



*A WWII SHORT STORY
FIRST PUBLISHED IN CUP
OF COMFORT FOR
MILITARY FAMILIES*

MIRACLE

at

SEA

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Miracle At Sea

This had to be a dream.

I had been awake for more than an hour and stood on the deck of the transporter ship as I watched the sun lift from the sea. As word had it, the Navy was zigzagging our Army troops across the Pacific to Washington, after which I'd head east to Indiana to receive my discharge papers. Supposedly, the war was over. Around me, the clamor of rousing soldiers talking about their hopes of what they'd find and do upon returning home drifted on the wind.

Two and half years had passed since I'd seen any member of my family. The anticipation of being with them again was so great I could concentrate on nothing else as the shifting sea slapped against the ship. At age twenty-one, I had left home and joined the Army, ignoring the exemption I had been offered due to my enrollment in college. I set out to serve my country with the pride and the respect for responsibility with which I'd been raised.

Lulled by the rhythm of the sea and the thought of home so near, my mind drifted back to when Dad cut hair and when each of us boys—six of us—staked our claim in the business world by shining shoes. I loved it, crouched on the sidewalk outside Dad's barbershop door, interacting with people. Dad loved it, too. He also loved music. We used to joke that if he didn't stop tapping his feet in church, we would have to switch pews, because he was wearing the carpet thin. When my brothers and I sang, Dad would come up and stand really close so he could immerse himself in the harmony. What I wouldn't give to be singing with my brothers right now.

Thirty months was a long time to be gone, and I was anxious to get back. Although we'd been told we were going home, allied warships roamed the area and a sailor stood watch. No word was final until your feet hit the soil. Sometimes, all a man could rely on were his memories . . . and hope. Hope carried me through each day and helped me to look forward to the next.

My next glance out over the water took in a tiny blue speck in the distance. I squinted for a better look: a warship, one of many we'd seen these past few days, but there was a familiarity about this one. Mom and Dad's letters described my brother's ship in detail. They always included nuggets of Jim's letters that instructed: "Tell John . . ." "Ask him if he saw . . ." "Make sure he . . ." The letters kept me close to home and all of us battling and working together toward

a common goal. My heart swelled with emotion over the memories Jim and I shared, and I knew he was out there somewhere. But what were the odds that my brother's sub chaser would be in such close proximity? Still, I had to know. I had memorized the number on the side of the ship for this reason. If he were close, I wanted him to know I saw him.

I located a pair of binoculars and watched until I could make out the letters on the bow: SC 994. No! I looked again. Black letters over blue: SC 994. It was Jim's ship! Too shocked to care about protocol, I flew past the sailor standing guard at the gate that led to the fly bridge and ran up the stairs to the sailor on watch.

"Is there any way you can signal that sub chaser?" I pointed in the distance, trembling at the thought of being so near to one of my family. "I think my brother is on that ship. I want him to know I'm here, right here!"

Even if we weren't able to see or talk to each other for the duration of the war, just knowing we were so close would fill the hole of homesickness that had been chiseled out of my heart these past couple of years. I hoped it would do the same for Jim.

The sailor grinned, whether at my shaking or the odds of such a miracle, I didn't know, but he swung the light around so the sub chaser could see the coded signal.

"The angle's not right; I'm not sure he can see it." The sailor tried again, but there was no response from the chaser. He moved the light and tried again to signal out the message. It was taking too long; the chaser would be gone.

I had been injured in battle three times, but no physical pain hurt more than knowing how near I'd come to making contact with my brother only to fail. I left the bridge heavy-hearted and wandered back onto the deck to share with the guys what had happened. They understood my disappointment, the need to affirm family, a life, and a tie to something more than a cause so great it's easy to feel lost in it. Then I remembered that these guys were my brothers, too—my surrogate family. I was grateful for the friendships and bonds we'd developed, and some of the guys didn't have family to ponder over. So I dropped the matter and went about my day.

"Hey, private, you're wanted by the captain."

I roused myself off the deck and followed the sailor to where the captain stood surveying the horizon. By now, the sun was high in the sky, but a nice breeze kept the air cool and refreshing.

"Private, I understand your brother is on the USS SC 994. They came within view, but we were unsuccessful in contacting them."

"Yes, sir."

"Of all men . . . you, with your positive thoughts, staying faith, and commitment—" It appeared he had some difficulty holding back a smile. I couldn't imagine where this was headed. I had broken protocol by approaching the bridge without permission, but it was an unusual circumstance and hadn't caused a problem. I didn't understand why he wanted to see me. "—I think you probably deserve this more than anyone."

"Deserve what, sir?"

Time closed in on that moment. The ship stopped, the clouds paused, and I was home. Laughs rang around a dining room table, songs drifted on a summer evening breeze, and home felt as real as if I were standing in the middle of the family room talking with Dad.

"Thank you, sir."

Cheers erupted across the ship as word spread of this miracle at sea.

In the middle of the Pacific Ocean, the crew from Jim's sub chaser tied up next to our transporter. While sailors and soldiers bartered for goods plundered in Okinawa, my brother and I sat on the deck and talked for an entire afternoon.

That memory remains etched in my mind and continues to carry me through times when I feel uncertain. It affirms that miracles do happen, if for no other reason than to bring joy and hope to those who need it and to those who are willing to embrace it.

by Tammera Ayers, as told by John Wine

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