helicopter, to then start to walk towards the AMP Building. A happy smile came to MacArthur's face when he recognized that person.

"Yes! Lady Hawk is back!"

"Lady who, General?" asked his secretary, mystified.

"Our Ace of aces, Major Ingrid Dows. The last time I saw her was when she was forcibly evacuated by air from the Philippines six months ago, along with me, due to a direct order from the President. Now, she is coming back into the fight with an air group entirely composed of women. She must have taken off with that helicopter from one of the cargo ships of the convoy bringing in her 99th Composite Air Group. God knows that we can use every new plane we can get. Could you please call the office of General Kenney to tell him that the commander of the 99th Composite Air Group has just arrived by helicopter and that I would like him to come to my office right away."

"Yes, General!"

As his secretary went to her desk to use her telephone, MacArthur returned to his office, where he stood in front of the big map of the South Pacific and Australia covering nearly half of one wall. He then studied that map carefully while keeping in mind where Guadalcanal was situated in relation to Australia. The message received a few days ago from General Marshall concerning the 99th C.A.G. had both infuriated and pleased him: infuriated because of the stupidity of the Navy for refusing the help from a complete air group; pleased by the fact that this Navy refusal was in turn providing him with some much-needed extra air assets. The timing for the arrival of the 99th Composite Air Group was also perfect, as Australian and U.S. Army engineer units had just finished building a number of new airfields around Port Moresby, in Papua New Guinea, which had been threatened for months by the Japanese. Some of these newly built airfields were still empty, waiting for air units to show up to occupy them. Well, new air units were now arriving, just as he was preparing to move his field headquarters to Port Moresby in order to deal with the Japanese threat in Papua New Guinea.

A few minutes later, as MacArthur was still looking at his big map, the commander of his Fifth Air Force, **Major General George Kenney**, arrived in his office, stopping at attention and saluting him.

"You wanted to see me, General?"

"Yes, George! I am happy to tell you that your new air group, the 99th Composite Air Group, is about to arrive. Its commander, Major Ingrid Dows, has just landed by helicopter in the parking lot across the street and should be here in minutes."



"Excellent! I saw her helicopter land: quite a nice-looking machine, I must say."

"Wait till you see Major Dows, George: she's quite a looker as well." replied MacArthur, a malicious smile on his lips. "By the way, don't be misled by her young age: she is a lot more mature than she looks like, even though she is only nineteen years-old. She is as well a master strategist and air tactician, on top of being our Ace of aces, with 72 confirmed air victories under her belt."

"Nineteen, General?" exclaimed Kenney, both stunned and shocked. "And she leads a full air group approaching the size of an actual air wing? You really believe that she will be up to the job of leading such a large unit?"

MacArthur then looked at Kenney with a most serious expression.

"George, in reality this girl is an old mind in a young body. Before she became a fighter pilot in the Philippines, she confided a big secret to me: she can remember her past incarnations, all 7,000 years-worth of them. General Arnolds tested her assertion while she was in Washington by inviting a bunch of archaeologists and historians to ask her questions in dozens of ancient and modern languages: she passed that test with flying colors by proving that she could speak over 35 languages, most of them extinct by now. In terms of personal life experience, we are mere infants compared to her."

"Wow!" could only say Kenney, overwhelmed by this revelation.

"Wow indeed! Now, we have her and her new air group and I fully intend to use them to maximum effect against the Japanese. My idea is to assign her air group to our newly built airfields around Port Moresby, where they will be closest to the action and will be best able to support our ground troops in Papua New Guinea, as well as our marines in Guadalcanal. You saw the unit and equipment list for the 99th C.A.G. we received by message from Washington, correct?"

"I have, General. It is quite an impressive list and includes models of aircraft never seen before in the frontlines. I am especially anxious to see what her helicopters

will be able to do to help our soldiers fighting the Japanese along the Kokoda Trail. To be frank, I know very little about helicopters in general and about their capabilities in particular. If they are all as impressive as that little machine now parked near our building, then I will be happy.”

“Well, they will still need proper airfields to accommodate them, George. Come close to this map and tell me which airfield could best serve the needs of the 99th C.A.G., taking in account the number and types of aircraft it has.”

Approaching the map and concentrating on the cluster of nine airfields surrounding Port Moresby, four of which were brand new and with a fifth one recently expanded.

“Hum, I would readily give them the full use of both Durand and Wards Airfields, plus the better part of Jackson airfield, which is still mostly empty of aircraft and only houses one bomber group headquarter unit at this time. Jackson and Wards airfields also have the bonus point of being linked by a taxiway, which allows planes to go from one airfield to the other. As for Schwimmer Airfield, its installations are still quite limited, with no hard buildings or aircraft revetments built yet. I would thus let the 7th Fighter Squadron continue to use it for its P-40 fighters.”

“That sounds just fine with me, George. Could you call your office and ask that they gather and bring here enough maps of the Port Moresby area and of the whole Papua New Guinea, Solomons and New Britain Islands and of Australia, to provide the needs of an air group.”

“Right away, General.”

Kenney had just finished his call to his office when MacArthur’s aide walked in with Ingrid Dows, with both coming at attention and saluting.

“Major Ingrid Dows reporting, General!” said loudly Ingrid while saluting. MacArthur returned her salute before pointing Kenney to her.

“I am truly happy to see you again, Major. May I present to you your new air boss for the Southwest Pacific Area, Major General George Kenney, in charge of the Fifth Air Force?”

“Pleased to meet you, sir.” said Ingrid while shaking hands with Kenney. The latter, nearly enthralled by her youthful beauty, had to concentrate to stay focused on the matter at hand.

“And it is a pleasure to finally meet our Ace of aces, Major. My predecessor, Major General Brereton, said a lot of good about you.”

"That was most considerate of him, sir. Now that I am here, may I ask if I am to land my aircraft, equipment and personnel here, in Brisbane, or somewhere else, sir?" MacArthur took on him to answer her on that subject.

"I will want your convoy to reroute to Port Moresby, Major. A number of new airfields have recently been built around Port Moresby and are still empty of aircraft. Your air group is just in time to fill them. If you will approach this map, General Kenney will show you which airfields will now be yours."

With Ingrid joining MacArthur in front of the big map, she took out a notepad and a pen and listened carefully to the descriptions of the airfields around Port Moresby done by Kenney. At the end, she quickly measured the distance between Port Moresby and Guadalcanal, as well as that with Rabaul, the main Japanese base in this area of the South Pacific. The interest she showed towards Rabaul didn't escape the attention of the two generals, with Kenney commenting on it.

"Do you plan on attacking Rabaul, Major Dows? I must say that it is a tough nut to crack, with plenty of planes and guns defending it. My bombers were barely able to make a dent on it despite numerous past attacks."

"With all due respect to your bombers, sir, I read the action reports from your squadrons while in Washington and their bombing tactics and accuracy didn't impress me. For one thing, they went in in penny packets and bombed from too high, resulting in few hits and little damage caused. Know that, before I left Washington, General Arnold tasked me and my air group to test new tactics and equipment while in the South Pacific, so that new air doctrines could be written. I will hit the targets you will point to me, plus will ask you from time to time to hit targets of my choosing, but I would be most happy if you would let me attack using tactics of my own choosing."

As Kenney hesitated a bit then, MacArthur jumped in.

"Give her as much free hand as you can, George: you will not regret it, I assure you."

"Alright! My priority concern right now is to stop the Japanese advancing on Port Moresby, using the Kokoda Trail, and to attack them from the air and from the sea. Rabaul and Lae, with their airfields and harbors, are my other main concerns. Feel free to attack any of them, but put a priority on being able to respond quickly to any ground threat along the Kokoda Trail. As for Guadalcanal, I understand that the original goal of General Arnold was for your air group to support our marines there but, with the Navy's

refusal to lodge your unit in the New Hebrides, your aircraft are now probably out of combat range of Guadalcanal.”

“Maybe, maybe not, sir. The operational range of my new aircraft may surprise you. However, especially in the case of my helicopters, to be able to fuel up in Milne Bay, which is much closer to Guadalcanal than Port Moresby is, would solve most of my problems when attacking the Solomons.”

Ingrid then turned to look at MacArthur.

“Sir, I would need your help in convincing the Navy and our marines in Guadalcanal to accept to house part of my helicopter squadron, which could then operate from Henderson Field and provide close air support to our marines there. Maybe the marines will prove more flexible and less misogynistic than the Navy about accepting the help of my women.”

“With the way our marines in Guadalcanal are screaming for air support, I doubt that the First Marine Division commander, Major General Vandegrift, will refuse to take in your helicopters, Major. I will talk with Admiral Ghormley, at the South Pacific Area headquarters, and will do my best to convince him to let your helicopters operate from Guadalcanal.”

“Couldn’t we just ignore Admiral Ghormley and rely only on General Vandegrift’s answer on this, sir?”

Both MacArthur and Kenney were amused by that feisty reply, with MacArthur answering Ingrid.

“I suppose that Admiral Ghormley could do little to actually stop you from using Guadalcanal, Major. If he protested your move there to Washington, he would probably cover himself with contempt and ridicule. However, with the present state of the fighting in Guadalcanal, resupplying your helicopters by air could prove to be a most dangerous job.”

“We came to the South Pacific to fight, sir, not to hide from the enemy. We will take the risks needed to be taken in order to do the job, sir.” was Ingrid’s firm reply. Her response was met by approving nods from both MacArthur and Kenney.

“I see that you have lost none of your combativity I witnessed in the Philippines, Major. You can thus count on all the support I can give you. There is one last point that I need to clear out with you, Major.”

“And what is it, sir?” asked cautiously Ingrid.

"What ranks are your squadron and flight commanders? What ranks are your non-commissioned aircrews? What ranks are your ground support personnel?"

"Uh, apart from me and a handful of male officers of my technical and administrative staff, all my officers wear the rank of second lieutenant, while my female non-commissioned personnel's rank, either aircrew or ground crew, is as simple private. Please understand that all my female personnel were recruited from civilian life last September, a mere five months ago. They haven't had time to accumulate enough seniority to go up in rank, while I don't have the authority to promote them myself."

MacArthur, like Kenney, clearly didn't like her answer, with MacArthur then looking at Kenney.

"George, what rank do your squadron and flight commanders normally wear?"

Kenney, who could see where MacArthur was going at and who also found that state of affair disturbing, answered at once in a firm tone.

"Sir, my squadron leaders are either captains, at a minimum, or majors, while my flight leaders are at least first lieutenants. They wear such ranks because they have extra responsibilities as leaders and also because they need the appropriate authority to give orders to their subalterns. Non-commissioned aircrew members should be at a minimum corporals or, more typically, sergeants. As for members of ground support crews, they also need clearly identifiable crew leaders and technical specialists, with each ground support team assigned to a specific plane needing a sergeant or technical sergeant as team leader. As for Major Dows herself, as the commander of an air group, she should be a lieutenant colonel. In view of the unusual size of her air group, which is composed of no less than five squadrons and one anti-aircraft battery instead of the usual three squadrons, the rank of colonel would not appear excessive, in my opinion."

MacArthur nodded his head at that, then shouted out loud, surprising Ingrid.

"CAPTAIN JENKINS, COME HERE AT THE DOUBLE!"

MacArthur's aide took only seconds to enter the office and salute his boss at attention.

"You need something, sir?"

"Yes! Get all the rank insignias for both officers, NCOs and enlisted personnel that you can find quickly in our offices and bring them here in a box. Make it quick!"

"Yes sir!"

As the captain ran out, Douglas MacArthur faced Ingrid again, his expression most serious.

"I frankly find inexcusable that General Arnold didn't use his authority to even try to allot proper ranks to your officers and enlisted personnel before sending them to the South Pacific, Lieutenant Colonel Dows. However, as your theatre commander, I do have full power to distribute promotions and rewards as I see fit. From now on, you are officially a lieutenant colonel, while your squadron leaders and senior staff officers will wear the rank of major. As for your flight leaders and heads of technical, logistical and administrative sub-departments, they will wear the rank of captain. Your enlisted personnel also need to be of a rank usually found with their male counterparts filling similar positions, with ground crew chiefs being no less than sergeants. Once back on your ship, write down a list of the promotions you will distribute around under my authority, justifying them as being 'promotions in the field'. I am due soon to visit Port Moresby, where I intend to move my theater headquarters to in November. You will be able to then give me your list of promotions, so that my personnel administration staff can officialize it and adjust the pay of your personnel."

Ingrid had to restraint herself from going to the old general and hug him, so happy she was for her women.

"General, I will never be able to thank you enough for what you just did for the women of my air group."

"You can thank me by destroying lots of Japanese planes and ships and by killing lots of Japanese soldiers, Lieutenant Colonel Dows." replied MacArthur with a malicious smile. "As soon as you will have your new maps and rank insignias, you will fly back to your ship and reroute your convoy towards Port Moresby, where you will be free to take possession of your assigned airfields."

CHAPTER 12 – PAPUA NEW GUINEA



11:42 (PNG Time)

Monday, September 21, 1942 'C'

Field communal kitchen and cantina of the U.S. 43rd Bomber Group (Heavy)

Jackson Airfield, 2.4 miles northeast of Port Moresby

Papua New Guinea, South Pacific

A number of officers and enlisted men working at the advanced field headquarters of the 43rd Bomber Group (Heavy) had started to line up for lunch at the unit's kitchen and cantina when one man suddenly shouted out while pointing at a big dot approaching from the South in the sky.

"HEY! LOOK AT THAT BIG THING APPROACHING. IT IS GOING TO LAND HERE."

"Gee! It must be the strangest plane I ever saw, apart from being the biggest one I ever saw." added another airman in the lineup. Then another aviator also shouted out loud while pointing out.

"I SEE TWO MORE PLANES COMING IN FOR A LANDING."

Lieutenant colonel Randolph Masters, who was on his way to the kitchen with his operations officer, Major Jim Lockwood, stopped and stared at the three big incoming planes, trying to identify them.

"They look like three Fairchild C-142 GLOBEMASTER heavy transport aircraft. They are probably from the 99th Composite Air Group: their arrival was announced this morning by encrypted radio traffic. They are supposed to be coming from Townsville, where the convoy bringing in the planes and equipment of the 99th stopped to unload its planes and thus allow them to fly in to Port Moresby. The facilities here at Port Moresby harbor were simply too limited to permit the unloading of dozens of aircraft from cargo ships, while the roads around Port Moresby would make it nearly impossible to tow airplanes unloaded from ships in the harbor. Damn, I hope that Ingrid Dows is aboard one of those three C-142s: she was a real hellraiser in the air over the Philippines and I would love to meet her again."

"Are you sure that her reputation was not overblown, sir?" asked Lockwood. "How could a simple girl with no formal fighter pilot training accumulate a claimed total of 72 air victories?"

Lockwood suddenly found himself facing an angry Masters, who pointed a hard index at him.

"Listen up, Major, and listen well! That simple girl, as you call her, fought on the ground in the jungles of Bataan and led bayonet charges against the Japanese after her last P-40 fighter aircraft became non-operational. I spoke with other fighter pilots and with anti-aircraft gunners who watched her fight the Japanese in the air and they all agreed that she was by far our best fighter pilot. Many of those men owed their lives to her, so please cut that misogynistic crap and show respect to her when you will meet her. Got that?"

"Uh, yes sir!" could only say Lockwood, stunned by the fury in Masters' voice. Masters then kept watching the three huge transport aircraft as they landed one after the other on one of the three parallel runways of Jackson Airfield. Their very short landing rolls impressed him but not as much as when he saw the staggering number of vehicles

which then came out by their aft cargo ramps, including big trucks towing trailers. One of those trucks even carried a radar mounted on a telescopic mast.

“Wow! These girls got the very latest equipment available to the Air Corps.”

“How many of their planes are we expecting to be based here, sir?” asked cautiously his operations officer.

“According to the message we got this morning, their 177th Bomber Squadron, equipped with B-25NGs, and their 117th Transport Squadron, equipped with C-142s, will use this airfield, while Wards Airfield will house the 99th C.A.G. headquarters, the 170th Fighter Squadron, equipped with P-38Ns, and the 171st Photo-Reconnaissance Squadron, equipped with a photo variant of the P-38N. A helicopter squadron will on its part lodge at Durand Airfield. Such an injection of new airpower should do us a lot of good here in Papua New Guinea. If Dows proves as feisty and devious as in the Philippines, then the Japanese are in for some very unpleasant times indeed.”

Lockwood was tempted to say something then but managed to keep his mouth shut.

Before the duo could enter the kitchen tent, six more C-142s overflew Jackson Airfield, heading to the nearby Durand and Wards airfields, where they landed. Finally getting in and grabbing some food, Masters and Lockwood had time to eat their lunch and come out again before two huge helicopters flew over them in a thunderous noise of engines and rotating propellers. Masters, who had never seen a helicopter before, was left with his mouth wide open as he watched the big machine fly by.

“My God! These things are as big as those C-142s which just landed here. You probably could move a whole infantry company with one of those.”

“And what about those, sir?” said Lockwood while pointing at eight speedy helicopters behind the heavy helicopters which had just overflowed them. Masters had one look at them before replying to Lockwood.

“Those have the looks of pure killing machines. Look at their nose-mounted cannons: they seem to be 20 mm guns to me. They should be able to make mincemeat out of Japanese soldiers. Damn, I really need to meet with Dows and speak with her.”

16:37 (PNG Time)

Field headquarters of the 99th Composite Air Group

Wards Airfield, 2.5 miles north-northwest of Port Moresby

Major General George Kenney was in a very good mood as he entered with three of his senior staff officers and Ingrid the newly positioned field headquarters building of the 99th Composite Air Group. That building, painted khaki with a camouflage scheme, was actually a large prefabricated module which had been lowered in place by one of the two heavy lift Sikorsky UH-3 SKYCRANE, and this after having been picked up at the vertical from the deck of the cargo ship which had transported it from San Francisco.

"I must say that you have some fantastic pieces of equipment as part of your air group, Colonel Dows. I can't wait to see how your new planes and helicopters will do against the Japanese."

"Well, you won't have to wait very long for that, General." replied Ingrid as she led her three visitors to the main operations room of her headquarters building. "Seven of my aircraft are presently in the air, conducting some reconnaissance work over objectives designated by me. Once we will have the results and photos from those reconnaissance missions and will have time to analyze them, we will then strike...hard."

"And what are those objectives you designated, Colonel?" asked Colonel Richard Conway, the operations officer of the Fifth Air Force.

"Rabaul and the Japanese forces advancing along the Kokoda Trail, Colonel Conway. I want to surprise the Japanese and hit them before they can even realize that my air group is here. I will explain my general plan of attack once we will be in front of my main operations map."

Conway, like George Kenney and Brigadier General Julian Barnes, obviously wanted to know more about that attack plan but managed to wait until their group stopped in front of the big map pinned on a wall-mounted cork board and covered with a transparent plastic film. Ingrid then used something which left her visitors wide-eyed: a small laser pointer which had belonged to Nancy Laplante and which she had inherited from her, along with other items from the year 2012.

"First, about the reasons I selected those objectives as priority targets. The need to target the Japanese troops advancing westward along the Kokoda Trail is obvious: they are threatening Port Moresby and its airfields and are already too close to anybody's taste. Right now, four of my RP-38N photo-reconnaissance fighters are taking a systematic photo and infrared coverage of the whole Kokoda Trail, up to and including Buna, on the East Coast of Papua New Guinea, in order to find where the Japanese forces are concentrated."

"Uh, excuse me, Colonel: infrared coverage? What's that?" asked Conway, confused. Ingrid answered him patiently, understanding how very few people would actually know about thermal and infra-red imagery.

"By infrared coverage, I was alluding to the capacity of our aircraft to use infrared cameras and thermal imaging cameras to see in the dark and detect heat sources, including human thermal signatures. With a thermal camera, you will see a person as a white silhouette on dark background, even through jungle foliage. With them and infrared camera pictures taken by my aircraft, we will be able to spot and locate the Japanese soldiers present along the Kokoda Trail and will then be able to target them for bombing and strafing during the day."

"That sounds like a good plan indeed, Colonel." said Kenney approvingly. "Up to now, it has been very difficult for us to provide artillery support to our troops on the Kokoda Trail, due to the fact that it is nearly impassable to vehicles. As for bomber support, the dangers of hitting our own troops in that thick jungle is quite great. Your helicopters sound like the perfect solution for our problems there."

"Thanks, General. Now, about the other priority target I have chosen: Rabaul. Rabaul is actually the main source of the air and naval enemy threat in this region, not only to us in Papua New Guinea but also to our Navy in the South Pacific and to our marines in Guadalcanal. The Japanese aircraft harassing our marines on Guadalcanal on a nearly daily basis come from Rabaul and its airfields, while Rabaul's Simpson Harbor is the base for many Japanese warships and troop transports entering the waters around Guadalcanal. Thus, eliminating Rabaul as a threat by destroying the aircraft and ships based there must be considered as a priority target for us."

"And how do you propose to do that, Colonel Dows?" asked a bit caustically Colonel Conway. "Our airplanes have launched to date a multitude of air strikes against Rabaul, causing only minor, temporary damage, while losing a number of precious planes and aircrews. That place is defended by over 300 anti-aircraft guns and by Japanese fighter aircraft, while a Port Moresby – Rabaul return trip is a good thousand miles, out of reach of most of our light bombers and fighter-bombers, unless they go in with a reduced bomb load."

Ingrid gave in return a critical look to the operations officer of the Fifth Air Force.

"Colonel Conway, your airplanes have caused little damage to Rabaul for two main reasons. First, they attack in penny packets and in uncoordinated fashion, except for one notable exception in the recent months. Second, they bomb from too high an

altitude and thus achieve only poor accuracy. Add to those two factors the fact that your planes are mostly of aging designs and don't have the sophisticated instruments and sensors used by my own airplanes, which are all pre-series aircraft whose models have barely started to enter mass production. Take for example my helicopters: nobody else but me have them on strength and in the frontlines in the Pacific, while only the British have operational helicopters in Europe."

"But your aircrews are all devoid of combat experience, except for you. Do you really believe them capable of doing such a difficult job on their first combat missions?"

"Yes, they do lack actual combat experience, Colonel, but they have one thing in their favor: I taught them all that I learned about air combat during my time in the Philippines, including the weaknesses of the various Japanese airplanes they will face, and they listen to me. By contrast, our fighter pilots fighting in the Philippines, while formally trained for combat, insisted at first on following outdated air tactics and on ignoring the directives about concentrating on the enemy bombers rather than looking for a fight with Japanese fighters. As a result, they got slaughtered, until Major General Brereton put his foot down and told them to cut both the dogfight glory-seeking and the constant blabbing and screaming on the radio."

"She is right about that, Dick." then said George Kenney. "Brereton spoke at length with me about how the air war went over the Philippines and he mentioned to me his frustration about our male fighter pilots' indiscipline in the air and refusal to adopt the new tactics promoted by Colonel Dows. Personally, I do not doubt that her female pilots and aircrews will show a good performance in combat."

From Conway's hard expression, Ingrid strongly suspected that he was still skeptical about her aircrews but didn't dare contradict his superior, at least openly. Kenney then looked back at Ingrid to ask her another question.

"And how do you propose exactly to attack Rabaul with your air group, Colonel Dows?"

"What I propose is an operation in three parts, sir." answered Ingrid, who then used her laser pointer as she described her plan of attack to Kenney, Barnes and Conway. At the end of it, Kenney nodded his head, impressed.

"I see that your reputation for deviousness was well earned, Colonel Dows. I agree with your attack plan. However, the weather is presently quite bad over the Solomons and, to a lesser degree, over Rabaul, nailing both the Japanese aircraft in

Rabaul and our aircraft in Guadalcanal to the ground. Advise me once the weather will allow you to attack, so that I could coordinate your actions with those of my bombers.”

“Will do, sir!”

CHAPTER 13 – RABAUL



03:25 (PNG Time)

Sunday, September 27, 1942 'C'

Wards Airfield, Port Moresby area

Papua New Guinea

Major General George Kenney, along with Brigadier General Julian Barnes, watched on with a mix of hope and dread as the planes of the 99th C.A.G. based in Wards Airfield took off in rapid succession: hope for a successful strike on the Japanese in Rabaul; dread at the thought of many of those young and brave women possibly dying today. Today was announced by his meteorological section to be the first day of good weather in nearly two weeks over the Solomons and Rabaul, so Kenney expected the Japanese to be active in the air today. With a clear sky and a full moon, the women of the 99th C.A.G. actually had some decent visibility as they took off in the darkness of the early morning, some two and a half hours before sunrise, and the takeoffs proceeded well and quickly, without any accident, demonstrating the skills and experience at piloting of the aviatrixes. In contrast, many of Kenney's male pilots were barely out of flying schools in the United States and had often proved to have abysmal skills in map

navigation, while flying in the dark was proving daunting to them. Kenney sighed as the last of the P-38Ns fighter-bombers rose in the night sky.

"May this be a good day for those women and for us, Julian. This is one big poker move Dows is playing."

"I am sure that they will do well, sir. They demonstrated quite convincingly their skills and bravery during the last four days, when they located and hammered the Japanese advancing along the Kokoda Trail. Our Australian infantry is already loving them, and not only because they are young women. Those who were skeptical about women combat pilots are now quickly becoming a distinct minority. As for young Ingrid Dows, I saw her at work in Australia, when she was recovering for combat wounds sustained in the Philippines, and I was impressed to no little degree with her intelligence, cunning and piloting skills. The Japanese in Rabaul are in for a very bad day, mark my words, sir."

"I hope that you are right, Julian."

03:42 (PNG Time)

Aboard a Fairchild EC-142E WAVEMASTER command and control aircraft Flying at high altitude 110 miles west-northwest of Rabaul

"We just got a short message from our headquarters in Wards Airfield, Captain: our planes are now in the air."

Jenny Kawena, the 99th C.A.G. intelligence officer, nodded her head at that report from one of the three female radio operators monitoring friendly radio frequencies. Three more radio operators, all of them ethnic Japanese-Americans, were monitoring the Japanese frequencies emanating from in or around Rabaul, while Captain Hedy Lamarr was sitting at the electronic warfare station of the EC-142E, monitoring the signal from the Japanese radar located in Rabaul. Approaching Lamarr's station in the big lower cabin of the converted C-142 transport, Jenny looked for a moment at the cathode screen Hedy was watching.

"Any sign that the Japanese may have detected us, Hedy?"

"Doubtful, Jenny: their radar signal is still well below detection strength. Also, the Japanese radar's working frequency limits its effective range to about ninety miles, twenty miles short of our actual flying station. I will be able to jam it the moment that you will give me the go."

Jenny nodded her head again, satisfied. Despite not having a diploma in electronics, Hedy's genius-level I.Q. had allowed her to assimilate by herself a lot about that and other technologies during her formative years. She had also sat on special training sessions given in the United States by the manufacturers of the extensive electronic surveillance and jamming equipment of the EC-142E, sessions during which she had dazzled her instructors with her brilliant mind, speed of assimilation of her training material...and great beauty. Jenny next moved to the radio monitoring station manned by Corporal Mary Takahashi.

"Anything special on the Japanese frequencies, Mary?"

"You could say that." replied Mary, smiling. "Their headquarters in Rabaul is now sending a general message giving the latest weather data and estimates about the conditions around Rabaul and the Solomons. Our planes will find a mostly clear sky and moderate winds over Rabaul."

"Excellent! This means that we may find the Japanese planes in Rabaul lined up and ready to takeoff for a raid on Guadalcanal after sunrise, just in time to offer us easy, concentrated targets to our planes." replied Jenny before returning to her own work station as the surveillance commanding officer of the EC-142E, where she studied again the most recent set of air photos taken over Rabaul and Simpson Harbor. If nothing had changed since yesterday, the P-38N and B-25NG pilots of the 99th C.A.G. should find moored in Simpson Harbor the light aircraft carriers SHOHO and TAIYO, the heavy cruisers CHIKUMA, HAGURO, NACHI and MOGAMI, two light cruisers, nine destroyers and 27 cargo ships. The two light carriers had actually been photographed from high altitude by a RP-38N photo-reconnaissance as they were in the process of delivering more aircraft to the two operating airfields around Rabaul, Lakunai and Vunakanau. Three other airfields around Rabaul were still under construction and empty of aircraft, so Ingrid had decided to ignore them and to concentrate on the two operating airfields and on the Japanese ships in Simpson Harbor. The RP-38N doing that reconnaissance works had actually evaded detection by the Japanese, whose radar coverage did not reach the altitude used by the RP-38N, who had also been flying above the cloud cover while using its infrared cameras.

05:46 (PNG Time)

Lead P-38N, approaching Rabaul from the Northwest

In the lead of her unit formation, Ingrid gave a short radio message to her pilots as the mountains surrounding Rabaul and Simpson Harbor became visible in the distance, outlined in the dark by the light of a full moon.

“To all Fifinellas, from Lady Hawk: go roller now!”

On that prearranged coded command, her pilots followed her in a shallow dive towards the ocean, to then level off at an altitude of a mere fifty meters above the wave, helped in that by their night vision goggles and their radar altimeters, two technologies from the future imported by Nancy Laplante in 1940 and then given to both the American and British governments. As she closed in on Rabaul, Ingrid did a silent prayer, wishing luck to her female aircrews in this most dangerous mission. She was less than ten kilometers from the coast of New Britain, approaching Rabaul from the Northwest, when she gave another short order by radio.

“To all Fifinellas, from Lady Hawk: dragster now!”

She then switched to her internal fuel tanks and jettisoned her now nearly empty drop tanks before accelerating at maximum power, quickly taking speed while still flying very low. Just as she overflew the coastline, she gave yet another order.

“To Witches, from Lady Hawk: sky jump now! To Hellraisers: bumpy ride now!”

The 24 P-38Ns following her own fighter-bomber, obeying her order, raised their noses in order to jump over the crestline of the mountain range surrounding Rabaul and Simpson Harbor, passing barely fifty meters above the ridgeline and continuing to climb for a couple of seconds before rolling on their back and diving steeply, rolling again to return to a normal position and splitting in three groups in order to better aim at the Japanese ships in the harbor and at the aircraft parked in the Lakunai and Vunakanau Airfields.

“GOOD LUCK AND GOOD SHOOTING, GIRLS!”

06:06 (PNG Time)

Japanese anti-aircraft gun position west of Lakunai Airfield

Private Hondo Kenji, who had been on early morning watch, was in the process of waking up the rest of the crew of their Type 88 75 mm anti-aircraft gun, one of the 367 anti-aircraft guns defending Rabaul and its harbor, when he started hearing the muffled noise of distant aircraft engines. Thinking at first that some Japanese planes either had just started their engines or were approaching Rabaul, he didn't pay much attention to

that at first and continued waking up his comrades. Then, as he was about to go heat up some water to prepare tea for his comrades, that engine noise suddenly became a lot more audible and intense. Looking up in the direction of the Northwest, from where the noise came, Kenji felt his hair rise on his head when he saw two dozen or so planes who had just jumped over the ridgeline and who were now diving for an attack. Their distinctive twin-tails made them easy to recognize for an anti-aircraft gunner like him.

“AMERICAN P-38S DIVING ON US! ALERT! ALERT!”

As he was running towards his gun to take his position as loader, he didn't see the fifteen B-25 medium bombers which jumped over the ridgeline after the P-38s, to then diving towards the ground at high speed. Kenji's comrades, still half asleep, did their best to run to their gun and man it but didn't have a chance to fire a first shot before the first of the eight P-38Ns diving on the Lakunai Airfield opened a devastating fire with its eight .50 caliber heavy machine guns, strafing the 24 Japanese Mitsubishi Ki-21 medium bombers lined up on the taxiway, ready to fly out on a raid against the American Henderson Field, in Guadalcanal. With the concentrated fire of its machine guns, which had a combined rate of fire of 4,600 rounds per minute, the P-38 pilot shredded the lined-up bombers to pieces and made many of them blow up or explode into big fireballs before zipping over the airfield at top speed and low altitude, thus making it a very difficult target to the Japanese anti-aircraft gunners now trying to react to the attack. The seven P-38Ns following Captain Virginia Luttrell then opened fire as well, aiming at the Japanese aircraft still parked in their earth protective revetments or lined up along the taxiways of the airfield. All eight P-38Ns had time to complete their first strafing passes before the first Japanese gun was able to fire its first shot, which missed by a wide margin due to the high speed and low altitude of the American fighter-bombers. Those eight P-38Ns then turned around for a second pass in order to destroy the remaining surviving Japanese aircraft and to strafe the barracks where the Japanese aircrews lived.

While another eight P-38Ns led by Captain Nancy Batson were diving to attack the Vunakanau Airfield, Ingrid led the five other P-38N pilots of her command flight, composed of her most experienced pilots, in a high-speed dive on the Japanese heavy cruisers and two light carriers anchored. That dangerous task, pitting her and her command flight against the firepower of the Japanese heavy cruisers and light carriers, had as its main goal to distract the Japanese anti-aircraft gunners into concentrating

their fire on her flight and thus help her fifteen B-25 medium bombers, which were now speeding just above the surface of the water towards the Japanese heavy units and preparing to deliver torpedo attacks. While the Japanese gunfire was at first rather light and inaccurate, with most of the gunners still running to man their guns, it quickly became quite intense. She replied to that anti-aircraft fire by first firing off her ten five-inch S.S.H.V. rockets at the heavy cruiser HAGURO, then following with a long burst from her heavy machine guns, which caused many ghastly casualties among the HAGURO gunners before her salvo of ten rockets impacted the superstructures and hull of the heavy cruiser. Raising her aircraft nose just enough to jump over the heavy cruiser's forward superstructures while copiously peppering the ship's bridge, Ingrid zoomed over the cruiser and flew away for a few seconds before reversing course and diving to only twenty meters above the water, heading back towards the heavy cruiser and firing her machine guns at the starboard side anti-aircraft gunners of the HAGURO. Her five command flight pilots imitated her, each concentrating on a particular cruiser or light carrier. Teresa James ended up firing at the light carrier SHOHO, which had little to no armor and thus suffered much more comparatively than the armored heavy cruiser. Teresa shouted out in joy when her bullets shred a number of Japanese aircraft parked on the flight deck of the SHOHO, starting intense fires there. Then, seven of her ten five-inch rockets hit the hull of the carrier, with some of them penetrating into its aircraft hangar and exploding inside. With a few of its aircraft fuel lines sectioned, the SHOHO erupted into a giant fireball as Teresa was turning around for her second attack. Deciding that her job on that light carrier was done, she switched targets and flew towards one of the light cruisers anchored in the harbor. Tracer shells from 25 mm automatic cannons then started zipping uncomfortably close past her aircraft. Her stomach gripped with fear but resolved to continue her attack, she pressed her gun trigger again, sending some 75 .50 caliber slugs per second at the light cruiser and turning its superstructures and hull into Swiss cheese. Teresa didn't know it at the time but her firing against the light cruiser NAGARA saved Captain Ann Baumgartner's B-25, which was being fired upon by the cruiser as Ann was about to launch her torpedo against the SHOHO. Letting out a breath out of relief at having completed alive her torpedo run, Ann Baumgartner fired for a couple of seconds both her eight fixed forward .50 caliber machine guns and her fixed nose 75 mm cannon at the port side of the SHOHO's hull, causing serious damage inside its aircraft hangar. Jumping over the carrier and zooming over the shaken Japanese sailors on its flight deck, Ann flew away

for a few seconds before turning around for her second attack. As she was lining up her guns at the light carrier, her torpedo hit the port side of its hull, under the waterline, creating a huge water geyser and shaking the whole 14,200-ton warship. A second torpedo, launched by Lieutenant Barbara Erickson's B-25NG, then hit the SHOHU some five seconds after Baumgartner's torpedo, sealing the fate of the light carrier. Seeing that, Ann shouted out in her radio microphone.

"HELLRAISER RED TWO, TIME TO SWITCH TARGETS TO THE CARGO SHIPS!"

"HELLRAISER RED TWO: ACKNOWLEDGED! I'M BEHIND YOU."

As the P-38Ns and B-25NGs were conducting their second attack pass, young Rosa Lea Fullwood's P-38N was peppered by shrapnel from a 75 mm shell exploding near her aircraft. Rosa Lea screamed with pain as a number of pieces of hot shrapnel pierced her right lower leg and also put her right-side engine on fire. Nearly passing out from the pain, Rosa Lea nonetheless managed to keep control of her damaged aircraft but quickly realized that her poor aircraft would never be able to return to Port Moresby and would probably crash quite soon. During the last pre-mission briefing given by Ingrid Dows to her and the other aircrews of the air group, Ingrid had made very clear that being captured by the Japanese would only result in tortures, followed by execution, citing examples from her fighting in the Philippines to support her assessment. Rosa Lea, on hearing that, had promised herself then to never allow that to happen to her.

"This is your last flight, old girl." she said to herself while evaluating her situation. Seeing that her damaged aircraft was roughly flying in the direction of the heavy cruiser MOGAMI, which was already seriously damaged, Rosa Lea took a decision and pointed her P-38N at the command bridge of the MOGAMI, then pressed the trigger of her machine guns until their breaches clicked on empty. Her last thoughts were for her parents, seconds before she smashed into the cruiser's bridge, killing everybody in it and enveloping it in a big fireball.

Ingrid saw that tragic scene as she was about to renew her attack on a Japanese destroyer, which was now in serious distress, with its hull and machinery rooms full of bullet holes. Even though she had seen many of her comrade pilots die during the fighting for the Philippines, the death of one of her female fighter pilots brought sadness to her, but also renewed resolve. Seeing as well that a lone Japanese fighter pilot had

somehow managed to take off from Lakunai Airfield despite the intense strafing from her P-38N pilots, she abruptly turned her plane around and headed towards that lone, brave Japanese pilot and his Mitsubishi A6M3 ZERO. That Japanese pilot saw her coming at him and tried to point his fighter for a frontal pass. Against a P-38N, that was a bad decision and the Zero was quickly turned into a flying sieve, with its engine trailing black smoke. Its pilot, still too low to parachute out, then decided to ditch his plane in the harbor. Showing some remarkable piloting skills, that pilot managed to keep his ZERO in one piece and to beach it on the shoreline of the Lakunai Airfield. Lieutenant Junior Grade Saburo Sakai then hurried to jump out of his burning fighter aircraft, swimming to the shoreline with a speed fueled by adrenaline. Once out of the water and standing on the sand and pebbles of the beach, Sakai looked around with disbelief at the scene of widespread destruction around Rabaul. The two light carriers in the harbor were now burning fiercely and were also listing heavily, close to sinking. As for the four heavy cruisers, each of them had been hit by at least one torpedo and by rocket and machine gun fire. A tremendous explosion then swept the harbor and made Saburo Sakai twitch nervously. He then understood that a burning ammunition ship had just blown up. As for the American planes which had caused all that carnage, they were already withdrawing westward, probably towards Port Moresby, pursued by furious but apparently ineffective anti-aircraft fire.

09:24 (PNG Time)

Main tarmac of Wards Airfield

Port Moresby area

Alerted by a radio message from the EC-142E shepherding the returning aircraft of the 99th C.A.G., Major General Kenney and Brigadier General Julian Barnes were waiting on the main tarmac of Wards Airfield when the P-38Ns and RP-38Ns of the Fifinellas started to land one after the other. It quickly became evident to both generals that some of the returning aircraft had been damaged, with one P-38N having to do a belly landing when its landing gear failed to deploy. Thankfully, the pilot of that fighter aircraft was able to walk away from her crashed airplane, to be collected at once by one of the ambulances and fire trucks standing ready to assist. However, the sheer number of aircraft which had been able to return surprised Kenney, who made a remark to Julian Barnes.

"It seems that their casualties were pretty light and not as bad as what I had feared."

"Well, that is only the fighter part of their strike force. Their B-25s may well have suffered much more than their P-38s, sir."

"True! According to Dows' in-flight report, they lost only one aircraft, a P-38, over Rabaul, but had a number of damaged planes returning to Port Moresby. As for the Japanese losses, they are supposedly heavy but a flight of RP-38Ns were ordered by Dows to do a complete post-strike photo coverage of Rabaul and of Simpson Harbor. We will have to wait until those photos have been received, processed and analyzed before we will be able to do an official assessment of this raid."

"I sure can't wait to see those photos, sir. Aah, I believe that Dows' aircraft is now landing: it seems to be intact."

"Let's give her time to taxi her aircraft up to the tarmac, then we will go speak with her."

Ingrid Dows aircraft was actually the last one to land, something Kenny appreciated: that showed that Dows gave priority to her pilots, instead of to herself, something not all air commanders he knew did. Eyeing carefully her P-38N as it wheeled around to park on the tarmac, Kenney and Barnes could see at least a half-dozen holes from bullets or pieces of shrapnel in the aluminum skin of her aircraft. Many other aircraft in her unit also bore similar marks of combat: their mission had been no picnic indeed. The ground maintenance crews hurried forward as soon as the engines were shut down and the propellers had stopped spinning. As they went to work assessing the state of the aircraft, Kenney and Barnes came up to Ingrid's aircraft as she was starting to climb down from her cockpit. Once on the ground, she faced the two generals and came to attention, saluting them. Kenney saluted back before asking his first question to Ingrid.

"How did the mission go, Colonel Dows?"

"Rather well, considering the density of enemy anti-aircraft fire, sir. Only one enemy aircraft, a ZERO, managed to take off during our attack but I promptly shot it down. The other aircraft in Lakaina and Vunakanau Airfields were destroyed on the ground. As for the enemy ships, I expect to be able to claim two light carriers, four heavy cruisers, two light cruisers, six destroyers and about fifteen cargo ships either sunk or gravely damaged. I will however wait until after the post-strike air photos of

Rabaul and of Simpson Harbor have been examined and analyzed before listing my combat claims. As for my unit, we lost one P-38N and sustained varied degrees of damage from anti-aircraft fire to many of my aircraft, including mine. The enemy was slow to react at first, due to the surprise we achieved, but then cranked up some pretty serious volume of ground fire. Also, one of my P-38Ns strafed the Japanese radar station protecting Rabaul and took it out: our EC-142E registered the abrupt cutting off of radar emissions from that station.”

“Your unit has done a great job today, Colonel. Let them rest after they will write their post-mission flight reports. We will speak again after your post-strike air photos will be ready for analysis.”

“My photo specialists will get on that job right away, sir.”

The trio then exchanged salutes again, following which Kenney and Barnes returned to the jeep which had brought them from their headquarters to the tarmac. As their jeep was rolling, Kenney asked a question to Barnes, who was sitting in the back of the jeep.

“So, what do you think, Julian? Did Dows’ report reflect reality or was she embellishing the results of her attack?”

“I would tend to believe her report, sir. The amount of flak damage that her aircraft sustained showed that her unit attacked from low altitude, contrary to what most of our bomber crews do, and braved heavy enemy fire during their attack. I also discretely watched the other arriving female pilots and, while looking sober, they were not shaking with shock or fear and acted professionally: not exactly the myths running around about women in combat being hysterical or crying from fear after a fight. Hopefully, people around this theater of operations and beyond will start taking those women seriously, sir.”

“I hope so too, Julian. I hope so too.”

08:40 (PNG Time)

Monday, September 28, 1942 ‘C’

Command bunker of the First Marine Division

Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands



“What do you have for me this morning, Roy?” asked Major General Alexander Vandegrift, the commander of the 1st Marine Division. The commander of the 1st Marine Air Wing, which was also nicknamed the ‘Cactus Air Force’, Brigadier General Roy

Geiger, seemed conflicted as he handed a decrypted classified message to the big marine general.

"A message received early this morning from Major General Kenney, the commander of the Fifth Air Force, in Port Moresby. In it, Kenney announces that the new 99th Composite Air Group, which is now operating from Port Moresby, attacked Rabaul yesterday morning and caused heavy losses to the Japanese there. The message lists those losses and says that post-strike air photos taken by RP-38Ns prove the extent of those losses, which basically mean that the Japanese in Rabaul have just been emasculated, both in terms of combat aircraft and in terms of heavy warships. That list of Japanese losses is worth a good look, Bill."

Vandegrift gave Geiger a bit of a cautious look while taking the message form offered by his air commander.

"The 99th Composite Air Group? Isn't that the new all-female air unit with no combat experience?"

"It is an all-female unit, but it is now gaining combat experience at a rapid pace, if I can believe General Kenney...and I do believe him. I know Kenney well and he is no bullshitter. For one, such a successful raid on Rabaul yesterday morning would explain why the Japanese air raid we were expecting around noon hour never materialized."

"Hum, you have a point there, Roy. Let's see this list of Japanese losses..."
It took only seconds of reading before Vandegrift made a double take.

"They sank two light carriers, two heavy cruisers, one light cruiser, one destroyer and six cargo ships, on top of seriously damaging two other heavy cruisers, seven destroyers and five cargo ships? They also claim to have destroyed on the ground 91 aircraft, plus shot down one Japanese aircraft and destroyed the Japanese fuel reserves at the Lakaina and Vunakanau Airfields? Is that even possible? And all this for the loss of one, ONE aircraft?"

"Kenney says that the post-strike air photos supported those claims, Alex. I would thus tend to believe these claims by the 99th C.A.G."

"But, how could a bunch of green women produce such a result at such a light cost to them?"

"How? Probably because they are led by our Ace of aces and our most experienced combat pilot, who fought the Japanese in the Philippines both in the air and on the ground. Some of my marines who also fought in the Philippines only swear by her. Now, read the second part of this message: it becomes even more interesting."

Vandegrift did so, to then look up at Geiger after a few seconds of reading.

“General Kenney is offering to assist us by sending to Guadalcanal parts of his helicopter force from the 99th C.A.G.? But Admiral McCain and Admiral Ghormley will never accept that the Fifth Air Force could assert part of the command authority here. Admiral Ghormley already refused earlier this month to even host those women on his bases.”

In response, Geiger shook his head vehemently.

“Read that message with more attention, Alex. General Kenney is not trying to sneak in some of his authority here: he is simply offering to support us, no strings attached. While it would still be under administrative command of the Fifth Air Force and the 99th C.A.G., that helicopter unit would come here to provide close air support and medical evacuation support to our marines, with me directing their efforts. This is in essence an American unit coming in to help another American unit while being ready to follow our orders at tactical level. How could that be considered wrong? Please remember that awful Navy directive ordering its ships to NOT travel to Tulagi and Guadalcanal waters and to NOT resupply our marines or provide escort ships to the transport ships destined to Guadalcanal, all that because the Navy deems the waters around us to be too dangerous to risk its ships. As far as I know, that Navy directive is still in force.”

“It is indeed still in force, Roy.” said Vandegrift, his jaws tightened by a flash of anger. “My officers are still shitting bricks on account of that order. It was bad enough that the Navy abandoned us and ran away after we landed here, taking with it most of our supplies, which were still aboard our cargo ships. You know what? Say yes to General Kenney and let’s greet those helicopters with open arms. And if Admiral Ghormley, who is hiding in his office in Noumea day in and day out, doesn’t like that, then tough! Would you refuse to help an Army unit attacked by the Japanese, just because they don’t belong to our chain of command?”

“Hell no! I am sure on the other hand that the Army would not refuse to help a Navy or Marine unit for that same reason. I am going to send a reply to General Kenney, accepting his offer of assistance. Are you going to inform Admiral Ghormley of that, Bill?”

“And why would I do that, Roy? Did he ask us for our consent to the withdrawal of his ships as they abandoned us? We will treat that helicopter unit as a guest and a

comrade-in-arms. I know little about helicopters but they may just be the one factor that would help us repel those Japs here on Guadalcanal.”

“I fully agree with you on that, Alex. I will keep you posted about anything else I get from the Fifth Air Force.”

It took less than three hours after that before Geiger returned to Vandegriff’s command bunker with a fresh message.

“I just got a new message from General Kenney, confirming what he will send us as help. On top of sending us twelve helicopters, his heavy transport aircraft will also bring in support equipment, vehicles and anti-aircraft guns, plus will bring in for us fresh supplies of fuel, rations and medications.”

“But that’s great!” exclaimed Vandegriff. “Are there any conditions attached to this support?”

“Only that we treat those women as equals to our marines and do not demean or segregate them, while also letting them use their own tactics, which they recently tested in combat in Papua New Guinea.”

“Does that message provide details about what kind of helicopters they are going to send us?”

“Yes, it does! We will get the support of six AH-4 attack helicopters, four UH-2 medium transport helicopters and two UH-1 light liaison and medical evacuation helicopters. An anti-aircraft battery with eight half-track-mounted quad .50 caliber heavy machine guns will also be transported here and will help in the local defense of our airfield. The Fifth Air Force will also send us what it can spare in terms of fuel, ammunition and rations.”

“Hell! That’s already a lot better than what the Navy is giving us. I will certainly greet these women with open arms when they will come here.”

08:58 (Tokyo Time) / 09:58 (PNG Time)

Imperial Japanese Navy headquarters

Tokyo, Japan

Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese Combined Fleet, read twice the message received an hour ago from Rabaul, then looked at the big map of the Pacific laid on top of his operations table with a closed expression.

"Our failure to capture Port Moresby earlier on is now proving quite costly for us, gentlemen, while our soldiers on Guadalcanal seem to have problems fighting both the Americans and the jungle there. If we don't remedy this situation quickly, then we may well risk losing most of the South Pacific...and the war in the long run. Penny-packet efforts will not do anymore. We will have to concentrate all our available forces on reducing Guadalcanal and, most importantly, either destroy or occupy Port Moresby and its airfields."

"But, Admiral, our army units advancing towards Port Moresby along the Kokoda Trail are now in utter rout, having been hit hard by those new American helicopters." replied Vice-Admiral Kondo. "Our army has basically abandoned its effort to take Port Moresby, while our troops on Guadalcanal have failed up to now to take Henderson Field. The Army says that it can't provide more troops than what they already have sent to the South Pacific."

Yamamoto's response to that was made in a harsh tone.

"The Army promised a lot...but delivered precious little but excuses. We will thus have to do the work ourselves. If we can't take and occupy Port Moresby, then we will crush it and its airfields with bombs and naval shells. We have many heavy units which are based in Truk and which have done little lately. Now is the time to use them and others in one mighty punch at Port Moresby. I thus want an operational plan for such a thrust to be prepared for my consideration as quickly as possible, with a strong air component to act in cooperation with our ships."

"HAY!" replied in unison his staff officers assembled around the map table, while bowing to Yamamoto. As Yamamoto was about to walk out of the big operations room, his intelligence officer accosted him and, after a quick bow to him, presented him a classified docket.

"Admiral, I have here some supplementary information about the American attack on Rabaul. Due to its content, I preferred to show it to you after you would have spoken to the rest of our staff, sir."

Yamamoto couldn't help feel some frustration as he took the file presented by his intelligence officer, a very sharp man who spoke fluent English.

"And what could have been so sensitive that my senior staff couldn't know about, Commander Naguro?"

"It is actually more embarrassing than sensitive, Admiral."

Now frankly confused, Yamamoto nonetheless opened the classified file and started reading the short message pinned to it. It took only seconds for him to look back in shock at Naguro.

“American women conducted that raid on Rabaul? Are we sure of that?”

“Yes, Admiral. While the Americans used codewords which our radio operators could not understand, all the voices they heard during the American attack on Rabaul were female voices.”

“But that’s nonsense! The Americans don’t use women in combat.”

“That was true before, Admiral, but not anymore. In that docket, you will find a separate intelligence file about a new female air combat unit that was formed recently and which apparently arrived in Port Moresby only a bit over a week ago. That unit is led by the American Ace of aces, who happen to be a woman and who fought us quite bravely and skillfully in the Philippines, both in the air and on the ground. Most of the information in that file is from American newspaper clips but our agents in Port Moresby heard American and Australian soldiers and aviators there babble in local bars about a bunch of female aviatrixes having arrived with new types of planes, including helicopters. Our agents also saw those new planes and helicopters as they overflew Port Moresby a number of times and say that they looked both very advanced and formidable. That female air unit is called the ‘99th Composite Air Group’.”

Yamamoto took the time to carefully read the whole file before looking back at Naguro.

“Ingrid Dows... I heard about her before, during the battle for the Philippines. By all the accounts I heard, she is a very dangerous fighter pilot and a master air tactician. Her connection with the dead Canadian time traveler, Nancy Laplante, only makes her more dangerous for us, due to what she may have learned from her deceased adoptive mother. I can see now how the Americans were able to take our people in Rabaul by surprise: Dows probably employed new tactics she learned from Laplante.”

Yamamoto then looked back at the file for a few seconds, contemplating the newspaper picture taken of Ingrid Dows as she stood in front of her P-40 while fighting in the Philippines.

“So beautiful and young, yet so dangerous. This girl has the spirit of a true warrior.”

19:53 (Washington Time) / 10:53 (PNG Time)

The Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was working late this evening, as it had become too frequent during this war, when his secretary advised him that General Marshall and Lieutenant General Arnold wanted to see him with important news. Roosevelt told her to let them in, then braced himself, in case that those news would prove to be bad ones. The big smiles harbored by both Marshall and Arnold however reassured him at once.

“So, gentlemen, you seem to have some good news for me this evening?”

“Indeed, Mister President.” answered George Marshall. “We received an action report from the Fifth Air Force, via General MacArthur’s Brisbane headquarters, stating that our new 99th Composite Air Group successfully raided the Japanese in Rabaul yesterday, causing them heavy losses.”

“The 99th Composite Air Group? Isn’t that the new female unit led by our young Ingrid Dows?”

“That’s the one, Mister President!” replied Arnold. “Using new tactics and surprise, our girls managed to sink two light carriers, two heavy cruisers, one light cruiser and seven cargo ships, plus destroyed on the ground nearly a hundred Japanese planes, at the cost of one aircraft lost and a few more aircraft damaged. They also severely damaged two more heavy cruisers and a number of destroyers. Before that attack on Rabaul, their helicopters hit hard the Japanese soldiers advancing on Port Moresby along the Kokoda Trail. Post-strike photos were taken over Rabaul and we received fac-simile copies of them from Brisbane. Here is the file containing those photos and a copy of the post-mission report from the Fifth Air Force, Mister President.” Roosevelt eagerly took the file presented to him by Arnold and opened it, reading first the post-mission report before looking at the dozen or so black and white air photos in the file. After about two minutes going through the pictures, Roosevelt looked up at the two generals, a wide grin on his face.

“This is great news indeed, gentlemen. So, those women delivered on what we were expecting of them?”

“They more than delivered, Mister President.” replied Marshall. “Lieutenant Colonel Dows also demonstrated in combat the validity of the new air tactics she had

been proposing, particularly concerning the tactical handling of helicopter units and how they could provide close air support to our ground troops.”

Roosevelt reminded himself about something, with his smile fading as he looked at Arnold.

“And what was the human cost of this success, General Arnold?”

“While every life lost is a tragedy, Mister President, our losses yesterday can be described as very light, in view of the results. One aviatrix was killed and three others wounded. All of those three wounded women will of course get the Purple Heart, while the family of the pilot killed will also get a Purple Heart, plus a Gold Star for the loss of their daughter. If I may say so, Mister President, this result fully validates our decision to allow our women to serve in combat with the Army Air Corps.”

“I would agree as well on that, General Arnold. I will authorize the award of a Presidential Unit Citation for the 99th C.A.G., for their attack on Rabaul.”

“Thank you, Mister President. Those girls richly earned it.”

“Talking of earning it, it seems that the refusal by the Navy to even allow them to operate from the Navy bases in Esperitu Santos and Efate was quite a stupid mistake.”

“About that, Mister President,” jumped in Marshall, “the Fifth Air Force stated that they have proposed to the First Marine Division in Guadalcanal to assist it by sending to Henderson Field part of the 99th C.A.G.’s helicopter squadron. While our marines are more than ready to accept that help, Admiral Ghormley, in Noumea, is strongly objecting to that, saying that it would constitute an undue interference to his authority as Commander South Pacific by the Fifth Air Force and the Southwest Pacific Command.”

“That Ghormley idiot is at it again?” spat out Roosevelt, irritated. “He keeps hiding in his office aboard a ship anchored in Noumea Harbor while proving completely ineffective against the Japanese. I am thus overriding his objections about the 99th C.A.G. sending a sub-unit in Guadalcanal. Furthermore, I will have a serious talk with Admiral King about replacing Ghormley as the commander of the South Pacific Theater. I don’t want deadweights in charge at the front. Can I keep that file, so that I could show it to Admiral King?”

“Of course, Mister President.”

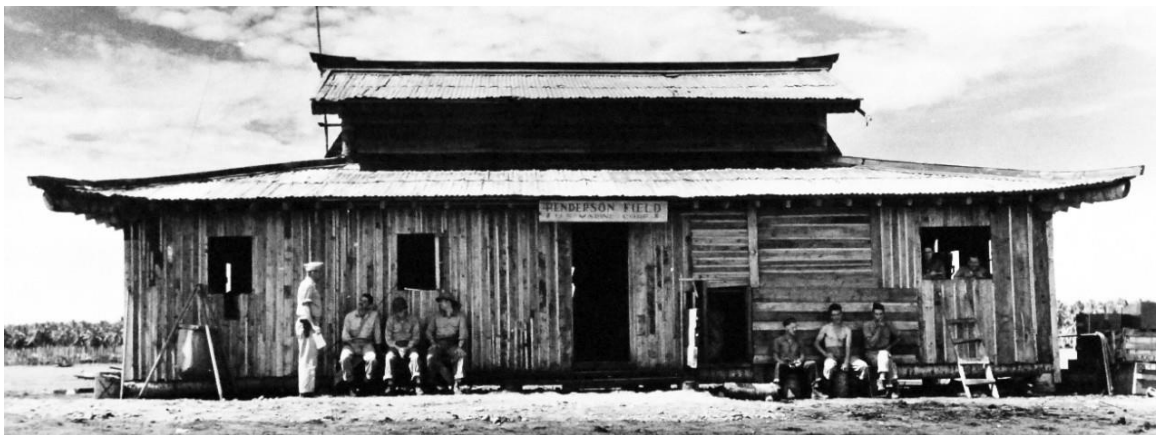
“Then, you are dismissed, gentlemen. Have a good night.”

“You too, Mister President.” replied Marshall, who then saluted with Arnold before leaving the Oval Office. Once they were gone, Roosevelt grabbed his telephone

and called upstairs, at the presidential suite, where his wife Eleanor was listening to the radio.

“Hello, Eleanor? It’s me! I have here at the Oval Office something that you may like looking at...”

CHAPTER 14 – THE CACTUS GIRLS



09:15 (PNG Time)

Wednesday, September 30, 1942 'C'

'The Pagoda', field headquarters of the First Marine Air Wing

Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands

Brigadier General Roy Geiger, who was watching the sky while standing next to the 'Pagoda', the wooden building constructed by the Japanese on a denuded low hill in Henderson Field and which served as his air wing's headquarters, made a grimace: the sky was covered with low gray clouds which had just delivered half an hour of moderate rain, transforming the airfield into a sea of mud. He then made a remark to one of his staff officers standing next to him.

"I hope that this shitty weather won't stop those girls from the 99th from flying in this morning. Apart from us badly needing those supplies they are supposed to be bringing in, we have our wounded and sick, who are waiting inside, waiting to be evacuated."

"I don't know, sir. Visibility is pretty crummy right now and they may find it difficult to find the airfield and land here in the present conditions."

As if to answer their doubts, a signaler then stuck his head out of one of the windows of the crudely-built 'Pagoda'.

"SIR, WE JUST GOT A RADIO CALL FROM THE 99TH C.A.G.: THEY WILL BE HERE IN FOUR MINUTES."

"At least they found their way to here." said the staff officer in response to that announcement. "Frankly, I have my doubts about the flying skills of those girls."

Roy Geiger gave him a sharp look but didn't reply to that. He was very conscious that his pilots and staff had a low regard about women flying in combat but the results of the 99th raid on Rabaul should have convinced them to reevaluate their assessment of these aviatrixes. The problem was that they had not, at least not yet. On his part, while not exactly a fan of seeing women fight, either in the air or on the ground, Geiger was ready to give them some slack, especially when considering that their leader was one woman who had more than proven her mettle in combat in the Philippines.

About two minutes later, Geiger started to hear the distant noise of powerful engines coming from the West. Looking in that direction, he was unable at first to spot any airplane, due to the low cloud ceiling. Then, the direction of that noise shifted, as if the newcomers were turning southward. Alarmed by that and fearing that those aviatrixes were deviating away from Henderson Field, Geiger saw another minute later a dot appear through the clouds, in line with the single runway of the airfield and on approach to it.

"Here they are! Nice navigating on their part, considering this pea soup." He then watched on as the first of eight big aircraft proceeded to land smoothly on the dirt and gravel runway, using only a very short distance to do so and to roll to a near-stop. The size and power of that C-142, which he had never seen before, was truly impressive as he watched it take one of the taxiways leading towards the part of the airfield which had been allotted for use by the 99th C.A.G. As a second C-142 landed, Geiger went to his jeep, parked next to the Pagoda, and sat in it before giving a brief order to his driver.

"Let's go greet those girls in their assigned area, Corporal Studebaker."

"Right away, sir!"

Using a dirt trail which could more correctly be described now as a mud lane, the driver waited until a third cargo aircraft had landed and passed by him before rolling across the runway and then drive towards the large deforested and leveled patch of terrain where there were plans to build a second airfield. Geiger's jeep arrived there in time to see two M16 halftrack vehicles, each armed with a quad .50 caliber heavy machine gun mount and towing a cargo trailer, rolling out of one C-142 via its wide rear cargo ramp. Their disbelief was then compounded by seeing a bulldozer and a big field forklift unit roll out behind the two nine-ton halftracks.

"Dear God! The lift capacity of these C-142 transport aircraft is simply unbelievable." said Geiger while watching two more M16 halftracks, a truck-mounted backhoe and a grader come out of a second C-142. As for his driver, he was smiling while eyeing the young women driving or manning all those heavy vehicles.

"Yeah, and the girls in those vehicles certainly look nice, sir."

While he should have taken to task his driver for making an inappropriate remark, Geiger had to agree with him.

"They certainly are, Corporal Studebaker, but please remember that they came here to fight and support us against the Japanese and not to party with our marines."

"Uh, understood, sir."

"Good! Drive to that 2½-ton field van truck which just came out of that third C-142."

Obedying at once, Studebaker rolled to next to the big truck, where Geiger flagged the woman driving it.

"CAN YOU TELL ME WHO IS THE COMMANDER OF YOUR UNIT? I'M BRIGADIER GENERAL ROY GEIGER, COMMANDER OF THE FIRST MARINE AIR WING."

"CAPTAIN SALLY NOLAN IS IN CHARGE OF OUR FIELD SUPPORT GROUP. SHE IS IN THE JEEP FOLLOWING US."

"THANKS, CORPORAL!"

Geiger then made his driver wait for the jeep following the van truck and signaled to the female officer sitting in that jeep to join him for a discussion. Both jeeps then pulled to a spot out of the way of the vehicles unloading from the C-142s and away from the ear-splitting noise from the cargo plane engines. Both Geiger and the female captain got out of their respective jeeps and met next to Geiger's jeep. The woman gave an apologetic smile to Geiger while offering her hand for a shake.

"Excuse me for not saluting you, sir, but Colonel Dows taught us not to salute in the frontlines, because of the risks from Japanese snipers."

"You commander is a most sensible officer, Captain. So, you are in charge of this ground unit?"

"Only the airfield support part, sir. Our anti-aircraft and security detachments will report to Major Phylis Burchfield, who will be in overall charge of our Guadalcanal detachment. Major Burchfield should arrive in about two hours, with our helicopters

selected by Lieutenant Colonel Dows to serve here. My sub-unit's task is to prepare as quickly as I can this part of your airfield for occupation by our helicopter detachment."

"Well, you certainly came well equipped for the job, Captain. Your inventory of heavy equipment can certainly be described as 'plentiful'."

"General Arnold was quite generous in his allocation of assets to our air group, sir. That had a lot to do with the experimental nature of our unit."

"By experimental, I suppose that you are alluding to the female nature of your unit?"

"Only partly, sir. General Arnold also provided us with the latest equipment and aircraft in order for Lieutenant Colonel Dows to test and validate new air tactics and unit organizations in combat. In turn, Colonel Dows is due to write recommendations and comments for General Arnold about how successful those new air tactics and organizations proved to be in combat."

"I see! And what is Colonel Dows sending to support my air wing, Captain?"

"You will receive six AH-4 HORNET attack helicopters, four UH-2 STORK medium transport helicopters, two UH-1 BEE light liaison and medevac helicopters, one battery of eight M16 anti-aircraft halftracks, one security platoon with eight jeeps mounting .50 caliber machine guns on anti-aircraft mounts, plus my field support detachment. Our last two C-142 which just landed are loaded with ninety tons of aviation fuel, ammunition, spare parts, rations and medical supplies destined for your marines, sir. Once unloaded and with your wounded and sick aboard, our C-142s will return to Port Moresby: they would be too vulnerable here to Japanese mortar and sniper fire."

"Aah, excellent! So, you won't need any material support from my wing, like medical and food services, for the moment, Captain?"

"No, sir! In fact, we brought with us a small medical team of one doctor and two nurses, plus a medical van truck and two field ambulances, which will reinforce your own field hospital. We also have our own mobile kitchen truck, a mobile bakery truck and a field shower unit. You wouldn't want your marines to be exposed to the ugly sight of naked women washing up in some local pond, sir?"

That last sentence, said with a malicious smile, brought a grin on Geiger's face.

"I certainly wouldn't want to hurt my marines' morale with such a spectacle. On my part, I will do my best to keep my marines in line, Captain."

From smiling, Sally Nolan became most serious then.

“Sir, having your marines ogle our women is less of a preoccupation for us than having our women’s professionalism questioned or demeaned, sir. We all enrolled in order to serve our country and we are ready to sacrifice, suffer and die in the process, but we would appreciate if we would be treated as equals rather than as potential field prostitutes. We already have started to suffer losses here in the South Pacific and we simply want our contribution in combat to be recognized, sir.”

Geiger nodded his head in agreement at that.

“And I will do my best to impress that fact on my marines, Captain. Well, I will now let you free to do your job here. I will meet with your Major Burchfield as soon as she will arrive with her helicopters. Thank you again for coming to support my wing, Captain Nolan.”

“It’s a pleasure, sir.”

The two then parted, with Geiger returning to sit in his jeep, where he kept watching the unloading of the C-142s and the work of the women engaged in preparing their base camp. The amount and diversity of their equipment, which included mosquito eradication fumigation units mounted on light trucks and manual chainsaws, with which the women of the 99th proceeded to cut trees in select spots along the treeline, kept making Geiger and his driver jealous.

“Chainsaws, sir? Our marines would have killed to have some of those here, sir.”

“Well, we had some, but they are gone, along with the rest of the supplies and materiel the Navy had on its ships when they fled the local waters with their tails between their legs.” replied Geiger, his tone bitter.

11:49 (PNG Time)

Aircraft dispersal and campsite of the 99th C.A.G.’s ‘Cactus Detachment’

Area of the future Fighter One Airstrip

Half a mile southeast of Henderson Field’s runway

For the expected arrival of the helicopters from the 99th C.A.G., Brigadier General Roy Geiger was accompanied by Major General Alexander Vandegrift, the commander of the First Marine Division, who was most interested in examining those fabled helicopters, none of which had been seen before in the South Pacific. The sky was still partially cloudy but the weather was now notably better than it had been in the morning

and the mud around Henderson Field was starting to dry up...slowly. Both general officers kept looking around them at the women still working diligently to prepare their assigned area for occupation under the direction of Captain Sally Nolan. Vandegrift nodded his head in approval as he watched a bulldozer driven by a woman prepare a series of well-spaced aircraft protective revetments, with other women then covering the inside of those revetments with steel planks, commonly called 'Marston's Mat' or 'PSP' planking.

"Those women certainly know their job, Roy. Our own Seabees¹⁰ wouldn't do much better than them."

"Our Seabees would love to be as well-equipped as these girls, Bill. That makes me even more anxious to see what those 'helicopters' look like. Hopefully, they will make an impression on the Japanese, the painful kind of impression."

"I sure hope so, Roy! Those ninety tons of supplies their C-142s delivered to us this morning did an awful lot of good, that and them evacuating our wounded and sick." Vandegrift, watching a jeep mounting a heavy machine gun as it was about to pass by them while patrolling the perimeter of the airstrip, then raised one hand to signal it to stop before walking to it. The three women aboard the jeep straightened up in their seats but didn't salute him, showing to the marine general that they had been well drilled into the dos and don'ts rules in the frontlines. Stopping near the woman occupying the front passenger seat, Vandegrift then pointed at the carbine she was holding.

"I don't know this model of rifle. Could I examine it, Corporal?"

"Of course, General." replied the young woman, who appeared to be quite tall and strong, before removing the curved magazine on her weapon and clearing its chamber before presenting it to Vandegrift, its bolt held back in the open position so that he could see that the weapon was empty. She then spoke as both Vandegrift and Geiger examined with interest the weapon.

"This is a Winchester M2 carbine in .357 magnum caliber, sir. It is the standard long arm of our unit and is a selective fire weapon, with a thirty-round magazine. It doesn't have the range or punching power of the Garand M1 rifle or of the Springfield 1903 but it was specifically designed for rear-area and support units like us. As you can see, it is very light and handy, sir. Our aircrews are also armed with it but use a variant with a folding stock."

¹⁰ Seabees: Nickname given to U.S. Navy field construction units.

“Very nice indeed. It should prove an excellent weapon for a jungle environment like here, where you normally can’t see the enemy before we see the white of their eyes. I see that you also wear a revolver. Is that also a standard weapon in your unit, Corporal?”

“Yes sir!” replied the woman before unholstering her revolver and unloading it for Vandegrift’s inspection. “This is a Colt .357 magnum Master Shooter six-shot revolver with a six-inch barrel, a commercially-available handgun in the United States. It uses the same ammunition as our carbines, which simplifies a lot our logistics. Lieutenant Colonel Dows went for a revolver instead of the Army regulation Colt 1911 .45 pistol because she knew that many of our smaller women would lack the strength to pull the slike of the Colt 1911 open.”

“Your commander decidedly sounds like a most practical and wise woman, Corporal. Uh, talking of strength, you do look quite strong for a woman, Corporal. What kind of job, if any, did you have before enrolling?”

“I was a professional wrestler, sir.” answered the woman, now smiling. “Our unit security officer, Captain Angie Dickinson, is herself an ex-roller-skating derby girl and is one mean, tough woman. Colonel Dows enrolled many professional athletes like me to serve either as security personnel or as ammunition and aircraft ordnance handlers. You should see the girls of our ordnance ‘tiger teams’, sir: they may not have a sexy body but they could probably crush a male soldier who would prove too adventurous with his advances. By the way, sir, some of our girls are black, while we have a number of Asian-Americans serving as radio intercept operators. Colonel Dows will vouch for the absolute loyalty of all our people, sir.”

Vandegrift, like Geiger, was a bit taken aback by that and gave the corporal a critical look.

“Isn’t the Army still enforcing racial segregation, Corporal?”

“Colonel Dows obtained permission from General Arnold to enlist any woman ready to enroll and having useful skills, sir. Since we are already segregated by sex, we do not further segregate within our air group, sir.”

“And your personnel didn’t get in trouble in the United States because of that, Corporal? Mind you, I am no racist but I know how deeply entrenched certain attitudes are.”

This time, the corporal took a couple of seconds to weigh her answer to Vandegrift.

"Just being female military flyers proved controversial in many places in the United States, sir. Some restaurants and shops refused to serve our women because they were wearing slacks instead of skirts. As for our black women and our Japanese-American girls, they have been very selective about where they went and always went around with some of our white women. Despite of all that, we came to the South Pacific to fight and serve our country, sir."

Vandegrift nodded his head, favorably impressed by the corporal's answer.

"Then, I will pass a general directive to the marines of my division, telling them to respect all of your women and to forget segregation rules."

"Thank you, sir. I promise that we will do our best to support your marines and can vouch that Colonel Dows will say the same to you."

"And I certainly am anxious to meet your famous commander. Here is your revolver and carbine, Corporal. You may continue your patrol."

"Thank you, sir."

The jeep then started rolling again, letting Vandegrift talk in private with his air unit commander.

"Decidedly, this unit is special in many ways. However, I am favorably impressed by what I have seen of them up to now. Let's get closer to that camouflaged big truck-mounted command van: I want to check on the time of arrival of those helicopters."

"By the way, did you notice that they brought a mobile radar unit with them?"

"I did! These girls decidedly have the best the Army Air Force can provide."

Getting back in their jeep, they rolled to a pair of 2½-ton trucks carrying command shelters and sporting long radio antennas. Both trucks were inside protective earth revetments and were covered with camouflage netting, while two trailers, also camouflaged, were situated a few paces away, with one of them carrying a field generator which was powered up. One jeep armed with a heavy machine gun and manned by three women was parked near the rear of the trucks, evidently tasked with protecting them from intruders. Climbing the short ladder of the van marked as being the command post of the unit, Vandegrift knocked on its door before entering the van. Inside, he found a young female lieutenant and three other women wearing non-commissioned ranks manning a number of radios and a battery of field telephones. Despite having been already warned by the corporal on patrol, Vandegrift couldn't help

stiffen on seeing that one of the women was clearly of Asian descent. The female lieutenant noticed that and hurried to speak up.

"Don't worry about Corporal Ann Morita, sir: she is our radio intercept specialist and Japanese language translator for our detachment. She is as American as you and me and speaks with a California accent."

"I see! Are you presently listening to Japanese radio communications, Lieutenant?"

"She is, sir. We also have other radio intercept specialists presently flying over Guadalcanal in one of our command and electronic reconnaissance EC-142E aircraft. By the way, I am Lieutenant Gayle Stevenson, the assistant operations officer of the 777th Helicopter Squadron."

Both generals then shook hands with Stevenson before Vandegrift asked another question.

"Have you intercepted some Japanese radio traffic of interest to date, Lieutenant?"

