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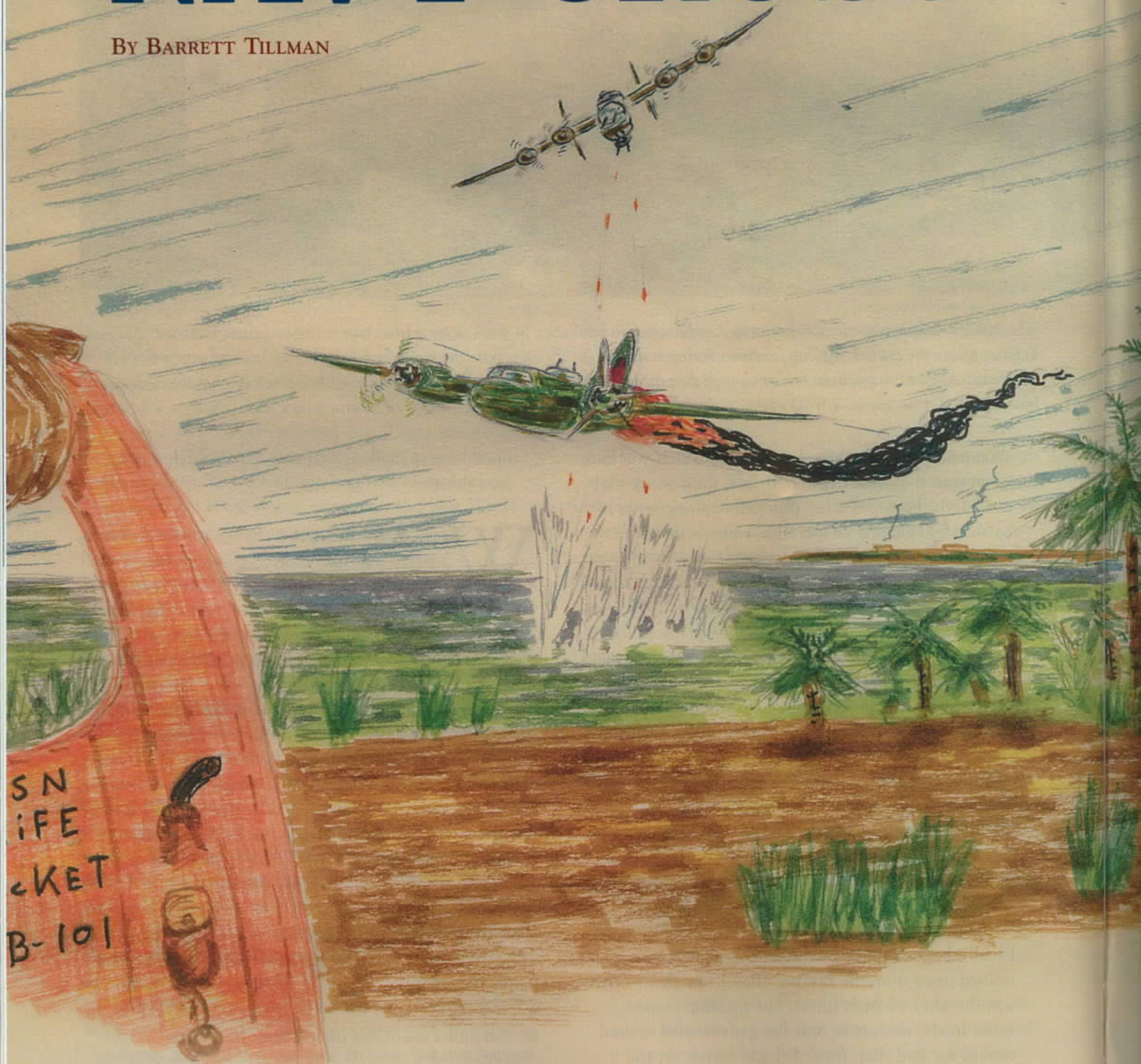


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Two COCONUTS and a **NAVY CROSS**

BY BARRETT TILLMAN



ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF WILLIAM A. READ JR.

William A. Read Jr.'s drawing of a U.S. Navy PB4Y's shootdown of a Japanese transport provides his perspective on what turned out to be the beginning of a bizarre chain of events. Seconds later, the transport crashed among a group of American aviators whose plane had been shot down the previous day, and Read (right) was soon facing off against the lone enemy survivor.

