



CAN A BOMBER PILOT
REDEEM HER REPUTATION
AND RESCUE HER WHEN
NO ONE ELSE WILL?

*Search
Light*

ANNETTE O'HARE

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Foreword

Each generation of Americans finds it hard to understand prior generations, but the “generation gap” between the average American of today and the America of World War II is different. It is immense. Thanks to movies and TV dramas, the world of the 1940s is perceived mainly in mythic stereotypes. Those of us who lived then—I was in seventh grade in 1941-42—are uncomfortably conscious of the differences between that era and the America of today. According to the 2020 census, the United States now has a population of about 331 million, with some 80 percent living in urban areas. The national population in 1940 was about 134 million. Only 29 percent of these lived in urban areas, with the other 71% scattered sparsely across the nation’s vast countryside. When most of us then heard the word “city,” we looked to the Northeast, to the top of the Midwest, or to the West Coast—with the real nation we lived in spread out in between.

This dispersion of the population, together with the absence of today’s instant communications, led most of us to focus mainly on local matters. We did have radio, but the once-a-day national news programs were mercifully limited to 15 minutes. We received only highlights of the most important news items—not enough to make us constantly conscious of violent events half a world away. We did know there was a war in Europe, and radio did bring us the dramatic, inspiring speeches of Prime Minister Winston Churchill after Dunkirk and during the 1940 bombings of London. We did know that German U-boats were torpedoing ships near the British Isles, but we had no idea that in 1940 they were sinking about 40 ships a month.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor angered us, and we knew the nation was going to war. But it still was far

away. From radio, we heard of the frantic preparations to bring the nation to total mobilization. We saw local men volunteering for military service or being drafted. But in the hinterlands, life for most of us continued at the same placid pace. The war seemed far away. We did not know how close it actually was.

How close? 170 miles south of the small town where I lived, the Gulf of Mexico shores buzzed with busy and often desperate activity. For German U-boats were wreaking havoc on allied shipping in the Gulf. Military aircraft flew long and dangerously low missions searching for the subs, and coast watchers scanned waters near the shore for survivors of torpedoed ships and possible enemy activity.

Annette O'Hare's novel captures both the details and the spirit of this coastal activity known as Operation Drumbeat. While peacetime life prevailed in the rural inland, aircraft crews and coast watchers fought a tense and desperate battle to keep the U-boats from cutting off America's supply of oil and other essential materials into Southern ports.

My own service in two later wars has given me greater appreciation for the urgency and dire circumstances faced by those depicted in the novel.

~Donn Taylor, LTC, Inf., AUS-Ret., author of *The Lazarus File*, *Lightning on a Quiet Night*, etc.

Dedication

To Franklin "Frank" L. Chessher, Jr., Corporal, U.S. Army,
Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas, Red Arrow Division,
Purple Heart recipient for injuries sustained in WWII Pacific
Theater and wife, Pauline Lopez Chessher. Together forever
in heaven

James M. Brannon and Mary Ellen Cokley Brannon,
Houston, Texas. Together forever in heaven

Rachel V. Sterner, Storekeeper 2nd Class, WAVES, Naval Air
Operational Training Command, Corpus Christi, TX

Irene Karchella, Corporal, U.S. Marine Corps Women's
Reserve, Camp Pendleton, Oceanside, CA

Oveta Culp Hobby, Colonel and first director, WAACS 1941-
1945

Jacqueline Cochran, Colonel and first director, WASP 1942 -
1944

Mildred H. McAfee, Captain and first director, WAVES 1942
- 1945

Ruth Cheney Streeter, Colonel and first director, U.S. Marine
Corps Women's Reserve, 1943 - 1945

To the men and women who have served this great country,
their families, caregivers, and survivors, thank you on behalf
of myself and my family for answering freedom's call.

Books by Annette O'Hare

Northern Light
Child of Light
Redeeming Light
Search Light

1

FOR THOU HAST BEEN A SHELTER FOR ME,
AND A STRONG TOWER FROM THE ENEMY.
PSALM 61:3

1942 Bolivar Peninsula, Texas Gulf Coast

Pauline Lopez gripped the iron railing until her knuckles blanched white. A chilling wind swirled up her spine and danced through her hair. She was terrified of heights. Why then had Divine Providence placed her atop a one-hundred-fifteen-foot tower shrouded beneath the darkness of night? A soldier in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, stationed at Fort San Jacinto on Galveston Island, Texas, Pauline proudly served her country. She was honored to accept sentry duty at the Bolivar Point Lighthouse even if the assignment scared the wits out of her.

Built during the Victorian Era, the Bolivar lighthouse had been decommissioned since 1933. But the tall structure remained standing making it the optimal place to keep watch over the mouth of Galveston Bay. Armed with a pair of binoculars, a military flashlight, and a standard Army issue, EE-8

two-way field phone radio, Pauline scanned the Gulf of Mexico. Her objective was to spot German submarines and report their activity to Galveston Harbor Defense Base.

