

FLIGHT JACKET

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THE FLIGHT JACKET

**A Novel about VMB-612,
the Marine Corps' B-25 PBJ
Night Bombing Squadron**

LAULIE POWELL

Hellgate Press



Ashland, Oregon

Also by Laurie Powell

Embrace and Flow

Color by Number

*In memory of my father, James H. Powell,
a pilot in Marine Corps Bomber Squadron VMB-612.*

*For my sisters: Jamie Lee Powell Chiles and
Sarah Elizabeth Powell Singer.*

*“Perhaps man’s urge to destroy his fellow men
is as much a part of the life cycle as conception,
birth, death, and decay.”*

—Edwin Howard Simmons,
Dog Company Six

Jacksonville, Florida

2004

INSIDE THE SMALL one-car garage, it was almost pitch black. At least, that's the way it seemed to Jules, as she stood on the driveway, the heavy metal door pushed up, the bright daylight keeping its distance from the darkness inside. She stood there for a moment before going in, allowing her eyes to become accustomed to the dimness. She couldn't get to the light switch, what with all the boxes full of mysteries stacked up along the walls.

She had come home from her duty station in Hawaii for her father's funeral and to stay two weeks to help her sisters sort through her parents' lifetime of belongings. She hadn't been home since her mother had died five years ago. From what she could tell from everything in the house, and now looking at everything in the garage, packed to the gills, she figured her father hadn't gotten rid of a single thing. In fact, he'd somehow just accumulated more.

As her eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness, she deeply breathed in the smell of the garage—a smell quintessentially the smell of her father, turpentine and cut wood. There was also the smell of a place that had been shut up in the dark. This sweet, dank smell was almost a living presence in the old buildings of North Florida, buildings without air conditioning in the hot, humid climate, where the air was allowed to hide inside, never going outside in the sunshine to freshen up.

As she squeezed past the old motorboat on its trailer, she was hit with a strong pang of nostalgia. Jules brushed the sides of the boat with her finger tips as she moved by it, remembering, in a rush of happy memories, her family's summer days in the company of the old girl. The "old girl" was a white and faded-turquoise beauty, a Redfish from the 1950s. With her original forty-horsepower Evinrude outboard motor still attached at the rear, she sat proudly on her trailer, taking up most of the available space in the garage.

She unlocked the back door of the garage. Opening onto the narrow back porch, it didn't let much light in, but at least the open door created some cross-ventilation so that the garage wasn't quite so tomb-like. She automatically looked for the old door prop. It had been there for as long as she could remember—a white concrete brick, a remnant from the addition to the back of the house her father had completed before she was born.

Straightening up, she took in the backyard. Up against the outside wall of the garage leaned a rake, a shovel, and an old wheelbarrow. The mosaic stepping-stones her father had made from different colored tiles were overgrown with grass. They trailed off to the right, toward the back door of the house. Filling a quarter of the yard was the gigantic Satsuma tree, easily fifteen feet high and as wide, covered in fragrant blooms with dozens of industrious humming honeybees.

As she turned back to the garage, she bumped the narrow green metal wall locker. Another thing that had always been around, but she remembered it being back in the workroom, a small room built off the garage where her father went to escape the constant chatter of his wife and daughters. On impulse, she tried to lift the rusty latch. It resisted her at first, but as she pulled harder, it gave way, and the locker door opened with an ear-piercing screech.

Hanging alone on a metal hanger was a moth-eaten, dark-brown leather jacket with a ragged wool collar. She immediately recognized it—a flight jacket. *Daddy's, from his days as a pilot during World War II.* She had never actually seen it before, but remembered seeing photographs of him wearing it.

Carefully taking the jacket out of the locker, she looked at it more closely. On its front, in faded gold letters were his first two initials and his last name. Above his name, there was the equally faded golden representation of aviator flight wings. Instinctively, she checked the pockets. The right pocket was empty, but from the left pocket, she pulled out a set of stainless-steel, oval-shaped dog tags, heavier and sturdier than her own, which were thinner, rectangular tags. Squinting, she could just make out his full name, service number, service branch, the “P” for his religion, and the “O” for his blood type. She put the dog tags back, feeling she was missing out on a story, one known only by the dog tags. Touching the brittle leather of the jacket, she closed her eyes, trying to get a feel for the man who had worn it.