In a stranger-than-fiction Pacific war encounter, Navy Lieutenant William A. Read Jr. successfully fended off a bayonet-wielding Japanese officer by using the only readily available 'weapons.'

Stranded on tiny Ramesamey Island on 20 October 1944, eight U.S. Navy fliers despaired of rescue. Three men had perished in the shoot down of their PB4Y Liberator patrol bomber the day before, and the crash site was perilously close to the Japanese base at Puerto Princessa, Palawan, in the southwestern Philippines. The survivors included the squadron skipper, Commander Justin A. Miller, who was in better condition than most.

That afternoon the crew of Miller's High Life heard the sound of salvation. The steady drone of four Pratt and Whitney engines could only belong to another PB4Y. The men able to stand moved out of the trees, trying to gain the plane's attention.

Nearby, however, a Japanese transport aircraft had just taken off, almost overflying Ramesamey. The timing could not have been worse for the enemy. The Liberator immediately pounced, firing from astern and flaming the transport's port engine. Caught at low level, the victim caromed off the water just offshore, rebounded, and crunched down almost amid Miller's camp, severing trees as Americans scrambled to escape the rain of debris.¹

The transport's fuselage crushed Aviation Radioman Second Class Francis M. Ford, killing him instantly, and narrowly missed the copilot, Ensign Hector S. McDaniel, and Radioman First Class Curtis Ford. Aviation Ordnanceman Second Class John F. Coshow sustained facial injuries, and a falling engine gashed Lieutenant William A. Read Jr.'s right leg, leaving him with a compound fracture and severed muscles and nerves.

Despite his crippling injuries, Read limped toward the tangled wreck since he was closest. The sight and smells were appalling: a blazing fire emitting dense smoke swirling over dead and dying Japanese. Eventually 14 bodies would be counted, some grotesquely mangled after smashing through the airframe on impact. A few were still breathing, gasping and bloodied.

Then a healthy Japanese officer grasping a sheathed bayonet emerged from the wreckage. He was a stocky, bearded warrior who glared at his enemy.

Since his foe had a weapon, Read sought one for himself. He retreated to the crew's lean-to, frantically seeking his knife among the survival gear. Surprisingly, he was the only crewman with a knife (he had lost his revolver in the crash). Finding nothing, he shouted for assistance from his crewmates, but no one heard.

In desperation, ignoring his maimed leg, Read turned back toward the Japanese officer and scooped up the only "ordnance" available—a coconut. The enemy responded by drawing the blade from its scabbard. Em-



broiled in a scenario almost unimaginable to an aerial gunner, Read swallowed hard while perhaps regretting that he'd volunteered for this mission.

Long Way to War

William Augustus Read Jr. was the next thing to a Navy brat. Three uncles—Russell Bartow Read, Curtis Seaman Read, and Duncan Hicks Read—had been naval aviation pioneers, and his father, a Harvard-trained economist, also earned wings of gold. At 26, Bill Jr. was a full lieutenant, and Bill Sr. was a captain on the staff of Vice Admiral Marc Mitscher's Fast Carrier Task Force.² Despite the Great Depression, Bill Read had grown up comfortably, even earning a private pilot's license. "I enjoyed acrobatics and was good at it," he recalled, and he dreamed of becoming a fighter pilot. But his eyes let him down. Nonetheless, Read Sr. encouraged him to apply for the Aviation Volunteer Specialist (AVS) program. A waiver was granted, and Bill completed officer's candidate school in 1942.³

Despite his son's spectacles, Captain Read knew that Bill's civilian marksmanship experience could benefit the Navy. Shooting was in the Reads' blood. "My dad taught me to shoot with both a rifle and a shotgun," he recollected, "and like the rest of the family I liked to hunt, and I kept my eye in with some skeet and trap."⁴

Consequently, Ensign Read entered the Pensacola gunnery instructor school in 1942 and finished at the top of his class. He readily took to the .30- and .50-caliber Browning machine guns, and apart from gaining an intimate familiarity with them, he thoroughly enjoyed putting rounds downrange. Enthusiasm combined with talent to produce an outstanding instructor. Transferred to San Diego, Read's reputation grew with each class, and there he gained the attention of Commander Justin Miller of Patrol Bombing Squadron 101, a "trade school boy" out of the U.S. Naval Academy class of 1931.

