

A Funny Thing
Happened on
the Way to
Miami

A Ben Wyporek Short Story

From the *Engage at Dawn* Series

By

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Lieutenant Junior Grade Benjamin Wyporek, US Coast Guard, was an hour into a 15-hour drive from Little Creek, Virginia, to his new duty station in Miami, Florida. He was tremendously excited about the new job he was heading for and almost as excited to be leaving Virginia for sunny Florida on this frigid January day. He should have waited a couple of days for the weather to moderate. There had already been freezing rain this morning, but this was an emergency transfer. His new unit had waited for nearly two weeks, but it couldn't be helped. He was the Communications Officer on his previous ship, which meant he had custody of beau coups classified publications and hardware, all of which had to be inventoried and page-checked before he could be relieved and detached. That took precious time, leaving little to spare for waiting on the weather. So, he drove along white-knuckled in his white Camaro, well under the speed limit on the two-lane state roads forming the shortest route from Norfolk to Interstate 95, and alert for any issues on the road ahead.

It had been only ten days ago when he learned of the new job. He was knee-deep in the usual drudgery of Communications Officer duty in US Coast Guard Cutter *Dependable's* Cryptography Office. He did not hear the ringer on the ship's phone in the adjoining Radio Room

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and startled when the Operations Specialist poked his head in and said, "Mister W., XO on the phone for you."

Ben's heart sank. The Executive Officer, better known aboard ships as the "XO," had never been a bearer of good news in Ben's experience. Calls from the XO typically included such dreaded phrases as: "Are you aware..." "Why did/didn't you..." or "I had occasion to inspect your division spaces today..." none of which resulted in a positive outcome for him or someone in his division. He pulled the Crypto Office door closed and took the phone. "Lieutenant J.G. Wyporek, ma'am." A month after his promotion, he was relieved he had finally gotten out of the habit of answering "Ensign Wyporek," a source of amusement among his peers in the wardroom, as the officer's mess was known aboard ship.

"Ben, I need to talk to you right now, please."

Wow. No preamble, just get down here. Ben's heart descended another couple of levels. This had the makings of a severe ass-chewing, and he would not help himself with the next sentence. "Ma'am, I have the safe open and crypto laying out. I'll need a couple of minutes to get it squared away."

"Yes, yes, of course. But get down here as soon as you're done."

"Yes, ma'am."

Ben hung up the phone and strode back to the crypto room. He took a deep breath and replaced everything in the safe, checking thoroughly around the room to make sure he left nothing out before closing the drawer and spinning the dial. Making a mistake with classified

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material was the worst form of unforced error a junior officer could make. Regardless of the added ire it cost him with the XO, he was determined not to become one of “those guys.”

He left the radio room, hustled through the corridor toward the ladder, and bounded down to the next deck to reach the XO’s stateroom. There was no need to knock. The door was open, and the XO looked up as he arrived. “Come in, Ben, and close the door, please.” After he did so, she said, “Have a seat,” and motioned to the spare chair by her desk.

Hmmm. Not an ass-chewing. He would be braced-up at attention. What the hell is going on here? “Yes, ma’am?”

“I have some good news for you, Ben. How would you feel about an XO job on a one-ten?” she asked with a smile.

Ben, a 23-year-old graduate of the Coast Guard Academy, had been aboard *Dependable* for 18 months and was due to transfer in the summer. He had hoped for a commanding officer job on an 87-foot patrol boat, but those went to Deck Division officers, not Communications/Electronics weenies like him. With the 110-foot patrol boats, referred to as one-tens, being phased out and their larger replacements having a full Lieutenant as XO, his hopes he’d have a shot at command cadre in the next tour were fading fast. “I would feel great, ma’am. Is there something I need to do I haven’t done already?”

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“You misunderstand. How would you feel about getting the job right now? There’s a mid-season opportunity, and your name has come up.”

Did I hear that right? What’s the catch? Uh-huh. It’s probably one of the boats three thousand miles from civilization up in Moose’s Balls, Alaska. “Still sounds good, ma’am. Dare I ask which boat?”

“*Kauai*, in Miami.”

