

Destiny in the Pacific

By

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Jupiter  EL

DESTINY IN THE PACIFIC



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DESTINY IN THE PACIFIC

In remembrance of

**Captain Terry J. Toms U.S. Navy (Ret.)
1950-2008**

A warrior and a friend

Preface

As the “greatest generation” passes on, our country is losing a mindset and attitude that was critical to America during the dark days of the Second World War. Most Americans today can remember Viet Nam or Desert Storm as something our country was involved in but not a conflict that might determine the survival of the republic. Even the Cold War and mutual assured destruction by nuclear weapons is a concept that has dissolved into vague worries about weapons of mass destruction.

But in the days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, as Japanese forces surged across the Pacific and Southeast Asia, the ultimate outcome was far from clear. With England already in a life and death struggle with Nazi Germany and much of Europe under occupation, the future of the civilized world was very much in question. Knowing what was at stake, these young Americans responded with courage and true patriotism. By 1945 the industrial might of the United States had asserted itself and the arsenal of democracy dominated every front with men and machines. However in that first year, particularly in the Pacific area of operations, the first line of defense was thin and underequipped. But with determination, ingenuity and unparalleled bravery they turned back the Japanese onslaught. Their story will always be one of sacrifice and courage.

May we never forget them.

Part One

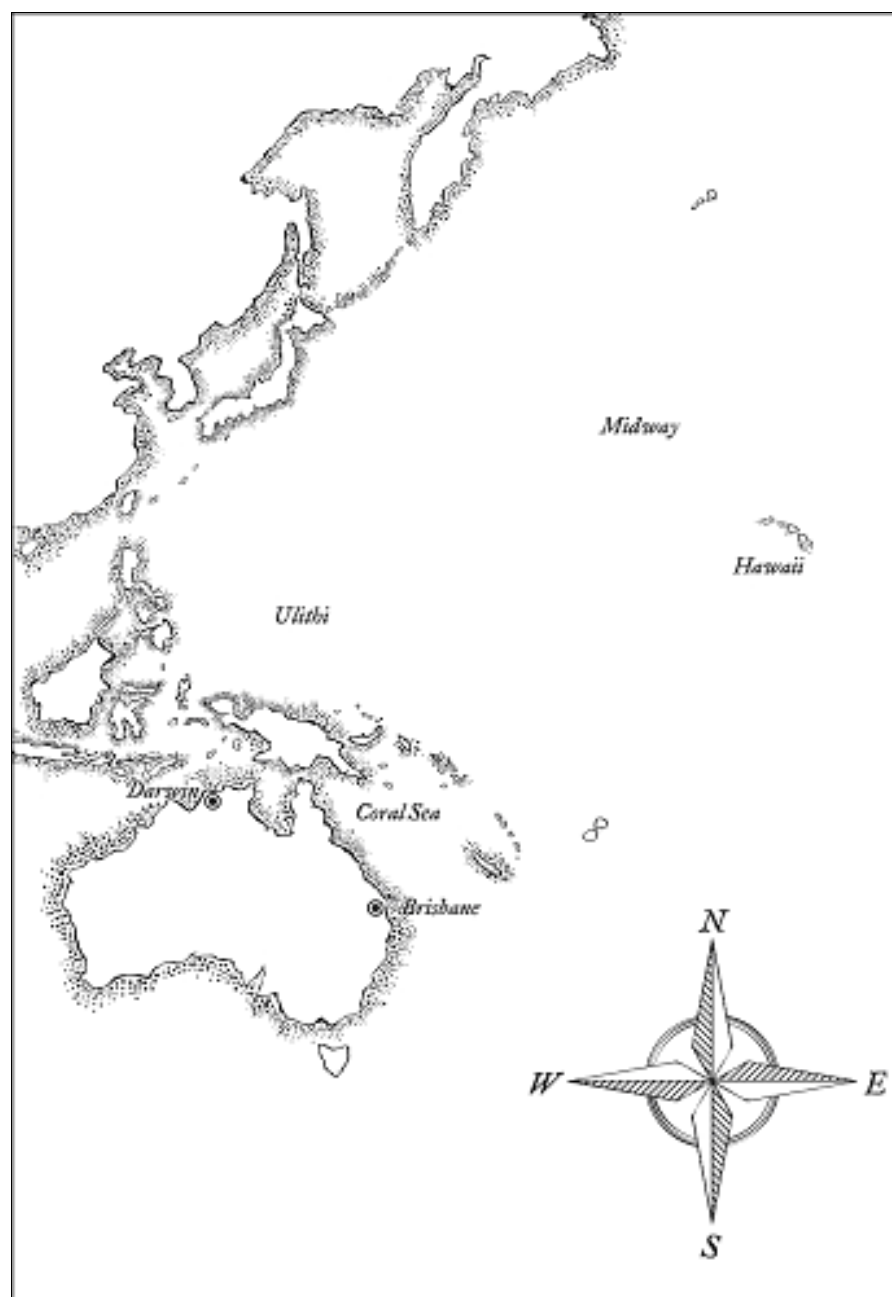
"A gigantic fleet... has massed in Pearl Harbor. This fleet will be utterly crushed with one blow at the very beginning of hostilities...Heaven will bear witness to the righteousness of our struggle."

