

Scene: (First chapter.) Ensign Jack De Vries joins his first sea berth, having just lived through the bombing of the Cavite Navy Yard.

December 10, 1941. Manila Bay, 1530 Hours.

In the bow of the *USS Otus* mailboat, Ensign De Vries stared at the waves of Manila Bay a thousand yards out and saw nothing. Not even water.

Ka-thump!

De Vries flinched, hunching his shoulders upward and pulling his head and neck downward.

The dark-haired Filipino.

After a moment he look skyward, searching for the bombers. There was nothing.

“Take it easy, Ensign,” said the mailboat’s coxswain. In the stern, tiller in hand, the man was frowning at his superior officer. “It’s just stored warheads or compressed air tanks going off in the fires.” He jerked his head toward Cavite Navy Yard a mile or two behind them. Three hours ago it was a bustling service and repair station, the largest American naval base this side of Pearl Harbor. Now it was twisted metal, fire and smoke, and body parts.

Wrinkling his brow, the cox examined the blouse of De Vries’ tropical whites. “What’s that on your—”

BOOM!

Almost simultaneous with the sound, the remnants of the shock wave hit them: a light wind passing over their cheeks and momentarily raising tiny ripples on the water. Even the coxswain jerked involuntarily. “Damn, that was a big one!”

De Vries’ mouth sagged open, and he began trembling. His eyes teared up.

The dark-haired Filipino.

With no warning he suddenly leaned over the side and vomited.

Done, he straightened up on his seat and wiped his mouth with his forearm. The cox was frowning even harder than before but quickly looked away. The ensign unconsciously rubbed his left forearm where all the hair had been singed off. It hurt.

After a minute or two the cox nodded toward the bow and said, “That’s the *Pope* up ahead.”

When the man's words registered, De Vries looked over his shoulder. About a hundred yards away, the flush-deck destroyer bobbed at anchor in the swell. She was World War I vintage, laid down in 1919 and launched in 1920, and showed every bit of her age. Cinnamon-colored rust streaks lined the panes of the bridge windscreen and oozed down the sides of the portholes. Aft her four smokestacks, soot stained the deck planking and the two side-by-side motor sailing launches. The torpedo tubes and the after 4-inch and 3-inch guns, though, were immaculate and gleamed in the sunlight.

The cox eased back on the throttle, and the mailboat drifted toward the destroyer's hull, arriving with a slight bump. De Vries vacantly looked up toward the main deck, which wasn't very high above his head. Like all her sister ships, the *Pope* rode low in the water. Apart from a PT boat, the four-piper had less freeboard than he'd ever seen on a warship. Visions of the ocean washing over the forecastle and carrying him out to sea flashed through his mind.

"This is where you get out," said the cox impatiently. "I got mail to deliver."

The ensign blinked, then reached out and grasped the ladder, which had been lowered over the side. He had mounted about halfway up, when the cox asked him, "Sir, could you lend me a hand? I feel like a sitting duck out here, tied up next to an anchored ship." Standing on the center seat of the mailboat, balancing easily in spite of the swell, he held up a canvas sack of mail.

Ensign De Vries wondered whether, as a U.S. Navy officer, he should be offended at the man's presumption; but he took the sack in his left hand, awkwardly hauled himself up the rest of the rungs with his right, and handed it to a sailor on deck.

"Don't forget your case, Sir," the cox told him.

He had. Descending the ladder, he took it from the man, who immediately untied the mailboat from the ladder and went on his way. Remounting the ladder as awkwardly as before, De Vries grasped the top handles when he came to deck level, pulled himself the last little bit upward, and stepped onto the wooden decking.

He glanced around in a daze. There was something he was supposed to do.

"Well?" barked an unhappy voice. "Come to attention and salute!"

Yes, that was it.

For a moment he stared stupidly at the man—by his insignia, a lieutenant junior grade: a superior officer, apparently officer-of-the-deck, glaring at the new man who was flouting naval regulations.

De Vries straightened up and saluted. “Ensign De Vries. Request permission to come aboard.” Something else. What was it? “Reporting for duty.”

“Permission granted.” The ensign saluted, and the lieutenant j.g. returned it. “Where’s your cap, Ensign?”

De Vries rolled his eyes upward, searching for the visor, and touched the top of his head. But he already knew he’d lost it. Waving his hand vaguely toward shore, he said, “Cavite.”

“Cavite, Sir!”

“Cavite, Sir.”

The lieutenant j.g. looked the ensign up and down and didn’t at all like what he saw. His scowl made De Vries examine the front of his uniform. He hadn’t known which one to wear under the circumstances—reporting for duty under wartime conditions. So he’d tried to play it safe and chose tropical whites: white visor cap, white short-sleeve blouse (no tie), knee-length white shorts, high white socks, and white shoes.

Except none of it was white anymore.

Blood and smoke stains on his nice white blouse. Blood and oil stains on his nice white shorts. Blood and flecks of skin on his nice white socks.

The lieutenant j.g. got the picture. Instead of glaring at the new man, he merely frowned. “I’m Lieutenant Ziegler.” Waving a sailor over, he told him, “Botsky, take the ensign to the Captain.”

