

# **Operation: Happy**

A World War II Story of Courage, Resilience, and an  
Unbreakable Bond

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ZONDERKIDZ

*Operation: Happy*

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For dog lovers everywhere.  
(Don't worry, Happy is going to be okay.)

# Part 1

Island Girl

*Chapter 1*

# Wish List

Christmas 1938

A dog is at the top of my wish list.

I unwrap number three: a Monopoly board game.

Then I pluck number five from under the Christmas tree: a Shirley Temple doll.

And number two: a new Nancy Drew book.

But number one is still very much missing.

Mom asks my older sister, “Are you happy, Peggy?”

“Very,” Peggy says. As she *should* be. She got her number one, a makeup set.

“And how about you, Jody?”

I nod quickly, like the good soldier I am.

I’m a marine, inducted at birth because of Dad being a commanding officer. And I’m not *unhappy*. I got a lot of things checked off my wish list. But a dog. I’ve been aching for a dog.

Big and shaggy. I want that dog to take up so much room on my bed, there will barely be a sliver left for me. And when that bed becomes a bed in a new house, and then a different bed after that, going to sleep will always feel the same after I close my eyes because he will be there. Or she. I don’t care what my dog is. Only that I get one.

Dad stands from his armchair and quietly slips from the room.

I gather the wrapping paper strewn about our living room.

Mom's eyes flick to the doorway.

Mine do too.

Dad appears. In his hand is a leash. That leash stretches behind him. Attached to that leash is something big and fluffy, with a red bow the exact same shade as Dad's robe.

I gasp. Peggy squeals. I give her a quick glare. She didn't put a dog on *her* list.

"His name is Happy," Dad says.

Yeah, it is!

This dog looks nothing short of happy, his tail wagging so hard I'm surprised his feet stay on the ground.

I jump to a stand so fast my glasses nearly fall off my face.

"Careful, now," Dad says. "Happy was a sentry dog for the base, but his eyesight's going. He's been more or less a mascot for some time now. Approach him slowly so he can see the shape of you."

I do, saying, "Hello, Happy, my name's Jody," and by the time I reach him, he's taking steps toward me too. And I swear, that dog is smiling like no dog I've ever seen before.

## Chapter 2

# Back on Duty

This is her. His new human.

Happy is officially back on duty. As her hand sinks into his shaggy fur, he sits. Solid like a rock, easier for her to pet.

Jody coos, “What a good boy.”

He’s heard that before. Happy loves hearing that from his humans. Although it took some time to understand how they talked. Humans use a lot of words. Confusing ones too. *Cattywampus* has nothing to do with cats . . . he doesn’t think? Then there’s *lookie-loo*. Happy used his back paw to scratch his head the first time he heard that one. *Malarkey* is another. It sounds like an ingredient in his dog food. But when his old handler Gordon once said, “Now that’s a bunch of malarkey,” there wasn’t any pellets to eat in sight.

But the simpler words—the everyday words—he learned lickety-split (that means *fast*) while he worked as a guard dog, protecting his humans and patrolling the base.

When Gordon said, “Happy. Sit.”

He sat.

“Happy. Heel.”

He trotted right beside Gordon’s feet.

“Happy. Stay.”

He remained behind.

“Happy. Move in.”

He began to inch closer to their target.

“Happy. Get him.”

He lunged and bit down hard—and growled to show he meant business.

“Happy. Out.”

He released his bite.

“Happy. Hup.”

That meant *jump*, but he never knew how high. So he jumped the highest he could. Every single time.

Happy took his job very seriously. When the sun went down and his collar went on, it was like a light switch flicked up inside of him too. His muscles were loose. His senses were keen. Every unique smell, sound, movement—he was on it. Nothing got past him. He once single-bitedly stopped an intruder from getting on the base. Happy latched on tight, yanking and pinning the intruder to the ground until Gordon took over.

But when the sun came up and his collar came off, his tongue promptly lolled to the side and he heard Gordon say, “It’s darn near impossible not to look at you and smile. You make me happy, buddy. Go get some rest—you earned it.” And that was when he knew he’d really done his job.

