

SARA:

A Hero's Story

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Prologue

World War II was the most widespread and the most destructive war in history. It lasted from 1939 to 1945, and eventually involved all the great powers and most of the smaller nations of the world.

The major antagonists were Germany, Italy and Japan, known as the Axis Powers. Great Britain, France, China, the Soviet Union and the United States, known as the Allied Forces, were aligned for peace.

The early years of the war were waged in Europe, from which the United States remained isolated until December 7, 1941 when Japan bombed U.S. installations at Pearl Harbor. The involvement of the United States altered the course of the war in Europe and in the Pacific, and transformed a sleeping nation into a world military power.

The cost of the war – in death, suffering and destruction of property – was enormous. Battle deaths alone were more than 16 million. At least as many civilians lost their lives as the war stretched from Europe to North Africa and from the islands of the Pacific to Southeast Asia. Many of the major cities of Europe were partially or completely destroyed by aerial bombing, and vast quantities of land were devastated. The war was fought on land, in the air and at sea.

In the final days, Japan was forced to surrender after the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, instantly killing and injuring hundreds of thousands of civilians. Emperor Hirohito signed the final surrender on September 2, 1945 to end the conflict.

Chapter 1

Island of Hell

Fiji was the most miserable place Petty Officer Third Class Harry Stewart had been stationed in all his years in the United States Navy. Since Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor, the islands had become the staging area for a huge military buildup by the Allied Fleet. Because it was strategically located between Hawaii and Australia, it served the dual purpose of supply and defense for the United States Navy. Fiji, once an insignificant island in the Pacific Ocean, provided safe harbor for American and Allied Forces as they tried to suppress Japan's steady expansion across the Pacific. At the same time, their presence helped keep trade routes open and protect Australia and New Zealand from invasion.

The sun beat so hot on the island of Fiji, Stewart swore he could fry an egg on the hood of the jeep he used to transport prisoners from one holding cell to another across the island. As the temperature and humidity hovered in the 90s, the slightest movement drained energy. It was even hard to breathe. When you did, you had to be careful what you inhaled, because Fiji was home to every insect, crawling or flying, imaginable.

Like most Americans, Harry Stewart, 32, was deeply impacted by the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. He was off duty, relaxing on the North Shore of Oahu with his wife, Flo, when the Japanese bombers struck. He hated the Japanese for what they did. Pearl Harbor was the sweetest place his eyes had ever seen when the *U.S.S. Lexington* pulled in for fuel in 1939. Harry loved the island, and he applied for shore duty in an effort to stay closer to its sandy beaches and refreshing tropical breezes. It was the best assignment of his career. Most enlisted men and commissioned officers in the Navy came to Hawaii for rest and relaxation; Harry was stationed there permanently. Sure, it wasn't always easy keeping the sailors and naval officers under control, but the beauty of the islands made the assignment all he wanted from military life. He had hoped one day to

retire to the North Shore, where he and his bride could spend the final days of their lives strolling deserted beaches and listening to waves crash against the rocks at Waimanalo Bay.

In June of 1942, however, he wasn't sure he would ever return to Flo or the crystal blue waters of the North Shore. Fiji was a death assignment. If he didn't die in the scorching heat, it seemed inevitable a snake or insect bite would do him in. Then, of course, he had to contend with the detainees — enemy prisoners and drunks, deserters and psychopaths from a variety of Allied ports, all of whom spent their days plotting escape at his expense.

Occasionally, an islander or two would be detained, casualties of war, so to speak. Not all of the Fijians loved the Americans. A few were sympathetic to the Japanese; others despised how the American buildup had changed island life and aggressively protested.

When American ships first arrived on their shores, the aborigines paddled out to meet them in outrigger canoes, offering to sell or trade native fruits and trinkets for cigarettes and items foreign to them. The American buildup was easy because the British had ruled Fiji from afar for decades. The British stayed away because the first islanders they encountered were notorious cannibals. Some of them, with their hair sticking out in all directions, still looked as if they wouldn't mind taking a bite out of a drunken sailor if he got out of line. For the most part, though, the natives were much like the Hawaiians Harry had gotten to know while stationed at Pearl. They were strong, proud and good-natured.