No way! Chasing drug smugglers in the sun and calm seas instead of puking my guts out measuring fishnets while counting the days until sunrise! “It just got upgraded to awesome, ma’am. Not looking a gift horse in the mouth, but this is rather sudden. Did something happen to the current XO?”

“That’s the downside. *Kauai* just had a serious mishap. The XO’s been taken off on a medical disability, and they have relieved the Commanding Officer for cause.”

Yep, there it is. If that boat wasn’t a hot mess before, it sure as hell will be now. “Um...”

“Before you reply, let me fill you in on things. I was on the phone with the Captain heading up response in the 7th District—she’s ramrodding the replacement rather than going through the normal process because they need someone down there yesterday. The mishap and the relief are on the old CO. He was one of those rare cases of a Captain Bligh slipping through the cracks. She says the crew’s a good bunch, just a little downtrodden right now.

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“Anyway, the new CO is there, and he’s the best one to right the ship. I haven’t met him, but I know of him, and everyone I trust says you *want* to work for this guy. So, do you have any questions before I pin you down for an answer?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m in, but am I right for a turnaround job? Kicking ass and taking names is not my forte.”

The XO smiled again. “The last thing *Kauai* needs is another screamer. ‘Ass-kicking,’ as you call it, is a tool that every officer should have and use when needed to get something done in an emergency. Officers who think it’s the only tool don’t last long—they have nothing left in a real jam. *Kauai*’s former CO just provided a spot-on example of that truth.

“You and your division have done extremely well under a very demanding schedule the last year. The chiefs and petty officers trust and respect you. They like working for you, and it’s not because they think you’re a soft touch. Your quiet competence has not gone unnoticed upward either; that’s why you got the call. You are the right man for the job.”

Ben was staggered by the revelations he was appreciated both down and up the chain of command. He knew he was a skilled ship handler, far better than average, but he was nowhere near as aggressive as the other junior officers in the leadership dimension. Ben thought that might be a disadvantage and considered changing, but decided he just couldn’t bring it off. He was getting the job done without being a dick, and that is how he wanted to keep it.

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“Thank you, ma’am,” he said. “If you think it’s right, that’s good enough for me. Where do I sign up?”

Ben turned over the Communications Officer job and sundry to other junior officers on *Dependable* with breakneck speed. He arranged the shipment of those possessions that would not fit in the Camaro, which was pretty much all of them. Finally, with great satisfaction, Ben was able to invoke the Soldiers and Sailors Civil Relief Act to cancel the lease on the hideously expensive apartment in Virginia Beach he’d been talked into by an ex-girlfriend. The big day came, and he pushed off, despite the weather. Next stop, Miami.

A few miles past Newsome, Virginia, a large green pickup pulled up behind him and started tailgating. Ben wanted to throttle the driver for doing something that stupid under the existing conditions, but settled for slowing even further. This drew several honks on the pickup’s horn and, when traffic allowed him to pass, an obscene gesture from the driver. *Go to hell, jackass! I’ve got your number.*

Ben watched the pickup speed off to repeat the tactic on a small SUV driving a couple of hundred yards ahead. This time it didn’t work out so well. The pickup mistimed his passing of the SUV, veering back into the right lane too soon. The SUV driver jiggled right to avoid the pickup, hitting the road’s soft shoulder, then over-corrected, crossing the road and smashing into the guardrail. After penetrating the barrier, the car came to rest, teetering on the edge of a cliff-like embankment. As Ben pulled over to see if he could help, he dialed 911 with the Camaro’s voice-activated Bluetooth.

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“Nine-one-one. What is your emergency?”

“This is Lieutenant Junior Grade Benjamin Wyporek, US Coast Guard. There has just been a single-vehicle accident two miles west of Newsome on state highway 761.”

“Understand single-vehicle accident. Are there injuries?”

“Unknown, I am just pulling up now.”

“Understood. Please stay on the line and let us know what you find.”

