

MEAD'S TREK

BY TOM GAUTHIER



CHAPTER SIX

Funifuti Atoll, South Pacific
08°31' S - 179°11' E

The four B-24 Bombers of the 11th Bombardment Group, cleared in first, flew a long straight-in southwest approach in trail formation to runway 21, braking hard in clouds of dust to stop before the end of the five-thousand-foot coral runway.

They taxied into revetments that the Seabees were still putting the finishing touches on.

Soon the four orbiting C-87's began their letdown, also cleared by the tower for the runway 21 approach.

From his station behind the pilots, the navigator instructed the OSS team, "Stow that gear and cinch up, gentlemen. We'll be touching down in five. Stay near the plane ... we're just gassing up."

Wetmore sat up straight in his seat and said loud enough to be heard, "You're shittin' me, right sir? We're not doing another twelve hours in this thing? Tell me you're shittin' me!"

The navigator hollered back for all to hear, "I'm just the messenger, Commander. What I heard is that we gotta get you guys *down under* chop-chop. Now buckle up, please!"

"Chop-chop, my ass," Mead mumbled to himself. "Don't do us any favors."

The change from in-flight to landing configuration for the giant C-87 transport did nothing to ease Mead's discomfort. The rumbling of flaps and landing gear being deployed, the change in pitch of the four large propellers, and the onset of the sluggish pitching and yawing of the slowing aircraft had Mead gripping the arm rests of his olive-drab seat, taut tendons defining the spread of whitening fingers that seemed to be looking for a way to hold the airplane in the sky. Even the final touch down brought him no relaxation as he endured the

crunching squeal of tires meeting the ground, the roar of reversed pitched propellers, and the feel of being thrown from the relative safety of the canvas covered seat by lunging brakes.

Only when the aircraft turned off the runway and began its relatively mild taxi to parking did he allow himself to breathe out and relax.

A small bit at a time.

Damn, I hate to fly.

Twenty minutes later, as Mead, Wetmore, Morse, and McIntire sat in the shade of the plane's tail using their Mae-West life vests as cushions, the civilian pilot of their airplane strode across the coral parking ramp, motioning to Mead. He rose to meet him.

"Bad news, Major. We've got a little problem with the number one engine and the boys tell me it'll be tomorrow before we can take off."

"So what do we do?" Mead asked, thinking that the news wasn't so bad.

"You guys grab your ditty and whatever else you'll need and report over to the tower. They've got some five-star quarters for us. With any luck there might even be running water."

Mead turned to his companions, not the least bit disappointed, and said, "You heard the man, gentlemen. We get a stationary bunk for the night."

The next morning the long, boring and cramped flight from Funifuti Atoll to Brisbane took off. Repairs on Mead's C-87 had required pirating parts from one of the other C-87's that had flown down from Hawaii with them. Since Mead's flight was a priority, the few passengers from the other plane had been transferred to his, the seats added further cramping the space.

The addition of part of their cargo, added to the additional fuel stowed on board in internal tanks, upset the pilot.

He knew the bad handling characteristics of a fully loaded C-87, especially as you burned off internal fuel. But with wartime priority as it was, he'd taken to the air and was skillfully winging his way to Australia with all aboard.

Amberley Air Field West of Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

Mead sat up straight in expectation of their landing and said to Wetmore, "I'm seeing this view once too often. Seems like only yesterday that I took off from here ... and fully expected to never set eyes on it again."

Wetmore chuckled and said, "It damn near was yesterday, eh Amos?" He squirmed and stretched his back. "I'm just going to be happy to separate my rear end from this seat."

Cleared to the Amberley Airfield's Runway 02, the C-87 settled into a low-power glide down its final approach heading, touching down just past the numbers with a screech and puffs of blue smoke from complaining tires, then bouncing airborne from a too fast initial touch, and finally settling onto the runway one last time to the roar of reverse pitched propellers.

“Welcome to Australia ... twice,” the co-pilot quipped over the plane’s public address system. “Sit tight ‘til we find a place to park this beast.”

Long before the aircraft came to a stop, the cramped and tired passengers moved about the forward cabin, gathering personal gear and anticipating the first breathe of fresh air. Standing straddle-legged or holding on to seatbacks or the curved fuselage overhead, the men anticipated the final stop, which came much more aggressively than they were ready for, sending a few flailing for something more solid to grasp. The pilot was as tired as they were and not very subtle with his toe rotation on the rudder pedals that activated the breaks. The aircraft rocked back on its wheels and the propellers began the welcome whirl of winding down to a majestic pose of the great blades.

The doors opened to a rush of humid tropical air, scented with a whiff of remnant exhaust mixed with an overtone of flowers. Nobody really noticed, just happy to be rid of the smells of each other in their cramped cocoon. The stop in Brisbane was to be overnight.

Mead checked in at the Army Air Corp operations desk. A message was handed to him by the duty officer. He read it, then turned around to see the waiting staff car mentioned in the note parked in front of the building. The rest of the passengers, Mead’s team included, queued to board an Army bus bound for the Lennons Hotel in Brisbane, nearly thirty miles east of the field.

Mead walked up to Wetmore at the end of the queue and tapped his shoulder and said, “I’ve got some business to attend to, Harmon. Get yourselves settled and I’ll catch up when I can.”

He walked away toward the car.

Mead’s message, from Commander Matt Kurek, told him that MacArthur’s communications ship was in Brisbane and that he was clear to use it. This was all very familiar to Mead, and he hardly noticed the scenery as the staff car took him directly to the waterfront and the moored US Navy ship OL-31.

He sat at the shelf-like work desk attached to the out-sized SIGSALY encrypted telephone system built into the ship. The duty sergeant from the 805th Signal Service Company that manned the giant units recognized Mead from his earlier visits weeks before ... after the sinking of the troop ship USAT Cape San Juan.

