



Pearl Harbor Christmas[©]

By Eric Douglas

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Author's note: The framework for the following story is true. However, many of the details of the events on Ford Island and Pearl Harbor surrounding the attack on December 7, 1941 are taken from a collection of Pearl Harbor survivor stories, not just those of Tony Sereno. While this story attempts to recreate the events of December 1941, it is a fictional account, both of what happened in the south Pacific and of the events in Richwood, West Virginia. The story is intended as a tribute to the brave men and women who faced the attack and their families at home, struggling with the unknown. This story is written in present tense – hopefully the readers will feel as if it is happening right now, not 70 years ago. It is also intended as a tribute to the families of the brave soldiers, sailors and marines serving their country away from home during this holiday season.

Richwood, WV

It's Sunday morning in early December and the family is gathered together after breakfast. They are talking about the week's events before leaving for the large Catholic Church down the street. Salvatore, the father of the Italian immigrant family works in the lumber fields six days a week. With the younger children in school and the older children working jobs of their own, Sunday mornings are the only time they can get together and be a family. Their mother, Carmella, requires that they take Sundays seriously and, aside from preparing meals, they relax and spend time together.

The family is gathered around the fireplace in their small West Virginia home. It is cold and the wood and coal fire is all that keeps the house from freezing. The Severino's home in Richwood is high in the mountains with rugged beauty all around.

Dressed in their Sunday best, they read a letter from Salvatore and Carmella's son Tony. He's aboard the battleship USS West Virginia currently on patrol in the south Pacific – but presently in Pearl Harbor. For convenience when he enlisted, Tony shortened his last name to Sereno.

“Papa, Tony says he expects to be home in time for Christmas. He says he is looking forward to seeing everyone again,” says Thelma, the oldest daughter and oldest child still at home. Because Salvatore doesn't speak much English, his daughter Mary leans over and tells him what Thelma reads.

“Read more, Thelma. Read more. What else does he say?” asks Sam, the youngest brother of the eight children.

“Quiet down, Sam,” Salvatore says in Italian. Sam didn't need his father's words translated for him. Salvatore gestures to Thelma to read more.

“There is a bank check in the letter. He asks us to go out and buy Christmas gifts for everyone using the money. He even included a list of what he wants us to buy,” Thelma continues. “He says he wants this to be a great Christmas for everyone.”

“What do I get?” Sam asks, forgetting his father's command.

“Nothing if you aren't quiet,” Thelma replies as she turns to face everyone in the room. “Tony says everything is going well aboard ship and he is enjoying Hawaii. It is beautiful, he writes, and the palm trees are amazing. Nothing like that around here, Papa. He says even you would have trouble cutting them down.”

Salvatore smiles and chuckles to himself as his son's words are translated.

"More wonderful news," Thelma continues. "He says he will be out of the Navy this spring. He finishes by saying that he loves and misses us all."

After a moment, a proud Salvatore stands and smiles. "Time to go to church now," he says in his native Italian. "And we will light a candle for Tony."

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

It is early morning on December 7, 1941, at Pearl Harbor. The first bombs from the Japanese fighter-bombers explode against the sides of the ships of the Pacific fleet, catching the men on board unaware.

Those who survived the initial attack are jumping off the ships and trying to swim to Ford Island in the middle of the harbor. The water is covered with burning oil and debris from the exploding battleships. As men scream in pain and fear, an airman and a sailor run down a dock toward an admiral's launch.

"Halt. Do not come any closer," a Marine guard shouts, pointing his rifle at the two men.

"Move out of the way," the airman replies as he tries to step around the confused guard.

"I said, halt," the Marine shouts. "Or I'll shoot."

"And I said move out of the way. We're gonna take the admiral's launch," the airman replies.

"You move one step further and I'll shoot," the guard yells with hesitation in his voice.

"Everything on this dock is my responsibility. You aren't going to touch anything."

While the airman tries to reason with the guard, the sailor edges around him.

"We are under attack. Men dying out in the water and we have to try and save them." the

airman screams.

“I don't have any orders about that. The only order I have is to protect this dock and that launch,” the Marine replies, confused. “That came directly from the admiral himself.”

The airman moves in closer to the marine.

“Your admiral is probably dead in the attack. Come on fella,” the airman says. “We've got to save those men. The Japs are shooting at our boys as they try to swim for land and there is burning oil all over the water. You've got to let us help.”

The sailor picks up a loose board and moves closer to the Marine. As he steps forward, a board on the pier squeaks and the Marine turns. The sailor hits him hard over the head, square on top of his helmet. The Marine's knees buckle and he falls to the ground unconscious.