Rear-Admiral Ito - Chief of Staff of the Combined Fleet -
November 1941

"Before we're through with them, the Japanese language will be spoken only in hell!

Admiral Halsey - December 1941

DESTINY IN THE PACIFIC





Chapter One

The End of a Career

Lying facedown on a soiled mattress, Bryan Michaels slowly began to move, his face contorted in reaction to the sour smell. The odor of dried vomit and urine enveloped him. He opened his eyes to see a dirty brick wall less than a foot from his face. A sheen of moisture covered the wall, the dampness hung over the cell like a blanket.

Rolling over, Bryan fought his nausea and tried not to be sick. Small beads of sweat shone on his forehead and upper lip. Raising a hand he attempted to rub some of the pain out of his head. A dull throb behind his eyes added to the misery of a queasy stomach. Bryan began to remember last night. He'd been in Barney's, a smoky back street tavern where he drank by himself for most of the night. Most nights Bryan could be found at the Pastime but the manager told the young officer they didn't want to see him back after a fight the previous weekend.

Last night two shipyard workers in Barney's had started needling him. It would have been smart to leave but he never did the smart thing anymore. Touching his jaw he felt soreness from one of several solid punches thrown by the two men. Running his fingers over the left side of his face he felt broken skin and crusted blood.

Bryan took a deep breath and sat up. Swinging his feet to

the floor he felt a sharp pain shoot up his leg. Putting a slight amount of weight on it confirmed a sprained ankle or worse. *Damn it.*

Still wearing his white uniform shirt and dark trousers, Bryan's jacket and tie were nowhere to be seen. A cold sweat began to soak his shirt as he fought to hold down the bile in his stomach, his skin clammy and white.

At the far end of the corridor a door opened, the metallic hinges making a sound that pierced Bryan's throbbing head. A Bremerton policeman stepped into the cellblock. Bryan watched the tall, heavysset man walk the length of the corridor and stop at his cell.

"Your name Michaels?" the man asked.

It took all of his energy to say, "Yeah."

"The base JAG wanted us to confirm we had an officer in lock up. You're an officer, right?"

Bryan paused a moment then said, "Yeah."

The man turned and walked away. Bryan lay back on the filthy mattress and closed his eyes. *Shit, that's all I need.*

Lieutenant (junior grade) Bryan Michaels belonged to the Deck Department of the *Utah*, a battleship currently in the Bremerton Naval Shipyard. After five long months the repairs were complete and the ship was scheduled to depart for Pearl Harbor in two days.