The thing was, as time went on, Happy’s job got harder. His eyes started working less and less for him—until he saw little more than shapes. But he didn’t rely on his eyesight much anyway. Happy mostly used his eyes to detect movement. To really do his job, he had his sniffer, which was an excellent one. That always steered him straight. Maybe he’d misjudged a step or two—or a whole flight of



stairs—but he shook it off, slobber flying. Problem was, his humans worried about him, and his eyes. “He could get himself hurt,” they said in whispers. “Or us.”

He’d never let such a thing happen. Never. Happy grinned extra for his humans, letting them know it. But their faces were hard to read, blurry and fuzzy. One day, Happy was on his back, getting belly rubs, when Gordon said, “We’ve been together a long time, boy. I’m going to miss you. I’m going to miss you a lot.”

Happy rolled over. He cocked his head.

“I know, I know,” Gordon said. “It’ll be a change for us both.”

Happy tilted his head to the other side. Gordon was sitting, legs crossed with his knees pointing out, but his shape wasn’t as straight as it normally was. He was more slumped. Sad?

“Your job here is done, boy.”

His job was done? Happy army crawled closer, whimpering softly, nudging with his wet nose.

“It’s nothing you did wrong, boy. It’s simply time. For me too. I’m retiring. No more work for either of us.”

No more work?

No more doing his job?

Keeping his humans safe?

Making people happy?

Happy had thought, *No. That couldn’t be right.*

Gordon cupped Happy’s cheek, scratching behind his ear. Happy leaned into it.

“I’m going to spend time with my grandkids. Where you’re going, I hear you’ll have your own kid. It’ll be an important job, Happy. You’ll have a new little girl to make happy.”

And that little girl is right in front of him.

It feels like an eternity has passed between saying goodbye to Gordon and hello to Jody.

But he’s here now, and he has a job to do.

### Chapter 3

## Best Of

Happy claimed me and I claimed him. Now, we're inseparable. Two peas in a pod. Compadres.

Where I go, he goes—and since he joined our family two years ago, we've lived in quite a few places and shared quite a few beds. Today, we're aboard the SS *Lurline*, on our way to yet another new home.

Happy's fluffy fur catches the sea breeze. I run a hand down his back. When I stop, he nudges me for more loving.

"Don't worry, boy, you're done being below deck. We'll be back on land before you can say *collywobbles*."

His forehead wrinkles. I laugh, squeezing his head against my leg. It's good to have him with me again. We've been on the steamship for nearly six days, each turn of the engine bringing us closer to our new home in Hawaii. For those almost six days, poor Happy was boarded on a lower deck.

"How long have you had him?" a crew member said to me during one of my *many* visits to the kennels.

I said proudly, "Two years. He was fully grown when we adopted him. We've been all over together."

"Ah, a fellow traveler." He rolled up his sleeve, revealing two tattoos: a turtle and a bird. "This one here," he said, tapping the shell, "commemorates how I've crossed the equator. The swallow means

I've sailed more than five thousand miles. Got that one ages ago. This trip alone gets you halfway there. Almost time for your own ink."

He winked, to which I snorted. Mom would rub a tattoo clear off my body.

"Anyway," he finished, "Sure is a big dog for such a little girl."

Little? I already tower over Mom, almost Peggy too. I twisted my lips but politely answered, "He's a German shepherd-collie-husky mix."

A mutt, like me. I'm a Washington, D.C.-Bremerton-Quantico-Long Beach-North Island-Yerba Buena Island mix. I certainly have earned my own bird tattoo.

Most recently, we lived on North Island in San Diego. Dad was *supposed* to be stationed there for two years. But before we even hit two months, a telegram arrived out of the blue:

You are ordered to report to the United States Naval Air Station, Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, assuming command of the Marine Barracks, October 16, 1940. Reservations have been made for your family to embark the SS *Lurline*, October 10, 1940.