Of course, Harry had seen his share of men die here. Most often, it wasn't the Japanese that brought them down, though; it was dysentery, jungle rot, malaria or "Fiji Fever," an irritating form of prickly heat that infected almost every American who set foot on the island.

A seasoned veteran who had joined the Navy to see the world, Harry survived on his cunning and wits, something few would suspect. Standing only about 5-foot-8, Harry's weathered look helped him remain inconspicuous. He looked like every other Navy lifer with bushy eyebrows cascading over a pair of deep-set eyes. Shore duty had softened him a bit. A slight beer belly and red nose were signs he knew how to have a good time when he wasn't guarding the military's misfits. Behind those well-traveled, green eyes, though, hid a

shrewdness he guarded closely. There also was a fire that burned deep inside, a blazing explosion Harry could summon whenever he was provoked or threatened.

Harry was working the graveyard shift on June 7, a few short months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, with Fireman First Class Scott Perry. Stewart took every rookie under his wing. Their training was his responsibility, one he took seriously because of the many hazards of the job. He liked training the rookies at night because it was cooler and generally quiet. Perry was as green as they come, though. But the two hit it off immediately. Harry guessed it was because they were both Midwesterners. Harry was from Ohio and Scott was a Michigan native.

“I don’t know how you got assigned to this hole, kid,” Stewart told the newcomer. “Do what I tell you and maybe you’ll survive this war.”

“Don’t worry about me,” the rookie said. “I plan to be going home when this war is over. My mother needs me, and I have a sweet girl waiting on me, too.”

At 6-foot-2 Scott was a full head taller than Stewart, and he his shoulders could span Lake Erie. His dark hair, deep brown eyes and infectious smile had to drive the girls back home crazy, Stewart guessed. They would do the newcomer little good in Fiji, though. It was the size of his new partner that comforted Stewart. He knew it might come in handy if trouble ever knocked at their door. Generally the duty on Fiji was easy, but every once in a while a drunken sailor or soldier would get out of line. Yet, it was the Japanese prisoners Stewart feared the most. They were the cockroaches on the penal food chain and would do anything to escape. There weren’t many of them on Fiji, but the handful who awaited transport elsewhere was desperate.

“Where are you from?” Harry asked.

“Detroit, Michigan’s largest city and the home of Henry Ford,” Scott said.

“I’ll bet this is the farthest away from home you’ve ever been, huh sailor?” Harry asked.

“Oh, no. I’ve traveled a bit,” the rookie said. “When I was very young, General Electric sent my family to China to introduce the Asians to refrigeration. It was quite an experience, I’m told. I was too young to remember much about it.”

"You didn't tell me you were a rich kid." Stewart replied.

"Yeah, right. My father got sick shortly after we came back to Detroit. I dropped out of school and went to work to help my mother get by. I still send money home every month to help her out. Times are tough back home, even though she says the Fords have hired thousands in their factories to help with the war effort."

"You send money home?" Harry said. "You don't make that much, sixty bucks a month if you are lucky. How do you get by?"

"Look around, Harry," Scott replied. "What is there to spend your money on here? The Navy feeds me and puts a roof over my head every night. There's not much to want."

"Would you turn down a nice cool breeze, some clean clothes and a refrigerator full of beer?" Harry asked. "Doesn't that sound good to you?"

"I wouldn't mind a cool breeze. A letter I got from home said the winter snow has finally melted in Michigan, and it's starting to warm up. Michigan's beautiful at this time of the year, Harry."

"I think a nice, cold longneck would be perfect right about now," Harry said, his eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"I'd settle for a Vernor's ginger ale," Scott replied. "You know, it's made in Detroit and will cut through the dust in a man's throat like a butcher's blade through butter."

"You don't drink beer, rookie?" the petty officer asked.