“Will do,” Ben said as he pulled to a stop and grabbed his phone. The scene that awaited him was surreal, with the SUV’s front half over the embankment’s edge, hanging in space with a sheer 40-foot drop. The guardrail was pierced and blocking both passenger doors. With the driver’s airbag deployed, he couldn’t see much other than that the driver was female and not moving. The car’s back end was drifting slowly up and down. *Holy shit! Talk about flipping a coin and having it land on its edge!* As he approached the vehicle, he could hear a child softly crying. Ben grabbed the hatchback’s top and put his full weight on to bring the rear down. He was not a large man, 5-foot-10 and 165 pounds, but his weight was enough to ground the vehicle’s rear wheels. Ben breathed a brief sigh of relief and then called out, “Hello, can anyone hear me?”

“Yes, I can hear you!” said a young child’s voice.

“Hello, my name is Ben. What’s yours?”

“Dierdre!”

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“Hello, Dierdre. Are you hurt?”

“No, but my mommy is. She won’t wake up!”

“I understand. Is there anyone else in the car besides you and your mommy?”

“My little brother, Sean. He won’t wake up either!”

“OK, Dierdre. I know this is very scary, but I need your help. I need you to stay where you are and not move around. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand!”

“Super. Now I need to talk to someone on the phone so they can get help for us, but I’m staying right here with you. OK?”

“OK!”

Ben pulled out his phone and whispered, “Operator, are you still on the line?”

“Still here, Lieutenant.”

“Alright, we have a single-car crash with airbag deployment. The driver is unresponsive. There are two passengers, both children, one unconscious. The car has penetrated the guardrail and is hanging over a steep embankment. I am standing on the rear of the vehicle to keep it from going over the edge. I can’t enter the vehicle to check injuries or remove the occupants.”

“Copy all, Lieutenant. We’ll get you help as soon as it’s available.”

“As soon as it’s available? How long will that be?”

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“Estimate 45 minutes.”

Ben was appalled and barely able to continue in a whisper. “Forty-five minutes? Have you been listening to me? This thing’s about to go over a cliff with two kids in it!”

“Lieutenant, we are working a dozen emergency cases right now with the weather. I’m sorry, but that’s the best I can do.”

Ben ground his teeth and said, “OK, make it as soon as possible. While I have you on the line, copy down this license plate number: Virginia IG5B17. It belongs to a green RAM pickup. That’s the asshole who caused this accident and then ran off.”

“Copy all. I’m sorry, Lieutenant, we’ll get someone there as soon as we can.”

“Understood. We’ll be here.” He hung up the phone. “Dierdre, how are you doing, honey?”

“I’m OK!”

“Alright, the people on the phone are sending help, but it’s going to take a little while to get here.”

“I’m getting cold, Mister Ben!”

“I know, honey. I’m going to get you out of there soon, but it’s very important you stay in your seat. OK?”

“OK!” After a brief pause, she asked, “Mister Ben, are you a policeman?”

“Sort of. I’m a Coast Guard officer. That’s like a policeman who rides on ships.”

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“Oh. Do you like it?”

“Yes, I do. Very much. What would you like to be when you get older?”

“I want to be a soldier like my daddy. Mommy doesn’t like that. She wants me to be a doctor.”

Yeah, don’t they all? “You have a lot of time to decide. I’m sure you’ll pick a job that makes you happy.” Ben continued this banter to keep the child’s mind off her predicament. It also helped with his own—his hat and gloves were still in his car, and he felt the effects of the 25-degree temperature on his fingers and ears. After 15 minutes, which seemed like hours to Ben, another car pulled over, and a man jumped out.

“How can I help?”

“Do you have any sandbags or other heavy stuff we can use to weigh down the car?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“You have something I can use to pry open the rear door?”

“I have a tire iron.”

“Get it. And get my hat and gloves out of the front seat of the Camaro, please!”

“Roger that!”

Ben was sure the relief he felt after putting on the hat and gloves was psychosomatic, but it was palpable nonetheless. “Thank you!” he said to the man. “There are two kids in there along with the driver. We’re going to get the kids out, and we’ll put them in your car. Looks

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like I'm lighter than you, so I get to be the one to go in. I need you to take over holding down the rear end. I'm Ben, by the way."

"Tom. I've got it," Tom said, grabbing on with clear relief that he was not expected to climb into a car hanging over a cliff.