“Aye, aye, Lieutenant. This way, Sir.” Seaman Botsky led De Vries toward the bow.

The dark-haired Filipino.

De Vries winced.

“After you, Sir.”

The ensign realized the sailor was speaking to him and was motioning the way up a steep stairway—hardly more than a ladder—of eight or nine steps. It occurred to him that he’d traversed some hundred feet of deck toward the bow, passing by the whale boat hanging from its davits; and then under the deckhead of a structure supporting two 4-inch guns, one starboard, one port. The trek had made no impression on him.

De Vries mounted the stairs. Botsky followed.

At the top he realized he was on the bridge. Two officers, older than the *Pope* sailors he'd seen so far, were in the midst of a sober conversation. They had the bridge to themselves.

“The way I see it,” said the older of the two, “our biggest problem is anti-aircraft defense. The 3-inch maxes out at about 6,000 feet—and the bombers were a good 4,000, 5,000 feet higher.”

The man was seated in a tall chair. De Vries guessed it was the captain's chair, and the man was the Captain.

The man standing next to the Captain had very short brown hair and appeared to be in his mid-thirties. “Agreed,” he said. “The pea shooters should have been replaced long ago. Pac Fleet destroyers have been outfitted with new 3-fifty guns that are supposed to be awesome.”

Seaman Botsky had been loath to interrupt the officers, but now he cleared his throat to get their attention.

“Yes?” said the elder man. “What is it?”

“Uh ... ensign to see you, Captain.” Having no idea who De Vries was nor why he was there, there was nothing more he could say.

“I'm De Vries, Sir.” The two officers knitted their brows, and he realized he'd messed up again. He straightened up, saluted, and said, “Ensign Jack De Vries reporting for duty, Sir. From Signals. And *Peary*. Sort of.”

The two men looked him over, then glanced at each other. “That'll be all, Seaman,” the older one told Botsky.

“Yes, Sir.” Botsky left.

“I'm Lieutenant Commander Blinn,” said the older man, “Captain of the ship. This is Mr. Antrim, the executive officer.” Antrim nodded but said nothing.

Taking in De Vries's uniform, Captain Blinn said, “I take it you were caught in the bombing?”

The bombing. Cavite. The dark-haired Filipino.

“Yes, Sir. I was on my way to ... umm ... *Peary*.”

“Are you all right?” asked the exec.

De Vries tried to remember the XO's name but came up blank. He looked around vaguely. The deck here in the bridge had wooden planking too. The steel walls and bulkheads were painted standard battleship gray. The telegraph could use a coat of paint

"Ensign?"

"Yes, Sir. Sorry, Sir. Yes, I'm all right." He looked down at his uniform. "The blood's not mine."

"You were helping the wounded?" asked Captain Blinn.

"The wounded. Yes, Sir. Some of them. A lot of them weren't wounded anymore."

Captain Blinn took that in a moment. "I received the *Peary's* message less than an hour ago. You were scheduled to report there?"

"Yes, Captain. But *Peary* took a bomb in the raid. Many dead." He grimaced. "Deck all" A shiver passed over him, as if he'd been hit by a cold wind. "Captain Keith was wounded, and their exec—umm" He'd only met the XO once and couldn't recall his name.

"Mr. Gates," Antrim prompted.

"Yes. Him. They think he's not going to make it. Their torp officer's in charge at the moment, and in the mess they're in, I think he just couldn't deal with a new man right now. So he turned me over to you."

Lieutenant Antrim shrugged. "Short-term thinking," he told the Captain. "They're going to need all the replacements they can get."

"I won't second-guess him," replied the Captain. "He made the call as he saw it at the time." Looking his exec in the eye, without inflection he said, "We may be needing replacements ourselves before—"

Ka-thump!

De Vries gasped and leapt backward, then stared toward Cavite breathing audibly. When he looked back at the two officers, they were both frowning at him.

"Pull yourself together, Ensign," said the Captain. "That's an order."

De Vries tried to draw himself up. "I'm sorry, Captain. I ... saw things."

Blinn pursed his lips. "We're at war, son. You're going to see a lot more before this is over." He let that sink in a moment. "Dick," he told the exec, take Ensign"

"De Vries. Sir."

“Take Ensign De Vries down to the pharmacist’s mate and have him administer a tumbler of restorative. Straight. Then have Ziegler settle him in.”

“Aye, Sir,” replied Antrim.

Just as they were about to leave, the Captain stared at De Vries’ blouse, wrinkling his brow just as the coxswain had. “Ensign, what’s that on your shoulder?”

“Where, Sir?”

“Right here.” Blinn touched his own left shoulder, just below the clavicle.

De Vries craned his neck down and to the left. Whatever it was was so near the top of his shoulder that it was just barely in his field of vision. De Vries reached over with his right hand and plucked it off.

The thing was almost black, roughly circular and about the size of a silver dollar, but thick and moist. De Vries screwed up his face, trying to figure out what it was.

The man with the thick crop of dark brown hair.

One moment he was there, and the next he was gone.

De Vries went smoke-gray. Covering his mouth with his left hand, he darted his eyes around the room in desperation, and when he saw it, grabbed the Captain’s waste basket.