"Occasionally," Scott said, "but I've never acquired a taste for it. We never had much alcohol around the house when I was growing up. I figure it's a habit I can easily do without, at least while I'm so far away from home."

"That's smart," Harry said. "It's the giggle juice that makes this job a pain in the ass. More than half of the shitheads we're assigned to watch got drunk and busted. If it weren't for the booze, I'd have my feet up and my guard down. Unfortunately, too many of these swabbies think four hours of liberty is a license to see how drunk they can get. When they climb back onto their ship drunker than Billy B. Damned, the MPs send them right back here to us. You're smart to stay away from the hooch, son."

The more he was around the kid, Harry quickly realized the more he liked him. Scott, of course, looked like the All-American boy, a gangly teenager from the Midwest. He was the youngest son of

Demott and Florence, and had experienced more ups and down in his first two decades of life than most young people his age could even imagine. He was a late and blessed arrival for the Perry family. His brothers were ten and twelve years his senior.

Scott's family prospered in the late 1920s. His father was a salesman who promoted of General Electric products around the world. They had, in fact, spent 1929 in China, his father promoting refrigerators in the fledgling Asian market to anyone who would listen. Scott was only five years old.

When the family returned to the United States, the Depression was not far off. Even worse for the Perry clan, the family patriarch began losing his vision and eventually went blind from a rare condition called retinitis pigmentosa, a genetic disorder with no cure. With his father's income lost and his older brothers struggling to support families of their own, Scott strained to help his mother make ends meet. She took in laundry and plied her sewing skills wherever possible; he dropped out of high school to work odd jobs for whatever money he could bring home. Throughout the period, he was able to maintain boyhood friendships, a childhood girlfriend and the belief that when the Depression ended he would find a new direction in life. His life took another unexpectedly turn when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. He joined millions of other Americans and enlisted.

HARRY AND SCOTT had been standing guard together for about three weeks, with hardly an incident to report. Harry knew, though, it was only a matter of time before their savvy would be tested. He'd been in the Navy long enough to know that calm always was followed by a storm; he just didn't know when or from what direction it would come.

It was midnight, six hours into a 12-hour stand, when Stewart told his partner that the quiet night gave him the creeps. It was damp and hot after a week of tropical rainstorms. "Don't be falling asleep or shining your nob tonight, sailor," Stewart said. "Something just doesn't feel right. It's too quiet."

"I was thinking the same thing," Scott said. "What do you think is wrong? Even the crickets seem to have deserted us tonight."

"Yeah, I know. If only the mosquitoes would do the same. Stay alert!"

Two hours later, under a hazy but full moon, Stewart heard something or someone rustle the bushes nearby. He turned just as a Japanese prisoner charged toward him brandishing what looked like some kind of homemade knife.

Screaming in a language neither of the guards understood, Scott realized he could only be saying, "Kill GI!" The attacker caught Harry by surprise, and was able to bury the knife deep into his shoulder. Nonetheless, the two struggled, and the stronger American grappled his assailant to the ground.

Scott reacted instantly. He was only 10 yards from his partner when the attack began, but he covered the ground with the quickness of a mountain lion. As the prisoner was about to strike a more deadly blow, Scott's rifle butt slammed into the back of his head. In a flash, he had the barrel of his rifle wedged against the prisoner's neck and pulled him off of his partner. With the prisoner struggling in the rookie's vice-like grip, the injured Stewart, with one arm dangling at his side, leaped to his feet.

"I'll be the last American you attack, Charlie," he said, pulling a knife from the inside of his boot. He buried the eight-inch blade into his prisoner's abdomen and pulled until he felt bone crack. Scott felt the prisoner's body go limp as he took his final breath. He loosened his grip, and the body dropped to the ground in a lifeless heap.

Harry, dazed by the sudden attack, took two steps backward before collapsing onto his knees, one hand dangling at his side and the other grabbing for the wound that was quickly soaking his Navy dungarees in blood. He grunted and stammered, "I don't think Flo is going to be happy about this."