"We certainly have, sir. Our EC-142E is presently following on radar a Japanese convoy of six transport ships escorted by four destroyers, which is presently heading towards Guadalcanal. From the exchange of radio communications between those ships and Japanese Army units located to the West of Henderson Field, we could say that those ships are probably intent on dropping supplies and reinforcements around Cape Esperance once darkness will have fallen."

That information made Vandegrift's and Geiger's jaws tighten.

"Damn! With our own ships keeping their distances and with our aircraft unable to attack accurately in the dark, we may see yet more Japanese soldiers come ashore tonight."

"They will most probably come ashore tonight, sir, but they may find out that a hot reception is awaiting them. Our attack helicopters are equipped with night vision devices which allow them to fly and fight in the dark. Six of our AH-4 are soon due to arrive as part of our unit detachment."

"And what kind of armament do your attack helicopters carry, Lieutenant?"

"Each of our attack helicopter is armed with one 20 mm cannon and two coaxial .30 caliber medium machine guns mounted in a small chin turret. They also have a total of seven weapons pylons for bombs, rocket pods, napalm canisters, fuel drop tanks and cluster munitions dispensers, for a maximum ordnance load of three tons."

“THREE TONS?!” exclaimed Geiger, stunned. “That’s more than my SBD dive bombers can carry.”

“I know, sir. Our AH-4 are also fast, agile and heavily armored. They should come as quite a nasty surprise to the Japanese, tonight, sir.”

“I hope so! We really can’t afford to have more Japanese soldiers on this island.”

That was when the woman manning the field telephones spoke up after answering one of the phones.

“Lieutenant, our radar has picked up our incoming helicopters and is now guiding them to here. They should be here in about twenty minutes.”

“Excellent! Thanks, Maria.”

Stevenson then opened a drawer next to her and took out eight small booklets. She next gave four booklets each to Vandegrift and Geiger.

“Since our helicopters are a novelty in the Pacific, General Arnold had those small user information booklets printed. They will tell you about the basic specifications of each of our helicopter type, their roles, capabilities and how to load troops and equipment aboard them. Please note that, while our two UH-3 we have in our unit will come in to drop extra supplies and ammunition, they will go back to Port Moresby after their unloading: when on the ground, they make really big and juicy targets for enemy fire.”

“That is quite understandable, Lieutenant.” said Geiger while starting to sift through one of the four booklets given to him. He however quickly strangled on some of the specifications he read.

“Your AH-4 has a total engine power of 4,200 horsepower? That’s as much as one of our heavy four-engine bombers. Why use so much power?”

“Because most of that power is used to lift our helicopters in the air and keep it there, sir. Contrary to conventional planes, which use the lift from their wings to fly, helicopters get their lift from their rotors, so need lots of power to fly. Our helicopter designs, which use some design features imported from the future by Nancy Laplante, have a pair of small wings to help unload their rotors when flying in high-speed cruising mode, which in turn helps them go faster and have a better range. You will be able to view from up close our helicopters once they will have landed, sir. You are of course also invited to tour our helicopters, General Vandegrift.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. I am really anxious to examine your helicopters. From what I can read in your booklet, they have some very interesting capabilities which will be most useful to my marines, especially their ability to move troops quickly from point to point, with no need for a landing strip. Right now, moving through the jungles of Guadalcanal is a truly hard and slow task. With your four medium helicopters, I will be able to move a complete rifle company to anywhere around this island within minutes, something that will give us a precious advantage over the Japanese.”

“And that is one of the main arguments for using helicopters in a tactical manner, sir. However, since they are slower than conventional aircraft, they have to be careful when flying in areas where enemy anti-aircraft guns are present. That is the main reason why our AH-4 is so heavily armored: to survive enemy anti-aircraft fire while on the attack.”

“I can’t wait to show these booklets to my staff officers, Lieutenant: your helicopters will help us change radically our tactics against the Japanese.”

“That is the main reason Colonel Dows sent us here, sir: to give you an edge on the Japanese.”

“And I will certainly thank her once I will finally be able to meet her in person.” replied Vandegrift, now feeling quite optimistic about the future of his unit’s situation.

Some ten minutes later, they started hearing the distant noise of engines and propellers approaching. Going out of the van truck with Gayle Stevenson, the two marine general officers peered at the western sky, trying to see the incoming helicopters. Geiger, having a sharper vision than Vandegrift, spotted first a dozen or so dots far away, flying at fairly low altitude as they approached Henderson Field. A number of aircraft guides then stepped on the PSP-surfaced tarmac area of the field, holding small orange flags. The first to land were two of the biggest aircraft the two marine generals had ever seen, with Gayle Stevenson then commenting on them.

“These are our two UH-3 SKYCRANE heavy lift helicopters, sirs. They are extremely useful in helping to unload heavy or outsized items from cargo ships in Port Moresby, thus are in high demand there. For this trip, they are bringing in a total of twenty tons of extra fuel and ammunition for our helicopters.”

Subjugated by the huge size of the two heavy helicopters, Geiger and Vandegrift watched on as a pair of field forklifts rolled to the back of the UH-3s and then entered

their holds once their rear cargo ramps lowered to the ground, to then roll back out while carrying wooden pallets loaded with either crates or steel barrels.

“By the way, sirs, could we ask you to not simply throw away your empty fuel drums? We could use them to help build more revetments and bunkers by filling them with dirt or sand.”

“We often do the same, Lieutenant, but I will happily give you the empty barrels we will not use.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Then, it was the turn of four UH-2 STORK medium transport helicopters and of two UH-1 BEE light helicopters to land. A collection of light trucks and jeeps then rolled out through the lowered rear ramps of the UH-2, including two Dodge ½-ton field ambulances, making Vandegrift nod his head in approval.

“Those two ambulances will certainly prove useful here, Lieutenant. Up to now, we had only jeeps to move our wounded and sick around.”

“And they will be attached to your field hospital, General, along with our doctor and two nurses who just came in.”

Next to land were six of the meanest-looking machines the two generals had seen, prompting another remark from Stevenson.

“Our six AH-4 HORNET attack helicopters, sir. The Japanese should positively hate them after tonight.”

“I could see why, Lieutenant. My own dive bomber pilots could easily become jealous of your AH-4s.”

“Would you like to go examine them from up close, sirs?”

“Very much so, Lieutenant.” replied Vandegrift. “Lead the way, please.”

With Gayle Stevenson walking ahead of them, the two generals soon got close to the first AH-4 as the two women of its crew were climbing down from their tandem seat’s cockpit, using built-in footholds and hand rails. Both aviatrixes, wearing revolvers at their belts and with M2A2 carbines slung in their back, came to attention but refrained from saluting as Geiger and Vandegrift approached them and stopped in front of them. However, before Stevenson could present them, both marine generals eyed with disbelief the tall brunette who had come down from the copilot-gunner’s seat.

"Miss Hepburn? Is that really you, here in Guadalcanal?" said Vandegrift in a strangled voice, making the actress smile.

"It is me, at least the last time I checked, sir. I was dying to serve our country in this war in another way than to play in movies or do war bonds selling tours, so I enrolled in the Fifinellas. Since my good friend Howard Hughes was giving me some private flying lessons, including on his new AH-4 helicopter, and since I am an expert shot, I requested to join as a copilot-gunner on attack helicopters, so here I am, ready to shoot up the Japanese."

"Well, I'll be! My marines will go bonkers when they will learn that the famous Katharine Hepburn is here as a combat aviatrix."

"Wait till they learn that Hedy Lamarr is presently flying over them in our EC-142E, as its electronic warfare officer, sir."

Geiger's jaw nearly fell to the ground on hearing that.

"Hedy Lamarr, an electronic warfare officer? But does she have any technical qualifications for that job, Miss Hepburn?"

"First, please call me 'Lieutenant Hepburn' rather than 'Miss Hepburn', sir. Second, Hedy is not only a most beautiful woman: she is also a certified genius and inventor who holds an official patent centered on the concept of radio frequency spread spectrum."

"My God! That is indeed some surprising news, Lieutenant Hepburn." said Vandegrift, who then shook hands with Hepburn and with the pilot, young faith Buchner. "Welcome to Guadalcanal, both of you. Hopefully, the Japanese welcome will not be too harsh."

"We will do the welcoming then, sir." replied Buchner, who then pointed at her helicopter. "Would you like to have a tour of my helicopter, sir?"

"We certainly would, Lieutenant."

Before climbing the steps leading up to the gunner's cockpit, Geiger rapped his knuckles on the aircraft skin of the cockpit section. Instead of the clear sound of thin aluminum sheeting, he got the sound of solid metal plating.

"Damn! How thick is the armor on your helicopter, Lieutenant?"

"Thick enough to stop heavy machine gun slugs, sir. It is made of an outer sheet of tempered armor steel over a thick plate of hardened aluminum, the best armor combination to stop projectiles while keeping the weight low. The cockpits, engines compartment, fuel tanks and vital hydraulic lines are protected by that type of armor,

while the canopies are made of bullet-resistant tempered glass. This translates into quite a lot of weight, which explains why our engines need to be so powerful. On the other hand, my AH-4 can carry more ordnance than our average medium bomber, thus can make the Japanese suffer quite a lot with a mix of cannon, machine guns, bombs, rockets, napalm canisters and cluster munitions dispensers.”

“And what are exactly those ‘cluster munitions dispensers’, Lieutenant Buchner?”

“Cluster munitions dispensers are basically long boxes filled with ejection tubes containing a variety of sub-munitions. Each sub-munition is about the size and weight of a 60 mm mortar bomb. On overflying a zone where the enemy is hiding, we trigger our dispensers, which then eject via compressed air their sub-munitions in a quick, timed sequence. Once out of their tubes, spring-loaded airbrake petals open up, slowing the sub-munitions down and making them point downward as they fall. The 300 bomblets can thus form a carpet of explosions and shrapnel covering a surface of up to 600 feet by 150 feet, causing near-certain wounding or killing to anyone inside that zone. That concept came from the future, like the general design of our helicopters, and we already verified their lethality when we attacked the Japanese advancing along the Kokoda Trail, near Port Moresby.”

“Gee, I can’t wait to see the Japanese here on Guadalcanal have a taste of these dispensers.” said Geiger. Gayle Stevenson, who had walked away while Faith Buchner was giving her guided tour, then returned with a woman wearing the rank insignias of a major. The latter stopped at attention near the two marine general officers and spoke up to them.

“Sirs, I am Major Phylis Burchfield, the commander of the 777th Helicopter Squadron. I will lead my unit’s detachment on Guadalcanal.”

In response, both Geiger and Vandegrift shook hands with her while presenting themselves.

“Major General Alexander Vandegrift, commander of the First Marine Division. I am most happy to have your unit here. I was told that a Japanese convoy carrying supplies and reinforcements is approaching Guadalcanal and will arrive after dark. Will your helicopters be able to hit them effectively at night?”

“We certainly can, General. Attacking at night will also impede greatly the Japanese gunners on the destroyers escorting those transport ships, thus will help us avoid heavy casualties on our side. If you were planning to hit that convoy with your

own SBD dive bombers during daytime, then be advised that one carrier escorted by destroyers is following some 300 miles behind that convoy and is providing it with fighter cover. The radars on our EC-142E detected a patrol of four aircraft, probably fighters, flying above that convoy. The convoy is presently some 160 miles from Guadalcanal and should arrive near Cape Esperance at around one or two in the morning.”

Geiger then made a quick mental calculation, with the result not being to his taste.

“Damn! That carrier is beyond the combat radius of my WILDCAT fighters. If my SBDs would attack it, they will have to do it without fighter escort. Could your air wing provide us with some extra fighter cover, Major?”

“We would love to do so, sir, but we would then need to base some of our P-38Ns here in Henderson Field. Unfortunately, while South Pacific headquarters accepted to let my helicopters land here, the Navy is still refusing to allow our aircraft to operate from Guadalcanal, saying that this area is not part of General MacArthur’s jurisdiction. Lieutenant Colonel Dows is however suspecting that the real reason for the Navy’s refusal to let us operate from here is the same as why it refused to let our aircraft land in Espiritu Santo and Efate: it doesn’t want to see a female unit on its bases in the South Pacific.”

Those words made both Geiger and Vandegrift furious, with the latter kicking out in frustration a small pebble near him.

“THOSE NAVY IDIOTS! I HAVE HAD ABOUT IT WITH THEM! First, they flee away while taking our supplies and equipment with them, then order their ships to not enter the waters around Guadalcanal. Now, they would refuse some precious help just because you are a female air unit?”

Roy Geiger, who was as pissed off as Vandegrift, thought for a moment before making a suggestion to his marine commander.

“What if we let the P-38s from the 99th C.A.G. land here on the pretext that they needed to refuel after escorting these helicopters to here? They could then be able to escort my SBDs for one strike before returning to Port Moresby.”

Vandegrift instantly smiled on hearing that.

“That could work! Major Burchfield, how fast could some of your P-38s get here and land to quote refuel unquote?”

Burchfield, harboring a malicious smile, looked at her watch before replying to the marine division commander.

"That's funny, sir: ten of our P-38Ns are presently over Guadalcanal, having escorted in my helicopters. They were due to escort our two UH-3s back to Port Moresby once they would be finished unloading. I can warn them that the unloading is taking longer than expected and that they should land here to refuel. How fast could your SBDs be ready to leave on a strike mission?"

"Roy?" asked Vandegrift while looking at his air commander.

"Well, since we are always on a rather high level of alert, my SBDs are already full of fuel and would only need to be loaded with bombs. My pilots could take off in less than forty minutes."

"And how many operational SBDs do you have available right now, sir?" asked Phylis Burchfield.

"Nineteen at last count. Four more SBDs are presently down for repairs." Burchfield then looked at Gayle Stevenson.

"Call Lady Hawk and tell her that she can land with her fighters and that an escort job is in the works."

"Right away, Major!"

As Stevenson ran back to her command post van, Geiger smiled to Burchfield.

"So, we will finally get to meet the famous Lady Hawk?"

"Correct, sir. She will relish this opportunity to pull out her tongue at the Navy and to help your marines. Remember that her deceased husband was a marine and was killed in the Philippines while she was fighting the Japanese on the ground. She has a lot of respect for the Marine Corps."

"And we will certainly return that respect to your women...all your women. Well, I better go drive back General Geiger to the Pagoda, so that he could prepare his dive bomber squadron for a mission. Come on, Roy!"

Once the two generals were gone in their jeep, Major Burchfield went to see Sally Nolan, who was supervising the unloading and the refueling of her helicopters.

"Sally, have our ground crews ready to refuel our ten P-38s and to arm them with three-inch rocket pods: they are going to escort out marine SBD dive bombers on an anti-ship mission."

"We should be finished unloading in at most ten minutes, Major. I will have our fuel trucks get ready to come forward."

"Excellent! After our P-38s will have been refueled and will fly out, concentrate our ground crews into arming our AH-4s with five-inch rockets, cluster munitions dispensers and napalm canisters: they may have a 'shake and bake' mission late tonight. On my part, I will go brief our helicopter crews and tell them to go rest in advance of a night combat mission."

About seven minutes later, the first of eight P-38Ns started landing on Henderson Field's runway, to then use the taxiway linking it to the area occupied by the helicopters of the 99th C.A.G. The two remaining P-38Ns which had escorted in the helicopters stayed over the airfield and departed once the two big UH-3s had taken off to return to Port Moresby. As soon as Ingrid Dows' fighter aircraft had stopped on the PSP-covered tarmac and shut down its engines, Phylis Burchfield went to talk to Ingrid as she was climbing down from her aircraft.

"Our refueling teams will start refueling your fighters at once, while our mechanics will check them out. Are you going to want to carry rockets for your escort mission, Colonel?"

Ingrid nodded her head at that.

"Four of our girls will carry three-inch rocket pods: Florene Miller; Caro Bayley; Betty Clark and Virginia Disbrow. Me and the three remaining pilots will stay in pure interceptor mode: we will have to shoot down a few Japanese fighters during this mission. Can I have a jeep to drive me quickly to the 'Pagoda'? I would like to confer with Brigadier General Geiger in order to coordinate our mission together."

"You certainly can, Colonel." answered Phylis before turning around and whistling out loud while making signs to the nearest security patrol jeep. That jeep then sped to near the P-38N before coming to a stop to let Ingrid jump in it. The female driver then sped away towards the low hill on which the headquarters of the First Marine Air Wing stood.

Three idle marine fighter pilots sitting on the benches lining the outer walls of the 'Pagoda' watched Ingrid's jeep approach at high speed, a black woman at the wheel and two white women also in it.

"Hey! Look at that: a nigger girl here in Guadalcanal." said one of the pilots, who was from Mississippi. Another pilot, who was from Maine, threw him a critical look.

"If she was willing to come here and fight, then I don't care what color that girl is, Lomax."

"But the Army is supposed to be segregated." objected the said Lomax.

"Maybe you guys in the South care about that but I don't. We have enough on our hands fighting the Japanese without also fighting each other."

The incoming jeep soon stopped in front of the Pagoda, near the three pilots. One of the three women on board, a very beautiful and very young woman, then stepped out of the jeep and entered the wooden building at a hurried pace, followed by the eyes of the three male pilots.

"Wow! She's quite a looker." remarked Lomax, attracting another acerbic reply from the pilot from Maine.

"Yes, but she also wears the rank insignias of a lieutenant colonel, so I would be careful what I would say in her presence if I were you, Lomax."

"Her, a lieutenant colonel? That can't be: she's still a teenager."

The female sergeant sitting in the jeep then cut in with a warning tone in her voice.

"That was Lieutenant Colonel Ingrid Dows, our Ace of aces, who has 73 air victories to her credit, so I would suggest that you behave around her, mister."

Lomax was about to fire back a retort at that but the pilot from Maine took hold of his right arm.

"Calm down, Lomax, and start thinking with your brain, instead of with your ass."

"Hey, I'm not in the habit of letting a woman telling me what to do."

The third pilot, who had a higher rank than Lomax, then spoke up.

"You better shut up right now and stop saying stupidities, Second Lieutenant Lomax, before I report you to Major Galer. Maybe you should go back to your tent now."

Understanding that this 'suggestion' was more like an order, Lomax got up with a grumble and walked away towards the tent camp of his squadron, situated some 200 meters away. The captain who had last spoken then got up as well and went to the jeep, where he smiled to the female sergeant while presenting his right hand for a shake, which she took.

"Hi! I'm Captain Phil Caldwell, from the VMF-224 Marine Fighter Squadron. I fly a F4F WILDCAT. To what unit do you girls belong?"

"I am Sergeant Ann Morrow. We are from the 99th Composite Air Group, a new, all-female air combat unit presently based in Port Moresby. Our detachment was sent

here to support your marines on this island. However, we will stay here on Guadalcanal for only a few weeks before returning to Port Moresby.”

“I see! Uh, don’t take my question wrong but I thought that black service people had to serve in segregated units, yet you have at least one black woman in your unit.”

“Well, our unit is already segregated on the basis of sex, so Colonel Dows convinced General Arnold to let her enroll women of any ethnicity in her new air unit. Be aware that we also have a Japanese-American girl from California here in our ranks, who serves as a radio intercept operator and Japanese language translator. She’s a really nice girl and is completely loyal to the United States, so could you please tell your comrades not to shit on her when they will see her, sir?”

“Alright, I will pass the word, Sergeant. And, by the way, welcome to Guadalcanal.”

“Thank you, sir!”

Having little to do at the moment and finding it pleasant to talk with this pretty young woman, Caldwell switched to a more mundane conversation with her, while the black woman driving the jeep kept to herself, having learned in her youth in Alabama to not insert herself in a conversation between two white people unless invited to.

A bit over fifteen minutes later, Ingrid came out and returned to her jeep. Caldwell stepped aside to let her sit in the vehicle and was about to salute her when Ingrid stopped him with a sign of one hand.

“No saluting in the frontlines, please, Captain.”

She then gave a short order to the driver.

“Let’s go back to the detachment’s operations van, Private Willis.”

“Yes ma’am!”

As the jeep drove away, Caldwell returned to sit on the bench, next to the pilot from Maine.

“Well, this place could become a bit more pleasant with those women around, don’t you think, Roger?”

“They are certainly like candies for the eye, Phil. It however remains to see how they will adapt to this hell hole.”

Just as he said that, their squadron leader, Major Robert Galer, stuck his head out by one of the windows of the Pagoda and shouted at them.

“GO GET READY TO TAKE OFF, MEN: WE ARE GOING OUT ON AN ESCORT MISSION.”

“Oops! Time to earn our doe.” said Phillip Caldwell while getting up from his bench.

Once her jeep stopped next to the detachment’s operations van truck, Ingrid got out of it and thanked Morrow and Willis before entering the large tent sitting next to the truck and which served as a briefing place. In it, she found her seven fighter pilots waiting for her instructions on their incoming mission. Not wasting time, she went at once to the map board set on a tripod and faced her pilots.

“Alright ladies, here is the latest poop. The marines will start taking off in some twenty minutes with nineteen SBDs, which is all the dive bombers they have in operational order right now, plus fourteen WILDCAT fighters and seven Navy TBF torpedo-bombers. Brigadier General Geiger and I agreed on the need to attack both the incoming troop convoy and the carrier providing it with air cover. Since the Japanese troop convoy is within range of the marine WILDCAT fighters, they will escort fourteen of the SBDs in an attack centered on the troop-carrying transport ships. The five remaining SBDs and the seven Navy TBF AVENGERS will be escorted by us and will attack the carrier JUNYO.”

Ingrid then looked directly at Captain Florene Miller, the leader of Gold Flight.

“Florene, you and your three pilots will attack the destroyers escorting the JUNYO, using your three-inch rockets, so that they don’t interfere with the attack by our SBDs and TBFs. Me and Shirley, Irene and Claire will stay high, in case some Japanese fighters manage to launch in the air before our attack begins or if we encounter a fighter cover over the carrier. Our EC-142E will guide both of our attacking groups to our objectives and will jam the Japanese radio frequencies. The weather over those Japanese ships is described as moderate, so we can expect to see Japanese fighters in the air. Remember your tactical classes I gave you: do not engage in dogfights and use to the maximum diving attacks and frontal gunnery passes while keeping your speed high. As well, I intend to have two of our UH-1 light helicopters be guided by our EC-142E to waiting stations near the locations of the two enemy groups of ships, ready to fish out of the water any of our aircrews which may get shot down. The latest positions, course and speed of the two enemy groups has already been marked

on this map. Prepare your navigation maps, then get in your planes and be ready to taxi to the Henderson Field runway. Let's move, girls!"

12:03 (Solomon Islands Time)

Bell UH-1 BEE light helicopter

In the air over the sea, northeast of Henderson Field

To say that Captain Juanita Redmond was nervous as the Bell UH-1 BEE light helicopter she was in flew away from Henderson Field would have been an understatement. While not actually scared, her mission she was in today with Major Phylis Burchfield and Captain Betty Haas, who were piloting her helicopter, promised to be very risky indeed. Basically her helicopter was tasked with taking a loitering station over the sea some 400 miles away to the North-northwest, under radio and radar guidance from the EC-142E command and electronic surveillance aircraft loitering to the Northeast of the Solomon Islands. There, they would stand by to respond and help any American flyer who would be shot down during the incoming attack on the Japanese aircraft carrier and its escorting destroyers. Another UH-1 BEE, piloted by Lieutenant Virginia Shannon and Second Lieutenant Patricia Chadwick and with Nurse Sally Burghoff aboard, was due to leave Henderson Field in about half an hour, in order to go take a waiting station near the anticipated interception point with the Japanese troop convoy, which was much closer to Guadalcanal than with the interception point of the Japanese aircraft carrier.

With their flight due to take close to two hours, Juanita did her best to slow her pulse by reviewing the content of her medical kit bag, then by watching the sea they were flying over. Thanks to the radio headset she was wearing, she could hear the occasional short calls from the air controller aboard the EC-142E giving them course corrections and updates on the relative positions of the enemy ships. Her UH-1 was going to actually stay away from the path of the Japanese troop convoy and its fighter cover by flying well off to the West of it, until it would get to their assigned loitering station. As with all air operations led by Ingrid Dows, the separate American forces were going to time their departures and attacks so that they would hit the Japanese simultaneously and thus preserve surprise until the last minute. Despite her confidence in Dows' competence as an air combat leader, Juanita still expected for her services as

a nurse to be called on today, as a Japanese carrier escorted by destroyers could not be described as 'easy targets'.

After two hours and twelve minutes of flying, her UH-1 reached its assigned waiting station under the guidance of the EC-142E. Seeing that the sea was calm, Major Burchfield decided to land on the surface in order to put her engine at idle power and thus save fuel, helped in this by the two large floats equipping the helicopter. Thankfully, Juanita was fairly resistant to seasickness, thus was not affected by the balloting of her helicopter once it was sitting on the waves. Then, some fifteen minutes later, they got a new radio call from the EC-142E.

"Gold Bee One, from Oracle One, Package Alpha is about to hit the jackpot. Stand by for possible calls for help, over."

"Gold Bee One, acknowledged, out." replied Phylis Burchfield, who then powered back up her Pratt & Whitney radial engine and took off from the sea surface.

"Time to tango, girls!"

Some 25,000 feet above the sea and twelve miles away from the Japanese carrier and its four escorting destroyers, Ingrid visually swept the sky, searching for any Japanese fighter which could have been flying as cover above the JUNYO. Not seeing any, she then got on the radio and sent a general message to her female pilots and to the aircrews of the SBDs and TBFs she was escorting.

"All Alpha aircraft, from Lady Hawk: the sky is free of enemy fighters. You may start your attack now, over."

She then got in succession three separate acknowledges: one from her P-38N flight leader, one from the marine SBD dive bomber group and one from the leader of the Navy torpedo bombers. With no opposing enemy fighters to deal with, Ingrid then dove with three of her pilots on the four destroyers escorting the JUNYO, intent on strafing them with her heavy machine guns in order to neutralize as many of their anti-aircraft gunners as possible and so make it easier for the SBDs and TBFs to conduct their attacks. The combined fire from her eight .50 caliber heavy machine guns, amounting to close to a hundred heavy slugs per second and with Ingrid's aim helped by the stream of tracer bullets from her guns, quickly started decimating the Japanese anti-aircraft gunners, who stood in open-air, unarmored gun mounts. Walking her fire along the length of the destroyer she was targeting; she completed her first pass with a rain of

slugs aimed at the ship's bridge and at the forward five-inch gun turret. Ingrid was rewarded by the sight of one TBF AVENGER, flying very low and aiming at the carrier JUNYO, which was able to cross the path of the destroyer without being fired at. That, in her mind, was the essence of a fighter pilot's true usefulness: to assist friendly aircraft, ships and troops on the ground. Looking quickly around her as she regained altitude after her dive, she saw that her P-38 pilots, despite being still fairly raw, were doing a more than respectable job of their own while strafing the destroyers. Her four P-38Ns armed with five-inch rockets had taken a lead ahead of the low-flying TBF torpedo-bombers and were now firing their rockets in the flanks of the unlucky JUNYO. Those rockets, whose warheads were in essence five-inch naval gun shells, easily pierced the hull of the Japanese carrier and exploded inside, devastating its aircraft hangar and also taking out many of the anti-aircraft guns of the JUNYO. The carrier was already in serious trouble when six torpedoes from the TBF AVENGERs slammed into its port flank, raising huge geysers of seawater. Five one-thousand-pound bombs launched by the SBD dive bombers then bracketed the Japanese carrier, with one managing a direct hit on the JUNYO. However, that lone bomb proved devastating, as it fell through the open forward aircraft elevator and exploded deep inside the ship. With its forward bomb magazine pierced, a huge explosion then broke the JUNYO in two while sending out a powerful blast wave. Unfortunately, that blast wave caught the SBD which had dropped that faithful bomb as it was recovering from its dive. Parts of the plane's stabilizers and vertical rudder were ripped off, making the SBD nearly impossible to control. The pilot of that dive bomber, by an impressive demonstration of flying skills, managed to regain some control of his plane and to not splash down into the sea. Lieutenant John Carver however understood that he was not going to continue flying for long and turned towards the South while calling for help on his radio.

"Mayday! Mayday! This is Blue Six: I am heavily damaged and will need to ditch soon, over."

To his relief, the female voice of the air controller aboard the EC-142E command and surveillance aircraft answered his call at once.

"Blue Six, this is Oracle One. Fly south and as much away from the enemy ships as you can. Angel One will now head towards you, over."

"Thank God for angels!" replied Carver, unintentionally turning his reply into a pun. His left side aileron then gave up and flew off, reminding him of how damaged his

poor aircraft was. His SBD started going down into a spin but again, by a miracle, he managed to level off his plane just before he was about to hit the water.

"BRACE FOR IMPACT, FRED!" he shouted to his rear gunner a few seconds before the belly of his SBD touched the water. Keeping the nose of his aircraft up for as long as he could, John Carver slid for a couple of seconds over the surface of the sea before the nose of the SBD hit the water, brutally braking the aircraft and causing Carver's head to hit hard his instruments dash. The SBD was already in the process of sinking by the time Carver's rear gunner, Corporal Elie Shomron, shook him hard.

"COME ON, JOHN! WAKE UP! WE ARE SINKING!"

Not getting any reaction from Carver, Shomron bent over the unconscious pilot and undid his seat harness, then pulled him up with the strength of despair, then pulled the inflation chord of both Carver's floatation vest and of his own vest. Both men then burst at the surface as their SBD disappeared in the depths of the South Pacific. Making sure first that Carver's head was above water, Shomron then looked quickly around him to assess their situation. He was not too pleased to see that they were less than one mile from one of the Japanese destroyers: way too close for comfort for him. However, he regained hope on seeing after a minute a tiny dot approaching while flying low over the water: the rescue helicopter must have seen their SBD crash. By then, his pilot was slowly regaining consciousness but was obviously still under shock.

"Wha...what happened? Where are we?"

"We were able to get out of our plane before it sank and we are now taking a bath in the Pacific."

"My...my head...hurting like hell."

"No wonder, John: you kissed your instrument panel hard." replied Shomron, who then noticed blood coming out of Carver's ears, which was not a good sign. Elie debated for a second about using or not his signal pistol to help guide the rescue helicopter to him but decided against: that could also attract the Japanese' attention to him. It was now up to the crew of that helicopter to be sharp.

"I SEE TWO YELLO DOTS ON THE SURFACE, AT ONE O'CLOCK!"

"I SEE THEM TOO! GET AS CLOSE TO THEM AS YOU CAN AND THEN LAND ON THE WATER, BETTY. JUANITA, GET READY TO GREET PASSENGERS." Phylis Burchfield then left her copilot's seat and went into the cabin to slide open the right-side door, then sat on the ledge after hooking a safety line to a handrail. Their

helicopter was only a few meters from the two American flyers floating at the surface of the sea when a frightening 'WOOOSH' was heard, followed by the splash of a shell in the water some 200 meters behind the UH-1.

'SHIT! THAT DESTROYER SPOTTED US! BETTY, CALL FOR FIGHTER SUPPORT WHILE WE FISH THOSE GUYS OUT.'

"ON IT!"

Now concentrating solely on rescuing the two airmen, Phylis ignored the few shells which followed, each other closer than the previous one. One of the men then shouted to her.

"MY PILOT BANGED HIS HEAD HARD. HE MAY BE SUFFERING A COMMOTION."

"THEN, WE WILL PULL HIM OUT FIRST. GET HIM NEXT TO OUR RIGHT-SIDE FLOAT AND I WILL THEN PULL HIM OUT. JUANITA, GIVE ME A HAND FOR THAT: THAT GUY LOOKS QUITE BIG AND HEAVY."

As the three women concentrated on saving the two male aviators, they didn't notice at first as no less than three P-38Ns dove on the Japanese destroyer shooting at the UH-1 BEE, raining .50 caliber slugs on it and basically turning it into Swiss cheese, piercing hundreds of holes in its thin hull plates and piercing as well its steam boilers, high-pressure steam pipes and its three main gun turrets. One of the torpedoes stored in the deck torpedo tubes was then triggered by a slug and exploded, in turn initiating the three other 610 mm heavy torpedoes in its mount. The powerful explosion then broke the destroyer in two, with both halves sinking in less than two minutes.

Aboard the UH-1, Juanita started treating John Carver as soon as he was aboard and on the stretcher laid on the floor of the cabin, as Phylis helped Elie Shomron to climb in. The moment both aviators were safely inside, Phylis slid the side door closed and shouted an order at the pilot.

"THEY'RE IN! TAKE OFF AND HEAD TO HENDERSON FIELD AT BEST SPEED, BETTY."

Haas did not reply to that, instead pushing her radial engine to maximum power and pulling her UH-1 off the surface of the sea before turning it southward. Phylis looked with concern at Shomron while patting his shoulder in a friendly manner.

"You're okay, Corporal? Any wounds?"

"None, ma'am, but I am worried about my pilot."

"Captain Redmond is a qualified nurse, Corporal. Your pilot will survive."

"How long before we get to Henderson Field, ma'am?"

"About two hours. Juanita, will your patient need to be medically evacuated out of Guadalcanal?"

"I am afraid so, Major: he suffered a severe head commotion and I am not sure that the marines' field hospital is equipped for that kind of condition."

"Then, I will call in advance to arrange a quick evacuation by air from Henderson Field. Corporal, to where do your unit normally sends its wounded for treatment?"

"To Espiritu Santo, ma'am: there are two Navy field hospitals there. If the cases prove too serious, they are then flown to Australia."

"Then, I will call to arrange a quick refueling stop in Henderson Field, following which we will fly your pilot to Espiritu Santo."

"You have the range to fly that far, ma'am?"

"Yes, we do, but it will be near the end of our autonomy and we will thus need to refuel in Espiritu Santo before returning to Henderson Field. You will of course step out at Henderson Field before we leave with your pilot for Espiritu Santo."

Elie Shomron then looked with sadness at John Carver.

"Hopefully, you will be able to save him: he is a good man and an even better pilot."

"We will do everything humanely possible for that, Corporal."

16:11 (Solomon Islands Time)

Henderson Field, Guadalcanal

Brigadier General Roy Geiger watched with pride and happiness as his pilots were landing back from their mission against the carrier JUNYO, some two hours after his other pilots had returned from their own successful mission against the Japanese troop carriers. For the loss of three SBDs and two WILDCATS, his force and the women of the 99th C.A.G. had sunk the JUNYO, two destroyers and all six of the troop transport ships, thus eliminating the immediate threat from the possible landing of more Japanese troops on the island tonight. Of his eight downed aviators, five were now declared missing and presumed dead, while three more had been fished out of the sea by the rescue helicopters of the Fifiellas. As the last of the planes from the strike mission

against the JUNYO was landing, Geiger spotted the dot of the approaching UH-1 carrying the two airmen of the SBD downed near the JUNYO.

‘Those helicopters decidedly proved to be a godsent for us today. We should get a few of them for the Marine Corps...and fast!’ he thought before going to his jeep, parked in front of the Pagoda.

“Let’s go to our field medical station, Corporal.” He ordered to his driver, who simply nodded his head before starting his engine and putting his jeep in gear. They arrived near the small medical complex of tents just before the UH-1 landed next to it. Getting out of his jeep, Geiger went to the divisional surgeon, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Meredith, who had been waiting for the arrival of the helicopter.

“You are going to check on Lieutenant Carver, Doc?”

“Yes, General! I want to make sure by myself that Carver’s commotion is severe enough to justify his air evacuation at once to Espiritu Santo. It is important to not move severe commotion cases more than needed. If I deem that Carver must go, then I will accompany him to Espiritu Santo, to ensure that he gets quick treatment there.”

“I agree with you on that, Doc. By the way, what do you think of those helicopters as life savers for our wounded?”

“That they are worthy of their nickname of ‘Angels’, General. If we had a few of them in the two preceding months, we could have saved many of our men. I can’t believe that the Navy doesn’t have at least some of them yet.”

“That’s probably something I will have to write about in my next letter to the Corps Commandant. Ah, I see a fuel bowser truck from the 99th approaching to refuel their helicopters. These women decidedly are proving to be quite efficient, both in the air and on the ground.”

Both men had to shield their faces with their hands when the UH-1 landed, spraying dust and mud around with its rotors. Once the helicopter’s engine was shut off, Geiger and Meredith went to it in a hurried pace. As the marine surgeon examined Lieutenant Carver, Geiger shook hands with Phylis Burchfield and Betty Haas.

“Thanks a lot for your heroic rescue, ladies.”

“We only did our duty, General.” replied Phylis, making Geiger nod his head.

“Yes, but you did it in exemplary fashion, Major. I wish that I could keep your unit here for good.”

“I suspect that General MacArthur would object to that, along with Lieutenant Colonel Dows, sir. Our air group is quite heavily involved right now in helping to push

back the Japanese around Port Moresby and, without bragging, we are making a marked difference there with our planes and helicopters. However, I will talk with Colonel Dows to see if she would be ready to loan you the long-term services of two of our UH-1 helicopters, to help you with rescue and medical evacuation work.”

“That would indeed be fantastic, Major. Please keep me posted on that matter.”

“I will, sir.”

Meredith then spoke up, his expression most sober.

“Carver will need to be evacuated at once, General. His case is quite serious.”

“Then, let’s do that! Corporal Shomron, you may climb out now: I would like to listen to your post-mission report. I was told that your SBD actually sank the JUNYO, right?”

“Correct, sir. Lieutenant carver’s bomb went right through an open aircraft elevator and exploded deep inside the JUNYO, touching off a magazine and blowing up that carrier, sir.”

Geiger nodded his head at that.

“Then, it is even better that you were saved by this helicopter, Corporal. I will ask you to go pass a quick physical check here at the medical station before going back to report to your squadron leader.”

“Yes sir!”

The bowser truck from the 99th C.A.G. was already starting to refuel the AH-1 as Shomron went inside the medical station for his checkup. Less than six minutes later, the helicopter was back in the air, with Lieutenant Colonel Meredith aboard, and headed southeast towards Espiritu Santo. Geiger watched it go for a moment, then went back to his waiting jeep: he was going to have to write quite a few action reports and messages during the hours to come.

22:08 (Solomon Islands Time)

Admiral Yamamoto’s cabin, battleship YAMATO

Truk Harbor, Caroline Islands, Central Pacific

Admiral Yamamoto was about to undress and go to bed when someone knocked on the door of his cabin, which was in reality a large suite.

“ENTER!”

One of his senior staff officers then opened the door and stepped inside before coming to rigid attention and saluting.

“A message from Rabaul, concerning the troop convoy headed to Guadalcanal and about the carrier JUNYO. Unfortunately, it is bad news, Admiral.”

Taking the message offered to him and reading it quickly, Yamamoto did his best to keep a neutral expression but still showed some frustration as he looked up at his staff officer.

“Our troop convoy destroyed and the JUNYO sunk, and this well before they were within sight of Guadalcanal? How could the Americans know so precisely how to find and then strike our ships? Even their vaunted radars don’t have enough range to detect ships further than a few dozen miles? And I was not aware that the Americans had P-38s and especially helicopters in Guadalcanal.”

“How the Americans were able to spot and locate our ships is still a mystery to us, Admiral. Maybe American submarines on patrol spotted them. As for helicopters, the only place they were recently signaled in the South Pacific was around Port Moresby, where they are being operated by that newly arrived all-female air unit.”

“That same female unit which operates P-38s and which savaged Rabaul only a few days ago...” noted Yamamoto while frowning. “Decidedly, those women are turning out to be real pests. This is yet another reason why we need to fumigate that nest of hornets...fast! I want the preparations for Plan ‘Ka’ to be accelerated, Commander. I want this ship and the other ships of this task force to be ready to sail out of Truk no later than tomorrow night.”

“HAY!” replied the commander while bowing to Yamamoto before leaving his cabin.

01:38 (Solomon Islands Time)

Friday, October 02, 1942 ‘C’

Patrolling AH-4 HORNET attack helicopter

Flying low over the west bank of the Matanikau River

West of Henderson Field, Guadalcanal

Their helicopter had barely started flying over land, having made a discrete night approach from the sea, when Katharine Hepburn, sitting in the copilot-gunner’s seat of

the Hughes AH-4 HORNET, spoke up to Faith Buchner, who was piloting their helicopter.

"Slow down further, Faith: I am getting lots of thermal human signatures on my cameras."

"Already? We just crossed the coastline. What are you seeing?"

"I have over a hundred men deployed around some kind of defensive position near the mouth of the Matanikau. Some are in what appears to be bunkers made of trees and dirt."

"Alright, I am slowing down to seventy miles per hour. Mark that position on your map."

"...Done! You can now continue up the west bank of the Matanikau River."

"Let's hope that the Japs don't have anti-aircraft guns in this sector: at our present slow speed and low altitude, we make a nice, loud target. Thankfully the night is quite dark: they will have problems aiming at us accurately."

"True! I... WAIT! I now see what looks like tanks, hidden a bit behind that defensive position."

"Tanks? Our marines will certainly be interested in knowing about them. How many are there?"

Hepburn, pivoting her remotely-controlled chin gun turret, which mounted their thermal cameras and low-level light night vision scopes, took a few seconds before answering.

"...four...five... I can see five of them, hidden among the trees. I can also see a Jap standing next to one of the tanks: those things appear to be quite small, about the size of our own marines' M5 light tanks. I am now marking their position on my map."

That was when some of the Japanese on the ground, alerted by the rotor and engine noises from their helicopters, started firing their rifles and machine guns at the sky. However, they obviously were aiming blind, as their fire proved to be wildly inaccurate.

"Oops! Time to find a quieter spot, Faith. Too bad that I can't fire back at them right now."

"Well, we are supposed to be on a reconnaissance mission, not a strike one, Katharine." replied the petite Faith Buchner, who took up some speed in order to leave that zone and to continue their reconnaissance of enemy positions along the west bank of the Matanikau River, which ran some four miles west from Henderson Field and presently constituted the frontlines in this sector.

During the next few minutes of flying over the jungles along the west bank of the Matanikau, the two women were able to fairly accurately map the dispositions of the Japanese on the ground, locating in particular the positions of half a dozen small artillery howitzers dug into firing positions a few hundred meters west of the river. Once they stopped seeing Japanese thermal signatures along the Matanikau, Faith decided to turn eastward and fly along the southern flank of the American defensive perimeter of Henderson Field. While she expected to spot nothing more than a few isolated Japanese or American patrols in the dense jungle and difficult hilly terrain in that sector, Faith was surprised when Katharine spoke up, alarm in her voice.

"Hey, I can see long files of thermal signatures apparently following along some jungle trail running east-west. With the numbers I see, those are not mere patrols." Checking quickly her map and then looking southward towards Mount Austen, in reality a group of prominent hills and plateaus to the southwest of Henderson Field, in order to confirm her position in the dark, Faith frowned as she felt some foreboding.

"But we are over a mile south of the defensive perimeter of Henderson Field. Our marines didn't signal any sizeable Japanese force south of their lines."

"Well, I can see hundreds, if not thousands of thermal signatures snaking in single file in the jungle below us and advancing eastward. Continue on this heading, Faith: I want to see where the head of that column is."

"Okay! I am also slowing down again, so that you can more easily spot those Japanese. In the meantime, I will radio back to our detachment and signal this." Activating her radio microphone, Faith then used a collection of prearranged codewords to describe what they had found.

"Black Widow Nest, this is Stinger Three, important message, over."

"Go ahead, Stinger Three." replied within two seconds Lieutenant Gayle Stevenson, who was on night watch duty in the operations van of their detachment.

"Black Widow Nest, I am now flying eastward over the jungle, about one mile south of the perimeter held by Jarhead Five and I am detecting hundreds of ant signatures advancing eastward along what looks like a jungle trail, over."

That message obviously startled Stevenson, who took a few seconds before responding.

"Stinger Three, can you confirm the most eastward point of advance of that contact, over?"

"We are in the process of finding that out, Black Widow Nest. I will contact you back once we will have that information, out."

Faith then slowed down her AH-4 further and spoke to Katharine, whose seat was forward and lower than her own seat in the armored cockpit section of their helicopter.

"Katharine, we are to find the easternmost point of advance of that Jap column. I will fly slower in order to facilitate your observation job. Guide me, so that I could veer left or right and stay over that trail."

"Got it! Veer to one o'clock now."

As the two women did their reconnaissance work, Gayle Stevenson jumped on the field telephone linking her operations van with the command bunker of the First Marine Division, where a marine captain answered her call.

"Captain Ritter, division command post!"

"This is Lieutenant Stevenson, at the 99th detachment's operations van in Fighter One. One of our patrolling helicopters just spotted a long column of Japanese soldiers advancing eastward along jungle trails about one mile south of the perimeter portion of the Fifth Marine Regiment. It is now trying to find out how far east that column has advanced at this point. Our helicopter also signaled that there were hundreds of Japanese soldiers in that column."

The voice of the young marine officer then reflected skepticism as he replied to Gayle.

"Your girls must be mistaken, Lieutenant: none of our patrols saw Japanese soldiers in that sector, nor did the local natives report anything south of our lines."

Gayle refrained with difficulty her frustration then: too many marines here in Henderson Field still didn't take the women of the detachment seriously despite what they had accomplished to date.

"Well, your marines and the natives don't have thermal cameras and night vision goggles, Captain, while our helicopters do. You better take this sighting report seriously."

"Alright, I will report your sighting once Colonel Pate will get back in the morning."

The marine officer then put down his receiver, cutting the communication and leaving Gayle looking angrily at her own handset.

"What an idiot!"

Putting down her receiver, she then mulled for a few seconds what to do next. Unfortunately, Ingrid Dows had returned during the day to Port Moresby with her P-38Ns, as she needed all of her fighters and bombers there in order to push back the

Japanese threatening the allied lines there. In exchange, before leaving, Ingrid had come to an accord with Major General Vandegrift, in which she had offered to the marine commander the help of two of her giant C-142A cargo aircraft in order to shuttle on a daily basis fresh supplies from Espiritu Santo and Efate to Guadalcanal. However, even though Vandegrift had warmly accepted that offer, they were still waiting for an answer from the Navy that would authorize the C-142As to pick up the mountains of stores which had been piling up on its airfields in the New Hebrides and New Caledonia. That was only the latest demonstration of the timidity, not to call it defeatism, and staffing incompetence shown by Admiral Ghormley and his command staff at South Pacific Headquarters. In Gayle's opinion and that of the officers of the First Marine Division, the Navy headquarters in Noumea were in urgent need of some serious command reshuffling. What she couldn't know was that she and the marines were not the only ones to be running out of patience with Ghormley and his subalterns. Gayle finally decided to go wake up Major Burchfield: even if the marines didn't decide to act on the warning from Faith Buchner, her helicopter detachment still could do something about it.

When Faith Buchner landed her AH-4 back at Fighter One at around two thirty in the morning, she saw two C-142As in the process of landing at night on the grass strip assigned to the Cactus Detachment, helped in this by the infrared beacon lights used by the 99th C.A.G., in conjunction with the night vision goggles used by the flight crews during night takeoffs and landings. While perfectly visible and bright through night goggles, those infrared lights were completely invisible to the naked eye...and to the Japanese.

"It looks that we are landing back at the same time as our scheduled nightly supply milk run from Port Moresby, Katharine. We will have plenty of fuel, ammo and rations for our operations here."

"Yeah," replied without enthusiasm the actress turned combat aviatrix. "We will be eating plenty while our marines here are at less than half rations. Just thinking about that is cutting my appetite."

Her acerbic remark was enough to cool Faith's good humor despite the sight of the cargo planes.

Faith was still rehashing that subject when she climbed down from her cockpit and walked with Katharine towards the briefing tent of their detachment. Inside the tent,

both went to the detailed photo-map of Guadalcanal pinned to a cork board mounted on a tripod, where they were debriefed in detail by Gayle Stevenson, who took some extensive notes in the process. Once that was done, Faith decided to change the subject with the operations officer.

"Gayle, we just saw our two C-142As land ahead of us with supplies from Port Moresby for us. Katharine then made me remember that our marines in Guadalcanal are at half-rations and have been so now for two months. Shouldn't we help our marines at least a bit by cutting our own individual rations, so that we could give some of our food to our marines?"

Stevenson, far from rejecting outright her proposal, became both sober and thoughtful before replying.

"You do realize that we have less than 200 women in our Cactus Detachment, while there are over 12,000 marines fighting in and around Henderson Field? Even if we gave half of our rations to the marines, that would still only represent a drop in the bucket."

"Then, can't we go get the supplies the marines were supposed to get from Esperitu Santo and Efate and bring them here on our C-142s? Even two planeloads a day would represent a dramatic improvement on the situation here, no?"

"It would, but the Navy has yet to authorize us to go pick up supplies there."

"And would those Navy rear-echelon motherfuckers refuse to let us move those supplies to Guadalcanal if we arrive with a requisition order signed by Major General Vandegrift?" shot back Katharine Hepburn. Struck by that idea, Gayle Stevenson quickly smiled to the actress.

"Katharine, you're a genius!"

"No I'm not! Hedy Lamarr is!"

"True, but I still find your idea to be great. Let's go see Major Burchfield to present to her your idea."

14:12 (Solomon Islands Time)

Marine Air Depot Squadron, Espiritu Santo Naval Base

New Hebrides, South Pacific

It had been a fairly quiet day for the personnel of the Marine Air Depot Squadron, so the clerks and duty officer inside the warehouse were surprised when a marine

colonel walked in, accompanied by a female army air force major. The quartermaster officer hurried to greet the arriving colonel at the service counter of the warehouse, saluting him at attention.

"Colonel Pate, sir? We were not expecting you here today, since we have no transport planes available right now to carry supplies to Guadalcanal."

"Well, you now have four cargo planes here, big ones, Lieutenant." replied the bespectacled Randolph M. Pate. "Here is a requisition request signed by Major General Vanderbilt, asking that all available supplies that can fit aboard departing planes be loaded in the C-142s of Major Betty Huyler, present to my right. We came in today with four C-142s but you can expect at least two C-142s a day to show up, depending of course on the weather, to load supplies for the First Marine Division. What? You seem to have a problem with that, Lieutenant?"

"Uh, not with me, sir." replied the young officer, looking embarrassed. "The problem is that our warehouse is presently less than half full, sir."

"WHAT?" exploded the marine colonel. "I WAS TOLD A MONTH AGO THAT ALL SUPPLIES FOR THE FIRST MARINE DIVISION WOULD BE STORED HERE, UNTIL THEY COULD BE BROUGHT TO GUADALCANAL. YOUR WAREHOUSE SHOULD BE AS FULL AS AN EGG RIGHT NOW."

"Er, it was, sir, until two weeks ago. That was when the chief of supplies for the South Pacific, in Noumea, decided that simply storing those supplies here would be a waste and allowed some of the Navy units in Espiritu Santo to come and serve themselves."

For a moment, the poor lieutenant thought that Pate would simply draw his pistol and shoot him on the spot. The marine senior officer, controlling his fury with difficulty, threw daggers with his eyes at the quartermaster officer.

"So, our marines are slowly starving on Guadalcanal while fighting the Japanese and the Navy just decided to appropriate our supplies, Lieutenant? I want to see the message from Noumea authorizing such a despicable move, NOW!"

"Yes sir!" said the junior officer before running to his office. Pate then looked at Betty Huyler while shaking his head.

"Those fucking ghouls from the Navy: coming here to steal our supplies while my marines are slowly starving."

Colonel Pate and Betty Huyler were still waiting at the counter when a Navy lieutenant-commander entered the warehouse, followed by eight sailors pushing empty cargo plates. Pate immediately stared hard at the Navy men as they approached the counter and challenged their officer while he was still a few paces away.

“STOP IT RIGHT THERE, LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER! WHAT DO YOU THINK THAT YOU ARE DOING HERE, IN MY DIVISION’S SUPPLY WAREHOUSE?” Struck by the fury in Pate’s voice, who was senior to him by two ranks, the navy officer stopped at attention and saluted him before answering in a less than assured tone.

“But, sir, I came to get some fresh supplies for the Navy’s Officers’ Mess, as authorized by Captain Reston, the Navy head of supplies for the South Pacific.”

“The Navy’s Officers’ Mess? THE NAVY’S OFFICERS’ MESS?! YOU WANT TO TAKE MY SUPPLIES WHILE MY MARINES ARE STARVING AT HALF-RATIONS ON GUADALCANAL? GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE BEFORE I SHOOT YOU LIKE THE STRAY DOG YOU ARE. THE SUPPLIES HERE BELONG TO THE FIRST MARINE DIVISION AND THE NAVY HAS NO BUSINESS STEALING THEM.”

“Uh, yes sir!” said the navy lieutenant-commander, who saluted again before walking out in one mighty hurry, followed by his sailors and their cargo plates. Instead of laughing at that scene, Betty Huyler could only shake her head, disgusted by what had been happening here in Espiritu Santo.

“My God! What kind of bastard could authorize such a misappropriation of supplies at the expense of men who are fighting the Japanese in the jungles of Guadalcanal?”

“The kind worthy of a court-martial.” answered Pate just before the quartermaster officer ran back out of his office and returned to the service counter, to then present a document to Pate.

“Here you go, sir: this authorization was signed by Navy Captain B. Reston, chief of Navy supplies for the South Pacific Theatre.”

Taking the document and reading it, Pate was about to tear it to pieces but reassessed his move in time, instead folding it and pocketing it: it was going to be useful as a piece of evidence for the complaint which was going to be sent to the Commandant of the Marine Corps and to the Joint Chiefs.

“Consider that document as null and void from now on. As of today, the supplies in this warehouse will be exclusively for the First Marine Division and will be brought by

air to Guadalcanal on the planes of the 117th Transport Squadron of Major Huyler. Understood?”

“Completely, sir. Uh, what do I do if the Navy sends other people and try to take part of my supplies, sir?”

That earned him a hard stare from Pate.

“You have a pistol, do you? Your men have weapons, don't they?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Then, shoot the bastards who will still try to take my supplies by force. The Navy's Officers' Mess... What a load of crap! Now, show me the manifest of what you still have inside your warehouse.”

“Right away, sir!”

The poor lieutenant took only seconds to get a clipboard on which was attached a thick document and to pass it to Pate, who started to read through it at once.

“Uh, where are your transport planes, sir, and how much can they carry?”

“I have four Fairchild C-142A transport planes right here, at this airfield, and they can each lift fifty tons on the trip Espiritu Santo to Henderson Field.” answered Betty. That made the young lieutenant nearly strangle himself with stunned surprise.

“FIFTY TONS EACH! JESUS CHRIST!”

“We won't need Jesus for that job, Lieutenant: we already have other high-priority tasks for him.” replied Betty with a straight face, making Pate nearly break into laughter.

“Major, that was a really good one. I will have to remember it.”

21:41 (Solomon Islands Time)

Henderson Field, Guadalcanal

Major General Alexander Vandegrift and Brigadier General Roy Geiger were positively ecstatic as they watched pallets after pallets of supplies, rations, fuel and ammunition being unloaded from the four C-142s which had just landed in Henderson Field, helped in that task by the two big field forklifts of the 99th Cactus Detachment and by about all the trucks available to the First Marine Division.

“This feels like Christmas Day to me.” exclaimed the joyous Vandegrift, making Colonel Randolph Pate, who stood at his side, nod his head.

"Our men certainly deserved all this, sir. Uh, by the way, I found out about something rather despicable while at the Marine Air Depot."

Pate then took out the document he had obtained in Espiritu Santo and gave it to his division commander while explaining what he had found out. Both Vandegrift and Geiger stared back at him, first with disbelief, then with outrage.

"Those fuckers! I will have this Navy Captain Reston's skin for this. By the way, Randolph, while you were gone to Espiritu Santo, Major Burchfield's attack helicopters went to the south of our defensive perimeter and poured sixteen tons of napalm over the jungle trails where Japanese soldiers had been spotted last night, then emptied their cannons and machine guns on the survivors. I believe that, in the process, we just eliminated at the least one Japanese regiment that was in the process of penetrating our south flank."

"But that's great! This should provide our men with some hard-earned respite from the action."

"It does, but there is still a lot of work to do here on this Hell of an island."

CHAPTER 15 – TURNING AWAY A NEMESIS



The Japanese super-battleship YAMATO leading a line of battleships.

15:52 (Central Australia Time) / 16:52 (Papua New Guinea Time)

Wednesday, October 7, 1942 'C'

Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Consolidated PBY-5A CATALINA

Flying over the Arafura Sea, 490 miles northeast of Darwin

Captain Arthur Bayley's PBY-5A amphibian patrol flying boat had been in the air for over six hours already and Bayley and his seven aircrew members were starting to feel fatigue from their long flight as they were flying over the Arafura Sea, sandwiched between New Guinea and Northern Australia. The most interesting things that they had seen to date during this flight had been a couple of Japanese freighters and tanker ships, which they had reported back by radio to their base in Darwin. Bayley was about to decide to turn around and head back to Darwin when his copilot, Lieutenant Gordon Sims, stiffened and froze as he was pointing his binoculars towards the sea.

"Arthur, I have a large group of ships navigating towards the Southeast in fleet formation. They are at our eleven o'clock, about 22 miles away."

Looking in that direction through his cockpit's windshield, Bayley effectively saw fourteen ship wakes. Feeling excitement chase his fatigue, he started turning his amphibian towards those ships.

"This is no merchant convoy, Gordon. Harry, get on the radio and call Darwin to signal a fleet of fourteen warships sailing towards the Southeast and situated forty nautical miles northeast of Tanimbar Island. More to follow."

As his radio operator sent that message, Bayley decided to approach that fleet, which had to be Japanese, from its starboard aft flank, in order to be less conspicuous, and used to the maximum the cover of the scattered clouds in the sky to mask his approach. His precautions seemed to pay off, as he was able to get to a few miles of the fleet without apparently being spotted...yet. Using his own binoculars, he then scrutinized the ships in that fleet, ready to identify them by type and class. What he saw made him swear to himself.

"Bloody Hell! This must be the whole Japanese Combined Fleet! I count eight battleships and heavy cruisers, including the YAMATO and the MUSASHI, escorted by six destroyers. Harry, send another message to Darwin and request an acknowledge. We have eight battleships and heavy cruisers, including the YAMATO and MUSASHI, and six destroyers, heading southeast at about 21 knots, 42 nautical miles from the northern tip of Tanimbar Island."

"On it, sir."

Praying that his radio operator would have the time to send this crucial message before he could get spotted by the Japanese, Bayley scanned quickly the sea and the sky around him with his binoculars. Less than a minute later, he saw something else on the horizon to the Northwest, following in the tracks of the fleet of heavy units. As he was turning in that direction to get closer and thus be able to better identify those new ships, his radio operator spoke to him on the intercom.

"Message sent and acknowledged, sir."

"Excellent! You may soon have yet another message to send: I have spotted a second group of ships following behind those battleships and heavy cruisers."

"Blast! Somebody is in for some severe hurt, sir."

"Exactly, Harry. Our job is now to make sure that the Japanese won't benefit from the effect of surprise. I am now starting to better distinguish those new ships... Jesus! I can now see three aircraft carriers and two battleships, plus six destroyers, all heading Southeast. Send this at once, Harry, while I try to better identify those carriers. Gordon, keep an eye out for enemy fighters."

"On it!" replied his copilot, now quite nervous...for good reasons.

Bayley, who had flown to within fifteen miles of the carrier group, was about to ask his radio operator to send yet another message when Gordon Sims shouted out a warning.

"FIGHTERS DIVING ON US FROM TEN O'CLOCK!"

"Shit! HARRY, SEND THE FOLLOWING: CARRIERS KAGA, HIRYU AND SORYU, ESCORTED BY BATTLECRUISERS KONGO AND HIEI, FOLLOWING THE JAPANESE BATTLE FLEET."

Not waiting for Harry to respond, Bayley then veered hard to the left, just in time to avoid the first burst of fire from the leading Japanese fighter. He however knew too well that his time was now pretty much up: a CATALINA amphibian had very few chances of surviving an encounter with a bunch of ZERO fighters. He was however resolved to make it as hard as possible to those ZEROs.

"ALL CREWS TO OUR MACHINE GUNS, EXCEPT FOR HARRY. HARRY, CONTINUE REPEATING YOUR LAST MESSAGE UNTIL YOU RECEIVE AN ACKNOWLEDGE."

Bayley then abruptly reversed his turn, again avoiding mostly another enemy burst, with only a couple of bullets piercing the tip of his left wing.

"MESSAGE SENT AND ACKNOWLEDGED! DARWIN..."

The poor Harry Blakeley never had a chance to finish his sentence, as the third burst of cannon and machine gun fire from the Japanese fighters pierced the thin aluminum skin of the amphibian and killed him while also destroying his radio set. His heart now in his throat, Arthur Bayley did the impossible to avoid most of the enemy fire by flying erratically, thus becoming a hard to predict target. However, his luck ran out after a terrifying forty seconds, when 20 mm shells pierced the cockpit, killing him and gravely wounding Gordon Sims. With one engine on fire and its two pilots taken out, the amphibian then fell out of the sky in an uncontrolled spin while trailing flames. The leader of the Japanese fighter flight which had intercepted the PBY-5 nodded his head in respect while watching the Australian plane go down: that aircrew had shown commendable courage and skill while faced with an overwhelming opponent.

On the battleship YAMATO, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto lowered his binoculars, now feeling frustration: he had probably just lost the advantage of surprise for his planned attack on Port Moresby, an advantage he had counted a lot on. After nearly a whole year at war, he doubted that the enemy would still show indolence or negligence when armed with an advance warning of his approach. Yamamoto then thought with

some bitterness that his most dangerous adversary in the days to come would probably be a certain young woman who had already proven to be way too clever to his taste.

20:25 (Papua New Guinea Time)

Headquarters of Fifth Air Force, Wards Airfield

Two and a half miles north-northwest of Port Moresby

Papua New Guinea

Alerted by a field telephone call from Major General George Kenney, Ingrid arrived by jeep at the modest building housing the headquarters of the Fifth Air Force in Wards Airfield and nearly ran inside. A young duty officer directed her at once to the main operations room of the headquarters, where she found Major General Kenney, Brigadier General Julian Barnes and Colonel Richard Conway. Saluting the trio on entering the room, Ingrid then went to the big map table around which the three senior officers stood. She noticed at once the preoccupied expressions on their faces.

“Something wrong, General?”

“Definitely, Ingrid.” replied Kenney while handing her a message. “We just got an urgent warning about a grave threat to us. This message arrived from Australia some forty minutes ago. Here it is.”

Ingrid, taking the message offered to her, read it quickly before looking back up at Kenney.

“It seems that Admiral Yamamoto has decided that he needs to throw the kitchen sink at us, General. Our raid on Rabaul must have annoyed him quite a bit.”

“That is most probably why most of the Japanese Combined Fleet is heading our way from the Celebes, Ingrid. I have asked all our wings and group commanders to join me here as quickly as possible, so that we could discuss how we will face such a massive threat.”

“Sir, if I can go by this message, the Japanese will be on top of us in at most a day. We thus have only hours to react to this and position our air assets so that they could best counter this threat. Do you mind if I call my command post and pass on some preliminary orders to my unit while we wait for the other unit commanders, General?”

Colonel Conway, the operations officer of the Fifth Air Force, was about to object to that but an imperative gesture from Kenney cut him off.

"I believe as well that we have no time to waste. Go ahead, Ingrid."

"Thank you, General. I won't be long."

Going to the battery of field telephones sitting on a table next to the entrance door, Ingrid called her command post, getting her deputy, Major Evelyn Sharp, on the line.

"Evelyn, we have a big emergency on our hands. Basically, most of the Japanese Combined Fleet is heading our way, coming from the direction of the Celebes, and will cross the Torres Strait in less than ten hours. We still have to decide on our response to it here at Fifth Air Force headquarters but I want you to immediately send a 'Critic' message to our Cactus Detachment. I want our attack helicopters, along with their ground servicing crews and a good stock of five-inch and three-inch rockets and their launcher pods to fly back immediately to Durand Airfield, where they will get ready for an emergency combat redeployment. Also, put the whole air group on alert for upcoming anti-ship operations and have Aline Rhonie take off in her EC-142E, to go take a surveillance station west of the Torres Strait, near the Australian coast, so that it can track the Japanese fleet and spot any incoming Japanese air raid towards Port Moresby. I will call you back once we will have formulated an action plan here. Please impress on our girls that we have only hours to react to this threat."

"I will get my whip out, Ingrid." replied the veteran flyer in a sober tone.

"Thanks, Evelyn!"

Putting back down the telephone receiver, Ingrid went back to the map table, where Kenney gave her an inquisitive look.

"Something tells me that you already have something cooking inside your head, Ingrid. Am I right?"

"You are, sir. Basically, our biggest priority at first will be to strip these incoming Japanese battleships from their air cover. With no air cover to protect them from our bombers, those battleships will thus become much more vulnerable to our air attacks. For that reason, I believe that our first task would be to either sink or render inoperable for flying operations those Japanese aircraft carriers following behind their battle fleet. Although the Japanese air assets based on land around the Celebes and Sumatra will be a factor to consider, those carrier-borne fighters and bombers will have to be taken out first, in order to make it easier for our bombers to strike those battleships and heavy cruisers."

"I agree with your logic on this, Ingrid. However, those carriers are screened by two battlecruisers and six destroyers and also possess themselves some very serious anti-aircraft artillery. Striking them will not be an easy task."

"But it is a task that we must accomplish, sir, as quickly as possible and at any cost. I have a plan forming in my head about how to do that, sir."

"I'm listening, Ingrid."

"Thank you, General. Basically, I intend to send in the next hour my attack helicopters towards the Torres Strait, in order to establish an operations station on one of the islands just off the Queensland, from where they will then launch surprise night attacks against the Japanese carriers."

Colonel Conway immediately looked at her with disbelief.

"Attacking carriers at night with helicopters? That's completely crazy, Colonel Dows."

"So crazy that the Japanese will not expect that, mister. My attack helicopters are equipped with thermal cameras and night vision goggles and are able to fly and attack in complete darkness, plus can carry a heavy ordnance load of up to three tons each. If handled well, they should be able to hurt very badly those three carriers and, at a minimum, make them unable to launch or retrieve aircraft. I will also use one of my two EC-142E flying command post and electronic reconnaissance aircraft to both track the Japanese fleet and guide in our aircraft helicopters. My second EC-142E will in the meantime stay on standby here, ready to take the relay from my first EC-142E. As soon as we will gain a good picture of the disposition of the Japanese fleet, I will then launch my fighter-bombers and medium bombers, which can all operate efficiently at night, contrary to most of the other aircraft of the Fifth Air Force. I would thus reserve those other aircraft as second line and third line defensive assets. Operations in depth, along with surprise and good command coordination, will be key to our success in this operation."

Both George Kenney and Julian Barnes nodded their heads, impressed by her plan, with Kenney saying so.

"Colonel Dows, you should be wearing the stars of a brigadier general, at a minimum, with such a keen operational and tactical sense. I am buying your plan, lock, stock and barrel. Proceed with your unit plans as you just stated them: your unit will be my spearhead while I organize my other air units as second and third waves of attack. I will also call General MacArthur and General Sir Thomas Blamey, so that they could

prepare our land forces and the little naval forces we have to face this Japanese threat. Unfortunately, our Navy is still very weak in this sector and we won't be able to count on our own battleships and cruisers before at least a couple of days. Now, go and do your magic, Colonel Dows."

"Thank you, General." said Ingrid before saluting Kenney and running out of the operations room. Brigadier General Julian Barnes watched her leave, admiration glinting in his eyes.

"This girl is going to end up one fine day with four stars on her shoulder pads."

23:29 (PNG Time)
Thursday Island, Cape York
Northern tip of Queensland
Australia

Captain Martha Lawson, leader of Black Flight, 777th Helicopter Squadron, looked around after she had climbed down from the cockpit of her AH-4 at the trees and low hills around the fresh water reservoir she had landed next to.

"Nice little place. I wouldn't mind spending some vacation time here one fine day."

The noise of the two UH-3 heavy transport helicopters and one UH-1 light helicopter which had accompanied her six AH-4 attack helicopters, and which were now also landing around the water reservoir, then reminded her that she was on no vacation period. This place had been selected because it was well positioned for her helicopters to easily cover the waters of the Torres Strait, which separated the northeast tip of Australia from Papua New Guinea and also because it was within easy reach from her helicopters, being only some 560 kilometers from Port Moresby and its airfields complex. This was meant to become the forward operating base for her attack helicopters bent on attacking the approaching Japanese fleet, now a mere seven hours from sailing through



the Torres Strait. With luck, the six AH-4s of Captain Isabel Madison were going to join her here in a few hours, after scrambling out of Guadalcanal to return to Port Moresby.

Martha Lawson was directing her women as they quickly established their operating base, dispersing their reserves of fuel and ordnance and using camouflage nets to hide the few vehicles they had brought in, including a small radio van based on a modified Dodge ½-ton truck, when a black sedan car stopped on the road next to the area they were in. One man in Australian Army tropical uniform came out of the sedan and walked towards Martha, who went to meet him halfway to the road.

"May I do something for you, Lieutenant?"

The man eyed with some skepticism her officer's rank insignias before answering her.

"You may, miss. I am Lieutenant Paul Westing, of the Australian Coast Guard. Who are you and why did you come here with those...things?"

"First, you may call me 'Captain' instead of 'miss', Lieutenant. Second, those 'things' are attack helicopters and we came to establish a temporary forward operating base here, in order to attack a Japanese fleet approaching the Torres Strait and threatening Port Moresby."

"The Japanese are coming here?" asked the rather old lieutenant, who was probably a reservist, apparently alarmed by her explanation. Martha shook her head while feeling some exasperation grow in her.

"No, they are not coming here, Lieutenant: they are merely going to transit the Torres Strait on their way to Port Moresby."

"But this could attract a Japanese attack on this island, Captain." objected the Australian, a reply which irritated Martha to no little degree.

"Lieutenant, we are at war and my women are going to risk their lives soon while attacking a Japanese battle fleet. So, excuse me if I find your worries about this island rather lame, if not to say cowardly. Our move to here was authorized by Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Blamey. If you have a problem with that, feel free to go discuss it with him if you wish so. However, in the meantime, I would appreciate if you would stay out of the way and don't start spreading panic around this island. If you will now excuse me, I have more important things to take care of."

Leaving the flabbergasted Australian standing where he was and pivoting around, Martha then went back to her helicopter and assembled her five other aircrews and her copilot-gunner, Lieutenant Betty Fames, around her.

“Alright girls, we are now at our new forward operating base and our EC-142E has a solid fix on the present location, direction of travel and speed of the Japanese fleet. As soon as our mechanics will have refueled our helicopters, we will depart for our first attack run against the Japanese carriers. Study your maps and check out your helicopters in the meantime. Our UH-1 will be on standby here for search and rescue operations if any of us have to ditch into the sea, so make sure that your pocket radio beacons are functional before taking off. The refueling should take about twenty minutes, so try your best to relax in the meantime. That’s all for the moment, girls.”

As the women of her flight dispersed, Martha walked to the radio truck of her detachment, to go update the information they had on the Japanese fleet. With five-inch rockets as their main armament and with the night to cover her approach, her helicopters should be able to disable or significantly damage the lightly armored Japanese carriers, which were also loaded with volatile aviation gasoline. As for the Japanese battleships and heavy cruisers, that was another matter, which was why that job had gone to the P-38Ns and B-25NGs of their air group.

23:36 (PNG Time)

99th C.A.G. first attack wave

Approaching the Torres Strait from the East

Ingrid, using her instruments, night vision goggles and directions from her on-station EC-142E, was leading a first attack wave composed of sixteen other P-38Ns and of fifteen B-25NGs, the latter ones armed with torpedoes and five-inch rockets. With a quarter moon and partially cloudy sky, the night was quite dark: conditions in which no Japanese fighter would dare take off, especially since most of them didn’t even have a radio set. On the other hand, Ingrid had extensively trained her pilots to fly at night and their aircraft had both night vision goggles and thermal cameras. Thus, night was the perfect time for her to attack while minimizing the risks from enemy action. She then received a brief radio message from the radar air controller aboard the EC-142E on station some sixty kilometers behind and well above her.

“Oracle One to Lady Hawk: the big bullies are now 23 nautical miles ahead of you and are still heading east. Turn on Heading 290 to start taking position on the port flank of the enemy, over.”

"Turning now on Heading 290 and starting a slow descent to 20,000 feet. To all Fifinellas, turn and follow me."

Both Teresa James and Helen Richey, as the respective squadron commanders of this attack wave, acknowledged her order on the radio. The special infrared marker lights fixed to the tails and wingtips of the P-38Ns and B-25NGs in turn helped their pilots follow their leader in this turning descent.

Still guided at intervals by directives from the EC-142E, Helen Richey and her fifteen medium bombers were soon flying low and heading directly at the enemy battleships, while Ingrid stayed high with her fighter-bombers. The ships' wakes were now clearly visible in her night vision goggles, appearing like long phosphorescent white horizontal trails at the surface of the sea. Estimating the distance to the enemy at being around four miles, she gave a brief order on the radio.

"All Hell Raiser girls, go down to 150 feet, open your bomb bays and arm your torpedoes. Be careful about staying level while near the water."

With her own copilot, Lieutenant Lillian Epsberg, watching closely their altitude and nose angle of attack while holding her own control column, Helen gradually descended to 150 feet and lined up her plane on the massive dark silhouette of the YAMATO, calculating at the same time her deflection angle for her torpedo shot. She then gave a second radio command.

"From Hell Raiser leader, go down to eighty feet, line up on your targets and release your torpedoes when ready."

Now as tense as a steel bar and concentrating on her target while Epsberg took care of keeping their bomber level and at the right altitude, Helen dropped her torpedo once she was less than 600 yards from the Japanese flagship.

"TORPEDO AWAY! LADY HAWK, YOU CAN DIVE NOW! My aircraft!"

Retaking full flight controls from her copilot, she started climbing at a slow rate while aiming at the superstructures of the YAMATO.

"GUNS, GUNS, GUNS!"