I still can't shake Mom's reaction to this sudden transfer. As a military family, we move a lot. Together. Always together. The Marines have a saying: *Semper fi*. It means "always faithful."

But Mom didn't want to go. The idea of her not coming was unthinkable. In the Marines, there are teams with three members and

a leader. We're Team Zuber: Dad, Mom, Peggy, and me. Happy's a bonus.

Just knowing I'm part of our team always helps me settle in at each new place we go. So do my best-of list, the ten things I like about my new home. The top of each and every list is identical: *#1: Happy takes up half the bed.*

But I'm nervous about my best-of list for Ford Island. I overheard Mom tell Dad that she had a bad dream and that this island was more than *an* island. She said it was *the* island. Whatever that means. Maybe it has something to do with the war? It's been going on in Europe for about a year. But the war doesn't involve Dad—or the United States in general—so we haven't paid much mind to what's happening over there.

"Here we go, Happy," I say, forcing cheer into my voice. "You're number one, of course, but let's see what else will go on my best-of list here . . ." I survey the approaching island of Honolulu. With Happy not having the best vision, I'm his eyes. "There's a huge mountain. It's right along the water," I tell him. "The bluest water we've seen yet."

Happy turns his head up toward me, showing me an underbite of white teeth, like he's grinning.

Sea mist coats my glasses. I clean them on the hem of my dress.

"There's another mountain too. This one looks like the dorsal fin of a fish."

We're getting really close now. And so far, I'm not seeing what's made Mom so nervous about coming here. Still, I grip the railing tighter than necessary. My charm bracelet clangs against the

metal. Mom, putting on a fake smile, let Peggy and me choose something from the gift shop. I chose a bracelet with three charms: a surfboard, a palm tree, and a blue-and-green tropical fish.

*#2: I live somewhere with tropical fish.*

Happy twitches his nose. “New scents, huh?” Unfamiliar ones carry in the breeze, somehow both sweet and spicy.

*#3: It smells really nice here.*

I won’t put this next one on the list yet—not until we experience it for ourselves—but Hawaii has some great surfing, hence the surfboard charm. “One day I’ll get you on a board,” I tell Happy. “Would you like that, boy?”

His tail wags.

I can see him on the board, tongue hanging out, riding a wave. I bet his four legs would help with balance. I chuckle to myself, just thinking about it.

Men in canoes paddle toward us, cheering the ship’s arrival.

Peggy is suddenly beside us.

“Where are Mom and Dad?” I ask her.

She pulls her long, curly hair into a low ponytail. “Finishing a bridge game.”

Not surprising. They’re addicted to the card game, even winning the ship-wide tournament.

“Oh, look!” Peggy says. “Aloha Tower.”

It’s tall, thin, and white.

“I know its name,” I pretend. “You don’t have to tell me.”

She shrugs.

Then the docks of Honolulu come into view. “There are musicians, Happy. Dancers too!”

Within seconds, Happy’s ears perk to the gentle and soothing music. I sway on my feet. On the dock, the dancers in their grass skirts move their hips.

Peggy shouts out, “Aloha! Aloha!” then begins to mimic them, and I can’t help but laugh with her. She’s okay sometimes.

The smile stays on my face while we disembark the ship with Mom and Dad, while flowered *leis* are put around our necks, while we wait for our Pontiac to be brought on land from the cargo hold, while we drive down the sleepy country roads toward Pearl Harbor, while we drive straight onto a smaller ferry that is taking us to Ford Island.

When we’re on the ferry’s deck and the full harbor comes into view, Dad points to the ships and says, “Here we have what’s known as Battleship Row.”

That’s when my smile falters, all because of Mom’s expression. She won’t even look at the ships. Her lips are pressed together. She holds her breath.

“The *Arizona, Nevada, West Virginia, Tennessee, Oklahoma,*” Dad goes on, naming the moored ships. “They’re all in.”

Still, Mom’s gaze is anywhere but on those ships. Why won’t she look at them? I stroke Happy’s head. We’ve moved plenty of times before. What has Mom so spooked about arriving at *this* island?