Scott calmly stepped over the dead prisoner and rushed to Harry's side. "Stew, are you okay?" he asked. "Stew... Stew... say something to me, buddy."

"I'm not exactly in the mood for a chit-chat right now, kid," Harry said. "I think I need a medic."

They were the last words Scott would hear from Harry that night as he slipped into unconsciousness. Scott radioed into headquarters, and an ambulance arrived in less than five minutes to whisk his partner off to the medical facility. Both he and Stewart were replaced at their station, and Scott was taken by military police to explain the events of the night. He spent most of the early morning

hours and the next day detailing the attack and the death of a prisoner to one officer after another. Forty-eight hours later, a hearing was convened and Scott and Harry were exonerated for their actions.

Investigators had a hard time determining how the prisoner had freed himself. It was suggested he fashioned the dagger from a piece of metal he must have recovered from the earthen floor of his containment hut. He used the metal not only to stab Harry, but also to dig his way out of the Navy's makeshift prison facility. Nobody pretended to know what the prisoner intended to do once he had executed his escape. It was assumed he happened upon the two guards purely by accident.

Scott was relieved of duty for 72 hours and allowed to get some well-deserved rest before visiting his friend and partner in the infirmary. The smell of disinfectant filled the air as he walked into the makeshift care unit. What was once a schoolroom now served as a medical ward for almost a dozen Americans. They were here for all sorts of reasons; some had been hurt in battle and others in accidents. A few suffered from "Fiji Fever." Stewart's cot was located in the southwest corner of the ward. He was sleeping when Scott approached, so the young fireman took a chair at his bedside and waited for his partner to awaken.

Scott was dreaming of being home in Detroit when a bedpan hit him in the chest and brought him to his senses with a start.

"What are you doin' here, ass hole? This ward's for sick people," Stewart bristled.

Scott smiled and said, "I guess you're feeling better, aye?"

"Never felt better in my life," Harry said. "Well, maybe a little better. But that Jap's attack was the best thing that could have happened to me. This little shoulder wound is going to earn me a trip back home to see Flo, sonny boy. I couldn't be happier."

"That's great, Stew," Scott said, "but this place won't be the same without you."

"You've been standing in the sun too long, haven't you?" the surly veteran said. "This island's no place for me, and it certainly ain't no place for a kid like you. Without me to take care of you, you'll die on this island."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Stew. It wasn't me that deranged Japanese soldier stabbed; it was you."

“Very funny, rookie,” Harry said. “You might think you’re too quick to be taken down by one of those Jap bastards, but if you stay around here too long it will be the fever or a snake that gets you, not the Japs.”

“I’m too tough for the fever, and I’ve befriended most of the snakes, Stew,” Scott said. “I’m just like you, biding my time until I can go home to a beautiful woman.”

Like most young enlistees, Scott’s mind often wandered back to those days in Detroit when he used to go to parties at Joanne’s house in Grosse Point, Michigan. They’d dance, play games and talk long into the night about what the future would be like. Neither of them envisioned this. The war had turned everyone’s lives upside down.

The sound of Harry’s voice brought Scott back to reality.

“Boy, I’m going to give you a little bit of advice, being you saved me and all. Come here close so I can tell you something.

“GET THE HECK OUT OF HERE!” he screamed at the top of his lungs.

As nurses and MPs rushed into the ward, Harry quickly feigned sleep.

“What’s going on back here?” asked one of the nurses.

“Ah... Ah... not much. I think this old coot is dreaming again about working in the coal mines of West Virginia,” Scott stammered. “He must have been dreaming about a cave-in or something. I’m just sitting here waiting for him to wake up or die. Do you think he’s going to die?”

“No, he’ll be fine. I think he’s too ornery to die,” the nurse said. “Let us know when he wakes up.”

Minutes later, Harry opened one eye to make sure the room was clear and said, “You think quick, rookie. Did you get the message, though?”

“Thanks to you, how could I not get it?” Scott said. “What’s wrong with you? Why did you have to scream in my ear like that?”

“I needed to make sure you heard me loud and clear,” Stew said with a smile.

