

AN AUSTRALIAN ADVENTURE

By Heidi Tompkins



It was Aug. 16, 1943. Somewhere in a salt flat in northern Australia, a group of Aborigines sang their eerie, five-

tone melodies under a seven-eighths eclipse of the moon.

The strange beauty of the scene touched the strangers with wonder. For Maurice "Marty" Powers, a young waist gunner from Harlem, this moment would be forever etched in his memory.

Powers was born on June 4, 1921. His father worked on the railroad, and his mother took care of their three sons, of which Powers was the middle child.

Sadly, his father passed away when Powers was

young, and soon the boys were doing their part to support the family. Powers went to work at age 16, washing dishes at a local hospital. It was a job he disliked, but being a responsible youngster, he kept at it for two years, earning \$37 each month and giving the money to his mother.

His next job was at Horn & Hardart Automat in New York, working as a busboy and then as head counterman. Automats were a precursor to fast-food restaurants and were popular in the 1920s and 1930s. Customers put coins in a machine to pay for their meals and then received their pre-made, wrapped food through another compartment in the machine.

This was the setting for the day that changed Powers' life forever.

"I was behind a food counter, 59th Street, the automat," Powers remembered. "It was on a Sunday morning. It was terrible."

The event, of course, was the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and in August 1942, Powers was drafted.

"They wanted to make me a cook due to my restaurant experience," Powers said. "I told them I'd rather fight for my country, so I became an aerial gunner."

Joining the Army Air Corps, then a division of the US Army, the 21-year-old was soon off to Tyndall Air Force Base school. There he learned how to be a waist gunner, who shoots out of the waist-high windows of the plane, and even met fellow gunner Clark Gable.

"He wasn't a bit stuck up," Powers remembered.

More training followed in Arizona, and Powers' first post took him across the Pacific Ocean. Working together with the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), his unit was stationed in the outback.

"It was pretty rough up in the bush," Powers shared. "In the rainy season, it was terrible. And we had little tents and cots, and we slept on our heavy flying jacket – that was our pillow."

There were good memories from that time, too. Powers loved the Australians' friendliness and still laughs about the jokes that sometimes went on in camp.

Jim Wright, a bombardier who served in Australia with Powers, mentioned Powers in his book "The Flying Circus:

Pacific War As Seen Through a Bombsight." He shared: "Slim' Powers, as he was affectionately called by crewmates and

other airmen, was a popular character at the 529th, known for his jovial nature and entertaining sense of the ridiculous."

Of all Powers' experiences during World War II, however, it was the mission to Borneo he remembers the most vividly. Well he might – it was the longest bombing run of the war, and the adventure of a lifetime.

The mission was to take out the enemy base at Balikpapan, Borneo.

Powers' airplane, the Shady

Lady Liberator bomber, flew to Darwin, Australia, on the northern tip of the continent, along with the other aircraft in the squadron. There they fueled up and slept in a bombed-out hangar.

When the 10-person aircraft (with nine crewmen and one Australian photographer to take pictures of the site after bombing) left from Darwin on Aug. 13, 1943, the crew members had no inkling of the strange journey that awaited them.

"On the way to the target, I always prayed," Powers said, "and I carried a St. Christopher medal and my mother's picture in my jacket."

The crew needed those prayers. The Shady Lady was the last plane to leave, the most at-risk position.

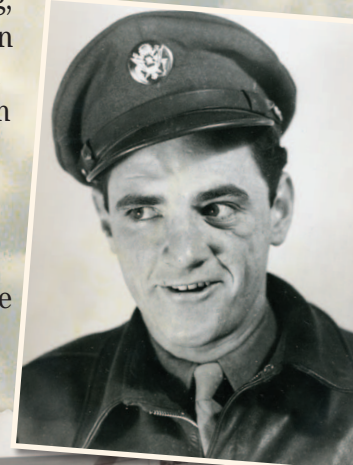
"On the way from Darwin, a storm broke out," Powers remembered. "It was the worst storm I've ever seen. We flew over enemy territory all the way to Borneo. We got to Borneo, and there was the navy there with searchlights, everything. And we got caught in the searchlights."

The men were quickly taking flak from anti-aircraft machines. Shady Lady made two passes over the target, shooting its guns and dropping its bombs without the guidance of the now-damaged interphone system. The bombardier still successfully hit two storage tanks. In all the excitement, the photographer never snapped his pictures.

"I looked at Little Joe, my waist gunner who was with me, and he looked purple, and he told me I looked pink," Powers remembered about the fear of the experience.

After they completed their mission, the crew headed back to Australia. According to the official mission log, it should have been a 2,300-mile round trip. However, with the weather and the two passes, things were not going as planned.

Things got worse as the men entered an electrical storm.



The two runs had used up a lot of fuel, and, heightening the drama, the navigator was unable to get a fix on their position. The crew was heading toward Australia, but the men were not sure if they would make it before their fuel ran out.

Another danger assailed them. Their flight path had taken them over the Japanese base at Timor, and two Zekes (the Allied code name for Japanese A6M Zero fighters) came after the Shady Lady. With the forward turret not working, the gunners could not do much.