Pressing the triggers of both her eight forward-facing .50 caliber heavy machine guns and of her fixed nose 75 mm cannon, she sent one 75 mm armor-piercing shell and over a hundred heavy slugs per second towards the open decks and superstructures of the super-battleship, imitated in turn by her bomber pilots after they had released their torpedoes against their respective targets. That deluge of projectiles swept dozens of

Japanese sailors manning the anti-aircraft guns and superstructures of the four battleships leading the Japanese fleet. Helen's B-25NG medium bomber then roared past the YAMATO, barely higher than its main mast and not having been fired at yet. A happy yell came a few seconds later from the tail gunner of Helen's bomber.

"A HIT! OUR TORPEDO HIT AT THE LEVEL OF 'A' TURRET. TWO MORE TORPEDOES HIT THE YAMATO."

"Heck, three torpedoes out of four, at night? That's some very nice shooting from our girls." said Lillian Epsberg, making a happy Helen nod her head.

"It certainly is, Lillian. What helped us is that the Japanese ships were not doing any evasive maneuver and were not firing at us. In daylight, this would be a completely new ballgame."

"What do we do now?"

"We do as we planned in Port Moresby: we come back at a shallow dive against the starboard side of the YAMATO and pepper it with our rockets and guns."

At that exact moment, Ingrid and her usual wingman, the young but talented Shirley Slade, were diving steeply at the YAMATO, aiming at her port-side superstructures and anti-aircraft gun mounts. She first fired off the twelve five-inch rockets she was carrying in two rocket launcher pods hooked under her wings, then fired a long burst from her eight .50 caliber nose machine guns before pulling the nose of her aircraft up to recover from her dive, imitated by Shirley Slade. Nine of the twelve rockets, which were each the equivalent of a naval five-inch gun shell, exploded against the superstructures of the battleships, while her heavy slugs mangled open gun mounts, destroyed searchlights and generally turned the unarmored superstructures into Swiss cheese. As she regained altitude quickly, she looked around her to evaluate the damage her fighters and bombers had inflicted on the enemy. From what she could see right now, all four enemy battleships had sustained a minimum of one torpedo hit, plus many rocket hits, while the four heavy cruisers had been peppered solidly by her P-38Ns. There was still a lot to be done but this was also only the first attack tonight. It remained to be seen how successful her helicopters would prove to be against the Japanese carriers.

23:50 (PNG Time)

Armored bridge of the IJN YAMATO

“WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON? WHO FIRED AT US?” shouted Admiral Yamamoto when he stepped on his armored command bridge, having just been brutally awakened in his day cabin, situated close to the bridge, by the rough shake from torpedo hits. His night duty bridge officer, quickly bowed to him while answering him.

“Enemy aircraft, sir! One group launched torpedoes at us, while another group dived on us and fired rockets and guns at us. We absorbed a total of three torpedo hits under our armored belt and are taking in some water but are not in danger of sinking.” Looking first outside through the armored portholes of the bridge and seeing only darkness, he then looked back at his bridge officer.

“An air attack, in such a dark night? How could that be possible, especially when considering that the enemy fire seemed to be accurate?”

“From what our watchmen saw, those planes were a mix of P-38 fighter-bombers and B-25 medium bombers, sir.”

“P-38s and B-25s...that sounds a lot like what those pests of American female pilots fly. But how could they find our fleet like this in the middle of the night?”

“They must have employed a radar picket ship, sir. Unfortunately, our electronic equipment is still unable to detect, much less jam, the latest models of American radars.”

“Humph! Get me a damage assessment, quickly, and check if our aircraft carriers were attacked as well.”

“Hay!”

The duty officer barely had time to get to an intercom box before the giant battleship shook again, while the flashes of light from multiple explosions against the starboard superstructures of the YAMATO briefly illuminated the inside of the bridge.

“THE ENEMY AIRCRAFT ARE BACK!” shouted rather needlessly one junior officer as Yamamoto had to grab on to a steel pipe in order not to lose his balance.

23:56 (PNG Time)

Lead AH-4 attack helicopter

On approach from aft of the Japanese aircraft carrier KAGA

Two hundred nautical miles north-northwest from Thursday Island

Western entrance to the Torres Strait

Martha Lawson smiled to herself as she observed in the distance ahead of her the fireworks from thousands of anti-aircraft tracer shells being fired in no particular direction at the sky, and this following multiple flashes on the horizon indicating powerful explosions.

“Too late, Mister Jap: our girls are now gone...at least those girls. Keep wasting your ammo like this.”

As she was approaching the big fleet carrier KAGA from the rear at about the level of its flight deck, followed by her wingman, Lieutenant Zelda Lamer, Martha was able to see through her night vision goggles that the aft third of the carrier's deck was covered with dozens of aircraft with their wings folded, ready to be launched at dawn, as per usual Japanese practice. She then activated her radio microphone, contacting her other helicopters, which were separated by pairs in order to approach simultaneously the three Japanese carriers, the KAGA, SORYU and HIRYU, which were sailing on parallel courses, level with each other.

“Black Widow Five leader to all Black Widow Five callsigns: the flight decks of the enemy carriers are covered with parked aircraft. Take some altitude and switch to napalm for your first pass.”

Betty Fames, her copilot-gunner, heard her and acknowledged out loud that order.

“Switching to napalm canisters.”

Martha then made her AH-4 jump up by about a hundred meters, enough to be safe from the fireball from her napalm canisters but still low enough to ensure a very accurate delivery against the big carrier. She then remembered herself that the KAGA had over 36 anti-aircraft guns, enough to rip apart her AH-4, thus kept sharp as she took extra speed while approaching the enemy carrier.

“The gunners on that big bathtub must be quite nervous and jittery by now, Betty. Be ready to hose them down if they get too trigger-happy.”

“I'll be happy to make them behave, Martha.” replied Fames with some bravado, doing her best to hide the fear gripping her. Concentrating on the view she had of the approaching carrier through her night vision goggles, Martha then pressed the trigger that would make her two 600-liter canisters filled with napalm drop off her pair of stubby wings. As her incendiary canisters fell towards the flight deck of the KAGA, Martha shouted to Betty.

“FIRE AT WILL, BETTY!”

Betty Fames, who was only waiting for that order, immediately fired her 20 mm cannon downward at the VAL dive bombers, KATE torpedo-bombers and ZERO fighters covering the flight deck of the nearly 44,000-ton carrier, peppering a dozen aircraft with 20 mm explosive shells as the AH-4 was zooming over the carrier. The fuel contained in those aircraft then started to spill on the flight deck and over the bombs loaded under the KATEs and VALs Betty hit. Then the two canisters full of napalm incendiary mixture hit the flight deck and burst open, with fuzes then igniting the petrol jelly. Martha saw two huge fireballs envelop the aft section of the carrier behind her AH-4 as Betty shouted aloud while pointing quickly her cannon towards the small navigation bridge of the KAGA, which they were about to pass by.

“RIGHT SALUTE!”

She had time to fire half a dozen 20 mm shells at the bridge before they flew away, chased by some wildly inaccurate anti-aircraft gunfire. Martha couldn't see it but her wingman, Zelda Lamer, proved to have the luck of beginners, with one of her napalm canisters falling through an open aircraft deck elevator before bursting in flames inside the main aircraft hangar, filled with aircraft and dispersed pieces of ordnance. As Martha was turning around and going down to near the sea surface in order to deliver a rocket attack on the Kaga, the bombs and gun ammunition on the aircraft now burning on the flight deck started cooking off in a string of spectacular explosions and tracers' fireworks.

“WOW! THAT SUCKER IS TOAST, TRULY!” exclaimed Betty Fames, not having expected such a quick success. While Martha Lawson was equally stunned by that result, she still kept a cool head.

“Betty, fire our five-inch rockets at the waterline: turn its hull into Swiss cheese!”

“Your desires are my orders, Grand Poopa!”

Betty then fired in one massive salvo their twelve five-inch rockets. Aimed towards the mid-body waterline of the KAGA, six of the rockets hit and exploded against the starboard side of the carrier's hull, two rockets hit at the waterline, creating large holes in which water started rushing in, while the four remaining rockets exploded in the water, away from the hull. However, those underwater explosions were enough to buckle in a couple of the hull plates, creating more water leaks inside the ship. For good measure, Betty sprayed the flight deck-level anti-aircraft gun platforms with her two .30 caliber machine guns as Martha flew past the wounded KAGA. Quickly looking in turn at the SORYU and at the HIRYU, which were flanking the KAGA, Martha saw that those

carriers had also been hit hard by her pilots, but apparently not as hard as the unlucky KAGA.

“To all Black Widow Five callsigns, report!”

“Black Widow Two, okay!”

“Black Widow Three, okay!”

“Black Widow Four, okay!”

There was a short delay before the next acknowledgement from Lieutenant Iris Cummings, who sounded shaken.

“Black Widow Six, okay! I believe that Black Widow Five got caught in the fireballs from her own napalm canisters, Black Widow leader. I didn’t see her fly away from the HIRYU.”

Sadness hit Martha Lawson hard at that announcement: Barbara Russel and Mary Trotman had been good friends of her.

“Alright, Black Widow callsigns, let’s return to our temporary base: the job is done here.”

03:19 (PNG Time)

Aboard ‘Oracle One’ (EC-142E flying command post aircraft)

Flying on station at high altitude over the Torres Strait

“Captain, the KONGO just ordered one of its escorting destroyers to scuttle the KAGA with torpedoes.”

That announcement from Corporal Mary Takahashi, who was monitoring the Japanese radio transmissions aboard their EC-142E WAVEMASTER, brought a satisfied smile on Jenny Kawena’s lips.

“One fleet carrier about to be scuttled and sunk and two other carriers on fire and out of action: our attack helicopter girls did a bang-up job there.”

“Yes, but they paid a price for it...and they are scheduled to attack again in the next hour, along with our fighters and bombers, while the Sun is still down.” replied the Japanese-American from California. “We are liable to suffer more losses during the next attacks, Captain.”

Jenny, acting as the onboard intelligence officer of the EC-142E, pondered that sad but realistic truth for a moment.

"Casualties are a part of war that we can't deny, Mary, but those Japanese ships must be stopped and forced to turn away from Port Moresby, whatever the cost. If not, then hundreds or even thousands of our people will die under the guns of that fleet."

Going to the surface watch radar station, she looked at the collection of dots on the large screen which represented the Japanese fleet.

"Hum! While the carrier group is now basically dead in the water, the battle group shows no signs of turning around, despite having slowed down because of battle damage."

The radar operator then pointed at two of the dots from the carrier group.

"Captain, the two battlecruisers which were escorting the carriers are now detaching themselves and heading east, probably to join up with the Japanese battle group."

"Damn! This means that the Japanese have not abandoned their plan to bombard Port Moresby, even without air cover. Our girls will have no choice but to attack that group again."

Jenny then shouted towards the woman manning the coded radio station.

"Georgina, send the following to our group headquarters: two battlecruisers who had been escorting the Japanese carriers are now going to join up with the enemy battleships. Carrier KAGA ordered scuttled by one of its destroyers. Carriers HIRYU and SORYU dead in the water and burning. Japanese battle group has slowed down to eighteen knots but is continuing eastward. Suggest next attack be concentrated on the enemy battle group. Send as 'Critic'."

"On it, Captain."

Next, Jenny looked at one of the two women acting as air controllers.

"Christine, what is the status of our attack helicopters on Thursday Island?"

"They are about finished refueling and rearming, Captain. Also, our six AH-4s from Henderson Field have joined them half an hour ago. Captain Lawson intends to return to the attack with our eleven remaining AH-4s in about twenty minutes."

"Then tell her to split her group in two: her Black Flight will concentrate on finishing off the HIRYU and the SORYU, while Green Flight will go hammer the destroyers screening the battle group. We want our bomber girls to face less anti-aircraft guns for their next attack on the Japanese battleships. Advise our group headquarters of this as well, so that our aircraft and helicopters can coordinate their attacks."

“Understood, Captain.”

As the air controller started sending an encrypted message to Wards Airfield, Jenny pondered about what Ingrid's aircraft were going to face during their next attack. With the element of surprise now gone, the Japanese will undoubtedly be expecting a second night attack. Despite having suffering significant losses amongst its anti-aircraft gun crews, those battleships and heavy cruisers still packed a heavy anti-aircraft punch. More losses to the Fifinellas were thus to be expected in the coming hours. One radio operator then spoke up.

“CAPTAIN, JAPANESE PLANES FROM LAE AND WEWAK HAVE BEEN DETECTED, HEADING TOWARDS PORT MORESBY. THE P-38s OF THE WITCHES ARE NOW TAKING OFF TO INTERCEPT THEM, WITH ORACLE TWO DIRECTING THEM.”

“So, the Japanese fleet intended to coordinate its attack with the bombers and fighters based around Papua New Guinea? That makes sense. However, their timings sucked. Still, that means that our B-25s will have to attack the battle group without fighter escort this time around.”

05:11 (PNG Time)

Lead AH-4 of Green Flight, 777th Helicopter Squadron

Approaching the rear of the Japanese battle group

Torres Strait, 300 miles west of Port Moresby

“Nervous, Katharine?”

“I would be stupid not to be, Faith. Should I fire all of my five-inch rockets at the destroyer we will target?”

“No! We will go for simply neutralizing that destroyer with half of our rockets and with our cannon, then will go pay a visit to one of the heavy cruisers accompanying the battleships. Those big suckers have a lot more anti-aircraft guns than their destroyers and, at last news, are still intact, since our Hell Raiser girls concentrated on the battleships during their first attack. You will thus have to aim carefully and be parsimonious with your rockets. I would say that you should fire at most two rockets at a time.”

“That makes sense: will do!”

Faith then concentrated back on her navigation and flying, with the EC-142E of Aline Rhonie sending her course corrections at intervals. Her AH-4 was presently leading two other attack helicopters from her flight against the port flank of the Japanese battle group, while the three other helicopters of her flight were going to attack the starboard flank of the Japanese. Then, a few minutes later, the B-25NGs of the Hell Raisers were going to attack with torpedoes, with the goal of finally sinking the tough YAMATO and MUSASHI, the two most dangerous ships for Port Moresby thanks to their monster 456 mm caliber guns.

A few minutes later, Faith and Katharine saw in their night vision devices the ghostly shapes of big ships on the horizon ahead. Taking stock of the positions of the Japanese destroyers on the port side of the bigger units, Faith got on the radio and called the two helicopters following her.

"Green Two and Green Three, from Green One: the port side destroyers are now some five miles ahead. Follow me in a twenty degree turn to port in order to get on their outer flank, then line up on your respective targets and open fire at my command, over."

"Green Two, acknowledged!

"Green Three, acknowledged!

Faith then turned to port, still flying about 200 meters above the waters of the Torres Strait, and eyed the lead Japanese destroyer. It was a KAGERO-Class destroyer, a modern, fast ship armed with three twin 127 mm guns in turrets and two twin 25 mm cannons in open mounts, plus two quadruple 610 mm heavy torpedo tubes mounts. It was thus not the most dangerous Japanese ship in that group for allied aircraft but it still could interfere by its mere presence with the planned torpedo attack runs of Helen Richey's bombers. One thing that was obvious about the Japanese battle group was that the heavy units had all their searchlights on, scanning the sky constantly in search of possible American aircraft, while the destroyers kept their own searchlights off.

"Hum, that's what you get when your ships don't have radars. Lighting their searchlights like this is quite dumb, as it will reveal their positions from afar, but at least they left their destroyers dark, maybe to attract our aircraft into a trap. Let's thus spring that trap off. Katharine, be ready to fire two rockets from short range."

"I am ready, Faith."

Doing a wide turn to the right in order to line up her helicopter on the lead destroyer, Faith then spoke again on the radio.

"To all Green callsigns, from Green Leader: attack when ready, out!"

From her present altitude of 200 meters, Faith then went into a very shallow dive, aiming at the middle of the Japanese destroyer.

"Fire when ready, Katharine."

"Let's just get a bit closer before I fire, Faith: I want to be as precise as I can."

Seeing that the Japanese destroyer was still apparently unaware of her presence, Faith reduced her speed in order to facilitate Katharine's aim. The latter then fired two five-inch rockets from a distance of a mere 500 meters. Both rockets performed direct hits on the destroyer, one hitting its port side hull and penetrating it before exploding inside its engine room, the other hitting the top deck amidship, where the torpedo launch tubes and their reload tubes were. Faith and Katharine were then stunned by what happened next: a powerful explosion swept the whole destroyer, with other explosions following within milliseconds, breaking the unfortunate destroyer in two. Katharine Hepburn understood at once that her rocket must have initiated the warhead of one of the big 610 mm LONG LANCE torpedoes, with other torpedo warheads then touched off by that explosion.

"A HOLE IN ONE! YIPPEE!" shouted out the avid golf player.

"Nice shooting, Katharine. This one is now finished. Let's go next for one of the heavy cruisers."

That heavy cruiser turned up to be the TAKAO, one of the most powerful and heavily armored Japanese heavy cruisers still afloat, with ten 203 mm main guns and 32 anti-aircraft guns of various calibers, on top of having sixteen 610 mm torpedo launch tubes.

"Shit! We drew the biggest bully in the lot." exclaimed Faith. "Do your best, Katharine."

"Don't worry, Faith: we will teach that bully a lesson." replied Katharine Hepburn with false bravado as she felt her stomach knot up with fear at the sight of the intimidating silhouette of the 14,600-ton heavy cruiser. The searchlights of the TAKAO were now searching the sky close to the surface of the sea, obviously expecting a torpedo attack by bombers coming in low and fast over the water. That decided Faith in making her helicopter jump up and take additional altitude before diving steeply on the heavy cruiser, now 700 meters away.

"IT IS ALL YOURS, KAT!"

This time, Katharine Hepburn decided to fire a salvo of six five-inch rockets while aiming at the forward section of the cruiser, where three twin 203 mm gun turrets were situated

in an odd two-tier arrangement ahead of its massive forward superstructure block. What Katharine and the other women of the Fifinellas didn't know was that, contrary to U.S. Navy cruisers, which had heavily armored main gun turrets, the Japanese followed the British practice of only providing a scant one inch of steel armor to their heavy cruisers' main gun turrets. With such light armor and with three closely positioned twin 203 mm gun turrets on its forward deck, two of the five-inch rockets fired by Katharine hit and easily pierced two separate main gun turrets of the TAKAO, to then explode inside the turrets and barbettes, which had dozens of ready shells and propellant powder bags out of their protected magazines and exposed to the detonating rocket warheads. To the utter surprise and astonishment of both Katharine and Faith, the TAKAO then exploded in a titanic explosion which cut it in half at the level of her bridge structure. The powerful blast wave then hit the still distant AH-4, severely shaking it up and making Faith Buchner use every ounce of her flying skills in order to avoid crashing into the sea. Thankfully, she was able to keep her helicopter in the air and soon recovered full control of her AH-4.

"WHAT THE HELL DID YOU FIRE AT THE TAKAO, KATHARINE? LIGHTNING BOLTS?"

"THAT WAS ANOTHER HOLE IN ONE! HOWARD HUGHES WILL BE JEALOUS ABOUT THIS." exclaimed the ecstatic actress.

"Me too! Let's circle around to check if we need to continue firing at the TAKAO."

They quickly saw that it would be unnecessary, as the two parts of the heavy cruiser were already starting to sink, with its bridge block ripped open and mangled by the internal ammunition explosion.

"How many rockets do you have left, Katharine?"

"I still have four of them, Faith."

"Then, let's pay a visit to the CHOKAI."

Unfortunately for them, the CHOKAI had its searchlights scanning the skies in all directions, while its enraged anti-aircraft gunners were shooting frenetically at everything they saw (or thought they saw). One searchlight beam then blinded Faith and stuck to her helicopter, obliging her to maneuver violently in order to escape it. Just as she had managed to evade the searchlight, she saw one of the tracer shells from the CHOKAI hit

one of her helicopters which had just completed an attack pass on a destroyer screening the heavy cruiser. Hit in its rotor hub and ripping it off, it made the AH-4 fall down like a stone and splash into the sea, where it disappeared for good. Transported with fury, Katharine Hepburn pivoted her turret and unleashed both her 20 mm cannon and two .30 caliber machine guns against the open decks and superstructures of the CHOKAI.

“YOU BASTARDS! YOU WILL PAY FOR THIS!”

Faith then assisted Katharine’s shooting by lining up her helicopter in order to face the bow of the heavy cruiser.

“GO WITH YOUR ROCKETS NOW, KAT!”

Having just learned one of the weak points of that class of warship, Katharine Hepburn aimed at the frontal main gun turrets of the CHOKAI and let her four remaining rockets rip. Three of them hit the frontal face of the bridge block behind the turrets, killing dozens of officers and sailors there, while her fourth rocket hit and penetrated the CHOKAI’s ‘B’ turret, where it exploded inside. This time, however, that rocket did not find exposed propellant powder bags but its explosion killed all the sailors serving that turret and sent the turret flying off its base ring, leaving its barbette a smoking hole. As they were about to jump over the heavy cruiser, Katharine fired her last cannon rounds directly into the command bridge, killing or wounding its occupants and leaving the CHOKAI with no one at its helm.

“I’M OUT OF AMMO!” shouted Katharine, close to hyperventilating from the stress and frantic action. Before she could reply to that, Faith saw through her night vision goggle a B-25 zoom past the CHOKAI, flying very low and aiming at the YAMATO.

“RICHEY’S GIRLS ARE HERE! WE DID OUR JOB! TO ALL GREEN CALLSIGNS, FROM GREEN LEADER: WITHDRAW NOW AND RETURN TO OUR FORWARD BASE.”

As Faith took a heading towards the West-southwest and Thursday Island, Katharine looked with sadness at the spot where one AH-4 had crashed into the sea. She would learn on landing that their missing crew was that of Lieutenant Margaret Bruns and Lieutenant Patricia Dickerson.

“Goodbye, girls, and rest in peace.”

07:14 (PNG Time)

Open port side bridge wing of the IJN YAMATO

Sailing westward at seven knots back through the Torres Strait

Admiral Yamamoto slowly lowered his binoculars after examining the state of what remained of his fleet. The catastrophic extent of his losses and damages from those night air attacks had left him no choice but to turn around and head back towards the Celebes and Sumatra. Sunk were his three carriers, the heavy cruiser TAKAO and three of his destroyers, while all his remaining ships had suffered varying degrees of damage. His own YAMATO, like the MUSASHI, had sustained nine torpedo hits and was partially flooded, forcing it to slow down to a top speed of seven knots. Yamamoto had lost over 4,600 of his sailors, the majority being anti-aircraft gunners, either dead or severely wounded. More crucially, Yamamoto had also lost 430 of his aviators who had been aboard the carriers KAGA, HIRYU and SORYU, aviators who were truly irreplaceable at this stage of the war. A shout of alarm from a watchman then made him look up at the eastern sky.

“AMERICAN BOMBERS ON APPROACH AT FIVE O’CLOCK HIGH.”

Raising his binoculars again, Yamamoto took only seconds to identify the some twelve incoming enemy aircraft: they were Douglas A-20 BOSTON light bombers. That reassured Yamamoto a bit, as the A-20 could only carry a fairly light load of bombs. Then, more bad news came to him, with a second sighting being announced.

“ENEMY TORPEDO BOMBERS APPROACHING AT VERY LOW ALTITUDE FROM OUR NINE O’CLOCK!”

Using his binoculars again, Yamamoto felt dread on recognizing the nine speedy incoming aircraft: they were Bristol BEAUFIGHTER twin-engine strike fighters, probably Australian ones, able to carry a torpedo. With his YAMATO and the MUSASHI only able to make seven knots and being barely maneuverable, they were going to be easy targets for the BEAUFIGHTERS, which were quite feared as strike bombers and torpedo bombers. The anti-aircraft guns of his fleet, at least the ones which were still operational, were now starting to fire at the two incoming groups of aircraft. As the commander of the fleet, Yamamoto could only act now as a spectator, leaving the fighting to his ships’ captains and crews. He thus watched on as the nine BEAUFIGHTERS carried out a textbook torpedo attack against the port side of the YAMATO and of the MUSASHI. Despite the best efforts of the Japanese gunners, nine

torpedoes were soon in the water and running towards the two super-battleships. With the severely damaged battleships unable to maneuver fast enough to avoid them, eight of the nine torpedoes struck their targets, five against the YAMATO and three against the MUSASHI, with the ninth torpedo barely missing the stern of the MUSASHI. The impact of those torpedoes was bone-jarring, forcing Yamamoto to take a hold on the upper ledge of the bulwark of the open bridge wing he was on. As the BEAUFIGHTERS flew away, pursued by ineffective anti-aircraft fire, the YAMATO was straddled by the bombs dropped by the A-20 bombers. Out of the twelve one-ton bombs, only one actually achieved a direct hit on the 70,500-ton YAMATO, hitting its stern deck, where it caused only some minor damage. The damage from the five torpedoes to hit the flagship was however a lot more serious, with the inclination of the YAMATO increasing noticeably, alarming Yamamoto, who went to see the captain of the ship.

“What do the damage reports say, Captain Takayanagi?”

Yamamoto didn't like the resigned expression on the face of Takayanagi as he answered him.

“I am afraid that our ship is doomed, Admiral. My crew is unable to stop the flooding from those new hits and we are in imminent danger of capsizing. We should abandon ship now, while we still can, sir.”

Yamamoto took a second to digest that piece of bad news and to take a decision. The sad fact was that Takayanagi was right: the YAMATO was now a mostly helpless target for all the enemy bombers based within range of the Torres Strait and keeping its crew aboard would only result in unnecessary deaths. On the other hand, surrendering to the enemy was simply out of the question.

“Have our destroyers come alongside to pick up the crew, Captain.”

“Hay!” said Takayanagi before going to an intercom box in order to pass on orders. As he did so, Yamamoto reflected on his personal outcome following this ignominious defeat, which had crippled his cherished Combined Fleet with no tangible result to show for it.

When Takayanagi returned to his side to say that a destroyer was alongside and ready to pick him up and his staff, Yamamoto shook his head firmly.

“No! I will go down with this ship, Captain. I will not survive this defeat, which will probably cost us the war.”

“But, Admiral, the nation needs you in order to lead us at sea.”

"Nobody is irreplaceable, Captain, including me. Take care of your crew instead. How is the MUSASHI doing?"

Takayanagi lowered his head before answering him in a low voice.

"It has started to sink by the stern, Admiral. Our destroyers are attempting to save its crew but it may sink completely even before we capsize."

That embittered Yamamoto to no small degree: the YAMATO and the MUSASHI had been the pride of the Imperial Japanese Navy and had been the image of the power of Japan. Now, they were going to sink in a piece of ocean few people could find by name on a map.

Some 35 minutes later, as the evacuation of the YAMATO's crew was still going on, the MUSASHI disappeared beneath the waves, saluted by the Japanese sailors who were witnessing its death. Another twenty minutes later, with the last of the crewmembers of the flagship now aboard destroyers, Yamamoto went out on the open bridge wing to watch as the destroyers took a safe distance from the dying battleship, whose inclination had by now exceeded forty degrees. Taking a solid grip on the bulwark of the open bridge wing, Yamamoto had a last look at the Sun before his flagship finally capsized in seconds, taking him to the bottom.

10:33 (PNG Time)

Friday, October 9, 1942 'C'

Headquarters of the Fifth Air Force

Wards Airfield, near Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

General Douglas MacArthur was silent for a moment while standing next to the big map table of the operations room, having just been briefed by Major General Kenney and his staff on the actions of the last two days around the Torres Strait. Also present for this briefing were General Sir Thomas Blamey of the Australian Army and the principal staff officers of both MacArthur and Kenney. Looking again at some of the pictures from gun cameras of the aircraft which had attacked the Japanese fleet, MacArthur finally spoke in a measured but happy tone.

"This is truly a very important victory, gentlemen. The Japanese fleet has basically been emasculated and has lost all but one of its aircraft carriers it had in the

whole Pacific. Just the sinking of the YAMATO and MUSASHI is by itself a tremendous feat of arms by our aviators.”

“And the sinking of the remains of that Japanese fleet is continuing, General.” added Kenney. “Late last night, the attack helicopters of the 777th Helicopter Squadron, which are still at their forward base on Thursday Island, off Cape York, caught the heavy cruisers NACHI, ASHIGARA and CHOKAI, all already severely damaged during the night battle of early Thursday, and caused them further damage, allowing the B-25s of the 99th C.A.G. to catch them nearly dead in the water and to sink them. The BEAUFIGHTERS of Number 30 Squadron, on their part, sank the battleship MUTSU just hours ago, as it was trying to find refuge in the Celebes.”

“What about the Japanese aviation? What is left of them in this region?”

“Not much, General. As the Japanese battle fleet was crossing the Torres Strait, on their way to Port Moresby, the Japanese launched nearly all the bombers they still had in Rabaul, Lae, Wewak, Kavieng and Bougainville Island. Since they did so at night, early on Thursday, they had no fighter cover, as Japanese fighters are not equipped to fly in the dark. They were counting on the darkness to safely reach Port Moresby and bomb our airfields but they still didn’t know that we have flying radar command and control aircraft and were detected well before approaching Port Moresby. Thankfully, the P-38Ns of the 99th C.A.G. are equipped with night vision devices and, with the guidance they got from their EC-142E flying over, they met the Japanese bombers while they were still north of Buna and then basically butchered them. The eighteen P-38Ns of the 170th Fighter Squadron ended up shooting down a total of 54 Japanese bombers and made the few survivors flee in utter panic. The 99th C.A.G. completed the job the next day by severely bombing the Japanese airfields in Lae and Wewak and strafing the aircraft which were on the ground there. Counting the aircraft destroyed with the sinkings of the carriers KAGA, HIRYU and SORYU, about 300 Japanese aircraft were destroyed during the last 48 hours, General. And let’s not forget that the carrier JUNYO was sunk northwest of Guadalcanal on the thirtieth by a combined effort by P-38Ns of the 99th C.A.G. and of the SBDs based in Guadalcanal. All in all, I would say that the Japanese are now mostly impotent, both in the air and at sea, around the South and Southwest Pacific, General.”

“And I like it like that. Gentlemen, there are a number of important lessons to be learned from what is going to be called ‘The Battle of Torres Strait’. First, having aircraft and helicopters equipped with night vision devices and guided by flying radar command

post aircraft, like the ones equipping the 99th C.A.G., completely changes the equation when fighting the Japanese at night, when they can't send their fighters up. Second, those AH-4 attack helicopters are a lot more useful than simply to be used for close air support: they have just proven how potent they are against warships when attacking under the cover of darkness. Third, we need more radar command post planes like the EC-142E. The two we got with the 99th C.A.G. have proven to be truly invaluable since their arrival a mere week ago."

"But, General," objected Brigadier General Julian Barnes, the deputy commander of the Fifth Air Force, "Washington is still giving top priority to the European Theater, which is sucking up about all the new units and aircraft we are producing. It could be a long time before Washington finally decides to send us some EC-142Es and armed helicopters like the AH-4."

While MacArthur nodded in agreement at that, he still tapped hard the map table with an index to make his point.

"Well, they did send EC-142Es and helicopters to us, no?"

"Yes, General, but they send them along with an all-female air unit which nobody in Europe wanted. Hell, even the Navy here didn't want them and we got them literally as 'hand-me-downs'."

"And we were lucky enough to get them thanks to the stupidity of the Navy, General Barnes. Well then, let's have the 99th C.A.G. enlarged to a full wing size, as long as it will still be getting those new models of planes and helicopters. I understand that Generals Arnold and Marshall would be amenable to that, as it proved to be one way acceptable to the President to allow the sending of more air units to the Pacific. After the incredible job those women have been doing here since their arrival, I doubt that the President would veto such a move."

"That could work, General." recognized Kenney. "In fact, with the losses they have incurred since their arrival, the women of the 99th could sure use some reinforcements right now."

"And what have been their losses since their arrival?" asked MacArthur, sounding worried. In response, Kenney sifted through the printed reports next to him on the map table and read from one of them.

"As of early this morning, the 99th C.A.G. has lost in ten days in this theater a total of eighteen women killed, plus another fourteen women wounded. In terms of aircraft and equipment, they also lost three P-38Ns, two B-25NGs and two AH-4 attack

helicopters, plus had another eight aircraft seriously damaged. This would constitute a personnel loss rate of about five percent and an aircraft loss rate of between ten and sixteen percent by type, all in ten days in theater. At this rate, the 99th C.A.G. will melt away within three months, General, and this is certainly not because of poor leadership or mediocre efficiency, as their performances to date demonstrated a truly superb combat record.”

Those numbers left MacArthur quiet and sad for a few seconds before he spoke again.

“Then, send as quickly as possible to General Arnold in Washington a request for an enlargement of the 99th C.A.G. to a full wing and for more of those new planes. In particular, I want that new female wing to have a full helicopter group: those machines have simply proved indispensable here, plus at least another two EC-142Es. How has the 99th C.A.G. detachment in Guadalcanal performed to date in terms of support of our marines?”

“From what Brigadier General Geiger, of the First Marine Air Wing, told me, he loves them, and not in sexual terms. The few helicopters we had there managed to repel a Japanese mass infiltration through the jungle and has also greatly simplified and sped up the resupply of our frontline marines and the medical evacuation of his wounded. Also, the 99th C.A.G. has been lifting up to a hundred tons a day of fresh supplies and equipment between Espiritu Santo and Guadalcanal, using two of its C-142As on resupply runs.”

“And the Navy allowed them to use Espiritu Santo?” asked MacArthur, surprised by that piece of news.

“Not exactly, sir. Basically, Major General Vandegrift sent a week ago his chief of supplies to Espiritu Santo, armed with a requisition order signed by him, and accompanied by the transport squadron leader from the 99th. He then told the marine depot there to let the C-142s come in and load up all the supplies requested by the First Marine Division. That colonel found out at the same time that the Navy had been taking over half of the supplies destined for the marines in Guadalcanal, and this for over a month, pretexting that they were being wasted while being stored away in Espiritu Santo. Major Huyler, of the 117th Transport Squadron, told me afterwards that Colonel Pate actually turned away at pistol point a navy officer who had shown up to grab some of the marine supplies for the Navy officers’ mess in Espiritu Santo.”

“THEY WHAT?” exclaimed MacArthur, furious. “I WOULD HAVE HAD ANY BASTARD DOING THIS IN MY COMMAND SHOT!”

"I would have done that too in your place, General. To have rear echelon men steal supplies destined to our frontline fighting soldiers is truly despicable. By the way, I passed on this little story to General Arnold as part of a general report on the Fifth Air Force. I am sure that General Arnold will in turn pass that info to General Marshall, which should put some heat under Vice Admiral Ghormley's ass."

"Ghormley... He is indeed quite worthless as a theatre commander. When time came to plan the landing of our marines in Guadalcanal, he didn't even bother to attend himself the local planning conference, pretending that he was too busy to do so, and sent instead one of his admirals to represent him. Admiral King should wake up and fire Ghormley...and soon. He could as well recall Admiral Fletcher as far as I am concerned: Fletcher has proved to be way too timid up to now, worrying only about safeguarding his carriers and forgetting about our marines. Well, enough said about that. Send that request to reinforce and enlarge the 99th C.A.G. to General Arnold as quickly as possible, General Kenney. By the way, would you have a list of proposals ready for medals and rewards as a consequence of the Battle of the Torres Strait?"

"I certainly do, General. Here is that list."

Taking the list offered by Kenney, MacArthur quickly read it, making a double take on reading one of the recommendations.

"That attack helicopter crew sank by itself one destroyer and the heavy cruiser TAKAO during one attack? Were these claims confirmed?"

"They were, General, using the gun camera pictures from that AH-4 and the reports from the B-25 pilots who were attacking the Japanese fleet at the same time."

"My God! That Lieutenant Hepburn is a true Calamity Jane." said MacArthur, bringing a malicious smile on Kenney's lips.

"She certainly is, General. By the way, this Lieutenant K. Hepburn happens to be known in Hollywood as Katharine Hepburn."

MacArthur's jaw nearly dropped on the floor on hearing that and he shot a disbelieving look at his air force commander.

"Noo! Seriously?"

"Seriously, General. Miss Hepburn walked away from her Hollywood contract in order to enroll last May. It appears that the famous Howard Hughes, who is a good friend of her and whose company produces the Hughes AH-4, had been giving her some private flying lessons, including a few hours on AH-4. She thus asked to be enrolled as a copilot-gunner on AH-4 and got her wish granted. By the way, another Hollywood

celebrity enrolled in the 99th C.A.G. at the same time as Katharine Hepburn. Care to guess who it was, General?"

"I don't have a clue, George. Who is it?"

"Hedy Lamarr, now Captain Hedy Lamarr. She serves as an electronic warfare officer and was actually aboard the EC-142E which was directing our planes and helicopters towards the Japanese battle fleet."

"And that actress was qualified for such a job, General Kenney?" asked Sir Thomas Blamey, obviously having trouble believing all this. Kenney nodded his head soberly in response.

"She does, General. It seems that she is actually a near-genius and is also an inventor with an official patent for a secure communications system based on random frequency hopping."

Still quite flabbergasted by all these revelations, MacArthur finished reading the list and then smiled back to Kenney.

"I accept all your recommendations, George, and will even add a few things to it. Our aviatrixes and aviators truly deserve all the praise they could get for their valorous efforts and sacrifices of the last two days."

CHAPTER 16 – MORE GIRLS FOR THE FIFINELLAS

11:03 (Washington Time)

Monday, October 12, 1942 ‘C’

The Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.



President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, obviously in a good mood, greeted with a wide smile General Marshall and Lieutenant General Arnold as they were being introduced in the Oval Office by his secretary.

“Welcome, gentlemen! Are you here to tell me more about that astounding victory our aviators won in the Southwest Pacific and which is on the front page of all our newspapers?”

“We are effectively here to talk indirectly about the Battle of Torres Strait, or rather about its follow ups, Mister President.” answered Marshall. “But I will let General Arnold explain, as it is specifically an Army Air Force matter we came to discuss about with you.”

“Then, go ahead, General Arnold.”

“Mister President, when our newspapers started celebrating our victory over the Japanese Combined Fleet, they didn’t mention the casualties we suffered during that battle, for obvious reasons of censorship. I received from Major General Kenney, the head of the Fifth Air Force, a list of those casualties on Saturday. While those casualties could be described as ‘minimal’ in view of the huge losses we inflicted on the Japanese, unfortunately a majority of those casualties were suffered by the women of the 99th C.A.G., who both directed and conducted the large majority of our attacks against the Japanese and who also repelled the air attacks against Port Moresby which the Japanese had launched in coordination with the advance eastward of their ships through the Torres Strait. In his report, General Kenney warned that, at the present rate of casualties and aircraft losses suffered by the 99th C.A.G., it was going to melt away within three months. General Kenney thus asked for reinforcements for Colonel Dows’ air group and also for extra planes and female personnel, in order to enlarge her unit to

a full air wing. He also insists that those extra aviatrixes should go to the Pacific with the same advanced models of planes and helicopters with which the girls of the Fininellas have proved so effective in combat. I know that our commanders in Europe are screaming to get some of those advanced planes but I would surmise that they do not urgently need them right now. In sad truth, our air forces in England have been nearly exclusively engaged in heavy bomber operations over Germany and have no plans to soon use helicopters in combat there. Sending more B-25NGs, P-38Ns, C-142 transports and helicopters to the Pacific thus should not impede our actual operations over Europe. I also suspect that my European Theater air commanders would still refuse to use female air units or, if they would accept them, that they would then misuse them.”

“Can’t you knock them on the head and tell them to put up or shut up, General Arnold?” asked in a caustic tone Roosevelt, making Arnold grimace in frustration.

“I could officially force them to accept and employ properly those women aviators, Mister President. However, it would then be nearly impossible for me to check that those women wouldn’t be misused or abused. To do that, I would have to go to England and micromanage the situation from there, or would have to dismiss and replace most of my air commanders, something I am not ready to do, Mister President. I thus believe that it will be a lot easier and also a lot more productive to send more female aviators to the Pacific, along with advanced models of aircraft and helicopters. Lieutenant Colonel Dows has more than proven to date that she could effectively command such a large combat air unit. She in fact has already drawn a suggested organigram of this proposed 99th Air Wing, an organigram General Kenney joined to his report.”

“And do we actually have enough trained female pilots and ground crews here in the States to fill that new organigram, General Arnold?”

“Easily, Mister President. The successes of the 99th C.A.G. in the South Pacific has actually inflamed the passion of many of our flying women and we also presently have a surplus of trained female pilots and ground servicing crews for our aircraft ferrying squadrons within the United States.”

Roosevelt thought for a few seconds before nodding his head.

“Very well, General Arnold. Send as quickly as possible the women, aircraft and equipment requested by General Kenney and officially form this new 99th Air Wing.”

The President then smiled to both generals.

“By the way, in view of this Battle of Torres Strait, should I expect another recommendation for the Medal of Honor for one of those aviatrixes?”

It was then the turn of Arnold to smile.

“You may get a couple of them soon, Mister President.”

10:46 (PNG Time) / 19:46 (Washington Time)

Henderson Field, Guadalcanal

Solomon Islands, South Pacific

Brigadier General Roy Geiger couldn't wait to be able to speak with the crews of the AH-4 attack helicopters and one UH-1 light helicopter now landing back at their detachment's terrain. There had been a lot of news about a huge Japanese naval defeat in the Torres Strait three days ago but little of it had been detailed, having been filtered through official censorship. A bit late, Geiger noticed that only five AH-4s were returning, out of the six which had left Guadalcanal five days ago. His heart pinched then, as he could too easily guess why: he himself had lost too many planes and aircrews in combat before not to understand that one AH-4 must have been shot down during the fight around the Torres Strait. He could see from the reaction of the female ground crews waiting next to the tarmac that they too had understood that sad fact. Major Phylis Burchfield, who had come out of her command post van, also understood that and went at once to Faith Buchner's AH-4 once it had landed, approaching it as its twin coaxial rotors were still turning. Looking quickly at the tail numbers of the five AH-4s, she lowered her head and made a silent prayer for Margaret Bruns and Patricia Dickerson as Faith Buchner and Katharine Hepburn finished shutting down their aircraft, then climbed down from their tandem cockpits. Geiger stayed a bit behind at that moment, wanting to leave some privacy for the three women to be able to speak privately. When Burchfield spoke first to Faith Buchner, it was in a low, soft voice.

“What happened to Margaret and Patricia, Faith?”

“Their helicopter got shot down by anti-aircraft fire from the heavy cruiser CHOKAI just after they had strafed one of the Japanese destroyers screening the battleships YAMATO and MUSASHI. Their AH-4 sank like a stone and never surfaced again. However, their covering fire and our own fire allowed our B-25s to slip past the screen and to hit the YAMATO and MUSASHI with torpedoes. On her part, Martha

Lawson's flight also lost one AH-4, that of Barbara Russel and Mary Trotman, while attacking the carrier KAGA and putting it on fire."

All three women then stayed silent for a few seconds, thinking about their lost comrades, before Burchfield spoke again.

"Alright, you all must be tired from your flight from the Torres Strait via Port Moresby. Go rest and have a bite with the other crews, then we will discuss your actions after lunch."

Letting both go and turning around, Phylis saw Geiger, waiting a dozen paces away, and went to him.

"Did you want to speak with my pilots, sir?"

"Yes but, in view of their downcast mood, I believe that I will wait for that. I mostly wanted to get from them some details about that 'Battle of Torres Strait', so that I could brief my pilots about the lessons taken from that battle."

"I tell you what, sir: I am expecting a detailed official account of that battle, written by the Fifth Air Force staff, either today or tomorrow. As soon as I will get it, I will make a copy of it for you. Did you receive anything about it from the Navy's South Pacific headquarters?"

"Nothing to date, Major. Your copy of the Fifth Air Force account will thus be greatly appreciated."

"I will keep you in mind, sir."

Phylis Burchfield then walked back to her command van, leaving Geiger to look at the cloudy sky. The last six days had been very quiet in terms of Japanese air and sea activities around Guadalcanal, with no attempt by the enemy to bomb Henderson Field or even to run some night resupply convoys for the Japanese Army units presently on Guadalcanal and threatening the marines' perimeter. Even on the ground the enemy had been unusually quiet. One could think that they were cooking up something...or that they were simply out of ammunition and supplies. That last possibility would certainly be to the taste of Geiger and of all the other marines on this hellish island.

09:05 (New York Time)

Thursday, October 15, 1942 'C'

Fairchild Aircraft Manufacturing Company plant

Farmingdale, Long Island, New York State

The six veteran aviatrixes, all long-time members of the famous Ninety-Nines female pilot association and now commissioned officers in the U.S. Army Air Corps, stopped in unison after entering a hangar annex of the Fairchild Aircraft Manufacturing Company plant in Farmingdale, subjugated by the giant aircraft parked inside it. It was not that they had not seen such a big plane before: in fact they all were already qualified on the Fairchild C-142A GLOBEMASTER, of which the aircraft in the hangar was obviously a variant. It was rather because of the multiple gun turrets jutting out of the aircraft's fuselage.

"Look at all those guns, girls!" said in an admiring tone Dorothy 'Dot' Lemon, a 35-year-old aviatrix. "And we are not talking about simple .50 caliber heavy machine guns. Those are medium caliber guns."

The Fairchild engineer and test pilot guiding them smiled with pride at that remark.

"What you see are three quadruple 40 mm gun turrets under the belly of our new AC-142G GRIM REAPER heavy gunship. If you look closely, you will see as well a casemate-mounted five-inch 38 caliber dual purpose naval gun located in the chin, behind the cockpit."

Florence Lowe 'Pancho' Barnes rubbed her hands together while eyeing with glee the muzzle of the big gun in question.

"Yes! I love playing with big guns."

The Fairchild engineer smiled in amusement at that, like her five female companions.

"I hope that you are referring to aircraft guns, Captain Barnes?"

"Of course, mister!" answered Florence in a falsely indignant tone, prompting a shot from Major Jacqueline Cochran, the leader of their group.

"Aren't you already on your fourth husband, Pancho?"

"Don is my third one, not my fourth one, Jackie."

"Whatever! So, Mister Brannigan, tell us about our new baby."

"With pleasure, Major. The AC-142G GRIM REAPER was designed following the suggestions and advices from Nancy Laplante, the late Canadian time traveler who visited us in the States in December of 1940, as was the case for our C-142A GLOBEMASTER and its other variant, the EC-142E WAVEMASTER. We designed it with its main use being heavy close air support for friendly troops on the ground and for anti-shipping missions. We thus optimized it for maximum firepower, long loiter time on station and ability to absorb damage. In terms of firepower, its armament includes three quadruple 40 mm gun turrets and one casemate-mounted frontal five-inch L38 gun, four

defensive turrets, each armed with two 20 mm cannons, plus a large internal bomb bay able to accommodate the biggest and largest aircraft bombs in existence.”

“And how heavy a bombload can it carry, Mister Brannigan?” asked Captain Louise Thaden, who was in her late thirties.

“Our GRIM REAPER can carry over twenty tons of ordnance, including guided gliding bombs, which are another concept introduced to us by Miss Laplante.”

“Guided gliding bombs?” said Lieutenant Evelyn ‘Bobbi’ Trout. “What’s that?”

“Something that could ruin the day of any warship captain. Basically, you take a really big bomb, like our original two-ton general-purpose bomb, then add to it a set of stubby wings and rudders, plus a radio or wire guidance system, and you then have a weapon able to perform a hit from a safe distance against a cruiser, battleship or aircraft carrier, and sink it in one shot. During your training, you will get to practice the aiming of such weapons on a simulator. Those heavy guided bombs will also be perfect to blow up big, tough targets, like a bridge or a command bunker. But there is more.”

“More?” asked Florence Barnes. “But that sounded quite enough by itself.”

“Yes, but I am referring now to a completely difference class of weapons: fuel air explosive weapons, or FAE weapons. Again, it was Nancy Laplante who introduced that concept, but to the British rather than to us. FAE bombs are extremely powerful and also terrifying weapons meant to blow down normal brick and wood buildings and to incinerate the inside of bunkers and tunnels. They are basically thin-walled bombs or warheads filled with a volatile hydrocarbon, in this case ethylene oxide, which burst open on impact and disperse their content to form a large cloud of volatile gas that is then ignited by a delay fuze. The explosion that will ensue, while less powerful in terms of shockwave speed, will spread its power evenly over a large volume, with the volatile vapors able to enter bunkers and tunnels before detonating. The British already used such FAE bombs against the Germans, with devastating effect. However, because the British Bomber Command used those FAE bombs against German cities, thus killing mostly German civilians, the Germans, enraged by that, have since then adopted a policy of executing on the spot as ‘terrorists’ any British bomber crewmen who parachute out.”

“And...how many German civilians were killed by those FAE bombs, mister?” asked hesitantly Louise Thaden.

"In one night bombing raid against Hamburg one year ago, over 30,000 civilians, men, women and children, were killed." said Brannigan in a sober tone which told the women what he thought about that.

"And we are going to use such awful things?"

"Yes, but against Japanese soldiers hiding in jungles or in bunkers, not against Japanese cities, Louise." answered Jacqueline Cochran for the engineer. "I read the reports about that bombing and it was said that Nancy Laplante was infuriated by it, as she had given the secret of FAE weapons to the British against the promise that they would never be used against civilians. It was the commander of Bomber Command, Air Chief Marshall Arthur Harris, who decided on his own to break that promise. Someone told me that Laplante was ready to go shoot that Harris bastard."

"She should have." replied Pancho Barnes. "Because the enemy committed atrocities is no excuse for us to commit some as well."

"Well, let's forget this business of FAE bombs for the moment, ladies." said the Fairchild engineer and test pilot. "Now that you are here, along with two dozen other women due to qualify as gunners on our AC-142G, we will be able to start training you on how to fly and maintain your new beast."

14:19 (PNG Time)

Sunday, October 18, 1942 'C'

U.S. Navy tender ARGONNE

Floating headquarters of the South Pacific Theater

Port of Noumea, New Caledonia, South Pacific

Vice Admiral William F. 'Bull' Halsey stopped for a moment on the quay, next to the U.S.S. ARGONNE, to critically eye the big navy tender ship. Telling the driver of his jeep, which also carried his personal luggage, to wait for him on the quay, he stepped out of the jeep before starting to climb the access gangway. Vice Admiral Ghormley, the commander of the South Pacific Theater, had obstinately kept his office and headquarters aboard the ARGONNE for months already, even refusing to step off the ship on the pretext that he was too busy to go on land. Well, that was going to change...fast! Two armed marines and a navy junior officer saluted him at the top of the gangway, with the junior lieutenant speaking to Halsey while saluting him.

"Welcome aboard the U.S.S. ARGONNE, sir. Are you coming to pay a visit to Admiral Ghormley, sir?"

"I certainly am, Son. Could you lead me to his office?"

"Certainly, sir! Please follow me."

The young officer then pivoted around and walked on the open deck towards the aft superstructure block, where he entered through a steel door that was also guarded by armed marines. Following a steel-walled passageway, then going down one level via a ladder, Halsey was soon in front of a wooden cabin door, on which the young officer knocked on, getting a reply after a second.

"Come in!"

The young officer then opened the door for Halsey but didn't enter himself, instead stepping out of his way and saluting him again. Halsey saluted back and stepped inside a compartment of modest size in which throned a large work desk nearly covered by piles of documents. The air in the room was stuffy, humid and hot despite the two open portholes, while the lighting could be characterized as 'insufficient', with a desktop lamp providing most of the light to allow work to be done at the desk. Vice Admiral Robert Ghormley, who knew Halsey well, was clearly surprised to see him as he rose from his swivel chair.

"Bill? I wasn't told that you were coming to Noumea. And what is the purpose of your visit?"

"Until I opened after arriving at the Noumea airfield the sealed envelope containing my instructions from Admiral Nimitz, I didn't know why he directed me to go to Noumea without advanced warning, Robert. Basically, I am here to relieve you and to take command of the South Pacific Theatre, effective immediately."

"Relieve me? Why?" asked the shocked Ghormley. Halsey frowned in reply.

"Why? Because your command has been failing at its job and because you basically let the Japanese take the initiative through your inaction and lack of leadership, that's why! First, you let Fletcher leave our marines high and dry on Guadalcanal. Then, instead of doing everything you could to reinforce them and resupply them, you wasted your time and assets in concentrating on preparing a pointless invasion of Ndeni. You also refused to leave this damn stuffy office of yours for all those months, not visiting even once our marines in Henderson Field. Worse, you let your staff basically steal from the supplies stored in Espiritu Santo and destined for our marines fighting in Guadalcanal. Then, you compounded that by refusing to allow the newly formed 99th

Composite Air Group to be lodged on your airfields, even though General Arnold had sent it to the South Pacific expressly to support our marines in Guadalcanal.”

“But these women were completely inexperienced and unproven in combat, on top of potentially causing major disciplinary problems on my bases.”

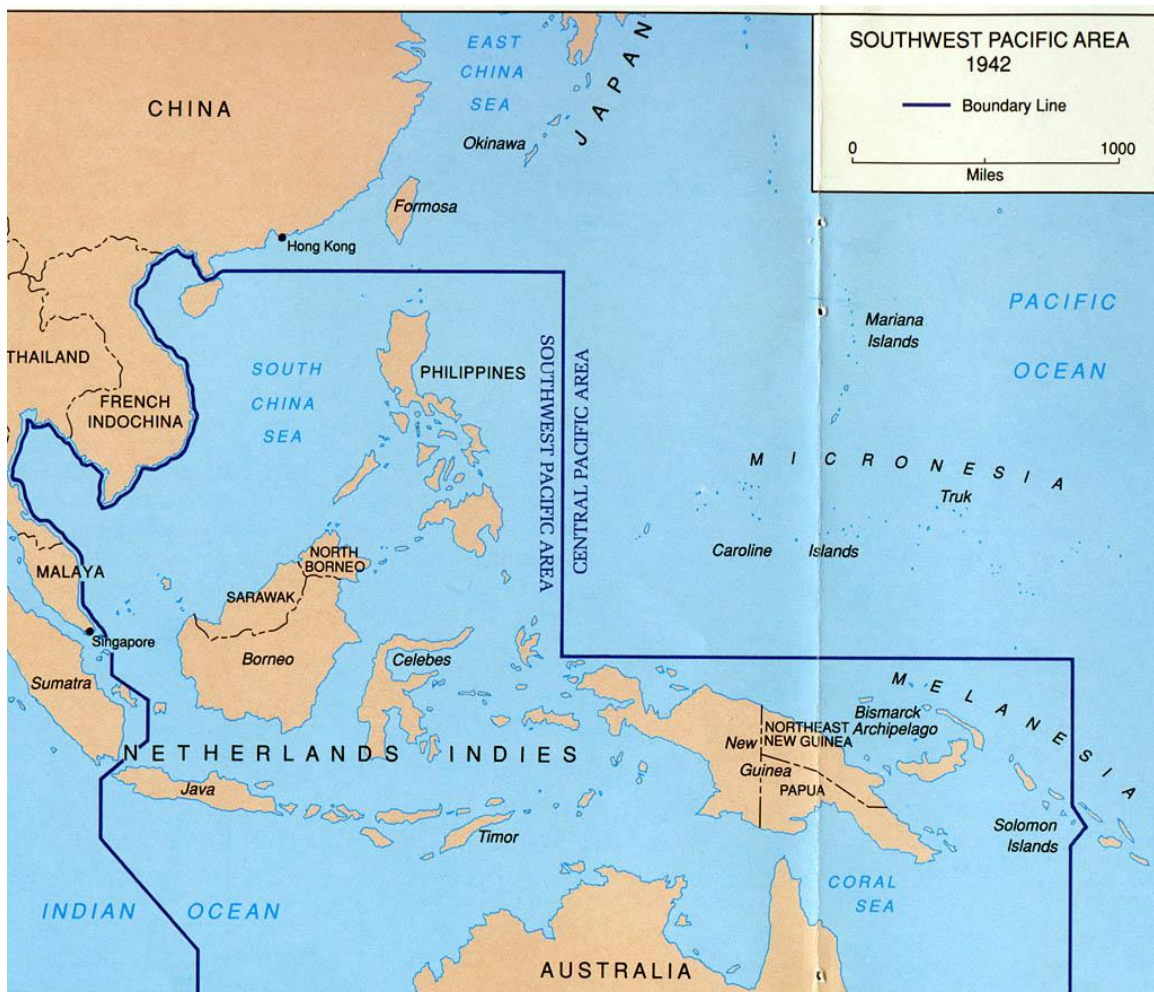
“So, you basically declared them ‘persona non grata’ on your bases, forcing them to go place themselves under the command of General MacArthur. It took less than a week for these women to prove their mettle by attacking Rabaul in a decisive manner and by helping to push back the Japanese advancing along the Kokoda Trail. Then, only ten days into their new environment, those same women inflicted a major defeat on the Japanese fleet, sinking more major Japanese warships than your command could in months of fighting. To top that cake, they sent a helicopter detachment to Henderson Field, where they quickly decimated a whole Japanese regiment with their attack helicopters, before starting a resupply air bridge which has revitalized the First Marine Division and allowed our marines to start pushing the Japanese off Guadalcanal. Those are the women you refused to host on your bases, Robert. Well, Admiral Nimitz and, more importantly the President, have completely lost confidence in your leadership abilities. That’s why you are being relieved by me today. Pack your things and book the next flight out for Hawaii, where Admiral Nimitz will tell you where you will go next. A number of your staff officers, starting with your Captain Reston, who allowed the pilfering of the marine supplies in Espiritu Sant, will also leave for Hawaii with you. I don’t want incompetents to work for me. I will now go find some adequate place to lodge my new command here in Noumea and it certainly won’t be on this ship.”

“But the local Free French authorities refused to allow me to use one of their facilities for my headquarters and...”

“You allowed a bunch of low-level French paper-pushers to refuse to give you some working space?” shot back Halsey, becoming furious. “And you wonder why nobody has confidence in your leadership? Leave quietly and quickly, but leave, Robert! In the meantime, I am going to rattle and shake those French assholes and show them who is in real charge here.”

Halsey then turned around and walked out of the office, leaving behind a most flustered Ghormley.

CHAPTER 17 – TAKING BACK PAPUA NEW GUINEA



09:33 (PNG Time)

Monday, November 02, 1942 'C'

General Douglas MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Theater's headquarters

Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

General Douglas MacArthur was in a good mood this morning as he greeted his arriving main commanders who had been fighting in and around Papua New Guinea...and with good reasons. He then gathered the dozen senior officers around the big map table set in the middle of his operations center and eyed them quickly. A small smile appeared on his lips at the contrast formed by the men present, men who were mostly in their fifties or even sixties, with the lone woman in the room, a teenager of great beauty with big blue eyes and reddish-brown medium-length hair. However, that

teenage girl had proved to date to be the most effective commander of the lot and also by far the most cunning.

“Good morning, lady and gentlemen. We are now approaching a crucial point in our campaign to throw the Japanese out of Papua New Guinea, with the obvious next step being to retake Buna and then advance on Lae. First, though, I would like to congratulate you and your Australian troops for the taking of Kokoda and its airstrip yesterday, Sir Blamey.”

The commander of the Australian Army forces in Papua New Guinea acknowledged the compliment from MacArthur with a nod.

“Thank you, General MacArthur. However, I must say that the operation to retake the settlement of Kokoda and its landing strip would not have been possible without heavy losses, if not for the helicopters of Colonel Dows and the way she handled what she called a ‘vertical air assault’, which took the Kokoda airstrip. The success of that new tactic would be well worth repeating in future operations.”

“Thank you, Sir Blamey.” replied Ingrid Dows while smiling at the old Australian general, who was actually a bit shorter than her. “I promise you that I still have many more things in my bag of tricks. I would like to start this meeting by announcing a good news I received during the night from Army Air Corps headquarters in Washington, via Fifth Air Force headquarters. Basically, I will soon start receiving replacements and reinforcements in both planes and personnel direct from the United States. I will thus have again a full-strength air group in the next few days, then will see it grow up to air wing size during the rest of the month. I will thus have more planes and helicopters to help support our ground troops. Those reinforcements will also include some new and very significant capabilities which could help us badly hurt the Japanese.”

“Can you give us some specifics about those new capabilities, Colonel?” asked Blamey, clearly interested.

“Yes sir! Apart from getting a lot more helicopters, medium bombers, fighter-bombers and transport aircraft, I will also get six AC-142G heavy gunships, a new concept imported from the future in 1940 by my late adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante. Those heavy gunships should prove devastating to the Japanese and will be perfect for all-weather strikes against enemy troops hiding among the jungle, like in the present case. The AC-142G is basically a specialized variant of my C-142A heavy transport and is designed for long loiter close air support missions over enemy-held territory. It is armed with three quad 40 mm turrets, a nose mounted five-inch gun and can carry up to

twenty tons of ordnance, including the biggest and heaviest air ordnance in Allied inventory.”

Sir Thomas Blamey opened his eyes wide on hearing this, while MacArthur and Major General Kenney smiled in anticipation.

“Good gosh! This sounds like a miracle aircraft to me, Colonel Dows. My soldiers should love watching it at work.”

“And I intend to use them in ways that will both baffle and terrorize the Japanese, Sir Blamey. Those heavy gunships should arrive here by the end of the week. I will gladly give you a tour of them once they will have arrived, sir.”

“And I will love examining your new aircraft, Colonel.” said Blamey before looking at Douglas MacArthur. “So, what should our strategy be to retake Buna, General?”

“For one, I certainly don’t want to advance along the Kokoda Trail all the way to Buna while slugging it out with the Japanese through the jungles and hills of New Guinea, Sir Blamey. You all were able to read through the copies I gave all of you of the description of the Kokoda Trail Campaign, as fought in the history known to Nancy Laplante. Thanks to that information from the future, we know that the Japanese have built an extensive network of mutually-supporting and well-camouflaged bunkers around Buna and along its approaches, bunkers which would cost us horrible casualties if we took them straight on. I have thus decided to use the novel capabilities offered by Colonel Dows air group in order to take Buna in a much faster and, more importantly, less costly way. I will now let Colonel Dows describe to you the assault plan she proposed to me yesterday. Colonel?”

“Thank you, General. Gentlemen, what I propose to do is to take Buna in the back of the Japanese, where their bunkers don’t face. Before our troops will arrive by helicopters, my attack helicopters will use their thermal sensors to detect the Japanese bunkers, then will destroy them from out of range of Japanese fire with five-inch rockets. Now that I can expect to soon have heavy gunships, I will also pound the Japanese with their guns and bombs, further softening their defenses. While we will prepare for that air assault on Buna, my bombers and fighter-bombers will concentrate on eliminating the Japanese aircraft and ships still operating around Papua New Guinea, so that our troops won’t have to fear Japanese air or sea attacks. My planes will also work to cut off Buna and Lae from any resupplies the Japanese may try sending to them. With the Japanese inventory in aircraft and ships now drastically reduced, we should be able to starve the

Japanese troops fighting in Papua New Guinea, something that can only help our own soldiers.”

“Those Japanese are already starting to starve, Colonel Dows.” cut in Sir Blamey. “My soldiers have reported that the Japanese they found are already down to skin and bone and appeared to be physically weak.”

“Well, Japan decided to launch a war that it couldn’t sustain in the long run and will now pay for it with its eventual defeat at our hands, gentlemen.” said MacArthur. “Our main task, apart from winning of course, will be to do it with the least number of losses to our own troops. The days of all-out frontal assaults are over for us, gentlemen. Instead, we will go around the enemy, take him in the rear and cut him off from its supplies and reinforcements.”

Somehow, Ingrid sighed at those words and spoke to no one in particular in a wishful tone.

“Things would be even easier if the Navy would coordinate its actions with us, instead of going their own way all the time.”

08:11 (PNG Time)

Friday, November 06, 1942 ‘C’

Main aircraft tarmac, Jackson Airfield

Ingrid was positively beaming with joy as she watched with Generals MacArthur, Blamey and Kenney a long file of giant aircraft in the process of landing at Jackson Airfield.

“Now, that is what I call ‘airpower’, sirs.”

“And I am suitably impressed as well, Ingrid.” replied Douglas MacArthur, who was also smiling. “Your C-142A heavy transports are the image of power.”

“Wait till you will tour my new AC-142G GRIM REAPER heavy gunships, sir.”

“GRIM REAPER...what an appropriate name for what is meant to be a pure killing machine.”

“And the Japanese will get to positively hate and fear them, sir.”

The group then fell mostly silent as they watched the first eight aircraft land, all of them C-142A heavy transport. Then, six slightly different aircraft landed in turn, prompting a remark from Ingrid.

"Those are AC-142Gs, General. Look at the quad gun turrets under their bellies."

"I see them, Ingrid. Quite intimidating machines I must say."

Once all fourteen aircraft had landed, Ingrid invited the three generals to follow her in their jeeps to the leading C-142A, which was now pivoting on its designated parking spot on the main tarmac. The heavy transport was shutting down its four powerful engines when the jeeps stopped a few meters from it, in the safe zone behind the plane. Ingrid and the three generals then dismounted from their jeeps and approached the rear cargo ramp, which had now started to come down open. All four were however surprised to see a lieutenant general of the U.S. Army Air Force come down first from the cargo cabin of the C-142A.

"General Arnold? Here?" could only say Ingrid before coming to attention and saluting Henry Arnold, the head of the U.S. Army Air Force, as the latter walked off the cargo ramp, followed by a sergeant carrying two suitcases. Arnold returned her salute before saluting MacArthur and Sir Thomas Blamey, who were superior in rank to him. Saluting back and stepping forward, MacArthur shook hands with Arnold, who wore a Summer tan uniform.

"Your visit here is a total surprise to me, General Arnold. Washington didn't advise me about it. So, what made you come to Port Moresby?"

"I kept my visit secret in order not to alert the Japanese about it, General. I came mostly to discuss with Lieutenant Colonel Dows about the new tactics she had been developing in combat, especially the ones concerning our new helicopters. In view of the successes of her air group here, I am resolved to push the Army Air Force into adopting them across the board. But could we go discuss all this in a more private setting?"

"Of course, General Arnold. I believe that General Kenney's headquarters will be appropriate for talking in peace."

"General," said Ingrid, "I would like first to greet the new members of my air group. I will then join you at General Kenney's headquarters."

"Go right ahead, Ingrid. That will give me a chance to discuss a few points with General Arnold."

With the four generals and one sergeant departing in two of the jeeps in which they had come in, Ingrid found herself alone at the foot of the cargo ramp of the first C-

142A. The crew of that plane came down the said ramp a moment later, with the pilot, a female captain presenting herself to Ingrid while saluting her.

"Captain Suzanne Humphreys, commanding officer of the 1171st Transport Squadron, reporting for duty with your unit, Colonel."

"At ease, Captain Humphreys." replied Ingrid after returning her salute. "And what did you bring with your planes, Captain?"

"My planes brought from the United States five replacement planes and their crews, ma'am: two B-25NGs, two AH-4s and one P-38N. We also brought the ground support equipment for my squadron and for that of the 1712th Gunship Squadron of Major Jacqueline Cochran. I was told that more reinforcements will follow in the weeks to come but most will have to travel by sea, so may take a week or two just in travel time before arriving."

"That's okay with me, Captain Humphreys: that will give me time to absorb your unit and that of Major Cochran and for you to acclimatize yourselves to the local climate...and to the Japanese."

That last sentence made Humphreys smile.

"It is the Japanese who will have to get acclimatized to us, Colonel, especially to the girls of the Dragons, the 1712th Gunship Squadron."

"The Dragons... What a fine name for a combat flying unit." replied Ingrid, approval in her voice.

When Ingrid showed up at the Fifth Air Force headquarters building 25 minutes later, it was to be greeted with an unexpected request from General Arnold.

"You want to visit Guadalcanal, sir? I must warn you that it is still quite a dangerous place, General."

"If my aviators...and aviatrixes, can go there, so can I, Colonel Dows."

"May I ask why you want to go to Henderson Field, General?"

"You may, Colonel Dows: I want to go there to properly honor in the name of the President two of your helicopter pilots."

"Honor in the name of..." started to say Ingrid before she understood what was going on and gave a stunned look to Arnold. "You want to give the Medal of Honor to two of my girls, sir?"

"Exactly, Colonel. I am talking about Lieutenant Faith Buchner and Lieutenant Katharine Hepburn, who performed an incredible feat of arms by sinking by themselves

the heavy cruiser TAKAO and one KAGERO-Class destroyer, on top of seriously damaging the heavy cruiser CHOKAI, all that during the same night attack mission.”

“Sir, I thank you for coming in person to honor my women like this.”

“Well, the President couldn’t come, even though he wished that he could have, so I came in his place.”

“And I will be there to make sure that the World knows about the bravery of those two women. I will also take that opportunity to distribute some medals of my own to your helicopter detachment in Guadalcanal.” added Douglas MacArthur. Ingrid understood at once what MacArthur meant by ‘making sure that the World knew’: he most probably intended to go to Guadalcanal in the company of his usual press and public relations traveling circus. While she knew that MacArthur genuinely cared for his men, she found that narcissistic trait of his a bit annoying.

“Well, that could be a good occasion to dispel the slanders and misconceptions which have been circulated about them by various politicians and journalists in the United States, General. It will also certainly boost the morale of my women.”

“That was definitely one of the goals of my visit here, Colonel.” said Henry Arnold. “Your women have performed admirably in combat, while you led them in a most masterful way. Talking of leading them masterfully, I would like to proceed with the help of General MacArthur and of Major General Kenney with a little formality. First off, in view of its enlargement to a wing-size unit, the 99th Composite Air Group will be known as of today as the ‘99th Air Wing’. Some wanted it to be called the ‘99th Composite Air Wing’ but I vetoed that idea.”

Ingrid did a facepalm as MacArthur, Kenney and Blamey burst out in laughter.

“The 99th C.A.W... I can see how that would have turned out, sir. Thank you for nixing that, sir.”

“You’re welcome, Ingrid.” replied a smiling Arnold. “However, this new unit title did bring one consequence with it. General Kenney, if you could help me here for a minute.”

“With pleasure, General.” said Kenney, smiling, who had been told in advance by Arnold about what was to follow. Both men then proceeded into removing the rank insignias of lieutenant colonel pinned on Ingrid’s combat shirt collar, to then pin the eagle insignias of a full colonel on her collar.

“Colonel Ingrid Dows, by my authority as Commander of the United States Army Air Corps, I am now promoting you to the rank of ‘colonel’, effective to November 01 of

this year, and name you the official commander of the newly recognized 99th Air Wing. Congratulations, Colonel Dows.”

Blood rushed to Ingrid’s brain as Arnold finished pinning her new rank insignias on her shirt: full colonel at the official age of nineteen! And she was in reality only seventeen. The American press was going to go bonkers on this.

“Thank you, sir. I already can see many politicians in Washington swallowing their false teeth when they will learn about it, sir.”

“Let them strangle on their false teeth, Colonel Dows: nobody could in good conscience still deny your incredible accomplishments in combat. Don’t move yet: I have something else to pin on you.”

Arnold then took a medal from a small box presented to him by Kenney and pinned it on her chest.

“Colonel Dows, I am most proud to award you with the Distinguished Service Medal, for exceptionally meritorious service to the government in a duty of great responsibility, for your planning and execution of your air attacks against the Japanese Combined Fleet at the Battle of Torres Strait, on the seventh and eight of October of this year. Know that President Roosevelt has authorized a second Presidential Unit Citation to the 99th C.A.G. for its valor demonstrated in that battle.”

“Sir, I don’t know how to thank you for all this.”

“You can thank me best by continuing to bash the Japanese into pulp, Ingrid.” said a beaming Lieutenant General Arnold.

20:08 (Los Angeles Time)

Thursday, November 12, 1942 ‘C’

Private cinema room, Howard Hughes’ mansion

Los Angeles, California, U.S.A.

Howard Hughes was both proud and happy as he finished viewing the latest War Department newsreel in his private viewing room. Proud for his friend Katharine Hepburn, who had been filmed in Guadalcanal while receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor from the hands of Lieutenant General Henry Arnold. Happy for her friend’s success in combat and for having Congress just sign on behalf of the Army Air Force a contract for the production of 800 AH-4 attack helicopters, an order adding to the 42 pre-series AH-4 already produced and in use by the Fifinellas of Colonel Ingrid Dows.

Hughes then started thinking about what could follow this Congress stamp of approval for him and his aircraft plant. With the proven combat successes of his AH-4 in the Pacific and with this new contract, the bureaucrats at the Materiel Command of the Army Air Corps should now prove a lot more sympathetic to his proposed aircraft projects. They had already rejected his proposed D2 heavy fighter-bomber, giving what Hughes thought as invalid reasons for their refusal. However, his XF-11 project should now have much better chances to be accepted by the Army Air Corps. However, the lessons learned by the girls of the 99th C.A.G. in the Pacific would be worth examining first, in order to further improve on the design of his XF-11. Discretely asking for Ingrid Dows' opinion about this via Katharine Hepburn would definitely be a smart move on his part.

22:50 (PNG Time)

Friday, November 13, 1942 'C'

Quarters of Major General Toru Okabe

Okabe Detachment headquarters, Lae

Northeast coastal area of New Guinea

Major General Toru Okabe, commander of the Japanese Army unit occupying Lae and its surrounding region, slowly sat down at the small desk in his room, totally discouraged. He then slowly reread for the third time the message which had arrived in the evening from the 18th Army headquarters in Rabaul. Basically, that message had told him not to expect any reinforcement or extra supplies, and this for an undetermined length of time. The main excuses given in that message were the chronic lack of transport ships and of escort warships, plus the severely depleted inventory of combat aircraft in theater due to the devastating enemy airstrikes of the last few weeks. It also warned Okabe not to expect any improvements in this situation, as the Navy had basically lost control of the seas around the South Pacific. Throwing down in frustration the message on top of his desk, Okabe thought for a moment about what he could do on his part to improve this situation. The sad answer was: very little. He already had directed his men, at least those not down with diseases, to plant crops in order to become somewhat food self-sufficient. While that had helped a bit, his men were still suffering from hunger and malnutrition. His own meager supper this evening had consisted of one boiled manioc root washed down with tea, the same ration his

headquarters personnel had received. Okabe would thus go to bed hungry tonight, like his soldiers.

