



# **In God's Hands**

*Historical fiction*  
*by*  
*Rebecca Wilhoite Weaver*

*“I am right where I am supposed to be.”*

Those words echoed in Lena’s head as she suddenly opened her eyes. The little room she was sharing with two of the other women seemed to be perpetually dark since it lacked anything more than a small porthole. Still, Lena knew it was very early in the morning. She glanced at her roommates and found them both lying still, eyes open, listening; what had pulled them from their dreams?

Suddenly, the sound of explosions, water spraying, and the rocking of the ship nudged her memory. Lena bolted upright in her bed: They were being attacked! In the dim light of their room, all three of the women dressed quickly and grabbed a bag holding their possessions. They had been in dangerous waters for several days now, and had practiced this silent ritual many times. Lena’s eyes swept her bed, and the surrounding floor for anything she might have missed. She was grateful for the spacious bag in her arms, and for its manageable weight as she and her companions reached for the door.

Even though the sun had only been in the sky for a short time, it blinded Lena. Others were leaving their rooms as well. Some were dressed, and some were still in their nightclothes while more were somewhere in between.

Shells exploded again. The ship rocked, and looks were exchanged between several of the men. While the problem, and the immediate fate of the passengers could be seen from the deck’s balcony, no lone lingered to gawk, but picked up their pace and filed up a small staircase to the main deck of the ship. Chaos of activity greeted them. Sailors were running this way and that. Water stood in large puddles, and had filled some of the lifeboats the sailors had uncovered and were clearly trying to lower. All around them in the water were boats, large chunks of wood, and other passengers. Farther away, though too close for comfort, loomed another ship. Its guns smoked. It was the author of all the chaos without a doubt: a German raider.

*“I am right where I am supposed to be.”*

Again the words ran through Lena’s mind as she and several of the other women and children were encouraged down the rope ladder nearest to them and into a waterlogged lifeboat. The crew worked from the deck to get more boats into the water. Several were damaged, and had been lowered, then abandoned. Nearby, some were filling with water, and their passengers were using all they had to bail it out. Shoes, a hat and three small buckets as well as many hands frantically pushed the water over the sides of the little craft. In most cases, they did not seem to be making any progress.

Lena tugged on the sleeve of the sailor nearest to her. “They’re sinking” she inclined her head towards the doomed vessel. The sailor nodded, but barely glanced over his shoulder. “Yes, but so are we all. The shells damaged all the boats on this side. We have to get as far back from the ship as we can in case they sink her.” He sat down and proceeded to begin rowing with a pair of oars that looked much too small for the task.

Lena sank to her seat. This was not where she was supposed to be. It wasn’t where any of them were supposed to be. Africa. The Congo was a place full of vicious animals, deadly diseases, and hostile natives and it was their longed for destination. God had blessed her years ago when He sent her there. God had again provided an opportunity for her to return. Of course she missed her family in Tennessee, and was grateful to come back and see them each furlough she was granted, but Africa had become her home. Closing her eyes momentarily she could see that home, could feel the sun on her face, and welcomed the comforting memory. Her skills were needed there, those as a nurse, and those as a woman of God. She had not fully known the glorious satisfaction of being needed and being able to fulfill those needs until she had willingly answered God’s call.

Lena remembered a moment after her graduation ceremony from Franklin High School when she was telling someone from church about her love of learning. She’d gone to Nashville Business College, thinking she might enjoy work in an office. That simple plan disappeared unexpectedly. Something bigger than herself had responded one afternoon during a district meeting of the Christian Endeavor, and it’s zeal had propelled her down the aisle when they called for volunteers. Her family would miss her, but they understood her desire to serve.

It had been a blessing that she loved to learn because she was soon enrolled at St. Luke’s Hospital as a nursing student. Immediately after graduation from that program, her time was spent training for spreading the gospel at the Presbyterian Assembly Training School. Filled with knowledge, she had kissed loved ones goodbye, and sailed for Africa.