“Yeah, I got the message, but just how do I do what you’re suggesting. I joined this Navy to fight the Japs. There’s no way I’m going to run off.”

“Boy, what did they feed you in Detroit that would make you think I was suggesting desertion?” Stew said. “You’re crazier than my Aunt Ginny. I meant reassignment.

“Thanks to that prisoner, I think some of the brass around here might be thinking you and I are heroes or something. Few men in this man’s Navy face the enemy in hand-to-hand combat. We did, and we’re both alive to talk about it.”

It was the closest Harry would ever come to saying thank you, but that was just fine with Scott. He’d grown to like the Ohio native, and he’d do just about anything for him. The bonds they had built over the past few weeks had made them partners for life. As usual, though, Harry wasn’t done talking.

“See that big-ass aircraft carrier out there in the harbor? She’s the biggest, baddest vessel in the United States Navy. She’s the *U.S.S. Saratoga*. Tell the brass you want to be assigned to the ‘Old Lady,’ Scott. She’ll protect you when I can’t.”

“I don’t need anyone to protect me, if you remember, Stew. I yanked that Jap off you like a fly,” the young fireman said with a smile.

“Yeah, and you still would be wrestling with him if I hadn’t gutted him like the pig he was,” the patient said.

“Listen, Scott, do as I say. I’ll be shipping out in a couple of days, and I’ll talk to Capt. Markum before I leave. You go see him, and get aboard the *Sara* before she leaves port.”

“Whatever you say, Stew,” Scott said. “You’ve been a good partner and friend; you’ve taught me a lot. I don’t know how I’ll ever thank you.”

“It was slop, wasn’t it?” an agitated Stew said. “They fed you slop in Detroit, didn’t they? It retards the brain and turns the mind to jelly.

“Look, you don’t have to thank me, Scott. You saved my life. This is my way of thanking you. Now, get out of here so I can get back to dreaming about Flo. She’s a hell of a lot prettier than you, and I miss her.”

“Thanks, Stew,” the gangly sailor said. “Give her a kiss for me, and I’ll see you when this war is over.”

Scott Perry, 17 years old and thousands of miles from home, stood up and left the ward. He didn’t know what the future held, but he

knew one thing: he was going to do everything in his power to be reassigned to the *Saratoga* as quickly as possible.

Chapter 2

Heading to sea

The *U.S.S. Saratoga* was affectionately referred to as the “Old Lady,” because she was one of the oldest vessels in the U.S. fleet. The Sara was commissioned in 1927. The cost of building her had been an unprecedented \$43,856,492, and she was the largest warship in the Pacific, weighing in at about 50,000 tons. Her 909-foot, teakwood deck floated sixty-five feet above the water like a tapestry on the back of a sleek-looking thoroughbred. She had enough battery to fight off the worst of attacks. Included in her arsenal were eight 8-inch, 55-caliber, breach-loading guns located in twin mounts fore and aft of the island structure. She also carried five 5-inch, 25-caliber, anti-aircraft guns and four 21-inch, above-water torpedo tubes.

Of course, her deck became most deadly when she was able to launch angry airplanes against enemy targets on land or sea. She set a world record in the summer of 1928 when she reached a speed of 35.42 knots on the open seas, equal to that of much lighter destroyers that were designed for greater mobility. The men who kept her afloat were equally sturdy and tough. Newly-assigned Fireman Scott Perry would find that out in the weeks and months ahead.

The *U.S.S. Saratoga* was not anchored at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Nor were any other American aircraft carriers, an oversight that would cost Japan dearly in the months after the unprecedented but deadly strike. The act, which President Franklin D. Roosevelt said would “live in infamy,” brutally crippled the naval fleet of the United States. Two American warships were sunk and sixteen others were severely damaged. One hundred and eighty-eight aircraft were destroyed and more than 3,500 men were killed or injured.

Pearl Harbor was the first of many steps in Japan’s plan to create a Greater East Asia sphere of power. Its army of six million was determined to control the Pacific passageways and cut off trade to China and the Far East. The attack on Pearl was intended to cripple the United States’ ability to defend bases anywhere in the South Pacific.