“I thought he had you for a second there,” the airman says to the sailor.

“Me too,” the sailor replies as he leans down to check the Marine. “Come on let's go. He's still breathing.”

“What was up with him?” the airman asks as he begins to untie the launch from the dock. “Doesn't he see what is going on out there?”

“I don't think he could handle all of this. He just shut down. He had his orders and that's all he knew,” the sailor replies.

“Come on. Let's go try to save some of those guys out there,” the airman says as he jumps into the small boat.

The men race out into the harbor and begin grabbing men from the burning water while intermittent fire continues to rain down. When the boat is nearly full, they reach a brief lull in the attack. .

“I think it's time to head back for the dock,” the sailor calls. “If we get shot out of the

water with these wounded men, we haven't done them any good.”

“Turn it about then. Let's head back in,” the airman says as he helps one of the men settle into the boat.

“Wait a minute. There's one more,” the sailor says pointing out across the water.

“All right. I got him, but then let's go,” the airman says. “Any more and we'll sink the boat.”

“What's your name, sailor?” the airman asks as he pulls the last man from the water.

“Tony. I'm off the WeeVee.”

“Well we got you now, so hold on” the airman replies.

When the small boat pulls back to the dock, a Marine helps the men from the boat onto dry land.

“Come on buddy. Come up this way,” the Marine says to Tony as he helps him from the launch. Tony tries to stand.

“You Okay, sailor?” the Marine asks.

“Yeah. I'm OK. I was on the WeeVee when it got hit. I've got to go back. I've got to help my shipmates,” Tony replies.

“You're not going anywhere buddy,” the sailor replies as he holds Tony down for a minute.

“I tried to fight back from one of the machine guns, until they ordered us to abandon ship,” Tony tells the sailor.

“If you're OK, we're gonna help some of these other guys. When you catch your breath, go over to that bunker and get out of the way. It sounds like the Japs broke off their attack for now, but you never know when they're gonna come back,” the Marine says as he turns to go.

Richwood, WV

“Momma. Pass me the flour for the rolls,” Catherine says to her mother as the women prepare dinner. Carmella passes the flour jar as Catherine’s sister Theresa watches from the corner.

“Cathy,” Teresa asks. “What do you think Tony will do when he comes home?”

“I’m sure he’ll spend time with us and with his friends from school. I mean, he will only be here for a week or so,” Catherine replies.

“No. I mean when he comes home for good. He’s been all over the world and seen so many things. Do you think he’ll be happy to live here with us again?” Teresa asks.

“I don’t know, Teresa. You know Tony loves this place. He’s seen so much of the world, but I think he’ll probably be happy to come home and settle down. He loves us as much as we love him,” Catherine replies.

“I hope so. It’ll be so nice with Tony home from the Navy and things are back to normal so we can be together again as a family. I really miss him,” Teresa replies.

“If you’re going to stay in here and mope, come over here and help me,” Catherine says to her sister, and then more gently she continues “I miss him too, Teresa, but he is proud to be serving his country and Papa is proud of him, too. Papa loves this country and wants us all to do well here. Tony’ll come home safe. I promise.”

Carmella and her daughters turn when they hear a knock at the front door. Joe, who is sitting closest, goes to the door and lets Mr. Roberts from next door into the house. Salvatore is in the front room reading the Bible.

“Hello, Salvatore. Hello Carmella. Hello kids. It is nice to see you all here today,” Mr.

Roberts says to the family.

“Hello, Mr. Roberts. Would you like to sit?” the second oldest son, Bruno, asks.

“No thank you, Bruno. I just stopped in to tell you that you will want to listen to the radio tonight. I'm not sure what is going on, but we just got word that the president is going to speak tonight,” Mr. Roberts says. “I am going from house to house passing the word. He will be on at 6 p.m. All I know is something about an attack. We might be at war.”

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

A scraggly group of sailors and Marines are mingling around the dock area of Ford Island in various states of undress. The airfield on the other end of the island took the brunt of the attack. Some are in only the t-shirt and underwear they were wearing when the attack started. A few men are wrapped in nothing but towels or sheets. Others who were on their way to church are in what used to be dress-whites. All of them are wet and covered in oil and soot from the fires on the ships and the water.

As the men walk up to each other, they peer into each other's eyes trying to recognize each other through the oil and muck.

An officer arrives in a truck. “Come on men. As soon as you get that oil off, come over here and get some clothes. This is all left-over stuff from the base store. It was everything we could grab. Not sure about sizes, but don't be picky right now,” the officer says. “Just get something dry and clean.”