Even after all of her preparations, she expected her time would be spent longing for familiar surroundings and gathering experiences to share with her loved ones. Surprise and a joy had filled her when she realized that she was not longing for her childhood home as she expected, but had found a home among her patients, her compatriots, and her God.

As the water filled the boat, shouts, splashing, and the occasional cries of small children filled the air. Many people were relying on their life-vests to keep them afloat as they bobbed in the water. Large pieces of the ZamZam supported others. Nearby, several small children bobbed in the water. Lena was struck with a happy memory of her own brothers and sisters. They had started out as eight Reynolds’s children. Then a tragedy prompted her parents to bring home five of their orphaned cousins. Maybe because she was young, and still blissfully unaware of the sacrifices that would be

required, she simply enjoyed the additions to her family. Cousins were wonderful friends after all, and she was thrilled to have them to play with all the time. Her parents never questioned their decision, and modeled nothing but love and patience when dealing with anyone in their large brood. It was never quiet at her house, and they did not live peacefully together all the time, but the lessons Lena learned were precious to her. Material wealth was not of significance in a family of thirteen children, but love, laughter, and faith in God were never in short supply. She had no doubt that after a little bit of crying and worry, she and her siblings would have made the most of the opportunity to be in the ocean.

Lena smiled as she watched the older members of the floating family make their way to the smaller ones and try to comfort them. Their mother, also bobbing in the water nearby, held the baby and directed her children to “remember that Jesus loves them.”

It occurred to Lena that her persistent thought applied to the mother of those children, and possibly to the children themselves. They were on the way to join their father, a missionary in Africa. All of the children looked to be under the age of ten, and the baby bobbed along in her mother’s arms, not yet old enough to walk. How many women would agree to raise so many of her precious children in a foreign environment? Accepting dangerous travel, potentially hostile natives, and no modern conveniences as suitable for her young family? Only those who felt that God, and His purpose for their lives were of utmost importance. He called them to do this work, and He would provide anything they needed if only they were willing to go. *“I will put my trust in Him.” And again he says, “Here am I, and the children God has given me”* Hebrews 2:13

Lena looked up at the raider looming over them. German soldiers lined the deck of their attacker. They stood, no emotion showing on their shadowed faces, guns at the ready, as they launched a ship. Were they waiting for an order to spray them all with their bullets, then let the sharks clean up the rest? Fear did not grip Lena, and she could not see it on any of the faces around her, despite their precarious circumstances. She trusted God, and was at peace with His hand on her life. “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear” Lena recited the first line and a half of Psalm 46 and the women around her nodded and murmured “amen.” Clearly others shared her sentiment. Again the phrase that had become a mantra entered her mind, “I am right where I am supposed to be.”

The Nazi craft weaved through the survivors, and then paused as its crew spoke to the ZamZam’s captain. Satisfied at least that the flotsam the passengers had become was not filled with a threat to the German cause, they returned to their ship and finally began pulling survivors from the sea.

Lena looked around at the familiar faces once her feet were firmly on the deck of the raider. Most of them were soaked to the skin, and several were only wearing pajamas. There were few tears, and those were only the youngest children, frightened by all the disruption and chaos. The soldiers, who said they were only armed against the appearance of sharks, were gracious, if only out of frustration that they had just captured a great deal of extra work for themselves. It seemed they were shocked to have shelled a vessel full of women and children.

Once the injured had been whisked away by the surgeons on board, they allowed the rest to try to dry out on deck. For several hours the raider's crew made repeated trips to the ZamZam, collecting anything they felt would be of value to them. Anything the Germans did not want, they piled in the center of the deck, presumably for everyone to fight over. Would people have physically fought the rightful owners for things that did not belong to them? Well, Lena thought, the Nazi's would not get to watch any fights today! Even as she dragged her other luggage to one side she was already working on the locks. One was full of shoes she planned to take to the missionaries she served with, and to those in her care who had need of them. Now she realized the shoes had another purpose. She began passing out as many as she could to the ladies who had either lost theirs to the sea, or never had an opportunity to put any on. Lena apologized to the men for not having more for them, but she gave out all she had. When she located another of her bags, she began passing out the extra dresses she had intended as gifts, and even some of her own. She was not the only one sharing, in fact, everyone who had anything was quick to offer its use to those nearby. "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12: 31) was practiced without a moment's hesitation. None of them knew what to expect, so they would not waste this opportunity to care for each other.

