Chapter 27

I Have Returned

My name is Elliot Nolan. I have light brown hair and brown eyes. I was 19 in 1944.

The cool, October air almost seemed to bite at me as I hung onto the railing of my current transport ship. This air was nothing compared to what I normally had to face back home in New Hope, Pennsylvania during this time of the year. At least the weather here still had somewhat of a warm tone, though the wind did not help anything. What I did not miss for sure about home was all the snow we got once the weather really started to get cold. Here, I felt no fear for snow or any other brutal temperatures. I just got out of basic training before being shipped off to here, but I had wished to be sent to the European front and fight some Germans.

I know that it seems like I don’t care about home, but I do miss my family back home even if some are missing. Since I’m only 19 and a private in the army, I don’t get to go home very often like the other officers and top officials. My older brother gets to go home and visit my parents more often than I get to. He’s a hot shot captain in the army air corps over in Europe, and he’s helping do all the bombing raids against important German targets. I should have known I would have been stuck over here with the Asians and fighting a lot worse people.

The ship bounced a little and brought me back to the present and back to what I have to start doing. We would be invading the Philippines in a few days and I had to make sure I had all my rations and ammo for the initial push inland. Many of my fellow soldiers were packing up their supplies in our assigned cabin when I came in. Soon, we would be off on landing craft and fighting for what was taken from us at the start of the war.

Finally, the battle started on October 20 with the U.S. Sixth Army invading Leyte in the Philippines. Before our invasion, the air corps launched massive bombing raids on many of the islands for days. The naval forces also launched a two day bombardment that ended with our advance on the island. I got off my craft and pushed onto shore, but there was no resistance initially. We landed on the northeastern coast with an invasion force of 175,000. Later on during our establishment of a beachhead, General MacArthur come onto the island and declared over the loudspeakers and the radio, “People of the Philippines: I have returned.” The peace only lasted for about two hours before we were pinned under fire from a sudden Japanese attack. Their heavy resistance made it much more difficult to advance inland. By the end of that first day, 3,320 Americans had been killed and an estimated 49,000 to 80,557 Japanese also. We left them no survivors.

While we were pushing further inland, another type of battle was happening off the coast and part of the ocean from our positions. From October 23 to 26, the Battle of Leyte Gulf commenced. The Japanese tried to draw off the U.S. fleet and attack our landing grounds, but our planes and subs forced the Japs to retreat. Their efforts were in vain because this battle ended up being a U.S. naval victory. The Japanese lost 4 aircraft carriers, 3 battleships, 6 heavy cruisers, 4 light cruisers, 11 destroyers, several hundred aircraft, and 10,500 sailors. Our navy lost only 1 light carrier, 2 escort carriers, 2 destroyers, and 1 destroyer escort. Also during this battle, the first suicide air attacks from the Japanese began. We started to call them Kamikaze attacks, and Admiral Halsey said, “The only weapon I feared in the War.”

We finished taking the island about two months later and moved to our next objective. On December 15, our troops invaded Mindoro which is also part of the Philippines. The men that first got there surprised the Japanese defenders upon arrival. The entire landing went unopposed and the fighter bases were quickly captured as well. The year ended quite well.

At the start of the next year, my commanding officer informed the men that we would have our next objective coming up. Also to be prepared for a much harsher fighting and much more defenders. On January 9, our Sixth Army invaded Lingayen Gulf on Luzon. We must have surprised the Japs again because our landing went unopposed except for a few air attacks. By the end of the first few days, we had landed 175,000 men onto the beaches. However, our ships did not fare as well as we had with constant Kamikaze attacks. They managed to sink many of our ships until it seemed the Japanese had run out of planes. The fighting ended up not being as bad as it was pictured, but perhaps this is because the Japanese troops were split in two with one to protect Manila and the other to fight us on Luzon’s Mountains.

While I stayed to fight on the mountains, many of my friends I had made went off to capture Manila. On February 3, they went off to begin fighting there. From the news I received, the fighting started at night when they arrived there, and they ended up freeing many Allied POWs on that day. Unfortunately, the 20,000 Japanese defenders holed themselves further in town to a fortress-like district. During this initial bloody fighting, the city was not supposed to be harmed and the residents left alone if possible. We still managed to kill 1,000 Filipinos by the tanks and artillery fire. This was nothing compared to the blatant murder the Japanese troops had done with taking 100,000 Filipino lives.

Other news came in from some of the front lines. On February 16, more U.S. troops recaptured Bataan on another island of the Philippines. When General MacArthur inspected the troops, he said they were ripped, soiled, and dirty but alive. Many of those men looked at him in awe, and rumors went around of many of them whispering stuff like “You came back” and “You’re back.” Also on March 2, the U.S. airborne troops recaptured Corregidor.

The soldiers reported back from the Manila front of a complete and total success of the capture of the city on March 3 along with Filipino troops. However, the damage report was horrendous. 70% of the utilities, 75% of factories, 80% of housing, and 100% of businesses were destroyed in the fighting. The casualty count came to 205,535 Japanese killed and 9,050 captured. For the Americans, 8,310 were killed and 29,560 were wounded.

I was sent to Manila for any clean-up jobs and flushing out any remaining Japanese soldiers, so the news I received was by radio and rumors from the other soldiers. On March 10, the U.S. Eighth Army invaded Mindanao, but the fighting was long and brutal. They were engaged in guerilla warfare in the mountains for months until the resistance ended on June 18. On June 28, General MacArthur’s headquarters announced the end of all Japanese resistance in the Philippines. The war seemed to be finally coming to an end in this part of the world. I was 19 years old. At least I was over here fighting instead of trying to on a tiny island that was supposed to be as close to Hell as possible.