“I lost everything when I went over the side,” Tony says to a sailor beside him.

“Me too. All I have left is the watch my mom and dad gave me when I graduated from high school,” the sailor says.

The men pick through clothes. Nothing is perfect, but in this situation, they will make do with what is available.

“I was in my whites heading to chapel. My shoes and everything else are on the bottom of the harbor. It was all covered in oil,” Tony says.

“When I hit the water, my shoes felt like they were dragging me down. I kicked them off in a hurry,” the other explains.

By 8:30 a.m. most of the men have found clothes in time for the second wave of the attack. The air raid sirens begin screaming as more airplanes come out of the sky. The men grab any gun they can find.

“Here they come again. Here they come again,” a Marine yells as he runs for his rifle.

“Give me a gun. Give me a gun. Let me help,” Tony yells.

A soldier tosses him a rifle and they take off running for a barricade.

“Take cover. They shoot at anything that moves,” the officer calls out to the men.

Tony and the soldier find cover and begin firing into the air at anything they can see, but none of the planes actually come toward the airfield. It took most of its hits in the first wave and the Japanese don't bother to attack it with the second wave.

Richwood, WV

The Severino family is gathered in their Richwood home listening to the radio as President Roosevelt addresses congress and the nation. The two older children sit close to their parents, translating the president's speech into Italian.

The president begins his address before an unusually somber crowd in the Capitol building.

Yesterday, Dec. 7, 1941 - a date which will live in infamy - the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.

The United States was at peace with that nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with the government and its emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific.

Indeed, one hour after Japanese air squadrons had commenced bombing in Oahu, the Japanese ambassador to the United States and his colleagues delivered to the Secretary of State a formal reply to a recent American message. While this reply stated that it seemed useless to continue the existing diplomatic negotiations, it contained no threat or hint of war or armed attack.

It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago. During the intervening time, the Japanese government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace.

The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian Islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. Very many American lives have been lost. In addition, American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu.

Yesterday, the Japanese government also launched an attack against Malaya.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked Guam.

Last night, Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.

Last night, the Japanese attacked Wake Island.

This morning, the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

Japan has, therefore, undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area. The facts of yesterday speak for themselves. The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation.

As commander in chief of the Army and Navy, I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense.

Always will we remember the character of the onslaught against us.

No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.

I believe I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost, but will make very certain that this form of treachery shall never endanger us again.

Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory and our interests are in grave danger.

With confidence in our armed forces - with the unbounding determination of our people - we will gain the inevitable triumph - so help us God.

I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese empire.

As soon as the president quits speaking, Salvatore turns the radio off. Everyone sits silently, except for Mary who cries quietly in the corner.

“Papa? Do you think Tony will be all right? Maybe he left before the attack,” Bruno finally asks, breaking the silence.

Salvatore doesn't answer.

"I'm sure he'll be all right, Bruno. We have to trust that God will take care of him and see him through this," Teresa says.

"I'll light a candle for him tomorrow," Catherine says. Then she turns to her father and asks him in Italian "Papa, can you ask Father Luigi to say a prayer for Tony tomorrow?"

Salvatore only nods. He is too stunned to speak.

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

When the second attack wave ends, it is still morning. Most of the men stay behind bunkers, scanning the skies for a return. An officer pulls up in a jeep. He stands, shouting to get the attention of as many men as he can.

"I need a couple volunteers. I've got reports of some men wounded at different places around the harbor area. I need a couple of you to take that truck over there and drive around for a little bit," the officer says. "See if you can find any wounded. We need you to bring them back in."

Two men raise their hands. Tony is there, but doesn't move.

"Fine, you two go out. We're also worried about some looting or invasion scouts. Take rifles and sidearms with you. Take a radio as well. If you see anything suspicious, call out. We'll come to you," the officer finishes.

"I want to help out, but not with the wounded. I just can't do that right now. I've seen enough misery for one day," Tony says. "I saw enough before I got off the ship."

"I know what you're saying. If they need something else, you and me can do that," says Jonesy, the soldier that gave Tony the rifle earlier..

“Sure,” says Tony.

“All right. I need a couple of you to go down to the bunker and pick up some more ammunition for these machine guns and small arms,” the officer continues.

“We'll do that, Lieutenant,” Tony volunteers for himself and Jonesy.

“Fine. You two take that dolly over there down to the ammo bunker.”