The Japanese held Americans in low esteem. In fact, governmental leaders looked upon the United States as an easy target, a nation of drunken pacifists who lacked the spirit to fight back. The military high command, believed Japan could defeat the United States easily and bring its many rich resources under the Emperor's rule.

In addition, American installations in Guam and Wake Island were bombarded two hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor. With much of its Pacific Fleet incinerated at Pearl Harbor, Navy leaders scrambled to mobilize but they simply were unprepared. On December 22, the Japanese took control of Wake Island with an invasion of 1,000 men. After hours of fighting, 1,500 American troops and civilians surrendered to the Japanese invaders. Twelve hundred of those who surrendered, mostly teenagers from Idaho, were shipped to Japanese prison camps. Five were beheaded to encourage good behavior on the journey. One hundred of the civilian contractors were retained on Wake to complete construction of an airstrip the Japanese needed in order to control the region. Wake was located almost halfway between Hawaii and Australia.

The Japanese timed the Wake invasion with a simultaneous attack on U.S. forces in the Philippines. They came ashore on beaches to the north and south of Luzon, prepared to engage a joint American-Filipino force of more than 130,000 that was commanded by General Douglas MacArthur. By Jan. 2, the Japanese marched effortlessly into the Philippine capital city of Manila, ready to annihilate their retreating nemesis at the Bataan Peninsula. The battle for Bataan lasted for four months and ended with total surrender by the Allied Forces. All survivors were taken prisoner and forced to march to Corregidor, a vital port city. More than 7,000 men perished along the trail, often clubbed, stabbed, shot, beheaded or buried alive when they stopped to rest. The death march incited anger throughout the Pacific Theater, and MacArthur's promise, "I shall return!" became a rallying cry as the Allied Forces prepared to strike back at the enemy.

The cry echoed through every city and town in the United States, lighting a flame of anger and revenge in every segment of American society.

The *Saratoga*, fresh out of the New York Ship Yards, was anchored in San Diego when the Japanese began their sneak attack. She and her crew broke all records in provisioning and put to sea the

following day with hopes of arriving in time to supply the ambushed Pacific Fleet with much-needed support.

Arriving at Pearl on December 15, 1941, the *Saratoga* was given the critical assignment of delivering Marine fighter planes for the beleaguered defense of Wake Island. In less than 24 hours, she was underway with her coveted cargo. The planes never reached their objective, however. Wake fell to the Japanese on December 23, with the Sara only one day away. The aircraft carrier was diverted to Midway, where American forces were building in an effort to repel another serious thrust by the Japanese.

Her first skirmish came on January 11, 1942. About 400 miles west of Hawaii, a Japanese submarine was able to sneak into the American flotilla and launch an effective torpedo attack. The torpedo struck the *Saratoga* on her port side, adjacent to the stack at 1915. The explosion was massive and the ship began to list immediately. Plumes of oil and smoke marked the Pacific sky as the aircraft carrier endured her first battle scars.

Immediately fire crews and engineers raced to the scene, sealing off the ruptured fire rooms to prevent the spread of water and flame. Some of the men inside died instantly. Others succumbed to the heat and steam. In all, six crewmembers perished in the attack.

By 2235, engineers had corrected the ship's list and bypassed the damaged boilers. The ship was able to get underway again, but the trip to Midway was no longer possible. The "Old Lady" masterfully achieved 19 knots as she limped back to Pearl Harbor. It took two days to reach the dry docks of Honolulu, where the *Saratoga* was patched and dispatched to the Puget Sound Navy Yard for full repairs.

Three months later, Sara was as good as new and ordered back to Pearl Harbor to take on provisions again for the Pacific war effort. While at Pearl, the *Saratoga's* eight-inch guns, useless against enemy aircraft, were removed for installation in shore defenses. Thirty-six 20-millimeter guns were installed, making her more deadly against aerial attacks.