Miller's unit held a distinguished record. Previously flying Consolidated PB4Ys as VP-51, the squadron had maintained a detachment in Bermuda at the time of Pearl Harbor. Two weeks later, the Catalinas arrived in Hawaii, and over the next several months they flew from Midway and the Aleutians. Back in Hawaii that fall, PatRon 51 converted to Consolidated's four-engine B-24 Liberator, designated PB4Y in naval service. The skipper at the time, Lieutenant Commander William A. Moffett Jr., had impeccable naval avia-



Although Lieutenant Read, shown looking out from the pilot's seat of the PB4Y Miller's High Life, was from a family of aviation pioneers, his poor eyesight prevented him from becoming a pilot. He nevertheless managed to serve as a volunteer bow gunner.


tion credentials. In early 1943 the "PatRon" became VB-101, and subsequently VPB-101. That February the bombers began flying combat missions in the Solomons, returning to California in October for a six-month training cycle.⁵

Miller seldom stood on regulations. Spectacles or no, he wanted Read's gunnery expertise and invited him to sign on before the squadron departed San Diego in April 1944. Previously resigned to serving stateside for the duration, Read leapt at the chance. VPB-101 deployed to Kaneohe in April and that summer was operating in the Admiralties and beyond.⁶

Once in the combat zone, Read began cadging rides. "Even though I wasn't assigned flight pay . . . if I saw an interesting mission I'd ask the bow gunners if they'd like to have the day off, and they all said yes," he recalled. "I began to acquire quite a bit of experience . . . and I flew with the commanding officer and had some pretty good luck. He started to ask for me, so I wound up flying with Captain Miller."⁷

Action at Puerto Princessa

For the 19 October mission, Read again volunteered as bow gunner in the CO's airplane, Miller's High Life (BuNo 32280). The skipper readily agreed; he wanted his best shooter up front. It was the first mission from Morotai, overflying Palawan en route to the South China Sea operating area.



At 1515 that afternoon, returning from a 1,000-mile patrol of the South China Sea, Miller decided to divert from his homeward leg to hit the Japanese seaplane base at Puerto Princessa. Attacking at 100 feet, he dropped ten 100-pound bombs on two moored ships, strafed an airfield packed with 40 or more planes, and orbited to photograph the results.

"I thought we should have gone home," Read reflected, "but the captain saw a seaplane base and went in to attack it. They were ready for us and shot us up."⁸

The navigator, Ensign George H. Martin, later wrote:

We came in as intended and dropped our bombs in perfect order. Two of the ships were definitely destroyed. And then we swept right down on the runway a little to the right. We were down pretty low, so low that there was mud on our windshield. We could not have been over 30 feet from the ground. We estimated there were forty planes on the strip . . .

we saw the fires of eight planes and more were probably damaged. Eight planes and two ships on the first run—that was good luck and good work.⁹

Miller was astute enough to avoid a second attack, but while egressing "We found ourselves heading for half a dozen seaplanes south of the wharf," Read related. Antiaircraft guns sited to overlook the harbor opened fire, crippling the Liberator. Fighting damaged controls and an engine fire, Miller and Ensign McDaniel kept the big bomber airborne a few minutes before smacking into the water. The plane broke apart on impact, throwing Miller, still strapped in his seat, through the windshield.

Three crewmen perished in the crash: Aviation Chief Ordnanceman J. W. Eckfield, Aviation Ord-

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During one of his flights in Miller's High Life, Read fires the bow turret's twin .50-calibers, lighting up a Japanese plane on the tarmac at Wolfe Field on Mindanao Island in the Philippines. The lieutenant again volunteered as bow gunner for the Liberator's fateful 19 October 1944 mission.

nanceman Third Class D. W. Doering, and Aviation Machinist Mate First Class P. A. Villa.

The nearest land was three miles away, so the eight survivors clung to a bomb-bay fuel tank and allowed the current to deliver them. The tiny island, however, was only seven miles from Puerto Princessa itself. Their landfall was later identified as Ramesamey Island, about 3,000 yards in circumference, covered with vegetation though the only source of nourishment was coconuts. Four men were largely uninjured but at that point lacked the strength for tree climbing.

Read found a sign of previous habitation: a crude thatch shelter with palm fronds for a base. The able-bodied men laid Miller and Aviation Radioman Francis Ford under cover. The survivors then settled down to await rescue or capture.