When Tony and Jonesy complete their errand, a sergeant orders them to help with a crew that is building gun emplacements. Men from every service branch work together to prepare Ford Island and the airfield in case another attack comes. Every so often, they stop and stare at the harbor and the battleships that are still burning. An airman walks up to Tony and Jonesy.

“Hey guys. You finished? Let's go get something to eat. I'm starved,” the airman says.

Sure. Sounds good. I think this is the first time I've stopped to think about food since...”

Tony replies as he lets his voice drift off.

“Yeah. Me too. Been too busy. Too confused. Haven't even stopped to think about it,”

Jonesy asks.

“There's no hot food yet, but they said there're sandwiches and things. We should be able to rustle up something. Come on,” the airman replies with his Texas drawl.

As the three men walk toward the mess hall, they pass other soldiers cleaning up from the destruction of the attack. Entering the mess hall, they stop cold when they realize the mess hall has been turned into an emergency hospital and morgue.

“You guys looking for something?” an orderly asks the confused men.

“They told us there was food here, but I guess not,” the airman says.

“There is. It's over there,” said the orderly pointing. “This was the only place big enough to spread out the wounded. You guys look like you need to get some food in your stomach. It's

going to be a long couple days, especially if the Japs come back.”

The three men walk toward the far side of the mess hall past several dead airman and sailors on tables. On the way, Tony notices a badly burned man sitting up in his bed. The man’s hands are heavily bandaged. Tony stops and then walks over. The man looks up at Tony, but doesn’t say anything.

Tony picks up a pack of cigarettes from the table beside the bed. The burned man nods his head when Tony offers him one. Tony puts the cigarette in his mouth and lights it, then places the cigarette in the man’s mouth. After a minute and a couple pulls on the cigarette, Tony takes the cigarette from the man and stubs it out in an ash tray.

The man nods his thanks, relaxes and closes his eyes.

“You know that guy?” Jonesy asks when Tony returns to the others.

“Nah. He just looked like he needed something. I tell you, he was burned so bad, I was afraid to pull the cig back out of his mouth. I was afraid the blister on his lip might break,” Tony replies.

“You did a good thing. He looks like he's relaxed now. He's asleep,” Jonesy replies, slapping his new friend on the back.

“Let's get some food and get out of here.”

The men grab some sandwiches and go back outside to eat. On his way out, Tony sees an orderly covering the head of the burned soldier he helped smoke. He stops for a moment, shakes his head and then moves on.

After hastily eating his lunch, Tony goes to help to repair airplanes and clean up the airfield. No one knows that yet that the attacks are actually over. The men are just trying to put out fires, prepare for a new defense and take care of the dead and wounded.

Evening comes and the men are milling around, counting noses. They are shaking hands, smiling, and a few begin cracking jokes.

“Wow. It's good to see you. Never thought I'd see you again.”

“You too. Last I saw you, you were diving in the water.”

“Not until they ordered Abandon Ship.”

“Oh, I know. You just didn't waste anytime.”

“No more ammo. Ship was sinking. Nothing else to do but take a little swim.”

“Hey, Phillips. Have you seen Patterson or Jersey Mike?”

“Yeah. I saw them in the mess hall earlier. A little banged up, but they looked all right.”

“That's great. That means everyone from our unit made it.”

“I just feel lucky to be alive. The lieutenant asked me to help him and Dorie get the captain down from the signal bridge, but it was no use. He was too far gone.”

“I heard the lieutenant and Dorie ended up manning the machine guns up there until they ran out of ammo and were ordered to abandon ship. Rumor is Dorie actually got a couple Jap planes, too.”

“Dorie? He's a cook. He doesn't know how to use a machine gun.”

“I know. I couldn't believe it either. But that's the story.”

“I just can't believe it.”

The men grow quiet as officer approaches.

“Men. It's time get inside. We're under a complete blackout tonight. Find a bunk inside and get some sleep.”

The men stub out their cigarettes and shuffle inside the makeshift dormitory. They continue talking.

“I’m telling you, the Japs are coming back. Just look at this place,” one man says.

“I guess the Admiral has been calling you with personal information, huh?” another man answers.

“The whole place is blacked out. They even turned out the light by the water tower. I heard they didn’t want anything that could guide in an invasion force,” a third man chimes in.

“If they try to come in here again, I don't think they will catch us so far off guard again,” Tony speaks up.

“I heard there was an invasion force coming in through the harbor in those mini submarines we caught during the attack. Hundreds of them are on their way. And we set up all of the guns to shoot into the sky for more planes. We aren't going to be able to stop them.”