Bryan looked forward to getting underway and out of the misery of the shipyard. In charge of maintaining the exterior of the ship, his men had worked in filthy, cold conditions trying to stay ahead of the salt corrosion in the wet climate. The long tedious hours had begun to wear on everyone. Many men ended up on report after getting into fights or drinking too much on liberty. Bryan couldn't blame them, he felt the same way. The noise, the rain, and the dirt made everyone miserable. Throughout the day and night the staccato sound of rivet guns kept the crew irritable and on edge. Mud from the shipyard found its way into every compartment and passageway making cleanup a non-stop task. The sun appeared

only occasionally to remind the crew how much they missed sunny Hawaii.

When Michaels stood his quarterdeck watches on the cold fall nights, time seemed to stretch on forever. He would stay huddled in the deckhouse trying to find some protection from the frigid wind coming off Puget Sound. After the watch, he would often go back to his stateroom and find no heat or fresh water. Because of electrical work, the reduced ventilation left noxious paint fumes below decks. Bryan counted the days until his obligated service would end and he could walk off the *Utah*.

The young officer hadn't always hated the Navy. Less than a year earlier he'd been assigned to Bombing Squadron Six aboard the *Enterprise* flying the Dauntless dive bomber. A graduate of the Naval Academy Class of 1937, a bright future awaited him after receiving his wings at Pensacola in the spring of '39. But today his career was on the road to nowhere, a disaster before it really began.

Waking with a start, he heard the cellblock door swing open. Standing in the doorway, his department head, Lieutenant Commander Rosey Rosenberg didn't look happy. In his hand he carried Bryan's coat, tie and hat.

His cell door swung open and Rosenberg threw the clothes to Bryan

"You're being released to my custody. Get dressed," Rosenberg said, his voice reflecting his disgust.

Bryan unsteadily stood up next to the bunk and their eyes met.

"Hurry up. I don't like spending my mornings in a jail, Michaels."

Pausing for a moment to regain his balance Bryan slowly pulled on his coat.

"Let's go," Rosenberg said impatiently.

Rosenberg stepped aside for Michaels to pass. The two officers followed a uniformed patrolman outside into the holding area, Bryan limping on his right ankle.

"Here's your wallet, Lieutenant, you'll have to sign for it."

Another wave of nausea swept over Bryan as he scrawled his name on the form and picked up his wallet. “Thanks for a wonderful evening,” he said, tossing the pencil on the counter.

Walking down the steps into the overcast morning, Bryan filled his lungs with fresh air, the queasiness slowly subsiding. But he’d been here before. The big challenge now was to make it back to the ship without being sick. From the low gray clouds over the jail, a mist began to fall, the wind blowing it into Bryan’s face. I hate this place, he thought.

The two men walked over to the grey Ford sedan parked in the lower lot. Bryan got in the passenger seat and Rosenberg slid behind the wheel. The older man put the car in gear and pulled out of the parking lot as the rain began to fall harder.

“I have a copy of the police report and it doesn’t look good. The bar owner is pressing civil charges. He has an axe to grind with the Navy and you made yourself a perfect target.”

“What does that mean?”

Rosenberg turned onto the main road. “We don’t know. But he’s said he won’t settle out of court. He wants money for damages and a conviction for disorderly conduct. The local judge advocate will handle the case.”

Bryan cracked the window open, he still needed the fresh air. Small rivulets of water trickled inside the car. “Why doesn’t Larry Hitchcock handle it?” Bryan knew the ship’s lawyer and trusted him.

“We’re getting underway in 48 hours or did you forget?” Rosenberg’s voice had an edge to it. “You screwed up magnificently on this one. Not only a civilian incident but you’ll miss ship’s movement. When you get back to the ship, assuming you’re convicted in civil court, you’ll be taken to mast or court martial for missing ship’s movement.”

Another wave of nausea flooded over Bryan. “If I can’t sail with the ship because I have court, how can they charge me with being absent?”

Rosenberg slowed as they approached the main gate to the

shipyard. "I'm not a lawyer but that's the rule. If you're guilty, there's no defense. Now try to clean yourself up."