Ben stepped off and flexed his arms, legs, and fingers, then picked up the tire iron. He tried his best, but the door wouldn't budge. Finally, he said, "I'm going to have to break the window." He made his way to the guardrail and looked in the passenger window. There was a small girl buckled into one of the passenger seats next to an infant car seat. He knocked on the window, and as she looked over, said, "Dierdre?"

"Mister Ben?"

"Yes, honey. I'm going to get you and your brother out, but the door is jammed, so I'll have to break the window. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mister Ben!"

"OK. Can you reach over and cover up Sean with that blanket, please?"

"Like this?" she asked as she pulled the blanket across the top.

"That's perfect! Now, I want you to turn away and cover your face with your hands, like this." He covered his face in demonstration.

"Like this, Mister Ben?" She covered her face and turned toward the door.

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“Perfect again! I need you to stay just like that until I tell you to stop. OK?”

“Yes!”

Ben returned to the rear of the vehicle. He looked at Tom and said, “Are you ready?”

“Let’r rip!”

“Alright, Dierdre, now there’s going to be a big crash when I break the window. So you know when to expect it, I’ll count down from three to zero and hit it on zero. OK?”

“OK!”

“Good girl, keep your face covered, now. Three, Two, One!” He swung the tire iron as hard as he could and shattered the window on the first try. The child involuntarily screamed with the impact. He used the tire iron to clear the glass around the edge, and said, “All done, Dierdre. I’m coming in now.”

“OK!”

Ben crawled in the window and moved to a position behind the passenger seats. He reached down and unbuckled Dierdre’s seat belt, and she looked up and hugged him. “OK, honey. You sit here for just a second while I get Sean out. OK?”

“OK. Thank you, Mister Ben!”

“Not at all.” He reached down and unhooked the seat belt and pulled the child seat over into the rear of the SUV. “OK, honey, time to go.” He took Dierdre’s hand, led her to the back, lifted her out the window, and

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lowered her to the ground. He did the same with the car seat and climbed out himself. He leaned on the car and turned to Tom. “I’ve got it. These kids must be hypothermic. Get them into your car to warm up.”

“On it,” he said, picking up the child’s seat. “Come on, Dierdre, I’m Tom. Let’s get you in my car to get warm.”

“Yes, sir. Bye, Mister Ben.”

“I’ll see you in a little while, Dierdre.”

As Tom returned from placing the children in his car, a second and third pulled over, and three more men jumped out and came to the SUV. Ben looked around at each of them. A quick mental calculation derived he was still the lightest of the group. “Thank you for stopping. We have enough weight now to go for the driver. You guys, climb on the back, please.”

They nodded and grabbed onto the rear of the SVU as Ben climbed back in the window. He made his way carefully past the passenger seat and felt the woman’s carotid; she had a strong pulse. He then took the Leatherman tool off his belt and pulled out the knife. He knew from his cutter flight deck training you cut the seatbelts to avoid entanglement when you pulled someone out of a crash. As he leaned over to make the first cut, the car shifted abruptly. *Shit, Shit, Shit!* He froze, his heart pounding in his chest. *OK, I finally found something I hate more than being in a confined space—being in a confined space about to fall off a cliff!*

“You need to hurry, Ben!” Tom called.

No shit, Sherlock! “Roger that.” He completed cutting the belt, then punctured the airbag. As soon as

the bag deflated enough, Ben dragged the unconscious woman into the passenger seat. The car shifted again with a grinding noise.

“Hurry up, Ben! The road bed’s crumbling!” Tom said.

Ben dragged the woman into the back, climbed out the window, turned to Tom, and said, “Help me lift her out!” He and Tom each reached under one arm and pulled the woman through the window. They carried her clear as the other men jumped off the car. It teetered for a moment, then toppled off the edge, followed by a loud crash.

Ben stared at the hole in the guardrail for a few seconds, then looked at the second new vehicle, a large SUV. “Let’s get her into the back of your SUV so we can keep her warm until EMS gets here.” Tom and Ben carried the unconscious woman to the SUV. Then Ben took out his phone and redialed 911.

“Nine-one-one. What is your emergency?”

“This is Lieutenant Wyporek. I called in an accident west of Newsome.”

