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, the railroad, and his mother 4, 1921. His father worked on the railroad, and his mother took care of their three sons, the railroad, and his mother.

By Heidi Tompkins

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 Bonalsight.” 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.”

Joining the Army Air Corps, then a division of the US Army, the 21-year-old was soon off to Tondal 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.

“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.”

The Shady Lady was our pillow.”

Powers remembered. “It was on our heavy flying jacket—that was our pillow.”

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.

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

Adventures

AN AUSTRALIAN ADVENTURE
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.

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 laughing. I come out yelling that, and this big guy says, ‘yi ya ya, yi ya ya.’ So I come out and learned a little about them. I brought them out to the plane and introduced them to the crew.”

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 arrive the following day. Powers pointed to the plane with a flare, and it revealed the crew’s distress. 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 out of 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.’” 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, they turned to the lagoon and ladders 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 unscathed.

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, 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.