Using themselves as examples, Lena's parents taught her about giving to others. Everything was shared, reused, and used some more but no one seemed to mind. Lena knew she was someone who rarely had exciting things happen to her. No excitement would be boring to some, but there was excitement in places others missed for Lena. God kept her close, and kept the unnecessary awe of excitement out of her life so she could focus on caring for those who needed her. As she passed out clothes, shoes, and comforting words, Lena naturally put the tension of sinking ships, Nazi guns, sharks, and an uncertain future out of her mind.

Later in the morning, Lena noticed that the old typewriter she had brought was lying in the center of the deck. Apparently, all of the newer typewriters were of greater value to the crew, therefore they kept them. Well, she thought, as she collected her domestic device, just because it was not shiny and new did not mean it did not perform its duty. Surely its scuffed appearance and worn keys were a testament to its many years of reliable, faithful service.

Shortly, the weary, ragtag group stood and began following the German crew to the deck rails to see the ZamZam for the last time. As the charges that had been set inside the ship detonated, the ship began sinking, and Lena thanked God for the strong ship that had withstood the shelling and

stayed afloat until everyone was safely off. It had done its duty and all aboard were still alive. Ignoring the Nazi soldiers' curious stares and comments, the passengers of the ZamZam offered up hymns of thanksgiving and praise to God while they watched the ship sink. They were faring better than the ship, but their future was uncertain at best. The men who saved them were still the enemy, after all, but they needed to know they rescued people of faith. God was with them, and they would not abandon His promises out of fear or despair. Lena shed a few tears finally, but not for herself, but for her family in the United States who might never know what happened to her. She prayed God would give them peace and prevent them from worrying too much; reassuring them that He was in control of all their lives.

At around 2:30 in the afternoon the ZamZam disappeared completely from view. The tired group of passengers was lead down several flights of stairs into the dark, oily, bowels of the ship. Nothing was comforting about their new surroundings. The soldiers who guarded them were polite, but not engaging. How long would they stay on this ship? Would they be taken to Africa, or to some other German-held territory now that their fates had been bound to those at war? As she ate the rations provided, and listened to the murmur of their crowded quarters the words repeated in her head "I am right where I am supposed to be." God would use her, was using her, Lena Reynolds, in whatever way He needed no matter where she was. He was fulfilling His promise to care and provide for those who promised to go where He led through her and for her with others. Of course she was exactly where she was supposed to be: She was in God's hands.



Did those passengers of the ZamZam ever make it to Africa? Unfortunately, the incident with the German raider was only the beginning of their voyage. Many, like Miss Lena, endured life as a virtual prisoner aboard a German supply ship, the *Dresden*, for nearly five weeks before being freed in France, then returning to the United States on board another ship. Others, many of whom were missionaries, priests, and medical personnel traveling on passports from England or Canada instead of the US, were sent to internment camps, and were held by the Germans until the end of WWII.

Lena Reynolds was a member of First Presbyterian Church since childhood. She was born in Franklin, and graduated from Franklin High School in 1918. She served as a nurse, and missionary from 1926 until 1959, most of those years spent in what is now Zaire, Africa. After returning to the United States to stay, she continued to serve the community of Franklin as a nurse at Williamson County Hospital until 1985.

Miss Lena commented in a letter home that she was not someone to whom unusual things happened. A story often told about her took place when she returned from this very adventure. All those who had been returned to the United States were departing from the ship, weeping and smiling as they reunited with family and friends. Miss Lena was one of the last to walk down the gangplank. It turns out she was assisting with the birth of a baby before she could leave the ship! As someone who listened for God's voice in her everyday life, Lena was able to see everything as possible with His guidance.