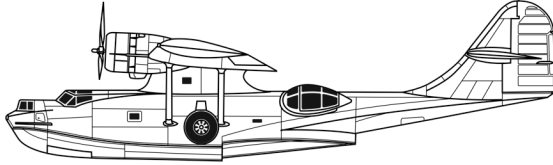


Chapter Two



“U-boat reported on the north side of the convoy, toward the front.”

Radioman Bruce Jenz’s words electrified Stefan Dabrowski. Their squadron had yet to sink a submarine. Their commanding officer, disgusted with their pathetic performance, had closed the officer’s club. The club’s closure didn’t bother Stefan, but their failure did. Ships, men, and supplies succumbed at an alarming rate to the unseen enemy.

He was no different from the rest of the men in hoping he would be the plane captain to break their string of bad luck. He nosed his PBY amphibious airplane into a northeasterly direction and raced to the head of the convoy.

“Jenz, do you have the coordinates?”

As he spoke, Stefan watched a merchantman plow through the North Atlantic chop. The ship appeared to have an airplane lashed to its deck. As he watched, the vessel jerked up in the waves. A fireball exploded out of it.

He stared in disbelief.

Torpedoed.

They'd arrived too late. Again.

Fire engulfed the back two-thirds of the ship. No way would it reach England. As they flew past the stricken ship, he spotted men on the deck. Men on fire. Some jumped overboard into the icy water to extinguish the flames.

Stefan's heart clenched as he imagined their pain.

"From too hot to too cold," Roy Pennington commented from his ringside seat in the bow. "They won't last long if one of the destroyers doesn't pick them up real quick-like."

"If they can even tread water with the pain of their burns," Mel Lawrenz responded from the blister window in the back of the plane, where he manned the waist gun. "Although I suppose cold water numbs the pain."

"There." Beside Stefan in the cockpit, his copilot Andrew Grant thrust a finger at a slight disturbance on the ocean's surface. "A periscope. It hasn't gone deep."

Stefan angled their flight into position. He released four depth charges attached to their wings in the spot where the sub should be.

"One of the depth charges is hung up," Lawrenz yelled through the headset.

Botheration! The hanger may have been the one to hit home. Stefan circled around. Heaving waves prevented them from detecting the sub's presence.

"Jenz, any word from the destroyer?"

"They think that one's going deep, but there's another possibility on the other side of the convoy. Stand by."

They flew over the stricken ship. Other ships in the line detoured around them. A corvette—one of the convoy escorts—stopped to pick up survivors.

Stefan sighed. "I sure wouldn't care to be a merchant seaman in wartime. They have no way to defend themselves."

“And yet lots of men dare to risk it. Just look at all the ships here.” Grant waved at the armada. “There are thirty-four, right? Only one’s been torpedoed. Do you think there’s more than one U-boat down there?”

“Maybe it just found the convoy,” Allan Ramsey chimed in from his engineer’s cubbyhole in the pylon attached to the overhead wings. “It’s probably radioed the location and one of those wolf packs is heading this way.”

Stefan and his men maintained their patrol over the convoy for five more hours as it plodded eastward. The lead destroyer detected no more submarine activity. Odd. What happened with the one that torpedoed the merchantman? Might their depth charges have caused some damage?

After another circle around the ships, Stefan squeezed his eyes shut. He needed a break. He tapped Grant’s shoulder for him to take over, eased out of the cockpit, arched his back, and stretched out his arms. He paused by the navigation-chart table. “McQuaid, I’m heading for the galley. Want anything to eat?”

David McQuaid set aside his pencil and ruler, leaned back, and rubbed his belly. “Why, yes, now that you mention it. I’ll have duck l’Orange, grilled asparagus, and a glass of chardonnay.”

“Ha, ha, dreamer. How about a bowl of tomato soup with a slightly stale slice of bread?”

“Ugh. How pedestrian. Bring me back a chocolate bar.”