The sudden, loud detonations from multiple anti-aircraft guns opening fire made him jerk. Getting up from his chair, Okabe went to the window of his room and looked up at the night sky. As he had expected, he wasn't able to see any enemy aircraft overhead, as the night was quite dark. Either his gunners were panicking for nothing or the enemy flew too high to be seen. Listening carefully, Okabe was then able to hear the engine noise from a solitary aircraft high above him. That solitary aircraft didn't seem to be disturbed in the least by the wild, inaccurate fire from Okabe's gunners and was flying on as if on a simple milk run. Then, a faint but growing whistling sound made Okabe stiffen with alarm: a bomb was on its way down! Running out of his room, he saw that his staff was also reacting and heading towards the shallow trenches dug around their building as bomb shelters. Following them at a run, Okabe was about to jump into one of those trenches when the most bizarre thing happened: something burst in the air above his headquarters building, producing only a weak sound, as if someone had just popped out a balloon. Then, what Okabe felt like a light drizzle went down all around and over him. He didn't have time to wonder what that was before the expanding cloud of ethylene oxide droplets was ignited by a delay fuse trailing behind the falling five-ton FAE bomb. The whole cloud of volatile gas then ignited, creating both high temperatures and lethal pressures within it and sending out a shockwave around it. While that shockwave travelled out at a much slower rate than that created by the detonation of high explosives, the FAE shockwave stayed lethal in a much larger radius, with the gas which had entered buildings and tunnels also igniting with the rest of the cloud. With an overall lethal power equivalent to about four times that of the same weight of TNT explosives, the FAE bomb blew away brick and wood buildings and killed people over a radius of about 500 meters. Those outside that lethal zone still suffered burns, lung damage and pierced eardrums from the blast wave. Since the aiming point of the bomb had been the local airfield, near which the headquarters building of General Toru Okabe had been situated, the Japanese aircraft parked on the ground there were blown away and ripped apart like simple paper planes. The terrorized Japanese soldiers who had been far enough to survive intact the bomb blast then watched on with horror as a huge fireball rose skyward, accompanied by a deafening rumble. What they couldn't see was the AC-142G gunship which had just delivered that massive FAE

bomb, as it flew towards its next objective of the night: the Japanese airfield at Wewak, some 318 miles to the Northwest.

Lae and Wewak were not the only locations to be hit that night by this new American weapon of mass destruction: the other five AC-142Gs of the newly arrived Dragons Squadron were also delivering death from above around the South Pacific, dropping some of the five-ton FAE bombs they had brought with them from the United States. Two of the AC-142Gs went to bomb the airfields in Rabaul. Another attacked the small airstrips established by the Japanese on the Bougainville Island and another went to say hello to the Japanese airfield of Kavieng, on the island of New Ireland, near Rabaul. Guadalcanal itself was not forgotten that night. The Japanese Divisional-level field command post on the island, situated near the small settlement of Kokumbona, was obliterated by a FAE bomb, along with the only heavy howitzer battery left to the Japanese on Guadalcanal. The next morning, the Americans and Australians around Port Moresby and Guadalcanal woke up to a sky essentially free of Japanese airplanes. All those Americans and Australians rejoiced at that news...all but one.

CHAPTER 18 – REACTIONS?

07:03 (PNG Time)

Saturday, November 14, 1942 ‘C’

Kitchen and dining tent complex, Wards Airfield

Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

Since the arrival of the 99th C.A.G. in Port Moresby seven weeks ago, George Kenney, recently promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General, had made a habit of going to eat at the dining tent of the female unit rather than eating inside his own headquarters building. There were many good reasons for his choice of venue, not the least being the quality of the food served by the cooks of the 99th C.A.G. Another reason was that it gave him the opportunity to discuss tactical and operational matters with Ingrid Dows, who had quickly turned into a pivotal member of his air force. Another small but not inconsequential reason to eat with the women of the Fifinellas was the fact that their dining tent and kitchen enjoyed some fresh air from an air conditioning unit the women had brought with them as part of their field equipment. There was as well the undeclared factor that the place was full of young women, something that had quickly convinced Kenney's staff officers and pilots to also go eat there with him. The frustrated male cooks of Kenney's headquarters had then been left with no other realistic choice but to move to the Fifinellas' kitchen and transfer the dining room of the Fifth Air Force headquarters to that tent complex.

Having collected some eggs, bacon and toasts, along with a cup of coffee, Kenney went to the table where Ingrid Dows was eating, intent on discussing with her the next phase of their operations against the Japanese. However, as he put his tray of food down on that table, he was surprised to see that Ingrid actually seemed sad, even depressed.

“Uh, something is wrong, Ingrid?”

Apparently conflicted about her internal emotions, Ingrid took a second before answering him in a tired tone.

“I couldn't find sleep last night, sir, as I felt remorse about our FAE strikes.”

"Remorse?" said Kenney, shocked and surprise, as he sat down on his bench. "Why? For killing Japanese?"

"No, not for that, sir. What I feel sad about is the death of the local Melanesians who were caught in the blasts of our bombs. Many of them must have died in Lae and Wewak, even though we were not targeting them directly, and their deaths weigh on my conscience."

Many American or Australian officers would have replied with a 'who cares?' to that but not Kenney. While his family was from the Boston area, he had been born in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia during a Summer trip to Canada, then later worked many years in Northern Quebec before enrolling in the U.S. Army Signal Corps as a flying cadet. He was thus no racist.

"Have you met some of the locals around Port Moresby since your arrival, Ingrid?"

Ingrid nodded once, then spoke a long sentence in a language which resembled what Kenney had heard spoken between local Papuans in Port Moresby. Next, Ingrid switched back to English while looking Kenney in the eyes.

"What I just spoke was in Wagiman, an Australian aboriginal dialect spoken in the region south of Darwin. One of my past incarnations was as a man named 'Djangawula', who was from a tribe which originally descended from the Melanesians who populated early Papua New Guinea. While I am a loyal naturalized citizen of the United States, I also happen to have been born in Berlin, Germany, where I was still living as a teenager when my whole family was killed in a British air bombing attack on Berlin in 1940. I consider myself as a child of Humanity as much as an American officer and the killing of non-combatants, any non-combatants, will always repel me, sir."

Kenney's response to that was made in a soft, low-volume voice.

"I can understand your scruples about that, Ingrid, but completely avoiding civilian casualties in such a war is impossible, unless we put our own people at increasing risk in order to avoid those casualties."

"I fully realize that, sir, and it only makes me feel worst, as I love my women and wish them to be all able to return home safely and in one piece at the end of this awful war."

"So, are you still able to follow up with Phase Two of our attack plan, Ingrid?"

"I am, sir, with one exception: instead of bracketing the Japanese positions around Buna with multiple FAE bombs, I would like us to limit their drops to only one,

centered on the actual Japanese Army encampment on the western outskirts of the local settlement. Our helicopters can then land our troops directly on ground zero, which should be devoid of living Japanese by then and this immediately after our bomb blast.”

“Hum, landing a reinforced infantry battalion with nearly no immediate opposition right in the center of the enemy positions... That could work, Ingrid, especially since you received more helicopters yesterday. We will have to brief General Blamey and Major General Hering this morning on this change of plans.”

“I will be there, sir.” promised Ingrid.

01:17 (PNG Time)

Monday, November 16, 1942 ‘C’

Sikorsky UH-2 STORK medium helicopter

Flying low off the coast, near Buna, Eastern coast of Papua New Guinea

One of the 36 Australian Army soldiers from the 17th Infantry Brigade travelling in the UH-2 medium transport helicopter of Captain Sylvia Dahmes looked briefly outside through a nearby window, then at his comrade sitting to his left.

“How did that sheila call the bomb they are going to drop on Buna? A ‘fuel doover thing’¹¹?”

“She called it ‘Fuel Air Explosive bomb’, mate. I studied chemistry and worked before the war for an oil prospecting company and I can understand roughly the principle of such a bomb.”

“And it could be powerful enough to clear of Japanese soldiers the ground we will land on?”

“Mate, have you ever seen a petrol¹² depot go up in flames? It can be fierce and scary, I assure you.” replied in a vehement tone the other soldier, making the first one shut up and rehash in his mind what they were supposed to do on landing. About two minutes later, their helicopter abruptly turned left towards the coast and took more altitude, only seconds before a bright flash of light appeared over Buna became visible through the windows of the Sikorsky UH-2 STORK medium helicopter. That flash was

¹¹ Doover thing: WW2 Australian slang for something you didn’t remember by name.

¹² Petrol: Term used by the British and Australians to describe gasoline.

turning to a rising fireball of huge proportions when the helicopter was hit by a powerful shockwave and shook violently for a few seconds before settling back in the air.

"BLOODY HELL! WHAT WAS THAT?" shouted the soldier who had asked about the type of bomb to be used. His comrade gave him a sarcastic look.

"That was a FAE bomb going off, Kilmeade. Any more questions?"

Private Ronald Kilmeade was still swallowing his pride when the voice of the woman piloting their helicopter sounded off a loudspeaker in the cabin at the same time as the lights in the cabin, which were switched to a dim red, shut off entirely, leaving the thirty Australian soldiers in darkness.

"TOUCHING DOWN IN THIRTY SECONDS! PREPARE TO RUN OUT AND DEPLOY AS SOON AS THE REAR RAMP WILL BE DOWN."

Kilmeade, like his companions, sat back in his seat and tightened further his safety belt as he braced for the announced landing. The woman acting as loadmaster, who was sitting next to the control box of the aft cargo ramp, pressed the opening button for the ramp, making it going partially down and allowing the soldiers to see that they were about to land. The moment that a shudder announced to them that they had touched the ground, the loadmaster lowered the ramp to the maximum while shouting at the Australians in her American accent.

"EVERYBODY OUT! WE'RE ON GROUND ZERO!"

Ronald Kilmeade was tempted to ask his friend, Corporal Bernard Shaw, what was 'ground zero' but decided to keep his mouth shut and, quickly unbuckling his safety belt, got up and ran out of the helicopter with the 35 other Australian soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 17th Infantry Brigade, his Lee-Enfield .303 bolt-action rifle at the ready. Doing as he had been shown during a short familiarization training the previous morning, Kilmeade followed his half of their rifle platoon at a run, turning towards the nose of the helicopter while deploying in an assault line. He was immediately struck by the fact that everything around him had apparently been flattened and incinerated by the equivalent of a giant blowtorch of unimaginable power. Ahead of his platoon were a number of American attack helicopters preceding them in extended line and firing their cannons, machine guns and rockets at anything that shot at them. Encouraged by that efficient close fire support and by the shouted orders from his platoon officer, Second Lieutenant Robert Bixby, Kilmeade charged ahead at a quick trot, ready to shoot down any Japanese who would show up. He encountered his first Japanese after jogging for about sixty meters but he didn't shoot him, for the good reason that this Japanese was

obviously dead, his body ripped to pieces and completely burned black. One look at the dead Japanese was enough to make Kilmeade nauseous and he quickly concentrated back on what was ahead while continuing to run along with the rest of his platoon. To his delighted surprise, nobody shot at them for a good 600 meters, by which time they had run by the whole of what had been the Japanese main camp in Buna, which had been completely blown flat and burned. A solitary Japanese soldier who had stuck his head out of a partially buried bunker then started shooting his rifle at the incoming Australians but, being still dark, could not fire accurately, with his bullets zipping past the Australians. The nose gunner from one of the attack helicopters covering the advancing Australian infantrymen then blew that Japanese to pieces with her 20 mm automatic cannon. When they arrived at that bunker, Shaw shouted to Kilmeade as he took a grenade hooked to his web gear.

“COVER ME!”

Ronald immediately stopped and raised his rifle, ready to shoot at anyone he would see move through the small bunker access trap. His comrade then pulled the safety pin of his grenade and, letting the safety handle fly off, waited two seconds before throwing his grenade inside the bunker, where it exploded two seconds later. Nobody came out of the bunker after that, so Shaw and Kilmeade resumed their advance, joining back with the rest of their platoon. They finally arrived at their planned initial stop line and took cover, ready to repel any counter-assault by the Japanese. Such an assault never came, with only isolated rifle shots ringing out in the night. Stunned by such an easy success, Kilmeade looked with bemusement at his friend, Bernard Shaw.

“Hell, those Nippo¹³ sure went bloody balls up¹⁴ with that big petrol bomb.”

At that moment, he saw that the medium helicopters which had brought them to Buna were now taking off and flying away, leaving their places to four huge helicopters which quickly landed in the middle of the devastated Japanese camp. The rumble of engines and clicking of steel tracks then announced the appearance of four M5 STUART light tanks as they rolled out of the Sikorsky UH-3A SKYCRANE heavy helicopters. The sight of the light tanks as they started rolling towards them made the Australians shout in triumph.

“YEAH! TALK ABOUT SOME BONZA¹⁵ AIR SUPPORT!” shouted Second Lieutenant Bixby.

¹³ Nippo: Australian World War 2 slang for ‘Japanese’.

¹⁴ Bloody Balls Up: Australian World War 2 slang for ‘turned into a total mess’.

08:48 (PNG Time)

Field headquarters of the 99th Air Wing

Wards Airfield, near Port Moresby

One female operations clerk, seeing two general officers enter the air wing's operations center, shouted at once to warn the other personnel present.

"ROOM!"

Everybody came to attention at once as General Sir Thomas Blamey and General Douglas MacArthur, closely followed by Lieutenant General George Kenney walked towards the big map table set in the middle of the room, where Ingrid saluted them.

"Good morning, sirs! What can we do for you, sirs?"

"Nothing but accept my warmest congratulations for a very well-done job by your helicopter crews in Buna, Colonel Dows." replied Blamey, all smiles. "Only a month ago, I expected that the taking of Buna would take weeks of fighting and cost us thousands of our men. Instead, my soldiers took it in hours and with only a few dozen casualties. Your air assault tactic is a real miracle weapon and a stroke of genius, Colonel."

While happy at that compliment, Ingrid kept a modest appearance.

"I learned about that tactic, which was from the future, from my adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante, sir. I only used it as it should be used."

"And I know too many fellow general officers who would have refused to use it, quoting the need to follow approved tactics only, Colonel. With Buna taken and Lae, Wewak and Rabaul mostly neutralized as Japanese airbases, we are now free to advance up the coast of New Guinea with little opposition from the air. Add to that the fact that the Japanese Navy had never been weaker and things are really looking good on our side."

"True, sir. However, our marines on Guadalcanal could use some extra support, while our navy is also quite weak, with only one damaged aircraft carrier left in the South Pacific, sir. There is still plenty to do, starting with neutralizing the big Japanese base in Truk Atoll and with preparing the liberation of the Philippines."

¹⁵ Bonza: Australian World War 2 slang for 'very good, alright'.

While Blamey's enthusiasm somewhat cooled down on hearing that, MacArthur became most sober at the mention of the Philippines.

"The Philippines... I promised when I left on order from the President to return one day. Taking Buna is certainly a good first step to that but there are still hundreds of thousands of Japanese soldiers on the way, supported by a few hundred land-based aircraft. Rushing North too quickly would cost us horribly."

"Then, let's destroy in detail those remaining Japanese aircraft and thus remove the air cover those Japanese soldiers enjoy, General."

"And how do you propose to do that, Colonel? Both Rabaul and the Philippines are out of range of all our bombers, with return trips of at least 4,000 miles. Only carrier aircraft can reach them right now and, as you pointed out, our aircraft carrier inventory is quite meager at present."

"I believe that I know a way to get there, General." said Ingrid, a malicious smile on her lips. "Talking of the Philippines, you do remember the guerrilla group led by Captain Villamor that we left behind in the Philippines, sir?"

"I certainly do, Ingrid. What about it?"

"Do you know if it is still operating, sir?" asked Ingrid, hiding her fear of getting a negative answer from MacArthur. To her immense relief, MacArthur nodded his head in response.

"It is still operating and in periodic contact with us, thank God. They are getting periodic supplies by submarines and are providing us with some precious intelligence about the Japanese forces on Luzon but they have to be very cautious about what they do, as the Japanese have been looking for them since they invaded the Philippines. Did you have in mind to provide them some help and, if yes, how?"

"I would need to know more about their exact situation and location before being able to formulate a plan, sir, but yes, I would like to help them. These men were under my direct command before I was ordered out of the Philippines and their fate preoccupies me constantly, General."

MacArthur's eyes softened as he looked at Ingrid.

"Your loyalty to your men and women can only be commended, Ingrid: it is one of the marks of a true leader. I will make sure that you get the latest information about Captain Villamor's group quickly. In the meantime, do you have another miracle plan to propose to me and Sir Blamey?"

"I do have a few ideas to propose to you, sirs." was Ingrid's firm reply. "But I will need first to arrange a few things with the help of Major Paul Gunn."

"Major Gunn, my advisor on aircraft repair? Why him?"

"Because I would like to have a few local modifications made to my helicopters first, sir."

That made both MacArthur and Kenney scratch their heads.

"Modify helicopters in order to attack the Japanese situated over 2,000 miles away? That doesn't make much sense to me, Ingrid."

"It won't make much sense either to the Japanese, sir." pointed out a smiling Ingrid. "I would also need the cooperation of the Navy for some of those plans, General. With Admiral Halsey now in charge of the South Pacific Theater of Operations, I can now at least hope to get his cooperation for my projects."

CHAPTER 19 – SURPRISE!

10:13 (PNG Time)

Thursday, November 19, 1942 'C'

Headquarters of South Pacific Theater of Operations

Noumea, New Caledonia

Vice-Admiral William F. 'Bull' Halsey was waiting on the porch of the building housing his headquarters in Noumea when the staff car he had sent to Noumea Airport stopped in front of the building. He had sent that staff car to pick up two announced visitors from Port Moresby who had flown in on a Lockheed C60 LODESTAR light transport and liaison aircraft. His decision to wait outside was partly due to his wish to properly receive his visitors, one of whom was also a Theater of Operations commander. He also wanted to finally meet the young woman, a teenager in reality, who had built an incredible reputation in combat which now amounted to a legend. Many in the Navy still scoffed at the notion of a nineteen-year-old female colonel but the combat feats of Colonel Ingrid Dows simply could not be denied or dismissed. Halsey, who had at first a hard time to believe what had been said about Dows, was by now ready to give her her full dues. The fact that she was said to be very beautiful could not hurt, of course. Halsey came to attention and saluted as General Douglas MacArthur, who was one rank senior to him, stepped out of the staff car, along with a very young woman wearing a U.S. Army Summer uniform. That young woman also saluted back with MacArthur before taking position behind and to the left of the old general. Halsey then presented his right hand to MacArthur, who shook it.

"Welcome to Noumea, General. Welcome to you as well, Colonel Dows."

The strength of Dows grip when he shook hands with her surprised Halsey to no little margin: her hand grip was as strong as that of any man. He however didn't remark on it and pointed the entrance of his headquarters to MacArthur.

"If you will follow me, we can go to my office, where we will be able to speak in private, General."

"Thank you, Admiral."

Passing by the two soldiers guarding the entrance, who were presenting arms with their rifles, the trio walked into a large reception area before climbing a large staircase. They then walked down a large hallway on the second floor, to finally arrive at a suite composed of an anteroom, where a military secretary stood from behind his desk and saluted, and of a large office well-ventilated by wide windows and a ceiling fan. Halsey showed to his two visitors a set of two sofas and one easy chair surrounding a low coffee table placed in one corner of the office, next to one of the windows.

"Let's sit and talk, General. Would you like some coffee or tea? The French do some really good espresso coffee in Noumea."

"A cup of good coffee will be nice, Admiral. The coffee we get in the rations from Australia is little more than brown water."

"I will also have a cup of coffee, Admiral." said Ingrid Dows in a melodious voice that went well with her youthful beauty. Halsey then gave orders to his secretary to bring in a coffee service before sitting around the low table with MacArthur and Dows. He first spoke to Dows while smiling to her.

"You will excuse me if I find you a bit fascinating, Colonel Dows: your story is so unique. To show such prowess in combat and in a senior leadership position at your age is truly unheard of."

"There is an explanation for that, Admiral, a rather extraordinary one known to only a very few." replied Ingrid. "My body may be only nineteen but my mind is over 7,000 years-old. Basically, I somehow started remembering in 1940 my past incarnations, all 71 of them, which were spread over 7,000 years. The same thing happened at the same time to my late adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante. I still don't know why or how that happened but I can't deny the existence of those memories. General Arnold had me tested in Washington about this, by having a group of illustrious historians and archaeologists question me and test my knowledge of ancient languages, and I passed that test with flying colors. However, I first confided my secret to General MacArthur while in the Philippines, at the start of the war. That in turn convinced him to get President Quezon to hire me as a fighter pilot."

Douglas MacArthur nodded his head once she stopped speaking.

"That is how it all happened, Admiral. After Ingrid showed some incredible maturity and depth of strategic thinking while we were facing Japanese air attacks in Manila, I then asked her privately where she had gained such military wisdom. That was

when she told me her story about her past incarnations. I believed her then and I never regretted giving her my full confidence since.”

Halsey starred in silence for a moment at Ingrid as he digested that revelation, to finally nod his head once.

“And I believe you as well, Colonel Dows. To be frank, your incredible victories against the Japanese make some of my fellow admirals look like rank amateurs in comparison. Your defeat of the Japanese Combined Fleet at the Battle of Torres Strait was positively brilliant, while the valor and effectiveness of your female aircrews were worthy of praise.”

“Thank you, Admiral. General MacArthur came here with me today in order to gain your cooperation for an operation we are planning. I will however let General MacArthur talk about it.”

“Thank you, Ingrid. Admiral, I am now contemplating an operation against a Japanese target which is part of your own theater of operation but which threatens both of our theaters: Truk Atoll. It would thus be in our mutual interest in cooperating to neutralize that threat.”

“Truk is effectively a thorn in my side, has been since the start of the war, as it is where the Japanese assemble their aircraft and ships before striking at us, including against Guadalcanal. The problem for me is that I am presently cruelly deficient in aircraft carriers, while Truk is out of range of my aircraft and, I presuppose, of your aircraft as well, General.”

“It was, until recently, Admiral. With the arrival of six Fairchild AC-142G GRIM REAPER heavy gunships two weeks ago, the 99th Air Wing now has a long-range, heavy bomber capability that I was able to exploit at once to strike the Japanese hard around New Guinea and against Rabaul. I was able to take Buna in mere hours, three days ago, thanks mostly to a devastating strike by an AC-142G which dropped a five-ton Fuel Air Explosive bomb on the Japanese main camp in Buna. The FAE bombs carried by those heavy gunships have an incredibly powerful blast wave that flattens and incinerate anything within 500 yards. We, or rather Ingrid’s aviatrixes, used such bombs to flatten the Japanese airfield in Lae, Wewak, Rabaul, Kavieng and on Bougainville, thus mostly eliminating the Japanese air threat around us. However, I am now worried that more Japanese planes could come and replace those losses, with Truk as a staging point. It is thus in my interest to strike hard at Truk and eliminate it as a staging point for

more Japanese aircraft and ships. However, Truk lies within your theater of operations and I am loathe to strike at it without at least your accord and, better, your cooperation.”

“And I thank you for your regards in gaining first my consent for such an operation, General. But do your...heavy gunships really have the range to hit Truk from Port Moresby, and this with a significant bombload? We are after all talking about a return trip of more than 2,400 miles, not counting combat time fuel reserves.”

“I will let Ingrid answer that, Admiral. Ingrid?”

“Thank you, General. The answer to your question is ‘yes’, Admiral. My AC-142Gs, which are heavily armed with one nose five-inch gun and twelve 40 mm guns, plus defensive turrets armed with 20 mm cannons, will be able to get to Truk with a twenty-ton bombload and then return safely to Port Moresby. Furthermore, they can strike at night with precision, thanks to their advanced radars and night vision devices. By attacking Truk at night, they will thus render most of the Japanese defenses, be they guns or fighter aircraft, ineffective. An EC-142E WAVEMASTER command and control aircraft will also accompany them and will jam the Japanese radars situated around Truk Atoll. Once over Truk, my gunships will strike in priority the Japanese airfields, to destroy the aircraft parked there, and the fuel depots. Without fuel reserves for passing aircraft and ships, Truk will then become useless to the Japanese as a staging base in the South Pacific.”

Halsey stared for a moment at Ingrid, truly impressed.

“If your aircraft can accomplish such a strike, then it would also relieve a lot of the pressure on my own ships and aircraft, Colonel. You thus definitely have my permission to conduct such a strike.”

“Thank you, Admiral.” said MacArthur, most satisfied by this. “However, we could make that strike even more effective if we could secure some support from your command. I believe that you recently received a newly-built light carrier, correct?”

“The U.S.S. SANGAMON is actually classified as an escort carrier, rather than as a light carrier, General.” corrected Halsey. “It is slower than a light carrier, with a top speed of eighteen knots, but is quite capacious in terms of aircraft, being able to carry thirty aircraft. The SANGAMON arrived here with replacement aircraft meant to replenish my squadrons. What did you have in mind for it, General?”

“Actually, it was Ingrid who thought about it, Admiral. If you could lend us the services of the SANGAMON, along with a few destroyers and cruisers to escort it, we

could use it to carry the attack helicopters of Ingrid's helicopter group, which would then conduct coordinated strikes with our gunships against Truk."

"Helicopters? Against ships and airfields?" said Halsey, incredulous. Ingrid took on her to assuage his doubts.

"May I remind you that my attack helicopters played a crucial role in our victory at the Battle of Torres Strait, Admiral? They heavily damaged or sank outright many of the Japanese ships there with their five-inch rockets and napalm canisters. Also, my AH-4s are presently being modified in order to be able to carry and launch 21-inch torpedoes, which would make them fully effective against any class of warship. If you compare my AH-4s to your own Grumman TBF AVENGER torpedo-bombers, Admiral, you will see that my attack helicopters have performances quite close to your TBFs in terms of top speed and range, but can carry a much heavier ordnance payload and has a faster cruising speed, on top of being heavily armored. Believe me, Admiral: my AH-4s can be deadly against both ships and ground targets and could add a lot to the punch of our planned strike on Truk. If your escort carrier could get to within 300 miles of Truk, then my AH-4s will be able to carry their maximum ordnance load."

Halsey's brain came on fire as he imagined what could be accomplished with that idea and he took only seconds to take a decision.

"Your plan sounds fantastic, Colonel. You can count on my escort carrier and an escort force of at least four destroyers for your operation against Truk."

"Thank you so much, Admiral. Could I further abuse your goodwill by asking to use your SANGAMON after the strike against Truk, in order to conduct another mission, this time around the Philippines?"

"The Philippines?" said Halsey, completely taken by surprise by that request. "And what would you strike there, Colonel?"

"Our old airfields, which are now used by the Japanese. My attack helicopters would concentrate on destroying on the ground the Japanese aircraft parked at Clark Field, Nielson Field and Nichols Field. This would further erode to near impotence the Japanese airpower in the South and Central Pacific, something that your ships could only benefit from, Admiral. At the same time, a couple of our transport helicopters would drop off supplies to a Filipino guerrilla group that is still operating to the northeast of Manila and would also evacuate their wounded."

"Uh, that is a lot of risks to be taken to simply resupply a small guerrilla group, Colonel." remarked Halsey, attracting a resolute expression on Ingrid's face.

“Admiral, those Filipino guerrillas once were under my direct command and I fought with them in the jungles of Bataan before I was forced to leave the Philippines due to a direct presidential order. I am ready to risk anything in order to help them.”

Her firm resolve left Halsey out of arguments and he thus nodded his head again.

“Very well, Colonel. My ships will stay to support both of your operations. We would however need to plan both of these operations in detail before we could launch it.”

“That is what we came for, Admiral.” replied with a smile MacArthur.



14:05 (PNG Time)

Saturday, November 28, 1942 ‘C’

Flight deck of the escort carrier U.S.S. SANGAMON (CVE-26)

Cruising south of Port Moresby, Coral Sea

Seaman Jake Finch, one of the sailors manning the flight deck of the U.S.S. SANGAMON, licked his lips in anticipation as he watched with other deck hands the approach of the over two dozen helicopters approaching their escort carrier at low altitude.

“Over eighty women about to come aboard. Hopefully, they will look at least half-decent.”

“You mean that you are hoping that they will actually be indecent, right, Jake?” replied his friend David Dunbar.

“Hey! How often do we get women on a warship? We should have the right to enjoy it when that happens.”

“Well, from what I heard, this trip will be no picnic, Jake, so we should concentrate on our jobs and let those women do their jobs.”

“And what’s wrong about simply watching, Dave?”

The said Dave gave up then and, shaking his head, went to get more aircraft anchoring straps for those incoming helicopters.

The first helicopters to land on the flight deck were two medium transport UH-2s in camouflage paint scheme and one small UH1 wearing large red on white Red Cross markings on its flanks and belly. Their pilots quickly braked their twin coaxial rotors to a stop, then activated their blade-folding mechanisms. As soon as their rotor blades were folded, they were pushed to one of the two aircraft elevators and then brought down to the aircraft hangar of the escort carrier, situated under the flight deck. It was then the turn of 24 mean-looking AH-4 attack helicopters to land on the SANGAMON. However, they were then stowed on the flight deck after folding their rotors and their pair of small wings. David Dunbar was one of the deck hands who got busy to tie them down to the flight deck and cover them with protective tarps, to avoid excessive corrosion from salt water sprays. He was thus in good position to have a close view of the young women who climbed down from the cockpits of the attack helicopters and couldn't help think that his friend Jake was going to go crazy at their sight. All of them were young, in their twenties, and most of them could be said to be at least pretty, while a few could qualify as downright beautiful. Jake was not the only sailor aboard the SANGAMON who was going to salivate at the sight of those female aviators. David himself nearly twisted his neck when he thought that he recognized one of the women, a tall brunette in her thirties.

"Nooo! That can't be the great Katharine Hepburn."

Putting that on account of his imagination proving to be too fertile, he then concentrated back on his work.

On the open bridge wing of the tiny bridge block of the escort carrier, the skipper of the SANGAMON, Navy Captain Joseph Burnside, watched on as the helicopters landed on his flight deck and were then stowed in tight ranks on the aft part of the carrier. Using his binoculars, he was able to detail some of the female aircrews coming out of the helicopters and shook his head in discouragement.

"Damn! With so many young and pretty women aboard, this combat trip could well turn into a floating bordello. Our men will go bonkers at their sight."

The young ensign on bridge duty at this time didn't make a remark then, instead examining some of the best-looking women with his binoculars. He however swore loudly to himself after spotting a particular woman.

"Shit! Sir, I believe that I just spotted Katharine Hepburn, the famous actress. She is now part of a group of six women walking towards the starboard side middle stairwell."

Captain Burnside quickly aimed his binoculars at that group of women and also swore to himself.

"Holly Moses! It is Katharine Hepburn! What is she doing here?"

"Uh, sir, didn't you read the November edition of the 'Navy Proceeding Magazine', in which Miss Hepburn got the Medal of Honor in Guadalcanal, for her actions during the Battle of Torres Strait?"

That made Captain Burnside look at his young ensign with big eyes.

"WHAT? I never got a chance to look at a copy of it: all four copies we got disappeared nearly at once. Are you sure about this Medal of Honor story?"

"Completely, sir. According to the magazine article, she sank by herself the heavy cruiser TAKAO and one destroyer, by firing five-inch rockets which detonated their forward magazines. From what I can see now, those helicopters do carry five-inch rockets under their stubby wings, plus...wait a minute! Sir, they have torpedoes hooked under their bellies."

Stunned, Burnside also looked at the belly of the attack helicopters and could only confirm what his ensign had spotted.

"Goddam! You are right, Ensign Parker. Jesus! This promises to be one memorable combat cruise."

00:44 (Central Pacific Time)

Monday, November 30, 1942 'C'

Aboard 'Oracle One', EC-142E WAVEMASTER electronic aircraft

Flying 120 miles to the east of Truk Atoll, Caroline Islands

Pushed by intense curiosity about how the women of the 99th Air Wing operated, William Halsey had requested to fly aboard the EC-142E command and control aircraft which was going to support the six heavy gunships and the helicopters now approaching Truk from the West of the atoll. He had been surprised to see his request accepted

without a fuss and even more so when he saw that both Ingrid Dows and Lieutenant General George Kenney were also aboard the big aircraft for this mission. However, his biggest shock was when he had seen that three of the women working aboard the control center of the plane were clearly Asian women and possibly Japanese ones. Ingrid had then to reassure him about Captain Jenny Kawena, the intelligence officer, and about Corporals Mary Takahashi and Jane Fumitomo, who were manning the radio monitoring stations tuned to Japanese frequencies. His last shock was to find the famous and most beautiful Hedy Lamarr in charge of the electronic warfare station of the plane.

As Halsey sat with Kenney at one of the command stations, one woman made an announcement on the command intercom circuit.

"Black Widow Callsigns are in the air and are now thirty miles west of the Japanese radar station on Tol Island, flying at an altitude of 200 feet over the ocean. Dragon Callsigns are at an altitude of 5,000 feet and are seventy miles west of the Tol Island radar station."

"Start jamming the Japanese radars, Hedy." replied Ingrid Dows, who was standing behind the radar operators of the plane. "Make sure that they can't see anything else but snow on their screens."

"On it, Ingrid."

Normally, Halsey would have frowned on this rather familiar use of first names but this was Ingrid Dows' operation, so he didn't comment about it, especially since Kenney, the direct superior of Ingrid Dows, didn't seem to mind one bit. After another eleven minutes, another announcement came on the command intercom.

"The Tol Island radar station is now destroyed. Our aircraft are continuing eastward towards the enemy airfields and naval installations."

"What is your target priority order, Colonel Dows?" asked Halsey.

"First, our heavy gunships will use five-ton FAE bombs to destroy the four Japanese airfields and two seaplane bases on Dublon, Moen and Pamm. Then, they will blow away the fuel tank farms on Felon and the port facilities and the headquarters of the Fourth Fleet and of the 31st Army on Dublon. Finally, they will pay a visit to the two remaining radar stations on Moen and Uman, while our helicopters will attack with torpedoes the ships anchored in Truk Lagoon, followed by the torpedo boat bases on Muon, Uman and Tol."

“Do we know which Japanese ships are presently at anchor in Truk Lagoon, Colonel?”

“Unfortunately, our reconnaissance flight of yesterday encountered a layer of low clouds and wasn’t able to ascertain what was in Truk Lagoon at the time. However, our helicopters will happily sink whatever they will find at anchor. Since those ships will be immobile, that will greatly simplify the aiming of our torpedoes, Admiral. Think of it as a repeat of the British air attack against the Italian fleet at Taranto, but in a larger scale.” Halsey nodded his head in understanding at that. The 1940 British attack on the port of Taranto, made by old, slow SWORDFISH torpedo-bomber biplanes, had sunk the modern battleship LITTORIO, plus two older battleships, and had severely damaged two cruisers, all at the cost of two British SWORDFISH biplanes. If Dows’ aircraft could repeat the equivalent result, that would make Halsey plenty happy.

00:58 (Central Pacific Time)

Red Dragon One (AC-142G heavy gunship)

Approaching the Japanese airfield on the southern point of Moen Island

“Those Japanese are sure slow to react: I don’t see yet any lit searchlights or firing anti-aircraft guns.”

Jacqueline Cochran’s remark made her copilot, Marjorie Kumler, smile.

“Hey, Truk is supposed to be this impregnable Gibraltar of the Pacific, too far away from the frontlines to be within our reach. This is going to be a nice wakeup call for them.”

“And we will make it a brutal one. Ruth, do you have Airfield Number Two in your bombing sight?”

“We are approaching it, Jackie. Give me local control, so that I can line it properly in my bomb site.”

“The plane is yours, Ruth. What do you see on that airfield?”

“I can count a minimum of sixty aircraft, mostly bombers, lined up in double ranks on the tarmac as if waiting to be inspected. Our FAE bomb will blow them all away like straw.”

“Good! Drop when ready.”

Cochran, making sure that her plane was kept stable and steady, only had to wait a few seconds before Ruth shouted out on the intercom.

“BOMB AWAY!”

Cochran then waited anxiously for the result of their bombing. At her present altitude, her AC-142G should not be seriously disturbed by the massive shockwave from the explosion of their five-ton FAE bomb. She was proven right when her airplane suddenly jumped up in the air but stayed otherwise undisturbed. Ruth then reported on the intercom again after a few more seconds.

“Direct hit on Airfield Number Two: our bomb struck the group of hangars next to the main tarmac. Those hangars, along with the planes parked on the tarmac, are toast. We can move to our second objective. I already see the seaplane base approaching in my sight.”

“Then go ahead and have more fun, Ruth.”

Some thirty seconds later, Ruth announced the dropping of their second and last big FAE bomb. Seaplanes being inherently more fragile to combat damage than land aircraft, that bomb positively ravaged the fleet of floatplanes and flying boats, including two big four-engine Kawanishi H8K ‘EMILY’ flying boats moored next to a quay. Once she was informed of the success of that drop, Cochran got on the radio and called her wingman, Ruth Francidine.

“Red Dragon Two, from Red Dragon One. My two primary objectives are now destroyed. How are you doing on your part, over?”

“From Red Dragon Two: I have dropped my two eggs and also have destroyed my primary objective. Still no anti-aircraft fire encountered, over.”

“Those Japs are really slow on the switch tonight.” said Cochran to Marjorie Kumler before talking again on the radio. “Red Dragon Two, you may now go engage your secondary targets with your guns. Red Dragon One, out.”

She had just finished speaking on the radio when an intense flash of light lit the whole sky to their four o’clock. That flash then turned into a gigantic fireball slowly going up from what looked like an inferno, while they could hear the terrifying rumble of that fireball even from inside their plane. Marjorie Kumler, who had a better view of it from her seat, quickly understood what that was.

“Geraldine’s FAE bomb sure did a great job on the big fuel depot on Felon Island. I didn’t expect such a huge fireball, though.”

“Well, add a five-ton FAE bomb to a fuel tank park containing over 3,000 tons of aviation gasoline and some 21,000 tons of navy fuel and you get one hell of a fireball.

With such a brasier ignited, our helicopters won't have trouble finding targets anchored in the lagoon."

"Yeah, but it will also make our helicopters easier to spot by Japanese gunners." replied Marjorie, sounding worried.

Much lower, near the surface of the Truk Lagoon, the AH-4 piloted by Faith Buchner was flying towards the large mass of an unidentified ship visible in their thermal cameras when the Felon Island fuel depot went up in flames, illuminating the whole lagoon. Faith swore to herself and spoke on the intercom to her copilot-gunner, Katharine Hepburn.

"Shit! Now every Japanese gunner around the lagoon will be able to spot us."

"Continue straight on, Faith!" replied Katharine, her voice rising with excitement. "I can now identify that ship ahead: it's an aircraft carrier!"

"WHAT? Are you sure, Kat?"

"Positive, Faith, and it is a big one, not a simple light carrier."

Faith looked ahead, concentrating for a few seconds on the big ship now silhouetted by the flames from Felon Island.

"Jesus! You're right, Kat: this is the fucking UNYO! Arm our torpedo while I call in some help to sink that big sucker."

Faith then keyed her radio microphone and spoke in it excitedly.

"To all Red Widow callsigns, this is Red Widow One: I have the aircraft carrier UNYO ahead of me, anchored in the middle of the lagoon. Make it your top priority target and torpedo it, out."

Faith then pointed her helicopter straight at the Japanese aircraft carrier and lowered her AH-4 closer to the surface of the water, in order to prepare to launch their torpedo. Thankfully, the UNYO was at anchor and immobile, making it an easy target for her.

"You have the controls, Kat. Make that sucker eat our torpedo."

"Target aligned in my sight and torpedo armed... TORPEDO LAUNCHED! SWITCHING TO ROCKETS!"

Just as Katharine had spoken, the guns of the aircraft carrier opened fire, aiming at the incoming AH-4. The firing from the 27,000-ton carrier proved at first to be quite inaccurate but it quickly enough became dangerous enough to make Katharine stiffen in her armored cockpit. Then, the salvo of eight five-inch rockets she had just fired hit the starboard flank of the UNYO and exploded, taking out part of the Japanese gunners.

“JUMP OVER THE SHIP AND COME BACK TOWARDS ITS STERN, FAITH!”

Faith reacted at once to the shout from Katharine and pulled on her flight stick, making her AH-4 jump up in the air, just in time to avoid a stream of 25 mm shells. She was turning her helicopter around in a tight half-turn when her torpedo hit the starboard side hull of the UNYO, creating a huge geyser of water. As she was heading towards the stern of the Japanese carrier, Katharine fired successive bursts from her 20 mm cannon, peppering the port side sponsons housing the anti-aircraft guns on that side of the UNYO. Those anti-aircraft guns, not having night vision devices, contrary to the AH-4, lost that gunnery duel and soon fell mostly silent.

“FLY OVER THE FLIGHT DECK ALONG ITS CENTERLINE, FAITH! I’M GOING TO FIRE MY CANNON DOWN ON IT.”

“CONSIDER IT DONE!”

Completing her turn, Faith pushed her AH-4 to maximum power and started overflying the aircraft carrier from barely twenty meters above its flight deck, while Katharine fired her automatic cannon nearly continuously. A number of aircraft parked on the flight deck were hit and caught fire. Spotting the forward-most elevator of the UNYO in the lowered position, probably to bring a fighter aircraft up to the flight deck, Katharine fired at it, with a number of her 20 mm shells penetrating inside the carrier’s aircraft hangar and exploding inside it. The AH-4 then found itself back over water, having zoomed down the whole length of the Japanese carrier. Faith was turning around for a second strafing pass when two big geysers rose in quick succession against the starboard side of the UNYO, making her scream in joy.

“TWO MORE TORPEDOES IN THE UNYO! WELL DONE, GIRLS!”

This time, Katharine chose to concentrate her fire on the bridge superstructure of the carrier, liberally peppering it with 20 mm explosive shells. As they again overflew the carrier, a fourth torpedo hit the UNYO. Seconds later, the carrier erupted into a giant fireball, to the elation of the two women.

“THAT TORPEDO MUST HAVE RUPTURED ITS AVIATION GASOLINE LINES: THE UNYO IS NOW TOAST! TO ALL RED WIDOWS: CEASE FIRING ON THE UNYO AND CONCENTRATE ON OTHER TARGETS IN THE LAGOON.”

Looking around her, Faith did her best to assess the situation at this stage of the battle. With the night partly illuminated by the flames from the burning fuel depot on Felon Island and with tracer shells fired wildly in all directions, that proved to be no easy task. Taking a decision, she keyed her radio microphone again.

"To Red Widow callsigns: report ammo status, over."

To her relief, all five of her other helicopters reported back, proving that none had been shot down. However, all of them reported that they had expended all of their rockets and torpedoes and that they were low on cannon ammunition. That decided Faith to call the EC-142E overlooking the raid on Truk.

"Oracle One, from Red Widow One: my callsigns are low on ammunition. Request permission to withdraw, over."

A few seconds later, she got a response from Ingrid Dows, who used a pre-arranged codeword to signal a compass heading for the return trip to the SANGAMON.

"Red Widow One, from Lady Hawk: permission granted. Take heading Green 040, over."

"Acknowledged, Lady Hawk, out! To all Red Widow callsigns: break contact and withdraw on heading Green 040."

On Oracle One, Vice-Admiral Halsey had been following the battle with growing excitement while watching distant Truk Atoll through the powerful optical telescope situated in the nose of the EC-142E. Turning around in his seat, he smiled up at George Kenney, who had periodically looked into the telescope himself.

"Goddam! This is going to hurt the Japs really bad: they just lost their last carrier in the whole Pacific. Your women did a fantastic job here."

Also happy, Kenney nodded his head once and replied in a measured tone of voice.

"And that is why I give as much freedom of action as possible to Colonel Dows and her air wing. Dows is a magician when it comes to the application of airpower. I just wish that the other generals in the Army Air Corps would take her more seriously and would listen to her advice, Admiral."

Halsey's smile faded then and he looked soberly at Kenney.

"And what is their beef against Dows, General?"

"Mostly, that she should follow accepted official bombing tactics instead of pushing what they call non-regulation tactics."

"Even after the tremendous victories she had achieved here in the Pacific?"

"Admiral, their main argument, which I find both stupid and racist, is that she has achieved her successes against an inferior enemy compared to the Germans."

That made a flash of anger appear in Halsey's eyes.

"An inferior enemy? We lost tens of thousands of brave sailors and airmen while battling the Japanese in the Pacific. Their argument against Dows is nothing less than an insult to my navy men, who sacrificed so much up to now in this war."

"I agree with you on that, Admiral. However, prejudice and racism are hard to kill. I am afraid that our generals in England will have to learn their lessons the hard way, with our airmen there paying the price for their leaders' stupidity and obtuseness."

02:19 (Manila Time)

Thursday, December 03, 1942 'C'

Isolated beach to the Northeast of Manila

Luzon Island, Philippines

Jesus Villamor, accompanied by what was left of the Filipino mechanics and ground crews of the 17th and 6th Pursuit Squadrons, who had been fighting as guerrillas against the Japanese for nine months now, was anxiously watching the sky to the East while listening for aircraft engines. When Ingrid had been forced by direct presidential order to leave for the United States in March, Jesus had then led his 214 Filipino men into a guerrilla fought among the jungles and hills of the Pacific coast. Now, he had only 132 men left in fighting shape, with dozens of men killed and many more wounded in battle or sick from malaria and dengue fever. The encoded message he had received three days ago, telling him that helicopters would bring in supplies and evacuate his wounded and sick today, had made him think seriously about the worth of further staying in the Philippines with the handful of men left to him. He was not obtuse to the suffering of his men and was honest enough to realize that what his group had accomplished to date while fighting the Japanese since they had taken over the Philippines was little more than pinpricks. He had thus answered back to the message from General MacArthur headquarters by requesting a complete evacuation of his small guerrilla unit. He had then received an acknowledge agreeing to his request and confirming the place and time of the pickup. Now, he could only hope that this promised pickup was going to materialize.

As Jesus was waiting and watching, he started to hear a faint noise of aircraft engine coming from the sea. That noise progressively grew, with those aircraft

apparently heading for his location. He thus shouted orders to his men, who were hiding among the trees growing along the beach.

“Get ready, men: I believe that our pickup is coming.”

His 132 men still able to fight then came out of the jungle and onto the beach, carrying on improvised stretchers or on poncho tarps held by their corners the 37 wounded or sick members of their unit. The noise of engines and propellers, rather peculiar for aircraft, soon grew quite loud. To Jesus dismay, he then saw two dozen dark, elongated shapes overfly him at high speed, showing no signs of slowing down as they flew towards the Southwest, prompting one of his men to shout at the sky.

“HEY, WE'RE HERE!”

Jesus, confused, also thought for a moment that they had somehow been forgotten, until he heard another group of aircraft approach, but near the surface of the sea this time.

“DON'T WORRY, MEN: MORE AIRCRAFT ARE COMING NOW. GET READY TO BRING OUR SICK AND WOUNDED FIRST ABOARD THOSE AIRCRAFT.”

With his men calming down somewhat, Jesus then tried to see the approaching aircraft. He finally started to distinguish a small group of black dots low over the water as they were about half a mile away. Those dots quickly grew to the strangest aircraft shapes he had ever seen. Never having seen or heard about a helicopter before, he scratched his head as six UH-2 medium helicopters landed one behind the other on the sand of the beach. One silhouette then jumped out from the rear ramp of the lead helicopter and started running towards him, with Jesus also starting to run to meet that person halfway. He soon slowed down and stopped, utterly surprised when he recognized that person.

“Ingrid, is that you?”

“Yes, it's me, Jesus!” replied Ingrid before opening her arms and hugging him while planting frantic kisses on his cheeks. “I am so happy to see you and our men again. But they must get aboard my helicopters quickly: the Japanese may react to their arrival. We will have time to speak further once on our escort carrier.”

“Right!” said Jesus before switching to Tagalog. “GET ABOARD THOSE HELICOPTERS, MEN, AND MAKE IT QUICK!”

With a number of nurses and medics coming out of the helicopters to help load the sick and the wounded in the waiting UH-2s, everybody was inside in mere minutes, allowing the six helicopters to take off from the beach. Ingrid then took the time to hug in turn the Filipino men now in her helicopter, hugs they warmly returned. Once that was

done, Ingrid went to sit next to Jesus Villamor and took one of his hands while looking with tenderness in his eyes.

“You and the men will soon be in Port Moresby, where you will get a complete medical examination before going on a month-long rehabilitation leave in Australia. General MacArthur is taking care of arranging that leave period for you.”

“And after that? What are we going to do, with our president in exile in the United States?”

“I came to an arrangement with Lieutenant General Kenney, the commander of the Fifth Air Force in Port Moresby, before flying to the SANGAMON with extra helicopters in order to be able to meet you on Luzon. Your men will be integrated to my air wing as extra ground crews, while you will become my only male pilot.”

“Your only male pilot? Does that mean...”

“That my air group is composed exclusively of female aircrews? Yes! The 99th Air Wing, nicknamed ‘The Fininellas’, is an all-female air combat unit composed of a mix of fighter, bomber, transport and helicopter squadrons. The attack helicopters you saw pass overhead on their way to attack Clark Field, Nielson Field and Nichols Field, were all piloted by women. Once they will have concluded their attacks, they will return to our escort carrier, which will then bring us back to Port Moresby. You may be happy to learn that my unit has severely clobbered the Japanese in the past few weeks and that the Japanese Navy is now a mere ghost of its past self. So, will you and your men accept to be integrated into my air wing, Jesus?”

“We would be stupid not to, Ingrid. You were and still are the best commander we had in this war.”

“Thank you for the compliment, Jesus. If you will now excuse me, I will go check on how my attack helicopter pilots are doing over the Philippines.”

As soon as Ingrid had returned to the cockpit of her UH-2, a doctor and a nurse started going from men to men, in order to make quick medical evaluations of the Filipino guerrillas, while the female loadmaster distributed bottled fruit juice and sandwiches around. Some ten minutes later, Ingrid returned to the cargo cabin of the UH-2. Jesus didn’t miss the sober expression now clouding her face.

“Something is wrong, Ingrid?”

"There always are things which go wrong in war, Jesus. My attack helicopters are now returning to the SANGAMON but they lost one of theirs, downed by an anti-aircraft gun over Clark Field."

"I am sorry to hear that, Ingrid. Did you know those pilots well?"

"I know all of my aircrews well, Jesus, as I personally enrolled all of them. At least, they didn't fall alive in the hands of the Japanese."

Ingrid then fell silent, absorbed in her thoughts, with Jesus respecting her silence by refraining from asking further questions.

09:52 (Manila Time)

Field next to Clark Field's main tarmac

75 miles north-northwest from Manila

Island of Luzon, Philippines

Lieutenant General Yamashita, the commander of all Japanese Army units in the Philippines, looked on in silence at the incinerated remains of the lone American aircraft shot down hours before over Clark Field. It was definitely unlike any other aircraft he had seen before, either American or Japanese ones. Just the presence of the large coaxial rotors, which had originally pointed directly at the vertical, made that mystery aircraft a puzzle for him. For that reason, he had asked for the assistance of a qualified aeronautical engineer who was part of his staff as his aviation advisor. That expert was now examining from up close the remains of that downed American aircraft while Yamashita looked on from a few meters away. After a good twenty minutes passed sifting through the burned-out debris, the engineer came back to his general to present his report.

"Sir, while I have never seen this specific model of aircraft before, I can tell you that it was a helicopter, a machine designed to take off and land at the vertical. The Germans experimented with a couple of models of helicopters just before this war started. However, this machine here is a lot more advanced and sophisticated than anything the Germans had designed and it looks quite formidable to me."

"I can gather that last point by the amount of damage those 'helicopters' caused to three of our airfields, Major Nakajima." replied Yamashita in a caustic tone. "At last count, 106 of our aircraft were destroyed on the ground in that night attack. What can you tell me specifically about this particular machine?"

“Well, I can say with certainty that it was powered by a pair of standard American piston radial engines, connected to a large gearbox which transmitted their power to two coaxial rotors turning in opposite directions, probably in order to cancel out the torque from each rotor. That principle is very advanced and also very efficient, eliminating the need for an anti-torque tail rotor. It was a tandem two-seater, with the cockpit areas and the engines heavily protected by steel armor. One of our 75 mm guns got lucky and managed a direct hit on it, which downed it. A small turret under its belly supported an automatic cannon and two machine guns and it was also seen carrying bombs, or something like bombs. As for the electronic equipment inside, it was completely destroyed by the crash and ensuing fire, so I can't say much about it. One of the anti-aircraft gunners who approached the wreck immediately after the crash told me that he had found the body of one of the two pilots, which had been ejected out on impact: it was that of a woman.”

“A WOMAN? ARE YOU SURE, MAJOR?”

“Sir, that gunner told me that they had preserved her body inside the nearest hangar. Shall we go examine it, sir?”

“Yes! This definitely intrigues me.”

With a staff officer from Clark Field leading them to the said hangar, Yamashita and Major Nakajima were soon standing next to a body covered with a tarp. Yamashita then went to himself uncover the said body before examining it with cold eyes accustomed to look at death. While badly mangled and mutilated, that body was definitely that of a young woman with brown hair and wearing a pilot's leather helmet and inflatable vest. Seeing a blood-covered patch sewn to the ripped combat shirt of the dead woman, Yamashita looked at it for a moment before looking at his senior intelligence officer.

“The 99th Air Wing, the Fifinellas? What do we know about that American air unit, Colonel?”

Yamashita didn't miss the way the face of his intelligence officer hardened on getting that question.

“General, the 99th Air Wing is the only known female air combat unit in the American forces and it is led by a young woman who is presently by far the top American air ace of all times, with over 75 claimed air victories. She is nicknamed 'Lady Hawk' and became famous...or infamous, while fighting us in the skies of the Philippines

last year. She is even said to have fought on the ground, in the jungles of Bataan, after her unit lost its last operational fighter aircraft. There is also a critical piece of information about her: she is said to be the adoptive daughter of the famous Canadian time traveler, Nancy Laplante, who died in early 1941.”

Yamashita raised an eyebrow at that, his interest pricked.

“And do we know where this young woman and her unit are right now?”

“The 99th Air Wing is presently stationed in Port Moresby, in Papua New Guinea, General.”

“IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA? THAT’S 4,000 KILOMETERS FROM HERE! HOW THE HELL COULD ONE OF ITS AIRCRAFT BE HERE, IN THE PHILIPPINES?”

“Uh, we presume that they were carried to close to the Philippines by an American aircraft carrier, sir.”

“You presume?” asked Yamashita, truly irritated and disturbed by now. “How about we search for that carrier and sink it, Colonel?”

“Er, we have no aircraft left to do that, sir, while the Navy is sorely short of ships at this time.”

“What about our submarines? What about Navy planes? Is someone going to do something about this or are we supposed to sit on our thumbs here? Get some kind of search initiated, Colonel, AT ONCE!”

“Yes sir!” replied the colonel, stiffening and saluting Yamashita before running away. His general then turned his attention back on the mutilated body of the female American pilot and, after a few seconds, came to attention and saluted the dead woman. She may have been an enemy of Japan but Yamashita could admire military valor wherever he saw it.

15:19 (PNG Time)

Saturday, December 05, 1942 ‘C’

Fifth Air Force headquarters, Wards Airfield

Near Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

After what had been some decidedly momentous days and weeks, Vice Admiral Halsey and General MacArthur had mutually decided that some strategic and operational level readjustments in plans were now needed. Having already seen how the 99th Air Wing was working with its advanced planes and weapons and realizing that

both of their theaters of operations were now closely influenced by the recent events, Halsey and MacArthur had called for a sort of combined regional strategic conference, to be held at the headquarters of Lieutenant General Kenney, in Wards Airfield. Now assembled around the big map table placed in the middle of the Fifth Air Force operations center were General Douglas MacArthur, General Sir Thomas Blamey, Lieutenant General George Kenney and Vice Admiral William Halsey, plus their senior operations and intelligence staff officers, with those Navy officers from Noumea having been summoned to Port Moresby by Halsey. The one participant which some navy officers were surprised to see at such a high-level meeting was Ingrid. However, since Vice Admiral Halsey had agreed with the intention of MacArthur to have Ingrid present, those navy officers didn't dare raise a stink about her participation to the conference.

The mood around the map table was decidedly positive as the participants looked at the numerous symbols in red and blue grease pencils written on the transparent plastic film covering the map. Most of the red symbols were now marked over with blue 'X' symbols and dates, signifying that those Japanese units or ships had been destroyed and on which date and time.

"How ten weeks can change things" said MacArthur, a slight smile on his lips, "and for the better, which is all to my liking. The Japanese Navy now has all but disappeared from the South Pacific and we haven't had to repel a single Japanese bomber raid for over three weeks. I am sure that your marines on Guadalcanal are not complaining about that state of affair, Admiral Halsey."

"They sure aren't, General." replied a grinning William Halsey. "Now that they don't have to worry anymore about Japanese air raids and naval bombardments, they have been able to push back the Japanese Army troops present on the island. Those Japanese soldiers, who have not received any extra supplies or reinforcements for over two months now, are reported to be slowly starving to death. The Japanese soldiers who were recently found and killed by our marines on patrol were said to be skin and bones and were very weak. Another month of blockade against Japanese resupply convoy and the Japanese troops on Guadalcanal will basically die by themselves from starvation and diseases. I have thus ordered my ships to return to the Solomon waters and to prevent any Japanese ships from approaching Guadalcanal. I also am going to soon replace the First Marine Division with the Army's Americal Division, so that our marines could finally take some richly deserved rest in Australia."

Halsey then smiled to Ingrid before continuing.

“By the way, I have a big Bravo Zulu for your helicopter detachment you sent to support our marines in Henderson Field, Colonel. Their air support proved very effective and was most appreciated by our marines.”

“It was our pleasure, Admiral. I believe that, by blockading the Japanese troops left in New Guinea, Rabaul and the Bougainville Islands, we will be able to starve them to death within months. We thus won’t need to needlessly risk the lives of our soldiers and marines by launching direct assaults on Japanese bastions. We will also be able to rebuild our forces in the South Pacific area while the Japanese are being starved. As for my air wing, I will concentrate on systematically hitting and destroying all the Japanese aircraft and ships to be found around our two theaters of operations and around the Dutch East Indies. We should in particular hunt down and sink all the Japanese tanker ships and cargo ships we will find. Without access to the oil and resources from its conquests, Japan will slowly wither and become impotent: no oil and no minerals will mean no possible major military actions by Japan. Yes, that will mean one or two more years of war before Japan will be forced to capitulate, but that will also potentially save the lives of hundreds of thousands of our men. The one place where we will not be able to avoid some serious fighting is the Philippines: starving the Japanese there would also mean starving the Filipino people and I am not ready to let that happen, Admiral. Let’s be patient and build up our forces in view of our retaking of the Philippines.”

“I fully agree with Colonel Dows on this, Admiral.” said MacArthur in a firm voice. “We want to liberate the Philippines while protecting the Filipino people from harm. I thus plan to conduct a campaign meant to isolate and blockade the Japanese occupying the Southwest Pacific, so that we could then concentrate on a future large-scale assault which will throw the Japanese out of the Philippines. However, to do that, we will need the support of the Navy.”

While in general agreement with MacArthur, Halsey had to caution him about what he had heard from his Navy superiors.

“Your overall strategic plan is both sound and realistic, General, however what I have heard from Admiral Nimitz in Hawaii and from Admiral King in Washington is that they want to advance across the Central Pacific and take the islands held by the Japanese, in order to eventually be able to take Formosa and blockade Japan directly.”

Ingrid immediately flared up in anger and irritation.

"Have your superiors even bothered to read the information from the future concerning this war, information my adoptive mother brought with her from the year 2012 and which I and my late husband brought a copy of to General MacArthur when we arrived in the Philippines in early 1941, Admiral? Didn't they take notice of the series of bloodbaths our marines and soldiers will endure by assaulting head-on those Japanese island garrisons in the Central Pacific? We now have the opportunity to win this war against Japan by going around those Japanese strongpoints and letting them starve at little cost to our men. And they would be ready to sacrifice tens of thousands of our men simply in order to take a few worthless islands?"

"Careful about your words, Colonel." replied in a hostile voice one of Halsey's staff officers, a navy captain who was his Plans Officer. "You are no naval expert and Admiral Nimitz has a very competent staff serving him."

Ingrid stared hard at that officer while raising her voice by one notch.

"It doesn't take an expert to see that losing thousands of marines just in order to take an island with no real potential as an air or sea base, when you could simply bypass it, would be a stupid waste of our men's lives, Captain."

That navy captain was about to reply to her in a harsh tone when Halsey signaled to him to keep his mouth shut. The vice admiral then looked soberly at Ingrid and spoke in a measure tone.

"You may be right about this, Colonel Dows, but those kinds of decisions are taken in Washington, not in this airfield or in Noumea. As for your information from the future on this war, I would have to read through it first to make up my opinion about it." Both Ingrid and MacArthur shot surprised looks at Halsey, with MacArthur then speaking first.

"You haven't seen those 'Hourglass Files' yet, Admiral Halsey? Have Admiral Nimitz and Admiral King seen them?"

"No, I haven't seen them, General: I never got a copy of them. As for Admirals Nimitz and King, I couldn't say if they read those files."

Ingrid, incensed by this, looked at MacArthur.

"General, do you still have the copy of the Hourglass Files you got from me and Ken? If yes, maybe Admiral Halsey would gain by reading them."

"I certainly still have them, Colonel Dows, as I constantly study them in order to help me formulate my battle plans. Admiral, I would urge you to sit down tonight and read through the chapters of those files pertaining to the war in the Pacific. You will thus

see by yourself how futile and costly a series of amphibious assaults across the Central Pacific would be. As for your Navy superiors in Washington having read or not their copies of the Athena Files, I suspect they either didn't or were dismissive of them, if I can judge by the way our forces in Hawaii were caught flat-footed by the Japanese in Pearl Harbor."

"I still will have to follow the strategic directives given to me by my superiors in Hawaii and Washington, General." said Halsey. "However, I will accept your offer of letting me read those Hourglass Files tonight. I would appreciate very much if you could then direct me to the more pertinent parts of those files."

"I will let Colonel Dows help you with that, Admiral: she is much more knowledgeable than me about that information from the future. She also knows things that are not in those files, as she was able to discuss them directly with her adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante."

Halsey threw a sharp look at Ingrid, while many of his staff officers appeared shocked.

"You know more about this than even Washington, Colonel?"

"I do, Admiral! I have been basing my tactics on that information ever since I started fighting the Japanese over a year ago. I also have some personal past experience which helps me guide my actions and decisions."

"Some personal past experience...as a teenage girl? Yeah, sure!" muttered Halsey's Chief of Plans. Ingrid threw him a furious look on hearing that. The officers around the map table then saw that navy captain grimace with pain while vacillating and holding his head with both hands.

"Aaah! My head...it wants to explode."

The navy captain's pain then apparently went away about as fast as it came and he looked with what was close to fear at Ingrid, who was still glaring at him.

"What did you do to me? Are you a kind of witch?"

"No, I am not a witch, Captain: I am simply someone who doesn't suffer fools gladly. Here is some extra info for you, which I already gave to General MacArthur and to General Kenney: while with Nancy Laplante in London, both of us simultaneously started remembering the souvenirs from our past incarnations. While Nancy remembered some 9,000 years from her past lives, I remembered 7,000 years of my own past incarnations. You want to hear me speak in Ancient Sumerian, or in Attic Greek? I also have been a different person since I lived through that experience. Now, I would appreciate if you could start taking me seriously, Captain Moorehead."

With most of the men present, except for MacArthur and Kenney, staring at her with disbelief, Ingrid then looked at MacArthur.

“General, do you wish for me to stay or to leave?”

“Stay, Ingrid: your advice is too precious for me, especially right now.”

MacArthur then faced Halsey and his navy staff officers, his expression sober.

“Admiral, gentlemen, I have always found the advice and counsels from Colonel Dows to be both judicious and most helpful. I would thus urge you to listen to her and to take her seriously, especially at this time, when we have to decide how to pursue the war in our respective theaters of operations.”

“I am ready to do that, General.” replied Halsey while cautiously glancing at Ingrid.

CHAPTER 20 - SHINY NEW TOYS



Upgraded ESSEX-Class fleet aircraft carrier.

16:04 (South Pacific Time)

Wednesday, December 16, 1942 'C'

South Pacific Theater of Operations headquarters

Noumea, New Caledonia

Having gone to the Noumea airport to greet Admiral Chester Nimitz, the commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, Vice Admiral Halsey led him to his private office on arrival at his headquarters and had a coffee service brought in before they sat down for a private conversation. Taking a first sip from his coffee cup, Nimitz nodded his head in appreciation.

"Now, that is good coffee, Bill."

"Whatever we say about the French, they do make some great coffee, Chester. Now, to what do I owe the honor of your visit in Noumea?"

"I came to discuss with you about the developments of the last couple of months in your sector, Bill. I am very pleased with what has been accomplished and with the way the Japanese have been beaten back."

Instead of being flattered by those words, Halsey gave a cautious look at his superior.

"To be frank, Chester, the merit for this should go mostly to the Fifth Air Force, and in particular to the 99th Air Wing of Colonel Dows. Dows' tactics and the prowess of her unit worked miracles in the South and Southwest Pacific. Without her, my fleet would still be in big trouble and the Japanese would probably have pushed us out of the Solomon Islands by now."

"Aren't you exaggerating a bit the accomplishments of that young woman, Bill? She's not even old enough to have the legal right to drink alcohol."

"Not one bit, Chester. You know that I would be the first one to claim credit when it is owed to me but, to be totally frank, this girl is a true military genius, on top of being a top combat aviator. General MacArthur, no slouch when it comes to hog the glory around him, has fully adopted the strategic plan proposed by Dows in early December and is not making any major move without getting first her opinion. My advice about Dows is that we should also listen to her very seriously, Chester."

"You're serious, Bill?" said Nimitz, shocked and surprised. Halsey nodded his head firmly and looked into Nimitz' eyes.

"Very! That young girl is no ordinary person and has demonstrated some incredible psychic powers. Did you know that she remembers her past incarnations, which cover 7,000 years? One of those past incarnations was as a Chinese emperor, while she was once a Spartan warrior who died with King Leonidas at the Battle of Thermopylae."

As Nimitz looked at him with incredulity, Halsey added more on.

"She proved that to me while she was helping guide me through the reading of a copy of the Hourglass Files brought from the future by Nancy Laplante, the Canadian time traveler, who by the way was her adoptive mother. When she was insulted by one of my staff officers, that officer suddenly felt an intense headache for a moment, apparently triggered by Dows' mental powers. She is also abnormally strong for a girl of her size. All this, according to her, started while she was in London in 1940, where she was getting some secret teaching from Nancy Laplante."

Nimitz took long seconds to digest this before looking back at Halsey.

"So, what is this young Dows proposing as a strategy that we should adopt?"

"Well, my reading of those top-secret Hourglass Files did support her opinion, which is that we should avoid making frontal amphibious assaults on the various garrison islands held by the Japanese in the Central Pacific and that we should instead simply bypass and blockade them to starve those Japanese into submission. In the

meantime, she has been busy systematically striking from the air and at night the various Japanese bases around Port Moresby, destroying on the ground the Japanese aircraft still intact and sinking the Japanese ships her aircraft encounter. She noticeably has six AC-142G heavy gunships as part of her air wing, which she uses to drop five-ton Fuel Air Explosive bombs powerful enough to flatten and incinerate everything within 500 yards. When dropped on a Japanese airfield, one such bomb basically blasts all the planes on that airfield to bits. She has struck up to now sixteen Japanese bases with FAE bombs, with the result being that Japanese airpower has basically ceased to exist around Papua New Guinea, Rabaul, the Solomons and the Bougainville Islands. This has allowed me to surge forward my remaining battleships, cruisers and destroyers and to enforce a sea blockade against the Japanese-held islands in the South Pacific. More recently, Dows has also started to hit the Japanese airfields around the Celebes and the Dutch East Indies, in order to eliminate the air threat from those territories. As a result of all this, my submarines now have a much easier task of blocking the various straits between the Dutch East Indies and the Philippines, thus strangling the Japanese tanker and cargo traffic between Japan and South-East Asia.”

“And what is my fleet supposed to do in the meantime in the Central Pacific, sit down and simply look on, Bill?” replied Nimitz, getting irritated. “And what about the marine units I have been preparing for amphibious assaults around the Central Pacific?”

“Prepare them for an eventual retaking of the Philippines, Chester. I can now see that this should be our main objective in the Pacific, and not Formosa.”

“I see!” said Nimitz in a cold voice, obviously not buying Halsey’s arguments. “Anything else that you think should be done, Bill?”

Halsey sighed in disappointment then but didn’t fight back on that point, instead covering another subject he had wanted to discuss with Nimitz.

“Yes! We definitely need to start using helicopters on our ships, and not only on our carriers. The AH-4 attack helicopters which attacked Truk Lagoon and the Japanese Combined Fleet in the Torres Strait have proved to be very efficient weapons against the Japanese ships, especially since they have been modified to be able to carry torpedoes and can attack at night. On its part, the UH-1 light helicopter has proved very useful for liaison duties, medevac missions and search and rescue operations. It would be particularly useful to the Navy as a ship-to-ship liaison aircraft and for ocean surveillance ahead of a fleet.”

“Hum! That does make a lot of sense to me, Bill. I will have my staff study this on my return to Hawaii.”

The way Nimitz phrased his reply ticked off Halsey, who threw a hard look at him.

“Chester, I would urge you to consider very seriously everything I just told you. The Hourglass Files I read gave a very bleak picture of what will happen if we go on with our planned amphibious assaults through the Central Pacific. In Nancy Laplante’s history, those assaults, from the Marshall Islands to the Mariannas, Iwo Jima and Okinawa, cost us over 80,000 marines and soldiers killed or wounded. That’s the equivalent of four full divisions, Chester! And for what? The capture of a few airfields and ship anchorages? On the other hand, if we concentrate our forces on the recapture of the Philippines, we will end up with a large base of operations within bomber range of Japan and will also free tens of thousands of our men who have been living through Hell as prisoners of the Japanese. By the way, did you have a chance to look at those Hourglass Files since 1941?”

“Er, no! My headquarters never got a copy of those files.”

The utter absurdity of this left Halsey speechless for a moment. While he knew Nimitz to be a competent and energetic naval commander, the fault here was clearly with the Navy staff in Washington, which probably had deemed unnecessary to disseminate that precious source of intelligence knowledge.

“Then, go visit General MacArthur in Port Moresby, so that he could show you his copy of those files. You could also find useful to discuss those files with Dows, who was the one, with her late husband, who brought that copy to MacArthur in Manila.” Halsey somehow expected Nimitz to again ignore his advice but, to his surprise, the Pacific Fleet commander finally relented.

“Very well, Bill. I will go to Port Moresby after my visit here. By the way, I do have a piece of good news for you: the newly-built USS ESSEX, the first of our new class of fleet aircraft carrier, has just been completed and will sail next month to join your fleet. Another new fleet carrier should then join up with you another month later. Both carriers will come with fully equipped squadrons.”

“Now, that is what I call good news, Chester. I will eagerly await their arrival in the South Pacific.”

13:32 (California Time)

Thursday, January 28, 1943 'C'

**Hughes Aircraft plant, Culver City, suburbs of Los Angeles
California, U.S.A.**

Lieutenant General Henry 'Hap' Arnold, accompanied by a small group of his staff officers and led through the Hughes Aircraft plant by Howard Hughes himself, had to stop at his first sight of the big prototype parked on the tarmac in front of the main assembly plant building.

"Wow! Look at this big beauty!"

"This is the prototype of my Hughes XA-11B VULTURE long-range, ultra-fast bomber, General." said proudly Howard Hughes. "Its design is derived from that of my previous D-2 heavy fighter, which was earlier rejected by the Army Air Force Materiel Command staff. However, I incorporated to my XA-11 a number of modifications and additions based on the lessons our aviatrixes of the 99th Air Wing learned in combat in the Pacific. The most significant of those modifications were the adoption of the same engine and contra-rotating propellers used in the Fairchild C-142A; the enlargement of the bomb bay in order to be able to accommodate our five-ton FAE bomb used to such good effect by the 99th Air Wing and the addition of the same suite of thermal imaging cameras and night vision goggles used in the various aircraft of the 99th. I also got a number of very useful counsels and tips from Colonel Dows on what would be best around the Pacific."

His words, carefully selected to put Arnold on his side, seemed to work, with the head of the Army Air Force nodding his head while still admiring the sleek lines of the big, twin-engine aircraft.

"Your XA-11B certainly looks like a true greyhound of the skies, Mister Hughes. What kind of performances has it demonstrated to date during its test program?"

"We are still testing it but its top proven speed is 490 miles per hour, while its cruising speed will be well above 430 miles per hour. The preliminary results of our fuel consumption tests have shown me a probable maximum range on internal fuel of over 6,000 miles, and this while carrying three tons of ordnance."

Arnold, like his accompanying staff officers, stared at Howard Hughes as if he was a magician.

"Over 6,000 miles with three tons of bombs and at a speed of up to 490 miles per hour? How did you manage such incredible performances?"

"By making my prototype as aerodynamically clean and profiled as possible and, more importantly, by using Pratt & Whitney R-4800W engines, each rated to 4,200 horsepower at maximum continuous power, in conjunction with the same paddle-blade contra-rotating propellers used by the C-142A. That way I both got lots of power and also used a proven engine of high reliability. It also will help us by ensuring a commonality of parts and maintenance procedures with the C-142 family, plus it also helped me cut the development time of my prototype."

Arnold, liking all those points enumerated by Hughes, nodded his head in approval.

"A wise development philosophy, I must say. What kind of armament does your XA-11B have?"