“Yes, Lieutenant. I am the one who talked to you earlier.”

“Good. We got everyone out of the car alive before it went over the cliff. Everyone is in a vehicle with heat. The driver and one child are still unresponsive. How long before we can expect to see EMS?”

“It will be at least 15 minutes for police and half an hour for EMS.”

“OK, where is the nearest ER to this location?”

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“Stand by.” After 15 seconds, the operator came back on the line. “OK, Lieutenant, the closest ER to your location is the Marysville Medical Center in Marysville, 15 miles away. Follow 761 east for ten miles, then turn left on 872. You’ll see the hospital signs as you enter Marysville.”

“Roger. Tell the state police we’re a convoy of three vehicles led by a white Camaro.”

“Will do. Please stay on the line so I can follow your progress, Lieutenant.”

“OK.” He turned to the other men. “Tom and, I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name?”

“Keith.”

“Keith, glad to know ya,” Ben said as he shook the man’s hand. “It’ll be at least 30 minutes before an ambulance can shake loose, but we can get these folks to the ER ourselves in 20. Any objections?”

As Tom shook his head, Keith said, “Hell no, let’s roll.”

“Roger that, follow me.”

The men returned to their vehicles and started east on the highway. Five minutes later, the operator came on again.

“Lieutenant, are you still there?”

“Affirmative.”

“There’s a state police car waiting for you two miles ahead of your present location. They’ll pick you up for an escort.”

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“Roger that, thank you. Tell them I’ll flash my lights when I see them.”

“Will do.”

A couple of minutes later, they came over a hill, and Ben saw a stopped police car ahead. He flashed his headlights, and the car’s vehicular beacon came on as it pulled onto the road ahead of them. “Operator, state police escort in place.”

“Roger that, Lieutenant. Do you need any other assistance?”

“No. Thanks for the help.”

“Good luck, sir. I’m signing off.” The call hung up. The rest of the drive was uneventful, and on arrival at the hospital, Ben pulled into parking while the other two vehicles pulled up to the ER entrance.

Dierdre was climbing out of the car as Ben arrived and ran over to hug him. “Mister Ben!” He picked her up and carried her into the ER as Tom followed with the child in his car seat.

“This way, please,” a nurse in scrubs led Ben and Dierdre into one of the intake areas. “Are you the father?”

“No, just a good samaritan.”

“Then you’ll have to leave.”

“No!” Dierdre began crying and hugged him tightly. “Don’t leave me, Mister Ben!”

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Ben quickly said, "Nurse, I'm a Coast Guard officer. The girl's mother is unconscious. Can I stay with her until next of kin arrives?"

"Oh, I didn't know. I suppose it will be alright. You must step out when we do an examination, of course."

"No problem." He put Dierdre down on the bed, pulled up a chair, and held her hand. "So, young lady, this has been quite a day!"

Dierdre fell asleep thirty minutes later. Ben covered her with a sheet and pulled up the bed rails as a state trooper appeared and beckoned him to come out. Ben stepped just outside the room to give his statement while not disturbing the sleeping child. When they finished, the nurse returned with a woman in tow.

"This is the child's aunt. I have to ask you to leave now, sir."

"I understand." He turned to the woman. "Is Dierdre's mother going to be OK?"

"Yes, she's coming around now. She has a severe concussion, and they are going to keep her overnight, but she should be fine."

"That is good news." He turned for a last look at Dierdre. "She's an extraordinarily brave girl. Would you tell her I said so and goodbye for me, please?"

The woman nodded and replied, "I heard what you did for my sister and the children. I was hoping you could stay for dinner tonight."

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Ben shook his head. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I have to get to Miami and report to my new unit as soon as possible."

The woman nodded sadly and offered her hand for a handshake. "I'm sorry too. Goodbye and good luck, sir."

After the woman turned and entered the room, and Ben nodded to the nurse. As they walked, she said, "There's a reporter outside who's looking for the story."

Ben stopped in his tracks. "I don't want any dealings with the press. Do you have a side exit to the parking lot?"

The nurse returned a quizzical look. "Sure. This way, please."

