

Excerpt:

AVENGING ANGEL: A PILOT'S STORY

Gifford and Millie Bridger were sitting on the sofa. Millie laid her head on Gifford's shoulder ... weeping quietly as her husband held her. Two men, a Navy Lt. Commander, and another sailor, stood in front of the couple.

"We're very sorry for your loss Mr. and Mrs. Bridger," the officer spoke softly.

"Thank you, gentlemen. And thank you for your service." Gifford choked out. With that, the two men departed.

Carl and Annie sat down across from Gifford and Millie. "It's George, isn't it?" Carl asked. Gifford nodded.

Carl stood and walked out the door onto the front porch. Annie followed him.

"Carl ..." Annie started to speak.

He turned toward her, buried his face on her shoulder and released a shuddering sob. His legs started to buckle, and Annie helped him to the swinging love seat. He wept freely in the arms of his Annie as she held him tightly.

Later in the afternoon the family gathered in the living room before dinner. Gifford opened the official report issued by the Navy, of the events surrounding George's death.

"On June 3rd, the U.S.S. Fiske was part of a group of ships patrolling the North Sea. They were engaged by a pack of three German U-boats. The Fiske began laying mines to protect the larger ships: two destroyers, and a cruiser. Two German torpedoes struck the U.S.S. Fiske causing her to sink with all hands. Two U-boats were destroyed by the Fiske's mines and the third escaped."

Penny had been crying steadily since she got home from the grocery, carrying a few items her mother needed, and heard the tragic news. "Daddy, wh...when will George come home? His body, I mean?"

Gifford dropped the report on the coffee table and lowered his head into his hands, unable to speak.

Millie spoke softly, "Honey, sweetheart, George is with his friends aboard his ship. He won't be coming home,"

The day ended without any mention of Carl and Annie's run-in with the wolves.



A graveside service for George was held by the family at the Cascade City Cemetery. They filled an empty casket with many of George's mementos: his high school letter jacket; ribbons from county and state rodeo events; his favorite boot, and many photographs of George, his family, and friends. A headstone read simply:

George Franklin Bridger, USN
Beloved Son and Brother - Still At Sea
1920-1944

Carl withdrew into himself over the next few weeks. Even Annie couldn't pull him out of his melancholy. One day in early July, he changed. He went about his ranch work with renewed energy ... even fervor.

"Carl, honey, I'm so glad to see you acting like your old self ... What's changed?" Annie asked. They sat alone on the swinging loveseat, out of ear shot of the rest of the family.

"I'm enlisting in the Army Air Corp, Annie." He spoke quietly, but firmly.

"What? What did you say?"

"Annie, I can't sit here all safe and cozy and pretend the war isn't still going on. George didn't hesitate when he made his decision. I have to do my share. If I don't go, someone else will go in my place. I'm not going to let one more man die for my comfort and safety ... I can't!"

Annie fixed her gaze on him. Carl remained silent and stared at the floor. She stood and ran into the house, the screen door banging shut behind her.

An emotional conflict raged inside Carl. *I need help. I love Annie ... and my family. What will this do to Mom? Yet, I can't NOT go. Oh, God, help me!* Carl ran to the corral and saddled up Butch. He rode out to the big cottonwood tree where he and Annie had picnicked the day the wolves came.

The meadow grass smelled earthy and fresh as he knelt in the shade beneath the branches. Butch grazed nearby. Carl removed his sweat-stained Stetson and interlaced his fingers. The feelings in his heart were tearing him apart. It was all about loyalties. His father's words about what defines a patriot came to him ... *a man never knows he's a patriot until he fights for his country.* He needed to ask his God what to do. He poured out his supplications, yet not a word was spoken. His was a prayer of the heart. Suddenly, an inexplicable warmth and peace enveloped him, and he knew what he needed to do. The only words he uttered beneath the old tree were... "Thank you, Lord." What had seemed like minutes had in fact been over three hours. Carl's knees were stiff as he stood. Butch had wandered off, but Carl's whistle brought him running from across the pasture.

When he broke the news to the rest of the family, Millie and Penny begged him to change his mind. Annie sat beside him ... silent and held his hand while they all went through the painful process of reconciling themselves to the fact that Carl was leaving.



July 6, 1944

At the bus terminal, Carl hugged his mom and dad, and they said their good-byes.

Penny fought back tears and forced a smile. "You come back home, big brother. You have to promise."

"I promise. I'll be back before you know it. Take care of Mom and Dad for me?"

"I will." Penny kissed Carl's cheek and joined her parents on a bench.

Carl took Annie aside and removed a small box from his pants pocket.

"Annie, this is for you." He smiled and opened the box. Inside lay a ration token which had been bored out and smoothed to the approximate size of her ring finger.

"Will you wait for me, Annie? Will you, please?" he asked humbly.

“Yes, of course I’ll wait for you. I’ll be here at the Double-B until you come home. Remember our song, Bridger? ... *Only forever ... if you care to know.*”

“I love you, Annie, only forever.” Their bodies shook and tears were shed as the two embraced. Finally, Carl pulled away and held Annie at arm’s length. “I WILL come home to you, Annie. Fire and brimstone won’t be able to keep us apart.”

Carl boarded the Greyhound bus for Texas. He couldn’t help remembering George’s departure from this same bus station nearly three years earlier.