"The XA-11B VULTURE, the fast bomber variant of my new family of combat aircraft, is armed with four fixed 20 mm cannons in its nose, plus twin rear-firing 20 mm cannons in a manned turret and a large bomb bay able to accommodate up to six tons of bombs, including our biggest bombs. The photo-reconnaissance variant, the XA-11R CONDOR, will have two fixed forward 20 mm cannons and a pair of rear turret-mounted 20 mm cannons, on top of a battery of six high-resolution reconnaissance cameras. As for the XF-11N FALCON night fighter variant, it will have six fixed forward 20 mm cannons, a rear-mounted turret with two 20 mm cannons and two retractable rocket launcher pods, each containing 32 76 mm rockets able to shred to pieces the biggest enemy bombers existing. It will also be equipped with a nose radar. Finally, I am going to build as well the C-11T SEAGULL fast liaison transport, which will be able to cross the Pacific at a cruising speed of up to 450 miles per hour while carrying up to sixteen V.I.P.s or six stretcher cases on medical evacuation flights."

By then, Hughes knew that he had his visitors sold on his aircraft.

"If I may make a suggestion, General. If you will authorize the production of a limited pre-series of my aircraft in order to test it in combat, then I would suggest that you let Colonel Dows and her aviatrixes fly them against the Japanese. My aircraft's huge autonomy was designed specifically for the Pacific Theatre, with its very long distances between various points, and would thus be perfect as a fast raider against the Japanese."

Henry Arnold grinned as he imagined Ingrid Dows at the commands of a XA-11, pounding the Japanese with it.

“Hell, you just sold me on your airplane, Mister Hughes. After doing a close-up tour of your prototype, we will go back inside your plant to discuss business together.” It was then the turn of Howard Hughes to grin as he led his visitors closer to the XA-11 for a detailed tour of it.

When General Arnold and his staff retinue left the Hughes aircraft plant some four hours later, he left behind with Howard Hughes a signed contract for the production on an urgent basis of eight XA-11B fast bombers, two XA-11R photo-reconnaissance models, two XF-11N night fighters and one C-11T liaison aircraft, along with a cheque to cover their production cost. Arnold also made a promise to secure from Congress a contract for many more XA-11s, once they would prove their worth in combat. As Howard Hughes relished this commercial success for his aircraft brand, the eccentric billionaire sobered up as he thought about his good friend, Katharine Hepburn, who was presently fighting in the Pacific, along with Hedy Lamarr and the other women of the 99th Air Wing. Maybe sending a gift to them, along with his first XA-11s, would help sustain their morale.

CHAPTER 21 – THOR'S HAMMER



16:06 (PNG Time)

Tuesday, March 23, 1943 'C'

Wards Airfield, near Port Moresby

Papua New Guinea, Southwest Pacific

Ingrid, imitated by most of the men and women in Wards Airfield, came out to watch as six big, sleek twin-engine planes landed one after the other on the field's runway, followed by one C-142A heavy transport. George Kenney, who came out with Ingrid, had glee in his eyes as he eyed the Hughes XA-11s in the process of landing.

"God, those planes look positively gorgeous, Ingrid. I hope that I will have a chance to take one of them out for a spin."

"Sorry, sir, but the crews I have selected in advance to train on them will have to have top priority on flying them."

"And you are part of those lucky selectees, I suppose, Ingrid?" sneakily replied Kenney, making Ingrid smile.

"I am, but not because I want to push rank on my pilots, sir. I simply make a point of qualifying on every type of aircraft used by my air wing. That way, I know better what they can and can't do and plan my wing's missions accordingly."

"A valid reason, I must say." recognized Kenney. "Still, those are beautiful, sleek aircraft. They also look quite mean, which is another positive point for them. Shall we go and inspect them from up close?"

"Hell yes, sir!" replied Ingrid before walking quickly with Kenney to her jeep, parked in front of the Fifth Air Force headquarters building. Jumping in it and taking the wheel, Ingrid then drove towards the main tarmac of the airfield, where the XA-11s and the C-142A were starting to pivot and take the parking spots indicated by the women acting as airfield guides. Stopping her jeep behind the first of the XA-11Bs, one of the four bomber variants to have arrived, Ingrid then stepped out of her jeep with Lieutenant General Kenney and walked to the big twin-engine aircraft as an access hatch opened up under its belly. One of the airfield guides hurried to put in place a short ladder as the first of four men started coming down from the cockpit section. To Ingrid's and Kenney's surprise, that first man turned out to be none other than Howard Hughes, making Ingrid suck air in.

"Wow! Talk about a surprise entrance in the Southwest Pacific Theater, Mister Hughes."

The billionaire grinned at her remark as he stepped on the tarmac.

"And you didn't think that I would want to fly my newest product myself, Ingrid? And don't worry about the Army Air Force getting mad about this: General Arnold gave me his permission to come to Port Moresby, along with a team from my company who will help your women train and get familiarized with my new XA-11. This way, your aircrews should be able to qualify more quickly on it."

"A good and judicious idea, Mister Hughes." replied Kenney while smiling. "Should we expect more of your XA-11s in the coming weeks and months?"

"Another four XA-11Bs will be delivered to you as soon as they are built, which should happen by the end of next month, General. After that, General Arnold will wait for your preliminary combat trial report before signing a contract for more of my planes. Essentially, the more successful in combat you will be with my planes, the faster you will be able to get more of them. But I am sure that Colonel Dows will have ways to make my XA-11s perform in combat against the Japanese in ways which will get everybody's attention in Washington, right, Ingrid?"

"Damn right you are, Howard! And what is the C-142 which flew in with you transporting?"

“Basically, stocks of spare parts and specialized tools meant to maintain those pre-series planes during their combat trial phase. I also have brought with me a little gift for your brave girls, but you will need to get an armed escort for it if you don’t want to see a riot occur when it will get off that C-142.”

“An armed escort? What did you bring for my girls, Howard?”

The billionaire grinned with malice before answering Ingrid.

“Individual care packages for all your women, with each package containing a box of luxury chocolate, beauty products and a small bottle of perfume of the best brand I could find in Los Angeles.”

Ingrid’s eyes widened as she sucked air in again.

“I’m going to call my MPs right away. Anything else, Howard?”

“Only one thing: would it be possible to see my two friends, Katharine Hepburn and Hedy Lamarr? They are still in good health, I hope?”

“Don’t worry, Howard: they are well and were not flying today. I will have them picked up right away at their airfields and brought to here. You and your team can lodge during your stay with the male Filipino guerrillas we recuperated in the Philippines four months ago and who are now serving as part of my aircraft maintenance units. You wouldn’t want your people to be assaulted by hundreds of young women, would you?” Howard Hughes, who suffered from a severe phobia about microbes and dirtiness, shook his head as his smile faded somewhat.

“I will let my people free to do what they want, within the confines of your military regulations, Ingrid. As for me, being able to see Katharine and Hedy will be plenty to make me happy. Do you have an idea about how you will use my planes?”

“I do, Howard.” answered Ingrid in a sober tone. “The fantastic capabilities of your planes will finally enable me to do something I have been dreaming to do for quite a while already: to go cut the head of the serpent rather than just its tail.”

01:06 (PNG Time)

Wednesday, April 14, 1943 ‘C’

Wards Airfield’s main tarmac

As she was about to climb aboard their four XA-11B and one XA-11R with her eighteen aviatrix she had selected for this mission, Ingrid was asked a question by a

curious Helen Richey, the commander of her bomber group, who was going to pilot one of the four XA-11B fast bombers, which bore the name 'Freyja'.

"Ingrid, why did you name our new planes according to Norse mythology?"

"Simple, Helen: one of my past incarnations was as a Norse carpenter and boat maker who strongly believed in his gods and goddesses. 'Mjolnir' is the name of the magic war hammer yielded by Thor, the god of war and thunder. Your plane's name, 'Freyja', is that of the goddess of love, beauty, sex and war. Delphine's plane, 'Sif', bears the name of the goddess of earth, while Jean's plane, 'Hel', is named after the goddess of the Underworld. As for Adela's photo-reconnaissance plane, 'Frigg', it is named after the goddess of prophecy."

"Oh, I see! Those names are certainly appropriate for the mission we are about to fly, Ingrid. What about the four extra XA-11B bombers we received two days ago? Will you also name them after Norse goddesses?"

"Since the Norse female pantheon is limited, I will name those four bombers after some of the Valkyries of the Norse pantheon, the female mounted warriors tasked with collecting the dead warriors who distinguished themselves on the battlefield, to then bring them to the Valhalla, the Norse warriors' paradise. I personally favor plane names which have significance, instead of the often-corny names our male pilots give to their aircraft."

"To fly into battle in planes named after female gods and warriors riding winged horses: now that is to my taste." pronounced Jean Hixxon, who was like the other women selected for this mission among the most experienced flyers and combat veterans of Ingrid's wing. Ingrid smiled at that and pointed at their waiting planes.

"Then, let's mount our magical mounts, girls: we have a serpent's head to cut off in Tokyo."

A few dozen meters away, on the edge of the tarmac and safely away from the five XA-11s, General Douglas MacArthur, Lieutenant General George Kenney and Brigadier General Julian Barnes all saluted at attention as the XA-11s, led by Ingrid in 'Mjolnir', started rolling towards one of the two runways of Wards Airfield. They stayed silent as they watched the five sleek planes take off one after the other, to then disappear in the night sky. Only once they were out of sight did MacArthur speak in a solemn voice.

"Our brave aviatrixes are now gone on a mission which could well change the course of the war in the Pacific, gentlemen."

"I am certain that they will succeed, General." said George Kenney. "Only a mechanical breakdown could stop them now."

Julian Barnes didn't say anything then but simply crossed his fingers in his back.

06:14 (PNG Time)

XA-11s' flight, approaching the eastern coast of Japan at 12,500 meters Seventy miles from Tokyo.

Myrtle Cagle pushed a blow of relief as she returned to her copilot's seat after visiting the tiny toilet compartment of Ingrid's bomber.

"Ooof! I really needed that toilet break. Thank God that Howard Hughes put a real toilet aboard his new planes, instead of simply installing a stupid piss tube, like in the other bombers of our air force."

"Well, that must have to do with the fact that he eyed us as his first users, Myrtle. With such a long range, he also had good reasons to provide a toilet for the crews of his XA-11s, be they male or female. You better strap yourself in: we are going to be over Tokyo in less than fifteen minutes. Helen, how are we doing with our navigation?"

"We are pretty much where we wanted to be, Ingrid. This part of the Japanese coast is pretty easy to recognize and we have the Tokyo Bay in sight ahead of us. Hopefully, the maps of Tokyo we have will still be accurate."

"They should be, Helen: while residential areas can change a lot in mere years, official buildings tend to stay pretty well the same through the decades and the maps we have, which were obtained from the State Department only two years before the war, should still be up to date concerning the various ministries and military establishments around Tokyo."

Ingrid's radio operator and rear gunner, Lieutenant Hazel Pracht, then got on the intercom from her rear-facing cannon turret.

"How strongly do you think that the Japanese will react to us, Ingrid? Can their fighters reach us this high?"

"No! None of their fighters can reach our altitude, Hazel. However, remember our attack plan: we are soon going to dive to a much lower altitude, in order to be able to bomb with the utmost accuracy. Also, if we stay this high, our condensation trails will

make us visible to anyone looking up at the sky. We are now approaching our first way point on the coast: get ready for action, girls.”

Ingrid then got on the radio for the first time since they had flown away from Port Moresby.

“Valkyries callsigns, from Valkyries Leader, we are now approaching our first land way point. Valkyrie Five, hold position until you get the go from me. The rest, follow me in a dive down to our attack altitude and reduce your speed to 350 knots. We will spread out towards our respective objectives once over Blue Blotch.”

Ingrid then pushed her controls, making her bomber dive towards the entrance to Tokyo Bay, which bore the codename ‘Blue Blotch’ for this mission. As for Valkyrie Five, the photo-reconnaissance variant of the XA-11 which was participating in this raid, it stayed at high altitude but lowered its speed considerably and adopted a holding pattern, waiting for the word from Ingrid which would make Adela Scharr head for Tokyo in order to take bomb damage assessment photos of the results of their raid.

In Tokyo, in a small section of the Imperial Japanese Navy intelligence department, located in the same big brick building as the rest of the Navy headquarters, a radio intercept operator scanning the radio frequencies stiffened when he heard for a couple of seconds words in English spoken by a woman. Frantically coming back to the frequency on which he had heard those words, he listened in vain for long seconds but didn’t hear more words in English. Putting this on an abnormality in radio atmospheric propagation from a distant station, he forgot about it and continued his slow scan of the radio frequencies.

In a coastal fort protecting the entrance to the Tokyo Bay and facing the Sagami Bay, a Japanese lookout scanning the horizon and sky with a pair of binoculars stiffened when he thought that he saw four rapidly approaching dots in the sky. Adjusting the focus of his binoculars, he was then able to catch a glimpse of four fast aircraft flying at about 300 meters of altitude and heading towards his fort. Since the shock caused by the American bombing raid on Tokyo about a year ago, any suspicious aircraft sighting was now taken very seriously, so the lookout didn’t wait to confirm further his sighting before shouting out in alarm.

“ALERT! INCOMING AIRCRAFT AT LOW ALTITUDE FROM THE SOUTHEAST, APPROACHING FAST!”

The young junior officer on visual watch duty at that time barely had time to raise his own binoculars before four big twin-engine planes zoomed past over his head. While he didn't have time to identify their types, he didn't miss the large white and blue stars painted under their wings. His heart racing into his chest, the young lieutenant jumped on the field telephone connecting him with the command room of the fort and frantically cranked its handle. To his fury, it took over five seconds and another turning of the handle before someone answered the telephone.

"Captain Miura speaking!"

"THIS IS LIEUTENANT SUGIMOTO, ON THE TOP SOUTHERN PARAPET: FOUR FAST AMERICAN PLANES FLYING LOW JUST ZOOMED PAST OUR FORT. THEY ARE HEADING FOR TOKYO."

"American planes? Are you certain, Sugimoto?"

"YES, CAPTAIN! I SAW THE WHITE AND BLUE STARS UNDER THEIR WINGS."

"What type were they, Sugimoto?"

Frustrated by the slowness of his superior into reacting, Sugimoto shouted again in his telephone receiver.

"I DON'T KNOW AND I DON'T CARE, SIR: THEY ARE AMERICAN PLANES AND ARE HEADING FOR TOKYO. WE MUST PASS THE ALERT TO OUR ANTI-AIRCRAFT DEFENSES AT ONCE."

Captain Miura was taken aback by the fury in Sugimoto's voice and was nearly tempted to bark back at him but, realizing that any delay which would cause avoidable damage in Tokyo would come back to hit him, he swallowed his pride and quickly answered his lieutenant.

"Very well: I am going to sound the alert now."

Miura then put down that telephone, then cranked the handle of another telephone which connected his fort with the command center in Tokyo directing the guns defending the capital.

"Hello? This is Captain Miura, in Fort Number Four. Four American planes just overflew my position at low altitude and high speed, heading towards Tokyo. Sound the air raid alert at once!"

"American planes, here? But that's impossible: the nearest American airfields are over 3,500 kilometers away." replied the duty officer in Tokyo, clearly incredulous. Furious, Miura barked into his telephone.

“DON'T YOU REMEMBER WHEN AMERICAN BOMBERS FLYING OFF CARRIERS BOMBED TOKYO A YEAR AGO? GET OFF YOUR ASS AND SOUND THE ALERT, DAMMIT!”

Miura then slammed down his telephone's receiver, leaving the Tokyo command center officer to look with indecision at his own receiver. After a couple of seconds he finally decided to sound a general, city-wide air raid alert and went to the covered button of his duty station, opening the cover and pushing the large, red button, before speaking in the microphone of the public alert loudspeakers system.

“Attention! Attention! American bombers are approaching Tokyo. Go to all available shelters immediately.”

He then switched to another circuit, which linked his command center with the various anti-aircraft gun batteries and fighter airfields defending the capital.

“Warning! Four enemy bombers are approaching Tokyo at low altitude, coming from the Southeast. They are presently over the Bay of Tokyo. Scramble all fighters! I say again: scramble all fighters! Man all guns!”

Unfortunately for the Japanese, Ingrid's had carefully chosen the timing of her raid to coincide with the time in the morning when Japanese officers and staff, along with yard workers, would be arriving for work and exchanging shifts with the night duty personnel. As a result, most Japanese soldiers, airmen, staff officers and yard workers were caught in the middle of their morning meal or during shift debriefs, causing mass confusion and more delayed reactions. The pilots of a fighter squadron equipped with Nakajima Ki-44 SHOKI fighters, nicknamed 'TOJO' by the Americans, alerted in the middle of eating their frugal breakfast, had to run to their planes and then put on their parachutes, helmets and inflatable vests before climbing into their cockpits, a process that took many precious minutes. The leader of that fighter squadron was about to start his aircraft's engine when he heard and saw distant detonations and the shockwaves of bombs exploding to the East of his airfield, making him swear.

“BY THE KAMIS! THEY BOMBED YOKOSUKA!”

Due to the shorter distance to her objective, Jean Hixxon's XA-11B was the first to reach her target, the important Yokosuka Naval Arsenal. Due to the nature of her objective, her aircraft was loaded with twenty 500-pound General Purpose bombs, rather than with a five-ton FAE bomb as carried by the other three bombers of her flight.

Arriving at an altitude of 300 meters and a speed of 300 miles per hour, she only had seconds to evaluate her target and decide where she would drop her bombs for maximum effect on the Yokosuka Naval Arsenal. She quickly decided to go for the densely packed lines of workshop halls, where hundreds of arsenal workers and technicians would be. Those workers would be particularly difficult for the Japanese to replace and their loss would thus considerably reduce and slow the productivity of the arsenal for months and maybe years. She thus ignored the various ships either in drydocks or at quay, reasoning that future raids would eventually strike them, and lined up her aircraft's nose towards the workshop halls as she spoke to her navigator-bombardier for this mission, Captain Elizabeth Gardner.

"Lizzie, go for the workshop halls! You have the controls for this bomb run."

"Objective in sight! Opening bomb doors now and arming our bombs."

Helped by the autopilot of their XA-11, which kept their plane level and pointed in the right direction and altitude, Elizabeth set the release interval between her bomb drops in order to hit along a long straight line which would walk at an angle across the workshop halls. Another few seconds and she pushed her release button while shouting in her microphone.

"DROPPING BOMBS NOW!... BOMBS GONE: ACCELERATE TO THE MAXIMUM, JEAN!"

"GOING TO MAXIMUM POWER!" shouted back Jean Hixson as she pushed forward her engine throttles and triggered the water injection system which would push each of her engines to their war emergency power of 4,700 horsepower. Her sudden acceleration forward actually saved her plane, as the anti-aircraft gunners defending the naval arsenal belatedly opened fire as she was zooming over their heads. Streams of 25 mm tracer shells thus missed her XA-11 by some fifty meters but her high speed didn't give those gunners a second chance to aim their cannons at her plane. Then, the twenty, 500-pound bombs crashed through the thin roofs of the arsenal's workshop halls, where the various parts for ships under construction were made. Set on short delay fuzes, the bombs dug themselves into the thin concrete floors of the halls before exploding, creating large craters and projecting in the air pieces of concrete, machine tools and bodies of workers. All that was captured by the bomb damage assessment camera of Jean Hixson's aircraft, which pointed downward and rearward. As more anti-aircraft guns were making futile attempts at shooting her down, Jean performed a tight turn in order to return to the open sea, all the while speaking on her radio.

"VALKYRIE FOUR TO VALKYRIE LEADER: OBJECTIVE HIT, AM WITHDRAWING."

The next aircraft to hit its target was that of Delphine Bohn, whose target was the Yokosuka Imperial Japanese Navy Academy, situated near the Yokosuka Naval Arsenal. Having gained some altitude while slowing down before dropping her five-ton FAE bomb, she saw on approach to the academy that the naval cadets had been lined up in parade order on the school's large parade square, probably to perform the daily morning salute to the flag raising ceremony. Right now, as bombs exploded on the nearby arsenal, she could see hundreds of Japanese running in all directions but still on the parade square.

"Perfect! My big petard should make maximum effect on such a target. YOU HAVE THE CONTROLS, EDNA! BLAST THOSE YOUNG FANATICS TO HELL!"

"BOMB AWAY! GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE BEFORE IT BLOWS US TO BITS, ALONG WITH THOSE JAPS!"

"YOUR WISHES ARE MY ORDERS!" replied Delphine as she went to war emergency power. Down on the parade square, the hundreds of naval cadets and their instructors running to find some shelter saw a huge bomb drop from the fast enemy bomber, with a small parachute deploying from its tail and quickly slowing it down while making it point down towards the ground. A long, thin rod also emerged from its nose, locking itself into place. When the tip of that rod finally impacted the surface of the parade square, the big fat bomb burst open, projecting around the 4,000 kilos of ethylene oxide contained in its thin-walled body. The volatile hydrocarbon had time to expand to a large cloud of mixed ethylene oxide and ambient air before an ignition charge trailing behind a long wire made that gas cloud explode. The shockwave and fireball created by that explosion swept the whole of the parade square and hit the surrounding buildings and barracks of the naval academy, blowing them away and incinerating them at the same time. Over 800 naval cadets, instructors and nearby anti-aircraft gunners died at once as a huge fireball rose with a mighty rumble over the destroyed academy, watched with utter terror by the Japanese civilians living nearby. Those civilians, while spared the full power of the FAE bomb, still saw the roofs and windows of their houses being blown away by the expanding shockwave from the bomb.

The third XA-11B to hit its target was that of Helen Richey, who was targeting the headquarters of the Imperial Japanese Navy, in Tokyo. She also had a five-ton FAE bomb in her aircraft's bomb bay in order to deal with her target. She made a mean smile when she saw a lineup of military staff cars busy dropping off what had to be dozens of senior navy officers at the main entrance of the three-story Victorian-style brick building.

"Excellent: more spectators arriving for my show. You have the controls for our bomb run, Mary."

Mary Gresham, Helen's navigator-bombardier for this mission and who was normally the operations officer of the 1772nd Bomber Squadron, nicknamed the FIRE GIRLS, aimed her bomb sight at the brick front façade of the IJN headquarters, as planned before their departure, and dropped her big bomb as they were still approaching the building at an altitude of 300 meters and a speed of 400 miles per hour. With her bomb nose fuse set for direct impact and short delay, the nose fuse rod which would normally spring out as the bomb dropped down stayed inside the bomb body, even though the tail parachute deployed. Decelerating while pointing down, the bomb hit the base of the front façade at an angle of about 45 degrees, with its kinetic energy making it smash through the brick wall before the bursting charge was fired. Instead of expanding into open air, the cloud of ethylene oxide was projected all around inside the building, penetrating its rooms via the various doors and hallways of the headquarters, to mix with the air inside the building. Many of the Japanese already in the building actually were knocked down by that expanding hydrocarbon cloud mixing up with ambient air before the trailing initiating charge ignited the vapors. With the internal and external walls containing at first the exploding cloud, the effect of the bomb was horrific, with the whole building blowing up like an overinflated balloon and being totally razed to the ground. Even the command bunker complex in its basement levels was destroyed, the ethylene oxide penetrating the underground complex via its ventilation shaft before being ignited.

As the Imperial Japanese Navy headquarters was being pulverized, Ingrid's plane approached her own target: the headquarters of the Imperial Japanese Army. In her mind, the militarists of the Japanese Army's officer corps were the most guilty of starting this war, having pushed for Japan's war of conquest in China and Southeast Asia while intimidating or even assassinating the Japanese politicians opposed to their aggressive plans. The Japanese Army, thanks to its medieval Bushido code of conduct, which declared that enemies who let themselves be taken prisoners as not worthy of

humane treatment, was also by far the worst offender in terms of war crimes, be they committed against prisoners of war or against conquered populations. Ingrid thus felt zero consideration for those Japanese Army officers she was about to kill as her navigator-bombardier, Helen Richards, released their five-ton FAE bomb on the large manor-like building in the Shinjuku District of Tokyo which housed the IJA headquarters. That bomb was set the same way as the bomb dropped by Helen Richey and it basically did the same effect, blowing from the inside the big building to bits. Again, the few anti-aircraft guns which were supposed to protect the headquarters building proved pitifully slow to react to her surprise attack, with their firing wild and completely inaccurate against such a low flying target coming in at 400 miles per hour. Ingrid muttered to himself as her plane, speeding away while turning towards the East, was shaken by the shockwave from her bomb.

“I hope that this Tojo¹⁶ bastard was in that building this morning.”

Next, she got on the radio and sent a coded message to Adela Scharr, who was still circling high and off the coast in her photo-reconnaissance XA-11R.

“VALKYRIE LEADER TO VALKYRIE FIVE: END RUN, OVER!”

“Valkyrie Five, end run acknowledged.”

Ingrid then zoomed to medium altitude but stayed over the Tokyo area, intent on covering Adela Scharr’s photo run, a very dangerous task during which Adela would have to fly straight and fairly low in order to take as clear pictures as possible of their now destroyed objectives. Seeing Adela’s XA-11R approach the Yokosuka Naval Arsenal, Ingrid spoke in a sober tone on her intercom channel.

“Hold on and keep your eyes peeled for enemy fighters, girls: we are diving in again.”

Her radio-rear gunner, Hazel Pracht, didn’t reply to that but checked again that the safety on her twin 20 mm cannons was off and braced herself for some wild flying. In that, she was not disappointed. Zigzagging constantly to avoid the growing Japanese anti-aircraft fire, Ingrid then dove towards the Yokosuka Naval Arsenal, intent on attracting on her the fire from the Japanese guns there as Adela started her photo run. However, Ingrid did a lot more than simply attract the enemy’s attention: she also poured

¹⁶ Tojo: General Hideki Tojo was Japan’s Minister of War from 1940 to 1944 and also Prime Minister from 1941 to 1944, Minister of Munitions from 1943 to 1944 and Chief of the Army General Staff in 1944. He was eventually judged for war crimes and executed on December 23, 1948.

20 mm shells from her four fixed forward cannons down on the Japanese gunners trying to shoot her down, succeeding into blowing to bits one gun crew and forcing another gun crew to hurriedly jump into their protective trenches. Once past the naval arsenal, Ingrid accelerated and pointed her cannons at the nearby Navy Academy. However, she had no need to fire at that target, as all the anti-aircraft guns protecting the academy were silent, with their servants presumably killed by Delphine's FAE bomb. She thus turned towards the next objective to be photographed by Adela Scharr: the headquarters of the Imperial Japanese Navy. That was when her copilot, Myrtle Cagle, acting as an extra pair of eyes, shouted a warning.

"FOUR ENEMY FIGHTERS COMING LEVEL FROM EIGHT O'CLOCK!"

"GOT THEM!" replied Ingrid at the same time that she reversed her turn and pointed her nose at the incoming four Ki-44 fighters. In a frontal duel, those Ki-44 were simply no match for the XA-11B, with its four nose 20 mm cannons opposed by four heavy machine guns per Ki-44. The XA-11B also had a sophisticated gun sight, compared to the rather rudimentary gunsights of the Japanese fighters. The biggest factor then was however the quality and experience level of the pilots. The four Japanese pilots were mostly green pilots with no combat experience, while they were facing in Ingrid the top Allied air ace, with 96 air victories to her credit and with one and a half years of combat experience. As American gunslingers said rightly: there is no second-place winner in a gunfight. The leading Ki-44 was shredded to pieces and exploded while its guns were still out of range of the XA-11. Ingrid then changed her aim in a flash and fired a short burst at the Japanese' wingman, cutting off its left wing and sending him down in a terminal spin. The two remaining Japanese pilots, with little practice at air gunnery, tried to shoot at Ingrid but missed by a wide margin the impossibly fast American plane. They then reversed their turns in order to go after Ingrid but, not looking widely enough around them while turning, did not see her as she performed a zoom climb followed by a tight looping. When the Japanese had completed their turn and looked for her, they found an apparently empty sky. One of them then spotted Adela Scharr's plane as it was flying towards the ruins of the Navy headquarters and, not having a radio, as was the case with many Japanese fighter planes, tried to signal it by hand to his wingman. Not getting a reaction from his wingman, that pilot then decided to go after Adela's plane by himself, wingman or no wingman. What he didn't see was his wingman then being shot down by Ingrid, who had dived on the hapless Japanese pilot. Twisting her plane around and raising its nose, Ingrid then exploded the

remaining Ki-44 with a short burst. As she turned yet again to go bother the Japanese gunners around the destroyed Army headquarters in advance of Adela's arrival, Ingrid muttered to herself a lesson she had learned from the German ace, Adolph Galland, while she was still a Luftwaffe female auxiliary serving in France.

"It is the enemy you don't see who will shoot you down."

Ingrid smiled when she saw that Adela's rear gunner, Margaret McCormick, was not simply sitting at her rear turret as the XA-11R flew away from the destroyed Navy headquarters building: she was returning fire with her two 20 mm cannons at the Japanese guns trying to hit her aircraft.

"Good for you, Maggie!"

The opposition around the Army headquarters soon proved non-existent, as the guns had been positioned close to the demolished building and had been taken out at the same time as the headquarters building by Ingrid's FAE bomb. Satisfied, Ingrid got on the radio again.

"All Valkyrie callsigns, time to go home. Meet me at Point Zulu."

She then got acknowledges from all of her four planes, making her blow air out in relief as she zoomed upwards, followed by Adela Scharr, heading for an altitude which was out of reach of both Japanese fighters and anti-aircraft guns. She knew how good she was as a combat pilot but the success of this mission truly rested on one factor: their Hughes XA-11 planes. In her wing's B-25NGs and P-38Ns, she would have most probably suffered a number of casualties during this mission. However, when General Arnold was going to see the results of this raid, done from a distance at which all other American planes would be way out of range, then he would have no logical choice but to order the mass production of the XA-11. If she could then sweet-talk Arnold into replacing her B-25s and RP-38s with A-11Bs, A-11Rs and F-11Ns, then she was going to be able to accomplish even more in the Pacific.

13:41 (PNG Time)

Main tarmac of Wards Airfield

Near Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

General MacArthur, General Sir Thomas Blamey, Lieutenant General George Kenney and Brigadier General Julian Barnes were back on the main tarmac of Wards

Airfield, waiting for the return of Ingrid's five planes from Tokyo, when Captain Angie Dickinson and two other female MPs arrived in a jeep and dragged out of it a man protesting in a distinct Australian accent.

"LET ME GO, YOU BITCHES! YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO ARREST ME LIKE THIS: I AM AN ACCREDITED WAR CORRESPONDENT FOR THE BBC AND ABC."

Sir Thomas Blamey seemed to recognize the man at once and shouted at him, clearly angry.

"YOU AGAIN! I THOUGHT THAT I HAD KICKED YOU OUT OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA."

Blamey then looked at the tall and strong Angie Dickinson.

"Alright, Captain, what did this bloody asshole do this time?"

In response, Angie raised her left hand, which was holding a 35 mm camera equipped with a zoom lens.

"We caught him taking photos of the four parked XA-11 we received two days ago, sir. He even slipped under the tarps which were put over our new planes to hide them from Japanese spies. We saw him when his camera flash gave him away as he was taking pictures from under the tarps, sir."

Blamey gave the Australian war correspondent a poisoned look before taking the camera offered by Angie. He then opened the camera, pulled out its film cartridge and unrolled the film, exposing it to sunlight and ruining it.

"Search him for more films, Captain.

MacArthur and Kenney approached the group as Dickinson searched the man, who was still vainly trying to wiggle out of the grips of the two matrons holding him.

"What's the deal with that man, Sir Blamey?"

"That man, General, is a war correspondent for the BBC and ABC. His name is Reginald Wilmot and I already had to kick him out of Port Moresby for publishing defamatory articles about my command. Apparently, he found a way to come back here and to disregard your interdiction on taking unsupervised pictures of your planes."

It was the turn of MacArthur and Kenney to stare hard at the reporter. Angie, having found more used film cartridges in the man's pockets and camera case, handed those to Blamey. MacArthur's jaw tightened in anger on seeing those films.

"Mister Wilmot, God knows I am liberal with the freedom of action of the members of my press team but you just went too far, way too far. Do you realize that the planes you just photographed are highly classified pre-series combat aircraft? The

fact that they had been covered with tarps for security reasons should have been indication enough for you to stay away from them.”

“The Australian public has the right to know what is happening at the front, General.” protested Wilmot. “I am an accredited war correspondent and have the right to report on the war the way I see fit.”

“No, you don’t, Mister Wilmot! Your accreditation is declared null and void by me as of right now and you will be charged with trespassing and endangering military secrets. Your political and press connections will not save you this time. You will now be detained until you can be flown out to Australia, where you will be judged in front of a military tribunal. Captain Dickinson, make sure that this man’s cell doesn’t have a window giving a view of this airfield, so that he can’t see our returning warplanes.”

“Right away, sir!” replied a smiling Angie while saluting MacArthur. She then had her two MPs put handcuffs on Wilmot before they dragged the swearing and cussing correspondent back to their jeep. Julian Barnes shook his head in disgust as he watched the jeep drive away.

“First, we had Australian stevedores pulling work-to-rule strikes, then had to repeatedly tell your newspapers and radio stations to refrain from reporting on sensitive military information. We also had residents on Thursday Island protesting that our aviatrixes attacking the Japanese fleet in the Torres Strait had dug protective trenches in their precious little park. Now this! What the hell is wrong with Australian civilians in this war, Sir Blamey?”

Blamey could only shrug in embarrassment at that.

“That is unfortunately part of our national psyche, General Barnes: we are quite hard-headed and independent by nature. It must come from the fact that our ancestors were mostly convicts brought from Great Britain as prisoners.”

Some ten minutes later, the group spotted the arriving five XA-11 planes and then watched them land one by one. George Kenney, who examined them with the help of binoculars, blew air out in relief.

“I can’t see any damage on our five planes, General. The five of them seem to be intact.”

“Thank God! I can’t wait to hear Ingrid’s verbal mission report.”

MacArthur's wish was fulfilled some four minutes later, when Ingrid's plane stopped in its assigned parking spot and its belly access trap opened. Ingrid climbed down first from her aircraft and went to stop at attention in front of MacArthur, saluting him.

"Mission accomplished, sir! We suffered no damage or malfunction and hit all our objectives, then filmed the results. The Yokosuka Naval Arsenal suffered heavy bomb damage, while both the Japanese Army headquarters building and the Japanese Navy headquarters building have been blown to bits. As for the Japanese Navy Academy, it was flattened by our FAE bomb and hundreds of naval cadets and instructors were killed as they were standing on their parade square. I will also be claiming four new air victories against four Ki-44 which tried to intercept us, sir."

"Goddam!" couldn't help exclaim MacArthur, most happy. "And how much would that get your air score to, Colonel?"

"A round one hundred, sir!" answered a grinning Ingrid. "I believe that this mission has truly decapitated the Japanese military. With luck, the Japanese emperor will now think twice about continuing this war. However, if he doesn't give up, or if some bunch of fanatical militarists assassinate him and take control of the country, then we will have to continue our hammering against Japan. By the way, we brought back some excellent bomb damage assessment photos with us. I will have those films developed as soon as possible today, sir, so that you can inform Washington of our success."

CHAPTER 22 – NOW WHAT?

19:54 (Tokyo Time)

Wednesday, April 14, 1943 'C'

Emperor Hirohito's private library

Imperial Palace, Tokyo, Japan

Emperor Hirohito was in his private library, studying a book on marine biology, a subject which passioned him, when a servant knocked on the side of the entrance door before kneeling and bowing.

"Your Majesty, Lord Kido wishes to see you about an urgent matter."

"Let him in."

"Hay!"

Seconds later, the Keeper of the Imperial Seal and political confidante of Hirohito entered and went to his knees before bowing to the Emperor.

"Your Majesty, I came to tell you that Prime Minister Tojo is confirmed as dead, killed in the bombing of the Army headquarters."

Hirohito took a few seconds to digest that information before asking a question to Lord Kido.

"What about Field Marshal Sugiyama? What about Admiral Nagano?"

"Also dead, Your Majesty. They were about to attend a high-level command conference meant to discuss how to respond to the more recent attacks by the Americans and Australians when the enemy bombers struck."

"Then, who is left alive of the Imperial War Council, Kido?" asked a shocked Hirohito.

"Right now, we can't find any member of that council alive, Your Majesty. The problem is that the corpses of those killed by those awful new bombs were dismembered and incinerated and are next to impossible to identify."

"And what about those bombs themselves? They weren't standard bombs, no?"

"Certainly not, Your Majesty. While extremely powerful and deadly, they seemed to work differently from usual explosives bombs, with a wider blast radius but less peak

pressures than normal explosives like TNT have. Our experts are still studying their effects and possible nature but they all agree that they are weapons to fear greatly.” Hirohito was again silent for a moment before speaking again.

“Lord Kido, find out who are the most senior general officers left alive in Japan tonight and make a list of them. We need to replace General Tojo and the members of our war council as quickly as possible if we want to avoid chaos to descend on our military command structure. Then, I will want to speak with them, so that I can ask for their counsel on how to pursue this war.”

“Hay! If I may, Your Majesty. Late Admiral Yamamoto once told me just before the start of this war that, once we initiated war against the United States, we then may prevail at first for the first two years of that war but that, after that, the industrial might of the Americans would start tipping the balance against us. It seems that his words are now proving to be prophetic, Your Majesty.”

“Indeed!” could only reply Hirohito with a bitter tone of voice.

14:50 (Manila Time)

Friday, April 16, 1943 ‘C’

Japanese Army Philippines Command headquarters

Manila, Luzon Island, Philippines

Lieutenant General Tomoyuki Yamashita, commander of the Japanese Army troops in the Philippines, shook his head in both frustration and discouragement after finishing to read the message from Tokyo announcing the full implications of the American bombing on Tokyo two days ago. Essentially, all army commanders in and out of Japan were enjoined to hold and defend their positions but not launch any new offensive or attack until the command situation in Tokyo had been made clearer. This basically meant to Yamashita that he was on his own until further notice. No new reinforcements would come, either in men, aircraft, ships or even supplies. As for the latter item, supplies, the resurging American navy had already severely cut the supply lines between Japan and its various conquests, through submarine barriers and anti-shiping air patrols. As for the American forces in Papua New Guinea, General MacArthur had by now succeeded in retaking all of New Guinea, with the few Japanese garrisons there surrounded, blockaded and left starving and short of ammunition, while Japanese airpower in the South Pacific was now mostly a thing of the past. The one

thing Yamashita could count himself lucky about was the fact that his forces in the Philippines were not at risk of starving, contrary to the Japanese garrisons around the Central and South Pacific which were now isolated and cut off. Local Filipino food production was sufficient at this time to feed his troops via local requisitions. However, that left him with limited stocks of ammunition, fuel and military equipment.

“We have pretty well lost this war already. How will Japan survive this?”

Yamashita was still rehashing that question in his head when he heard the start of heavy rifle shooting coming from downtown Manila. Jumping on his feet and running to a window of his office, he looked around outside, worried that this announced some kind of mass guerrilla attack on the Japanese troops in the city. He however quickly dismissed that notion as his well-exercised hearing recognized that the shooting was done by only one type of weapon: this was one-sided firing. Going to his telephone, Yamashita called his chief of staff and barked an order.

“Muto, find out what the hell is happening in town. Who is firing at who?”

“Uh, yes sir!”

Hanging up, Yamashita then returned to the window to try to see what was happening, swearing to himself: things were already bad enough around the Philippines and he didn't need more trouble right here in Manila.

His telephone rang after about ten minutes, making Yamashita return to his desk.

“Yes?”

“Sir, this is Muto! The shooting is being done by the naval infantry of Rear Admiral Iwabushi: he apparently ordered his marines to avenge the bombing of Tokyo by going around and killing Filipino civilians in Manila.”

“WHAT? Did you order him to stop this nonsense?”

“Yes sir, but he replied that he is not taking orders from the Army, only from the Navy.”

Yamashita became furious on hearing this, not because Filipinos were being killed but rather because Iwabushi's refusal to obey his command constituted rank insubordination.

“If this continues, the whole of Luzon could descend into uncontrolled chaos, Muto, something the enemy could exploit. Send our troops in town and have them stop these damn navy thugs. As for Iwabushi, have him arrested for insubordination.”

“Yes sir!” could only reply his chief of staff before Yamashita hung up, furious: in addition to having to fight the Americans, he now could well have to fight the Navy on top of everything. Thinking about it, he bitterly thought that the long-lived rivalry between the Imperial Japanese Army and the Imperial Navy could well turn to a shooting one, especially now that command chaos had descended on Tokyo. If that happened, then only one person could put an end to such stupidity: the Emperor.

10:27 (PNG Time)

Saturday, April 17, 1943 ‘C’

General MacArthur’s field headquarters

Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

Douglas MacArthur nodded his head on seeing Ingrid and Lieutenant General George Kenney enter at a quick pace his operations center, where Sir Thomas Blamey, Brigadier General Stephen Chamberlin, MacArthur’s operations officer, and Major General Willoughby, his intelligence officer, were already standing around the large map table of the center.

“Thank you for coming so quickly, General Kenney and Colonel Dows: I have received some awful news from the Philippines and we may need to react to them quickly.”

“And what is going on in the Philippines, General?” asked Kenney.

“An abomination!” answered MacArthur in a grim tone. “Basically, the Japanese soldiers there are taking revenge for our bombing of Tokyo by slaughtering both Filipino civilians and our men held as prisoners of war there.”

On hearing that, Ingrid froze and became pale, deeply shocked by that news.

“Oh my God! But we are still too far from the Philippines, with too few ground troops to intervene in any effective way to stop such a massacre.”

Chamberlin, a highly competent staff officer and the man responsible for planning and executing operations for MacArthur, nodded in agreement at her words.

“You are correct, Colonel: as much as I would like us to be able to intervene in the Philippines to stop this monstrosity, we simply don’t have the means to do it at this time. We may unfortunately have to simply watch as things happen in the Philippines...unless you come up with a truly outstanding idea, Colonel Dows.”

Ingrid then understood with a shock that she had been called in as a near-act of desperation by MacArthur's and his staff. Walking slowly to the map table, she looked at the various symbols covering the Philippines Archipelago, then looked with profound sadness at MacArthur.

"Sir, the Japanese troops in the Philippines may lack air and sea cover but they are still way more numerous than what we have here in the whole of Papua New Guinea and Australia in terms of ground troops. Any operation by us in the Philippines would thus have to limit itself to save and extract our men who are prisoners of the Japanese there. However, we won't be able to ensure the safety of the Filipino people at the same time, short of a miracle. Even while limiting in that way the scope of any operation in the Philippines, this would still be an extremely risky and costly endeavor, General."

"I fully agree with you, Ingrid. However I refuse to simply do nothing about this. Take a moment to think, then tell me if you have an idea I could use...any idea. Whatever you say, I am ready to support it with all the resources I have."

Ingrid was again silent for a moment, deep in thoughts, before looking into MacArthur's eyes and speaking in a resolute tone.

"I may have an idea, General, but we won't have time for any planning discussion, rehearsals or writing down of comprehensive operational orders. Everything will have to be done verbally, according to a single set of directives: my directives, once you approve my plan. We will also need the immediate and unreserved assistance of the Navy. I may sound a bit like a demagogue but time is of the essence and this is truly a time when too many cooks will spoil the sauce."

"Ask and you will get, Ingrid." replied Douglas MacArthur.

CHAPTER 23 – A HALF-BAKED IDEA

16:30 (PNG Time)

Saturday, April 17, 1943 'C'

Flight deck of the escort carrier USS SANGAMON (CVE-26)

Part of Carrier Division 22, steaming northward at full speed

Coral Sea, South Pacific

The two American sailors standing near the small bridge island of the escort carrier USS SANGAMON and enjoying a smoke break eyed the three other sisterships of the SANGAMON, the SANTEE, SUWANNEE and CHENANGO, which were sailing as a group with their own carrier, then the empty flight decks of all four ships.

"If we sailed out on such short notice for a supposedly urgent combat mission, then why did our captain ordered all the planes stationed on our flight deck to fly off first, leaving us with only a few aircraft in our hangar? And why send four escort carriers with empty decks on such a mission?"

"Beats me, Dave. Hopefully, someone will eventually tell us something."

That sailor had just finished speaking when his comrade turned one ear towards the Northwest.

"Wait! I think that I can hear the sound of aircraft engines approaching. We may get an answer to your question soon, Jack."

The two sailors focused their eyes in that direction and soon saw a large group of dots appear, flying low over the sea and towards the group of escort carriers. After a couple of minutes, their shapes became more identifiable, which made Jack jump up with joy.

"Helicopters! We're again going to have a bunch of young women on our carrier, Dave."

"Hallelujah!" said Dave, ecstatic. Both of them watched on as a mix of sixteen UH-2 medium transport helicopters and eight AH-4 attack helicopters landed one by one on the SANGAMON, to immediately fold their rotors and be pushed towards the aft part of the deck, where sailors parked them tightly before tying them down. At the same

time, another sixty or so helicopters of various types, including six giant UH-3 heavy transport helicopters, landed on the three other escort carriers of their division, which were being escorted by nine destroyers, one light cruiser and one heavy cruiser. The glee of the two sailors as dozens of young women climbed out of their machines vanished when over 300 heavily armed paratroopers from the 11th Airborne Division also came out of the UH-2s.

“Urk! Those are not what I would call the ‘sexy’ types, Dave.”

“Yeah! Well, we better get back inside now: our duty shift is about to start. Wherever we are going, this definitely looks like some very serious business.”

17:00 (PNG Time)

Sunday, April 18, 1943 ‘C’

Tarmac of Wards Airfield

Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

Douglas MacArthur accompanied Ingrid Dows, Jesus Villamor and George Kenney to the foot of the access ladder of the EC-142E flying command post before shaking hands with them.

“Good luck in your mission, lady and gentlemen. May you succeed in delivering the Filipinos in Manila from those barbaric Japanese. Once you will fly off, I will send a warning message to Washington, to advise our leaders about the atrocities the Japanese are committing in the Philippines and about our plan to stop those killings. Hopefully, Washington should then redirect more of our forces in the Pacific towards the Philippines.”

Ingrid had doubts about that wish by MacArthur but kept her mouth shut while saluting MacArthur.

“Thank you, sir. We will do everything humanely possible, General.”

“You always do, Ingrid.”

On that, the trio climbed aboard the big airborne command post aircraft as MacArthur stepped away to a safe distance. The EC-142E, along with eight XA-11Bs, two XF-11Ns and six AC-142Gs heavy gunships, then started its engines one by one before starting to roll towards one of the two parallel runways of the airfield. MacArthur waited until all of the planes had taken off and had disappeared in the sky before climbing back into his jeep and returning to the headquarters of the Fifth Air Force, where he was going to be

able to send an encrypted message to Washington, advising the President and his military chiefs about what was happening in the Philippines and about the initiation of 'Operation Lifesaver'. First, however, he was going to instruct his chief of intelligence, Brigadier General Charles Willoughby, to fully activate via the Allied Intelligence Bureau, or A.I.B., the numerous and efficient Filipino guerrilla groups operating throughout the Philippines and which counted well over 120,000 fighters, so that they could support Operation Lifesaver. The message to Washington would come as a second priority for MacArthur.

23:58 (Manila Time)

General Yamashita's headquarters (in old Commerce Ministry Building) Intramuros district of Manila, Luzon Island, Philippines

Lieutenant General Tomoyuki Yamashita went to bed angry, frustrated and deeply worried. Angry about the indiscipline and insubordination of too many of his units, which had started slaughtering Filipino civilians and interned enemy civilians alike without orders; frustrated by his lack of control of his own forces, some of which, like the Kempetai military police units in the Philippines, actually escaped his direct command; and deeply worried about his overall less than firm control of the Philippines as the Americans demonstrated their growing strength in the Pacific. He barely had time to go to sleep before he was rudely awakened by the thunderous explosion and building shaking from the first 1,000-pound bomb to hit his headquarters building after being dropped in dive-bombing mode from a XA-11B. Yamashita had time to swing his legs out of his bed and sit down on it before the second of five 1000-pound bombs hit the wing of the building containing his suite, pulverizing it and killing him.

The old Commerce Ministry building was far from being the only one inside the Intramuros, the walled Old Manila City, to be hit by bombs. At nearly the same time, the Central Post Office, which housed the hated Kempetai military police Manila detachment, was also bombed to rubble. Using to the maximum the extensive intelligence gathered for over a year by Filipino guerrilla groups on the various locations of the Japanese garrison centers and barracks in Manila and the Philippines, bombs delivered with precision via dive-bombing mode by the eight XA-11B overflying Manila destroyed the main Japanese headquarters facilities and troop barracks inside the

Intramuros, killing or seriously wounding over 12,000 Japanese soldiers and officers in the process.

At about the same time as the XA-11Bs attacked the Japanese housed in the Intramuros, two of the six AC-142G heavy gunships which had flown in formation with the ten XA-11s, twenty C-142A heavy cargo aircraft and the one EC-142E, on which Ingrid Dows was directing and monitoring the air strikes on Manila, delivered five-ton FAE bombs on Nichols Field and Nielson Field, the two military airfields just south of Manila, despite the fact that the Japanese aircraft and installations there had already been destroyed by FAE bombs in preceding air attacks a few weeks ago. However, there was a firm reason for those apparently useless strikes: for one, those bombs were going to destroy the few replacement Japanese aircraft which had flown in during the past couple of weeks and would also flatten the new hangars and buildings which the Japanese had been building to replace the older ones. Secondly, and most importantly, they were going to kill the crews of the anti-aircraft guns protecting Nichols Field and Nielson Field.

00:14 (Manila Time)

Monday, April 19, 1943 'C'

Lead C-142A GLOBEMASTER of the 117th Transport Group (Heavy)

On tactical landing approach to Nichols Field

South suburbs of Manila

"Dear bums of the 7th Marine Regiment, we are now about to land in Nichols Field, just south of friendly Manila, where Japanese soldiers are eagerly waiting to party with you. Please buckle your seatbelts and brace for impact on landing. Thank you for travelling with Angel Airlines and have a nice crash landing."

Betty Huyler, who was at the commands of their C-142A heavy cargo aircraft, threw an amused glance at her copilot, Dorothy Scott.

"That was a rather non-standard pre-landing warning, Dorothy."

"Hey, I'm sure that those marines needed something to help them relax as much as I did myself."

In the large cargo cabin of the C-142A, Lieutenant Colonel Lewis 'Chesty' Puller, couldn't help chuckle with the 120 other marines of his battalion sitting on folding jump seats.

"Hell, you really can't say that these girls don't have a sense of humor. ALRIGHT, BUMS OF 'A' COMPANY, FIRST BATTALION, YOU HEARD THE LADY! MAKE SURE THAT YOUR SEATBELTS ARE BUCKLED AND HOLD ON TO YOUR WEAPONS. ANY MAN WHO WILL LOSE GRIP ON HIS RIFLE WILL HAVE TO DO FIFTY PUSH-UPS, WITH A KICK IN THE ASS BY ME BETWEEN EACH PUSH-UP. SERGEANT PETERS, YOU WILL LET OUR MEN RUN OUT BEFORE ROLLING OUT WITH YOUR TRUCK."

"YES SIR!" shouted back the NCO sitting in the Dodge ¾-ton light truck chained down to the cargo floor of the big transport aircraft and which carried extra ammunition, water and rations for the marines of 'A' Company. Despite the joke made by Dorothy Scott, the marines sitting in the cargo hold waited nervously for their plane to touch the ground and let them out into combat: this was the first time that marines, or any American infantrymen, would participate in what they were told was going to be an 'air assault' operation. The female loadmaster of the C-142A, who was connected to the cockpit by an intercom headset, then pushed the button operating the big rear cargo ramp, but only opened it partially, with the ramp about two-thirds down.

"TWENTY SECONDS TO LANDING! YOU WILL BE GOING OUT AT THE NORTHERN END OF THE RUNWAY."

Puller, looking around his men to judge their state of minds, saw the four young women wearing combat uniforms and armed with carbines and revolvers also prepare to run out. Those women also each carried a pair of flashlights equipped with long orange plastic cones and were going to act as airfield aircraft guides, signaling to the landing transports where to turn and in which direction. Doing such a job at night while yielding luminous batons near Japanese positions certainly took a lot of guts in Puller's opinion. He eyed in particular the youngest of the women, a teenage beauty with curly red hair who was most pleasant to male eyes. When Puller had come aboard, he had chatted a bit with all four women and remembered that young beauty's name to be **Norma Jeane Mortenson**, who had claimed to be eighteen. What Puller couldn't know was that young Norma Jeane was in reality sixteen years-old and had



used a falsified birth certificate in order to enroll in the Army Air Corps and join the Fifinellas. A shout from the loadmaster then returned Fuller's mind on the present moment.

"TOUCHDOWN IMMINENT! HOLD YOUR OVERHEAD HANDLES!"

Puller grabbed at once the rubber handle attached above his jump seat, just in time as the C-142 bumped none too gently on the runway it was landing on. Then, the plane slowed down quite brutally, using both wheel brakes and propeller reverse thrust. Holding on to dear life to the overhead handle as the plane decelerated quickly, Lewis Puller then felt it do a tight half-turn to the left, probably to leave the runway and let other planes free to land on it. Then, their C-142A came to a stop and the loadmaster finished lowering the cargo ramp to the ground while shouting to the marines.

"OUT, OUT, OUT!"

As the marines ran out in a double file, the loadmaster hurried to go undo the chains holding the light truck to the cargo deck, helped by the four female airfield guides. As soon as the truck rolled out of the plane and onto the ground, the four airfield guides grabbed the bicycles they had brought with them in order to go around the airfield faster when needed and rolled out as well, leaving the loadmaster free to raise and close the cargo ramp before calling the pilots.

"THE RAMP IS UP AND EVERYBODY IS OUT!"

"THANKS, LYNDA!" replied Betty Huyler before making her aircraft roll down the taxiway parallel to the runway, in order to take a takeoff position, as a second C-142a touched down on the runway. This was only the first of the trips between Port Moresby and Manila she was due to do in order to airlift American soldiers and equipment into Manila.

At the northern end of the runway, Lewis Puller led his first company at a run towards the perimeter fence of Nichols Field, intent on taking positions there in order to stop any Japanese possible counter-attack. On the way, he ran past the burned and mutilated corpses of Japanese soldiers who had apparently been killed by the terrifying big bomb which had exploded over Nichols Field just before their landing. Wishing to never die in such a horrible fashion, Puller finally crouched behind the remains of a small sort of shed near the perimeter fence and signaled Sergeant Peters and his driver to drive their truck to his position, then took hold of the receiver of the backpack radio carried by his signaler.

"Six Mike Seven, this is Six One Mike Seven: I am now in position at the northern end of the perimeter, over."

"Six Mike Seven acknowledged!" replied his regiment's commander, who had been in the second C-142A. "Hold position until all our men are in place, over."

"Six One Mike Seven: understood, out!"

Puller then used his night vision scope, a brand-new addition to the marines' equipment which he found positively fantastic as a tactical tool, in order to look for any Japanese soldiers or guns. He did see two Japanese anti-aircraft guns visible within 150 meters of him but their servants were apparently all dead, lying around or over their guns. He nodded his head in satisfaction at that: up to now, this operation was going very well indeed. His degree of satisfaction then increased measurably as four M5 STUART light tanks brought in by the C-142As rolled to a stop in an extended line just behind his marines. Puller was however more than a little surprised to see as well four jeeps mounting .50 caliber heavy machine guns and towing small trailers joining the tanks and his marines. Getting up and going to the nearest jeep, he was shocked to see that three young women were in that jeep.

"Uh, excuse my language, ladies, but what the fuck are you doing here, in Nichols Field?"

The female corporal manning the heavy machine gun gave him a disarming smile.

"Well, just doing our job, sir. We are in charge of security at the airfields used by the 99th Air Wing. Since this airfield is now going to be operated by our wing, we came to secure its perimeter, so that you could be free to advance towards Manila, sir."

Puller, flabbergasted by that unexpected but correct answer to his question, could only nod his head and smile back to the young corporal.

"A most logical answer, I must say. Carry on with your duties, ladies."

"Thank you, sir."

Puller's next surprise was when a group of armed men waving a white flag approached him from the direction of Manila. The young platoon lieutenant nearest to Puller scratched his head in confusion.

"I thought that the Japanese never surrendered and fought to the death, sir."

"Normally they don't, Son. However, I believe that those guys are not Japanese. TO ALL MARINES, HOLD YOUR FIRE! HOLD YOUR FIRE! POSSIBLE FRIENDLIES APPROACHING!"

Puller then got up and started walking towards the newcomers, meeting them at the ruined perimeter fence. The man holding the white flag, apparently a Filipino, wore an old-style American 'barber bowl' helmet and carried a Springfield 1903 bolt rifle. He then spoke in a relatively fair English to Puller.

"I am Captain Manuel Romero, of the Hunters ROTC guerrilla group. Did you come as part of a simple raid or to stay, Colonel?"

"We are here to stay, Captain Romero. My regiment of marines just landed on this airfield, while a second regiment is landing in Nielson Field. Our transport planes are now on their way back to Papua New Guinea, where they will load up with more American troops before coming back. How many guerrillas do you have with you, Captain?"

"I presently have about 160 fighters with me, Colonel, but have another 300 guerrillas dispersed around the southern suburbs of the city, fighting the Japanese and stopping them from slaughtering more of our people. Your marines will be like a miracle sent to us by God, Colonel."

Puller grinned at that.

"Well, we certainly will be most happy to perform an exorcism on those Japanese demons, Captain."

"And we will be happy to guide and support you around Manila, Colonel."

As Romero finished speaking, what looked like a fire lance came out of the sky, hitting a Japanese anti-aircraft gun which had been trying unsuccessfully to find and shoot one of the roaming AC-142Gs.

"Wow! You brought dragons with you, Colonel?"

"Bingo! Those heavy gunship aircraft belong to the Dragon Ladies of the 99th Air Wing, Captain."

"Ladies? You also have women fighting the Japanese, Colonel?"

"Uh, what do you mean, 'also'? You have women guerrillas with you?"

"Not in my group, Colonel, but we have a number of guerrilla groups formed of women, notably the Escoda Group, the Daughters of Tandang Sora and the Daughters of Liberty."

"Oh dear! Wait until Ingrid Dows hears about that."

An air of absolute revelation and ecstasy then came to Romero's face at the mention of Ingrid's name.

"Lady Hawk is with you, Colonel?"

"Uh, yes: she commands the 99th Air Wing, whose planes are presently pounding the Japanese around Manila."

"May the saint Virgin Mary be praised! We are saved!"

Puller could only scratch his head at that: there definitely were a lot more women than he had expected involved in this mission.

14:09 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, April 20, 1943 'C'

The Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

"Alright, gentlemen, what the Hell is going on in the Pacific and in around the Philippines?"

General George Marshall, the head of the U.S. Army, answered the President first.

"It happens that, after getting reports that the Japanese had started to slaughter our men held as prisoners of war in the Philippines, as well as killing indiscriminately the Filipino people around them, General MacArthur decided to act and launched a lightning rescue operation to save our men and the Filipinos, Mister President. He was able to get the support of Admiral Halsey, in Noumea, who lent him the use of four escort carriers, so that the helicopters of the 99th Air Wing, based in Port Moresby, could be brought to within range of Manila. At last news, General MacArthur has succeeded in landing by air two marine regiments and one paratrooper battalion in and around Manila. Those troops are in turn supported by the heavy gunships of Colonel Dows and also gained the effective support of thousands of Filipino guerrillas. If I can believe MacArthur's latest reports, most of the Japanese in Manila are now dead or cornered like rats."

Roosevelt nodded his head at that, then looked at Admiral Ernest J. King, the head of the Navy.

"And what are your objections about that, Admiral? It seems to me that General MacArthur has acted promptly and for a most legitimate purpose, which is to save the lives of our men held captive by the Japanese in the Philippines."

"My objections are about how he obtained the help of Vice Admiral Halsey, Mister President. Halsey never asked permission from either Admiral Nimitz or me before loaning the services of a full escort carrier division and of the First Marine Division

to General MacArthur. When I finally heard about this, I ordered him to make his carriers turn around and to keep the First Marine Division in reserve in Australia. Halsey, through Nimitz, then flatly refused to obey my order, so I relieved him of command for insubordination, Mister President.”

King, who had expected that Roosevelt would support his command authority, was then shocked by F.D.R.’s reaction, who would have jumped out of his wheelchair from rage if not for his physical disabilities.

“YOU WHAT? THOSE ESCORT CARRIERS WERE ON THEIR WAY TO HELP SAVE OUR MEN HELD IN THE PHILIPPINES AND YOU WANTED TO HAVE THEM TURN AROUND? WHAT KIND OF UNCARING EGOMANIAC ARE YOU, ADMIRAL KING? I WANT HALSEY REESTABLISHED AS COMMANDER OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC THEATER OF OPERATIONS RIGHT AWAY! AS FOR YOU, YOU ARE RELIEVED AS CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS. THE DEPUTY CNO WILL TAKE YOUR PLACE UNTIL A MORE PERMANENT REPLACEMENT IS CHOSEN BY ME. NOW, GET OUT OF MY OFFICE!”

Watched by the other stunned service chiefs and by Admiral Leahy, the President’s military advisor, King could only salute before walking out, furious and humiliated. Once King was gone, Roosevelt gave a hard look at Marshall, Arnold and Leahy.

“Well, gentlemen, now that I have made myself perfectly clear about what I think of General MacArthur’s flash initiative and about Admiral Halsey’s support of his rescue operation, what could you do to quickly reinforce his rescue force in Manila? Do we have extra troops here that we can spare and then send quickly to Manila?”

Marshall thought for a moment before nodding his head.

“I can see two units which could be sent right away by air to Manila: the First and Second Filipino Infantry regiments. They are composed of ethnic Filipino-Americans and of native Filipinos who were able to escape from the Philippines before the Japanese took the islands. They are presently training in California but are rather lightly armed by our normal infantry standards. Since General MacArthur has succeeded in capturing almost intact two airfields near Manila, we could transport those two regiments by air directly to Manila, via Hawaii and the Samoa Islands.”

Lieutenant General Arnold, the head of the Army Air Corps, then spoke up.

“I could temporarily assign the two heavy transport groups equipped with C-142s that I have within our country to carry those two regiments to the Philippines, Mister

President. However, any vehicles and heavy equipment they have would necessitate many more roundabout trips by C-142s or follow by ship, under Navy escort.”

“That is still a good start, gentlemen.” approved Roosevelt. “General Marshall, I know from numerous rumors I heard about those Filipino units that they were often discriminated against and got only inferior or old equipment. See to it that those men are fully reequipped with modern weapons and equipment before they leave the states. What about our airborne units? Can we send at least one airborne division to Manila? It seems to me that this is a golden opportunity for us to strike a deadly blow to the Japanese if we could succeed in retaking the Philippines, or at the least isolate and render impotent the Japanese forces there, no?”

“Indeed, Mister President. However, our two airborne divisions are slated to soon go to England, in preparation for the day we will land in France.” answered Marshall, making Roosevelt shake his head in disillusionment.

“...In preparation for the day we will land in France... General, I have heard many promises of action to come soon in Europe and have agreed to nearly all the requests for help from Prime Minister Churchill. Yet, nothing concrete seems to be happening over there. Our troops in England are languishing in training camps while supplies and equipment are piling up in the depots there. As for our bombers, they are suffering awful losses at the hands of the Luftwaffe while apparently causing little true damage to the Germans. On the other hand, I have General MacArthur progressing at lightning speed and who now has landed his forces in the Philippines, a full year before our most optimistic predictions. Can you tell me what is MacArthur doing that our generals in England should be doing, gentlemen?”

Marshall was left speechless by Roosevelt’s question, either unable or unwilling to give him a satisfactory answer. However, Henry Arnold, grabbing his courage with both hands, cleared his throat and spoke up.

“If I may, Mister President, I would say that you should not praise General MacArthur for his recent successes, but rather a young woman who commands his 99th Air Wing: Colonel Ingrid Dows. Colonel Dows suggested a number of times some daring operational plans which none of our staff officers would even dare consider or propose. In turn, her suggestions repeatedly turned to gold for General MacArthur. If I would refer to the most recent events I know of, Dows was the one who suggested and then implemented the plan to bomb Tokyo from Port Moresby with her new XA-11s, a plan that effectively decapitated the Japanese high command of both the Army and the Navy.

She was also the one who attacked the Japanese Combined Fleet as it tried to get to Port Moresby and bombard it with its heavy guns. The taking of Buna was also thanks to her novel helicopter air assault tactic, which succeeded with very little casualties.”

“And how old is this military genius, General Arnold?”

“Uh, I believe that she is actually nineteen years-old, Mister President.”

Roosevelt bowed his head while shaking it at the same time.

“Nineteen... If I had a rival this young and this talented facing me in the next presidential elections, I would get trounced. Anything else I should know about her?”

“Uh, I believe that you already know about her remembering her past incarnations, Mister President.”

“I do! I must say that facing a political rival with 7,000 years of experience would be a humbling experience for me. And she is a lieutenant colonel?”

“A full colonel, Mister President. Many of my generals are already eating their socks and complaining about that.”

“Let them eat socks!” replied Roosevelt, paraphrasing a famous historical saying from France’s history. Both Marshall and Arnold had a good chuckle at that.

CHAPTER 24 – OPERATIONAL SWITCH

13:51 (Manila Time)

Tuesday, April 27, 1943 'C'

Nichols Field, southern suburbs of Manila

Island of Luzon, Philippines

Douglas MacArthur, with President Quezon of the Philippines at his side, saluted as soon as he stepped on the tarmac after coming down the stairs from his personal transport aircraft, a four-engine Douglas C-54 SKYMASTER. A small military band that had been hurriedly brought to Nichols Field then played the American national anthem, followed by the Filipino anthem. At the end of the second anthem, Lieutenant General Hodge, who commanded the American ground troops in the Philippines, came forward and saluted both MacArthur and Quezon.

“Welcome to liberated Manila, Mister President, General. While there are still plenty of Japanese outside of the Greater Manila Area, the city itself has been thoroughly cleansed of Japanese soldiers and their Filipino collaborators and the Japanese are now out of artillery range of Manila. Both the Malacanang Palace and the Manila Hotel are safe and ready for occupation.”

MacArthur, feeling happier than he had been in a long time, strongly shook hands with Hodge while grinning.

“Your troops have accomplished a fantastic job in Manila, General Hodge. Their valor will be recognized, I assure you.”

“Then, General, two other groups would deserve at least as much praise as my troops: the women of the 99th Air Wing, which gave my troops first class air support and are still pounding the Japanese around the Philippines; and the tens of thousands of Filipino guerrillas who guided and supported my soldiers and marines during the fighting inside and around Manila. Without those guerrillas, we would still be fighting the Japanese inside Manila. I would strongly recommend that we do our utmost to properly arm and equip those guerrilla groups, so that they could continue the fight for the liberation of the whole Philippines.”

"I will certainly appeal to Washington for more weapons and equipment for these heroes, General Hodge. Uh, talking of the women of the 99th Air Wing, I was expecting that Colonel Dows would be present for this arrival ceremony."

Hodge had a gentle smile at that question.

"Colonel Dows has been a very busy young woman during the past week or so, General. She is presently flying a mission over Japan with her XA-11 bombers, targeting the Japanese shipyards and naval bases in Kure and Sasebo. Here, her heavy gunships and attack helicopters are busy patrolling the whole of the Philippines, strafing and pounding any Japanese Army units they find or to which they are directed to by Filipino guerrilla groups. However, while the Japanese have been mostly cut off from their logistical supplies, there are still close to a quarter million of them spread around the Philippines, so the fight will still be long and difficult, General. We definitely would need a lot more troops to finish the job here."

"I hear you, General Hodge. I am planning to go to Washington after the situation stabilizes further here, in order to plead directly with the President for more troops and support. From what I can see here, Nichols Field's infrastructures, if you except the runway itself, would need to be completely rebuilt before it could be used to the full."

"The same would apply for Nielson Field and Clark Field, General. We would need at least two engineering and construction battalions, ideally three or four, to rebuild those airfields and thus allow our supporting aircraft to move to here from Port Moresby. We would also need a couple of tankers to be sent, so that we could rebuild the local reserves of fuel. And there are of course the needs of the Filipino population in food and medical supplies to take care off."

"I will also plead for that with the President, General Hodge."
promised MacArthur, now looking and sounding most sober.

19:43 (Greenwich Mean Time)

Friday, April 30, 1943 'C'

Command hut of the 305th Bombardment Group (Heavy)

RAF Chelveston, Northamptonshire, England

Colonel Curtiss LeMay, the commanding officer of the 305th Bombardment Group, equipped with B-17 four-engine heavy bombers, angrily threw away his copy of the latest edition of 'Yank, The Army Magazine'.

"A bunch of young women aviatrixes are busy bombing Japan, and this after helping MacArthur retake the Philippines in mere days, while we keep being getting cut to shreds by the Germans, with little concrete results to show for our losses."

LeMay then took a couple of deep breaths to calm down as he thought about what he had just read. In truth, he could only admire what those young and brave aviatrixes were accomplishing in the Pacific. His real beef was with the obtuse and inflexible way his superiors at Eight Air Force were leading, or rather misleading, the young airmen under their command, airmen who were dying by the hundreds each week because of the incompetence of those old farts at Eight Air Force headquarters and at Army Air Force headquarters in Washington. Grabbing back the magazine he had thrown against a wall, LeMay opened it to the page showing a color picture of Colonel Ingrid Dows, young, beautiful and looking most resolved while standing in front of the partially obscured image of a XA-11B, in which she had just bombed the Japanese naval base in Kure.

"This is the kind of leader we should have here in England, rather than this Spaatz old fart."

18:15 (Washington Time)

Monday, May 10, 1943 'C'

Washington National Airport passenger terminal

On the western shore of the Potomac River

At border between Washington, D.C., and Arlington, Virginia

U.S.A.

General George Marshall was waiting for them in the passenger terminal of Washington National Airport, due to the light rain that was falling on the capital region, when Douglas MacArthur, George Kenney, Ingrid Dows and a few aides and staffers came down from MacArthur's plane. Before Marshall shook hands with them, he couldn't help look at Ingrid for a moment, fascinated by her youth and beauty. Returning his mind to serious things, Marshall returned the salute of his three main visitors as a

crowd of reporters and photographers kept in check by military policemen photographed the newcomers.

"Welcome to Washington, lady and gentlemen. I'm sorry about the rain but, unfortunately, I don't command the clouds...yet."

"That's understandable, General." Replied a smiling MacArthur while shaking hands with Marshall. "I myself can't. May I present to you Lieutenant General George Kenney, Commander of the Fifth Air Force, and Colonel Ingrid Dows, Commander of the 99th Air Wing and my designated miracle worker."

Marshall shook hands with both Kenney and Ingrid and was surprised by the strength of her grip but didn't remark on it before looking back at MacArthur.

"You must undoubtedly be tired after over a day or air travel through eleven hourly zones, so the command conference was put back to tomorrow afternoon, so that you can rest a bit. Rooms have been booked for your group at the Hay-Adams Hotel, which sits across Lafayette Square from the White House. I have staff cars waiting for you outside the terminal."

As he was starting to accompany MacArthur towards the exit of the terminal, Marshall recognized with a shock a woman in uniform that was part of the group of staffers accompanying MacArthur's party. He then whispered to MacArthur, so that the reporters around them wouldn't hear what he said.

"Uh, that Army Air Force major from the Fifinellas, isn't that the famous actress Hedy Lamarr?"

"It is effectively Hedy Lamarr and she came as Colonel Dows' assistant for this conference. She is the electronic warfare officer of the 99th Air Wing and has already flown many combat missions aboard our flying command post aircraft, notably over Rabaul, Truk, Manila and Tokyo."

"Hedy Lamarr flew over Tokyo?" exclaimed a bit too loudly Marshall, prompting Ingrid in putting a finger up to her lips.

"Careful, General: cameras have microphones here. Besides, many more of my aviatrixes have flown over Tokyo in the last few weeks. With most of the Japanese fighters based around Tokyo now destroyed on the ground and with our bombing campaign targeting the main aircraft and engine plants around Japan, the Japanese will soon be reduced to flying wood and canvas biplanes, so flying over Tokyo these days, especially at night, is not as risky as it was before, General."

“Still. And how many missions over Tokyo or Japan have you flown to date, Colonel?”

“Nineteen over Japan, including twelve of them over Tokyo, General.” answered Ingrid, not sounding pretentious one bit. Marshall could only reflect then on the fact that the commander of his Eight Air Force in Europe, Lieutenant General Carl Spaatz, had not personally flown yet a single bombing mission over Germany. That didn’t mean Spaatz was a coward, but it suggested to him that maybe Spaatz was failing to connect with the reality of modern air war over Europe. Once outside the terminal, Marshall led his visitors to a line of waiting staff cars and military police jeeps which included a bus meant for the staffers and for the baggage of the newcomers. While Marshall went in a staff car with MacArthur, Kenney travelled with Ingrid in the next staff car. As the official convoy started moving, Ingrid looked dreamily at the lights of Washington, across the Potomac.

“I haven’t visited a real city for months now, George, and I am really tempted to walk a bit around the hotel after supper.”

“You should really get some sleep instead, Ingrid: we are liable to have to counter many skeptics at the command conference tomorrow afternoon and we will need to be fresh and alert.”

“I slept most of the time during our air travel, so I am not really tired, George. Besides, Hedy had offered to show me a few good places around downtown Washington, including a restaurant specializing in German cuisine.”

“In German cuisine?”

“Yes! Please remember that I was born and grew up in Berlin, while Hedy was born in Vienna and started her acting career in Austria. We are both dying for a good plate of Schnitzel Mit Spätzle. At the worst, we will go for a good delicatessen restaurant, as we were both Jewish.”

“Okay!” could only reply Kenney, amused.

After crossing the Potomac River on the Highway One bridge, the convoy rolled north up the 14th Street Northwest, then turned on H Street Northwest and rolled past part of the Lafayette Square before arriving at the Hay-Adams Hotel. Again, Marshall accompanied his guests to the reception desk of the hotel, where they received their room keys and collected their suitcases from the bus. Before leaving them, Marshall spoke again to MacArthur.