She thought about yesterday, when one of her sisters had found the box of letters. They’d been saved by their mother, written to her by their father before their marriage. Of course, she and her sisters had immediately stopped what they were doing and read them all. The letters were tender, youthfully optimistic with plans for their life ahead and just plain innocent and sweet. One sentence was like a line from a hopelessly romantic movie. “I don’t believe two people could love each other any more than we do.”

“Who was that man?” she muttered to herself. Certainly not the reserved, quiet, and unemotional father she had known.

“Why are you talking to yourself?”

Jules spun around, saying, “God in heaven! You scared the Be-Jesus out of me!”

Standing behind her was her “baby” sister.

“I’m sorry,” Lizzy said, her eyebrows raised, an expectant, inquiring look on her face, “but what are you up to?”

Lizzy was seven years younger than Jules, and except for the sound of their voices and a few familial mannerisms, would never have been taken for Jules’s sister. Quietly steady and practical, Lizzy was happily married and the mother of two beautiful and well-behaved children. Jules was still searching for her purpose in life, in an often-difficult relationship with her second husband, and had no kids. Where Lizzy

was dark-haired and tanned, Jules was redheaded, fair-skinned, and freckled. Where Lizzy was large-breasted with no hips to speak of, Jules was small-breasted with definite hips. Where Lizzy had blue, almost violet eyes, Jules was golden-eyed. In fact, Lizzy looked so different from her older sisters that, when she was a little girl, their mother once said in the presence of their father, “Lizzy must be the milkman’s daughter. I swear, I should have been more careful.”

Jules looked into her sister’s pretty face, smiled, and said, “I’m not up to anything . . . yet. I thought I would take a look around and see what we need to tackle first.” She held the flight jacket out to her sister. “Look what I found.”

Lizzy reached a hand out to lightly stroke the leather. “It’s held up pretty well, considering it’s been hanging out here in this damp garage for decades.”

Nodding at the jacket, Jules said, “His dog tags are in the left pocket.”

Lizzy reached into the pocket. “I’ve never seen these.”

Jules thought her sister was handling the dog tags reverently, like they were made of delicate glass. Lizzy carefully put them back in the pocket, and Jules hung the jacket back in the locker. Shaking her head, Jules said, “You know, I could kick myself for not asking Daddy about his war experiences. He never said anything about them.”

“What? Didn’t Daddy tell you about his squadron?”

Jules shook her head. “Nope. Nary a word to me about anything to do with his time in the Corps. Although, when I told him I was joining the Marine Corps, he told me women didn’t belong in the Corps. That I should join the Air Force.”

Lizzy scrutinized Jules’s face. “Oh, come on!” she said. “Are you telling me he didn’t tell you anything about the PBJ he flew in the Pacific?”

“Never,” said Jules, and looking at Lizzy’s expression of disbelief, added, “I swear! Why? Did he tell you about it?”

“Yeah, of course!” Lizzy said, like it was the most natural thing in the world for their father to talk to her about his experiences during the war, or for that matter, about anything that was on his mind.

Jules wondered why her baby sister had been the only one of his daughters their father had ever really talked to about anything.

“So then, what kind of a plane is a PBJ?” Jules asked.

“It was—or rather is since I believe there’re still some around—a B-25, the Marine Corps’ version,” Lizzy said. “The Army flew them too, and they called their planes Mitchell B-25s after some WWI Army pilot named Billy Mitchell—the same planes used to bomb Tokyo right after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.”

“I’ve heard of the raid over Tokyo,” said Jules. “I didn’t realize they flew the same plane Daddy flew.”

