



PROLOGUE

Pearl Harbor - Territory of Hawaii TH
Approximately 0840
Sunday, 7 December 1941

A cool spray of water hit Fire Controlman Third Class Lauren F. Bruner's burned torso as the saltwater bit at his exposed nerves.

More important concerns arose, as the Navy motor launch navigated through oil-fueled fires, dead and dismembered bodies—and sharks.

Early in the morning, USS *Vestal's* launch had been a simple Liberty boat for sailors. That designation ended in an instant, less than an hour prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Orders from *Vestal's* captain had been to "...get these two burnt bastards to *Solace*, straightaway!"

"Doesn't look like either will make it."

Adrenaline pumped through Bruner's veins. Burned over seventy-three percent of his body; he knew death was closer than life.

Pain was the last thing on Bruner's mind. Fellow crew member Alvin Dvorak was seated next to him. They had just escaped off USS *Arizona*.

Bombed and still being strafed, their ship had already sunk into the shallow depths of Pearl Harbor's Battleship Row.

The coxswain maneuvered his rescue launch through turbulent waters. He quickly read and reacted to every twist and turn the Japanese fighter planes hurled at them. His hook-man, pole in hand—stood sure-footed at forward, while he called out, and pushed aside obstacles and bodies in the water.

With the strength Bruner had left, he used his charred fingers to grip at the wooden bench seat.

Bruner hung on while the launch's coxswain deftly evaded errant torpedoes and bomb geysers on each side of the channel. Machine gun fire and the whine from Zeke fighter planes and Val dive-bombers were relentless from above.

Lauren focused on the all-white ship, with the giant Red Cross painted on its side—dead ahead. He turned to his crewmate, Alvin Dvorak, Boatswain's Mate Second Class.

"Alvin... looks like they're taking us to *Solace*."

Dvorak simply answered, "Yup."

Dvorak was badly burned like Bruner, with over eighty percent of his body—scorched. Each man had the skin on their hands, arms, legs and faces "blackened like charbroiled chicken."

"Both of us had our hair burned off. But Alvin was worse. Both ears completely gone."

To reassure himself, Lauren had reached up to touch his own.

Thank God...

They were still there.

A new wave of enemy fighters returned up the West Channel, banked directly over hospital ship USS *Solace*, then came south, down Battleship Row. They strafed

anything dead or alive that moved—or floated—in the water.

Lauren felt certain he was headed to his own funeral.

Is this an honorable way to die? Barely twenty-one, he'd never given any thought to death.

He'd offered his life to the Navy for his father's lie, and he'd been determined to get through whatever was thrown at him.

His lungs were seared from fire and smoke; Lauren choked as he took a breath.

I'll get through this.

Only a hundred yards to *Solace*.

"Alvin... we're gonna' make it. Don't give up..."

"Yup."

Out on liberty, only twelve hours before, Lauren Bruner changed his mind about life. *Life is a shitty and dangerous place.*

"I wanted to puke my guts out."

As though to avoid the horrific sights, the coxswain sped up the boat. Lauren became even more nauseous. "I couldn't hold it in any longer." He gagged, dry heaved and finally retched over the side.

He turned back. It was all he could do to keep his eyes on *Solace's* red cross.

The launch inched closer toward its hull.

Other launches ferried more wounded Sailors and Marines toward *Solace*. Each competed to get in line for the starboard gangway—first-come, first-served.

All medical personnel were engaged in triage on deck. There would be only one at water level to help victims come aboard or to climb the steps of the gangway once they arrived.

“So many dying,” Lauren said. “Most picked up, straight outta’ the water.”

Still, Lauren felt relief wash over him as the launch approached the mercy ship—so far, untouched by Japanese invaders.

It appeared they were within reach until, at less than twenty-five feet above the water, a new lone-bandit Zero headed straight for them.

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Lauren's Purple Heart

"My Purple Heart was awarded to me for my wounds suffered during the attack on Pearl Harbor, but I would be surprised if you have ever seen one exactly like it before.

The uniqueness of my medal is that an Admiral's Silver Star is pinned to its ribbon, which was given to me by my friend Rear Admiral Fernandez 'Frank' Ponds on the day we met years ago.

At our first meeting, which was scheduled to last only 5 minutes but ended up being more like 30, Frank took a silver star off of his uniform and pinned it to the ribbon of my medal as his way to pay me honor.

Along with our friendship, his star has always meant a great deal to me, and I wear it with pride."



My Purple Heart

Awarded for Wounds Suffered
During the Attack on Pearl Harbor
December 7, 1941