By the time the *Saratoga* returned to the Pacific, the Battle for Midway was waging, and the "Old Lady" was needed badly. News that the *U.S.S. Lexington*, the Sara's sister ship and one of a very few American aircraft carriers, had been sunk in the Coral Sea, made the men of the *Saratoga* realize their mission to Midway was of utmost importance.

At Pearl Harbor, she became the first U.S. aircraft carrier to load the new TBF Avenger, a Grumman aircraft that would soon become the standard for the war effort. The "T" stood for torpedo, and the "B" for bomber. The Grumman Company began building prototypes of its TBF Avenger in 1940 with the approval of the United States Navy, which was aware of the need for more effective planes as air attacks by Germany were dominating the war in Europe. The Avenger was Grumman's first torpedo aircraft, and its design matched the company's durable fighter aircraft, the F4F Wildcat and later the F6F Hellcat. Once in production, the Avenger began replacing the antiquated Douglas TBD Devastator that was the standard torpedo plane aboard every U.S. aircraft carrier.

The American Fleet had lost many of its Devastators at Midway and had lost confidence in the effectiveness of dropping torpedoes from the air. Therefore, the Avenger was used mainly as a bomber and anti-submarine search plane. The TBF was equipped with the R-2600-20 Double Cyclone two-row radial engine that could drive the Avenger skyward at 1,075 feet per minute. The new Grumman aircraft could reach a maximum speed of 278 miles per hour, still slower than the Japanese Zero and Betty but more competitive than its predecessor. It had Browning machine guns forward and aft, and it could carry 2,000 pounds of bombs. It was just what the Navy needed and was arriving just in time.

Flying the flag of Task Force 11 and with Rear Admiral Jack Fletcher in command, the *Saratoga* arrived too late to engage the enemy at Midway. Another aircraft carrier, the *U.S.S. Yorktown*, was lost in the battle. The crew of the *Saratoga* was assigned to clean up duty. The Sara's sister flattops, the *U.S.S. Hornet* and *U.S.S. Enterprise*, lost a considerable number of planes and pilots. Arriving on June 10, the *Saratoga* immediately dispatched planes and pilots to the other two aircraft carriers. Then, she began patrolling the open waters for survivors, debris the Navy would not want to fall into Japanese hands and, of course, the enemy.

Despite heavy losses, American forces won the Battle of Midway. The U.S. victory was significant because it was the United States' first lengthy engagement, made easier by the fact days before the invasion the Americans cracked the Japanese Secret Code, allowing them to eavesdrop, so to speak, on enemy planning and

strategy. The Japanese suffered significant losses at Midway, including more than 250 of its carrier-based aircraft and some of its finest pilots. The air, ground and sea assault proved effective, and similar tactics would be used throughout the war for control of the South Pacific.

IT WAS SHORTLY after the Battle of Midway that young Fireman Scott Perry was assigned to a security detail aboard the *Saratoga*. The aircraft carrier had dropped anchor in Fiji's Suva Harbor in order to take on fuel and provisions. As the ship's crew enjoyed some rest and relaxation on shore, Scott and six others were being reassigned. They were to become the ship's newest crewmen in the summer of 1942. They would fill vacancies in each of the aircraft carrier's many departments — engineering, mechanical, supply, gunnery, construction, air and communications.

Scott was assigned to work security for the engineering department, but before he was given the opportunity to stow away his gear, he had to pass muster before Chief Petty Officer William "Biff" Malone, a veteran who had been aboard the Sara since she was first commissioned. A burly man who had left the cornfields of Iowa to serve with the U.S. Navy, Malone's reputation was known throughout the fleet. He had earned his stripes defending democracy and was an extremely good judge of character. Everyone respected Malone, officers and enlisted men alike. There were those who feared him, too, especially when he lost his temper. His temper tantrums had become legendary aboard the ship.