“Same plane, but the Marine Corps only got the plane—at least this is what Daddy told me—because the Army ordered more planes than they really needed, and the Marines were always ready to take whatever the other services didn’t want or couldn’t use. The Marines called it the PBJ. “P” for patrol, “B” for bomber, and the “J” for the manufacturer of the plane, North American Aviation in California.”

“How do you remember that, that the J stood for North American Aviation . . . in California?” Jules asked.

Lizzy shrugged. “I don’t know. I just do. But, of course,” she said, and a big grin broke out on her face, “the Marines gave the plane a nickname. They called the plane ‘peanut butter and jelly.’”

“Peanut butter and jelly. Heavens! Today the Marines would still give it a nickname. That hasn’t changed. But it wouldn’t be such an innocent nickname. It would be more like ‘penis butter and jelly.’ Or something they think is really clever.”

Lizzy laughed. Jules smiled, shaking her head.

“There used to be a picture of Daddy and the men in his flight crew, standing in front of one of the planes, back here,” Lizzy said, motioning toward the workroom. “Come on,”

The room, long and narrow, had cabinets all along the walls above their heads. Most of the room was taken up with the woodworking equipment their father had used for his various projects. Jules helped her sister clear a path, moving pieces of wood out of the way so that Lizzy could get to where the photo hung on the wall.

“You’re not going to tell me you’ve never seen this?” Lizzy said, taking the framed photo off the nail and handing it to Jules.

“Oh, I remember seeing the picture hanging here. But . . . well, I guess . . . I don’t know. I never asked him about it.”

The faded black and white photograph depicted five very young men, probably in their early twenties, but to Jules’s eyes, they all looked like teenagers. All of them were dressed in what she recognized as flight gear and what she supposed was the uniform of the day, and they were all carrying parachutes. She recognized her father, so young and handsome, standing in the middle of the group. The plane, huge and dark, was behind them, taking up the entire background of the photo.

“Do you know where this picture was taken?” Jules asked, looking over at her sister.

Lizzy looked closer and said, “I’m not sure, but it has to be either Saipan or Iwo Jima.”

Jules nodded her head. “I wonder if any of them are still alive,” she said, taking the photo out of the picture frame to see if there were any names written on the back. There weren’t, just moisture spots where the damp air had saturated the paper.

“Oh, no, at least not if these guys were the ones with Daddy when his plane went down,” said Lizzy. “Everyone else was killed. Daddy was the only one who survived.”

“Say, what?” asked Jules, surprised by this unexpected information.

“Yeah,” Lizzy said. “Didn’t you ever see that long scar on Daddy’s left leg?”

“Sure,” Jules said, “but it never occurred to me it was a war injury. Do you know what happened?”

“Not really, or rather, not specifically,” Lizzy said. “All he told me is that a submarine found him. But he never talked specifics about the crash—where it took place or how it happened or the death of the crew. It was like a passing thought, like it was no big deal. Of course, now I realize it must have been a huge deal, but I was only twelve or thirteen when he told me about it.”

“Goddamn it!” Jules said. “I guess we’ll never know any more about it. I would like to have known. At least now.”

“What do you mean?” Lizzy asked.

“Well, now that I’m older and not quite so caught up in my own life. I’ve reached that stage in life where I’m actually able to see beyond my own affairs, and I realize I missed knowing something important about Daddy’s life.”

Her sister cocked her head, and said, “What’s that expression that goes something like ‘a tree falls in the forest and no one sees it fall, but because no one saw it, it doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.’ You know the one?”

“I think the expression is ‘When a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?’” Jules said. “But what does that have to do with Daddy??”

“What I mean is that just because we’ll never know exactly what happened doesn’t change the fact that it did happen, and it shaped the man he became, the life he led, and the man we knew—or didn’t know.” She looked at her sister.

“Aren’t you the philosopher,” Jules said, the sound of amusement in her voice.

“Well,” Lizzy said, with a serious look, “you’re not the only person who’s gotten older, to the point, as you say, of seeing beyond your own affairs. Think about it for a minute. Daddy lived to be over eighty years old. He was only twenty-one years old when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and just barely twenty-five when he came home from the war. Those years of the war, well, can you imagine?” Jules was shaking her head. “They must have been intense and chaotic, with men he knew, friends even, dying around him. I can’t help but think how thankful you and I need to be he made it home.”