The coast was clear. Pauline lowered the heavy field glasses hanging from her neck. Glad to be away from the edge, she relaxed and leaned against the cold iron outer wall of the catwalk encircling the lighthouse service room.

Bam, bam, bam!

Pauline sucked in a deep breath, startled by the banging sound behind her. Her palms and back flattened against the service room.

"When are you coming inside?"

Releasing her breath, Pauline placed a hand over her racing heart. She crept around the catwalk toward the door, her heels clinging to the service room wall. Once inside, a gust of wind caught the heavy door and slammed it shut. She turned on the flashlight, illuminating the cylindrical room.

Inside the service room, her friend and fellow WAAC, Mary Ellen Cokley, stood in the middle of the small room. Mary Ellen scowled, tapping her foot. The broken broom handle she'd used to beat on the wall was poised in her hands ready to give it another go. "There you are." Mary Ellen lowered the broom. "I was starting to worry about you."

Pauline glared at her. "You should be worried. You nearly gave me a heart attack, beating on the wall like that." She gestured with the flashlight. "You know I'm afraid of heights. I could have accidentally fallen to

my death, for heaven's sake."

Mary Ellen's face softened. "I'm sorry, kiddo. Didn't mean to scare you."

"You don't sound very sincere." Pauline shut off her flashlight.

"What? I'm sorry. I'm sorry. How many times do I have to say it?" Mary Ellen walked toward an oil lantern, their only light source besides the flashlight. Easing down to the floor, she crossed her legs and picked up a magazine. "I'm just so bored. They've had us out here for days on end and we haven't seen one dad-blamed German U-Boat."

Pauline couldn't believe her ears. "Would you listen to yourself? How could you possibly be bored? We are on high alert. Do you have any idea how many oil tankers the Germans have attacked while trying to dock at ports in both Texas and Louisiana?"

Mary Ellen looked up from her magazine. "No."

"Well, I don't either, but I do know it's a lot. And it's our job to make sure no German submarines get into the Gulf of Mexico. The United States depends on those shipments of oil and supplies. And...well...I don't think you're taking your job very serious."

Mary Ellen rolled her eyes. "I do take my job seriously, but there are four good reasons why no German soldier is dumb enough to come anywhere near Galveston Island or Bolivar Peninsula."

"Four good reasons, huh. What are they?"

Mary Ellen laid the magazine on her lap and held up one finger at a time as she spoke. "Number one, Fort San Jacinto, number two, Fort Crockett, number

three, Galveston Army Airfield. And last but not least, have you forgotten about Fort Travis? It's practically across the street from the lighthouse." She pointed in the direction of the fort and gave a haughty, harrumph, before picking up her magazine and snapping it open.

Pauline took her tongue lashing in stride and retreated to gaze out the service room window. Mary Ellen was right. No sane person would risk coming anywhere near the Texas Gulf Coast with the fortifications of the United States behind it. And yet somehow, freighters were still being sunk or damaged and their crewmen injured or even killed by enemy fire.

A glint of light flashed from the water. Pauline jumped to attention and raised the binoculars to get a better look. "Oh, my goodness." She adjusted the focus wheel making the object appear crisper through the eyepieces. She turned to her friend.

"What is it now?" Mary Ellen's devil may care manner annoyed Pauline.

"Come here. I need you to see this."

Mary Ellen's shoulders drooped; her head dipped to the side. "Really?"

"Yes, really!"

"All right." Mary Ellen groaned and rose from the floor with the speed of a wounded tortoise.

"Would you please hurry?"

"OK, OK."

Pauline handed the binoculars to Mary Ellen. She pointed out the window. "Look down there, directly to the south. It's in the water just west of Fort Travis."

"It's pitch black. I can't see a thing. What am I looking for?"

"In the water close to shore. Can't you see it?"

Mary Ellen sighed. "No. What... Hey, wait a minute."

"Do you see it now?"

"Yes." Mary Ellen giggled and continued looking through the binoculars. "Oh, boy, those guys will be in a heap of trouble."

"What? Give me those." Pauline yanked the field glasses from her hands.

"Hey!"

Pauline took another look, confirming what she'd seen before, and lowered the binoculars. "What do you think you're seeing? Because I see a rubber raft full of men, rowing toward Galveston Island."

"Calm down, Pauline."

"How can I calm down when we've just spotted the main thing we were warned to keep a look out for? What is wrong with you?" Pauline trembled.

Mary Ellen grasped her friend's forearms to steady her. "Come on now. You need to get a grip on yourself." She gave her a reassuring gaze. "Now listen to me. I don't want either one of us looking like a couple of fools for calling this in. It looks to me like a bunch of kids out on a jaunt. You know how kids are. School is out, and they're all up to no good." Mary Ellen giggled. "They probably stole their pop's raft. So, what do you say, can't we just let this one go?"