“As jumpy as everyone is out there, right now, I'd hate to be a duck on the water,” Tony replies.

“That's right. There's a bunch of itchy trigger fingers out there right now. The wrong noise on the water and all hell will break lose,” a Marine joins in.

“I don't know about you guys, but I’m so worn out, I could fall asleep standing up. I'm going to fall into this bunk and crash till morning. Nothing we can do about an invasion until it gets here, and when it does we aren't going to get much sleep then either,” Tony replies.

“Spoken like a Marine, Tony. I think you missed your calling. You did all right out there today. Time for some shuteye. We'll let the morning take care of itself,” the Marine agrees.

The last of the low lights goes out, but within moments, a light comes back on. A door opens and light streams into the room. An officer walks in.

“Men. I know you’ve had a long day. I’m sorry to ask this, but I need 12 men from the West Virginia to help fight a fire on board. The fire crews on board her have been at it since the

attacks ended and they're exhausted. They need some relief," the officer requests.

Groaning, men begin to stand up and fall into line. Tony is in the group.

Moving on board the partially sunken battleship West Virginia, the men are stunned. Most hadn't seen the mighty warship since that morning when they jumped overboard. The decks are a mess. Burnt and twisted wreckage is everywhere. Fire crews spray water onto the decks of the West Virginia from the Tennessee where it is tied up on the other side of the dock.

The men move along to where they can help, careful to avoid the hoses that cross the walkway. Approaching the burning area, smoke and flames shoot out of openings. The smoke glows orange making the lower decks look like the fires of hell.

Before he starts to work, Tony stops to look at the remains of the USS Arizona. She is blown in half and is mostly underwater.

"Nothing left of her at all. No telling how many men died on her today," a fireman says to Tony.

"Too many," Tony replies, shaking his head. "So what do you need me to do?"

"We've got to get water in below decks. The only way is to spray it in through those holes. It's still too hot to get any closer for now," the fireman says. The wind turns and covers them both in smoke for a moment.

"How do you deal with the smoke?" Tony asks.

"We have some gas masks. Try to find one of those. Some of the other men are covering their heads with wet towels and coats to keep the soot and smoke out. Do your best. We change out the crews pretty regularly," the fireman replies and moves off to continue working.

"Aye, aye," Tony replies as he turns to three other men from his group. "Come on guys. Let's help these guys out."

Tony and the other men take a hose away from another group to give them relief and proceed to fight the fire throughout the night.

Richwood, WV

The Severino family waits to hear anything about Tony following the attack on Pearl Harbor. They stay close to home, supporting each other. It is the middle of the week after the attack, December 11, and Carmella and her daughters are in the kitchen preparing for the evening meal when they see a man coming up the sidewalk. Carmella tells her daughters to keep working while she goes to the front and opens the door before the man gets a chance to knock.

“Hello, Ma'am. I have a telegram from the War Department for Salvatore or Carmella Severino. Is this the right home, ma'am?” the deliveryman asks

“Yes, yes it is, yes it is,” Carmella answers nervously. She is shaking as she takes the telegram, knowing what it might say.

“I sure hope everything is all right, ma'am. All of them telegrams aren't bad news, after all. I should know. I've delivered enough of them,” the deliveryman continues. “You take care of yourself.”

Carmella doesn't acknowledge the man as he leaves. She is too focused on the telegram. She closes the door behind her, still just staring at the telegram. She opens it, but can't read it. After a moment, she collapses in a chair by the door. Catherine comes out to check on her mother.

“Momma. What is it? Momma?” Catherine asks, before she sees her mother unconscious in the chair. “Momma. Momma. Wake up. Momma. Are you all right? I need help. Momma. Are you all right?” she shouts.

Teresa comes rushing in.

“What is it? What's wrong?” she asks.

Carmella starts stirring as Teresa notices the telegram in her hand.

“Cathy, go get mom some water. She fainted is all,” Teresa tells her sister. She takes the telegram from her mother and begins to read.

“The War Department regrets to inform you that Anthony Sereno has been listed as Missing in Action during the enemy attack on Pearl Harbor. More information will be sent to the family as soon as it is available.”

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

Three days after the attack, word has leaked out that the Japanese have withdrawn after launching attacks throughout the South Pacific. The American Pacific fleet is in shambles and operations are still confused.

Two officers work in a makeshift office. Every letter from every serviceman in Pearl Harbor is being reviewed. Security is at an all-time high. The two lieutenants have been ordered to make sure no operational information leaks out – to the enemy, or to the people back home. The American people know about the attack, but they still don't know the extent of the damage.