“I’ll grant you that,” Jules said, nodding. “But it’s a shame I’ll never know the side of him that was a Marine. Which, of course, is why I joined the Corps. I think it was a need to feel closer to him.”

“I know,” said Lizzy. “He was proud of you.”

“Really?”

“For sure,” Lizzy said, smiling as she reached over to put a strand of hair behind Jules’s right ear that had come loose from her ponytail. Then she turned toward the cardboard boxes, all different sizes, stacked along the walls. She bent over and opened the one nearest her, the heavy layer of dust on the flaps rising like a huge flock of miniscule birds.

“Lizzy?”

She looked up. “What?”

Dust motes danced all around Jules in the light from the window behind her. “It would be great to know more about Daddy’s squadron. Let’s put that on our bucket list.” Looking at her sister’s “you’ve got to be kidding me” expression, she added, “One of these days.”

It's All About Luck, Timing, and Some Chutzpah

THE BATTLE FOR Guadalcanal began in early August 1942. It was the first amphibious landing force for the United States since 1898. This seemingly insignificant fact was key to the Marine Corps' post-World War II status as the US military's golden child and marked the beginning of its coming of age. It's the island battles of Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Peleliu, and Iwo Jima, and, more specifically, the very young men who fought there and the thousands who died there, which, after three-quarters of a century, still resonate with the courage and selfless devotion still thought of as part and parcel of what it takes to be a Marine.

I know, I know, this statement is a bit melodramatic, and as the Marines are fond of saying when something appeals to their sense of the heroic, "OO-RAH, OO-RAH!" However, the effect of these island battles (dramatically and intensely covered by the press, not to mention the photograph of the flag raising on Iwo Jima taken by Joe Rosenthal) on the vitality and continued existence of the Marine Corps cannot be overstated.

But, before 1942, the Marine Corps was only a witness to the intense rivalry that existed between the Navy and the Army. The Marine Corps was in the position to understand both sides and to use that understanding as a means to continue to exist. It had started out life as the Navy's infantry unit aboard ships, a job, which, by the middle

of the 20th century, was no longer relevant. With the Pacific island-hopping necessary to reach Japan, the Marine Corps fell back on its traditional role as an amphibious landing force, breathing new life into its existence. So, in many ways, it had to learn how to perform amphibious landings all over again. Essentially, the essence of what it took to pull off an amphibious landing had not changed: boats to get troops to the shore and lots of troops to assault the beaches and overwhelm the enemy. It was simple in concept but complicated and costly in terms of human lives. This time, airplanes would take on an important role in the overall fighting of the Pacific war.

So, this story begins on Guadalcanal. A ninety-mile-long jungle island, it's one of the largest and southernmost in the Solomon Islands chain. The capture of this island was critical to opening up the Pacific to American forces. This is because if the Japanese controlled Guadalcanal, they could block the critical American supply line.

The American operation against the island was officially called "Operation Pestilence." The Japanese came in each night under the cover of darkness through "the slot" to resupply troops occupying Guadalcanal. "The slot" was the long waterway between the island of New Georgia to the south and the islands of Choiseul and Santa Isabel to the north. The Japanese had a major base at Rabaul, on the island of New Britain, northern-most in the island chain. Japanese ships cruised down past Bougainville and into the slot to Guadalcanal. There they would unload and be away before daylight. In addition to the supply ships, the convoy normally consisted of a destroyer and several light cruisers as protection. Because of the regularity of the resupply to Guadalcanal, the Americans referred to the Japanese resupply route, and the ships that ran it, as the "Tokyo Express."