"The command conference will start at two in the afternoon tomorrow. Staff cars will collect you and the hotel's main entrance at one fifteen. I will now wish you a good night sleep, General."

"Thank you, General Marshall."

With a small army of valets carrying their suitcases, the group from the Pacific went up to its assigned suites and rooms, whose windows faced Lafayette Square and overlooked the White House and its lawns. While MacArthur and Kenney each got a suite, Ingrid ended up with Hedy Lamarr in a large room with two large beds and a bathroom. First unpacking her suitcase, Ingrid then went on her balcony and admired the view of Washington it gave, noticing at the same time that the rain had stopped.

"Hey, Hedy, the rain has stopped. What do you say to go search for that German restaurant?"

"I'm game! We go as we are, in our dress uniforms?"

"Yes, but less our jackets: the climate in Washington is quite warm and muggy right now."

"Deal!"

A few minutes later, the two women went down to the reception lobby and went out to the taxis waiting lane in front of the hotel. As soon as she got in one taxi, Hedy asked a question to the driver, a graying man with a bit of a paunch.

"Would you know by chance the 'Vienna Hall' restaurant, sir?"

The man reacted by looking at her with some misgiving.

"Uh, the Vienna Hall restaurant closed in 1942, like the other German restaurants and hotels in Washington, miss. How long ago was your last time in Washington, if I may ask?"

"The last time I came here was four years ago." answered the disappointed Hedy Lamarr. "Why did they all close then?"

"Their owners were interned as enemy aliens, miss. Do you want to go instead to another type of restaurant, miss?"

"What good European restaurants do you know in town, mister?" asked Ingrid.

"Well, if you are looking for fine cuisine, then I would counsel the 'Restaurant de Bourgogne', miss: it is a very good French restaurant, a bit pricy but with an extensive menu. It is in the Georgetown District."

Ingrid exchanged a look with Hedy, then nodded her head.

“Go for the ‘Restaurant de Bourgogne’, mister.”

“Right away, miss.”

Thankfully, the taxi driver was not the kind that kept trying to engage in conversation with his customers, so the trip to Georgetown was a quiet one, allowing Ingrid and Hedy to look around at the streets of Washington while rolling. The taxi finally stopped in front of a small restaurant with terrasse which looked nice enough to Ingrid. Getting out of the taxi and paying the driver, leaving him a good tip, Ingrid and Hedy then walked to the restaurant’s entrance, where a mature couple was being received by the Maître D’. To their shock and irritation, the Maître D’ shook his head with a closed face as they approached him.

“I am sorry ladies but you can’t get in: women wearing pants are not allowed in our restaurant.”

Ingrid stared hard at him on hearing that.

“Are you serious? We are wearing U.S. Army dress uniforms, mister.”

The man replied to her in a rather smug attitude and voice.

“Miss, ‘dresses’ are not trousers. I am sorry but you can’t enter.”

Ingrid, who was getting quite hungry by now, then raised her voice by a notch.

“Get your manager, NOW!”

Instead of replying directly to her, the Maître D’ turned around and snapped his fingers to attract the attention of one of the waiters.

“Léon, get the owner!”

Then facing Ingrid again, the man made a gesture of the hand meant to tell her to step aside.

“Could you please step aside for a moment, miss? I have customers coming in.”

“You can call me ‘Colonel’ instead of ‘miss’, mister.” replied Ingrid, who still stepped to one side to let in two couples in suits and evening dresses. A couple of minutes later, a short, stocky man in his fifties came from the inside and briefly looked at Ingrid and Hedy before speaking to the Maître D’.

“What is the problem, Jacques?”

“Those two young women want to come in but are wearing trousers, Monsieur.”

“Those trousers are part of our U.S. Army uniforms, mister, and we just arrived from the Pacific.” cut in Ingrid, doing her best to contain her anger. The restaurant

owner then eyed her rank insignias and her multiple rows of medal ribbons pinned to her tan shirt before doing the same with Hedy.

“You look very young for your rank, ‘Colonel’.”

“That’s because I am young, mister, but that didn’t stop me from becoming the American ‘Ace of aces’, with 108 confirmed air victories in the Pacific. Don’t you read the newspapers from time to time? I am also known as ‘Lady Hawk’ and this is my electronic warfare officer, Major Hedy Lamarr. So, will you still turn us around because of your sexist dress rule?”

The names ‘Lady Hawk’ and ‘Hedy Lamarr’ finally made the owner realize who they were. Looking at the Maître D’, he then gave him a firm order.

“Find a good table for these two Army officers, Jacques.”

“Uh, yes, Monsieur.”

The owner then faced Ingrid and bowed to her.

“Please accept my excuses for this incident, Colonel. We will get you a table right away.”

“Merci beaucoup, monsieur¹⁷.” replied Ingrid in her fluent French, making the owner smile and bow his head in salute to her.

“You are welcome, Colonel.”

The owner then returned to his office next to the kitchen, leaving the Maître D’ to guide Ingrid and Hedy to a free table next to the front windows, where he put two menus and a wine card on the table before returning to his position next to the front entrance. Ingrid had a malicious smile while opening the wine card.

“Technically, I am still too young legally to drink alcohol in the United States, something which I find downright ridiculous, and I don’t want to create more disturbance by ordering wine for myself. I will thus let you order the wine, Hedy. If someone asks why I am not drinking, just say that I am a teatotaler.”

Hedy, who was definitely a sharp cookie, threw a questioning look at Ingrid.

“And how old are you, Ingrid...officially?”

Ingrid bent forward over their table and used her right hand to hide the movements of her lips.

“Officially, I will be twenty years-old in September.”

“And...unofficially?”

¹⁷ Merci beaucoup, monsieur: Thank you very much, sir.

“Unofficially, you can call me a ‘jail-bait’, Hedy. Now, let’s look at the menu: I am really famished.”

Her mind in turmoil at the confidence Ingrid had just made to her, Hedy opened the menu and looked for dishes which would remind her of her native Vienna. While she didn’t see any German or Austrian recipes, she did find an item that she had often eaten in Vienna and liked.

“I will go with the Beef Bourguignon with butter noodles.”

“And I will go for the Coq au Vin. I don’t think that I could get arrested for that.”

Hedy chuckled at that, then consulted the wine card. She quickly selected a bottle of fine red Bourgogne and announced her choice to Ingrid before asking a question with a smirk.

“And what will the teatotaler drink with her Coq au Vin?”

“Mineral water: it is still an expensive drink, being mostly an import item, and it will look classier than a simple glass of milk. The one thing I will drink at the end is a cup of espresso coffee. I am so tired of the brown water the Army calls ‘coffee’.”

“I can sympathize with you on that. Let’s order now.”

Calling a waiter to their table, Ingrid and Hedy placed their orders, both using their fluent French to do so.

As they waited to be served, Ingrid discretely watched if the other diners around their table were looking at her or appeared to recognize her, or were simply curious about her medal ribbons and those of Hedy. With her exploits in the skies of the Pacific, she had been featured more than once on the front pages of American newspapers. While she herself seemed to be ignored, Ingrid did notice that a couple of men dressed in expensive suits kept glancing at Hedy, as if they were wondering if she was the one they thought they recognized. The arrival of the wine waiter at their table, with their bottle of red Bourgogne and bottle of mineral water, thankfully seemed to make the two men forget about Hedy...or make them more discreet about the way they looked at her. Their food then arrived after another twelve minutes and Ingrid dived with gusto in her Coq au Vin, while Hedy closed her eyes with delight at her first bite of Beef Bourguignon.

“God! I really missed good cuisine. Any way you could tell your cooks to serve Beef Bourguignon from time to time, Ingrid?”

“Are you kidding? My female cooks are good but what could you realistically do with Spam¹⁸, or worse, Australian Bully beef¹⁹?”

Hedy shivered at the mention of ‘Bully beef’.

“Please, don’t mention that slop, Ingrid: you could ruin my appetite.”

“Sorry about that, Hedy.”

By the time that they finished their supper and left the restaurant to hail a taxi and return to their hotel, the fatigue from their long air travel and from the change in time zones started to weigh on both Ingrid and Hedy, with the latter also feeling the effect of the wine she had drunk. When they arrived in their room at the Hay-Adams, they barely managed to take a quick shower before getting in their bed, where they fell asleep in seconds.

13:49 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, May 11, 1943 ‘C’

Cabinet Room, West Wing of the White House

Washington, D.C.

Ingrid’s group, led by General Douglas MacArthur and Lieutenant General George Kenney, arrived a few minutes in advance for the strategic command conference called by President Roosevelt. A presidential staffer then led them to the Cabinet Room, where the President normally met with his cabinet for in-depth discussions. There, they found General Marshall, Admiral Nimitz and Lieutenant General Arnold already milling around the room while sipping on cups of coffee. There was an exchange of handshakes then, with a steward next serving coffee to the new arrivals. The group from England, General Dwight Eisenhower, Lieutenant General Carl Spaatz and Major General Jimmy Doolittle, arrived a couple of minutes later, along with a number of their

¹⁸ Spam: type of tinned meat that was often found in American military rations in WW2.

¹⁹ Bully beef: Widely used nickname for one of the most despised military rations served in the Pacific Theater during WW2. ‘Bully beef’ is a deformation of ‘boiled beef’, which was essentially what it was. The variety produced in Australia then often was of very low quality and was composed of an equal amount of melted fat and actual meat, with a generous amount of salt mixed in.

staff officers. More handshakes followed, with Doolittle grinning to Ingrid as he shook her hand.

“So, you are the young woman who bombed Tokyo and killed all those Japanese generals and admirals? That was a hell of an outstanding job, Colonel Dows.”

“Thank you, General. I must say however that me and my aviatrixes were greatly helped by the superlative performances of our Hughes XA-11s.”

Doolittle’s eyes glinted at the mention of the XA-11.

“Very little was said publicly about the XA-11. Could you tell me about it?”

“With pleasure, General.”

Ingrid was still describing the XA-11 to Doolittle when President Roosevelt entered the Cabinet Room, sitting on his wheelchair pushed by a steward. All the officers immediately came to attention, prompting Roosevelt into gesturing to them.

“At ease, ladies and gentlemen. Please take your seats: we have some heavy decisions to make about this war.”

With Roosevelt sitting at the head of the conference table and with the junior staffers sitting on chairs lined along the walls, Ingrid and the generals sat around the table, the Pacific Theater participants sitting on one side and the European Theater sitting opposite them, while Marshall and Arnold sat nearest to the President. Roosevelt first looked around the table at the conference participants before starting to speak.

“Welcome to this command conference, ladies and gentlemen. I called this conference mostly because of the lightning-fast advance and successes of General MacArthur’s forces in the Pacific, which in my mind would justify a reassessment of our national priorities in this war. His landing in the Philippines and the bombings in Japan in particular have profoundly changed the situation in the Pacific and we now must consider how to reinforce that success and follow on with a coherent strategy.”

Both Eisenhower and Spaatz frowned on hearing that, now fearing that the President was going to switch the national war efforts from Europe to the Pacific. Roosevelt then continued after a short pause.

“I would now like to let General MacArthur describe briefly the main events which occurred in his theater of operations during the last seven months. General...”

“Thank you, Mister President.” said MacArthur while getting up from his chair. He then went to a large map board set on a tripod and grabbing a pointer, started designating locations on the map of the South and Central Pacific displayed on it.

"Gentlemen, ladies, until last September, my command and that of the Navy's South Pacific Theater were in a rather precarious situation. Our marines were having a hard time on Guadalcanal; our fleet suffered a number of defeats and painful losses around the Solomon Islands and Japanese troops were advancing along the Kokoda Trail towards Port Moresby. I was then short of troops and planes, while the Navy had lost all but one of its aircraft carriers, along with a number of cruisers and destroyers. Then, I received a big gift from General Arnold: the 99th Composite Air Group of then Major Dows, equipped with the latest models of fighters, bombers and transport aircraft, plus what has since proved two winners in the Pacific: helicopters and EC-142E electronic flying command post aircraft. Along with the 99th Composite Air Group came another big gift: its commander, then Major Ingrid Dows. She started as the civilian wife of a Marine Corps officer freshly posted to Manila in 1941, an officer who came from London with a very precious package: a copy of parts of the Top-Secret Hourglass Files concerning this war in the Pacific. Those files then allowed me to adjust my defensive strategy for the Philippines, with great success. Ingrid Dows immediately proved her worth by adding additional information to these files, using personal discussions on the war she had with her late adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante. I thus hired her as a female auxiliary working in my Manila headquarters. Later on, she convinced me to push President Quezon to hire her as a fighter pilot for his own small air force. From then on, she quickly proved to be a top ace. Even more important to me and my command, she used new air tactics and pushed their use against the Japanese aircraft attacking the Philippines nearly daily. I mention this because her proposed new tactics and various counsels proved a godsent for my command, which was then able to resist much longer to the Japanese than it did in the original history as known to Nancy Laplante. I thus adopted fully those tactics and counsels and never regretted doing so since then. Now, to return to the situation in September of 1942. When the 99th C.A.G. arrived in the South Pacific, it was first rejected by Vice Admiral Ghormley, who was in command of the South Pacific Theater of Operations. That stupid mistake by Ghormley then turned into a gift to me, as I was able to integrate the 99th C.A.G. to my own command. I then sent it to Port Moresby, where a number of newly-built airfields were sitting mostly empty, due to the lean resources assigned at the time to the Pacific. Major Dows then started accomplishing miracles with her air group, first bombing the big Japanese base in Rabaul, causing huge losses in aircraft and ships to the Japanese, then by supporting my troops fighting along the Kokoda Trail with her helicopters. She also sent of her own

accord a helicopter detachment to help our marines in Guadalcanal and also used her squadron of C-142 heavy cargo aircraft to fly in supplies for our marines in Henderson Field. That, along with the neutralization of Rabaul as a Japanese airbase, relieved much of the pressure for our marines in Guadalcanal, which constituted in my opinion a great example of interservice cooperation on the battlefield. Then, in October, a powerful Japanese force of aircraft carriers, battleships and cruisers was spotted approaching the Torres Strait, evidently bent on hitting Port Moresby. Major Dows, using her planes, helicopters and, in particular, her EC-142Es flying command post aircraft, struck that Japanese fleet hard, sinking two carriers, four battleships and five heavy cruisers, plus a number of destroyers. That Japanese fleet, or rather what was left of it, was then forced to withdraw back to Dutch East Indies water, losing more ships on the way after having lost its commander, Admiral Yamamoto, who sank with his flagship, the battleship YAMATO. That battle, which has not been sufficiently studied by our national military staffs in my opinion, turned out to be a crucial turning point in the Pacific. With the bulk of the Japanese fleet's heavy units sunk, the situation around the Southwest Pacific improved dramatically, notably by preventing more Japanese resupply by sea of their troops on Guadalcanal. That victory then prompted me to ask General Arnold to send both replacements and reinforcements to the 99th C.A.G., which had suffered some significant losses during its first two months on the frontlines. Again, General Arnold obliged and sent enough new planes and aviatrixes to enlarge the 99th into a full-size air wing. He also sent a new type of airplane to be tested in combat, the Fairchild AC-142G heavy gunship, armed with a new weapon for us: Fuel Air Explosives bombs, or F.A.E. in short. Those heavy gunships and their five-ton F.A.E. bombs then hammered the Japanese bases near Port Moresby, destroying in turn the Japanese airfields in Lae, Wewak and Rabaul before flattening the Japanese Army camp in Buna, which was then immediately assaulted by air, using helicopters transporting a reinforced battalion of Australian infantry supported by four light tanks. Next, in November, after obtaining the support of Vice Admiral Halsey, who had just replaced Vice Admiral Ghormley in Noumea, the planes and helicopters of now Colonel Dows went to attack the big Japanese base in Truk Atoll, with her helicopters carried on the escort carrier SANGAMON. That attack was a huge success and basically convinced the Japanese to stop using it as a waypoint in the Central Pacific. In the command meeting I held in Port Moresby after that strike on Truk, me and Vice Admiral Halsey decided that our strategy would from now on be to isolate and jump over the various Japanese garrisons in my

command sector and in the Solomon Islands, in order to prepare for our next big objective: the Philippines. In March of this year, I received yet another gift from General Arnold: ten pre-series Hughes XA-11s in fast bomber, photo-reconnaissance and night fighter variants. Only three weeks after receiving those XA-11s, time to train her crews on them with the help of a training team sent by Hughes, Colonel Dows flew from Port Moresby to Tokyo with five XA-11s and utterly destroyed the Japanese Army and Navy headquarters there, along with the Japanese Navy Academy, and caused serious damage to the Yokosuka Naval Arsenal, near Tokyo, and this while suffering zero losses herself. However, barely two days after that bombing, we learned that the Japanese troops in the Philippines had started to take revenge for this by slaughtering our men prisoners of the Japanese and the Filipino civilians living in Manila. That same day, I gathered my main subordinates to find how we could possibly help our people in the Philippines and stop that slaughter. Again, Colonel Dows came up within minutes with an audacious plan, which I approved. I then asked Vice Admiral Halsey for his support by lending me four escort carriers which would carry the 99th Air Wing's helicopters to within range of the Philippines. Colonel Dows also immediately implemented a program of airstrikes to destroy what remained of Japanese aircraft in the Philippines and to provide air support for our troops, which then landed directly on airfields next to Manila, after those airfields were flattened by FAE bombs dropped by her heavy gunships. Only ten days later, I was able to fly to Manila with President Quezon, with Manila cleansed of the Japanese and with our people held there rescued and then evacuated to safety." MacArthur then pause for a short moment and looked straight at the leaders from the European Theater.

"Some of you may now wonder why I gave this long monologue and apparent praise for one of my officers, gentlemen, thus let me expose the points I want to push here at this command conference. First, this was truly meant to praise the one person who merited the most in my sector during the last few months: Colonel Ingrid Dows. Second, I also want to emphasize why she was so successful with her air unit. The reasons for her successes and those of my command are this: flexibility of thinking; the capacity to quickly devise new tactics and strategies adapted to the situation of the moment and to then apply them; the maximum use of our advantage over the Japanese in advanced military technologies and, finally, the willingness to depart from official military doctrine when needed. Gentlemen, we are now on the verge of defeating the Japanese in the Pacific, and this in only seven months, thanks to allowing and using

those new ideas and tactics. I now submit that, in view of our successes in the Pacific and of the prolonged morass our forces in Europe have been experiencing, that our nation should now reinforce success rather than continue supporting a costly stalemate.” From the visible reactions she saw on the faces of the generals posted in Europe and North Africa, Ingrid sensed that their reactions would be fierce. In that she was not mistaken, with General Spaatz throwing a poisoned look to MacArthur.

“How can you justify calling our bombing campaign in Europe a costly stalemate, General MacArthur? My bombers have been pounding the German military industries and their bases and airfields in occupied Europe, causing an appreciable diminution of German war production. Further, we are facing in Europe an adversary of a much higher caliber than the Japanese.”

Ingrid stiffened with anger in her chair and immediately looked at MacArthur.

“Sir, permission to refute those points!”

“Fire away, Ingrid.” answered MacArthur, smiling, knowing that Ingrid always said what was on her mind. In that, he was not disappointed, with Ingrid locking eyes with Spaatz.

“General Spaatz, let me correct you on the points you just said. First, about the efficiency and results of your bombings in Europe, let me say that your claims are mostly wishful thinking. In reality, most of your bombs are killing cows and turning over fields around Europe, when they are not hitting cities rather than factories, needlessly killing non-combatant civilians. If you would objectively examine your bomb run pictures, you would see little more than open fields, forests and residential areas receiving your bombs. As for your claims of significantly hurting German war production, I again call ‘bunk’ on you. In truth, German war production has been steadily increasing despite of your bombings. Those bombings have in turn been very costly for your bomber units, which still insist thanks to your directives in attacking in large, slow formations against concentrated German anti-aircraft and fighter opposition. Their lack of bombing precision is also partly due to your order that only the lead bomber uses its Norden bombsight, with the rest of the formation then bombing ‘on command’ when they see their leader dropping its bombs. Your bomber units have been suffering an average of five to ten or more percent losses PER MISSION over Europe and your bomber crews have virtually no chance of surviving the required 25 missions before they could go enjoy a break in the United States. I know that because I was able to talk with many bomber crews reassigned from England to Port Moresby. As for your assertion that we faced in

the Pacific an inferior enemy compared to the Germans, I call that simple racism, General. The Japanese may not be as advanced technologically as the Germans are but I know no German pilot who would willingly commit suicide by crashing on an enemy ship or ramming an enemy aircraft. Your claim of the Japanese being an inferior enemy is nothing less than a gross insult to the courage of our sailors, marines and aviators who have been fighting and dying in the Pacific.”

As a fiery Ingrid continued on, MacArthur saw Admiral Nimitz nodding his head in approval at Ingrid’s last sentence while throwing a hard look at Spaatz.

“Now, tell me, General Spaatz: why are you still forcing your bomber crews to follow the obsolete strategic and tactical elucubrations of an Italian air force general of the 1920s who served when fighters and bombers were still made of wood, canvas and string? Why are you still sending your bombers to their objectives without providing them a fighter escort all the way? I can tell you from personal experience over the Philippines that unescorted bombers will NOT get through when faced with a competent fighter opposition. I know that because I personally shot down dozens of such Japanese bombers. Maybe you should personally lead your attacking bomber groups and see by yourself the reality of their predicaments. I say, change your bombing tactics before our bomber units are completely decimated by the Germans.”

Spaatz, enraged, shot up from his chair and laid both fists on the table while staring hard at Ingrid.

“NOW LISTEN, YOU YOUNG PRESUMPTUOUS BITCH!...”

“GENERAL SPAATZ, SIT DOWN! NOW!” shouted Roosevelt, interrupting the boss of the European Theater American bomber forces. Spaatz reluctantly obeyed him and sat down, still fuming. Roosevelt then looked at Lieutenant General Henry Arnold, who appeared to be in his small shoes.

“General Arnold, do you have informations and facts which would refute what Colonel Dows said about our bombing campaign in Europe?”

Arnold, who had been a long, firm proponent of the present American bomber strategy and tactics but who had started gradually to doubt it when faced with the successful tactics used by Ingrid, took long seconds to answer, something that Roosevelt noted.

“Mister President, the results of our bombing operations in and around Europe are presently being reassessed by my headquarters, along with the air actions recently flown in the Pacific.”

'Waffle, waffle, waffle!' thought to herself Ingrid, while Roosevelt was clearly not convinced.

"General, I would like to review personally some of those bomb runs film footage from our raids in Europe, along with factual statistics about their results. Colonel Dows, I would like you to stay here after this meeting, along with General Arnold."

"I am at your service, Mister President."

"Excellent!" said the President before he looked hard at Spaatz, Eisenhower and Doolittle.

"Gentlemen, the American public is presently cheering our recent successes in the Pacific, while I am getting more and more poignant calls and letters from the families of our aviators killed over Europe. I now believe that you could benefit from studying the methods and tactics used by Colonel Dows to such good effect in the Pacific."

As Spaatz paled at that remonstrance from the President, Roosevelt then delivered a hammer blow.

"Up to now I have been approving and supporting every request from assistance from Prime Minister Churchill and thus gave top priority to the European Theater, to the detriment of the Pacific Theater. However, this will change as of today. The American people demands it and I now demand it, gentlemen. General Marshall, General Arnold, Admiral Nimitz, I want you to reinforce as quickly as possible our ground, air and naval units in the Pacific, using if need be units previously due to move to the European Theater. I want in particular to see sufficient reinforcements, equipment and supplies sent to our units in the Philippines, in order to allow us to fully cleanse the Philippines from the Japanese troops still there."

"But, what about the British, Mister President?" objected Eisenhower. "Without our full support, they are liable to suffer greatly under German air and missile attacks."

Roosevelt gave a sober look at his top commander in Europe.

"What about our people just freed from captivity in the Philippines? What about the brave Filipino people, who had confidence in our protection against the Japanese? When we were still desperately defending the Philippines from invasion in order to stall the Japanese offensive in the rest of the Pacific and in Southeast Asia, the British didn't raise a finger to help us in or around the Philippines. Instead, Prime Minister Churchill concentrated solely on reinforcing the territories he had not yet lost in Asia and also drastically cut the supply of arms and equipment he had been sending to Australia, forcing us to compensate for the slack he created. Enough is enough! I will call him

tonight to tell him that our efforts in Europe will now be put on pause until we will have decisively defeated Japan and will have fully retaken control of the Philippines. As General MacArthur said earlier, let's stop flogging a dead horse. I will want to see a new air strategy written and adopted in Europe within a month, gentlemen. As for General MacArthur, may I assume that you already have a plan about how you intend to continue your campaign in the Southwest Pacific and the Philippines?"

"I have, Mister President: Colonel Dows already gave me a few good ideas about it."

Roosevelt stared for a moment at young Ingrid before looking at Henry Arnold.

"General Arnold, correct me if I am wrong: our air wing commanders normally wear the rank of brigadier general, right?"

Carl Spaatz turned purple on hearing that, while Ingrid stiffened, not having expected this. As for MacArthur and Kenney, they simply smiled to themselves as Arnold answered Roosevelt.

"My air wing commanders are effectively brigadier generals, Mister President."

"Then, see that Colonel Dows' status be upgraded to that of temporary brigadier general rank, with her permanent rank raised to full colonel. General MacArthur, be assured that you from now on will get what you need to continue your campaign in the Pacific."

"Thank you, Mister President!" replied a most happy MacArthur.

17:45 (Washington Time)

Hay-Adams Hotel, Washington D.C.

Ingrid closed the door of her room, then leaned her back against it while blowing air out as she looked with big eyes at Hedy Lamarr.

"My God! I never imagined that things would happen this way, Hedy."

"Well, it seems that, contrary to my own experience, opening your big mouth can be profitable, after all. Brigadier general rank insignias, plus a second Distinguished Service Medal, a Legion of Merit medal and a new Distinguished Flying Cross, all for mouthing off at a general: quite an accomplishment, I would say. On the other hand, General Arnold was nice in pinning a DFC on me at the same time."

"Damn, how could I properly celebrate such a day?"

"How about going to try the Beef Bourguignon at the Restaurant de Bourgogne, Ingrid?"

"After the President publicly pinned my new rank insignias in front of dozens of reporters? I'm going to get publicly mugged if I show up there tonight."

"Maybe but it would also be a fine occasion to smear that Maître D' with a pie in his face." added Hedy in a sneaky tone, making Ingrid grin.

"Hell, let's go then! We should call in advance in order to reserve a table."

"Then, check first with General MacArthur and with General Kenney, to see if they would like to go dine with us."

"Again, a great idea, Hedy."

Ingrid was on the telephone, speaking with Douglas MacArthur, when someone knocked on the door of their room.

"Damn! I hope that this is not some pesky reporter." said Hedy before looking through the peephole of the door. What she saw was a hotel valet carrying a big box. When she opened the door, the valet smiled and bowed his head to her while presenting the box he was carrying.

"Gift package for Miss Dows!"

Surprised at first, Hedy then accepted the box and was about to tip the valet when she realized that she had no money on her. She then tipped the surprised but delighted valet with a kiss on his lips.

"And a big thank you from Hedy Lamarr, mister."

"Why, thank you very much, Miss Lamarr." replied the valet before walking away. Closing and locking the door, Hedy then carried the big box, which had to weigh a good fifteen kilos, to her bed, on which she put down the box before examining it. It didn't bear any post stamps or return address, just Ingrid's name and hotel room number. Now deeply suspicious, Hedy stared at it, unwilling to open it. Ingrid, who had just finished her calls to MacArthur and Kenney, approached while looking at the big parcel.

"Uh, what's that, Hedy?"

"A hotel valet just brought it. He said that it was a gift package but I am not sure if it would be prudent to open it: you do have a few enemies after all, Ingrid."

"Too true!" said Ingrid just before a female voice which she knew very well resonated inside her head while apparently not being heard by Hedy.

‘Do not worry and open it, my dear daughter: it is a gift from me. Keep on doing your things in the air: you are doing great.’

To Hedy’s surprise and sudden fear, Ingrid then started ripping the paper wrapping the parcel, uncovering a simple cardboard box. She then opened the box itself and looked inside it: it contained what looked like a hard-shell pilot’s helmet, an aviator’s inflatable vest, a khaki flight suit, a pair of flying gloves and what Ingrid recognized as a type of advanced G-suit Nancy had once shown her a photograph of, plus an envelope. Taking first the envelope and opening it, she extracted and opened a gift wish card, reading it aloud with growing emotion.

“To my beloved Ingrid, from a proud mother. Congratulation for your latest promotion and for your successes in this war...signed: Nancy.”

“Nancy? As Nancy Laplante, your dead adoptive mother?” said a stunned Hedy, making Ingrid nod her head as a tear rolled down her left cheek.

“One Nancy Laplante. I will explain that to you later. Now, let’s examine the content of this parcel.”

Taking out the items she found inside the box, she lined them up on the bed and examined them with growing glee as Hedy also looked at them with stupor.

“A 21st Century jet pilot’s outfit! I love it!”

“A 21st Century outfit? How could this be possible?”

In response, Ingrid gave a solemn look at Hedy.

“Nancy was a time traveler, remember? Also, she told me that she suspected that her time travel trip had created a parallel universe to that she came from. Let me put this outfit on: I am burning to look at myself in the mirror while wearing it.”

Ingrid quickly put on the flight suit, the G-suit, the inflatable vest, which also was a bullet-resistant vest, the flight gloves and, finally, the pilot’s helmet, before smiling to Hedy.

“So, how do I look now, Hedy?”

“Like a brand-new bitch, Ingrid.” was her response.

CHAPTER 25 – A BRAND NEW BITCH

13:26 (Manila Time)

Friday, June 25, 1943 'C'

Main tarmac, Nichols Field, Manila suburbs

Island of Luzon, Philippines



When Ingrid came down from the cockpit of the F-11N night fighter she had piloted during her wing's latest bombing mission over Japan, it was to find Lieutenant General George Kenney waiting for her on the edge of the tarmac, next to a waiting jeep. Kenney smiled while shaking his head as he eyed the approaching Ingrid, clad in her 21st Century pilot's outfit which had made all the other aviators of her wing jealous of her. Kenney himself was jealous of her for the same reason and wished such flight suits and helmets could be produced in sufficient quantities to equip all his aviators. However, he realized that there were much higher priority items that needed to be procure than fancy helmets and flight suits. The one item which had merited special attention was her G-suit, an advanced design that didn't need to be connected to a pressured air pump or even to an electrical connection in order to work, since it functioned by using simple liquid-filled bags judiciously distributed along the legs and torso of the wearer's G-suit, which looked like a pair of trousers combined to a wide belt. Flight testing by Ingrid had shown that this G-suit increased the resistance to G forces of the pilot wearing it by at least three Gs, thus giving a very appreciable advantage in combat to a pilot engaged into an energetic dogfight. In view of those results, Colonel Paul Gunn, a genius when it came to thinker with aircraft and their equipment, had been put in charge by Kenney of a special project team tasked with replicating that G-suit, using only commonly available materials and simple tools.

"So, Ingrid, how did that mission go?"

"Perfectly, sir. We suffered no losses, while the Nakajima aircraft engine plant is now nearly completely destroyed. Our supporting EC-142E detected no Japanese radar emissions during our raid, showing that the Japanese have been unable to replace the radar stations we destroyed during the previous weeks. With the low level of training

and experience of most of their remaining pilots and with their lack of radars, the Japanese are mostly unable to oppose us at night. Give us another few weeks and Japanese airpower will be a thing of the past, opening Japan's skies wide to even daylight bombing raids. In another few months, Japan will be reduced to an impotent adversary with no planes, no major warships, no oil and no mineral resources left to it. Then, our Navy will be able to blockade at will the Japanese islands and starve the Japanese into submission, all at little human cost to us. What about our forces in England and Norway? Has the Eight Air Force finally adopted the new tactics President Roosevelt pushed on our 'Bomber Mafia'²⁰?"

"You mean the new tactics you pushed for via the President? Yes, it seems so, Ingrid. However, the Eight Air Force is rather slow in adapting to those tactics. The two biggest problems right now for our bomber force in Europe are the generally low level of training and experience of our aircrews, due to its past horrible loss rates, and the design of its actual heavy bombers. The B-17 and B-24 were designed according to the mission criteria of the Bomber Mafia of the 1930s and are thus too slow, too short-ranged and have too small a bombload capacity. In comparison, your A-11s are years ahead in terms of design and capabilities, as our bombing campaign against Japan is proving. What I am afraid now is that most of the production run of A-11s could be diverted to Europe, instead of continuing to replace the B-25s and RP-38s of your air wing."

Ingrid sighed in response; a bit frustrated by this situation. On one hand, she strongly wanted to reequip her air wing with the Hughes A-11 in fast bomber, photo-reconnaissance and night fighter variants, something that would make her air unit so much more potent than it already was. On the other hand, she also wanted her comrade aviators in Europe to get new planes which would help them survive in their fight against the Germans.

"Well, we really can only take care of what we are facing in the Pacific, sir. We simply can't win the war in both the Pacific and Europe just because a bunch of old fools took too long to look reality in the face."

²⁰ Bomber Mafia: Term used in WW2 to describe the old-fashioned Army Air Corps officers who were the proponents of unescorted mass heavy bomber attacks over enemy territory and who said that 'the bombers will always get through'. Most U.S. Army Air Corps senior officers belonged to that 'Bomber Mafia' at the start of WW2.

“Well, those old fools are mostly on the way out, Ingrid. While General Spaatz resigned and left the service after that May command conference in Washington, I have just been informed that General Arnold is also resigning after being severely criticized by the President. General Marshall is now looking for a replacement for Arnold and I just got an offer from him to go to Washington and replace Arnold at the head of the Army Air Force.”

Ingrid was immediately alarmed by that and she stared directly into Kenney’s eyes while speaking in a firm tone of voice.

“Don’t take that offer, sir! You are too important here in the Pacific and there is still so much left to do before Japan could be truly defeated. One big reason for my successes and that of my air wing was and still is your support for my new air tactics and operational plans. If you go to Washington, then we don’t know what kind of old schmuck would replace you at the head of the Fifth Air Force.”

“What if that ‘old schmuck’ is you, Ingrid?” replied Kenney. While he somehow had hoped that Ingrid would say ‘yes’ to that, she responded the way he had expected of her.

“Me? No way, sir! I have no wish to end up behind a desk, pushing paper and playing politics. I belong in the air, with my aviatrixes.”

Kenney nodded his head at those words, his expression sober.

“I know, Ingrid, and I wish that more people around Washington would better appreciate the full value of your service. If it can reassure you, I already sent a message to General Marshall, telling him that I am not interested to move to Washington. Hopefully, he won’t order me to take Arnold’s place.”

“I hope so too, sir.” said Ingrid, feeling a bit reassured now.

The growing noise of approaching aircraft engines then made her and Kenney look up at the eastern sky of Wards Airfield. They then saw a group of fifteen A-11Bs fast bombers, twelve F-11Ns night fighters and four A-11R photo-reconnaissance aircraft, plus four C-142A heavy transport aircraft and four C-11T fast liaison aircraft, approaching at low altitude and preparing to land. Ingrid grinned with joy at that sight.

“Here comes the girls of the Demon Girls and of the Silver Foxes, back from their familiarization training on A-11s in California, at the commands of their new planes. With them, I will now have two of my three medium bomber squadrons equipped with the A-11B, while my photo-reconnaissance unit will now be a mixed night fighter and

reconnaissance unit equipped with A-11Rs and F-11Ns. This will be worth celebrating at the mess tonight, sir.”

“That indeed calls for celebration, Ingrid.” said approvingly George Kenney, also smiling. “Decidedly, things are starting to fall into place here.”

“Yes! The Japanese better brace for even more trouble now.”

Ten days later, the U.S. Army and Navy construction units working on rebuilding the facilities at Clark Field, northwest of Manila, declared the airfield safe and ready for operational use. That allowed Ingrid to move her air wing to Clark field, which had more extensive runways and taxiways than Nichols Field and Nielson Field. That in turn allowed General Kenney to move most of his other squadrons and air groups still in Port Moresby to take the place of the Fifinellas in Nichols Field and Nielson Field, while Australian Air Force squadrons occupied the now nearly empty airfields in Papua New Guinea. This consolidation of the Fifth Air Force’s air units did a lot to improve its overall efficiency and further helped in the long, arduous fight to eliminate or neutralize what was left of the Japanese Army units still in the Philippines. Once installed at Clark Field and with the male squadrons of the Fifth Air Force taking care of dealing with the Japanese Army remnants in the archipelago and of interdicting any Japanese ship movement in the region, Ingrid was now free to fully exercise her considerable airpower directly against Japan itself.

CHAPTER 26 – MILITARY COUP



Emperor Hirohito and his family in 1936.

18:31 (Tokyo Time)

Wednesday, August 4, 1943 'C'

Emperor's private apartments, Imperial Palace

Tokyo, Japan

"Tell me the truth, my husband: are we losing this war?"

Hirohito paused for a moment at that whispered question from his wife, Princess Nagako, who was having a family supper with him and their six youngest children, the youngest one being Princess Takako, now four years-old. He finally decided to answer her, but also in a whisper, in order that his children would not hear him.

"Yes! It is only a question of time before our military becomes mostly impotent, except maybe in China. The new American planes, ships and weapons are proving superior to what we can produce and we simply can't compete with the industrial might of the United States."

"Then, what are we to do, my husband? Will we continue this war until its ultimate end?"

Hirohito perfectly understood what his wife meant by 'until its ultimate end': it was a softer way to say 'until Japan is defeated and destroyed'.

"I still don't know, Nagako. If we don't surrender soon, then the Americans will continue bombing and blockading us until our people will starve in the dark and the cold. However, surrendering would mean lasting dishonor and shame for Japan. I am not sure which one of the two is the worse. I have asked Lord Kido, the Keeper of the Seal, to quietly seek the advice of our still living elders on this question. With most of our generals and admirals now dead, I can't count anymore on the counsels of my regular Imperial General Staff."

"Why don't we simply bring our army back from China, so that we could properly defend Japan? You said that our army there is mostly intact."

"It is, for the moment, Nagako. However, it has few aircraft and even fewer ships and the Americans will undoubtedly target at once the ships used to carry our troops back from China. Those American devils have simply become too good at sinking any of our ships that they can find."

"And the British? Our people talk a lot about the Americans but I heard next to nothing about the British lately."

Hirohito snickered at that question: his wife was right about the British having shown little activity in the last few months of the war around the Pacific: they were too busy fighting the Germans in Europe to spare much of their military power in Asia and the Pacific. They had simply concentrated on blocking the Japanese advance towards India, the so-called jewel of the British imperial crown.

He was about to reply to Nagako about the British when a dense exchange of shots was heard, coming from inside the walled imperial grounds. Alarmed, Hirohito got up and gave an urgent order to his wife.

"Quick, Nagako, bring the children back to their rooms and stay there with them. I am going to see what is happening."

Nagako knew better than to dispute that order and urged her children to quickly follow her. Hirohito was still walking towards the entrance door of their dining room when it was violently pushed open by a young imperial guards officer whose left arm bled from a bullet wound.

"YOUR MAJESTY, MUTINEERS ARE ATTACKING THE PALACE. THEY MANAGED TO ENTER THE IMPERIAL GROUNDS AND ARE NOW LOOKING FOR YOU TO KILL YOU."

"WHAT? WHO ARE THEY?"

“YOUNG ARMY CADETS, YOUR MAJESTY. MY MEN ARE PRESENTLY OPPOSING THEM BUT THEY HEAVILY NUMBER US. YOU MUST FLEE THE PALACE AT ONCE WITH THE IMPERIAL FAM...”

A rifle shot then rang from close by, inside the hallway. The young officer fell dead at Hirohito's feet, to the utter shock of Hirohito. Knowing that the lives of his wife and children were now at grave risk, Hirohito bent down and grabbed the Katana saber worn by the dead guards officer, then stepped in the hallway while brandishing the saber with both hands, facing in the direction the shot came from. Maybe those mutineers would think twice before shooting at their own emperor? What he saw was at least a dozen armed young army cadet officers coming at him at a near run. The cadets stopped abruptly on seeing Hirohito, giving to the latter hope that they could still turn back.

“HALT! LEAVE MY PALACE AT ONCE OR SUFFER UNENDING DISHONOR.”

The captain leading the cadets threw a hateful look at him in response.

“YOU ARE THE ONE WHO IS BRINGING DISHONOR TO JAPAN, BY CONTEMPLATING SURRENDERING OUR COUNTRY TO THE ENEMY. FIRE!”

Before Hirohito could react to that, seven of the cadets fired a rifle volley, killing the Emperor at once. As Hirohito slumped to the floor, dead, the captain gave another order to his cadets.

“FIND THE IMPERIAL FAMILY AND KILL THEM TO THE LAST! THIS TRAITOR SHALL NOT SEE A SON SUCCEED HIM ON THE IMPERIAL THRONE.”

09:22 (Manila Time)

Friday, August 6, 1943 'C'

Fifth Air Force headquarters, Clark Field

Island of Luzon, Philippines

Lieutenant General George Kenney didn't like the expression on Ingrid's face when she walked in at a hurried pace inside his operations and planning room. Ingrid then handed him a single paper page.

“Sir, this is a translated transcript of a Japanese public radio broadcast that is now being emitted all over Japan and which my intercept specialists recorded. It announces the death of Emperor Hirohito, who was allegedly killed by one of our bombing raids on Tokyo Wednesday evening, along with his whole family. The problem

is that none of our aircraft flew over Tokyo that evening: we were busy bombing the Japanese naval base in Kure.”

Kenney quickly read the short transcript, then looked at Ingrid, obviously confused.

“Then, why would the Japanese pretend that we were the ones who killed Emperor Hirohito?”

“The reason is simple enough, sir: Japanese militarists probably murdered Hirohito and are now putting his death on us in order to firm up the resolve of the Japanese people to resist us. If General MacArthur was hoping to influence Emperor Hirohito into eventually ordering his soldiers to lay down their arms, then all possibilities of that happening just vanished.”

“Dear God! And I was starting to hope that the Japanese could soon become reasonable. General MacArthur won’t like this one bit.”

“Of that you can be sure, sir. However, this has one consequence which will impact at once our men held in Japan as slave workers. Like when we first bombed Tokyo, the Japanese may again take revenge on our people, but in an even more savage and cruel fashion. Before you ask me, no, I don’t have any plan or idea that could possibly help the Allied prisoners held in Japan: there are simply too many of them, dispersed all over Japan in locations we know too little about. Any decisions about how to react to this are anyway well above our pay grades, even that of General MacArthur. This hot potato is now Washington’s business.”

Kenney passed a hand on his face in discouragement.

“I hate to say this, Ingrid, but you are most probably correct about that.”

16:58 (Washington Time)

Monday, August 9, 1943 ‘C’

The Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt sat back in his wheelchair after finishing reading the latest intelligence briefing on the situation in the Pacific, both utterly appalled and disgusted. Then, his disgust turned into anger and he pushed a button on his intercom box, calling his military advisor, Admiral Leahy.

“Admiral, please come and see me right away in the Oval Office.”

“On my way, Mister President.”

Since Leahy's office was only a few doors down from the Oval Office, the old admiral showed up within a minute. The moment he was in, Roosevelt showed him the cover of the briefing book he had just read.

"Have you read these reports about the slaughtering of Allied prisoners by Japanese soldiers, and this across the whole Pacific and in China and Southeast Asia, Admiral?"

Leahy's expression became somber at that question and he nodded his head once.

"Yes, I have, Mister President."

"Then, how should we respond to these Japanese atrocities, in your opinion?"

Leahy took a moment before responding, obviously conflicted.

"My first, initial reaction to reading those reports about the massacres being committed by the Japanese Army was to want us to unleash Hell on Japan. Then, I received a personal message from General MacArthur on this subject. Actually, it was sent via General MacArthur's communications channels but was in reality a message written by Brigadier General Dows, the commander of the 99th Air Wing, and sent with MacArthur's consent."

"Dows? What did she have to say on this?"

"Basically, she was pleading for us to show judgment and restraint towards the Japanese people in general and to limit our attacks to legitimate Japanese military targets and to Japanese war industries. She was also pleading for the Japanese-American citizens presently interned in camps in the United States to be protected from lynch mobs when the news of these massacres will become public, which should happen fairly soon. We won't be able to censure such awful news from the American public for very long, Mister President."

"Yes, I already can see the newspapers' front pages on this. Do you have that message from Dows in your office? If yes, I would like to see it."

"I will go get it right away, Mister President."

While Leahy was returning to his office, Roosevelt's mind worked overtime, trying to figure out why an illustrious and capable officer like Dows would send a message to Washington on this awful subject. He then remembered that Dows had personally recruited a number of Japanese-American young women for her new female unit, even going directly to at least one internment camp to find and recruit those women. Leahy then came back and put a message form on Roosevelt's desk.

"Here is Dows' message, Mister President."

Taking the single sheet of paper, Roosevelt then read it slowly, in order to fully grasp its content and goals.

This message, sent to the office of Admiral Leahy, is actually meant for the President and is a personal plea from me for restraint and a measured response to the awful actions of the Japanese military against Allied prisoners held by them.

Dear Mister President.

I want first to say that the first news I got about the killing of Emperor Hirohito, which triggered this wave of massacres, came from the intercept of a public radio address made on Radio Tokyo and broadcasted across Japan. That radio intercept was actually made and translated by one of my radio intercept specialists working in my air wing's intelligence section, Sergeant Mary Takahashi. I personally recruited Mary Takahashi, along with nine other American women of Japanese descent, into my original air group during a visit I made to the Manzanar internment camp for Japanese-Americans in California in May of 1942. I say 'American women' because that is who they are, irrespective of their racial traits. Mary Takahashi, like the other Japanese-American women I recruited into my air unit, has always showed utter loyalty to the United States and has been serving in combat with courage and efficiency, flying multiple missions over enemy-held territory for over nine months now.

Next, I wish to emphasize the fact that the Japanese militarists, who more than probably were the ones who assassinated their own emperor and his family, lied to the Japanese people, both to hide their role in the death of Emperor Hirohito and to incite hatred towards us and thus harden the resolve of the Japanese people to resist us and continue the war. Then, those same Japanese militarists used that lie to justify slaughtering our military personnel and civilian citizens held by them, along with other Allied prisoners. The Japanese militarists, and particularly the officer caste of the Japanese Army, are the sole ones responsible for these latest atrocities and war crimes, which are not the first ones they have committed in this war, by far.

In view of the present events, I would urge you, Mister President, and our nation to do the following:

First, to not equate the Japanese people in general to those Japanese militarists and their supporters in charge of their war-oriented industries and to refrain from indiscriminate bombings against Japanese population centers. My air wing is presently continuing to strike at the Japanese military units we find and at legitimate Japanese industrial targets, like naval arsenals, aircraft factories and oil refineries, and will continue such strikes until Japan surrenders.

Second, to protect from lynch mobs the Japanese-American citizens presently interned on American territory and to not make what I still consider an unjust treatment of them even harsher. You just need to remember what racist lynch mobs have shown themselves to be capable of against African-Americans during the past decades in the United States to understand how very quickly things could turn ugly.

Third, about the treatment of eventual Japanese soldiers captured by us. I am as disgusted and incensed as anyone else about the atrocities being committed by Japanese soldiers around Asia and the Pacific. While we have been up to now respecting the Geneva Conventions concerning the treatment of prisoners of war, I believe strongly that the Japanese military, and particularly its Army officer caste, has placed itself outside of the international legal norms and should be considered and treated as a criminal organization unworthy of the treatment normally given to legitimate prisoners of war. I strongly believe that we should thus, as a nation, declare that Japanese soldiers and officers will no longer enjoy the protection of the Geneva Conventions and thus be accordingly shown no mercy. I also believe that the Japanese industrialists who have been supporting the Japanese military and who have been willingly employing our people imprisoned in Japan as slave labor should pay for their crimes and should not be protected in any way by us for some post-war political purpose. The list of atrocities and war crimes committed for many years by Japan in this war and in China is a long one which deserves the

harshest of punishment. I would at this time urge you, Mister President, to consult the Hourglass Files we have in Washington in order to document yourself about what the Japanese military has been doing and is still doing in this war, including the use of chemical weapons in China and the horrific 'medical' experimentations and vivisections done by their Unit 731 on Allied and Chinese prisoners in Manchuria. Such documentation should be enough of a legal justification to revoke normal Geneva Conventions rules when it comes to the treatment of Japanese Army personnel and of Japanese industrialists who have been using Allied slave labor in their factories and mines in Japan and around Asia.

Finally, I would counsel that we start a campaign of counter-propaganda aimed at the Japanese people, with the goal of unmasking the role of the Japanese militarists in the death of Emperor Hirohito. This may, at long last, convince the average Japanese citizen to stop supporting the militarists in this war.

I will conclude this message to you, Mister President, by urging you to show both resolve and justice at this time: resolve to bring just punishment to the Japanese militarists and their industrialist and political supporters; justice by ending the unjust internment of people who are American citizens victims of baseless racist fears. If you consider that latest plea as a demonstration of a lack of loyalty by me towards the United States and states so, then I am ready to present my immediate resignation as an officer of the United States military.

Yours humbly

Brigadier General Ingrid Dows

Commander of the 99th Air Wing

CMOH and Cluster, Distinguished Service Cross and two Clusters, Distinguished Service Medal and Cluster, Purple Heart, Legion of Merit, Silver Star and two Clusters, Distinguished Flying Cross and four Clusters, Bronze Star, Air Medal (7).

Roosevelt slowly put down the message on his desk and then looked up at Leahy, still waiting and standing in front of the presidential desk.

"What do you think about this message, Admiral?"

"That Dows is walking a dangerous path by sending you this message, Mister President. Any lesser officer would be court-martialed and dismissed from the service, or worse, for what many would consider as gross interference with our political chain of command."

"But she is no such 'lesser officer', Admiral." shot back Roosevelt, raising his voice, disappointed by the rigid thinking shown by his military advisor. "She has more than proven her loyalty to the United States in this war, as her decorations and successes in combat amply prove. Furthermore, she has a special knowledge and understanding of this war, through both the teachings she got from her adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante, and through her souvenirs of past incarnations. Dismissing her letter as inappropriate or even as a proof of disloyalty would be both short-sighted and stupid. I will at once follow one of her counsels and will read through the pertinent parts of our Hourglass Files concerning the war in the Pacific and Asia, then will decide our conduct towards the Japanese. Please have a copy of the Hourglass Files we are holding delivered to me as quickly as possible. In the meantime, I will veto any attempt at disciplinary action against Dows which would be done because of this message from her."

"Very well, Mister President. I will have those files brought to you before the end of the day."

"Good! Thank you for having brought that message to my attention, Admiral." Leahy saluted Roosevelt, then left the Oval Office. Thoughtful, Roosevelt then picked up his telephone and called his wife Eleanor, who was probably in her little office in the East Wing of the White House.

"Eleanor, could you please come in to the Oval Office? I have just received a message that I would like to read, so that you could give me your opinion of it... Thank you, my dear!"

Less than a minute later, his secretary announced by intercom that Secretary of State Cordell Hull wanted to see him. When Hull entered, Roosevelt immediately saw the disturbed look on his face.

"Something is wrong, Cordell?"

"You may say that, Mister President. I just got a call from the Swiss ambassador that was both astonishing and shocking. He was relaying to me a message from the

Swiss ambassador in Tokyo, who was relaying that message...from the German ambassador in Tokyo.”

“The German ambassador?!” exclaimed Roosevelt, surprised. “Why would the German ambassador in Tokyo want to send us a message?”

“It seems, Mister President, that German Ambassador Stahmer was appalled by something he saw in Tokyo. While passing by our old embassy in Tokyo, where our ambassador and his staff were being held under house arrest by the Japanese, he saw the heads of Ambassador Grew and of his diplomatic staff planted on the piked entrance gate of our embassy. Ambassador Stahmer was so shocked and disgusted by this that he then decided by himself to inform us of this via the Swiss ambassador in Tokyo.”

Roosevelt had to restrain himself not to bang his fist in anger on his desk.

“THOSE DAMN BARBARIANS!”

The President then did his best to regain his calm and looked soberly at Hull.

“Please thank Ambassador Stahmer via the Swiss, for informing us of this.”

“I will, Mister President.”

Hull was about to leave when Roosevelt took a quick decision.

“Please stay a bit more, Cordell: I have something that I would like you to see.”

Hull, curious, came back near the presidential desk and took the message handed to him by Roosevelt.

“Please read this and tell me what you think about it, Cordell. By the way, I am showing this to you in confidence.”

“I understand, Mister President.” said Hull before going to sit in a nearby chair and starting to read the message from Ingrid. Roosevelt saw him frown nearly at once, with Hull then looking up from the message he was holding.

“That young girl is quite presumptuous, to give you her advice like this, Mister President.”

“That young girl, as you called her, is a brigadier general and we have been winning the war in the Pacific during the recent months thanks mostly thanks to her and to her tactical and strategic genius, Cordell. Don’t dismiss her just because she is not a man. So, what is your fair assessment of her message to me?”

Understanding that he had to present an opinion he could defend rather than one Roosevelt would dismiss outright, Hull reread the section containing her actual advice to Roosevelt. That actually changed the initial impression his first, partial reading, had given him.

"She actually makes a number of valid points, Mister President. Ambassador Grew often told me before the war that the real power in Japan lay with the military officers and their supporters among the big industrialists and politicians. I also agree that, in view of the unspeakable atrocities committed in this war by the Japanese military, we would have a valid justification to treat them as proven war criminals and to judge them as such summarily and execute them. I doubt that few people here would protest such a measure, Mister President."

"And what do you think about her plea for us to both protect from lynch mobs and treat more fairly the Japanese-Americans presently interned in the United States, Cordell?"

"I don't know about that, Mister President. When you issued your executive order to intern all the citizens of Japanese descent because they represented a possible treat to the security of our nation, you were acting according to a legitimate concern shared by most Americans."

"Yet, according to Dows, the Japanese-American women she enrolled in her air unit have shown to be loyal to the nation in combat. Could I indeed have made a grave mistake by issuing my Executive Order 1066?"

"Again, I don't know about that, Mister President. Uh, what are those Hourglass Files she mentioned in her message?"

Roosevelt then remembered that only a few very select members of his cabinet had been given access to the Hourglass Files provided by Nancy Laplante, or even knew of their existence.

"The Hourglass Files are a set of documents brought from London by the late Canadian time traveler, Nancy Laplante, in late 1940. Those documents were in essence extracts from historical documents describing in detail this war and produced decades after our time, some as late as the year 2012. Those files also contained much priceless information and data about future technology, some of which we were able to use in order to improve our arsenal in this war."

Hull opened his eyes wide on hearing that.

"My God! I would kill to be able to read those files, Mister President. Did those files support what this Ingrid Dows says in her message?"

Roosevelt nodded his head at that question.

“They do, as far as I remember their content. I was going to review them again later today, in order to refresh my memory about a few specific points mentioned by Dows. So, you would mostly agree with her recommendations, Cordell?”

Roosevelt saw Hull do some hard thinking before he answered him.

“Yes, Mister President. I especially agree with her point about withholding the protection of the Geneva Conventions from the members of the Japanese military, especially in the case of Japanese Army officers, for their monstrous conduct during this war. You should have our Judge Advocate General formulate a legal argument in order to justify our future treatment of Japanese military personnel, Mister President.”

“I will certainly do that, Cordell. Thank you for your advice on this and for passing that information from the German ambassador in Tokyo.”

“It was my pleasure, Mister President.”

Hull then got up and left the Oval Office, leaving Roosevelt alone to think things over.

10:03 (London Time)

Tuesday, August 10, 1943 ‘C’

British Prime Minister’s office

Home Ministry building, London

England, UK

“All our men held as prisoners of war by the Japanese, dead?”

“Not only them, Mister Prime Minister.” answered Churchill’s military secretary, Lieutenant General Hasting Ismay. “The Japanese also slaughtered all the Commonwealth citizens held by them, including women and children, along with the Dutch citizens captured in the Dutch East Indies. If we count only our own citizens and soldiers, we just lost over 90,000 people. If we add to that the civilian citizens and soldiers from Commonwealth countries, that total climbs to over 200,000 killed, massacred by the Japanese.”

“And the Americans held by the Japanese? Were they also slaughtered?”

“They would have been, if not for the incredibly fast reaction of General MacArthur to the first news about those massacres and his air landings of American troops in Manila. Most of the Americans held by the Japanese in the Philippines were thus saved in the nick of time by that airborne assault, Mister Prime Minister.”

Winston Churchill shook his head in disbelief at that information.

"And I thought that MacArthur was little more than a wind bag."

"Uh, actually, General MacArthur was not the true architect of that airborne assault and, most uncharacteristically for him, he publicly said so while pointing at the true person to be credited for that quick and efficient response.

"And who was that military genius, General?"

Ismay answered by extracting a picture from the file he held and then putting it on Churchill's desk.

"None other than a young German girl whom we once held as a prisoner of war in the Tower of London, Mister Prime Minister: Nancy Laplante's adopted daughter, now known as Ingrid Dows. She is by now a Brigadier General and commands the 99th Air Wing, the Americans' only female combat air unit."

"Nooo!" said Churchill in utter disbelief. "But, wasn't she a minor then before we pardoned her and let her go in 1940?"

She certainly was, Mister Prime Minister. According to our files, she will be eighteen years-old this coming September."

"And the Americans still let her serve in combat and promoted her all the way up to the rank of brigadier general?"

Churchill's naïve reaction made Ismay smile slightly.

"It is obvious that they don't know her real age, Mister Prime Minister. Even the Germans didn't know about that when she enrolled as a Luftwaffe female auxiliary in 1940. Her real age was discovered by Nancy Laplante shortly after then Ingrid Weiss was captured in a commando raid on Wissant, on the French coast. It seems that this young girl was quite good at passing for an adult. She also apparently put to good use the teachings she got from Nancy Laplante."

Churchill examined with interest the picture Ismay had handed to him, which showed a smiling Ingrid Dows in her flying outfit and with the insignias of a full colonel on her collar.

"I remember her now. Quite an intelligent and spunky girl... Quite beautiful too."

"Uh, should we tell the Americans about her dirty little secret, Mister Prime Minister?"

"God, no! She would then be thrown out of the U.S. forces and everybody would then lose the benefits from her strategic talent. Let her be, General, and hide this little piece of information from the Americans."

CHAPTER 27 – RUNNING OUT OF TARGETS

15:35 (Manila Time)

Thursday, September 30, 1943 ‘C’

Command center of the 99th Air Wing

Clark Field, northwest of Manila

Island of Luzon, Philippines

When George Kenney entered the operations command center of the 99th Air Wing, which was next door to his own command center in Clark Field, he found **Ingrid Dows** standing next to the big map table set in the center of the room and in



apparent deep thoughts. He then walked to the map table and waited for Ingrid to react to his arrival, something that she did nearly at once by looking up at him and smiling to him. That smile warmed up Kenney but he didn't let that show up as Ingrid spoke up.

“Yes, sir? What can I do for you this afternoon?”

“Well, you could first tell me what you were thinking about, Ingrid.”

“Oh, that? I was reflecting on the fact that my air wing is running out of valid, worthwhile targets. We have destroyed pretty much every significant Japanese base, garrison, command center, aircraft, ship, supply center and war industry to be found in Japan. The surviving Japanese forces within our area of operation, including in the Philippines, are now hopelessly cut off from Japan and are without any air or sea support, while all the maritime routes between Japan and its conquered territories are effectively cut by us and by the Navy. Also, Admiral Halsey has now enough new carriers and battleships to be able to maintain a tight blockade around Japan and to continue our air bombardment of selected Japanese targets. The only worthy targets left for my planes are to be found in Malaya, Sumatra, Indochina and China, all of which do not belong to the Southwest Pacific Area of Operation. The problem is that we won't be able to completely defeat the Japanese Army until we will have destroyed its units occupying those territories, especially in China, where the Japanese started their war of conquest before they attacked us and where they still have close to one million troops. On the other hand, I have no wish to fall under the control of General Stilwell, who

controls the American forces operating in China, or that of the British. To be frank, I believe General Stilwell to be a poor strategist who is mostly busy managing the political and military intrigues between the various Chinese factions and warlords. He also happens to be a racist with a mean temper and with little regard for the welfare of his troops. It is not for nothing that he is widely called 'Vinegar Joe', sir. As for the British, they showed little efforts in Asia except for what was needed to protect India from Japanese Army advance, all the while we in the Philippines were helping them by making the Japanese bleed."

"I would tend to agree with you on those points, Ingrid. Stilwell has a much too abrasive type of character for the multi-national force he commands. As for the British, they flatly let us down in the Pacific."

"So, what was the reason for your visit, sir?"

Kenney paused, managing the effect of what he was going to say.

"I came to announce my departure from Manila, Ingrid: I was just promoted to the rank of four-star general by General Marshall and will be going to Washington to replace General Arnold at the head of the Army Air Force."

Ingrid opened her eyes wide and grinned in response to his announcement, then shook hands with Kenney.

"Well, congratulations, sir! You more than earned that promotion. Who will replace you at the head of the Fifth Air Force?"

"Major General Julian Barnes, whom you know well, is favored by General MacArthur to succeed me and will be promoted to the rank of lieutenant general for that purpose. By the way, I would like you to accompany me to Washington, to discuss with me and General Marshall the next role of your air wing, as I believe that your air wing would be best employed in a more challenging environment than what the Southwest Area has become by now. What remains of the Japanese forces in the Pacific can now be dealt with by the Navy and by our Army units."

Somehow, his request to her to go to Washington with him definitely didn't appear to enthuse Ingrid.

"Damn! I hope that General Marshall will not glue me to some desk in Washington. I also hope that he won't disperse my squadrons and air groups around other theaters: my air wing fights best when working as one entity."

"Don't worry, Ingrid: I will tell him to be sensible about how he will use you and your air wing." assured Kenney while patting gently her back.

09:16 (Washington Time)
Monday, October 4, 1943 'C'
Office of General George Marshall
The Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia
U.S.A.

The military secretary working in the anteroom of the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, General George Marshall, got up from behind her desk and saluted George Kenney and Ingrid Dows when they entered the small room.

"Good morning, sir, ma'am! General Marshall is ready to see you first, sir. Brigadier General Dows is welcome to have a coffee while waiting in this room."

"Very well!" said Kenney before looking at Ingrid. "I will try to prepare the terrain for you in advance, Ingrid."

"Thank you, sir."

As Kenney entered Marshall's office and closed the door behind him, Ingrid went to the coffee machine sitting on a corner table and poured herself a cup, then sifted through the nearby rack containing an assortment of magazines and newspapers and chose the morning's copy of the New York Times before going to sit on a sofa. She then started reading her newspaper while sipping on her coffee, as she was interested to see what were the news like on the home front. Most of the main articles dealing with the war proved to be centered on what was happening in Europe...or rather what was not happening in Europe. The one article about the Pacific front was actually comparing the quick progress done in the Pacific and around the Philippines to the costly stalemate in Europe. She was still reading the newspaper when Marshall's secretary told her that she could see the general now. Replacing the newspaper in the rack, Ingrid adjusted her wedge hat on her head and entered Marshall's office, taking a few steps in before stopping at attention and saluting Marshall, who was sitting behind his desk.

"Brigadier General Ingrid Dows, reporting as ordered, sir."

"Please sit down, General Dows." replied Marshall, his expression serious, while returning her salute. Ingrid didn't miss the fact that Marshall had not gotten on his feet to come shake hands with her. She thus sat next to Kenney on a sofa set near Marshall's desk and waited. Marshall made a point of staring at her for a moment, his hands joined and his elbows on his desk, before speaking to her in a rather cold voice.

"General Dows, I must tell you that I didn't exactly appreciate the fact that you took on you to send a personal message directly to the President, and this to give him advice on a matter of grand strategy."

"Sir, I did so with the knowledge and approval of both General Kenney and General MacArthur. My intention..."

"But you didn't pass by me. I am the one who is supposed to brief and counsel the President about Army matters, not you."

"Sir, we were facing a situation of utmost urgency which called for a quick response. Since we were not getting any official reaction or directives from Washington on that subject, General MacArthur authorized me to propose a line of action about how to react to the massacres being committed by the Japanese, sir."

"And you thought that we in Washington were not working on a response to that, General Dows?"

"What we thought in Port Moresby was that we needed a quick reaction from Washington and that it wasn't coming, sir."

"And you thought that you could think better and faster than me and my staff, General Dows?" replied Marshall, hardening his tone. Seeing where this was going, Ingrid got up from her sofa and stared back at the Army Chief of Staff.

"With all due respect, sir: yes! I know and understand better than anyone else the information on this war that my adoptive mother brought from the future and I have also proven that I am able to use that information quickly and efficiently. If General MacArthur would have waited for directives from Washington about what to do about the ongoing massacre of our people held by the Japanese after I bombed Tokyo for the first time, we would not have been able to save the tens of thousands of American men, women and children held in the Philippines. So, General MacArthur asked for my suggestions and then let me plan and direct our rescue operation, which ultimately allowed us to retake the Philippines at least a year in advance of the most optimistic operational plans we had. I am sorry, sir, but I will not apologize for thinking outside the box in order to solve an urgent problem, sir!"

That was when Kenney also got on his feet to stand next to Ingrid.

"Sir, I fully support General Dows on this, and so is General MacArthur. We were able to save over 26,000 of our people from certain death, along with at least 100,000 Filipinos, thanks to her quick, unconventional thinking. And she would be disciplined for her strategic and operational talent, sir? We need more officers like her,

General, not less. If you are going to discipline her for sending some judicious advice to the President on a matter of great urgency, then you can look for someone else as your new head of the Army Air Force, sir.”

Marshall sat back in his chair, not having expected such a backlash. He stayed silent for long seconds before finally speaking again.

“Very well, let’s forget that business of her message to the President. This leaves me with the question of what to do with her air wing. Where should it go and what should it do then?”

“Sir, as your new commander of the Army Air Force, I believe that this would be my decision to take, sir.”

“True!” recognized Marshall. “So, what are you proposing about her wing, General Kenney?”

“Sir, while me and Dows discussed that subject during our air trip from the Pacific, I would need to see the operational reports from Europe and from the China-Burma-India theater, to see where General Dows and her 99th Air Wing would be most useful. I however believe that the CBI theater would not be the best place for the 99th Air Wing, for many reasons.”

“Which are?” asked Marshall.

“I would start with our American commander in China, Lieutenant General Stilwell, sir. He has been alienating everybody there, be they Chinese or British, with his insults, racist remarks and utter disregard for the welfare of his soldiers. How do you think that he will treat an all-female air combat unit placed under his command, sir? There is also the matter of the extensive graft and corruption rampant across the Chinese government and armed forces, plus the fact that the Nationalist Chinese of Chiang Kai-shek spend about as much time fighting the Chinese Communists as they do fighting the Japanese. I believe that sending the 99th Air Wing to China would be a waste of a fine combat unit.”

“Alright, what about Europe, then?”

“Europe it could be, sir, but I would use the 99th Air Wing there the way I used it in Papua New Guinea: I would give it a mission and a number of general objectives, then would let General Dows do her magic and let her fight her wing the way she thinks best to do, irrespective of what tactics and strategies the Eight Air Force or the RAF Bomber Command employs. To be frank, I am still not sure that our bomber leaders in England

have fully understood their lessons, if I judge by their still high casualty rates and low bombing efficiency, sir.”

Marshall's eyes narrowed and he then looked at Ingrid.

“And how would you do things over Europe, General Dows?”

“First, I would abandon this business of big bomber packages lumbering at high altitude and dropping their bombs ‘on command’ instead of individually using their Norden bombsights, sir. I would go in with multiple small groups of no more than four bombers penetrating enemy-held territory at low altitude and high speed while supported by radar-jamming aircraft and by escort fighters. Bomb release would be from no higher than 2,000 feet, to ensure maximum accuracy, and each aircraft packet would approach their objectives from different directions, in order to confuse the enemy and prevent him from concentrating his fire. If the weather is acceptable, then they would attack at night, using the night vision devices equipping the planes of my air wing, something that would further degrade the enemy defenses. I call all this ‘raider tactics’. As for the objectives themselves, I would continue the policy I was following in the Pacific: to cut the head of the serpent rather than trying to cut its tail.”

“But the RAF and the Eight Air Force already have a strategic bombing plan, with the target type priorities set by that plan. If you play lone ranger over Europe, you will create utter confusion with their plan.”

“Sorry to say this sir, but my answer to that is: screw their strategic bombing plan! To date, our strategic air planners in England have proven to have the tactical and strategic talents of a can of sardines. Take for example Major General Anderson, the present chief of operations of the Eight Air Force. He sent unescorted a big pack of B-17s at high altitude to go bomb an industrial target in Germany and lost over twenty percent of his bombers, with meager results. What did he do a week later? He again sends a big pack of unescorted B-17s flying high against the same objective and lost another 22 percent of his bombers. And I am supposed to obey the directives of such an idiot and send my aviatrixes to be needlessly slaughtered? No thank you! If you want the same results as I got in the Pacific, then let me loose over Europe and the Nazis will cry ‘uncle’, sir. However, if you order me to have my aircrews follow to the letter the tactics decided by the higher command in England, then I am ready to present my immediate resignation from the Army Air Force, sir.”

Marshall sat back again in his seat, impressed by the firm and direct answer from Ingrid, while George Kenney had to repress a smile before defending Ingrid again.

“Sir, I strongly believe that the best way to employ General Dows and her 99th Air Wing in Europe would be to use them as a special operations air unit dedicated to strike specific enemy command centers, airfields, naval bases and other high-value military targets. One way I will definitely not use them would be to bomb German cities the way the British do right now. In fact, I fully intend to prohibit such mass city bombing raids by our bombers, sir. In the Pacific, I never condoned or ordered the area bombing of Japanese cities and I will continue to follow that policy in Europe. Let’s continue to target only military or war industries targets, sir.”

Marshall was again silent for long seconds before replying to Kenney.

“Your suggestion has merits, General Kenney, and I would agree that General Dows and her air wing would be the best to implement such a concept. I thus approve your idea. General Arnold is waiting for you in his office, so that you could conduct a proper change of command procedure. Once you are officially in place, then your first task will be to arrange the transfer of General Dows and of her complete air wing to the European Theater of Operations. However, I realize that the women of the 99th Air Wing have been continuously in combat on the frontlines for over a year now. They would thus richly deserve a long leave period in the States before they move to Europe. That would also allow us to replace its worn equipment and replenish its personnel list during their leave period. General Dows, good luck to you and your aviatrixes in Europe. Dismissed!”

Kenney and Ingrid saluted Marshall again, then pivoted on their heels and walked out of his office. Once out on the hallway of that section of the Pentagon, Ingrid allowed herself to blow air out in relief.

“God, I thought that General Marshall was going to simply relieve me on the spot without listening to my arguments.”

“You effectively risked big by holding your ground against him, Ingrid. Many officers I know would simply have folded in a similar case.”

“But I am not a run-of-the-mill officer and never will be, George, and you know it.”

“And that is why I like to have you as my subordinate, Ingrid. Well, let’s go and try to find General Arnold’s office in this big monstrosity called ‘The Pentagon’.”

To do that, they needed to ask their way to a couple of passing officers before they arrived at the section of the building housing the command offices of the United

States Army Air Force. There, a greying master sergeant led them to Arnold's office, where they found him sitting and waiting on a sofa next to his work desk. Ingrid was immediately struck by how much older he now looked, with deep pockets under his eyes and a tired look. Arnold got up at their arrival and saluted them back before coming to shake hands with both Kenney and Ingrid.

"Welcome back in Washington. You two have been doing a fantastic job in the Pacific, particularly with your retaking of the Philippines and the saving of all our people there. Now, you will be able to apply your magic in Europe. General Marshall just phoned me to inform me of the decisions he took concerning you."

Arnold then looked directly at Ingrid with what appeared to be regret.

"I wish that I could have continued to follow your exploits in the air, Ingrid, but my time to go has come. If anything, I now realize how much I needed to rest from this continued high stress from my command responsibilities."

"And I am sure that your wife will be equally pleased to see you being able to relax, sir," replied Ingrid, meaning it. "You always treated me and my aviatrixes right and it is only just that you treat yourself right at last, sir."

"Thank you, Ingrid."

Arnold was silent for a second before asking her a question in a soft tone.

"You are such an exceptional combat officer, Ingrid. I truly hope that you will continue going up the command ladder. Are you planning to stay in the Army Air Force after this war?"

"I don't know yet, sir. I love flying but I am getting truly tired of all this killing. One thing I would like to do after the war would be to study and obtain a degree in aeronautical engineering: I find the prospect of designing new aircraft as attractive than that of continuing to fly, sir."

"And you will certainly be able to do such studies with the help of the new G.I. Bill. One thing you could do would be to transfer to our reserves forces while studying for your degree. You could thus continue flying part-time while in university."

"That is an excellent suggestion, sir. I will certainly try to follow it, sir."

"Good! Now, to go on with my last day in office. General Kenney, approach my desk, please. I have prepared for your signature the documents concerning this change of command. General Dows, you may stay and look on while we do this."

"Thank you, sir."

That informal change of command ceremony took only a few minutes, after which Arnold and Kenney shook hands and exchanged salutes before Arnold led Kenney and Ingrid out of his office, to tour his command's offices and present them to his staff officers and NCOs. Just as that tour was about to be concluded, Arnold sprung a surprise on them and, calling Ingrid to attention in front of his staff, then took a small box out of one pocket while facing her.

"Brigadier General Dows, I truly wanted to conclude my time in command of the Army Air Force with what I will now do: to promote you to the temporary rank of major general. Your outstanding combat leadership and service deserves no less, unless of course General Kenney would object to this."

"Me? Hell no, General! Please proceed." replied a happy Kenney.

