

Chapter Thirty-Five

Homeward Bound: 1940

January, 1940

Honey, this is the letter I've been waiting to write to you for a long time. My last one to you, from the Canopus. I get first contact, which is as soon as we get back into port Friday evening, January 5th. Yes, then I'll be sent over to the Henderson which leaves Manila for China on the 6th. (January 3)

Herb tells Louise about the drill his ship is conducting.

Yesterday the Canopus and most of the fleet which is now in the Manila area get underway for maneuvers. This evening we are all anchored in a lovely little cove and a battle problem is being conducted, and we have to stand watches tonight; I have a twelve-to-two watch; the first night watch I've had to stand in an awful long time.

I'm writing this on my cot and as soon as I finish this letter I'll turn in and get some sleep, in preparation for that watch. It's a headphone watch way up on the bridge where along with the other people on watch we have to keep a sharp lookout for enemy motor launches trying to raid the ship. Gosh, with but two more days to do on here they would start something like this. (January 3)

Herb is eagerly anticipating the start of his homeward journey, and he reflects upon how he and Louise made it.

Louise, I can't begin to tell you what a wonderful feeling it gives me to know that I'm getting off here in a few more hours now to start the long homeward voyage back to you. ... It really doesn't seem as though I've been on this ship over two years and two months and away from you even longer than that.

That business of being philosophical as much as possible while we were apart did help tremendously Mary Lou. (Even if it did get your goat at times).

So here goes my last letter to you from the Canopus. Remember the first one, way back in October '37? My what a long time ago! Doesn't seem that long! Thank God that it did go quickly and that we are still both well and happy waiting to fly into each other's arms. (January 3)

At Sea Aboard the U.S.S. Henderson.

On Saturday Herb writes to Louise about transferring ships.

I packed up Thursday night and was all set yesterday morning. I couldn't get all my stuff into two suitcases and a sea bag; I still had half a bedding bag full of stuff left over. So after saying farewell to all of the fellows I knew on the Canopus it was with the greatest of satisfaction that I and the rest of the fellow carried our luggage into the motor launch; and then we were off.

The old decks of the Henderson sure seemed good again, in fact it is just like home, with all its inconveniences. But compared to when I came out, I'm going back in luxury; all because of that little arrow and crossed keys on my left arm. Because rated men are assigned to the division of their rate; and therefore, I was immediately turned over to the Supply Department on here.

And since there are only a few storekeepers on every ship it is more or less like a clique; and the storekeepers on here for duty try to make it as comfortable for the passenger storekeepers as they can. They gave me a locker in one of the storerooms which I can live out of; infinitely better than having to live out of a sea bag as most of the fellows in the draft must do. ... And they gave me a key to the storeroom my locker is in. ... I work down in the storeroom with the fellow in charge of it doing little odds and ends, as they come up. (January 6)

Again, Herb reflects on his experience of these events and the time spent.

I'm almost in a daze. It just seems too darn good to be true, to know that I'm actually on here; starting on my way home; even if it is a rather long trip. ... It doesn't seem as if I could have been [on the Canopus] over two years, two long years, waiting for this time to come. But I guess that is human nature, you look forward to something and it seems a long way off; but when the time finally arrives, it doesn't seem as if you had to wait very long for it. It gives you a funny, contented feeling to have things turn out the way you planned them. ... I mean, often pictured myself back on board here, all squared away, eagerly awaiting the trip back; and here I am. (January 6)

He tells Louise how happy he is to be among fellow storekeepers.

Coming out here I'd have to find any place on deck to write. Now I'm writing at a desk. Sure am glad I decided to be a storekeeper. It's undoubtedly one of the best rates in the Navy.

The storekeepers on here like to hear all the news of the ship you came off; and they tell you all about the storekeepers who went back or came out on the last trips of the Henderson. ... There are quite a few fellows on here now that I know who are on here for duty, that used to be on the Canopus.

They tell you all the news, the storekeepers on here. They all sit down in the Main Issue Room and talk for hours at a time with the incoming and outgoing storekeepers. You never saw such a bunch of tongue-waggers, sweets. And I get in my two cents worth now and then because you know every other person being talked about. And news sure gets

around fast. I think darn near every storekeeper in the U.S. Navy knows that [named person], "our supply officer," is a good for nothing "skonk." I ran into a storekeeper on here who knows him and thought about as much of him as I did. (January 6)

Herb writes his next letter in the morning while at the YMCA in Shanghai.

We pulled up the Whangpoo to Shanghai yesterday morning, and around noon tied up to a couple of buoys a little ways downstream from the Bund. And what did I get on arrival but patrol. They sent us over shortly after we anchored and it was supposed to be just for the day and evening; but after we got over at the patrol headquarters here at the YMCA we found out that we were to stay on patrol until the Henderson was about to leave.