Bryan said nothing in response. Rosey Rosenberg was one of the few officers on *Utah* he actually respected.

Walking down Pier Twelve Michaels tried to make his uniform look as presentable as possible. He tucked the lining back into a torn seam but a large red ketchup stain on his chest couldn't be hidden.

A cold wind blew off the harbor as the rain increased. *I hate this weather.* His ankle hurt like hell, the pain increasing as he made his way up the accommodation ladder to the quarterdeck. Arriving at the platform he faced aft and saluted the national ensign. He turned to the Officer of the Deck, Lieutenant Ted Small, and saluted.

"Reporting my return aboard."

Bryan considered Small a first class prick and the two had never gotten along. "Very well," the OOD said, returning the salute with a smirk. To his Quartermaster of the Watch Small said in a very smug tone, "Petty Officer Barnwell, please note in the log: Lieutenant (jg) Michaels returned to military authority at 0915.....from the Bremerton Jail."

Rosenberg put his hand on Bryan's back. "Come on."

Bryan walked aft, his face flushed with embarrassment and humiliation. In thirty minutes it would be all over the ship. One more screw up by the "aviator." Once proud to be identified as a Naval Aviator, the term was now used derisively by many of the junior officers aboard the *Utah* who took pleasure in his situation. He descended one ladder to the second deck on the way to his stateroom. He couldn't wait to get out of his filthy uniform and take a shower. A large wooden sign blocked the main second deck passageway. *Shit!* Doubling back he crossed over to the port side and then forward to his room, his ankle throbbing steadily. When he opened the door he found Tim Hutchins at the fold down desk working on stores requests.

"You look like hell," he said, looking up from the small pile of official papers.

Trying to put on a good face Bryan grinned. “It feels worse than it looks.” Throwing his coat on the bunk, he sat down at his desk taking the weight off his ankle.

“The duty officer told me you were in the Bremerton Jail.”

“Yeah.”

“What happened?” Tim asked.

“Not really sure,” Bryan said. He pulled off his shoes. “Got in a fight with a couple of locals.”

“Your fault?”

Bryan sighed. “Probably.”

“Don’t worry. It’ll work out,” Tim said, turning back to his paperwork.

They both knew better. Bryan Michaels had alienated most of the ship’s officers and there would be little motivation by the Executive Officer or Commanding Officer to intercede on his behalf. In fact this might be their opportunity to get him off the ship forever.

Thirty minutes later Bryan heard a knock at the stateroom door. Bryan opened the door to find a Marine Corporal in dress uniform.

The young man’s face was expressionless. “Sir, are you Mr. Michaels?”

“Yup.”

“Sir, you are ordered to report to the Executive Officer at 1030 hours.”

“Wonderful.”

Standing at attention in the Executive Officer’s cabin Bryan stared straight ahead, his eyes fixed on the wall behind the seated Commander Harris. He tried hard to ignore the pain in his leg but it had been ten minutes since Harris had started reading the local

police report. Lieutenant Commander Rosenberg sat in a chair behind and to the right of Bryan. Behind them a small fan made the only noise in the cramped stateroom. A faint smell of fresh paint permeated this part of the ship.

Commander Neil Harris looked up at Bryan and tossed the report on his desk. "Lieutenant Michaels, you're a disgrace to this ship, that uniform and the Navy. I've signed temporary additional duty orders transferring you to the Naval Shipyard. You'll remain here until your civil case is settled by the authorities. If you receive time in jail you'll be transferred permanently while you serve your sentence. If there's no incarceration involved you will return to the ship for either Captain's Mast or a court martial. Do you understand these orders?"

Bryan continued to stare straight ahead but answered, "Yes, sir."

"Your father and I were shipmates in the Tennessee. He's one of the finest naval officers I've ever known. This will devastate him. So you've destroyed two lives, Mr. Michaels. I hope you're proud of yourself. Now get out of here."

Bryan Michaels turned and walked out of the cabin.