In early September 1942, after the infantry Marines had taken the beaches and a portion of the island, the commander of the 1st Marine Air Wing, General Geiger, arrived on Guadalcanal, beginning air operations against the Japanese. Since "Cactus" was the island's code name, the group of flyers he brought with him from Marine Air Group 23 was called the Cactus Air Force. The purpose of the Cactus

Air Force was to stop Japanese ships from resupplying troops, now in pockets on Guadalcanal. As long as they could be resupplied, they could hold out against the American forces for a very long time.

These Marines had a much-repaired group of three different planes: the Grumman Avenger, a single engine plane that carried torpedoes, called a TBF; the Grumman Wildcat, a single engine fighter called the F4F; and the Douglas Dauntless, a single engine dive bomber called the SBD. These aircraft were solid, maneuverable, and heavily armed. Unfortunately, the pilots of these aircraft had to spend their time not on their stated mission but on holding off the Japanese from recapturing the island during the day, trying to protect the airfield from being bombed, and attempting to keep the Japanese from destroying the American resupply ships for the upward of ten thousand American troops on the island.

The infamous Japanese Zero, the dreaded enemy aircraft of the Pacific, was built for offense, and its pilots were trained to be predators. The American planes were good at defense, not in small part because of their heavy armament. The Japanese were good at offense, the Zero being lighter and more maneuverable. Neither side could gain the advantage over the other. And, General Geiger's mission—stopping the Japanese resupply ships from reaching their troops on Guadalcanal—seemed impossible. There was no reliable way to find these Japanese ships in the darkness, and American planes only flew in daylight.

Plus, the Japanese were a stoic, implacable enemy. They didn't easily give up any land occupation, especially these island defenses in the western Pacific. They were the first line of defense for Japan, and they needed to drive the American force back the way it had come. In early October, the Japanese made yet another concentrated effort, their third, to recapture the Guadalcanal airfield. Japanese artillery from their units on the island, gunfire from their destroyers, and air raids contributed to the ruin of the airfield, damage to many of the airplanes, and destruction of the headquarters building.

Enter Major Oscar Melville Stevens, General Geiger's aide and

personal pilot. Before the war, he had gone through flight training at Pensacola and trained at Quantico on biplanes in close air support. When the war began, he was working as a test pilot for Grumman Aircraft, based out of his hometown of Seattle, Washington. The Marine Corps Air Wing was the perfect service for a man of his personality and ambitions: it was small, experimental, and daring. Think of the Marine Corps as a living, breathing being. You would characterize it as pugnacious and stubborn. Stevens also possessed these attributes.

He had met General Geiger when he had delivered Geiger's official aircraft to him in early 1942. Taking Geiger up in the aircraft, Stevens impressed the general with his flying ability. Geiger must have felt some connection, some affinity of character, with this intense man. Geiger not only took the plane, but he also took Stevens on as his personal pilot and his aide. It was a life-changing opportunity for Stevens. Not only did it set him up for what was to come, but his new role set the stage for a unique friendship with Geiger.

Physically, Stevens was not a big man, topping out at 5'8" and 150 pounds, for his era, the perfect size for a pilot. In his early thirties, he was dark-haired, and-dark eyed, with a beautiful smile. It transformed his face, lighting up his small, suspicious eyes with warmth and allowed his sense of humor, usually shut in behind his hard and serious expression, to peek out. His smile was a rarity, and it was only revealed to official photographers and beautiful women. He was intelligent and taciturn, appropriately subordinate to senior officers, pushy and unrelenting in wrangling with equals, and a taskmaster extraordinaire in dealing with subordinates.

As Stevens looked around at the dire straits of the damaged airplanes and runway on Guadalcanal, he didn't see defeat or annihilation. He saw just the opposite. He had just returned from his regular weekly run to General Geiger's official headquarters at Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides. For these trips, he always flew Geiger's big Consolidated PBY, affectionately called the Blue Goose.

Stevens had come back from Espiritu with two torpedoes, weighing one thousand pounds each, one under each wing. Getting the tor-

pedoes was easier than he thought it would be. All he had to do was say, “General Geiger wants two torpedoes. We’re expecting a big Jap attack soon.”

At least the second part of his request was the truth. The Marines were always expecting a Japanese attack on Guadalcanal.