The next day the war literally dropped on their heads.

Face to Face

Previously Bill Read only had a gun-sight view of combat. He said of his gunnery missions: "I wasn't after the individual Japanese. I was after their machines of war." But now he faced a scowling, formidable-looking enemy officer in khaki uniform and high-topped boots, the very image of an imperial warrior.¹⁰

Both men began yelling, trying to intimidate one another. The Japanese, with an edged weapon, had the upper hand. From the Tokyo perspective, Read logically believed that since the enemy aircraft had crashed disastrously, the honorable option for a samurai was hara-kiri. But the American's belly-cutting pantomime had no effect on his opponent.

By then the Japanese had stalked up to copilot Hector McDaniel, stunned by the crashing debris. Still woozy from his near miss, he lay back, gawking at the apparition advancing on him.



Read hefted his coconut, calculated its weight versus the distance—about 25 feet—and let fly. His fire solution was accurate; the foe man glimpsed the inbound missile and ducked as it narrowly missed his head. Read immediately “reloaded” by grasping a second coconut, and the Japanese seemed impressed. “Maybe he thought I was a Yankees pitcher,” Read later mused.

Another shouting match ensued, neither opponent making an impression. Read attempted by word and gesture to demonstrate other “Americanos” were present. By then the commotion drew reinforcements; Miller appeared, also armed with a coconut, and Curtis Ford brandished a stick.

The standoff would have struck anyone from America or Japan as absurd: At the height of the greatest war of the 20th century, men accustomed to combat with aircraft, bombs, and machine guns, wielding the most primitive of weapons.

Outnumbered at last, the Japanese conceded the field. He turned and sprinted to the beach, splashing to the sandbar. There he commandeered the Liberator’s bomb-bay fuel cell, pushed off, and hand-paddled for the far shore.

Miller’s crew meanwhile scavenged the enemy wreckage, retrieving two pistols, swords, life vests, parachutes, and tarps. More important, they found four cans of fish, a sock full of rice, and ten packages of “the Japanese equivalent of Lifesavers.”¹¹

Long Voyage Home

Whatever the fate of the Japanese officer (likely the one reported killed by guerrillas several days later), the Americans realized that eventually they would be discovered by the enemy. Therefore, on the 21st “Mac” McDaniel tried swimming to Palawan, where friendly natives might offer help. But it was too far, and the copilot returned.

On 25 October, Miller observed his 35th birthday by helping construct a raft. Two days later, using crude paddles, he and McDaniel reached another deserted islet but lacked the strength to proceed. They remained three or four days and then struck out again. This time persistence counted. The pilots reached Palawan on 2 November, the fourteenth day after their shoot down.

Once ashore, Miller and McDaniel made contact with Filipino-American guerrillas. They then returned with friendly natives who took the others to Palawan in dug-out canoes. Carried ashore on bamboo stretchers, the fliers stayed a week before a runner arrived from a guerrilla officer about 80 miles away.

He was an enterprising character called “Colonel” Jacinto Cutaran. Actually, he was a sergeant who adopted the rank of colonel to “carry out his work more efficiently.” In any case he radioed news of Miller’s crew, and a pickup was arranged. Early attempts to extract Miller’s men by PBV were cancelled owing to frequent enemy fighters overhead, so plans were laid to evacuate by submarine.¹²

The USS *Gunnel* (SS-253) had departed Freemantle on her seventh war patrol on 21 October. Her skipper, Lieutenant Commander Guy E. O’Neil Jr. (USNA 1937), had relieved Lieutenant Commander John S. McCain Jr. in July. Though a junior officer, O’Neil was an old hand. He had been at Manila on 8 December 1941 and logged five previous patrols in two other boats before taking over the *Gunnel*. On the current patrol he sank three ships including a 10,000-ton oiler.

On 1 December the sub received instructions to “pick up a party of eleven Naval Aviators led by Commander Miller, USN.” The sub arrived ten miles off Flechas Point, Palawan, at dusk on the 2nd, watching

for the expected sailboat. To remove any doubt, the password “Ballast” was selected “Because the Japanese couldn’t pronounce ‘ballast.’”¹³

Miller’s men had meanwhile been joined by two dive-bomber crews off the USS *Intrepid* (CV-11), shot down in September. The rendezvous was accomplished, with all rescued men soon enjoying pie with ice cream, followed by chocolate cake and coffee. Parting gifts to Colonel Cutaran’s men were automatic weapons and ammunition, clothing, medical stores, and canned food.