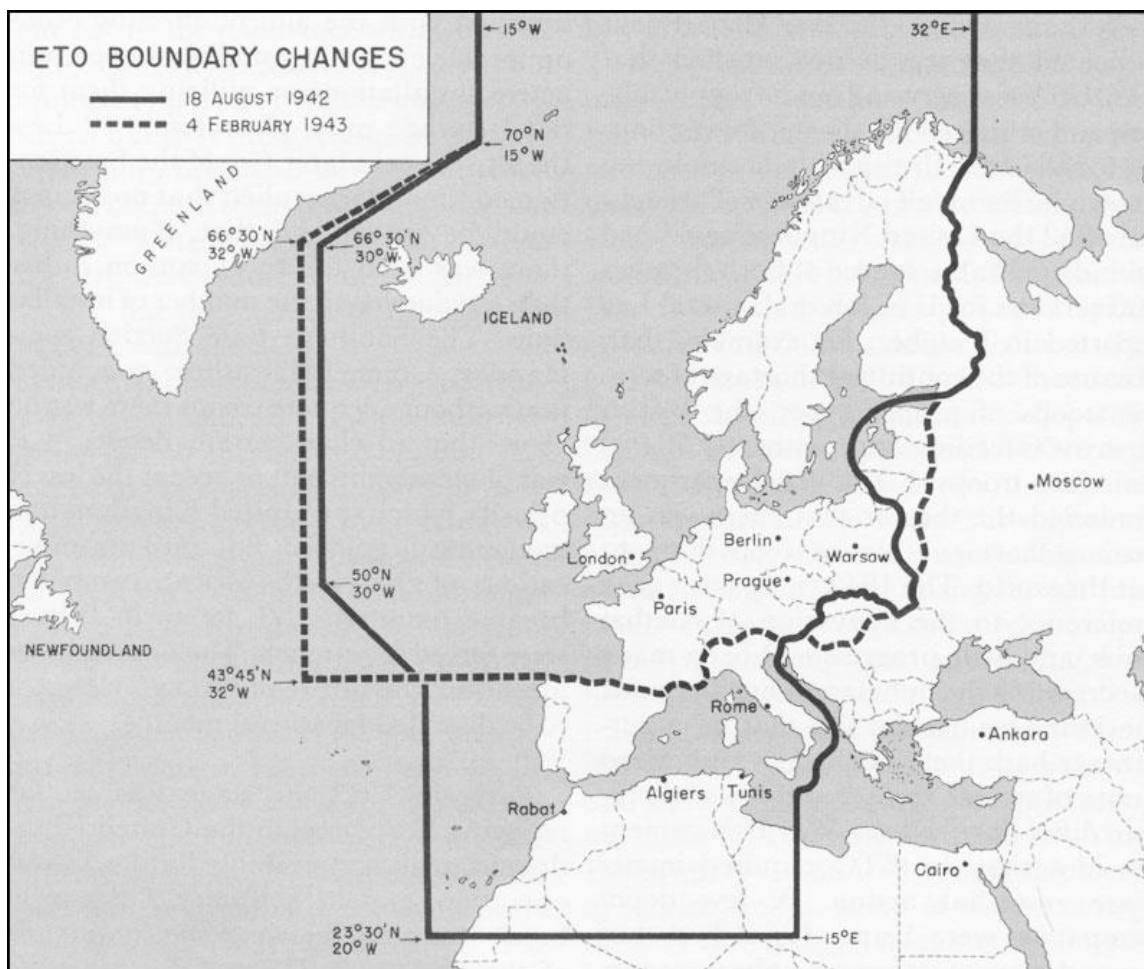
"Then, help me here to replace her rank insignias."

Blood rushed to Ingrid's head as the two four-star generals worked together to replace her single-star insignias of brigadier general with the two-star insignias of a major general, with the onlooking staff members applauding and cheering at the end of it as Arnold shook hands with Ingrid.

"The way I know you, you are likely to get into verbal scrapes with other, more traditional and conservative general officers in Europe. Better for you to do so as a major general. Again, congratulations, Major General Dows."

"Thank you, sir." said Ingrid, not believing her luck.

CHAPTER 28 – EUROPEAN THEATER OF OPERATIONS



17:08 (GMT)

Friday, December 10, 1943 'C'

RAF Charmy Down (USAAF Station AAF 487)

4.8 kilometers north-northeast of the city of Bath

County of Somerset, England



Ingrid was happy to finally land on one of the three asphalt runways of the British airfield of RAF Charmy Down, also designated for security reasons as USAAF Station AAF-487: she was anxious to be able to go relieve herself after her long transatlantic flight from Saint-John's, Newfoundland. No doubt that the other female pilots of her mixed formation of Lockheed P-38NCs and Hughes A-11Rs, F-11Ns and C-11T would also be anxious to visit a bathroom once on the ground. The only women of her

formation who would be alright in that aspect were the aircrews of her four EC-142E flying command posts, six AC-142G heavy gunships and six C-142A heavy cargo aircraft carrying her ground equipment and vehicles, who benefitted from full bathroom and crew facilities aboard their big aircraft.

As per her usual practice, Ingrid waited for all the other planes of her formation of 44 aircraft to have landed before landing herself dead last on the longest runway of RAF Charmy Down, a typical British World War 2 Class 'A' airfield with three runways forming an 'A' and with a perimeter track with dispersal points along it. Her P-38NC then taxied along the perimeter track, behind one of her C-142A cargo aircraft, and was directed by a flag-waving guide to one of the dispersal loops, where she was able to cut her engine and step out of her cockpit. Thankfully, there was on one side of the dispersal loop a small open-air latrine made of a portable toilet seat surrounded by a privacy curtain made of heavy canvass, which she ran to at once. When she emerged from behind the latrine canvas curtain, she found a RAF officer and a jeep with driver waiting for her. The British officer, a squadron leader wearing the wings of a bomber pilot on his jacket, saluted her at attention while keeping his balance with the help of a cane.

"Welcome to RAF Charmy Down, General. I am Squadron Leader Frederic Wharton, in charge of the caretaker unit of this airfield, and I am ready to guide you and your aircrews around."

Ingrid returned his salute, then pointed at Wharton's cane.

"I suppose that you were wounded during a mission, Squadron Leader Wharton?"

Wharton nodded his head at her question.

"Yes, General! I was wounded during a bombing raid on Hamburg but was able to fly my damaged aircraft back to England. Unfortunately, the wound to my left leg resulted in a permanent disability, so I was put on the non-flying roster list."

"And how bad is that disability, Mister Wharton?"

"I will be limping for the rest of my life, General. However, I can count myself lucky to have returned alive to my wife and kids: many others were not so lucky."

"Well, even if you can't fly anymore, you certainly can still be useful to the war effort, like in this case. Me and my aircrews and ground personnel will certainly need

your caretaker unit in order to find our way around this base. By the way, are all of the facilities on this airfield functional?"

"They are, General. We have fully functional mess and dining facilities, accommodations for up to 400 personnel and thirteen hangars. Our only limitation is in terms of cooking staff. Presently, we have only three local cooks available, who were preparing the food for my caretaker unit and for the army anti-aircraft battery protecting this aerodrome."

"And how many guns are protecting Charmy Down, Squadron Leader Wharton?"

"We have a total of six 40 mm Bofors guns and four .50 caliber heavy machine guns around the airfield, General. Uh, I notice that your airplane seems to be a new model of the Lockheed P-38. In fact, all of your aircraft which just landed are of models I never saw before, General."

Ingrid proudly smiled as she answered Wharton.

"That is because my unit, the 99th Air Wing, is equipped with the latest models of aircraft available in the United States. My personal aircraft is a P-38NC, the latest variant of the P-38 LIGHTNING, with which my fighter squadrons were just reequipped after their arrival from the Philippines. The P-38NC is even more formidable than its predecessor, the P-38N, with a top speed of 480 miles per hour and an armament of four 20 mm cannons, plus two retractable rocket pods with a total of twelve five-inch rockets and five weapons pylons."

Wharton opened his mouth wide on hearing the speed she had quoted.

"Four hundred and eighty miles per hour? But that's faster than any of our latest fighters, General. You should be able to make a killing in the skies of Europe."

Ingrid grinned and took one step to the right before pointing at the nose of her aircraft, which sported a total of 107 miniature Japanese flags painted on its side.

"I already have been making quite a lot of killing during the past two years in the Pacific, Mister Wharton. You also may find that my pilots are no beginners in this war. Now that we are in England, the Germans better brace themselves."

"And I will be happy to cheer for you from the sidelines, General. Do you have some personal effects in your aircraft that I could put in my jeep before we drive you to your quarters?"

"I do! Give me a minute."

Walking around her aircraft, she went to the small stowage compartment situated in the right-side boom of her P-38NC and extracted from it a kit bag and a leather briefcase,

then went to her cockpit and pulled out from behind her pilot seat a suits bag, her M2A2 carbine and her old Springfield 1903 rifle. Wharton opened big eyes on seeing the two long guns and her pistol holster, strapped to her upper right leg.

“Dear God! You are as heavily armed as a commando soldier, General.”

“And all of my weapons were actually used to kill Japanese soldiers during ground fighting, Mister Wharton. We will roll as soon as I will have put my things in your jeep.”

One minute later, the jeep's driver was rolling out of the dispersal loop and speeding down the perimeter track, heading towards a group of buildings centered around the control tower of the airfield. As it did so, the jeep passed by the now occupied dispersal loops situated to the sides of the track, with Ingrid taking that opportunity to briefly name and describe the types of planes they were passing by. While Wharton was greatly impressed by all of them, the RAF officer sucked air in and opened his eyes wide when they start rolling by the lone Hughes C-11T SEAGULL that had flown in with Ingrid's armada, a plane with grateful, slick lines.

“My God! What a beauty!”

“The Hughes C-11T SEAGULL transoceanic fast liaison transport aircraft is indeed a beautiful plane, Squadron Leader Wharton. It is the fast passenger transport variant of the Hughes A-11, which I have in bomber, photo-reconnaissance and night fighter variants as parts of my air wing. The C-11T was designed to be a very fast, very long range 16-seat transport dedicated to V.I.P. transport and medical evacuation over the Pacific. Its top speed is 505 miles per hour, with its normal cruising speed being 460 miles per hour and with a range of 6,500 miles with two tons of passengers and luggage. Its cabin and cockpit are also pressurized and it can climb to an altitude of 46,000 feet.”

“But it is faster than our jet fighter, the Gloster METEOR. How could this plane achieve such performances?”

“The answer is simple: powerful engines, careful aerodynamic profiling and good design which incorporates lessons imported from the future by Nancy Laplante. With this plane, our wounded will be able to be flown to treatment in the United States in less than seven hours, with no mid-way refueling stop.”

What Ingrid didn't say was that the British could have produced a much better jet aircraft than their Gloster METEOR if they would have fully embraced the counsels given to them by Nancy Laplante. Alas, as they had done too often before, the British had let

their conservatism get the better of themselves, thus resulting in a jet fighter that was actually slower than the fastest British piston-engine fighter already in service, the Supermarine SPITFIRE XIV, capable of a top speed of 448 miles per hour.

After rolling down half of the length of the perimeter track, the jeep stopped in front of a low brick building situated next to the airfield's control tower, on the north side of the base.

"This is the command building of the airfield, General. Your quarters are inside it, next to the operations center and communications section. There are also three more rooms for senior officers in the same building. My driver will help you carry your luggage."

"You are too kind, Squadron Leader Wharton." replied a satisfied Ingrid, who was liking the setup at RAF Charmy Down. With six other RAF airfields in Southwest England due to be occupied by her air wing during this coming weekend, her air wing should be able to start flying missions over Europe within a week.

16:11 (GMT)

Sunday, December 12, 1943 'C'

RAF Aston Down, 10 kilometers south-east of the city of Stroud

County of Gloucestershire, England

"GIRLS, COME IN, QUICK, AND WATCH THOSE FANTASTIC MACHINES COMING IN."

The dozen or so female pilots from the RAF Air Transport Auxiliary (A.T.A.) Service who were inside their unit mess rushed to the windows at that call from one of their own. What they saw then were dozens of helicopters lining up for landing along the sides of the airfield's perimeter track. Prominent among those helicopters were 27 AH-4 HORNET attack helicopters, with their long 20 mm cannons mounted in mini-turrets under the chin of the AH-4s. Another twenty helicopters of differing models were also in the process of landing at the vertical, while six C-142A heavy cargo aircraft were landing conventionally on the longest runway of RAF Aston Down.

"Those must be from the American 99th Air Wing, parts of which were supposed to be based here." said one of the British women. Another woman then added to that.

“That’s supposed to be an all-female unit, girls. What do you say that we go out and greet our American sisters?”

“Great idea! GET YOUR COATS, GIRLS: IT’S COLD OUTSIDE.”

Eleven British female A.T.A. pilots ended up running outside as most of the incoming helicopters were now on the ground and cutting their engines. Since AH-4s were the nearest machines to the A.T.A. building, the British women naturally approached the attack helicopters first but stayed at a safe distance until their rotors stopped turning. By then, women of the ‘Black Widows’ were starting to climb down from their machines. The first British woman to have spotted the helicopters, Mary Bailey, approached an AH-4 with the name ‘WONDER WOMAN’ painted on its side, under the cockpit. However, there were also five small ship silhouettes and names painted under the cockpit, along with two images of tanks. Mary’s jaw dropped when she read the names next to the images and recognized what they designated.

“This helicopter crew sank the Japanese heavy cruiser TAKAO, a KAGERO-Class destroyer and three Japanese cargo ships, on top of destroying two tanks? Wow! These girls are real pros.”

Mary then approached the two women who had just set foot on the grass, intent on greeting them to Aston Down. She however froze on recognizing the tall woman who had come down from the front cockpit section.

“Miss Katharine Hepburn, is that really you?”

The actress grinned widely in response while looking at Mary.

“Last time I checked, I was me. Captain Katharine Hepburn, of the ‘Hornets’, the 7771st Attack Helicopter Squadron. We came from the Pacific to here to kick German ass.”

20:13 (Montana Time)

Thursday, December 23, 1943 ‘C’

The ‘Crawford’s Nest Ranch’, Havre, Montana

U.S.A.

John Crawford was reading his newspaper on a sofa of his ranch’s lounge, with his wife Joan listening to music on their radio, when their son Patrick and their daughter

Marilyn showed up at the entrance of the lounge, their expressions most serious. Joan, who saw them first, felt apprehension on seeing their expressions.

"Something is wrong, children?"

Marilyn, who was the oldest of the two at nineteen, looked at her with some reprobation.

"We are not children anymore, Mom: I am nineteen, while Patrick just turned eighteen. We actually came to see you and Dad to announce to you that we decided to enroll in the Army."

While Joan stiffened with alarm on hearing that, John put down his newspaper and got up from his sofa, to then walk to his two oldest children.

"You are serious about this, Marilyn? Did you think this well before taking that decision?"

"Yes, Dad! I want to serve my country, like many other women already do."

"And what convinced you to take such a decision, Marilyn? Ingrid's example?"

"Not really, Dad." replied the tall brunette teenager. "Yes, I admire what Ingrid is doing in this war but what decided me were all those stupidities I keep hearing at school and in town, along with the hypocrisy of the people in Havre. Those matrons and old fossils in Havre spend their time poo-pooing Ingrid and the other women who are fighting in this war, saying that they should instead return to more appropriate roles in their homes, but none of those assholes have had the guts to go themselves serve at the front. I basically told that to the editor-in-chief of the Havre Daily News, where I work part-time as an assistant photographer, when he criticized Ingrid in my presence. I told him clearly what I thought of his hypocrisy before quitting my job and slamming the door behind me on my way out. I am frankly tired of hearing all those idiocies and I want to stop feeling like I am hiding here while other girls do their duties to the United States."

John stared for a moment at his eldest daughter, then looked at his eldest son.

"And you, Patrick? Why do you want to enroll now?"

"I also want to do my part in this war, Dad, like Marilyn. I hope that you and Mom will respect my decision and will support it."

John passed an arm around his wife's shoulders as he eyed his two eldest children, his mind in turmoil. Joan's hand then pressed his hand, passing a silent message. He looked at his wife, who nodded her head, then looked back at his two children, containing his emotions with difficulty.

"Marilyn, Patrick, we understand and accept your decision. You are making me proud, both of you."

Both him and Joan then hugged tightly their two children, with Joan being near tears. Seeing that, Patrick hugged his mother while talking to her in a soft voice in order to reassure her.

“Don’t worry, Mom: I will be alright.”

“And...what specialty will you ask to serve in, Patrick?”

“I don’t know yet, Mom. I will see what they will offer me in Havre.”

“And you, Marilyn? What do you want to do in the Army?”

“I studied photography and know how to run a photo lab. I will ask to serve as a photo technician in the Army Air Force, which is said to use a lot of such photo technicians.”

Joan felt a bit reassured by that answer from Marilyn: at least her daughter was probably going to serve at a relatively safe distance from the frontlines in such a specialty. John then put his hands on the shoulders of his two children and smiled to them.

“We will go together after Christmas to the Army recruitment office in Havre. It will then probably take a few days after that before you will depart for your military training. That will give us a chance to prepare a little departure party for you two.”

09:15 (GMT)

Tuesday, December 21, 1943 ‘C’

Ninth Air Force headquarters, RAF Middle Wallop

County of Hampshire, Southern England

With RAF Middle Wallop being in the **county of Hampshire**, next to the counties where her air groups were now based, Ingrid’s flight to the headquarters of the Ninth Air Force in a UH-1 helicopter had taken only a bit more than thirty minutes before she landed in the grassy area near the headquarters building. This morning, she was accompanied by her air group commanders, Teresa James,

Betsy Ferguson, Helen Richey, Betty Huyler and Phylis Burchfield, plus had brought as well her second in command, Evelyn Sharp, and her wing’s intelligence officer, Jenny Kawena. Her UH-1 was thus full to capacity when she landed at RAF Middle Wallop. With the actual local temperature being above freezing point, the grassy expanse that was used to land and take off aircraft was free of snow when they landed, although the wind that was blowing was quite cold, making the eight women, who had spent the last



few months in a tropical climate, shiver in their army trench coats, which they wore over their going-out uniforms. Walking quickly to the main entrance of the headquarters building, the group presented itself to the duty officer in charge of the armed sentries posted at the door. The young lieutenant got up from behind his control desk and saluted Ingrid at attention.

“Good morning, ma’am! May I see your military identity cards, please?”

“Of course, Lieutenant. We are here to see Lieutenant General Brereton.” replied Ingrid while saluting back, before producing her identity card, imitated by her subalterns. The duty officer examined their cards, then returned them before grabbing his telephone receiver in order to announce the visitors. After a few seconds, he put down his receiver and smiled to Ingrid.

“If you will follow me, ladies.”

Following the young duty officer, Ingrid and her group were soon introduced in the operations room of the Ninth Air Force, where she saw Lieutenant General Brereton standing next to a large map table, along with a Hispanic-looking major general. Brereton, who knew Ingrid well from her time in the Philippines, smiled and walked to greet her halfway with a strong handshake.

“Ingrid, it is really nice to be able to see you again and even nicer to know that you will again be serving under me. Come to the map table, so that I could present you and your officers to Major General Elwood Quesada, the commander of my fighter command.”

Walking quickly back to the map table, Brereton then presented Ingrid to Quesada.

“Elwood, this is the legendary ‘Lady Hawk’, our Ace of aces, Major General Ingrid Dows.”

Quesada, while shocked by Ingrid’s obscene youth for her rank of two-star general, nonetheless shook hands with her.

“You have quite a reputation, you and your air wing, General Dows.”

“Bof, you know what they say about reputations: they are mostly overblown...except in our cases.”

The group had a quick laugh at that before Ingrid presented her officers.

“May I present first my wing’s second-in-command, Colonel Evelyn Sharp? Also with me are my air group commanders, Lieutenant colonels Teresa James, Helen

Richey, Betsy Ferguson, Betty Huyler and Phylis Burchfield. Finally, here is Major Jenny Kawena, my wing's intelligence officer."

Brereton and Quesada had a round of handshakes, both paying particular attention to the exotic beauty of Hawaiian-born Jenny Kawena, before Ingrid handed an envelope to Brereton.

"General Kenney, our new Army Air Force commander, tasked me to hand to you this letter concerning me and my air wing, sir."

Brereton nodded his head while accepting the envelope and starting to open it.

"It probably is the written version of the private secure telephone call I got from him two weeks ago. In essence, he was proposing that, due to the composite nature of your air wing, you should serve directly under me as my strategic reserve and special operations unit. After seeing what you were able to accomplish in the Philippines when left free to use your initiative, I agreed at once to his suggestion. By the way, at how much is now your air victory score, Ingrid?"

"A cool 108, sir, and I can guarantee you that my imagination is as fertile as ever. In fact, I have been tinkering about an operation plan which could make the Germans shit bricks."

"I like plans that can do that, Ingrid." replied Brereton with a smile. "Tell me about it."

"With pleasure, sir. Basically, I was thinking about a variant of my strategic decapitation strike I used against the Japanese high command in Tokyo, but with a political twist."

"A political twist? What do you mean by that, Ingrid?" asked Brereton, mystified. Ingrid then took a few minutes to explain her plan and its specific goals, leaving both Brereton and Quesada open-mouthed.

"I would call my plan 'Operation Guillotine', sir." said Ingrid as she finished to expose her idea. Elwood Quesada wrung his left hand at that.

"That's a damn appropriate name for such a devilish plan, Dows. The question is: can you truly succeed in its execution? You are talking about a number of heavily defended and fortified objectives there."

"The critical part of my plan is actually how accurate and up to date our intelligence about the German leadership will prove to be, sir. If our info proves correct and if the timing is right, then we may be able to shorten this war by months or even a year. I mention the timing because we are now close to Christmas and the New Year, a

period of time when pretty much everyone who can will be away from their normal locations. On the other hand, waiting after the New Year to initiate my plan will give us time to review the intelligence we have at hand, which is the main reason I brought Major Kawena with me today. I also came to get..."

One of Brereton's senior operations officers, a lieutenant colonel, then came to their group, a catastrophed expression on his face, interrupting their conversation.

"Excuse me, General, but I have General Doolittle on the phone, asking urgently for help. Our big bomber raid on the Messerschmitt aircraft factory near Munich has hit something new and deadly, a sort of guided anti-aircraft rocket. Despite their escort fighters, our bombers are taking very heavy losses, sir."

"Uh, excuse me for a moment, Ingrid." said Brereton before quickly following the staff officer towards the battery of telephones lined on a long table in a corner of the room. That left Ingrid and her officers looking with concern at each other.

"A guided anti-aircraft rocket?" said Betty Huyler, mystified. "Would you know something about that, Ingrid?" Ingrid thought for a moment before she suddenly seemed to think of something.



"The **V4-A5 WASSERFALL!** In Nancy's history, the Germans developed late in the war, around 1945, an anti-aircraft variant of their V2 ballistic missile with a crude radio-command guidance system operated by a ground controller. If the Germans have indeed developed such a missile this early, then it would be a very bad news for our bomber force and the British bomber force."

"And is there a way to counter that missile, Ingrid?" asked a worried Betsy Ferguson, while Elwood Quesada was listening carefully to the exchange.

"We could possibly jam its guidance link...if we knew more about it. The one thing we could do right now against it would be to fly low: the WASSERFALL was mostly ineffective at low altitude due to its guidance mode. Teresa, call your fighter group at RAF KEEVIL and tell it to prepare for an emergency long-range escort mission into Southern Germany. Call as well RAF Charmy Down and tell our ground crews there to prepare the three P-38NCs of our wing command element, plus one of our EC-142Es, for a combat mission over Germany. We are going to fly back to our respective bases, so that we could fly out with our fighters."

As Teresa James ran to one of the available telephones, Elwood Quesada questioned Ingrid's intentions.

"General, your aircrews only recently arrived in England and have not been briefed yet about the German air defense network. You could lose a lot of planes by rushing headlong into Germany like this."

"There is no such thing as a war without risks, General Quesada. Our bomber boys are in trouble and it is our duty to help them as much as we can. As soon as General Brereton will be finished speaking with General Doolittle, I will ask for his permission to let us go help our bombers."

Maybe a minute later, Brereton returned to the side of Ingrid and Quesada, his expression somber.

"General Doolittle says that his bombers are being cut to shreds over Munich by those guided rockets, while German fighters, including a few Messerschmitt 262 jet fighters, are also harassing our planes. He is asking for fighter escort reinforcements to at least cover our bombers on the return trip portion over France."

"General, my fighter group commander is already calling our airfields to scramble our P-38NCs and one EC-142E in order to support our bombers. Do you have any objections to that, sir?"

Brereton gave her a sharp look before nodding his head.

"Proceed with that, Ingrid. From what General Doolittle told me, his bombers truly need all the help that they can get right now. General Quesada will go get you the necessary list of radio frequencies and callsigns to be used to contact our bombers."

"I'm on it, sir!" replied Quesada before walking away at a quick step. Brereton then looked at Ingrid, hoping that her uncommon knowledge about this war would help them now.

"Do you know something about this German guided rocket, Ingrid?"

"I do, sir!" answered Ingrid before telling Brereton what she knew about the V4-A5 WASSERFALL. As soon as she finished telling him what she knew on that subject and had gotten a list of radio frequencies and callsigns from Quesada, she excused herself with Brereton, then ran out with her officers to return to her helicopter. A minute later, she was taking off and speeding towards the West-Northwest and RAF Charmy Down.

Once at Charmy Down, Ingrid stepped out of the UH-1 with Evelyn Sharp, Betsy Ferguson and Jenny Kawena, leaving the light helicopter in the hands of Teresa James, Helen Richey and Betty Huyler, so that they could get back to their respective airfields. Running inside her headquarters building, Ingrid went to her room to change quickly from her going-out uniform to her wool-lined leather flight suit and boots, which were more appropriate for flying at high altitude over Europe, especially in December. Another five minutes and she was ready to jump in her P-38NC. Checking first that her fighters and the EC-142E assigned to this mission were ready to go and also getting the list of relevant callsigns and frequencies, she took off, followed by the P-38NCs of Evelyn Sharp and Evelyn Hudson and by the EC-142E piloted by Kathryn Bernheim, in which Jenny Kawena had climbed aboard. Once at medium altitude and climbing, she made a radio call to her planes.

“To all Fifinellas, from Lady Hawk: form up on me over Upavon. We will then speed eastward in formation at 330 knots and at an altitude of 35,000 feet. Oracle One, once we will pass the English coast, you will switch to the alternate language when speaking with me. Get updates on the big boys while we will fly. Lady Hawk, out!” Concentrating back on her flying and navigation, Ingrid thought about what was happening to the heavy bombers of the Eight Air Force sent to Munich this morning. While they were now being escorted by fighters all the way to their targets in Germany, contrary to their past practices which had cost them so dearly, it seemed that the leaders of the Eight Air Force still sent their bombers in dense packs and at high altitude, obstinately refusing to drastically change their methods. Something needed to change, drastically, after this new failure. If Eight Air Force leaders refused to do so, then General Kenney was going to need to do some serious cleanup among those senior commanders.

Ingrid and the fifty other P-38NCs she was leading were passing the southeast coast of England when she got a call in Japanese from Jenny Kawena, aboard the EC-142E providing her with radar coverage and electronic jamming.

“Lady Hawk, this is Oracle One. The news about the big boys are not good. They have now turned away from their objective and are on their way back but are constantly under either fighter or missile attack. Their escort fighters have now all turned around and left, out of ammunition and short on fuel. The big boys are thus presently alone over Germany. Their last position was just northeast of Ulm but they are slowed

down by many bombers having been damaged and are doing only 150 knots, in order to keep a protective box around their lame ones. At that speed, the Germans will have all the time to send successive waves of fighters at our big boys and to prepare their flak units in advance of their passage, over.”

“Is the Ninth sending some small boys to help, over?”

There was a distinct pause before Jenny Kawena answered that question.

“The small boys from the Ninth went with the big boys of the Eight, as extra protection. They are now on their way back, short on fuel and out of ammunition. The battle was apparently quite ferocious, over.”

It was Ingrid’s turn to pause. The Eight Air Force already had multiple fighter groups under its Eight Fighter Command. With the fighters from the Ninth Air Force added to them, that would have made for an escort force of over 600 fighters for the bombers sent to Munich, yet that had apparently not been enough. The implications of this were downright alarming.

“Message acknowledged, Oracle One. Keep guiding us towards the big boys and be ready to jam the German radars as needed. Lady Hawk out!”

In ‘Oracle One’, Jenny Kawena went to the electronic warfare station, where Hedy Lamarr was watching the radio and radar frequencies used by the Germans stationed along the French coast on the Pas de Calais.

“So, do the Germans have many radars active along the French coast, Hedy?”

“Are you kidding, Jenny? There are enough electro-magnetic waves in the air to fry an egg in seconds. I will soon need to start jamming two of the nearest radar stations, whose signals are presently at close to detection level.”

“Feel free to jam any radar that you judge as dangerous to us, Hedy. We are going to open a door to let our fighters enter French and then German airspace with the minimum of opposition. Keep an eye as well for any strange or unusual signal which may be associated with that new German surface-to-air missile.”

“What’s the name of that missile again?”

“The V4-A5 WASSERFALL. Something tells me that we will end up hearing a lot about it in the days to come, as it appears that the Germans kept the deployment of this new weapon secret, in order to ambush our bombers. We should thus expect most of the main industrial centers in Germany to be now defended by those missiles.”

“You are probably right about that, Jenny.”

In a German coastal radar installation near the port of Le Havre, at the mouth of the Seine River, a Luftwaffe²¹ radar operator swore to himself in frustration before twisting his chair to look at his duty officer.

"I'm sorry, Herr Hauptmann²², but I can't break through that radar jamming. I tried switching frequencies multiple times but the jamming followed my radar signal."

"Himmel!" exclaimed the duty officer. "It must be one of those devilish American flying radar stations they started to field during the past few months. I can only wish that we would have the equivalent in the Luftwaffe. Oberhelferin Steiner, what do you have on the radio frequencies?"

The German female auxiliary made a face at that question.

"Uh, I am able to listen to some intermittent and short bursts of radio conversations which are from probable American aircraft, if I judge from their accent, Herr Hauptmann. However, there are two problems with those radio conversations: most of them are in Japanese, while all of them are female voices."

"What? Are you sure, Fraulein?"

"Well, if American men would talk with those kinds of voices, we would be laughing at them and taunting them, Herr Hauptmann. They are female voices for sure."

"Speaking in Japanese, here over Europe?"

The female auxiliary, who had studied in an arts college before the war, smiled at her officer's bemusement.

"Well, sir, how many Germans can understand Japanese here in France? That would actually be a simple and effective way to encrypt your radio communications, Herr Hauptmann."

"But who could these women be, speaking Japanese and flying into combat over Europe?" wondered the duty officer. The female auxiliary thought over that for a second before she remembered something.

"You remember that notice we got months ago about a female traitor who was fighting for the Americans in the Pacific, sir? She was said to be leading the first all-female air unit of the American Air Force somewhere in the South Pacific. Maybe her unit got transferred to England."

²¹ Luftwaffe: German Air Force.

²² Hauptmann: German rank equivalent to 'Captain'.

"Hum, that could be a possibility, Fraulein Steiner. Good thinking! I will contact our regional command post about that. In the meantime, call by landline our fighter base at Le Bourget and alert them about these American planes penetrating our airspace."

"Right away, Herr Hauptmann!"

11:28 (GMT)

Lead German Messerschmitt Bf 109G-6 fighter

Sky southwest of city of Metz, France

Hauptmann Heinrich Kuntz, leading five other Bf 109G-6 fighters of his squadron, shook his head in frustration as he could only watch from a distance the big formation of American fighters heading towards the German border: those American planes were simply too fast for his own fighters. Besides, for six Bf 109Gs to try to attack fifty P-38s would simply be suicide. As for why those P-38s were heading towards German airspace, the reason was easy enough to guess: they were going to try to escort back to England the huge pack of American heavy bombers which had attacked the Munich area this morning. The fact that those P-38s were flying in only now was telling Kuntz that this was not a planned move by the Americans, but rather a reaction to the disaster that had fallen on those heavy bombers. In that he could only respect the American pilots for trying to help their bomber comrades. Deciding that this pursuit was futile and with his fuel levels quickly going down as he was pushing his engine to its limits, Kuntz finally decided to quit and return to his base in Le Bourget, where he would be able to refuel and then take off again to intercept those bombers on their way back to England. He tried to radio his intentions to his wingmen but met again the annoying radio jamming which had been dodging the whole air defense network since those Americans had crossed the Channel coast. He was thus forced to fall back to hand signals to communicate his intentions to his five pilots. As he was turning back towards his base, he looked way up at the tiny shape of the big four-engine American aircraft flying at very high altitude, just out of reach of his fighters: that plane was most probably one of the new flying radar aircraft which had been making a pest of themselves during the past few months. Unfortunately, the speed and operational ceiling of those radar aircraft put them just out of reach of his Bf 109. Kuntz let out a pungent swear word before leading his wingmen back to Paris.

Much further east, between Karlsruhe and Stuttgart, another German fighter pilot had reasons to feel much better about the present situation. Despite being dodged by the same persistent radio jamming causing havoc in the German air defense network of Southern Germany, General Adolf Galland, flying a **Me 262** jet fighter, had a front row seat to the spectacle of death and destruction befalling the American B-17 heavy



bombers which had tried to bomb the Messerschmitt aircraft factory near Munich. 'Tried' was the operative word here, as those B-17s had been savaged by salvos of the new WASSERFALL surface-to-air missiles before they could bomb the factory in question. They thus had been forced to release their bombs haphazardly all over the Munich area, with swarms of German fighters and intense anti-aircraft gunfire adding to their misery. Those German guns had proved very effective, again, as they were using shells equipped with proximity fuzes, the same ones found on the WASSERFALL missiles. Those proximity fuzes, copied from examples captured after the failed Allied landing in Denmark in 1942, had been proving to be a true godsend to the German air defenses, making the fire from 88 mm, 105 mm and 128 mm guns hugely more effective and increasing their lethality by a factor of more than ten. As a result, the more than 700 American bombers which had tried to bomb Munich were now down to less than 500, a total which included dozens of seriously damaged B-17s, which were now slowing down considerably the retreating bomber box formations trying desperately to return to England.

Seeing that the surviving American bombers were now flying in a zone free of anti-aircraft guns and missile batteries, Adolf Galland then signaled by hand to his seven wingmen to attack the B-17s, then veered towards one of the bomber boxes. While those tight bomber box formations made their concentrated defensive heavy machine gun fire quite dangerous, they also made them more vulnerable to the deadly WASSERFALL missiles, whose heavy fragmentation warheads were easily able to down at least two or three bombers in one shot. However, now was a good time for Galland and his wingmen to cause more losses to those American bombers. Aiming his gunsight on one of the intact bombers flying in the rear of one box formation, Galland waited until he was quite close to it before firing a volley of four R4M rockets at the B-17. While

three of those rockets barely missed the heavy bomber, one rocket performed a direct hit and exploded, breaking the bomber in two and sending both parts down in a death spiral. One of the rockets which had missed that bomber then hit another bomber flying nearby, destroying it and making Galland grin as he zoomed through the bomber formation. A second salvo of R4M rockets then downed a third bomber before he emerged on the other side of the bomber box, pursued by fire from dozens of heavy machine guns. Looking behind him, Galland was satisfied to see his wingmen also do their parts in decimating the B-17 formation. As a reflex he had acquired through nearly three years of air combat, Galland next did a quick visual inspection around him, to make sure that no enemy fighter was after him, despite the fact that most escorting P-47 and P-51 American fighters had turned back minutes earlier, short on fuel and out of ammunition. His acute vision then spotted a group of dark spots diving from up high on him and his wingmen, making him shout in the radio microphone inside his oxygen mask.

“ACHTUNG, JAEGER²³!”

He then veered brutally to his left, in time to avoid a stream of cannon shells which barely missed his plane. Swearing to himself for having been ambushed like this, he then went in pursuit of the American P-38 that had fired at him. However, while his jet fighter was faster than the American piston-engine fighter, that P-38 proved to be much more agile in terms of dogfighting abilities and he was unable to stay on its tail and aim his guns at the P-38. The pilot of that P-38 then proved to be no beginner by performing a sudden barrel roll while brutally slowing down by using its airbrakes. From hunter, Galland suddenly found himself turned into the hunted and began a series of brutal maneuvers while pushing his two turbojet engines to maximum power in order to evade the fire from the P-38. However, the inferior agility of his Me 262, compared to that of the P-38, cost him heavily, with a number of cannon shells slamming into his jet fighters and putting one of his two engines on fire. Understanding with bitterness that he would soon have to eject before his plane became uncontrollable, Galland slowed down, praying that the American pilot would not use that chance to finish him off. He was ejecting his canopy when he noticed that his adversary was now flying very close alongside him. Surprised by that, Galland looked at the P-38 and its pilot, noting the dozens of miniature Japanese flags painted on the side of the plane, along with the

²³ Achtung, jaegers: 'Watch out, fighters!' In German.

words 'LADY HAWK' painted in black and pink letters. He was thus facing an American ace fresh from the Pacific. That American pilot then surprised him further by opening the visor of his helmet and pulling his oxygen mask aside, allowing Galland to see the beautiful face of a young woman. Galland was stunned when he recognized the young helperin²⁴ with whom he had a few very nice nights in France, back in early 1941.

"Helferin Ingrid Weiss?"

Weiss then smiled and waved at him before making a thumbs up signal to him, then slowed down her P-38 in order to take a position on his tail. Understanding that she was going to fire again if he didn't bail out now, Galland pulled the ejection handle of his seat and was rocketed out of his Me 262. Thankfully, his parachute opened up correctly and he found himself floating down over the German landscape, with the mass of American bombers flying away to the West, now escorted by the newly arrived P-38s. Galland was also able to see with bitterness that six of his wingmen had been shot down at the same time as himself, with the sole surviving Me 262 now fleeing with an engine trailing black smoke. After many minutes suspended under his parachute, Galland finally landed a bit brutally in a grass field, whose soil had been made hard by the cold temperature. He was gathering his parachute when a civilian car stopped on the nearby road, disgorging three German policemen waiving pistols. Galland immediately raised his hands up and shouted to them in German.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE! I'M A GERMAN PILOT!"

Thankfully, those policemen didn't fire then, instead helping him to gather his parachute before offering him a ride in their car. As the police car drove off with him on the backseat bench, Adolf Galland pondered about what the appearance of Ingrid meant. She obviously had become a top ace on the American side and was now either part of or leading an American unit fresh from the Pacific, all things which were going to be of high interest for the intelligence officers of his wing.

14:45 (GMT)

Over Southeast England

Ingrid felt sadness as she watched the first surviving B-17 bombers she had escorted back to England start landing at their various airfields in Southeast England.

²⁴ Helferin: World War 2 German female Luftwaffe auxiliary.

Despite her best efforts, more bombers had been lost over their return trip over France, victims mostly from accurate German anti-aircraft gunfire. Thankfully, no missiles had shot at the B-17s while over France, tending to show that those WASSERFALL batteries were only to be found inside Germany, around industrial sites. Dozens of German fighters had also tried to attack the surviving bombers but had been repelled by Ingrid's pilots at a high cost to them. However, those air battles had also cost Ingrid three lost P-38s and their pilots, in exchange for a total of fourteen German Bf 109s and Fw 190s fighters, on top of also shooting down six Me 262. Ingrid sadness then turned to contained anger as she reflected on the causes of this disaster: things were going to have to change at the Eight Air Force...and drastically.

19:32 (GMT)

**Ninth Air Force headquarters, RAF Middle Wallop
County of Hampshire, Southern England**

When Ingrid walked in the operations center of the Ninth Air Force at RAF Middle Wallop, accompanied by Jenny Kawena and Hedy Lamarr, she found a visibly unhappy Lieutenant general Brereton reading a pile of printed message forms next to his big map table, with Elwood Quesada also present. However, Brereton's unhappiness was not directed at her, as he weakly smiled to Ingrid and her two officers when they entered the big room.

"Aah, Ingrid! Just the person I wanted to speak with. Do you have your mission report with you?"

"I do, sir! Here it is."

Brereton took the document she was presenting him and started to read it, still standing next to the big map table. Ingrid used that time to go speak in a low voice to Major General Elwood Quesada.

"Has the Eight Air Force informed you about how many planes they lost in that raid on Munich, General?"

"It did!" answered Quesada. "Out of 712 heavy bombers and 611 fighters sent to Munich early this morning, 247 bombers and 68 fighters were lost, while over 160 bombers returned with serious damages, with a few bombers crashlanding on return. By the way, my IX Fighter Command had provided 240 of the escort fighters and I lost 29 of

them, plus had fourteen more returning with various degrees of damage. What about your planes, Ingrid?"

"I lost three of my P-38NCs, along with their pilots. However, we were able to shoot down twenty enemy fighters, including six Me 262s, and damaged another nine more German fighters damaged, including one Me 262."

Quesada nodded his head at those numbers, favorably impressed.

"You and your pilots truly did a bang-up job this morning, Ingrid. Your quick intervention saved hundreds of our bomber aircrews over Germany. Unfortunately, this still left over 2,500 of our men killed or missing in action."

"My God!" whispered Ingrid while closing her eyes for a second. "This means a loss rate of about 35 percent on that raid alone. We cannot afford such a casualty rate."

"Definitely not!" agreed Quesada, his expression hardening. "Those who planned and authorized this mission should answer for their lack of judgment."

"Let's call it for what it is, Elwood: criminal incompetence. There were enough preliminary warnings against using such stupid bombing tactics before today. In fact, I thought that those tactics had been put away after that command conference at the White House, last May."

"Well, apparently not everyone got the memo then, Ingrid."

They then both fell silent while waiting for Brereton to finish his reading. Once he had finished going through the report, Brereton passed it to Quesada, so that he could read it too, and looked soberly at Ingrid.

"You again saved the day thanks to your lightning quick initiatives, Ingrid. I will make sure that everybody of importance knows about that. Your pilots also proved today that they are true professionals of air combat."

"Thank you, sir. However, I believe that something drastic should be done to prevent the repetition of such a fiasco, starting with the firing of those idiots who planned that raid on Munich. To assign a strong fighter escort to it was a positive point but it did nothing to eliminate the deadly threat presented by German anti-aircraft guns equipped with shells tipped with proximity fuzes. You saw yourself in the Philippines how effective such fuzes proved to be, sir."

"I certainly did, Ingrid, and I also remember that you were the one who told us on your arrival in the Philippines about our old, inadequate fuzes, something that allowed us to order in time large stocks of replacement fuzes, including a quantity of proximity fuzes. Unfortunately, we are now facing another mortal threat, that of those new

WASSERFALL missiles, which we in Europe knew nothing about before today. Would you by chance know a way to counter those missiles, Ingrid?”

“I may, sir. I brought with me Major Jenny Kawena and Captain Hedy Lamarr, who were aboard the EC-142E that went along with my fighters and provided me with radar and electronic jamming support during our rescue mission. Captain Lamarr in particular, who is my electronic warfare officer, was able to record and note a number of things about those WASSERFALL missiles and their guidance system.”

Brereton, like Quesada, couldn't help stare in disbelief at a beautiful but also very serious-looking Hedy Lamarr, who was taking a file docket out of her locked briefcase.

“Miss Lamar, your electronic warfare officer? Uh, what are your competences in the electronic domain, Captain?”

“I am the co-holder of an official patent concerning a jamming-resistant guidance mode based on spread spectrum frequency hopping, sir.”

Ingrid nearly laughed on seeing the confused expressions which then appeared on the faces of the two general officers as they stared at the beautiful ex-actress. Hedy then presented her docket file to Brereton while continuing to speak.

“This file contains a resumé of my observations and analysis concerning those WASSERFALL missiles we saw fired from a distance, sir. Basically, we were able to intercept and record radio signals compatible with a type of guidance system called ‘Manual to Command Line of Sight’, or MCLOS in short. In such a system, an operator within direct visual sight of both the target and the missile aligns the missile with the target after launch, using a joystick to steer the missile. Normally, it would be very hard to achieve a direct hit with such a system against a high-flying plane, since it is nearly impossible for the ground controller to judge the actual vertical distance between the missile and its target, but the use of a proximity fuze, which initiates the missile's warhead as it passes by its target, has rendered the use of a MCLOS guidance system effective. However, such a system would only be functional in daylight and good visibility conditions. To achieve hits at night, the WASSERFALL system would need to be paired with a high-definition tracking radar which would replace the manual guidance ground controller.”

“Uh, you said that you were able to both intercept and record the radio command signals for these missiles, Captain. Does that mean that you could also jam those command signals?”

“Not with the present equipment aboard our EC-142Es, sir. However, I believe that, with the help of electronic experts, I could modify one or more of the radio jammers we have aboard our EC-142Es, so that they could be tuned to the frequencies we recorded, sir.”

That attracted a resolute look on Brereton’s face, who pointed an index at her.

“I will send you my best electronic engineers tomorrow morning, Captain Lamarr. This will be your top priority from now on.”

“Thank you, sir. May I ask how our bomber boys fared today, sir?”

Brereton appeared to age by an extra twenty years at that question.

“Very badly, I am afraid. We lost over 2,500 men in that raid, which constitutes about 35 percent of the aircrews we sent to Munich.

Both Hedy Lamarr and Jenny Kawena looked horrified by that number, with Lamarr shocked nearly to tears.

“My God! We are not going to launch a similar bombing raid after this, sir?”

“Not if I can have my word on this, Captain.” replied Brereton.

CHAPTER 29 – COUNTERMEASURES



09:24 (GMT)

Friday, December 24, 1943 'C'

Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF)

Bushy House, Bushy Park, Richmond District

London, England

Ingrid landed her UH-1 light helicopter on the lawn in front of the rear entrance of Bushy House, the three-story red brick building which presently housed the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces, or SHAEF in short. Normally, the command meeting she and her officers were going to participate in would have happened at RAF Daws Hill, the location of the headquarters of the Eight Air Force, the main air formation implicated in the disastrous bombing raid on Munich effected three days ago. However, the meeting had been moved to Bushy House, in London, the location of General Eisenhower's headquarters, because British RAF leaders wanted to participate in it, as their Bomber Command was deadly concerned about the new threat represented by the V4-A5 WASSERFALL. Ingrid had found that request by the British to be most logical but it still had made her quite jumpy, as she was probably going to encounter as a result the commander of the British Bomber Command, Air Marshal Arthur Harris. That was not out of fear of Arthur Harris himself but rather out of her intense hatred of the man, whom she considered to be a war criminal. She was going to have to tightly control her emotions in order to keep civil in his presence during the command conference. However, she had come to this meeting with some heavy backing, which included General George Kenney, who had flown in from Washington yesterday, Lieutenant General Brereton and Major General Elwood Quesada. Completing the American Ninth Air Force delegation for this meeting were Teresa James, Jenny Kawena and Hedy Lamarr.

With General Kenney in the lead, Ingrid's group was admitted inside Bushy House by the armed American soldiers guarding the rear entrance, then was guided to a

large conference room, where General Dwight D. Eisenhower greeted them with a handshake, starting with Kenney.

"Welcome to England, General Kenney. I wish that your visit would be for a more pleasant occasion than today."

"Indeed! However, we now have a big problem and we have to deal with it decisively. Do you mind if Major General Dows' team gives the part of the briefing concerning their encounter with the German air defenses?"

"Not at all, General Kenney: they faced those defenses and dealt with them directly, so are the logical choice of briefers for that subject."

Kenney, seeing that a few senior RAF commanders, including Air Marshal Arthur Harris, were already sitting at the conference table, along with Lieutenant General Jimmy Doolittle and other senior officers of the Eight Air Force, lowered the volume of his voice.

"General Eisenhower, I anticipate that at least one commander present may object to or even dismiss the recommendations Major General Dows and her team may present. Know that I fully support General Dows' point of view and told her to feel free to tell the unvarnished truth. It is high time that we face some hard realities."

"I agree wholeheartedly with that, General Kenney. Would you like to take the time to have a cup of coffee or tea before we start this meeting?"

"Thank you but no: we already had breakfast before leaving for London. Let's start this show right away."

"Good! Name plaques are already on the table, to designate the seating arrangement."

As he sat at the conference table, Kenney saw that Lieutenant General Doolittle had brought with him his chief of staff, Major General Nathan Twining, and his operations officer, Brigadier General Hoyt Vandenberg, along with the commander of his VIII Bomber Command, Major General Frank Armstrong. On the British side, he recognized Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, sitting next to Air Marshal Arthur Harris and Air Vice-Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory. As he was looking at the British participants, Kenney saw the look of pure disdain and contempt on Harris' face as the head of the RAF Bomber Command eyed both Ingrid Dows and Jenny Kawena. That ticked off Kenney to no little degree and decided him to put the arrogant Harris in his place during this meeting. The first to speak was General Eisenhower, who seemed as the host of this meeting to want to keep the relations cordial.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. As you all know already, we are due to discuss the results and consequences of Tuesday’s bombing raid on Munich by the bombers of the Eight Air Force, with particular emphasis on a new German anti-aircraft missile employed for the first time against our aircraft and on how to possibly counter that new threat. General Doolittle, if you would like to speak first and describe the goals and planning for that raid.”

“Thank you, General Eisenhower. The goal of our raid on the Munich area was actually simple: to destroy the Messerschmitt aircraft factory situated in a suburb of the city. To fulfill that goal, I sent a total of 712 heavy bombers from my VIII Bomber Command, along with 422 fighters from my VIII Fighter Command, reinforced by 189 fighters from the Ninth Air Force, as escorts. My bombers were to carpet-bomb the Messerschmitt factory in closed box formation, both to increase the density of our bombing and to provide mutual protection via the machine guns of our bombers. However, our bombers and their escorts were attacked by successive waves of German fighters and fired on by anti-aircraft guns as soon as they crossed the French coast, forcing parts of our escort fighters to fight and burn their fuel early. However, our bombers’ real troubles began once they crossed the German border and encountered the first sites of German surface-to-air missiles, about which we ignored even their existence, near Bonn. Those V4-A5 WASSERFALL missiles, as I am told they are called, proved positively murderous for my bombers, with warheads powerful enough to destroy or severely damage three to four B-17s in one shot. After passing those first missile batteries, more German fighters attacked our planes. While our escort fighters did a good job of repelling most of those attacks, they were forced to fire away most of their ammunition and remaining fuel, with the consequence that only about a quarter of our escort fighters were able to continue on to Munich with our bombers. More missile batteries were encountered in succession near Ludwigshafen, Stuttgart, Ulm and Augsburg, with our bombers ending up being fired upon by more missiles once near Munich. Waves of German fighters continued to harass my bombers in the intervals between missile salvos, forcing the last of our fighters to drop their fuel tanks and engage in combat. By the time my bombers approached their objective, none of their escort fighters were left to protect them. By then, our bombers had already lost over 170 aircraft, with many of the surviving bombers having been damaged by flak or enemy fighters. When our remaining bomber force encountered just short of their objective a dense and murderous flak barrage from 128 mm guns firing shells equipped with

proximity fuzes, the force commander decided that it was not worth continuing on and ordered his bombers to drop their bombs off and turn back towards England. Unfortunately, the Germans continued their concentrated fighter attacks against our B-17s, using a number of Me 262 jet fighters in the process. Our surviving bombers would have probably suffered more catastrophic losses if not for the arrival of General Dows' fighters, which succeeded in repelling the German fighters and then escorted my bombers all the way back to England."

Doolittle then paused for a second and smiled to Ingrid.

"My boys owe you and your pilots a great debt of gratitude for your timely rescue, General Dows. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your brave and timely initiative."

"Thank you, General Doolittle. You can thank my girls best by inviting them to the next dance nights your crews will hold in the weeks to come."

"They will certainly be eager to send invitations to your units, General Dows." replied Doolittle, making quite a few of the men around the table smile in amusement. Doolittle then finished his description of the raid and its aftermath for the benefit of the meeting's participants.

"As a result of the raid, my command lost a total of 247 bombers and 46 fighters, while 22 fighters from the Ninth Air Force and three fighters from the 99th Air Wing were also lost. As well, 136 other bombers and 32 fighters suffered serious damages, with 27 bombers having to belly crash-land on return to England. As a final result, over 2,500 of my aircrew are gone, killed or missing in action, while another 980 were wounded and hospitalized. All in all, my bombers suffered a loss rate of no less than 37 percent on that raid, a loss rate that my command simply cannot sustain."

"And what about the damage caused to their target, the Messerschmitt aircraft plant?" asked George Kenney. The embarrassed response from Doolittle then shocked many around the table.

"My bombers were not able to get to the Messerschmitt plant before they were forced to jettison their bombs, General."

Kenney stared at him, both disturbed and furious at those numbers.

"So, you lost close to 3,500 men, killed or wounded, and this for zero results? Is that it?"

"Yes!" said Doolittle, lowering his head in sadness. Ingrid felt bad on seeing his obvious pain, as Kenney asked another question to him.

"And what are you planning to do in order to avoid a repeat of such a disaster, General Doolittle?"

"I...I haven't decided yet, sir: we are still analyzing the events and factors from that battle, so that we could formulate new tactics."

"And what about adopting the tactics our bombers used in the Pacific?"
Doolittle's operations officer, Brigadier General Hoyt Vandenberg, took on him to answer for his commander.

"We can't compare the tactics used in the Pacific with those used here in Europe, sir: the Germans are way more sophisticated and competent as opponents than the Japanese are."

That attracted on Vandenberg furious looks from Kenney, Brereton, Ingrid Dows, Teresa James, Jenny Kawena and Hedy Lamarr.

"May I remind you that I, along with General Brereton and General Dows, commanded air units in combat in the Pacific, Brigadier General? Your comment smacks to me of racism, pure and simple. I would like to remind you as well that your surviving bombers were ultimately saved by the intervention of fighter pilots fresh from the Pacific Theatre, which included Major General Dows, present here."

Vandenberg was going to defend his comments then but was cut off by an imperious look and gesture from Doolittle.

"Cut it off, now, Hoyt!"

"Uh, yes sir!"

Doolittle then looked at Ingrid.

"General Dows, I was told that your specialists aboard the EC-142E command post aircraft accompanying your fighters were able to collect some electronic information about those missiles which decimated my bombers. What could you tell us about those missiles?"

"We were indeed able to gather some information about the V4-A5 WASSERFALL, General, both from the radio signals intercepted by my EC-142E and from the information contained in our Hourglass files. My electronic warfare officer, Captain Hedy Lamarr, will now brief you on this."

"Hedy Lamarr?!" exclaimed Arthur Harris while stiffening in his chair. "Isn't she Austrian?"

Hedy, who was getting up from her chair, stared hard at the old RAF officer.

"Yes, I was born in Vienna, Air Marshal Harris. I also was a Jew and now have my American citizenship, thanks to my service with the Fifinellas. Risking my life multiple times in combat while flying aboard an EC-142E, including over Tokyo, should be enough to convince you that I am loyal to the United States, sir."

"And what about her?" said Harris while pointing at Jenny Kawena. Kenney, having had enough of this, banged his fist on the table while staring hard at Harris.

"Air Marshal Harris, if you are more interested in the ethnicity of my officers than in the intelligence they are about to give you, then you are welcome to get the hell out of this room! In fact, I believe that this meeting would proceed better without you."

Dwight Eisenhower, who also didn't like Harris much but was concerned about preserving American-British relations, was still alarmed at the way the atmosphere in the room was quickly degenerating. However, he could not ignore the fact that George Kenney was a service chief, thus had a higher authority than his own. Eisenhower exchanged a look with Sir Charles Portal, who got his silent message and looked in turn at Harris, a severe expression on his face.

"I will brief you later about the intelligence obtained during this briefing, Air Marshal Harris. You may leave now."

Turning red with anger and embarrassment, Harris got up from his chair, then walked out while grumbling to himself. Once he was gone, Hedy took out of her locked briefcase copies of a document she passed around before going to an easel and putting a first large cardboard diagram on it.

"Gentlemen, this is a rough diagram of how the V4-A5 WASSERFALL missile system works. The missile itself was developed and then built by the Flak-Versuchskommando North, in Peenemunde, and incorporates many technologies used in the V2 ballistic missile, from which it was evolved. The missile itself, which you now have a photograph of in the document I gave you, has a length of 7.85 meters, a body diameter of 864 millimeters and a launch weight of 3,700 kilos. It is propelled by a rocket motor which uses a hypergolic combination of storable liquid propellants: vinyl isobutyl ether and red fuming nitric acid. Its range is fairly short, being only 25 kilometers, or 15.6 miles, and its top speed is 1,700 miles per hours. It is thus a supersonic missile. The WASSERFALL is launched from fixed sites with the codename 'Vesuvius'. Its guidance mode is radio manual command to line of sight, or MCLOS in short, and it uses the FuG 203/FuG 230 'Kehl-Strassburg' radio guidance system, which is also used with the FRITZ X guided bomb and the Hs 293 rocket-boosted anti-ship

missile the Germans have already used in the Mediterranean. We were able while flying over Germany to detect and record the parameters of the radio command signals used by WASSERFALL operators, parameters which we then compared on return to England to the information contained in Hourglass Files on secret German weapons. The intermediate frequency band of the WASSERFALL system is in the 3-megahertz frequency band and that allowed us to quickly modify one of our existing radio jammers we use on the EC-142E, in order to allow it to jam WASSERFALL guidance signals.”

“Wait!” said a stunned Charles Portal. “You are saying that we already had information about this missile system in our Hourglass Files we hold in London, Captain Lamarr?”

“Correct, sir. Copies of those files were also held in Washington, where they had been brought to in 1940 by Nancy Laplante. Parts of those files concerning the Pacific war were then used by Major General Dows while fighting the Japanese and we took the remaining parts concerning the war in Europe with us before coming here.”

General Eisenhower made a double facepalm on hearing that, while Charles Portal quickly scribbled a note on a paper pad laid on the table in front of him. Hedy waited until Portal was finished scribbling before continuing her exposé.

“We thus have two ways to avoid those WASSERFALL missiles, gentlemen: we could either fly around them, since their range is relatively short, or we could jam them. Of course, we would first have to test our new jammers over Germany before all our bombers would get equipped with it.”

“And who would do that combat testing, Captain Lamarr?” asked Jimmy Doolittle. Ingrid then took on her to answer him.

“My unit will, next Tuesday. I have planned a number of simultaneous missions over Germany with small, separate bomber and fighter packages, each escorted by one EC-142E electronic command post aircraft. And before anyone here thinks that these will be suicide missions, I will say that I am not the kind to send my crews on one-way missions. In fact, I will be leading the package that will bomb Berlin Tuesday morning.”

The senior commanders sitting around the table either sucked air in, stunned, or looked at her with a mix of incredulity and horror.

CHAPTER 30 – OPERATION GUILLOTINE



05:38 (Berlin Time)

Tuesday, December 28, 1943 'C'

Stavanger Airfield, Norway

Ingrid watched the first wave of P-38NCs from her fighter force, which had come to Stavanger from England yesterday afternoon, disappear as her aircraft climbed above the low cloud cover sitting over Norway, Denmark and Northeast Germany. Normally, most Allied air force commanders would have judged the present weather to be marginal at best for flying but, for Ingrid, this was perfect weather in the context of 'Operation Guillotine'. For one, German ground observers and anti-aircraft gunners would be incapable of spotting or tracking her aircraft as they penetrated German airspace. Second, those same cloudy conditions would either reduce or completely curtail German air patrols and would complicate any attempt at intercepting her aircraft. On the other hand, Ingrid's planes were able to use their radars, thermal imaging cameras and night vision goggles to safely fly and navigate in darkness and cloudy conditions, giving them

a huge advantage over the German air defenses. With the near totality of her air wing now engaged in this operation, which could well change drastically the course of this war, Ingrid was ready to use any advantage she could obtain over the Germans today. The batch of ten P-38NCs that had just taken off would now join what Ingrid designated as 'Package Number Four', composed of those ten fighters, plus one EC-142E, four F-11N night fighters, three AC-142G heavy gunships and twelve A-11B medium bombers, and would head towards their objectives around Munich and Southern Germany, using what Ingrid described as a 'back door' which would keep them away from the main German air defense radar coverage. Since that 'package' had one of the longest routes to its objectives, it was flying out in advance of 'Package Number One', the group to be led towards Berlin by Ingrid.

About half an hour later, with the Sun about to rise, Ingrid received a radio message in the heated hut in which her pilots were waiting. That message, sent by Jenny Kawena from aboard the EC-142E 'Oracle One', was composed only of three words: 'Potato One Up'. That was the signal for Ingrid and her nineteen P-38NC pilots waiting in Stavanger to get in their planes and take off to join the 33 bombers and mission support aircraft of their package.

"ALRIGHT GIRLS: TIME TO FLY OUT! REMEMBER MY PRE-MISSION DIRECTIVES AND GIVE YOUR BEST."

Ingrid was the first to run out of the heated hut and to her waiting aircraft, where a pair of female mechanics had been pre-heating her two engines with a mobile heating unit, to avoid the engine oil from freezing in the cold Norwegian Winter weather. Already wearing her parachute, modern flotation vest, G suit and helmet, Ingrid climbed quickly up and into her cockpit and started her engines as soon as her mechanics had moved away to a safe distance with their heating unit. Rolling up to the start of the single runway of Stavanger Airfield, Ingrid waited for her other fighter pilots to be close behind her and ready to take off before pushing her engine throttles forward. Her wheels came off the ground after a 400-meter roll and she then climbed towards the low clouds, going through them and emerging in a clear night sky at the altitude of 4,000 meters. That was when she spotted the flashing navigation lights of Oracle One, the EC-142E flying command post that was going to guide and support her mission force with radar and electronic jamming coverage. Once all of the twenty P-38NCs had emerged above the clouds and were lined up in multiple echelons behind her, the EC-142E switched off its

navigational lights and replaced them with tail-end low-intensity red lights which would be hard to see from more than a mile or so. The mix of 53 aircraft then took a heading that would make them fly down the coast of Sweden while staying just outside of Swedish airspace. The formation then skirted Copenhagen from the East and continued over the Baltic, flying southeast at moderate speed and just above the cloud cover while following the EC-142E. After some 400 miles of flying, the formation turned towards the Southwest and crossed the German coast, so that it would approach Berlin from the North-northeast, thus skirting the radars and fighter stations of the Kammhuber Line, which defended Germany from air attacks coming from England. Ingrid's unit was helped in this by the fact that the radar technology of World War 2 was still mostly in its infancy, with detection ranges and target definition much inferior to what would be known in the 21st Century.

The first warning to Ingrid from the EC-142E came as her formation was less than twenty miles from Berlin and came in the form of a verbal radio message in Japanese from Jenny Kawena.

"Potato One from Oracle One: we have started actively jamming a targeting radar associated with an anti-aircraft missile battery located in the northern suburbs of Berlin. Our anti-missile jammers are now active as well. We will soon see if our jammers work, although the low cloud cover will hinder greatly the missile operators, over."

"Let's hope that they do, Oracle One. Advise me when we will have to start diving on our respective targets, over."

"Oracle One acknowledge, out."

Taking a couple of deep breaths to calm herself before entering combat, Ingrid glanced at her detailed map of Berlin fixed to one side of the small map board clipped to her upper left leg. On this mission, her personal knowledge of Berlin, in which she had grown up as a teenager until her family home had been bombed by the British in 1940, was going to prove very useful to her and to her attack formation. The main concentration of targets for her group was in Downtown Berlin, along the Wilhelmstrasse and the Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse. She then got another radio message, this time in English, from the EC-142E guiding her aircraft.

"Oracle One to Potato One: dive now, over!"

"Potato One diving now!" replied Ingrid, also in English, before shouting in the radio to her pilots.

"POTATO ONE ALFA FIGHTERS WILL LEAD AND TAKE OUT THE AIR DEFENSE GUNS. TORA, TORA, TORA!"

While Ingrid and nine other P-38NC pilots dove down at a steep angle of sixty degrees, quickly going through the low cloud cover, sixteen of the A-11B medium bombers also dove down, but at a more moderate angle of forty degrees while deploying their dive-bombing airbrakes, so that they would arrive over their objectives after the fighters. The remaining ten P-38NCs and ten A-11Bs in the formation then headed south on their own in order to go strike another set of important targets, the German military grand headquarters of the OKW²⁵ and OKH²⁶, housed in a complex of underground bunkers in Wunsdorf, some twenty kilometers from Berlin.

As soon as her P-38NC pierced through the clouds, which sat at an altitude of some 1,400 meters, Ingrid started pulling hard on her control stick, in order to raise the nose of her aircraft, suffering a force of five Gs in the process. However, her G-suit, a gift from the 21st Century, helped her a lot in soaking up the centrifugal force and preventing her from having her vision suffer. As she sped at 340 miles per hour towards downtown Berlin, she looked on for any German anti-aircraft batteries which could be an obstacle to her bombers. Within seconds, she spotted a pair of quad 20 mm cannons posted on the flat roof of a large concrete building. The German gunners spotted her at about the same time and started frantically turning their guns towards her. She however won that gun duel, spraying those two gun mounts with her four 20 mm cannons and downing their servants before zooming over them and continuing towards Potsdamer-Platz. Her next target turned out to be a so-called flak tower, a huge cube of reinforced concrete on which throned four heavy anti-aircraft guns and a number of automatic cannons. Performing a quick up and down maneuver, Ingrid ended up in a shallow dive pointed at the flak tower, then selected her five-inch rocket launchers and pressed her trigger, firing off four of her twelve rockets. As her rockets sped towards their targets, Ingrid went up in a zoom climb, followed by a half-loop, ending up diving again on the flak tower after her four rockets had exploded, sweeping off the crews of the four big 128 mm guns and of half of the 20 mm and 37 mm pieces on top of the tower. Two of the

²⁵ OKW: OberKommando der Wehrmacht. German military high command in WW2.

²⁶ OKH: OberKommando der Heer. German Army high command in WW2.

surviving 20 mm quad mounts tried to target her but their shooting was wild and they missed her by a wide margin. Her own shooting again proved to be on the mark and the last guns still active atop the flak tower fell silent. Zooming again over the flak tower, Ingrid quickly looked around her to see how her pilots were doing and saw the six A-11Bs led by Helen Richey diving on the large complex occupying the city square delimited by Wilhelmstrasse and Volsstrasse. That complex included the old Reich Chancellery, in which Adolf Hitler had his official Berlin residence, the **new Reich Chancellery**, in which Hitler had his office, and the Propaganda Ministry building in which Goebbels worked.

“GO, HELEN! BURY THAT
HITLER RAT UNDER YOUR BOMBS!”



In Helen Richey’s Hughes A-11B medium bomber, diving at an angle of forty degrees and a speed of 260 miles per hour and aiming at the new Reich Chancellery, her navigator-bombardier, Elizabeth Gardner, was in actual control during their bombing dive, since she had her own flight controls on top of her bomb sight, so that she could act as copilot in order to relieve the pilot during long flights. With their flight path lined up on the long axis of the new Reich Chancellery, Elizabeth set her bomb release to ‘concentrated cluster’ and, with the eastern extremity of her target firmly centered in her bomb sight, she pressed her bomb release trigger once down at an altitude of 900 meters. The six AN-MK 1, 1600-pound armor-piercing bombs contained in their belly bomb bay were ejected in quick succession as Elizabeth was starting to slowly raise the nose of their aircraft. Once all six bombs were out, Elizabeth pulled hard on her flight control stick while shouting in her intercom.

“BOMBS AWAY!”

Inside the new Reich Chancellery, Adolf Hitler, alerted by his SS bodyguards, was running towards the garden grounds, in which the entrance to his personal protective bunker was, when a series of tremendous shocks coming from the reinforced concrete ceiling of the building made the whole structure shake. A dark object about the size of a big man then pierced the ceiling in a rain of debris and continued its speedy fall through the floor of the Grand Marble Gallery, along which Hitler and his bodyguards

were running. Before Hitler or his SS bodyguards could react to that, the delayed fuze arming the armor-piercing bomb set it off.

The detonation of the explosive charge in the basement level of the building then blew up a portion of the **Grand Marble Gallery**, projecting Hitler and his bodyguards towards the ceiling, against which they smashed and were killed. The six heavy bombs from Helen's aircraft had



already mostly ruined the large stone and concrete building when the A-11B piloted by Jean Hixson followed behind Helen Richey's plane and dropped a second cluster of six 1,600-pound bombs. Those bombs also hit squarely their target, completing the destruction of the new Reich Chancellery and the killing of Adolf Hitler's personal staff. Ingrid, a great believer of the 'belt and suspender' principle, had assigned two A-11Bs piloted by her two best bomber pilots to hit the new Reich Chancellery, plus had three more A-11Bs aim bombs at the old Reich Chancellery and at the underground bunker situated in a corner of the garden grounds. The Propaganda Ministry, next to the two Reich Chancellery buildings, was also targeted by two A-11Bs, while the Interior Ministry building, the Reich Aviation Ministry building and the Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, belonging to the SS Corps, all situated along Wilhelmstrasse and close to the Chancellery buildings, got the attention of a total of another seven A-11Bs, all effecting steep, high-precision dive bombings.

Very satisfied by the results of the bombings against that strategically-important block of buildings and with the anti-aircraft guns located in the downtown area now neutralized by her fighters, Ingrid flew the short distance to the big 5-story stone building at **8, Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse**, which housed the grand headquarters of the SS Corps, including the offices of Reich Führer Heinrich Himmler, the offices of the SD, the security service of the SS Corps, and the offices and jails of the dreaded Gestapo, the secret police of the Reich. If



anything was the image of the brutal, inhumane nature of the Nazi regime, that building was it. Ingrid flew over it after four A-11Bs had dive-bombed it and dropped a total of 36 1000-pound general purpose bombs on the building, thoroughly gutting it and blowing off its roof. While they had done quite a thorough job, Ingrid saw that a small wing of the building was still mostly intact, except for blown windows. With hatred filling her as she remembered how Nancy Laplante had been tortured to death by the Gestapo in Berlin, Ingrid made a tight turn and returned towards the ruined building while selecting her rocket launchers. Aiming at the side wing, Ingrid fired her remaining eight five-inch rockets into it, collapsing that wing as well. She was taking back some altitude when she saw from the corner of one eye a small convoy of one staff car and five military trucks rolling on Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse and heading towards the ruined Reich Chancellery complex. Those vehicles were flying Nazi flags and were most probably carrying SS troops, as the regular German army was normally excluded from security duties in downtown Berlin.

“You want your piece of the pie, eh? I’ll serve you a big piece of it, you bastards.”

Turning around yet again, Ingrid lined up the convoy in her gunsight and copiously strafed it, destroying all six vehicles and killing or wounding the SS soldiers, recognizable at their black uniforms, who were trying to run to safety. She was climbing back through the cloud when she got a message in Japanese from Jenny Kawena, aboard Oracle One.

“Lady Hawk, from Oracle One: our bombers and fighters have finished their jobs in Downtown Berlin. No losses incurred at this point. Callsign Potato One Bravo is also finished dealing with its objective and is now regrouping around me, over.”

“Any reaction from the German fighters yet, Oracle One, over?”

“None yet, Lady Hawk. If I go by the radio traffic we are intercepting, the whole command structure in this part of Germany is in a mess, with many stations asking what is happening but not getting answers, over.”

“I like it that way, Oracle One. Have our formation regroup around you and then let’s head West, over.”

“Understood! Oracle One out!”

Once she emerged over the top of the clouds and in the light of the early day, Ingrid spotted nearly at once the EC-142E, flying at high altitude over Berlin and with a

growing number of aircraft reforming their formation around it. She joined that formation after another two minutes and took the time to fly under it to inspect her aircraft for any possible damage as they all started flying westward towards Cologne and England while staying above the clouds. She felt better once her visual inspection was completed but she still had many other aircraft attacking other locations inside Germany concerned with either German strategic command and control installations, high-level leadership locations, aircraft factories, oil production centers and railway bridges over the Rhine River. However, if she could judge by how things had gone in Berlin, things looked good for her and her unit, while this was definitely a very bad day for the Nazis. How bad a day it had been for them would soon be known once the photo-reconnaissance A-11Rs of her air formations would bring back to England their post-bombing photos of her air wing's objectives. As for the dreaded V4-A5 WASSERFALL surface-to-air missiles which had mauled the Eight Air Force only one week ago, it seemed that Hedy Lamarr had found the right counter to it.

14:55 (GMT)

Wednesday, December 29, 1943 'C'

**Main conference room, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces
Bushy House, Bushy Park, London**

General Dwight Eisenhower was on hand to greet British Prime Minister Churchill and his retinue of top military brass with salutes and handshakes as they arrived at the main conference room of Eisenhower's SHAEF. Eisenhower's keen eyes didn't miss the fact that Air Marshal Arthur Harris was conspicuously absent from the group of British military leader lined up behind Churchill.

"Welcome to SHAEF, Mister Prime Minister."

"Thank you, General Eisenhower. I must say that what I already heard about the success of Operation Guillotine is already making for a happy coming New Year. I can't wait to see those post-strike air photos of Berlin and other places hit by your 99th Air Wing."

"Those photos indeed do raise our collective morale, Mister Prime Minister. If you will follow me, I will show you your place at the conference table."

As Churchill followed Eisenhower inside the conference room, he saw a number of women in American Army Air Force uniforms, sitting on chairs lining one of the walls and

apparently waiting for the conference to start. He thus spoke in a low voice to Eisenhower while discretely pointing at the sitting women.

"These are some of the women from the 99th Air Wing, General?"

"Yes, Mister Prime Minister! Their leader, Major General Ingrid Dows, is the young one with reddish-brown hair sitting on the chair nearest to the lectern: she is due to brief you on the results of her unit's raids inside Germany."

"She's quite a looker, I must say," said Churchill with a smile.

"Most importantly for us, she is a strategic and tactical genius of the first order and a top air ace, Mister Prime Minister." replied Eisenhower, his expression most serious. "Don't forget that she and her air unit were the ones who decapitated the Japanese high command in Tokyo and then devised the lightning air assault on Manila that led to our retaking of the Philippines and saved tens of thousands of our people being massacred there by the Japanese."