Lawrenz and their tail gunner, Lucius Poulos, were drinking coffee, and Poulos poured Stefan a cup without interrupting his conversation. “I’m telling you, Mel, that girl didn’t even look at us. It’s like we weren’t even there.” He shouted to be heard over the roar of the engines. “Most Icelandic girls are rude.”

“Can’t blame them for not being friendly. Iceland was occupied against their will. Remember what that British sailor

said? They sailed into the harbor and fired a shot over the town. I wonder where that shell landed.” Lawrenz cradled the steaming cup and blew across it before testing the coffee. “Did she speak English? Maybe she didn’t understand you and was intimidated.”

Their comments brought to mind the Red Cross girl Stefan had greeted last week. Icelandic girls weren’t the only ones to be rude. *Stay away from me.* Wow. Just for saying good evening. And she was here with an organization to raise morale among the men?

He raised the heat on the hot plate and stirred the pot of soup.

The girl’s red-haired friend had run after him and pleaded for mercy for her teammate. Said she’d just been assaulted by another pilot who had grabbed her and latched onto her neck.

Okay, he could see how that would upset her. That also explained the Casanova remark. It wasn’t like she’d been raped, though. Why was she so hysterical?

Stefan braced himself as the plane banked. Turning off the hot plate, he poured a bowlful of soup and grabbed a spoon.

Maybe he was being too harsh. What had the redhead called her? Mary? What if it had been his sister who was attacked? Dorota surely wouldn’t have panicked. She was feisty. Had to be with three brothers.

But if the assailant had overpowered Mary, if she couldn’t fight back, yes, that would have shot up her blood pressure. Her adrenaline would have soared.

Maybe that explained her actions. She was still wound up when he crossed her path.

Grant her grace. That’s what his mother would say. She’d had a dreadful fright and wasn’t thinking clearly. Blessed are the merciful. Let it go.

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He blew out his breath and tested the soup. The metal spoon burned his tongue.

What really bothered him was how she equated him with the assailant. Tony Dever was the only other pilot Stefan had seen that night. She insulted him with the comparison. To think she expected him to force himself on her simply because he smiled. He heaved a sigh. That Dever was the guilty culprit didn't surprise him. Stefan had never met a more arrogant bully who delighted in belittling any and everyone.

Stefan grimaced. He understood his problem now. She'd hurt his feelings.

Get over it, Dabrowski. Be a man. Show some compassion.

He, probably more than all the others in his squadron, understood mankind's cruelty. The Nazis and Soviets had teamed up to destroy his ancestral homeland. His relatives knew unbelievable suffering. Some had vanished, no doubt tortured and executed. What was a little thing like a hysterically offered insult?

He gulped down his soup and headed to the lavatory in the tail of the plane. Time to quit moping and return to work.

* * *

The weather deteriorated in an instant. The plane bounced all over the sky as the wind approached hurricane strength. Stefan's arms ached as he wrestled with the control column, fighting to keep the aircraft from flipping over.

"I won't be a bit surprised to arrive back in Reykjavik and discover Iceland has blown away." Grant added his muscles to the effort of remaining airborne. "I suppose they'll tell us this wasn't in the weather forecast."

Stefan smiled. "By the time we get back, we'll have sunny

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skies with barely a hint of a breeze. They'll say, 'Oh, did you have a spot of weather?'"

Growing up in Wisconsin, he had often heard, "If you don't like the weather, wait five minutes." The saying never made sense to him as he lay shivering in bed, listening to a blizzard howl all night long. Iceland, however, had a perfect claim to the motto. He gritted his teeth as another gust hurled them fifty feet down.

Jenz broke into his tumbling thoughts. "Just heard from base. The weather's grounding a lot of the trans-Atlantic traffic. They're running out of parking space. We'll have to land in the bay and, if the beach is too crowded to go ashore, we'll have to remain onboard."

"Stay onboard? You mean all night?" The waist gunner groaned. "Will a caterer come around with some supper?"