The supply men on *Espiritu* were harried and overworked. No questions were asked. No paperwork was requested. In fact, these men seemed to think nothing of Stevens’s request. The Navy PBY squadron based there regularly required these large torpedoes for their missions. In times of crisis anything is possible. Normal reality was completely out the window.

The torpedoes were loaded in short order, and Stevens was off before he had to answer questions from someone with more authority. He didn’t want to answer questions, because his purpose in getting those torpedoes was purely personal: he wanted to make a daylight torpedo run against the Japanese ship convoy, the *Tokyo Express*.

He was old enough to recognize the very real possibility of dying on this mission. He had been involved in the thick of the island fighting on Guadalcanal since August and seen the scores of dead young men killed at the hands of the enemy. But seeing the death around him only fortified him, made him feel more courageous. And, he needed to be recognized for the hero he imagined himself to be. He was compelled by his drive for glory to convince General Geiger that he be allowed to undertake what appeared to be an impossible mission.

A fifty-six-year old Marine Corps general, Roy Stanley Geiger was a formidable presence not easily persuaded. He looked every bit like the man he was: a country boy from north central Florida. He had a big, strong frame and the hands of a farmer. When he spoke, Stevens heard the faint, though definite, cadence of the South. Occasionally the general’s speech was peppered with some word befitting a Florida cracker. And, he never smiled. His military experiences had a ring of romance: duty in China and the Philippines in the early part of the century, then, later, as a WW I fighter pilot in France.

Geiger hadn’t made it to his current rank by being less than calcu-

lating and hard-nosed. Though more than cautiously reluctant, he did see the merit in Stevens's suicidal plan. He reasoned there was but a slim chance of getting through to the target with the preponderance of Japanese Zeros, but he couldn't escape the reality—the Tokyo Express was the main reason his unit was on Guadalcanal.

For over a month, his Cactus Air Force had been dropping bombs and flying surveillance missions, and the F4Fs and the Zeros had been engaged in dogfights with little to show for it. Stevens, as his aide, had sat in on both the pre-mission and the post-mission briefings. Stevens had said nothing during these briefs. He had sat there, intently listening, looking frustrated, as was Geiger. The primary problem was that they could rarely predict the Tokyo Express's schedule, because it traveled at night. The upside was there were few places where the men and supplies could be unloaded. Geiger would never have admitted it out loud, but the part of Stevens's plan that he hated the most was the major's intention to fly the Blue Goose, his personal plane (and his baby). But there was something heartening in the confident, rousing conviction of his aide. Because Stevens had been with Geiger for almost a year, they had a relationship bordering on the familial.

Geiger assented, but made it clear—the raid must be accomplished by a mere skeleton force of fighters. They had few planes as it was, and they couldn't risk all of them. Essentially, it would be a lone mission, not much in the way of support. This was the tricky part, considering Japanese Zeros were always present at the unloading of the supply ships. Both Geiger and Stevens knew that the lumbering seaplane didn't stand much chance of surviving an attack by the fast Japanese aircraft.

With no copilot, Stevens carefully navigated the damaged airfield and took off toward Kokumbona Point, a mere twelve miles to the north. Six Japanese transport ships had been spotted slowly heading that way by scout aircraft the day before. As he climbed above the island, he saw what a gorgeous South Pacific October day it was going to be. From the air, the view was stunning. The sky had a few white,

fleecy clouds. They barely stirred in the light winds. The ocean below was a true blue color, blending into the powder blue of the sky. But, the sublime beauty of the view was lost on him. He was focused only on finding his target.

He almost immediately spotted it below, moving very slowly back toward Rabaul. The dark color of the ships stood out from the light color of the water. Without a second thought, he adjusted his vector to intercept and put his plane into a forty-five-degree dive (something for which it wasn't designed), flying the plane like a dive-bomber. He had given his bombing run a lot of thought. In fact, he had thought of little else since he was granted permission to bomb the destroyers. He knew diving toward the target would simplify the torpedoes' trajectories, and it would allow him to keep visual contact throughout the bombing run. But when he began his run, the plane only began diving under protest, the massive wing above him shuddering. The feel of the pressure on his body was like a hard, physical presence as the plane dropped down. It was like he was pushing against an invisible wall. The plane began shaking like a dog shakes a bone.