“You see anything interesting in the letters you're reading?” the first officer asks.

“Not really, no,” the second man replies. “Most of what I'm reading is basic stuff. Everyone is vowing revenge on the enemy. Other than that, they seem to be more worried about their families at home than they are for themselves.”

“I'm seeing the same thing. There've been a few laughs, a few guys are talking about friends they lost, but nothing to worry about.”

“Take this letter for example. Some guy named Tony off the West Virginia. He is just talking about coming home for Christmas. He doesn’t talk about the attack or the things he’s seen. He just wants to reassure his mother that he’s all right,” the second officer says as he drops the letter down on his desk.

“I’ve seen about 50 letters just like that,” the first officer says with a laugh.

A soldier enters the room with another bag of mail. Before he can place the bag on the floor, he trips and spills the entire contents on the officer’s desk.

“What are you doing?” the officer shouts. “You’ve messed everything up.”

“I’m sorry sir. It was an accident,” the corporal stutters.

“Just get out of here,” the officer says more gently.

“That’s a mess,” the first officer says, shaking his head.

“Well, get over here and help me straighten all this out. I had several letters out of their envelopes. It’s going to take forever to figure out which letters go where and who wrote to whom.”

Richwood, WV

“Come in, Father Luigi. Mother and Father will be pleased to see you today. Mayor Tomas is already here,” Catherine says.

“Thank you, child. I came over as soon as I heard about Anthony,” Father Luigi says.

Catherine takes his coat and leads him into the front parlor where the Severinos are speaking quietly with the Mayor of their small town.

“Momma. Papa. Father Luigi is here to see you,” Catherine says in Italian to her parents.

“Welcome, Father. Please come in,” Salvatore greets the priest in his native language.

“Catherine. Get some coffee for the Father.”

“Thank you, Salvatore,” says Father Luigi. “That is very nice of you. It is cold this year.”

“Hello, Mayor Tomas. It is good to see you as well.”

“It is good to see you, although I hate that it is under these circumstances,” the mayor replies.

“Salvatore, I came as soon as I heard the news about Anthony. Have you heard anything else?” Father Luigi asks.

“No, Father. We are just listening to the radio and hoping to hear something. The news from Pearl Harbor doesn't sound good. Tony's ship sunk to the bottom. Many men got off they say, but there is no way of knowing if Tony was one of them,” Salvatore replies.

“Salvatore. I am praying for Tony. Also, I have placed a call to a friend of mine who is a Navy chaplain to see if he knows anything,” Father Luigi replies. “As you said, though, no one knows much right now, not even who is in charge. It is all very confused. Men are separated from their ships.”

“West Virginia has suffered a great deal in this horrible attack. There are four young men missing or confirmed dead from the central part of the state alone. It is just a shame,” Mayor Tomas says.

“I will pray for your whole family, Salvatore,” Father Luigi offers. “Your family is a big part of my congregation and we support you. Please let me know if there is anything else I can do for you.”

Mayor Tomas and Father Luigi stand to leave.

“I will call to Charleston to see if anyone in the state capital knows anything,” the mayor offers.

Catherine enters the room with the coffee for Father Luigi. Realizing the men are leaving, she turns immediately to fetch their coats.

“Thank you for coming, Father. Thank you as well, Mayor. It is great comfort to me and my family,” Salvatore says.

“You are welcome, Salvatore. Let me know if you receive any more word,” Father Luigi says.

“Just like in the old country, my friend. We all look out for each other. We are here for you,” Mayor Tomas says as he walks out the door.

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

It has been more than a week since the attack on Pearl Harbor and the men are settling into a routine. Some are reassigned to new ships and have moved out. Others are still helping to clean up on shore. The command structure is still uncertain and confused. The fleet command is struggling to determine who is still alive, much less put them on a ship or figure out what to do with them.

“Hey, Tony,” says Jonesy, looking at a board with lists of names posted on it. “Your last name is Sereno, right?”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“I think I just found you on this list. You’re listed as missing and presumed dead. I bet they’ve told your family.”

“You’re kidding. You don’t think they’ve moved that quickly, do you?” Tony asks his friend, knowing the answer already.

“Probably have. They try to take care of that stuff pretty quickly, although no one was

prepared for this mess,” Jonesy says.

“I did write a letter. But no way to know how long that will take to get through. I hate to think about my mama worrying,” Tony says.

“You better go talk to the chief petty officer and see if he can help. They can at least get you off the MIA list so you can get paid again,” Jonesy laughs.