"Can I do anything to help?" Tim Hutchins asked from the stateroom doorway.

Throwing a sweater into the suitcase, Bryan closed the cover and fastened the latches. "If you happen to have a .45 handy you might put me out of my misery." He swung the case down and reached for his overcoat. "Better get going. I don't want to run into the XO any time soon."

"Pretty bad?" His friend closed the door and sat down on the bunk.

"I think the term is verbal flogging...the son of a bitch. I just don't give a shit anymore." He picked up his hat and threw it against the metal locker.

Tim stood up and grabbed his friend by the shoulders. "Hey,

there's a war coming. The Navy needs officers like you.”

Michaels looked him in the eye. “Yeah? Well they sure didn't need me last year.”

“Come on, I'll help you carry your stuff to the quarterdeck.”

Lieutenant Commander Rosenberg waited on the main deck when the two young officers came out of the hatch.

Bryan saluted Rosenberg.

Tim carried Bryan's suitcase to the quarterdeck leaving the two men alone.

Shorter than Bryan, Rosenberg looked up at him with a hard stare. “Michaels, you can't stop feeling sorry for yourself. I know what happened last year was a tough deal. But it's over. Now get your life back in order and start earning your paycheck.” Rosey extended his hand. “Now get going.”

Tim carried the suitcase down to the pier. The two friends looked back at the *Utah*.

“Thanks, Tim.”

“Hey, it's gonna be okay.”

The two shook hands. Bryan picked up his bag and began to walk down the rough wooden planks of the pier. A few sailors loading supplies into a truck looked up as he limped past. A loud chorus of cries came from the gulls gliding effortlessly over the pier. Bryan turned and looked at the ship then continued up the street.

After checking into the Bachelor Officer's Quarters, Bryan walked down the street to the Bremerton Naval Shipyard Administration Building. His ankle still hurt and it took him twenty minutes to reach the two story brick building. The transient personnel office looked like one of a hundred Navy offices he'd been through in his short career. A bored Second Class Yeoman looked up as Bryan leaned over the counter.

“Can I help you, sir?”

Laying the manila envelope on the counter Bryan said, "Checking in for temporary duty."

The man got up and began to go through the contents of the envelope. He closed the folder. "Just a moment, sir." The sailor walked away toward a glass enclosed office at the rear of the room.

Resigned to the always tedious process of checking in at a new command, Bryan put all of his weight on his good ankle to wait. The Petty Officer returned and opened the wooden swinging door to the office area. "Chief Warrant Officer Leonard would like to see you, sir."

Following the man, trying not to limp, he made his way back to the small enclosed office. On the frosted glass door painted white letters said: "CWO T.N.Leonard, USN." *I wonder what this paper pushing asshole wants?*

The Petty Officer opened the door and announced, "Lieutenant Michaels, sir."

A huge man rose to his feet behind the desk. Easily six foot four and 220 pounds, the nameplate said "Transient Personnel Officer."

"Come in, Lieutenant. Take a seat," he said pointing to a worn wooden chair by a locker. A tanned and weathered face showed the effects of many years at sea.

Checking the man's collar insignia he cautiously answered, "Thanks, Boats."

The Petty Officer closed the door.

"We heard you were coming. You caused quite a stir with the heavies this morning." Leonard laughed. "Our XO is just about as pissed at you as he is with Barney."

Interesting, Bryan thought, here's a member of the establishment who isn't acting like last night was the end of the world. "Why's that?"

Leonard pulled out a pack of Chesterfields and offered one to Bryan. "Barney O'Conner, the owner of the bar you tried to destroy, is a gold plated son of a bitch. He hates the Navy and is constantly fucking with our sailors."

“That doesn’t make sense. He runs a bar three blocks from the main gate. You think he’d want all the sailors in there.” Bryan waved off the cigarettes.