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Thankfully, as Powers said, "I had the best pilot in the world," and the plane evaded most of the fire and did not go down.

The Shady Lady entered low clouds, and the enemy planes disappeared. With only an hour's worth of fuel remaining, the men were desperate to reach land. Just in time, they arrived over Australia and set down in a deserted area on the Anjo Peninsula. The plane's nose turret broke off during the landing, causing a jolt, but all 10 men were alive.

The first order of business was to try to find a way to communicate. Powers got out the portable transmitter, which the men called a Gibson girl.

"The kite goes with it, and I was out there running the kite back and forth, and I shot a flare up when we saw a plane going overhead," Powers explained. "We discovered the Gibson girl was all shot up. And the radio was shot out on the plane."

Eventually, they got the plane's radio to work enough to send a message to Darwin. Powers also got the other plane's attention; it signaled that a rescue party would

find them. The plane dropped food, which landed fine, and water, which spilled, much to the crew's dismay. How were the men to stay hydrated in the arid climate? They were quickly running out of the water they had on the aircraft.

That night, Powers had a fascinating encounter.

"They assigned me to be on watch, and the whole crew was sleeping, and I looked over in the woods, and there were three Aborigines. They had their war paint on and spears, and they told us before the mission, 'If you run into any Aborigines, this is how you talk to them: 'Yi ya ya, yi ya ya, yi ya ya.'" So I come out yelling that, and this big guy says to me, 'Good morning.'"

Powers could not help laughing.

"I turned around, and I told my little buddy, Joe, 'He's from Harlem.' They were friendly, and I brought them out to the plane and introduced them to the crew."

Powers and his friends shared their rations with the Aborigines and learned a little about them. Their rescuers were Christians on

a vacation from the local Catholic mission at Kalumburu. They also turned out to be something like angels for the crew – they found water.

That afternoon, the civilian plane flew over again, dropping more food and water (which again spilled) and signaling them to build a fire for the search parties to find them. That evening, the search party arrived.

Among the rescuers were five Aborigines, a priest named Father Sanz who worked at the Kalumburu mission, and four Australian soldiers. Together, they shared a meal and waited for the tide to come in so they could reach the lugger (a raft-like vessel).

"We had a little feast around the fire, and then the Aborigines sang," Powers remembered. "Oh, you've never heard such singing in your life! Toward the end of the song, they all let out a holler. And we had a near eclipse of the moon at the same time. It was weird – the surroundings and them singing. I said, 'Will I ever get out of here to tell someone about this?'"

About 4 a.m., the group headed for the coast. When they reached it a few hours later, the men piled onto the lugger and were guided to the mission. Powers remembers that evening fondly, meeting new friends and feasting on watermelon at the mission.

The next day, the crew of the Shady Lady headed back to the base, and again they were protected. As they were in transit at a high altitude, the Japanese were flying beneath them, bombing the base. If they had arrived any sooner, they would also have been hit.

Powers' war experiences continued. Amazingly, he made it through the war unwounded.

The war's end came when Powers was rotated to California. "We all went down to Frisco to celebrate," he remembered, "and everybody was going nuts."

Powers and his fellow servicemen returned to Brisbane, Australia, where he was decorated by his general. With 300 hours of combat service, he earned three air medals.

After the war, Powers went into the reserve and got a job as a security guard at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

His country called Powers to serve again in the Korean War,

and though he was no longer a gunner, he served in the newly formed United States Air Force as a security guard at a military base during the conflict.

"We were isolated from everybody, and we got no R&R," he remembered.

When that war ended, Powers continued with the Air Force, serving at several bases around the United States.

On temporary duty in Goose Bay, Newfoundland, he met a young lady named Genevieve. The two fell in love and wed, creating a marriage that has been going strong for 51 years. The Powers went on to have five children: two sons and three daughters, and over the years, precious grandchildren and great-grandchildren have been added to their family tree. It is family that hits closest to the heart of this soldier, who considers marrying Genevieve the event he is most proud of, even with his medals and years of service to his country.

Retiring from the Air Force with the rank of tech sergeant did not mean Powers retired from adventure. Many challenges have come at Powers over the years, including the pain of losing two children, breaking his hip in a

skydiving accident and going through kidney cancer.

There are good memories, too, though, such as playing an officer at the beginning of the movie "The Right Stuff," travelling the world with his wife, kissing the Blarney Stone in Ireland and returning to Australia in 1988 for a World War II reunion.

"It was beautiful going back," Powers said. "And who do we meet there but Father Sanz! He remembered me, and he said, 'You're so funny.'"

Today, Powers is a resident at Rimrock Villa Convalescent Hospital in Barstow, Calif., not far from Edwards Air Force Base, where he worked for several years. Those blessed to know him respect him for all the years he has given in love to his country and his family.

It is, after all, a long journey from that young dishwasher from Harlem to the accomplished veteran and survivor of today. Powers is a living testament that no one really knows what adventures will come along life's way. 🍷



Photo by Mariah Backlund