Every sense heightened, his control of this particular plane was so second nature, he didn't give the vehement shuddering any conscious thought. A detached part of his mind weighed how best to avoid the heavy flak exploding around him, but his primary thoughts were on how close to the transports he needed to be before he released his torpedoes. Since they were large, he knew a near miss would be effective. But he would be devastated if he missed. He had to time it just right: too close and he wouldn't have time to pull the plane out of its dive. Given a choice, he didn't want to go down in the proverbial blaze of glory.

Explosions were going off all around him. The sound was deafening, as the flak filled the air with dense, black smoke, impairing his visibility. But he was a lucky man. As he was almost rocketing down, a break in the smoke gave him a clear sight of the Japanese destroyers below him. He clicked the button and released both torpedoes, one right after the other, and immediately pulled out of the steep dive. The plane responded so slowly at first, he thought he would crash.

As he evened out the plane, he heard a resounding explosion behind him. He looked over his shoulder out the window. The sight he saw made him whoop with delight, followed by a half-dozen celebratory obscenities.

One of the ships was now in two pieces. Thick black smoke covered the front, with tall flames beginning to spread. Another ship had not been hit directly, but the explosive blast had damaged it. The green water was now tinged with black from spilled oil and dotted with the bodies of dead men, floating on the surface. He also saw the five Zeros. They were behind him at a distance but gaining on him fast.

He searched the sky above him. *Where were the four F4Fs that had accompanied him on his mission?* Their job had been to cover him as he made his run on the ships and protect him from the Zeros. He picked up the transceiver to his airplane's radio. But before he had the chance to say anything, he heard the *rat-ta-ta-ta-ta* of the guns of one (*or two?*) of the Zeros coming up on his tail.

He dove for the ocean to try to get below the altitude at which the Zeros could safely fly. Here was the one advantage the PBY had over the Zero—it could fly mere feet above the water. Then he heard the distinctive sound of the machine guns of the F4Fs. He didn't have the luxury of time to take a look around to find his escorts or the Zeros chasing him. Now that he had accomplished his mission—a mission that had taken thirty minutes but, to him, had seemed the length of a heartbeat—his normal sense of self had returned. He wanted to get the hell out of there and back to safety.

He felt elated when his plane touched back down on the runway of Henderson Field. Not far behind him were his escort planes, taxiing to a stop. It was as if he was experiencing life in slow motion: the men yelling "hooray" at him as he exited his plane, the slaps on the back, and the words of hearty praise from the men around him. His only moment of regret (and a recognition of what could have happened to him) came when he saw what had happened to the Blue Goose. She was shot through with bullet holes. The fuselage looked like a chunk of Swiss cheese, but the engines, miraculously, weren't

damaged nor, for that matter, was anything else that couldn't be repaired. She was a tough beast. He was lucky the PBY was mostly made of metal, and not fabric like many fighters. Later, he was told there were fifty-two holes that had to be patched.

After berating Stevens for neglect and willful destruction of his plane, Geiger wrote him up for the Navy Cross. It read:

For extraordinary heroism while attached to a Marine aircraft wing during combat against enemy Japanese surface and air forces in the vicinity of Kokumbona Point, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, on October 15, 1942.

Piloting a PBY-5A plane in a daylight attack by combined air units, Major Stevens, despite heavy and accurate anti-aircraft fire and constant assaults by enemy fighters, gallantly pushed home his attack to point-blank range before releasing his torpedoes, hitting and sinking a Japanese transport.

Although his plane was severely damaged and carried the scars of more than fifty hits in its battered fuselage, he returned to his base and landed safely.

His expert airmanship and indomitable fighting spirit reflect great credit upon himself, his command, and the United States Naval Service.