Striking a match on the side of the desk Leonard lit the Chesterfield. “There was a time when that was true. But a few years back one of our sailors screwed up. This little piss-ant off the *Lexington* takes his one daughter for a roll in the hay, gets her pregnant and then ships out. The daughter goes off the deep end. Now he’s got an unwanted kid and a daughter who spends more time drinking than sleeping. He blames the Navy.”

“And now he has an officer to take to court.”

The big man smiled ruefully. “It wouldn’t surprise me if he didn’t set you up with those yard birds. Course that might be hard to prove.”

“Well, it looks like I’m here until things get sorted out. I’m screwed with my ship getting underway for Pearl. How long will this take?” Bryan crossed his leg and began to massage the throbbing ankle.

“Hard to tell. The lawyers have to go through all the regular procedures. This is in the municipal court so it should be quicker than the county. I don’t think you’ll go to trial for at least a month.” He stubbed out his cigarette in the wide glass ashtray. “You looked like you were limping. You all right?”

Standing up gingerly he tried to put weight on the ankle. “I did something to my ankle last night. It’s not getting any better. Suppose I better hit afternoon sick call. Any chance the duty driver could run me up to the hospital, Mister Leonard?”

“No problem. And my friends call me Tiny.”

“Thanks, Tiny.”

“I’m sorry, sir. You missed the normal sick call hours.” A short hospital corpsman sat at the reception desk of the hospital filing a stack of forms. “Is it an emergency?” A tinge of sarcasm in the man’s voice.

“No, it’s not an emergency,” Bryan said. “But it hurts like hell and I’m staying here until someone damned well takes a look at it. You read me?”

“What’s the problem, Petty Officer Gibbons?”

Turning toward the female voice, Bryan saw a Navy nurse in a crisp white uniform her dark auburn hair and deep green eyes perfectly matched. Her nametag said “Sommers.”

“Ma’am, the Lieutenant missed afternoon sick call. He doesn’t want to wait.”

“I think we can take care of the Lieutenant. Remember our job is to minister to all sick and wounded.” The slightly sarcastic tone in her voice did not escape Bryan. “Follow me, Lieutenant”

She must think I’m an asshole, he thought, following her down the hallway.

Bryan sat on the examining table while she filled out information for the doctor. Watching her write, he was taken with her grace.

“So you don’t really know how you hurt your ankle?” Looking up she had a doubting look in her eyes. “Does that happen often, Lieutenant?” she asked coldly.

“No.” He looked down at the floor, feeling his face getting flushed. “Not normally,” he muttered to himself.

She rose and turned to go out the door. “It will take me a few minutes to find a doctor. Just sit there and try not to jump on anymore of my corpsmen.” She was gone.

The treatment took two hours, complete with several x-rays, two exams and a trip to the cast room. A small bone in his ankle turned out to be cracked. According to the doctor the pain would subside in a day or so and the bone would heal in short order. After getting a small walking cast and cane he returned to the reception desk.

“Is Miss Summers still here?” he asked a new corpsman manning the desk.

“Just a minute, sir. I’ll check.” Picking up the phone, he dialed and spoke briefly. “Sorry, Lieutenant. She’s off shift”

Bryan felt disappointed. He wanted to apologize to her. “Thanks for checking.” He paused for a moment. “Do you know her first name?”

The corpsman smiled. “Yes, sir. It’s Elisabeth but everyone calls her Liz.”

Bryan repeated the name, “Liz.”

The next morning Bryan had an appointment with Commander Steve Smith, the senior JAG officer. Arriving ten minutes early for his 0900 appointment he noticed he was the only officer in the waiting room with four sailors.

“Lieutenant, Commander Smith will see you now.”

Bryan followed a Third Class Yeoman down the short hallway and into the office. A short, squat man, with thinning hair and a ruddy face, Commander Smith sat at a very large wooden desk reading a folder.

Glancing up, Smith said, “Have a seat, Lieutenant. Jenkins, please close the door behind you.” Smith read for another five minutes then looked up. “You certainly stepped in it, didn’t you?”