On the return trip the *Gunnel* dived three times to avoid enemy aircraft and, running surfaced, was nearly swamped in a “monstrous typhoon.” However, the boat arrived at Saipan on the 16th, and the survivors made their way eastward. After reaching safety, Read received long-delayed medical



After Miller’s High Life was shot down, the survivors managed to swim to tiny Ramesamey Island. The wreckage of the Japanese transport that crashed the next day is visible near the bottom edge of the island’s thick coconut-palm jungle.



Eventually rescued by the USS *Gunnel* (SS-253), most of the PB4Y survivors were later photographed on the sub's deck. Front row (beginning second from left): Read, Ordnanceman Second Class John Coshaw, Ensign George Martin, Commander Justin Miller; second row: Ensign Hector McDaniel (fourth from left), *Gunnel* skipper Lieutenant Commander Guy O'Neil (eighth from left), and Ordnanceman Third Class Harry Rummerfield (second from right).


attention. Surgeons operated on his right leg, which he said benefited from "ants, salt water, and my guardian angel."¹⁴

On returning to San Diego, Read met Lieutenant Commander J. E. Muldrow, the skipper of a PB4Y-2 squadron who extended an invitation for him to join the unit in its upcoming deployment. Read was interested but declined owing to follow-up surgery. "My angel was watching over me again," he mused, "because Johnny Muldrow was killed in 1945, and I probably would have been with him."¹⁵

Speaking of VPB-101, Read reflected, "I was very lucky to be in the Navy, the squadron I was with. Everybody was a volunteer, and I found them all to be intelligent, articulate, and some of the nicest guys you could ever meet, and brave, all of them."¹⁶

Subsequently Justin Miller, Hector McDaniel, Bill Read, and *Gunnel* captain Guy O'Neil received the Navy Cross for their actions at Palawan. Read retired as a commander in the Naval Reserve and was a partner with Phelps Fenn, a municipal bond firm in New York City. Miller and O'Neil retired as captains in 1960, Miller died in 1992 at age 82, and O'Neil died 7 December 2007, age 93. Apparently McDaniel died in 1977, age 56.

Bill Read no longer holds any animosity toward Japan; he drives a Subaru and has two Japanese outboards on his motorboat. His shooting skills are still sharp. In 1978 Read won an international senior's skeet championship, and he

remains an active shotgunner—a reminder of the long-ago era when he represented his nation in the global competition called World War II. 

1. Confusion exists as to who shot down the Japanese plane and when. Some of Miller's crew thought the victor was a VPB-115 PB4Y, but that kill on 20 October occurred 40 miles away, west of Palawan. A report dated the 22nd involved LT (jg) K. H. Dunn of VPB-101, credited with a Nakajima Ki-34 "Tess" (DC-2) at Puerto Princessa. The differences remain irreconcilable. James C. Sawrak, "Air-to-Air Claims and Credits for Navy Patrol Type Aircraft During World War II," <http://www.history.navy.mil/avh-vol2/Appen4.pdf>.

2. William A. Read Sr. would retire as a vice admiral and serve as commander general of the Naval Order from 1946 to 1949 before passing away in 1976.

3. Telephone interview with William A. Read Jr., 30 July 2009.

4. "Experiencing War: Stories from the Veterans History Project," <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.53073/>.

5. Verle D. Ashcraft, <http://www.geocities.com/Pentagon/Quarters/6439/info.html>

6. Monthly Location of Naval Aircraft, October 1943 to June 10, 1944.

7. Veterans History Project, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.53073/>

8. Veterans History Project.

9. George H. Martin diary, provided by William A. Read.

10. Veterans History Project.

11. Frank Kelly, "7 Navy Flyers Live 6 Weeks in Foe's Territory," *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 Dec. 1944.

12. USS *Gunnel*, seventh war patrol report, <http://www.jmlavelle.com/gunnel/patrol7.htm>.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Telephone interview, 30 July 2009.

15. Telephone interview, 8 September 2009. LCDR John E. Muldrow of VPB-108 was lost with most of his crew over Marcus Island on 19 May 1945.

16. Veterans History Project.

Mr. Tillman is a writer and speaker whose 45 books include six published by the Naval Institute Press. He has received six awards for history and literature, and continues working in the field of naval aviation.