Taking his friend’s advice, Tony walks to the makeshift headquarters to let someone know he actually is alive and get a message home. At headquarters, Tony quickly realizes the reason for his missing status. Even though activities on the outside are beginning to shape up, the administrative functions of the Pacific fleet are not in as good shape. In some cases the personnel files were destroyed or burnt for the land-based personnel. The addition of thousands of men from the ships has created even more chaos.

The first person Tony speaks with says he isn’t even missing. Tony responds that he knows that, but the Navy thinks otherwise. The next person Tony finds agrees that he is missing, but doesn’t know what to do about it. Finally, after wandering from office to office, Tony finds someone who will help him.

“I need to get word home to my family and let them know I’m all right,” Tony says. “I’ve been told that the Navy sent telegrams to the family of everyone on the missing in action board.”

“You’re right, of course. The War Department sent out telegrams just a few days after the attack to notify families,” a young female assistant explains to Tony. “Now, we’re still trying to get caught up and figure out who is still missing and who isn’t.”

The woman gives Tony a form that has been hurriedly thrown together. The Navy has never had to deal with people being listed as missing in action and then showing up only a few days later.

“This is the first war where we’ve been able to get word home so quickly. The way we communicate today makes it too easy to make mistakes,” the woman says, shaking her head.

“Can I make a phone call?” Tony asks. “My family doesn’t have a phone, but one of the neighbors does. I can call there and get word to my folks.”

“I’m sorry, no. We’re still on a communications black out. No phone calls go out unless ordered by the base commander. And he isn’t letting anyone make a call,” the woman tells Tony.

“Have you written a letter home?”

“Well, yeah, I have, but I would like to get word to them sooner, if possible,” Tony explains.

“Once you’ve filled out that form, I’ll get it to the right department, and they’ll send a telegram to your family and let them know. Okay?”

“Thank you ma’am for taking care of this for me. I really appreciate it,” Tony replies.

The woman takes the form from Tony, but within minutes of his leaving, she is reassigned to handling correspondence for an admiral. The form sits with dozens of others.

Richwood, WV

Catherine walks down the main street of town. She has the money Tony sent home before the attack and plans to follow his instructions to the letter.

She knows people are watching her with pity, but she doesn’t stop. She doesn’t want to talk. She looks down to avoid questions or condolences, but that doesn’t deter Mrs. Jenkins who is walking out of the dress shop.

“Hello, Mrs. Jenkins. Merry Christmas,” Catherine says, trying to look cheerful, but only halfway succeeding.

“Hello, Catherine,” the older woman replies. “Merry Christmas to you and your family. Please tell Carmella I said hello.”

“I’ll make sure and do that, ma’am,” Catherine replies as she tries to step around the woman, but finds her way blocked.

“Catherine. I’m awfully sorry about Tony. But don’t you worry, our boys will get them Japs for what they done.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I agree, but don’t worry. Tony will be home. He isn’t dead. They just haven’t been able to find him yet. The radio says everything is still a mess over there. He’s alive. I just know he is, ma’am.”

“You poor dear. I know this is a hard thing to swallow...” Mrs. Jenkins starts to say, when Catherine cuts her off.

“No, ma’am,” Catherine replies forcefully. “Tony is just fine. I know he is. The Navy just doesn’t know where he is, but he is just fine. I know it.” She stops and takes a deep breath before she continues. “Mrs. Jenkins. We have to believe Tony will be all right. We have to have faith. That is the only thing that keeps our family strong. We can’t give up. I won’t give up.”

Mrs. Jenkins looks sadly at Catherine, but doesn’t say anything else. She simply pats Catherine on the arm and walks away. Catherine walks into the store, continuing her shopping. She wipes a tear from her eye, trying to shake off the doubt creeping into her mind.

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

Even under high security, life goes on. But, it is a strange life for the men living on Ford Island and around Pearl Harbor. They have limited access to entertainment. They can’t buy alcohol. They can’t go out on the town, not that much is open if they could.

On Christmas Eve the men try to think about peace, even while they prepare for war.

“So, Tony, what are you going to do for Christmas?” Jonesy asks, knowing exactly what Tony will be doing – exactly what he’ll be doing since they can’t leave the base. But he wants to dream about home.

“You know, I’m looking forward to getting leave tomorrow and getting out of here. I want to go around the island, maybe go down to the beach and just forget about the attack and the destruction,” Tony says, staring off into space. “I should be home now. I was supposed to go home for the holidays. I had it all planned out. My sister was going to go shopping for me and buy gifts with my money but I’d get to give them out. We would all dress up for mass. Then we would all sit down for Christmas dinner. It would be just perfect.”