“Apparently someone thinks so,” Bryan said, his voice hostile.

“Relax, Lieutenant. I’m on your side. Whether you know it or not you’re in deep shit. Now let’s go over your side of the story from beginning to end and don’t leave anything out.”

Bryan’s foggy recollection of the evening’s events took only five minutes to relate. After telling his story he realized how bad it looked.

“So you don’t actually remember who threw the first punch?”

Shaking his head he said, “There was some pushing...it might have been me. I was pretty hot.”

“And pretty drunk I daresay?”

“That’s probably true.”

“Don’t get smart with me, Lieutenant. I’m trying to keep your ass out of jail. So take that damn chip off your shoulder and

let's figure out some kind of defense. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir."

When Bryan left Smith's office an hour later, he felt better knowing exactly what the legal process would entail. But Smith had made it clear Bryan's days in the Navy were coming to an end. With luck, he wouldn't go into the civilian world with jail time on his record. Limping down the sidewalk he knew what this would do to his father.

Rear Admiral Chuck Michaels had recently retired in San Diego after 32 years of service. A battleship sailor, he had commanded the *Arizona* and finally Battleship Division Two before retiring last summer. Now he lived in a small house on "C" Street in Coronado, playing golf and sailing his sailboat. Bryan had last seen him after the court-martial last year.

During the two weeks it took Commander Smith to gather information and file the appropriate papers with the City of Bremerton, Bryan spent his time assigned to the Transient Personnel Office working with Tiny Leonard. The routine administrative work helped pass the time. Tiny had Bryan doing barracks inspections, personal effects inventories and a host of other things that needed to be completed for the stream of sailors passing to and from ships in the yard.

At night the two men would stop by the Officer's Club for several beers and then grab dinner at one of the local cafes. They were an odd couple, the young smart ass Lieutenant and the imposing Warrant Boatswain. But the two hit it off well and they enjoyed each other's company.

Tiny Leonard had come up through the ranks. Enlisting in 1914, he'd served in some of the first U.S. destroyers to participate in World War One. His natural talent as a sailor resulted in rapid promotion and selection as one of the youngest Chief Petty Officers in the Navy's history. One failed marriage confirmed him as a sea-going sailor and he'd been a bachelor ever since. Now as the end of his career approached, this job was probably his last assignment.

Two more years of pushing papers and then he'd receive his own set of retirement orders. Leonard dreaded the prospect of retirement. The Navy was all he'd ever known.

On Wednesday the Legal Office passed word that Bryan's trial would begin December 10th in the Municipal Court of Bremerton. Tiny dropped the letter on Bryan's desk.

"At least you'll get out of limbo."

Bryan read the letter. "Perfect timing, I can spend Christmas in the Bremerton jail. Think they have eggnog for the inmates?"

"Hey, don't convict yourself before the judge does. I've got someone working on this."

"What does that mean?" Bryan threw the letter on the desk.

"I have a former shipmate from the *Nevada*, an ex Machinist Mate named Tony Mazzeo. He got out and now works in the shipyard, Shop 43."

"I don't get it."

"Those two yard birds that worked you over? I saw they worked in the shop next to Mazzeo. I asked him to see if he could find out anything about them or what happened. It turns out he knows one of the mugs. I told him to be quiet about it but do some snooping. He's a smart kid. If there's something going on that we should know about, he'll find out. Now let's go get a beer."

Bryan bought the first round and the two sat in the Officer's Club Lounge in companionable silence.

Tiny finished his beer and ordered another round from the bartender. "I had to send your service record over to the Legal Office. Guess they need it to get ready for court."

"Yeah, probably." Bryan took a drink and reached for the peanut dish in front of his friend.

"I saw your page 9. Wasn't prying but I had to sign the custody sheet. You were in an aircraft squadron before the *Utah*?"

Normally, Bryan would have ignored the question. But he felt Tiny Leonard deserved to know the whole story. "Yeah, Bombing Six on the *Enterprise*."