Pauline steeled her body, willing away the shuddering inside her. She ripped her arms away from

Mary Ellen's grip on her. "I can't believe you. This is a matter of national security."

Raising her hands, Mary Ellen backed away and puffed out her chest. "Look, I just don't want you getting called on the carpet by the Little Colonel for reporting mischievous schoolboys having a little fun on a nice summer night."

Chatter crackled over the two-way radio, drawing their attention. Pauline picked up the handset from the floor and started for the door. The long cord trailed behind her. "I'm going back out to get a better look."

"Suit yourself."

Mary Ellen's terse words tied her stomach in knots. How dare she threaten her with involving her hero, fellow Texan Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby, director of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. Gathering her courage, Pauline opened the door leading out to the catwalk. The wind blew harder now than before. She leaned against the door frame to steady herself while looking through the binoculars.

It took a few minutes to locate the raft that had paddled even closer to Galveston Island. She lowered the field glasses and squeezed the trigger on the handset. What should she do? Think Pauline, think.

Her military training hadn't been so very long ago. She knew what she should do. The possibilities of what might happen if she didn't make the call flashed through her mind. Could she remember the hand-to-hand combat moves she'd learned? The only thing holding her back was the fear Mary Ellen had lodged in her psyche of calling out the cavalry for what could

possibly be a false alarm. Why am I second guessing myself? I don't want blood on my hands.

President Roosevelt had signed Executive Order 9066 in February authorizing the incarceration of Japanese, German, and Italian Americans in internment camps. The President felt the same protective nature she had concerning the country. Surely a false alarm would be forgiven. One couldn't be too cautious in the current world climate. President Roosevelt would call.

In April, Pauline had read in the paper about an internment camp opening in Kenedy, Texas, southeast of San Antonio. The story went on to say that more would be opening soon. Overcome by a wave of dread, she clamped her fist around the binocular strap. Her stomach lurched when she remembered that Fort Travis was at present overflowing with German prisoners of war.

Were the ones in the raft paddling toward Galveston Island perhaps POWs having escaped the fort? A sense of urgency tingled inside her. Should she make the call at the possible risk of her dignity, or choose not to call and put American lives at risk?

A chilling wind swirled around her. Pauline raised the binoculars for another look. Those weren't schoolboys in the raft...they were men—grown men. The handset squawked. She gasped and squeezed it tight, so she didn't drop it. Think, think, think. What should I do?

She had to make a decision one way or another, and fast, before it was too late.

2

Pauline pulled a scrap of paper from her sweater pocket and read over her notes before closing her hand around it. She was stationed at Watchtower One for a very specific reason. It was her responsibility to do what she knew was right.

Her mind was made up, it was now or never. Raising the handset, she squeezed the trigger. "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. This is William One calling George Baker. Do you copy George Baker? Over." Pauline spoke loud and clear over the sound of the rushing wind as she called Galveston Harbor Defense Base, using their call sign, George Baker. Her hands trembled, hoping she wouldn't forget the correct words used in the phonetic alphabet.

The radio crackled to life with Watchtower One's call sign. "William One, this is George Baker. What is your emergency? Over."

"This is William One reporting an eminent threat. I repeat, this is William One reporting an eminent threat. Over."

"George Baker here. What is the threat? Over."

Pauline gripped the handset careful not to let it slip through her moist fingers. "William One here. A rubber raft with four men aboard is leaving Bolivar en

route to the island. Possible enemy threat. Over.”

“What are you doing calling Harbor Defense Base?” Mary Ellen appeared beside her, grabbing for the handset.

“Stop it!” Startled by Mary Ellen’s outburst, Pauline reacted by pushing her away.

“Give it to me!” Corporal Cokley was a slight little woman, not nearly big enough to get the handset away from tall, slender Pauline.

“No!” Pauline held it out of her reach.

“Roger, William One. Can you confirm that it’s the enemy? Over.”

Pauline released the air trapped in her lungs. “Negative, George Baker. I can neither confirm nor deny. Over.”

“Roger, William One. We’ll take care of it. Do you have anything further? Over.”

“Negative. Over.”

“Thank you, William One. This is George Baker. Out.”

“William One. Out.”

Pauline lowered the handset praying she’d done the right thing.

Mary Ellen leaned against the service room’s wall, her arms crossed over her chest. She glared at Pauline. “Listen here, Pauline Lopez. Don’t you think for a minute that I plan on taking one iota of responsibility for what you’ve done.” She uncrossed her arms so she could point at Pauline as she walked toward her. “You, my friend, are on your own with this...this problem. Do you hear me?”