Malone used experience and instinct to measure a man's character, and officers and shipmates relied on his intuition. Of course, the chief bragged he could recognize a Navy man the minute he saw one. If there was any question, he could resolve it in the first five minutes of interrogation, using his penetrating brown eyes to pierce deep into a sailor's soul. Of course, at 6-foot-4 he towered over most recruits, and his 230-pound frame made him an imposing figure. That's why most recruits visited his office before they reported to duty.

Scott was not a small man at 6-foot-2 and 175 pounds, but he would feel small next to the towering Malone, who knew every inch of the *Saratoga*. Many said he knew more about the Sara than the skipper himself. Ship lore said he once lifted one of the Sara's big guns onto his shoulder and fired it at an enemy target. It didn't take long for

Scott to be called for an audience before the chief petty officer. Escorted by a seaman second class to the department headquarters, Scott recognized quickly that Malone was in charge.

"Be careful in there, kid," the escort said. "Biff's in a bad mood today. His volleyball team got beat up on the island yesterday, and he doesn't lose easily."

The escort announced the arrival of the transferred fireman, and Scott entered, dressed in his brightest white uniform and his shoes shined to a reflective brilliance.

"Fireman Scott Perry reporting for duty," he said.

"At ease, fireman," barked Malone while shoving the nub of an unlit cigar into his mouth. "So, rookie, you pulled some strings to be assigned to the Sara, didn't you? What makes you think you're worthy of serving aboard this proud ship?"

"I'm just an ordinary fireman who wants to play a bigger role in this war, sir," he said.

"What? You think you're gonna be a hero aboard the "Old Lady?" Malone countered.

"No, sir. I have no such plan," Scott said, not letting his guard down. "I'm here only to do my duty, as assigned. And I'm willing to do it as well as possible, sir."

"Well, there are no ordinary fireman aboard the *U.S.S. Saratoga*, son. She wouldn't have it, nor would I." Malone barked. "This is not an ordinary vessel, and it requires extraordinary personnel. Do you think you are extraordinary, fireman?"

"No, sir, I am not," Scott replied. "But I am hoping this ship helps me become extraordinary. I've been told only the finest men serve aboard the *Saratoga*, and I'd be honored to be part of her crew, sir."

"I'm sure in the course of the many battles the *U.S.S. Saratoga* will face in the months ahead, she will protect me from the enemy. In return, sir, I promise to lay down my life for this ship and its crew. And I will do everything in my power to see this ship completes her mission in the Pacific."

"Very eloquently stated, fireman." Malone said, placing the cigar he had been rolling around in his mouth into a busy ashtray. "Where are you from, boy?"

"Detroit, sir," Scott replied.

“Okay, if you’re from Detroit you can’t be all bad. In fact, you might have seen a battle or two of your own before this war broke out,” Malone said.

“Nothing like this war, sir,” Scott replied.

“You’ll be assigned to guard duty outside one of the fire rooms, Detroit,” Malone said. “It’s the worst duty aboard this ship. When we’re crossing over the equator in a few months, the temperature will be 115, maybe 120 degrees. Outside the fire rooms that house the boilers that keep the ship moving, it will seem like 140. Inside, it’s even hotter. If you can survive duty down there, son, you might survive duty aboard this brave ship.”

“Thank you, sir. I welcome the assignment,” Scott said. “The fire rooms will be just fine, and I’ll do you proud.”

“Seaman, take Detroit below so he can stow away his gear, and help him get acquainted with the ship,” Malone told Scott’s escort.

Scott pivoted and headed for the exit, breathing a sigh of relief. As he got to the exit, Malone bellowed one more time.

“And Detroit, don’t you worry about making me proud, son,” Malone roared. “You make this ship proud.”

“Yes, sir!” Scott replied.

And so, Scott Perry’s duty aboard the *U.S.S. Saratoga* began. He felt good about it, and he liked Malone. He reminded him of his father, demanding and hard to please. He felt at home, and he made a mental note to once again thank Harry Stewart for the advice. The old sea dog had pointed him in the right direction again. He vowed to make Stewart and his father proud of him. With a little bit of luck, he and men like Malone might be able to put the *Saratoga* in a position to play a pivotal role in determining the outcome of the war.

