

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 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 need 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.