As usual I caught dock patrol, down on the waterfront. My first watch was from 4 to 6 and boy, I never was so cold in all my life. Even with blues, leggings, woolen socks, and peacoat! Oh it wasn't so cold I guess; but coming up from the tropics as we did made it seem all the worse. ... I really kept pacing from one end of the dock to the other, flapping my arms now and then too. My duties were to keep order on the doc as far as our Navy is concerned and to count the fellows as they came ashore from the Henderson and log them in a book. (January 11)

Herb completes his second watch, from 10 to 12 P.M., and the next morning finds him writing this letter to Louise. He still has two more watches to do before he gets to return to the ship. He explains what his plans are.

When we come back here next week for our ten-day stay here, I'll go on a shopping trip and get everything I want and then I'll be satisfied. We leave here tomorrow for Chingwangtao; we stay up there a day or so and then come back here.

I'll write from here some more honey if I get time to.

February, 1940

Herb writes his next letter while they are at sea, enroute from Hong Kong to Manila. It is an airmail letter, because he needs to let Louise know about some changes to his itinerary upon his return to San Francisco.

I had been under the impression that I could get leave from the ship immediately upon tying up in Frisco but I was mistaken. Instead, our whole draft will be transferred first to the receiving station in Frisco which is at Goat Island. From there we can go on leave but it will take 4, 5, or 6 days before they get us squared away and our leave papers made out.

So the change, as I see it, is that it would hardly be practical for you to wait around the city several days or a week until I got leave. To drive up to Frisco and wait around that long might prove to be a little more expensive than the occasion warrants. It would be comparatively simple for me when my leave begins, to catch a bus down to Arroyo Grande where you could meet me. (February 2)

Herb briefly mentions something that happened while he was in Shanghai.

I had a fairly pleasant time there despite some snow and a cold wave.

Your Herbie is ever and anon a comparatively weak person in some respects. Oh, it isn't that bad. I just kissed an old friend (not Tamaro), but probably shouldn't have done it. (February 2)

He reflects upon the past two and a half years, and how they made it.

I expect my life to change radically for the better, once we are together and united Louise. It's so empty now. You know too how this business of just living on dreams can leave one down in the dumps at times. ... It's just that so much waiting almost does make a person feel continually empty of heart. But now with all our wonderful dreams in sight and almost come true we can admit how strenuous was the strain that we were under.

Gosh darling, I don't know how I ever did it; much as I know how great and complete my love is for you. There lies the answer to it naturally; but knowing my own inclination towards weaknesses as I do, my faithfulness to you does almost amaze me.

We'll be so wonderfully happy together darling; and then all this will just seem like a nightmare. It almost does now! It doesn't seem as though I can have spent two and a half years out here away from you. It seems like a blank interval. I can recall vividly watching the California horizon recede, with a leaden heart; and so I shall exultantly hail its approach; but that interval; only the term "nightmare" aptly describes it.

Not as far as living conditions, or welfare, or health was concerned; but as far as peace of mind or heart was concerned; that's where it was nightmarish. Huh; does this sound like I usually write darling or am I trying to be particularly loquacious with a pen today. All I know is I love you! (February 2)

Herb received three letters from Louise when they finally arrived at Manila after their Shanghai cruise. They were dated December 6, 12 and 31.

A week later the ship is at sea, enroute from Manila to Guam. He plans to send this last letter, with his responses to her letters, via airmail from Guam.

Oh it didn't worry me, not getting rated. And I am still glad that I went to Shanghai instead of taking the exam in January.

Know what my latest plan is? To take several civil service exams (customs collector, border patrol, postal clerk) and only go out of the Navy when I am sure of some civil service position. Of course, that's not as easy as it sounds but it's what I favor most right now. (You know – changeable me!)

I got you a veil in Shanghai. I don't know if it's what you want but we'll see. A full length one, made in France.

We'll go shopping together and get anything we both need before we go on our honeymoon.

We can't spend too much on our wedding and honeymoon darling, if we are to have anything left at all when we come back off it. Oh well, we only live once, no use worrying about it too much!

I heard from home – first time in ages. My step mother isn't so well again. She sends you love and hopes we'll both be very happy. Here we'll just be able to struggle along; and I'd still like to help them. Whew! What a world!

(February 10)

Herb closes his last letter.

Sweetheart, to me, our love is about the only thing that makes much sense to me any more in this crazy world. ... I believe in Victor Herbert's "Sweet Mystery of Life!" Darling please stay well, and happy, and patient, and love me as I love you. (February 10)

Lyrics for "Sweet Mystery of Life" by Victor Herbert

*Ah, sweet mystery of life, at last I've found thee
Ah! I know at last the secret of it all
All the longing, seeking, striving, waiting, yearning
The burning hopes, the joy and idle tears that fall*

*For 'tis love and love alone that can repay
'Tis the answer, 'tis the end and all of living
For it is love alone that rules for aye
For 'tis love and love alone the world is seeking*

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