“Sounds great, Tony. Actually, it sounds a lot like what I would be doing with my family,” Jonesy replies.

Before Tony can reply, or even think about what he wants to say, an officer enters the room where the men are all sleeping.

“Men, I know its Christmas Eve and you have all been working very hard, getting things back in order since... Well, you’ve all been working really hard. I want you to know how much I appreciate it,” the officer begins.

Tony leans over to Jonesy and says, “This can’t be good. I don’t like the way he is starting out.”

“Doesn’t sound like he just wants to wish us Merry Christmas, does it?” Jonesy replies.

“Men, I am sorry to be the one to tell you this, but Pacific Command is afraid the enemy will try to take advantage of the holiday by staging another surprise attack. So, because of that,” the man hesitates, “Because of that, all leave has been cancelled until 0800 hours on December

26. No one is to leave the base tomorrow on Christmas day.”

Richwood, WV

“Papa, I don’t feel like Christmas this year,” Joe says to his dad as the family returns to their home from a Christmas Eve mass at the church.

“I know son. I know,” Salvatore replies to his son.

“I am worried about Tony,” Joe replies.

“I am too, son, but Christmas is one of Tony’s favorite times of the year. He loves having the entire family together,” Salvatore says. “I think we need to go home and prepare for Christmas. We’ll do it for Tony.”

“You’re right, Papa. Okay,” Sam says, “we’ll do it for Tony.”

When the family gets home, the women go to the kitchen to make last minute cookies and candies. Salvatore and his sons bring in a Christmas tree for the family to decorate.

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

The sun rises over Pearl Harbor on Christmas morning. Everything is quiet and still in the south Pacific. The Japanese fleet has retreated closer to home and there is no attack on Hawaii. Recognizing the men’s need to keep some normalcy in their lives, the base commander keeps the work crews to a minimum, allowing the men to assemble for a Christmas morning service.

The men take communion and sing Christmas carols. It is a strange mix of people assembled. There are sailors in dungarees, navy wives and officers all mixed together. Christians and Jews alike have gotten together. They are celebrating the fact that they all lived through the attack and remembering the lives of the men who didn’t. They are also remembering their

families at home.

The Navy Chaplain speaks about the need for those with goodwill in their hearts to keep that goodwill in a world of hatred and destruction. In spite of war, they must all work for peace, he says.

Tony is there with other men from the USS West Virginia and the other survivors who have worked together for the last three weeks since the attack. Many of them have received their orders and will soon be shipping out on battleships or cruisers that will patrol the Pacific.

It is an emotional day for them as they realize that they may never see each other again.

Richwood, WV

In spite of their best efforts, the Severino family is somber on Christmas morning. Even the children are slow to ask to open presents or sneak cookies from the kitchen. The traditional aroma of turkey and stuffing comes drifting out, but they just can't seem to get excited. The country is at war. Tony is still missing and they haven't received any word.

A knock comes at the door. The family freezes. Joe runs to the window and sees a delivery driver standing outside. For a moment, no one moves. Finally, Salvatore lowers his head and begins moving. Every step for him is like moving through cement, and he suddenly feels very cold. Catherine goes with her father to help him read the note.

Salvatore opens the door, takes the message and thanks the man. Numbly, he turns and hands the paper to his daughter with shaking hands. Catherine opens the telegram and quickly reads. She stands still, in shock.

"He's alive," she screams at the top of her voice as the tears begin to stream down her cheeks. "Papa, he's alive," she says again more quietly as she wraps her arms around her father.

The rest of the family comes running into the front room. The country is still at war, and times will be hard and dangerous for the next several years, but at least they know Tony is alive.

On December 7, 1941 Anthony (Tony)

Sereno was getting dressed and preparing to go to church in the chapel on the battleship, the USS West Virginia, when the Japanese torpedoes struck. He had been building a model of the battleship. It was lost when the ship went down, along with everything else he owned.

Tony was transferred to another ship and continued to serve his country in the Pacific theater. Tony went on to serve until 6 months after the war in the Pacific ended aboard two more vessels and saw action throughout the theater. In total he served 7 years, 7 months and 27 days in the Navy. He returned to West Virginia where he eventually retired from the US Postal Service many years later. He rarely spoke of his experiences in World War II. He married and raised two children in Charleston, WV.

Anthony “Tony” Severino, passed away in 2011.

His great grandchildren still remember him fondly.



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