"Another woman of the caliber of Nancy Laplante, then?" suggested Churchill, making Eisenhower nod.

"She certainly is one such woman, Mister Prime Minister. And don't forget that she was adopted, secretly at first, by Nancy Laplante and was then educated by her about this war."

"Yet, she was once one of the German women we were holding as prisoners of war in the Tower of London, until that day in September of 1941 when a German V2 struck the Tower of London and killed all those Germans, save for this girl. Her personal story is quite incredible, I must say."

"Indeed, Mister Prime Minister. Here you are, sir. Each position around the table has a docket containing copies of the air photos which will be shown and briefed to you this afternoon."

"Good!"

Churchill sat down at the head of the table, with Eisenhower flanking him on his left, along with Generals Kenney, Doolittle, Brereton, Bradley and Patton, while the British Chief of the General Imperial Staff, Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, sat on the right side of the table, along with Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, Air Vice-Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery and General Dempsey. On a signal from General Eisenhower, Ingrid got up and walked to the lectern, which was

set aside a large projection screen facing an overhead transparency projector manned by Jenny Kawena. Eisenhower then nodded to Ingrid.

“You may start your presentation, General Dows.”

“Thank you, sir. Mister Prime Minister, gentlemen, my air wing launched in the early morning of yesterday Operation Guillotine, an air attack plan meant to decapitate the German High Command, as its name implied. It also had another, equally important goal: to start breaking the grip of terror the Nazis held on Europe and to encourage more moderate factions than the Nazis in Germany to soften their war stance and, hopefully, to push them into surrendering to us. The first phase of Operation Guillotine was actually launched on Monday evening, when the P-38 fighters of my air wing flew to staging airfields in Norway, namely Stavanger and Oslo-Fornebu, in advance of my bombers and support aircraft, in order to have them fully refueled in Norway before they would escort my other planes over Germany. I flew myself as part of that fighter force and spent the night there before flying out on the arrival from England of my bombers and support aircraft. Slide Number One, which is now visible on the screen, shows the number and types of aircraft involved in Operation Guillotine, along with their grouping into five separate attack packages, each package being assigned a group of targets in specific regions of the German Reich. Those attack packages were numbered from one to five and were assigned to the following regions and groups of targets: Package Number One was aimed at the Berlin area, with its primary targets being the old and new Reich Chancelleries used by Adolf Hitler, the SS Grand Headquarters, the Nazi Propaganda Ministry building, the Reich’s Aviation Ministry building, the Interior Ministry building, the SS Main Economic and Administrative Office building, the building of the Ministry for Occupied Eastern Territories and the barracks lodging Hitler’s SS bodyguards unit. Part of that package split to go attack the underground bunker complex near Wunsdorf, south of Berlin, in which the German OKW and OKH were operating. Once those targets in and around Berlin were hit and destroyed, Package Number One then flew westward to go attack the oil refineries and synthetic oil plants around Cologne, on top of destroying the railway bridges spanning the Rhine River in Cologne, plus the local Gestapo offices in Brussels and Lille. Attack Package Number Two went to Eastern Prussia, where it attacked Hitler’s eastern headquarters complex, nicknamed the ‘Wolfsschanze’, near Ketrzyn. My aircraft there used heavy 1,600-pound armor-piercing bombs and five-ton FAE bombs to take out the numerous bunkers and buildings of that complex. Once done with the Wolfsschanze, that package turned

westwards and hit the naval base in Wilhelmshaven, a number of railway bridges over the Rhine and the local Gestapo offices in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, before flying back to England. Attack Package Number Three, the smallest of the four packages, hit first the Berghof, Hitler's summer residence in Berchtesgaden, and the Eagle's Nest, Hitler's mountaintop house, then flew westward, first blowing up the railway bridges around Karlsruhe, then to Paris, where it destroyed the local Gestapo headquarters and also blew up the guards' facilities and the external walls of the Fresnes Prison, where the Gestapo and the SS held their prisoners, before flying back to England. My Package Number Four, on its part, flew to the Munich area through its eastern back door, where it destroyed the following targets: the BMW aircraft engine plant and the SS Court Main Office in Munich; the Messerschmitt aircraft factories in Augsburg and Regensburg; the Dornier aircraft factories west of Munich and in Friedrichshaven, on the Swiss border; the Hirsh aircraft engine plant near Stuttgart and the railway bridges on the Rhine in Karlsruhe and, finally, the local Gestapo offices in Metz, before returning to England. My Package Number Five, which was actually composed of my attack helicopters escorted by P-47 fighter-bombers from the Ninth Air Force, flew out of England and crossed the English Channel at very low altitude, to then use the chaos and confusion sown by my other attack packages in order to attack the radar stations and German fighter airfields of the Kammerhuber Line in the Netherlands and in Belgium. On top of seriously hurting the German air defense system as a whole, this also helped open the withdrawal route of my bomber packages returning to England after attacking Germany."

"And how many aircraft did you lose during that operation, General Dows?" asked Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal. Ingrid answered him in a sober tone, as any loss among her aviatrixes was taken very seriously by her.

"I lost three of my aircraft to either flak fire or German fighters: two A-11B medium bombers and one P-38NC. Seven more aircraft suffered damages to various degrees but were able to fly back to England, where one of them, a P-38NC had to crash-land in the English countryside south of London. Thankfully, its pilot was able to walk away from that crash."

Most of the participants present, except for Kenney and Brereton, looked at her as if she was telling a tall tale to them, with Trafford Leigh-Mallory nearly shouting in disbelief.

"You lost only four aircraft while hitting multiple targets deep inside Germany? How did you manage that, General Dows?"

"I kept my losses low by using a number of things, Air Vice-Marshal. First, we attacked on a day when most of Germany and Europe was covered by low clouds, which prevented most German anti-aircraft guns to see and track my planes until we dived down through those clouds. Second, each of my package was supported by one EC-142E WAVEMASTER flying command post and electronic support aircraft, which both guided my aircraft to their objective and also jammed the German radars and radio transmissions. By the way, you may be interested to learn that our new anti-WASSERFALL missile jammer was tested in combat during that operation and was found to be completely effective in making those missiles uncontrollable by their operators. All of the WASSERFALL missiles observed to be fired at our aircraft veered wildly in all directions before crashing on the ground."

That triggered an exchange of happy comments and grins among the American and British air force commanders present, forcing General Eisenhower to ask for silence.

"PLEASE, GENTLEMEN, LET GENERAL DOWS FINISH HER BRIEFING."

"Thank you, General Eisenhower. To continue about the reasons for my low level of losses, the third reason concerned the tactics my aircraft used. For one thing, all our attacks were made from low altitude, where the bigger German anti-aircraft guns had big problems trying to track and aim at my planes. Also, my bombers, before they started emerging from the clouds, were preceded by my fighters, which then engaged any anti-aircraft guns they could spot, neutralizing them before they could have a chance to fire at my bombers. Since the majority of German defensive guns were situated in protective rings outside and to the West of the cities and locations they defended, my airplanes, by emerging from the clouds right over their targets and after approaching from the East, had to deal with only a few of those anti-aircraft guns. As for the German fighters, our attacks and our approach from the North and East, instead of from the West, took them by surprise. The confusion caused by our electronic jamming and by the destruction of the various high-level German headquarters also left those fighters without an effective command system and without radar support. These tactics, gentlemen, if used by us earlier, would have prevented in my opinion the painful losses in bombers we sustained in the previous months. Lastly, I will say that precision bombing against purely military, command or industrial German targets, using dive-bombing techniques and low altitude attacks, will maximize the results while avoiding unnecessary civilian deaths. I firmly believe that we should abandon for good our past carpet bombings from high altitude, both at night and in daylight. As for deliberately

targeting German civilian population centers, such attacks, which some called 'dehousing', are nothing less than war crimes in my opinion and only put us down on the same level as the Nazis stooped to. Our ultimate goal should be to break the hold that the Nazis had over the German population, in order to encourage demands from those German civilians for an end to this war, instead of simply trying to bomb them into submission."

Ingrid saw at once a number of British and American officers stiffen, angered by her remarks, but she couldn't care less about their opinions right now: her recent successes and results had amply proved to anyone with an objective mind that she was right, while those generals were proven wrong over and over. The problem here was that many of those minds present were neither objective nor open ones. However, she was not ready to hide the truth just in order to stay popular. At that moment, General Kenney came to her rescue by speaking up to the other participants in a firm voice.

"Gentlemen, I fully agree with Major General Dows on these points. She may be holding unorthodox ideas but she has proven both in the Pacific and in Europe that her ways are winning ways, while the past months have seen the failure of our past tactics and strategies, at great costs to us in lives and materiel. It is high time that we drastically change the way we conduct the air war over Europe. When I will return to the United States, I am going to counsel to President Roosevelt that we completely revise our combined bomber offensive campaign and adopt the doctrines and tactics employed by General Dows."

Those words, coming from the head of the U.S. Army Air Force, made more than a few clam up and swallow their objections to Ingrid's concepts. Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke then asked a question to Ingrid while keeping his tone polite.

"General Dows, were you able to assess the level of actual damage you inflicted on the Germans during your operation of last Tuesday?"

"I was, Sir Alan, as my attack packages included a number of photo-reconnaissance A-11R aircraft, which took pictures of our objectives minutes only after our strikes. Major Kawena will now show you the bomb damage assessment pictures we took, so that you will be able to judge the efficacy of our bombings by yourself. Jenny, start with the pictures of the old and new Reich Chancellery, in Berlin. Keep each transparency up long enough to let the viewers ask questions."

"Understood!"

As soon as the first transparency was put up, showing the city square containing the old and new Reich Chancellery, exclamations went up at the sight of the field of rubble left of the two buildings.

"My God! Nobody inside could possibly survive this." said Lieutenant General Doolittle, attracting a nod from Ingrid.

"That is my opinion as well, General. Our bombing came as a total surprise and, if Hitler was indeed in Berlin at that time, then the probabilities are that he is now dead, along with most of his staff and governing cabinet. As you can see, both Reich Chancelleries are completely destroyed, along with the Propaganda Ministry, the Interior Ministry, the Reich Aviation Ministry and the Ministry for Occupied Eastern Territories, which managed the looting of the Soviet and Polish territories seized by Germany in this war. Jenny, show the Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse building now."

More exclamations rose at the sight of the fuming big pile of stones into which that building had been reduced.

"Mister Prime Minister, gentlemen, this was once the center of SS power in Berlin and housed the offices of Reich Führer Himmler, the command offices of the SS Corps and of the SD security services and the offices and jails of the Gestapo. My adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante, was tortured to death in the basement of that building. Very few Berliners will cry at its destruction, while many of the worst monsters in the Nazi war machine are now dead. We also destroyed the nearby barracks lodging the SS unit guarding the Nazi regime in Berlin."

On cue, Jenny Kawena switched transparencies, showing the said barracks, which surrounded a large courtyard acting as a parade and inspection ground. In that courtyard, hundreds of inert shapes lay on the ground.

"We dropped a five-ton FAE bomb in the center of that courtyard, just as the local SS unit was doing its daily morning roll call and inspection. We were able to count over 800 bodies around that courtyard alone. Now, last inside Berlin, we have the SS Main Economic and Administrative Offices building. Those offices were busy administering the financial and industrial empire belonging, or should I say stolen, to the SS Corps, including the various concentration camps run by the SS around Germany and Occupied Europe, camps where Jews, captured Resistance members, political prisoners and various ethnic groups were being worked to death and exterminated by the Nazis. Now, to the bunker complexes housing the German OKW and OKH near Wunsdorf. By the way, I would like to thank the RAF for loaning us the use of a few of

your TALL BOY 12,000-pound penetrating bombs: they worked like magic. Unfortunately, they were destroyed in the process, so we couldn't give them back on return to England."

Laughter greeted that joke from Ingrid as a picture showing what looked like rows of widely separated 'houses', with giant craters sprayed among them. Many of the top structures of those 'houses' had been blown away, revealing the underground bunkers hiding under them, bunkers which were now utterly destroyed.

"Gentlemen, my EC-142E accompanying that attack package confirmed that all radio transmissions coming from that command complex were abruptly cut off after our first TALL BOY bombs fell on it. We thus destroyed the German military High Command and Army Command centers, along with their communications center in the nearby 'Zeppelin' bunker complex. We can't know who exactly was present there at that time but we certainly killed at least a few of the higher-level German officers licking Hitler's ass in Berlin. Now, to the 'Wolf's Lair' in East Prussia."

Dozens more transparencies were then shown in succession, with Ingrid commenting on each of them, covering the rest of the objectives hit by her planes. At the end of it, Ingrid then leaned on the lectern and stared at the meeting participants.

"Mister Prime Minister, gentlemen, we may now have a chance to bring this war to a quick conclusion if we play our cards right and if the Nazi leaders we targeted in this operation are indeed dead. If the more moderate leaders, both political and military, left in Germany then take over from Hitler and his clique, we may have to think hard about what kind of compromise we would offer them in exchange for their surrender. On the other hand, any hardline, 'no compromise' attitude on our part may only harden the resolve of the Germans to continue this war to the bitter end. We could thus now prevent the deaths of hundreds of thousands more of our people if we manage to obtain the surrender of Germany, so let's think long and hard about what we will do next as the Germans react to my raids. Personally, my only hard condition would be the complete elimination of the SS Corps and the evacuation by German forces of all the territories taken by Germany in this war. Some may say that politics are none of my business but the long personal experience of my soul, spread over 7,000 years, taught me that war is indeed a continuation of politics by other means. Finally, I will say this: we may be on the verge of defeating both Germany and Japan in this war but let's not lose sight of the other danger threatening us and democracy which is looming on the horizon. I am

talking here about Stalin, who is as much of a human monster as Hitler was, and whose Soviet Union will use every opportunity to seize as much as it could of Eastern Europe if we don't firmly block its path westward. As my late adoptive mother already warned Prime Minister Churchill in the past, Stalin will prove to be as dangerous and greedy for power as Hitler and his Nazis were. Let's not forget as well that the same Stalin was too happy to sign an alliance treaty with Hitler in order to split in two and take over Poland. The coming decades could prove both dangerous and painful if we don't exercise utter vigilance in Europe and around the World, gentlemen."

CHAPTER 31 – CHAOS IN BERLIN



11:02 (Berlin Time)

Thursday, December 30, 1943 'C'

Ruins of the new Reich Chancellery

Downtown Berlin, Germany



The German Minister for Armaments, **Albert Speer**, was inspecting the ruins of the new Reich Chancellery, along with Luftwaffe Major General Adolf Galland, when Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, the commander of the German Navy, walked in, escorted by four armed sailors who were looking with stupor at the devastation around them. Dönitz then joined up with Speer and Galland and gave the minister and Hitler's chief architect a somber look.

"So, do we know what happened to the Führer, Herr Speer? Are there any chances that he could still be alive after this?"

"While we haven't found his body yet, Herr Admiral, the chances that he would be alive somewhere under all this rubble are very low, in my opinion. Also, I was told by surviving SS soldiers who were guarding the Reich Chancellery that I was the first high-level dignitary to come and look for Hitler here. You do realize what this probably means, Herr Admiral?"

Dönitz frowned as he looked at Speer, trying to figure out what he meant by those words. Speer then helped him, speaking in a low volume of voice.

"Admiral, I have been serving the Führer for long years now and I got to know his entourage quite well. If there was anything that followers of the Führer had aplenty, it was ambition and thirst for power. With him probably dead, you would expect them to run here like jackals to claim their part of his power. Yet, none of them have shown up here, which suggests to me that they are either dead, in hiding or on the way to here from some distant location. Since those airstrikes occurred a full 48 hours ago, I would think that this would be more than enough time to return to Berlin by air, even if you came from the Eastern Front."

"Hum, I see what you mean now. So, you think that all the other members of his entourage must be dead, is that it?"

"It may well be the case here, Herr Admiral. I must say that whoever planned these Tuesday air attacks on the Reich is a true strategic genius, from what I have been able to hear. Only significant command locations and key installations were hit, and this with pinpoint precision and with an apparent desire to avoid civilian casualties as much as possible. This was not the work of your usual American or British bomber commander. The air raids were also executed with incredible brio and flair. To be frank, I still can't figure out which American or British general could have planned and executed such raids."

"I can think of one person, Herr Speer." then said Adolf Galland, making both Speer and Dönitz look sharply at him. "Don't call me crazy but this could be the work of one of the rising stars of the American Air Force, a young woman who was born here in Berlin and who was once part of the Luftwaffe. I first met young Ingrid Weiss in France, in 1940, and she was both very beautiful and very intelligent and was passionate about aviation and aircraft. She was captured by the British in a raid in France and taken as a prisoner of war to England. Then, only nine days ago, I saw her again...piloting an American P-38 fighter bearing over a hundred miniature Japanese flags painted under her cockpit and with the name 'Lady Hawk' on the nose of her aircraft. She actually proved to be a true air ace and managed to damage my Me 262 jet fighter and force me to parachute out. When I asked about her at my fighter division's intelligence section, I was shown a file concerning her, in which I read that she was pardoned and freed by the British in 1941 after marrying an American officer, then went with him to the Philippines. There, she paid for private flying lessons and eventually was hired by the Filipino

government as a new fighter pilot, when the Filipinos were desperately short of fighter pilots. Somehow, she gradually became the American Ace of aces, fighting the Japanese and shooting down their planes by the dozen. According to our intelligence, she was eventually returned to the United States, where she formed and commanded their first and only female air combat unit. That unit eventually went to fight in the Pacific and supposedly played a big role in turning back the Japanese attacking in the South Pacific. Unfortunately, our intelligence about her ran dry a couple of months ago, so I learned nothing new about her...until she shot me down near Karlsruhe nine days ago.”

“Come on, Herr Galland!” said Dönitz. “That story is downright incredible.”

“Yes, but I also believe it to be true, Herr Admiral. While my fighters were unable to stop those air raids Tuesday, due to American jamming of our radars and radio transmissions, our Luftwaffe radio intercept service was able to listen to and record some of the radio conversations exchanged between the attacking aircraft: some were in English, but some were in Japanese, while all the voices were those of women. I thus strongly believe that this Ingrid and her female air unit recently moved from the Pacific to England and executed those murderous air raids on Germany.”

Both Dönitz and Speer stared at Galland with incredulity before the minister of armaments shook himself back to reality.

“That may be quite a fantastic story, Herr Galland, but that still leaves us with a big problem, which is: who is in charge in Germany now and what do we do next? From what I have been told, all our personnel and senior officers at the OKW and OKH are dead, killed by huge deep penetration bombs. Do you know about the whereabouts of FeldMarshal Goering?”

Galland seemed to age at that question and he lowered his head slowly while answering Speer.

“I just visited what was left of the Reich Aviation Ministry, where Goering had his offices. It was totally destroyed and they were still pulling corpses out of the rubble. I also saw and recognized Goering’s staff car, parked near the entrance of the ministry building: it was destroyed and its driver was dead at the wheel. We thus must consider FeldMarshal Goering as dead, along with our Army commanders killed in Wunsdorf.”

Dönitz then paled on realizing what that meant.

“Then, this would leave me as the only head of service still alive. Any surviving high-level SS officer could then target me in order for them to take power from our dead Führer. This could become one ferocious rat race in terms of political succession.”

“Well, you can probably breathe easy about that, Herr Admiral.” said Speer. “I passed by the grand SS headquarters on Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse and it was reduced to a pile of burning rubble. The nearby SS barracks were also flattened, with all the SS men there killed by one of those awful vacuum bombs the British have been using against us for more than a year. Those American planes did a thorough job of exterminating every SS man and office in Berlin Tuesday, so you can probably feel safe from the SS...for now.”

“But that still leaves the question of what do we do now!” replied Galland, becoming agitated. “Right now, our country and our military are utterly leaderless. We can’t even communicate efficiently with our units around the Reich, since our high command headquarters are now destroyed. The enemy could use our present confusion to attack us again and cause us more major damage.”

Dönitz, like Speer, was left in deep thinking by Galland’s declaration.

“Somehow, I found the local offices of the KriegsMarine here in Berlin still intact, with functioning radios. I will go establish a temporary national command post there and will have more information collected about the losses we suffered on Tuesday. You are welcome to join me there. In the meantime, I will ask the surviving guards and policemen around the Chancellery to pass the word to any general officer who will show up here to come and report to me.”

Speer was about to agree with that when a thought struck his mind, making him hold his head with both hands while his eyes bulged out and his mouth opened wide.

“Mein Goth! What if the Americans wanted exactly this to happen: to see people like us succeed the Führer, rather than Himmler or another SS man?”

03:10 (Berlin Time)

Friday, December 31, 1943 ‘C’

Administrative offices of the KriegsMarine

Berlin, Germany

Karl Dönitz had been in a deep sleep on the camp cot set in his Berlin administrative office when someone started shaking him awake with increasing insistence.

“Admiral... Admiral, wake up please!”

“Uh! What is it?” asked Dönitz to the naval officer shaking him awake.

"We believe that another round of American bombings is happening across the country, Herr Admiral."

That made Dönitz wake up in a hurry and sit on his cot. Taking a few seconds to let his eyes focus back to the light, he then looked up at the duty officer who had awakened him.

"What is exactly happening, Lieutenant?"

"As you requested, our various local KriegsMarine recruiting offices had been watching for instances of new bombings around the country and were told to report such instances at once to us, sir. Our telephone switchboard is now lighting up like a Christmas tree with calls from all over the country about noises and flashes happening at various locations. Up to now, those locations include Gauleiters' residences, local Gestapo offices, SS barracks, aircraft manufacturing plants, important railway nodes, Luftwaffe airfields and command posts and the like, sir."

Dönitz shook his head in discouragement on hearing that.

"Another round of strategically-oriented bombings. We should have expected this. What about our main KriegsMarine headquarters in Wilhelmshaven and our U-Boote Command headquarters in Lorient?"

"They are still untouched...for the moment, sir. However, calls keep arriving to signal more bombings, including in France, Belgium and the Netherlands, sir."

"Very well, I will dress quickly. Prepare a compilation of those calls and have their observations plotted on a map, to be ready for my review."

"Right away, Herr Admiral!"

The duty officer then left the office, letting Dönitz free to get up and put his uniform back on. That took him mere minutes, after which he walked out of his administrative office to go to the small conference room of the administrative center, which had been transformed into an improvised operations center, complete with batteries of telephones, a few long-range radios and a large wall map board. Going to the map board, Dönitz looked at the freshly marked symbols in grease pencil on it and mentally analyzed what they said.

"So, the Americans want to continue taking out our political leadership and our local security offices and units, as well as our ability to defend against air attacks. If this goes on, we will soon be at the total mercy of American and British bomber raids."

Dönitz then decided to go wake up Albert Speer, who had been given a camp cot and a small office in the administrative center, as his normal quarters in Berlin, on

Wilhelmstrasse, were now a pile of rubble. As for General Galland, he had returned to his fighter base north of Berlin. Apart from them, no other military or political leader of importance had shown up to date in Berlin, demonstrating how acute this national leadership crisis was becoming.

Once awakened and led to the improvised operations center, Speer was shown the symbols-covered wall map, to which more symbols were being added each few minutes. Like Dönitz, Albert Speer quickly caught on the pattern of the American bombardments.

"Political leadership residences, Gestapo offices, SS barracks, radar stations, fighter airfields: those Americans are consistent in their bombing pattern...at the moment. God knows what will be their next priorities. I would bet on our aircraft plants and oil refineries in this case. Once we will have little to no fighter aircraft left and no radar stations to track their bombers, Germany will then be at the complete mercy of enemy air raids, in which case we would soon have no choice but to surrender if we don't want to see Germany transformed into a field of ruins."

"The worst part is that there is little that we could do to prevent that, Herr Speer. Those new American airplanes have some incredible range, plus can apparently fly at night and in bad weather nearly as they please, contrary to our own planes. Even our new WASSERFALL surface-to-air missiles are now useless, as the Americans have apparently found a way to jam their guidance system."

"Damn! This is looking more and more like a lose-lose situation for us. Another week like this and we might as well give up. What do you think, Herr Admiral?"

"That you are unfortunately right, Herr Speer. Without effective air defenses and without an effective national leadership system, Germany will descend into chaos and our armies deployed to the East and West will not be able to change that."

Both men were still looking at the map, trying to figure out a way to get out of this situation, when a navy female auxiliary brought a piece of paper to them, handing it to Dönitz.

"Sir, propaganda tracts are now falling all over Berlin. Here is one of them: they all bore the same message, sir."

With Speer looking over his shoulder, Dönitz read aloud the tract, which was written in German.

"To the German people. Your Führer and many of his top minions of the Nazi Party are dead, killed in our bombing raids of December 28. Your Luftwaffe is powerless to stop our bombers and your war industries are in the process of being flattened by us. We are also in the process of destroying the Gestapo offices around Germany and the rest of Europe. Soon, you will not need to fear anymore the jackals of your secret police. If you wish to see an end to this war soon, then use passive resistance and do not believe the lies your Nazi leaders will serve you. Report sick to work, especially if you work in a war-related industry, and abstain from providing any information about your neighbors, friends or relatives to the Gestapo or to other Nazi officials. We don't want to utterly destroy Germany but, if you continue to support your Nazi Party and its policies, then we will not hesitate to scale up our bombing campaign. The choice is yours: don't let Nazi stooges decide for you."

Dönitz then gave a worried look to Speer.

"I hate to say this but this line of propaganda could work on many Germans. This call to passive resistance in particular could hurt our war industries quite a lot."

"Agreed! Unfortunately, if such tracts are dropped over other parts of Germany, it will be impossible to stop that message from spreading throughout our population. This is bad, very bad."

The young duty officer who had awakened Dönitz then came to him with a printed message transcript, his expression most sober.

"Herr Admiral, we just got the news from our office in Amsterdam that Reichskommissar Arthur Seyss-Inquart has been killed in the bombing of his official residence. The nearby barracks housing his SS guard force were also bombed."

Dönitz took the message and read it, then gave an acerbic look at Albert Speer.

"Well, you could say that this is one bombing raid which will make the local people in Amsterdam happy. If I would be, say, Reich Minister of State Frank, in Prague, I would go find myself a big rock to go sleep under."

In the hour that passed, more reports of bombings, all concerning the same categories of targets, continued to come in. Speer was particularly frustrated to hear that the precious oil refineries and synthetic oil plants of the Ruhr, which were so vital to the German war effort, were being systematically bombed and put on fire. Worse, the hundreds of anti-aircraft guns protecting the Ruhr area seemed powerless to repel those air raids, probably because of the combination of darkness and low cloud cover which

hid the American bombers from the German guns. As for the German night fighters, they had to contend with powerful American electronic jamming and with the shocking revelation that the American bombers were being escorted by a new and powerful model of night fighter equipped with radar. Thus, most of the German night fighters which took off to intercept those bombers either didn't find them because of the electronic jamming, or were shot down themselves. Then, just before Sunrise, Dönitz was given another printed message, which he read silently before looking at Speer.

"It seems that Minister Karl Frank didn't follow my advice, Herr Speer."

10:04 (GMT)

U.S. Ninth Air Force headquarters

RAF Middle Wallop, Southern England

Lieutenant General Lewis Brereton knew at once that something was wrong when he saw a furious-looking Ingrid Dows charge into his office.

"Uh, something is bothering you, Ingrid?"

"Yes, sir: Arthur Harris! That bastard sent a large bomber force to go firebomb Hamburg last night, despite our understanding that the RAF would suspend such bombing raids for the time being. One of my attack packages returning from hitting Nazi leadership targets in Warsaw stumbled on over 300 LANCASTER heavy bombers dropping a mix of incendiaries and blast bombs on Hamburg. Those British idiots were doing so even though they don't have yet anti-WASSERFALL jammers in their bombers and had no escorting electronic radar-jamming aircraft. I had to divert the EC-142E and the four F-11N night fighters attached to my attack package in order to help those British bombers get out of trouble. If this goes on, I swear that I will go kill that fucking Harris myself, sir."

"Now, please calm down, Ingrid. I understand that you hate that man, while I myself think that he is a mean-spirited, uncaring incompetent, but killing him would put you in big trouble and would also mine our mutual cooperation with the British."

"Our mutual cooperation with the British, sir? Since the start of this war, the British have done what they wanted while mostly ignoring us. They didn't do a damn thing to help us while we were fighting to keep the Philippines and they also cut their supply line to Australia, leaving us to carry the full load there, so that they could reserve everything they had to help keep their precious empire. I know that President Roosevelt

and Prime Minister Churchill had an understanding about putting Europe first in this war but that understanding does not stand anymore, since President Roosevelt shifted our top priority to the Pacific. Now that we are helping strike Germany in a more efficient and better targeted manner, they continue their failed bombing tactics under our nose? I am not sending my women to risk their lives over Germany just to have the British stab us in the back, sir. General Eisenhower must tell the British to stop those useless, costly raids on German cities.”

“Alright, I will call General Eisenhower right away, Ingrid. Why don’t you go have a cup of hot tea or coffee in the meantime?”

Understanding that Brereton preferred to have her out of his office during his call to the SHAEF, Ingrid saluted him, then walked out.

She had time to drink in succession two coffee cups while sitting in a sofa near Brereton’s office before her superior came to her, his expression sober.

“I just got a call from General Eisenhower, who talked to Air Chief Marshal Portal after my call to him, and he is not happy at all. Not because you complained about Harris’ raid on Hamburg but rather because of the way Portal replied to Eisenhower’s concerns. Apparently, Portal never informed Eisenhower in advance about that night firebombing raid and, when asked about it, tried to excuse it, despite our understanding of a mere two days ago.”

“So? What is General Eisenhower going to do about that, sir?”

“He told me that he is going to send a message to General Marshal, to ask him to have the President talk to Churchill on this matter. I am sorry, Ingrid, but that is the most that we can do here at this time, as this touches the highest level of policy between our two nations.”

Ingrid, repressing her anger as best she could, got up and faced Brereton.

“Fine, sir. But if one of my air groups encounter another British bombing raid over Germany in the next few days, then I will not divert my support aircraft to help them at the cost of my own aircraft. Permission to leave, sir?”

“Permission granted, Ingrid.”

They exchanged salutes before Ingrid walked out, watched by a frustrated Brereton. He fully understood Ingrid’s anger about this and was also pissed at the British but they simply could not afford to see the U.S.-British alliance fall apart right now.

CHAPTER 32 – POLITICAL RESET

15:51 (GMT)

Saturday, January 8, 1944 ‘C’

SHAEF headquarters, Bushy House

Bushy Park, London, England

Warned via radio of the imminent arrival of the UH-2 medium helicopter coming from RAF Charny Down, General Eisenhower was on hand to greet its occupants when it touched down on the lawn behind Bushy House. The V.I.P. guest he was about to receive had landed in secrecy at RAF Charny Down a couple of hours ago, then had transferred into a UH-2 helicopter of the 99th Air Wing in order to come to Bushy House for a crucial strategic meeting with Eisenhower and his main American subordinate commanders. No British commanders would assist to that meeting, as what was to be discussed would be politically very sensitive. Only after that meeting was the V.I.P. going to go meet with Prime Minister Churchill for what promised to be a contentious discussion. Unfortunately, the uncompromising line the British had chosen to follow during the last few days concerning how to run this war had forced the United States into hardening its own political agenda.

As the aft access ramp of the medium helicopter came down, Eisenhower signaled to the American military band and small guard of honor to stand ready, then walked towards the UH-2. He stopped near the foot of the ramp and saluted at attention as President Roosevelt was rolled down the ramp in his wheelchair, with General George Marshall holding the handles. Following close behind the President and Marshall were General George Kenney, Admiral Leahy, Admiral Nimitz, presidential advisor Harry Hopkins, Secretary for War Henry Stimson, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, plus six Secret Service agents from the Presidential Detail. Closing the procession were Ingrid Dows, President Roosevelt's secretary and his head steward. The band then started to play 'Star Spangled Banner' as Eisenhower shook hands with Roosevelt.

"Welcome to the SHAEF, Mister President. How was your trip across the Atlantic?"

"It was a fast one, which made it agreeable, General. This Hughes C-11T is truly an outstanding plane. It may be relatively small but is still quite comfortable. I will definitely get a couple of them for the Presidential Squadron."

"I am happy to hear that, Mister President. We will now go inside, so that you could escape this cold."

"I won't say no to that, General: the British weather seems to still be as wet and gray as I remember it from my last visit."

As Eisenhower walked beside the President's wheelchair, he exchanged a few pleasantries with him.

"I thought that your wife was going to come as well, Mister President."

"Oh, she did come, General: she loves to visit England when she can. She stayed in RAF Charmy Down and was going to tour the old city of Bath, with Captain Hedy Lamarr as her guide. She is going to join me tomorrow, in order to visit London as well. There are so many historical places to visit here."

"Indeed, Mister President."

Roosevelt then switched to serious business as they were about to enter Bushy House.

"Are the British showing any sign of softening their stance, General?"

"Unfortunately, no, Mister President. They still insist on conducting this war their own way, complete with the continuation of their night area bombings of German cities. If they continue like this, they may just derail completely our attempts at inciting the Germans into surrendering without further combat."

"Damn it! What is wrong with Churchill? Each unnecessary month of war means thousands of deaths on both sides."

"I am afraid that the British want revenge on the Germans for the losses and destruction they suffered in this war. I tried to convince the British that it was better to compromise a bit, so that we could put a quick end to this war, but they refuse to compromise from their position of total, unconditional surrender. There is something that I don't know about that seems to be pushing them into this hardline attitude."

"Like what?" replied Roosevelt, irritated. "Without our support in this war, they would have lost it over two years ago. Why are they now deciding to go it alone?"

"Maybe they think that our latest successes in our own bombing campaign against Germany and the deaths of most of the Nazi leadership has softened enough the Germans to allow them to prevail all by themselves, Mister President."

“Well, if they really believe that, then I will have to shock them back into reality. I will not let tens of thousands of our boys unnecessarily die now just so that the British can claim revenge on the Germans. I think that their notion of being an imperial power went to their heads.”

“That may be it, Mister President.”

Entering Bushy House, the group went to the main conference room of the SHAEF, where the main commanders of American forces in Great Britain were already waiting. After an exchange of salutes and handshakes, Roosevelt was wheeled to a position at the head of the conference table as everybody else took their seats. He then looked around at the participants to this meeting, his expression most sober.

“Gentlemen...and lady, I came to England to try to convince the British to adopt a compromise with the Germans on a peace plan that would finally put an end to this damn war. With the Japanese apparently still not ready to surrender and with our forces in the Pacific thus tied down for many more months to come, while our losses there continue to pile up, albeit at a much slower rate, I have decided that we can't anymore play the second fiddle to British ambitions and wishes. The British will have to realize that, without us, they won't be able to win quickly this war. They will also have to accept the fact that we were the ones who eliminated the Nazi leadership in Germany, without any help from them. This is thus turning into a political crisis, a crisis I am now resolved to deal with decisively, so that we could end this war in Europe and then concentrate on the Pacific.”

Roosevelt then paused while looking again around the table to gauge the attitudes and feelings of the participants.

“Gentlemen, the decisions I am going to announce to you were taken after consultations with my advisors and with a few of you. One of the main persons I consulted is Major General Dows, herein present. Before anyone thinks that she pushed her own views on me, know that I was the one who specifically asked for her advice. She was the architect and main enabler of our present campaign to systematically eliminate the Nazi leadership and its instruments of terror and repression in Europe, a campaign I believe to have been most successful to date. She was also the person who decapitated the Japanese High Command and who devised our quick response to the news of the Japanese slaughtering our prisoners held by Japan, a response that resulted in the liberation of the Philippines in the matter of mere weeks, and this at least

a full year before our most optimistic plans. Now, I have heard many complaints about having a young woman overplaying her rank and not staying in her lane. Well, I am most happy that she left her lane and used her strategic and tactical genius and initiative, as we are now winning in the Pacific very much thanks to her. So, I will now say to those criticising her to shut up and listen to what she says, because I have now firmly decided to listen to her advice when faced with difficult circumstances, like today. She may be young physically but her mind is thousands of years wise. With this said, here is the line of conduct I have decided on for our campaign in Europe. First, the United States will continue its present campaign of air attacks against the Nazi leadership, SS-related facilities, aircraft manufacturing plants, oil industries and the German rail transportation network, in order to push the Germans into surrender as quickly as possible. I am prepared to accept some compromises to get such a German surrender, especially in the case of the German Army units facing the Soviets. A German surrender, if followed by a Soviet push through Eastern Europe, would be in my opinion an empty victory for us and would be the prelude to future headaches at the hands of Stalin, a man I consider to be as much a monster as Hitler was. Second, I am resolved to obtain such a victory over Germany without resorting to a bombing campaign directed at the German people, which would equate to us committing war crimes. I will not sully the United States' name by intentionally killing masses of German men, women and children. We are better than that! Third, our actions will have as their long-term goal to prevent and stop any Soviet attempt at taking over Eastern Europe and to restrict Stalin into solely taking back the U.S.S.R.'s territories invaded by Germany in 1941. However, Stalin will not be allowed to keep the half of Poland he seized in 1939, when he made a pact with Hitler. One way to do this, if the Germans accept to surrender, will be for the German forces on the Eastern Front to withdraw to the pre-1939 borders of Poland and then hold that border against any Soviet advance, and this until we could ourselves send troops to hold and defend that border. At the same time, as a condition of their surrender, the Germans will have to immediately leave France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark and withdraw back to Germany proper, while leaving behind their heavy weapons, which will then be taken over by the military forces of those liberated countries. The final results I am envisioning with this plan are a liberated Europe, a denazified Germany and a Soviet Union kept in check east of the Polish border. Any questions or comments about this strategic plan, gentlemen?"

The generals sitting around the table looked at each other in silence at first, stunned by the ambitious goals of Roosevelt's plan. Eisenhower was the first to raise one hand to ask to speak.

"Mister President, what about our planned landing in France, which we were contemplating for this Summer?"

"Such an assault from the sea will not be necessary if we manage to get the Germans to surrender, General. That alone would prevent the deaths of thousands of our young men as well as preventing extensive damage to French territory and lives. If we are to land troops in Europe, then I want us to do it unopposed by the Germans."

"What if the British refuse to follow our plan and continue their area bombings of Germany, Mister President?" asked Jimmy Doolittle.

"Then, I will tell Prime Minister Churchill that he will have to continue the fight against Germany alone, without us. Germany has at this stage been weakened enough that it is not capable anymore of presenting an existential threat to Great Britain. If the British insist on landing by force in France this year, then they will have to do it alone. This may sound callous but we can't afford anymore to play this game only according to British rules. If the Germans refuse to surrender, then we will reconsider the need for an invasion across the English Channel. That is one main reason why I am not going to let the British sabotage our plan with their indiscriminate area bombing of German cities. We need to entice the Germans into surrendering quickly, gentlemen, instead of creating more hatred which could harden the resolve the Germans into resisting us at all cost. I am prepared to withdraw most of our troops, bombers and ships from Great Britain and back to the United States, if that is what it will take to convince the British to support our plan."

"So, a lot will depend on how quickly the Germans will accept to surrender on our terms, is that it, Mister President?" asked Eisenhower, making Roosevelt nod his head.

"Correct, General Eisenhower. One critical factor in achieving that goal is to present as early as possible our conditions for surrendering to the German leadership, at least what is left of it. We could either use the services of a trusted neutral nation, like Switzerland, to pass on our terms to the Germans, or we could send an envoy ourselves."

"Mister President, that envoy would be on a nearly suicide mission." pleaded Lewis Brereton. "The Germans may just kill that envoy on sight, or some of the

remaining SS fanatics in Berlin could decide to assassinate our envoy in order to sabotage any negotiated peace accord.”

Roosevelt looked back at Brereton with a most serious expression.

“I do agree that it will take a person of immense courage to take on that task, General Brereton. Fortunately, we have such a person at hand, a person who speaks German fluently, understands the German psyche and who could see through any attempt by the Germans at tricking us.”

Without Roosevelt naming her, all eyes went to Ingrid, who had kept up to now an impassive expression. She then simply nodded her head once while looking at Roosevelt.

“I would be ready to deliver your conditions for surrender to the Germans, Mister President.”

“I thought so, General.” said Roosevelt before looking around the table. “Gentlemen, I intend to go see Prime Minister Churchill right after we conclude this meeting, to present my plan to him and secure his approval and support for it. In the meantime, and until General Dows can deliver my message to the Germans in Berlin, I want all our air attacks on Germany and German forces suspended, while I will strongly urge Prime Minister Churchill to do the same. If he refuses to listen to me, then be prepared to fly our Eight Air Force back to the United States on short notice. That alone should convince Prime Minister Churchill to become reasonable. If there are no questions now, I will declare this meeting over and will leave to go meet Churchill.”

As the meeting slowly broke up, Roosevelt called Ingrid and Eisenhower to his side before handing to each of them a diplomatic letter, with Ingrid’s copy being sealed with wax.

“General Eisenhower, this is a copy of the terms I will offer to the Germans, for your information, so that you will know what I am asking of the Germans. General Dows’ letter is to be hand-carried by her to Berlin and is to be opened only by the most senior German official in charge there. General Dows will now read your copy, General Eisenhower, so that she would at least know what she is going to bring to Berlin.”

Those last words made Eisenhower snap his head in surprise to look at Ingrid.

“You mean that she doesn’t yet know the details of your demands to the Germans, Mister President?”

“Only the general lines of my plan. I however never had any doubts about her accepting this mission to Berlin and she didn’t disappoint me this time...or ever.”

Eisenhower then felt very humble as he looked at the quiet but resolved expression on Ingrid’s young and beautiful face.

CHAPTER 33 – PLENIPOTENTIARY ENVOY

09:02 (GMT)

Thursday, January 13, 1944 'C'

Sky over the French coast, near Calais

Reducing the engine power of his Messerschmitt Bf 109G fighter, so that he could stay level with the American helicopter which had just crossed the French coast, Major General Adolf Galland took a moment to admire the lines of the big helicopter, which was flying at a not insignificant speed of 240 kilometers per hour. In contrast, no helicopter had been put into Luftwaffe service to date and the few prototypes Galland knew about were toys compared to this impressive machine. He and three of his fighter pilots had gone to Calais to escort this helicopter, whose trip had been announced in advance, all the way to Berlin. Galland, who knew about the diplomatic meeting which had been accepted by the Provisional Reich Government, truly hoped that it would somehow put an end to this war on terms which could be acceptable to Germany. He knew too well that the recent targeted bombings of key German industries by the Americans had all but sealed the fate of this war in the Allies' favor, as the Luftwaffe had by now lost the majority of its aircraft on the ground, due to the devastating vacuum bombs used by the Americans, on top of seeing nearly all existing German aircraft and engine plants bombed to rubble. With the systematic destruction of German radar stations and the continuing vulnerability of the WASSERFALL missile batteries to jamming, Germany was now nearly wide open to air attacks, a condition that spelled doom for the German military cause. At least, the American bombings had eliminated those fanatics who were too ready to sacrifice the whole of Germany to their grandiose dreams of domination over the whole of Europe. Whoever had planned this had certainly aimed straight.

As Galland was flying level and to the left of the American helicopter, he recognized with a shock its pilot, a young and beautiful redhead.

"Ingrid? Again?"

Looking back at him, the pilot smiled to Galland while waving her left hand as a 'hello'.

"Damn, this can't be just a coincidence." said Galland to himself. "What is exactly her role in all this?"

He was still rehashing that question in his head when they arrived over Berlin some three hours later. As previously arranged through the services of the Swiss embassy, the helicopter then landed at the Tempelhof Airport, situated just south of downtown Berlin. Galland and his three wingmen also landed in Tempelhof, so that they could escort back the American helicopter once the meeting with the provisional government would have concluded. As Galland's Bf 109G fighter was coming to a stop next to the helicopter, which had landed at the vertical, he saw that Luftwaffe soldiers were already surrounding the helicopter, not to attack it but rather to protect it from possible attacks by Nazi fanatics opposed to surrender. However, the recent American bombardments had considerably eased the danger of such actions, by targeting and destroying most of the SS units and command centers in Berlin, opening the way for troops from the Luftwaffe and from the regular army to take over security duties in the capital. Those SS troops still alive in Berlin and who had refused to leave had then been put down by elite Luftwaffe paratroopers and Heer commandos from the Brandenburg Regiment, which obeyed the head of Army Intelligence, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, who was no great lover of the Nazi regime.

Hurrying to remove his flying helmet, flotation vest and parachute and then putting on his general officer's cap, Galland jumped on the ground and quickly walked to the helicopter, getting there in time to watch its rear cargo ramp lower to the ground. An American jeep then rolled out of the big machine, with two young women sitting in it. One of them was Ingrid Dows, now wearing a sky-blue beret instead of her flying helmet, while the other was a very young and also very pretty girl who was also wearing a sky-blue beret. Both wore combat uniforms and were armed with handguns. Galland gestured to the Luftwaffe officer in charge of the troops around the helicopter to not react to the fact that the women were armed, then walked around the jeep to approach Ingrid Dows, who was sitting in the front passenger seat. Both exchanged salutes before Galland spoke first.

"Welcome to Berlin, Major General Dows, or should I say 'Weiss'?"

"I would prefer that you call me 'Dows', as it is my married name, but simply 'Ingrid' will do, Adolf, like in the old days."

Understanding that she was alluding to their past intimate encounters in 1940, Galland smiled and nodded once.

"It will be 'Major General Dows', for the decorum of this present moment. I must say that I wonder how such a young woman like you managed to be first accepted as a fighter pilot in the American air force, then got to climb the rank ladder all the way to two-star general."

Ingrid made a mischievous grin as she answered him in German.

"Well, let's say that I am a girl full of surprises, Herr Galland. Maybe we could discuss that subject later, after I will have met with your provisional government. By the way, this is Corporal Norma Jean Mortenson, my driver and a member of my air wing." Galland smiled to the young woman, a teenager really, who was a lot more than simply cute.

"A delightful-looking young woman I must say. I will now guide you to the Hotel Bristol, where a conference room was booked for your meeting with our government representatives. You do know where the Hotel Bristol is, do you?"

"I certainly do, General Galland: my family house was situated not far from here...until it was bombed to rubble by the British in 1940, killing my whole extended family."

"I am sorry to hear that, truly. You have my sincere condolences for your loss."

"Thank you, General Galland."

Galland then signaled to the Luftwaffe's Kubbelwagen²⁷ light car waiting nearby to come forward, then sat in it, along with two Luftwaffe soldiers. Before guiding Ingrid's jeep out of the airfield, Galland gave a few instructions to the officer in charge of the troops around the helicopter about safeguarding it.

As the two small vehicles drove off the airfield and started rolling northward along Wilhelmstrasse, Ingrid smiled to Norma, who was understandably tense as she drove her jeep.

"You may relax, Norma: you are doing just fine."

"Uh, thanks, General. I must say that driving like this in the enemy's capital is a bit unnerving."

²⁷ Kubbelwagen: WW2 military variant of the famous VW Beetle.

"That is quite understandable, Norma. And please call me simply 'Ingrid' when in private. The fact that you volunteered to be part of this mission is a testament to your courage, which you already demonstrated many times in this war."

"Thank you, Gen...uh, Ingrid. You said in the helicopter that you were born here, in Berlin?"

"That's correct. In fact, my family home was near this airport. I grew up there until my family was killed in a British bombing, after which I joined the Luftwaffe as a female auxiliary, not because I believed in the Nazi cause but because I wanted to defend my country against further British bombings."

Both then fell silent while looking left and right at the parts of Berlin they were passing by while following Galland's Kubbelwagen. To Ingrid's satisfaction, most of this part of Downtown Berlin was still intact, a testament to the precision of the strikes effected by her own air wing. However, the scenery changed drastically as they arrived at the corner with Niederkirchnerstrasse and could look at the ruins of both Reich chancelleries and of the various ministry buildings around them. While the rubble and debris which had blocked Wilhelmstrasse had by now been cleared, hundreds of workers and dozens of pieces of heavy machinery were still busy cleaning up those city blocks. Young Norma opened wide eyes at the sight of the ruins.

"Wow! Our girls sure did a bang-up job here."

"They effectively did a hell of a job over Berlin and over other parts of Germany. I wonder if they have found Adolf Hitler's body yet. Mind you, I don't expect the Germans to inform me on that subject. The fact that we haven't heard or seen him since our bombing raid should be fair proof that he is indeed dead, along with most of his Nazi minions."

"Uh, that General Galland, is he a Nazi believer, Ingrid?"

"I don't believe so, Norma. Our intelligence on him describes him as a talented fighter pilot with no known political links, except for the obligatory vow of obedience to Hitler every member of the German military had to make, like Americans do with their constitution or like the British do with their kings and queens."

Once past the ruins of the old and new Reich chancelleries, they continued on Wilhelmstrasse until they arrived at the crossing with the Unter Den Linten Strasse, near the Brandenburg Gate, where they turned right, with Galland's car still in the lead. Soon after that, they rolled onto the main entrance loop of the Hotel Bristol, one of the most

luxurious hotels in Berlin, a grandiose-looking five-story Baroque-style building, which appeared mostly intact, save for a few broken windows which were being repaired. There, Galland got out of his Kubbelwagen and walked to Ingrid's jeep as Ingrid also stepped out of her vehicle.

"The representatives of our Provisional Reich government will receive you in a conference room on the second floor of this hotel, General Dows. If you will please follow me."

"Could my driver come with me, instead of freezing outside while waiting for me, General Galland?"

Galland nodded his head at once while looking at Norma Jeane Mortenson.

"Your corporal is welcome to follow you inside. My soldiers will watch your jeep in the meantime. By the way, I have a question for you. I thought that American aviators wore either a service cap or a wedge garrison hat, yet you both wear berets."

Ingrid made a gentle smile as she answered the German ace.

"You are right about berets not being a standard type of head cover for American air force personnel. My unit, the 99th Air Wing, won the exclusive right to wear sky blue berets as a presidential reward, after we conducted an air assault operation which helped save our people prisoner of the Japanese in the Philippines."

"I see! I heard about this business of the Japanese slaughtering their prisoners of war: quite a barbaric act. Germany may be allied with Japan but we would never commit such an atrocity."

Ingrid looked at Galland with a hard expression, trying to decide if he was talking out of ignorance or was intentionally lying to her.

"You do know that I was educated during many months by Nancy Laplante, the Canadian time traveler your Gestapo tortured to death in 1941. She told me many things about what her history said about this war and one thing I know from her is that Germany committed plenty of monstrous war crimes in this conflict, including the systematic extermination of the Jews of Europe, so please don't gloat too much about Germany's conduct in this war, General. However, those atrocities were mostly committed by the SS Corps, while the Luftwaffe and the Kriegsmarine did not participate in those killings. Thankfully, most of the human monsters who committed those acts are now dead. Well, I am here to make sure that such atrocities and loss of human lives finally stop, so let's go inside now."

"Right!" replied the chastised Galland, suspecting that what she had said was probably the truth. "This way, please."

With Ingrid and Norma following close behind him, Galland walked through the main doors of the Hotel Bristol and led them up the monumental staircase of the hotel's lobby, then turned left along a large, carpeted hallway. After walking maybe twenty meters down that hallway, Galland opened a double door guarded by two armed Luftwaffe paratroopers and invited the two women in. Once inside, Ingrid found herself in a large and luxurious lounge in which a conference table and chairs had been set. Five men in uniform attracted her attention at once, as they apparently were the ones who had been waiting for her. Seeing a few chairs lined against the wall near the entrance door, Ingrid pointed them to Norma.

"Please take a seat while I speak with those gentlemen, Corporal Mortenson."

"Yes ma'am!"

As Norma sat down, Ingrid and Galland walked to the group of men, then stopped at attention a few paces in front of them and saluted them. The most senior man, whom Ingrid recognized as being Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, saluted back for the group before stepping to her to shake hands with her.

"I am happy to see that you made it safely to Berlin, Major General Dows. I am Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, head of the Reich's Provisional Government. Present with me are the main members of our provisional government. Let me present them to you." Dönitz led her first to a man who wore the yellowish-brown uniform of a Nazi Party official.

"General Dows, this is Herr Albert Speer, who is our ranking civilian member of government and who is also our Minister of Armaments."

Despite being turned off by the man's Nazi Party uniform, Ingrid stayed polite while shaking hands with Speer, who had the reputation of being a brilliant technocrat and manager.

"Pleased to meet you, Herr Speer." she said while taking his hand and pressing it with a strength that surprised him. The next man in line wore the rank insignias of a field marshal of the German Army, who presented himself.

"GeneralFeldMarshal Erwin Rommel, representing the Wehrmacht units on our Western Front."

"Pleased to meet you, GeneralFeldMarshal. You gained quite a reputation in North Africa, I must say."

"And you yourself gained quite a reputation in the Pacific, General Dows. Just the fact that you are so young for your rank shows that you must be quite a dangerous foe."

"The Japanese would agree with you on that, GeneralFeldMarshal."

Next in line for a handshake was another graying field marshal.

"GeneralFeldMarshal Hans Guderian, in charge of the Wehrmacht units on the Eastern Front."

The last man in line was quite old and wore the uniform of a Kriegsmarine admiral.

"Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, head of the Abwehr, our military intelligence."

"I was told after Nancy Laplante's body was repatriated to England that your agents attempted to free her from the Gestapo but arrived too late. I want to thank you and your agents for this attempted rescue, Herr Admiral."

"It was the least we could do, General Dows. At that time, the Gestapo and the SS were acting in flagrant violation of an order by the Führer to have Brigadier Laplante treated decently and according to the rules of the Geneva Conventions."

While that surprised Ingrid, she didn't let it show and nodded her head in salute to Canaris. Then, she took out of a cargo pocket the sealed diplomatic letter which she was tasked to deliver in Berlin, giving it to Dönitz.

"Here is the letter from President Roosevelt, meant to detail to your government the terms presented to Germany in order to put an end to this war in Europe, Herr Gross Admiral. You will find identical copies in German and in English. You may take all the time you wish to examine and discuss it with the members of your provisional government. In the meantime, I will go sit with my driver, or do you prefer that we wait outside in the hallway."

"Some privacy would be welcome while we discuss this subject, General Dows. There is a small dining room next door in which you will be able to have something to eat and drink in the meantime. General Galland will accompany you."

"That is most acceptable to me, Herr Gross Admiral. I am certain that General Galland is dying to compare with me air combat in the Pacific versus Europe."

"I am sure of that. Just out of curiosity, how many air victories do you have, General Dows?"

"I have accumulated to date a total of 122 air victories, the great majority of them over the Pacific, Herr Gross Admiral."

"More than General Galland? I am impressed, General Dows. Well, we will try to do this quickly, so that you could depart soon to return to England. Be advised that we may ask you to return here in a few days, once we will have finalized our response to your President."

"That is most understandable. However, don't take too much time before presenting your response. Let's just say that President Roosevelt had to put some pressure on Prime Minister Churchill in order for him to show patience and abide by this temporary ceasefire."

"I am taking good note of this, General Dows. General Galland will now guide you to the private dining room next door."

Dönitz waited until Ingrid and Norma had left the lounge before pointing the conference table to his colleagues.

"Let's sit down and read this letter together, so that we could discuss what we think of it, gentlemen."

The five men promptly sat down around one end of the table and watched Dönitz open the letter and extract from it two documents: one written in German; the other in English. Dönitz gave the English copy to Admiral Canaris, who was fluent in English, while keeping for him the German copy, then started to read it silently at first before commenting for the others' benefit on its content.

"Well, here are President Roosevelt's conditions for our surrender, gentlemen. It first states that us refusing those terms will result in the immediate resumption of air bombardment on Germany and on German units in Occupied Europe. If we accept those terms, then a ceasefire will continue until we will have withdrawn our forces back into Germany, at which time a more permanent accord will be discussed. Here are thus the terms offered by President Roosevelt: first, we will have to immediately withdraw all our troops and units from Occupied France, Belgium, the Netherlands, the Luxembourg and Denmark. While doing so, all armored vehicles except for light reconnaissance vehicles and self-propelled anti-tank guns will be left behind, intact. The same will apply to all our artillery and anti-aircraft guns bigger in caliber than 88 mm. Halftracks will be allowed to go back to Germany but not tanks, be they light, medium or heavy, will be

allowed to be withdrawn. There will be no restrictions in that respect for wheeled vehicles and towed guns of less than 88 mm in caliber.”

Dönitz then looked at Erwin Rommel, who represented the Wehrmacht units in Western Europe.

“What do you think of this first term, Herr Rommel?”

“That it could have been a lot harsher, Herr Gross Admiral. Roosevelt could have demanded that we abandon all our heavy weapons before withdrawing. Instead, this clause will permit us to withdraw back to Germany with enough medium anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons to allow us to defend our western and northern borders. The alternative, with us refusing those terms, would have condemned our troops to the continuation of American air bombardments, which have already hurt us badly.”

“And what about our troops on the Eastern Front?” asked Hans Guderian.

“That is covered in the second term of this letter, Herr Guderian. Basically, our units in occupied Soviet Union territory will withdraw with all their equipment and weapons to the pre-1939 eastern borders of Poland, Rumania, Bulgaria and East Prussia, where they will stand facing eastward to prevent any attempt by the Soviets to enter those territories. A simplified map of that line of withdrawal is joined as an annex to this letter. The Soviets will only be allowed to retake their old territories in the Baltic States, Belorussia and Ukraine. If the Soviets try to push further west, then the Americans and British will bomb them. Then, once Anglo-American troops will have arrived in Poland, Rumania and Bulgaria, they will replace our forces there, allowing our units there to withdraw to Germany proper, but without their heavy weapons, along the same lines as our troops retreating from the West. East Prussia will then be given back to Poland at that time. At the end of what Roosevelt calls ‘Phase One’ of his plan, our forces will all be back within pre-1939 German borders, equipped with light weapons and vehicles. The Luftwaffe will be allowed to retain its fighters, fighter-bombers and transport aircraft but will have to scrap its fleet of bombers. We will thus be able to hold our borders and defend Germany but will lose our heavy guns, tanks and other weapons considered as ‘offensive weapons’. As for the Kriegsmarine, our ships and submarines are to immediately cease all hostilities and return to their bases on our Baltic and North Sea coasts. All warship construction will also be halted until further accords will decide what to do with them.”

Albert Speer, who had been reading over Dönitz’s shoulder, then added to that.

"Our war industries are to cease production of all armaments and munitions the moment we will accept the terms of this armistice. That will leave us with enough to defend ourselves for a few months, especially if we stop shooting away our munitions, but will make us incapable of further offensive operations. Once all the terms of Phase One will have been implemented, a future armistice conference will be held in Switzerland between us, the United States, Great Britain, Canada, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark, with Poland participating as observer."

"Uh, what about Czechoslovakia?" asked Admiral Canaris. "It was joined to Germany via a plebiscite before the war started in 1939."

"Uh, this letter only says that the status of Czechoslovakia will be discussed at that future armistice conference. However, there are a number of so-called 'special clauses' mentioned in this letter. Firstly, all SS units and offices, including Gestapo and SD offices, will be immediately disarmed and disbanded. If we do not enforce that clause, then this accord will be declared null and void. There is also a demand that all concentration camps and extermination camps operated by the SS be immediately taken over by Wehrmacht or Luftwaffe troops, with the camp guards arrested as war criminals and handed over to the Allies and with the inmates freed and returned to their original homes with adequate compensations for their suffering. Both the SS and Gestapo will cease to exist and will not be allowed to continue operating, while the National-Socialist Party will be banned from existence. The last term concerns the prisoners of war held by both sides. The moment that we will accept the terms of this letter, mass exchange of prisoners will start on both sides, to be arranged under the good offices of the International Red Cross."

Dönitz then looked gravely at his members of provisional government.

"Gentlemen, these terms may sound harsh to you but I frankly had expected them to be a lot harsher. In fact, I was expecting Roosevelt to ask for our complete surrender, the complete disarmament of German forces and the occupation of Germany. Instead, we will be allowed to keep intact pre-war Germany, except for East Prussia, and to defend it with our lighter equipment and weapons. The alternative would be for us to refuse the terms of this letter and to then suffer a continuation of air bombardments on Germany. Can we really afford in the long run to refuse those terms and continue this war, gentlemen?"

Speer was the first to speak after a long silence.

"I would honestly say that we can't continue like this, Gross Admiral. Our aeronautical industries and oil refineries have been hammered hard during the last month and rebuilding them, even without the hindrance of more bombings, would be the work of many months. Even one month of continued bombings by the Americans would be enough to mostly destroy our other war-related industries, including submarine building and ammunition and vehicle production. If we can at least save Germany proper, then I am ready to agree to Roosevelt's terms. It seems from those terms that President Roosevelt has correctly judged the long-term threat represented by Stalin towards Western Europe and is ready to use our forces to help contain the Soviets."

"I believe so as well, Herr Speer." said Hans Guderian. "If I may say as well, while we presently hold the Soviets in check, there are signs that they are about to start a large-scale offensive meant to retake their territories from us. Without further ammunition resupply and vehicle replacement from Germany, my forces will not be able to hold the Soviets for very long and, once we run out of ammunition, we will then lose all our people and will leave the eastern borders of Germany open to Soviet forces. That last outcome is unacceptable to me. I say, let's agree to the terms of this letter."

"Herr Rommel?" asked Dönitz, making Erwin Rommel nod his head.

"I am ready to accept those terms, Gross Admiral."

"Admiral Canaris?"

"I also find those terms acceptable, Gross Admiral."

"Herr Speer?"

"I am an architect by trade and was dreaming of building a greater Germany. I will not suffer to see it reduced to ruins just to satisfy the ego of a few fanatics. I say: let's accept those terms."

"Good! Then we are all in agreement. Let's call back in General Dows and present her our decision."

Ingrid appeared to be both calm and serene when she came back in the lounge, accompanied by Galland. What the Germans couldn't know was that she had been able to telepathically read their minds from the dining room while sipping on a cup of coffee. The final decision by the German leaders to give up had come as an immense relief to her. Still, she acted as if she didn't know yet of the outcome of their discussion.

"Have you reached a decision on the terms offered by President Roosevelt, gentlemen?"

"We have, General Dows. We collectively agreed to accept the terms offered by President Roosevelt. Immediately after this meeting is over, orders will be sent to all German forces, telling them to withdraw as per the terms of this letter. In return, we expect the Anglo-American forces to continue this ceasefire and not resume your bombings of Germany. Can we count on this, General Dows?"

"You can, Gross Admiral Dönitz. I will thus return to my helicopter and fly back to England to bring the good news to my superiors. Expect soon a visit by high-level representatives of the International Red Cross, so that a mass exchange of prisoners of war can be effected as soon as possible. Those representatives will also most probably ask for close protection by Wehrmacht or Luftwaffe units when they will go ensure that the inmates in the various concentration camps and Gestapo prisons are freed and those camps and prison are then closed for good. If you don't know details about those concentration camps, just ask Minister Speer about them: his industries relied on hundreds of thousands of camp inmates for slave labor. By the way, you can refer to the last annex to President Roosevelt's letter if you need a detailed list of those concentration and extermination camps. See you soon, gentlemen."

The eyes of the other German leaders snapped towards Speer at that moment and he had to hide his anger at her departing barb as Ingrid turned around and walked out after saluting Dönitz. Speer became angrier and more frustrated when Admiral Canaris, no lover of the SS Corps, spoke up after Ingrid had left.

"With your permission, Gross Admiral, I would like to use units of the Brandenburg Regiment to go escort those Red Cross representatives and to close those camps. I doubt that those sadistic cowards from the SS-Totempkoff will be able to fight off my commandos."

"Do so, Admiral Canaris. If you need support from Luftwaffe troops to do so, then you only need to ask."

"Thank you, Herr Gross Admiral."

The moment that she had been collected by Ingrid in the dining room and was walking with her towards the exit, with Galland leading them, Norma couldn't help ask her a question in an anxious tone.

"Did our mission succeed, General? Have the Germans accepted the terms dictated by President Roosevelt?"

"They have, Corporal. With luck, we are now this much closer to an end of this war in Europe."

"Thank God! Uh, what about Japan then?"

"That is still another kettle of fish, Corporal. We may get peace in Europe but the Pacific and Asia will be a longer problem, I'm afraid."

11:01 (Berlin Time)

Sunday, January 16, 1944 'C'

Concentration and extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau

West of Krakow, Poland

Lieutenant-Colonel Kurt Wagner, of the Luftwaffe's 1st Paratroop Panzer Division Hermann Göring, stood next to Major Albert Steiner, of the Brandenburg Regiment's Second Battalion, as both officers looked down at the long and large trench filled with the emaciated and naked bodies of hundreds of dead camp inmates. Wagner, like Steiner, felt nearly sick with disgust and horror as he eyed the corpses of men, women and children piled three-deep in the trench. Their units had arrived early in the morning and had no problems disarming the guards of the camp, which included a number of female SS auxiliaries, before inspecting the inside of the camp. What they had found had enraged the Luftwaffe and Brandenburg men, to whom Auschwitz-Birkenau had supposedly been a prisoner of war camp for Soviet soldiers and Polish Resistance fighters. They were now still waiting for the arrival of a team of representatives from the International Red Cross sometime this afternoon.

Wagner exchanged a hard look with Steiner before speaking to him.

"There is no need for a formal trial in view of such evidence of atrocities. What do you think, Herr Steiner?"

"I agree with you, Colonel. This is a giant stain on Germany's name and justice has to be served...now!"

With the Brandenburg officer in agreement with him, Wagner then looked at one of his subaltern officers also standing next to the trench.

"Herr Major, have the camp guards lined up against the wall of one of their barracks and prepare a large firing squad."

"What about the female SS auxiliaries, sir?"

Wagner didn't think for long before answering that.

"Line them up as well, Major. I will command the firing squad myself."

Lining up the 360 or so camp guards and 55 female auxiliaries took only minutes, with 500 Luftwaffe soldiers formed in two ranks facing them from twenty meters away. Machine guns were also set up on the flanks, in order to sweep the SS guards from the sides. However, Wagner first pushed the camp commandant, a SS major named Rudolph Höss, in front of the other SS guards, then raised his pistol as he spoke.

"For committing war crimes which dishonored Germany, I condemn you to death, Major Höss."

"But I was only..."

POW

Letting Höss drop dead in the snow-covered ground, Wagner then walked to one side of the line of Luftwaffe soldiers and shouted out orders to them.

"LUFTWAFFE SOLDIERS, STAND READY! AIM! FIRE!"

The noise of shooting rifles, sub machine guns and medium machine guns was deafening and went on for many seconds, until all the camp guards, male and female, were down on the ground. Soldiers then went forward to finish off any guard still moving or breathing. At the end of it, Wagner spat in the direction of the dead SS guards.

"May you roast in Hell, you sadistic bastards. You were not worthy of being called soldiers."

CHAPTER 34 – ARMISTICE IN EUROPE

15:44 (GMT)

Tuesday, February 22, 1944 'C'

Headquarters of the 99th Air Wing (the Fifinellas)

RAF Charmy Down, County of Somerset

England

General George Kenney sat in a sofa opposite the sofa used by Ingrid after giving her a large envelope and started speaking as she was opening it.

"I have good news for all of us, Ingrid. First, as you know, the Germans formally accepted in writing the terms of the letter from President Roosevelt that you brought to Berlin three weeks ago. They will thus sign an armistice with us on March 3, in Geneva. You will be present as part of the American delegation: you amply deserve such an honor and President Roosevelt specifically asked that you be there."

"It will indeed be a great honor for me to attend, sir. Do we have news about Japan? Are they finally ready to surrender?"

"Unfortunately, no! In this case, no news is bad news for us, so we will keep up the naval blockade of Japan until they do finally surrender. This leads me to why I wanted to speak with you. Your wing is one of our few air units now equipped with long-range new generation aircraft like the A-11 and C-142 and its variants, thus would be more useful in the Pacific than in Europe. Your girls also know how to fight the Japanese, contrary to most of our air units in England. For those reasons, your air wing will be moved back to the Pacific at the end of March and will go reestablish itself at Clark Field, Nichols Field and Nielson Field, in the Philippines. I know that your aviatrixes would have liked to stay in Europe but there is still a lot to be done in the Pacific."

If Ingrid was disappointed by that news, she didn't show it.

"I understand, sir. Supporting our young men will always take precedence for us Fifinellas."

"And I thank them for that, Ingrid. However, they will move back to the Philippines without you, for a number of reasons. Please hear me out before you jump

on me to scratch my face, Ingrid. First off, Evelyn Sharp will be promoted to the rank of brigadier general, which is a sufficient rank to command an air wing. She has also proven to be an excellent leader and a good air tactician, thanks to your teachings to her and to your other aviatrixes. As for you, you will be detached from your wing once it starts transiting into the Pacific and will stay in Washington for a while afterwards. At that time, your permanent rank of colonel will be upgraded to that of your present temporary rank of major general. That is mostly thanks to President Roosevelt, who appreciates very much your competence, courage and ability to think outside of the box. He knows how rare your kind of talent is and doesn't wish to lose or waste such a talent. I suppose that you will want to stay in the Army Air Force after this war has truly ended, Ingrid?"

"Hell yes, sir! Where else could I continue to fly high performance aircraft? I just don't see myself become a simple passenger airliner pilot. However, how will I be able to fly if I am stuck behind a desk in Washington?"

Somehow, Kenney smiled at her last question.

"How? By not being stuck behind a desk, Ingrid. Rather, you will be stuck behind a school desk."

"Er, I don't get it, sir."

"Basically, I will be sending you to earn for yourself a university degree, for a couple of reasons. First, I won't tell you anything new by saying that you don't have only friends within the Army Air Force and within the American forces in general. Many male officers resent the fact that you rose so quickly at such a young age, while ignoring or even denying your accomplishments in combat. Be assured that I am not one of those misogynistic idiots."

"And I thank you for that, sir."

"You're welcome, Ingrid. Second, one of the arguments those male officers use against you is the fact that, contrary to regular officers, you still don't have a college or university level diploma, nor did you graduate from one of our military colleges. I replied to some of them that sending you to a military college, like the War College, would be a dumb idea, as you debunked in combat most of the teachings done at the War College. For you to be forced to adopt their present teachings would be the summum of idiocy. Instead, I will be sending you to a civilian university, using our new G.I. Bill to pay your tuition and residency fees during your four years of learning."

"Four years without flying, sir? That will feel awfully long for me, sir."

"Who said that you would not be flying at the same time, Ingrid? What I intend to do is to transfer you to our air reserves during your studies, so you will be able to fly with an Air Force unit on weekends. How's that for you?"

"That's a lot more agreeable to me, sir. Will I be able to choose which university I will study in and which degree I will be pursuing, sir?"

"Yes, but please don't go study something like music."

Ingrid had a chuckle at that remark.

"Don't worry, sir: I am no musician. I have wanted for some time already to study aeronautical engineering, sir. I even used some of my spare time during the war to study on my own basic subjects like advanced mathematics, physics, aerodynamics and general engineering. I am thus confident that I could ace an entrance exam to any of our universities. I particularly wish to be able to study aeronautical engineering at the Boston's M.I.T.²⁸, if possible. General Doolittle studied aeronautical engineering there and highly recommends the M.I.T. to me."

Kenney nodded his head in approval.

"The M.I.T. is indeed a very highly rated learning establishment, Ingrid. If you could enroll there, it would be perfect. To finish on that subject, the main reason for me and the President to want you to stay and get a degree is that I have little faith in the present Army Air Force generals to be able to guide us towards the future. Very few of them proved to have open minds or to have what I would call true vision. You are a rare and precious commodity in that respect, Ingrid."

"And once I will have graduated from the M.I.T., what then, sir?"

"Then, President Roosevelt would like to see you take charge of our jet aircraft programs, so that our air force could enter that new age in quick strides, rather than with the present baby, bumbling steps we are engaged into."

The mention of President Roosevelt then made Ingrid's expression turn sober.

"Sir, you did read through the Hourglass Files, right?"

"Well, parts of them. Why do you ask?"

"Because President Roosevelt will not live for much longer, sir. He is already old and quite sick and probably won't see the complete end of this war. However, his successor will still need my talents, so I will still follow your plan to fruition, sir."

²⁸ M.I.T.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology. One of the highest rated engineering schools in the U.S.A.

“Thank you, Ingrid. The nation could truly use your continued service in the Army Air Force. I myself intend to continue as head of the Army Air Force for at least two more years and I will insure that nobody at the Pentagon will try to stab you in the back while you study engineering. I will also make sure that the 99th Air Wing is not simply disbanded and that it will become a permanent unit of the Army Air Force, with its female members given all due considerations for their valor and expertise.”

Ingrid felt relief on hearing that, as she had feared that the numerous misogynists still populating the ranks of senior Pentagon officers and officials could have forced out her aviatrixes at the end of the war. With Kenney present to protect their future military careers, her women were thus going to be able to further serve and advance within the Army Air Force. That, even more than her own future, had been her main preoccupation.

“Thank you, sir, for all that you are doing for my women. I promise you that, in a few years, you will see some great jet aircraft enter service in the United States.”

ANNEX 'A' – WASP GALLERY

This page is dedicated to the hundreds of brave American women who volunteered to serve their country during World War 2 as Army women auxiliary service pilots, also known as WASPs. Unfortunately, I have space here only for a few of them, some of whom were named in this novel as fictitious combat pilots but who did serve as non-combattant ferrying pilots during that war, a number of which were killed in air accidents.



Evelyn Sharp



Teresa James



Helen Richey



Betty Huyler



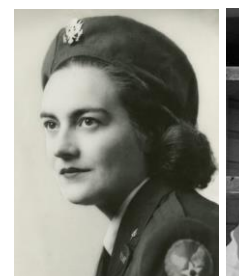
Florene Miller



Shirley Slade



Elizabeth Gardner



Anne Baumgartner



Anne Armstrong



Delphine Bohn



Gertrude Tompkins



Hazel Ying Lee



Jean Hixson



Maggie Gee



Millie Rexroat



Nancy Batson



Dorothy Avery



Cornelia Fort



Betty Jo Reed



Faith Buchner

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