Ben exited through the side door and hurried to his car. A few moments later, he was on his way again, this time sticking with the 4-lane US 58 to Emporia to pick up I-95 South. When he stopped for fuel and supper in South Carolina, he called the number for his new CO to report his progress. A female voice answered the phone. "Hello?"

"Ma'am, this is Lieutenant J.G. Wyporek. May I speak to Lieutenant Powell, please?"

"Of course. Hang on, please." Then, a male voice came on the line.

"Powell here."

"Sir, this is Lieutenant J.G. Wyporek. I am en route, but there was an accident, and it set me back four hours."

"First things first. Are you OK?"

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“Yes, sir. I was a witness and pitched in to help out a bit. No injuries or damage here.”

“OK, that’s a relief. Look, I can’t *order* you around until after you report in, so I’ll *ask* that you keep yourself safe and head to at a hotel no later than 2200 tonight. Naturally, I’m looking forward to meeting you and getting you in the game, but I’d much rather see you safe and ready in the afternoon than knocked out and bleary-eyed at 0800.”

“Very good, sir. Shall we make it 1300 then?”

“That will be fine, and if anything else comes up, don’t feel obligated to push it. Just call me to let me know. Stay safe, and I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon.”

Around 9 p.m., fatigue set in, and he pulled over for the night at a hotel near Brunswick, Georgia. Unlike most hotel stays, he was asleep almost as his head hit the pillow on this occasion. He was up and on the road by 6:30 the next morning and arrived at Coast Guard Sector Miami a little after noon.

His first impression of *Kauai* was very positive: clean and orderly, with an alert crewman manning the quarterdeck. Lieutenant Powell came out at once to greet him. His handshake was firm and warm. “Welcome aboard, Lieutenant! Your reputation precedes you, and I’m delighted you’re here. What’s your preference, Benjamin or Ben?”

“Ben, sir.”

“Excellent. Come in, and let’s talk.”

Talk they did for more than three hours. It was a relief to find that Ben's former XO was right—Powell had no intention for either of them to come down hard on this crew. The previous CO was an arrogant tyrant and a bully who had all but broken them. He *had* broken the XO. If the mishap hadn't physically crippled the man, he would have been relieved as psychologically unfit. Powell's program was quiet rebuilding and encouragement, one that Ben could sink his teeth into.

After Ben changed from his service dress uniform into his utilities, Powell took him around the ship to meet the crew. Chief Machinery Technician James Drake, the senior enlisted crewman, showed him the engine spaces. It amazed Ben that a 6-foot-4, broad-shouldered man like Drake would want an assignment with such tight spaces as a patrol boat, but discovered later he enjoyed the autonomy it afforded him. He struck Ben as one of the "good" chiefs, who could be relied upon to keep the engines running *and* take care of most people-type problems before they came to the officers' attention.

The other crewmember Ben found notable was Operations Specialist First Class Emilia Hopkins, known as "Hoppy" among the crew. She was tall—Ben's height—about ten years older than him and carried herself with a quiet confidence that seemed surprising, given the boat's history. Hopkins was extraordinarily knowledgeable about everything on the bridge, and Ben expected to learn a lot from her in time. She had also greatly impressed Powell. He related to Ben privately that Hopkins had saved the ship during the mishap after the former CO's blundering and, with Drake, had kept the crew intact and functional through the transition.

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Ben's worries about the crew and his fitting in were gone at the end of that first day.

Three weeks after Ben reported aboard, the Sector Commander arrived for an impromptu visit. Ben was called forward at a muster of all hands, and, to his great surprise and intense embarrassment, was awarded the Coast Guard Commendation Medal for his actions in saving Dierdre and her family. Later, he learned that her father, an Army Lieutenant Colonel, had put him in for the award after hearing the story. When the ceremony and heartfelt congratulations from the crew had passed, Powell pulled him aside.

"You 'helped out a bit,' I seem to recall you saying. Mind telling me what you consider helping out a lot?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I might have understated my contribution some, sir."

"Right. Well, if you pull any more Captain America stuff in the future, would you let me know, please? I'd like to sign the award nomination myself," he said, putting his arm around Ben's shoulder as they went inside the boat.