"Man up, Lawrenz." Stefan worked to keep amusement out of his voice. "We've got soup and bread's that getting staler by the minute."

"Oh, yummy." As the baby in his family with five sisters, Lawrenz had been granted every wish, so military life proved to be a challenge for him. Still, he maintained a happy attitude most of the time, much to Stefan's gratification.

They landed in the bay without incident, and Pennington set an anchor from the bow with Lawrenz's assistance. They headed to the back of the plane to check on the deployment of the rear anchors.

Stefan and Grant completed the post-flight checklist when Jenz called them. "They want us to beach after all."

Stefan sagged in his seat. "Well, at least we don't have to warm up the engines. Reel the anchors back in, fellas."

"I'm back here," Pennington responded.

"What he means is, he's in the lav," Poulos said.

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Grant was already flipping through the switches, so Stefan hauled himself out of his seat and dropped down into the bow compartment. The plane rocked in moderate swells as he raised the hatch on top of the turret. Cool air swirled around him as he leaned out and grabbed the lizard line. The anchor refused to budge. Sighing, he hoisted himself out of the turret and balanced on the tiny walk rail on the side of the fuselage. He leaned forward in an effort to see what held it and unhooked the line. The plane rose on a wave and dipped, dousing Stefan. Just as suddenly, another wave smacked the plane. The anchor line pulled taut in his hand and yanked him off his feet to tumble into the icy water.

The air whooshed out of his lungs, and the water stabbed him like knives. His soaked flying gear weighed him down as the waves pushed him away from the airplane.

Served him right. Working with the anchors was a two-man operation. And why hadn't he hooked up to the safety belt?

Did his crew even know he was in trouble? Did Grant, the only one forward, realize he was no longer inside?

Stefan tried to swim, but his arms seemed to weigh a hundred pounds each. The plane lumbered toward the beach. Lawrenz wasn't in the blister window. Where were they? Stefan would drown right there in the bay, and they wouldn't be the wiser.

* * *

A nurse layered another blanket on him, but it failed to stop the shivers as knives of agony stabbed Stefan's body. The nurse prodded him to open his mouth for a thermometer. "Do you remember what happened?"

"Swimming."

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She smiled. “You were in the water for half an hour before a local fisherman pulled you out.” She checked the thermometer. “One hour out of the water, and your temp is up to ninety-five degrees.”

Thirty-four minutes, and without a life vest. How had he survived?

The sequence of events remained hazy. The overwhelming stench of fish still filled his nostrils, and a vague memory of Icelandic chatter teased his mind.

A groan to his left snagged his attention. A sailor lay with severe burns, from a torpedoing most likely. Now there was some serious suffering.

And here he lay, shivering like a leaf. The doctor said something about keeping him for observation. Pneumonia posed a threat. His lungs didn’t sound clear, and he couldn’t take deep breaths without coughing.

A louder groan emanated from the wrapped bundle of misery next to him. Stefan huffed in frustration and coughed. His own “injuries” hardly merited him occupying a bed.

From beyond the doorway came a voice he recognized. Lieutenant Commander Arnett, the squadron’s commanding officer, spoke at full volume as though he stood on the deck of a heaving ship in a storm.

“Why is Dabrowski lazing about here? Are you afraid he’ll catch a cold?”

Stefan flinched. They might have matching thoughts, but did Arnett have to be so crass and loud about it?

Whoever the CO conferred with countered in a moderate tone, which was indistinguishable to Stefan in the ward.

“Aw, well, he’s not one of our best pilots. Boring as last night’s bathwater, he is.”

Heat surged through Stefan, suddenly curing his chills. He

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might have jumped out of bed if a wave of lightheadedness hadn't messed with his equilibrium.

Boring as old, dirty bathwater? The CO didn't even know him. What justified his claim?

A face flashed across his mind. A sneering, arrogant face. Dever didn't only accost women. He was probably telling the CO stories to undermine Stefan.