

## CHAPTER I

## Home Seems a Long Way Away



*Only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun.*

—HINDU PROVERB

STIRRED TO LIFE by the drone of aircraft engines, a drowsy soldier emerged from under mosquito netting as the pink hue of dawn appeared on the eastern horizon—ushering in another sweltering day at the Tezpur Air Base. Pulling on a pair of khaki trousers, he carefully dusted talcum powder between his toes and inspected his GI shoes for green mold; fungus was a problem during the monsoon season in the Assam province of India. Playful monkeys watched from overhanging branches as he washed and shaved from a tin basin on the veranda of the hut. Donning a pith helmet to shield his head from the blazing sun, Lt. Lyle Sladek, 0872240, sauntered off to the bamboo mess hall for morning chow.

While eating breakfast, Lyle thought of his parents and siblings on the other side of the world. Then, ignoring the flies buzzing in and out of the open windows, he sipped GI coffee from a tin cup as he planned his day's activities. Censoring the outgoing mail was first on his list, a task he did not relish but one of his duties as Cryptographic Security and Intelligence Officer for a detachment of the Army Airways Communications System (AACS).

Later in the morning Lyle dropped in at the crypto station to check the settings on the coding machines and to ensure the enlisted men were observing proper procedures in handling classified messages. Not that he anticipated any problems—the men were dependable and knew their work. Still, he was responsible for the operation of the station and did not want any foul-ups. Finding everything running smoothly, he said he would return when new codes were scheduled to go into effect.

## 2 ★ LUCKY STARS AND GOLD BARS

Hoping to find something new and interesting to read, Lyle set off for the post library. Although he walked slowly, beads of perspiration dampened his brow and heat rash prickled the small of his back before he reached the bamboo hut. While thumbing through a book of poetry he marveled at how well Rudyard Kipling had captured the India scene. Yes indeed, the heat was enough to “make your bloomin’ eyebrows crawl.”

After browsing for an hour, Lyle checked out a copy of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Tucking the book under his arm he ambled back to the crypto station, voiced the password for the day, and gained admittance to the code room.

“How’s it going, Sergeant?”

“We can’t decode this garbled message, Lieutenant. We’re hoping you can unravel it.”

“I’ll get right at it, Sergeant.”

Tenaciously applying several techniques, Lyle succeeded in obtaining clear text. Never, never did he request a sending station to repeat a communication—a grave violation of cryptographic security since cross-referenced messages were a boon to enemy code breakers.

While at the station, Lyle learned Allied bombers had dropped tons of incendiaries on Tokyo two days earlier. Surely, he thought, the devastating firebombing would induce Japanese leaders to admit defeat.

It was dusk when Lyle returned to the basha, a lonely place that evening since his two bunkies were working down on the flight line. Lighting a candle, he pulled a chair up to the native-made table, removed his shoes, and reread a letter from Peggy. Quite a girl, Peggy, plenty cute and danced like a dream. Yes, that last month in St. Louis had been like a fairy tale.

Thinking of another girl back home, Lyle picked up the framed studio photo he kept on the table. Beatrice had a certain touch about her—that dazzling smile and upswept hair, eyes that twinkled with mischief. No wonder she had knocked him for a loop. He thought of their parting at the railroad station a year earlier. She had given him a snapshot, the two of them standing arm in arm by a fountain on Belle Isle. On the back, in lavender ink, she had written, “Till we meet again.” God willing, Lyle thought, we will meet again after the war.

Turning his thoughts to home, Lyle filled a fountain pen from a nearly empty bottle of ink and, mindful of censorship, penned a letter to his parents and siblings on the farm in South Dakota:

3 AUGUST 1945 (FRIDAY). Dear Everybody,  
For some reason I’m just feeling tops tonite—and I hope it’s even better with each of you. Somehow I just hope things always stay on an even keel around home—it will be much easier for us if we come back to

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something solid—something dependable. We get used to most anything it seems after about so long but there are times when one feels like how swell it would be to have Mommy tuck him in and bring a glass of water when he's sick. It's a lonely feeling like when they fire a volley and a flag wrapped body breaks the stillness of a tropical sea. Although I guess that's a good way to go. Today I had to censor our detachment's mail which is the worst job in the army. I have enough troubles of my own most of the time without hearing other people's too. . . . Dad, you sure wowed me with that "Fee On Say." You should get on Bob Hope's show. But Dad, you just don't understand the situation here. If you so much as glanced at these Indian gals the MPs would toss you in the guardhouse and quick. You see actually you cannot comprehend this country cause you cannot see and smell it. You cannot possibly realize how absolutely positively it lacks any resemblance to our type of living. Just like trying to tell someone how a carrot tastes. Get me? . . .

Yes, that C-46 picture over the Hump looked natural. While riding the controls through storms I wondered how it would feel to bail out into the dark of the night into the wilds of the world's roughest terrain. Lots have done it—lots don't get a chance to jump. But the life line to China must and will stay open in all weather day and night. August 1 was the anniversary of the air forces. News is good lately isn't it. Got my fingers crossed. . . . It has rained hourly for the past week so it has been some relief from heat. But you have to dry feet and powder well etc to prevent fungus growth. And envelopes must be strung on thread like beads cause they seal if they touch anything. Great country. Really feeling on top of the world though. Be good.

Lyle hoped the war would soon end. Drafted at age nineteen and now nearly twenty-two, he longed to return home and get on with his life. He pictured his mother, Emma, making pancakes on the kitchen range and his father, Charles, returning from morning chores, milk pail in hand. He visualized his three younger sisters, Virginia, Jean, and Wilma, setting the breakfast table. No doubt his little brother, Chuckie, was out on the porch roughhousing with his mutt, Skippy.

Leafing through *King Lear* by candlelight, Lyle pondered the lines: "It is the stars / The stars above us, govern our conditions." Thus far, it seemed, all the stars had been in the right alignment for him, as though some unseen hand had nudged him along a predestined path.

Ready for sleep, Lyle crawled under the canopy of mosquito netting. Clasp his hands behind his head, the young lieutenant reflected on boyhood dreams and world events that had brought him to this strange land—such a long way away from home.