Pauline twisted up her lips. Her voice cracked as she spoke. "I read you loud and clear—friend."

The grimace melted off Mary Ellen's face. "Hey, you're not going to cry, are you?"

"No. But what if I'm wrong, and it is just some kids playing as you said?"

Mary Ellen stretched her arms out and shrugged, her words pleaded. "I told you not to call."

"I know, but..."

"Hey," Mary Ellen put her arm around Pauline's shoulders. "There's nothing we can do about it now. What's done is done. If you're right, there won't be a problem. And if you're wrong, well...we'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Thanks, friend."

The two women stood in the service room doorway. A beautiful array of bright twinkling stars hung in the summer sky. Had they not been involved in a world war, and if the whole coast wasn't on high alert, it would have been the perfect night for a beach bonfire and wiener roast with music playing on the radio. Instead, the two-way radio blared with calls for action.

Pauline stared out across the vast Gulf of Mexico searching for any signs of the reinforcements dispatched by Galveston Harbor Defense Base.

"Look," Mary Ellen said, pointing downward.

Pauline followed her friend out onto the catwalk to get a better look. She gripped the rail tight and looked where Mary Ellen pointed.

On the other side of the road from the lighthouse

the familiar close-set headlights of an army jeep came to life, leaving out of Fort Travis. The automobile bobbed from side-to-side driving on the sandy beach.

"I wonder where he's going?" Pauline asked.

"Looks as if the action has started."

Pauline's stomach was already tied in knots when a plane roared in the distance sending her heart racing. A sudden flash of light slashed across the towering lighthouse. Both women instinctively secured their hats, ducked, and looked heavenward as a military aircraft blew over their heads.

"Oh, my goodness," Mary Ellen said. "He almost hit the lighthouse."

Pauline stood to her full height. "No, but that was much too close for comfort."

The pilot flew in wide circles, searchlights panning the entryway to Galveston Bay and beyond. Two boats equipped with bright spotlights emerged from Fort Travis below them. Across from the Bolivar Peninsula on Galveston Island two more fast moving boats motored toward them from Fort San Jacinto. The ground beneath them crawled with flashlight wielding soldiers.

Pauline's heart hammered against her chest knowing she was responsible for all the hubbub.

"Look," Mary Ellen said. "Over there." She pointed to a pair of pursuit boats slicing through the water.

Pauline raised the binoculars. "Yeah, it looks as though they've got them."

All four boats shined their spotlights on the rubber

raft. The airplane continued circling overhead, searchlights combed the night sky making it difficult to see what was happening.

Mary Ellen tugged Pauline's arm. "Tell me what you see."

"Don't do that!" Pauline gripped the railing, fearing a fall. "Well, they've pulled all four men onto one of the boats from Fort Travis."

"Oh, yeah? Can you tell if they're Nazis?"

Pauline squinted looking into the binoculars. "I...I can't tell. It's too far away and those lights are blinding." She lowered the field glasses and blinked a few times before taking another look. "Oh, wait, now it looks as if they're tying the raft to the back of the other boat."

"OK. What about the men? Can you see them better now?"

"No. They're all sitting on the deck with their heads down. Oh, wait, the boat with the four men is leaving. They're heading back toward Fort Travis."

"Let me see."

"Here, take them." Pauline removed the strap from around her neck and handed the binoculars to Mary Ellen. For the first time all evening she felt good about making the call, even a little proud of herself. "Stay here and keep watch. If you see anything suspicious call it in."

"Wait. Where are you going?"

A wide smile spread across Pauline's lips. "I'm going over to Fort Travis to find out who those men are."

Mary Ellen sucked in a quick breath. "Oh...promise me you'll be careful, Pauline."

"I will. Don't worry. I'll be back in a flash." Pauline went inside the lighthouse service room, clicked on her flashlight and started down the stairs.

"Pauline, wait," Mary Ellen called out to her.

"What is it?"

"I just wanted to say, I'm glad you made the call."

"Thanks." Pauline blushed. "I'm glad I did too."

~*~

The vehicle came to a stop at the guard shack outside Fort Travis. Pauline waited for the soldier to open the gate. A big man with a rifle hanging from his shoulder approached. Pauline squinted when the soldier shined his flashlight in her eyes. Blinded by the light, she couldn't very well see his face. He put his elbow on the door and leaned in so close she could feel his hot breath. His deep, gravelly voice unnerved her.

"Looky here, looky here. And what's your name, darlin'?"

"Corporal Pauline Lopez." Anxious to get into the fort, Pauline had no time to waste on the pigheaded soldier.

"What have I done to deserve a visit from Corporal Lopez on this beautiful moonlit night?" The soldier chuckled.

To Pauline's annoyance, the flashlight remained shining in her face. "Sir, I really need to get to the fort, It's urgent. So, if you would please let me in."