“Welcome aboard, Major. Thought you’d gone back to the States.”

“So did I, Sarge, so did I ... and I almost made it.”

“You want LA on the line like before, sir?”

“Nope ... Hawaii this time.”

“Roger that, sir. It’ll just take a few minutes to synch up.”

SIGSALY, an acronym with no particular meaning, was developed by Bell Labs after the old A-3 telephone scrambler system was broken into by the Germans. Churchill and Roosevelt had needed a secure system and the twelve channel SIGSALY was the answer. The 805th manned the fifty ton encrypted telephones in London, Washington, L.A., Hawaii, and aboard MacArthur’s floating communication ship, Ocean Lighter 31, where Amos Mead paced in thought as the system whirled up to synchronize with its twin in Pearl Harbor.

The duty sergeant spoke as he handed the headset to Mead, "They're on, sir. You know the drill."

Mead took the headset and adjusted it over his ears. "Hello. Matt? Yah, what's up?" He was informed of secure teletypes sent with information on the Thai guerillas, and the OSS take-over of China Intel from a very unhappy Tai Li. "Okay, Matt, I understand. Maybe it'll make better sense as to how I'm impacted after we get up there. Yeah, I know, okay ... yeah, sure, I'll hold."

Mead heard the click and shuffle of headsets being exchanged, then . . .

"Hello, Amos."

"Brigit? Hi, Honey."

It was business-like in the words, but the undertone of emotion was poignant and evident to anyone listening. The only people listening were in the rooms at each end.

This would be the last direct conversation for a long time.

As Mead set the headset on the desk and prepared to leave, the duty sergeant asked, "Is that your lady, sir?"

Mead smiled. "Astute observation, Sergeant. Thanks for asking."

The drive to the hotel was quicker than he expected, his mind thousands of miles away and taking no notice of the passing scenery.

The Navy petty officer held the door open and Mead stepped from the rear seat of the gray Plymouth. "Thank you, Petty Officer," he said, the comment helping to bring him back into focus.

"No problem, sir." The response he heard as he stepped toward the familiar door. He stopped and looked back as the staff car pulled away from the curb, focusing on the ornate ironwork façade of a red corrugated steel roofed residence across George Street and remembering the last time he stood in this spot, remembering when he met, *really met*, Brigit for the first time.

Mead sat relaxed, eased deeply into the cushioned high backed wicker chair, when he caught a glimpse of the tall, auburn haired beauty moving in his direction. He was just focusing on the smooth curves of the tailored cotton khaki shirt when she surprised him by speaking. "Hello, Major Mead."

His eyes tracked up to meet the sparkling brown eyes of the speaker. Recognition set in as he carefully placed his drink on the glass topped table. "Hello, yourself, uh, Major O'Hare, isn't it?"

She smiled and extended her hand. "It is. Call me Brigit."

"Amos," Mead said as he stood and warmly clasped her hand. He glanced back toward the seat she had come from and asked, "Are you alone? Would you join me?" He hadn't waited for the first question to be answered.

"Why thank you, kind sir," Brigit said with a small curtsy and a flirtatious lowering of her eyes. "Let me get my bag."

He watched her walk away from him. The cotton khaki uniform of an Army Nurse did not hide the curves and athletic moves as Brigit O'Hare shouldered the russet leather handbag that matched her army-issue 1 ½" heels and turned back toward him. He didn't look away as he pulled out a chair for her at his table.

Brigit O'Hare was Boston born and raised of good Irish Catholic stock. But, at nearly 30 years old, and not yet married with a sizable brood of kids, her family saw her as the maverick daughter. She had gone to nursing school and earned an RN, which pleased her schoolteacher mother. Then she had continued college and finally earned a doctorate in psychology, which didn't please her retired Boston cop father; at least not to her face. But, when he was down at the JJ Foley's pub in the south end of Boston, he bragged like the Irishman that he was.

Amos Mead waved Charles the bartender over from his station behind the ornate dark wood bar where he stood, carefully polishing the surface with a folded cloth, and then turned back and asked Brigit, "Can I order you one of these? Chivas?"

"No, sir," she said quickly with mock dismay and a richly flirtatious Irish brogue, "yer spellin' yer whiskey with an 'e', now, are yah true?" She turned to Charles who had stepped up and stood at her side, the cloth carefully folded over his crooked left arm. "Sir, I shall have Jameson if you please; neat and spelled with no Scot's 'e'."

"One Irish whisky coming up, ma'am!" Charles said, louder than he needed to, and with a broad smile.

Mead laughed aloud. "You are full of the Blarney, Major!"

"Guilty as charged, Major; and I've been so told. But today I'm feeling relaxed for the first time in this damn war, so maybe I'm gettin' a little sassy."

The memory producing a grin on his face.

Was it only a few weeks before?

He turned and stepped into the hotel, taking a moment to adjust his eyes from the bright Queensland sun to the lobby's subdued light. This time he noticed the ceiling fans twirling lazily, still only partly dispersing the humid late afternoon air.

He heard a familiar voice. "Well, well, good afternoon, Major. Joining us for a cocktail?"

Mead looked up to once again acknowledge the greeting from Mrs. Margaret Byrne, the flamboyant manager of the Lennons Hotel. He responded with a smile, "Yes I am, Margaret. Thank you for asking."

"Your friends are in the bar," she said, taking Mead's elbow in a flourish.

Guess I'm being announced into the grand ballroom once again, he thought, and he smiled broadly and went along with Mrs. Byrne's usual flair for the dramatic.

Mrs. Byrnes announced, "Charles, it's our Major Mead!"

"Welcome back, Major," Charles said, "Chivas, rocks, coming up."

"Thank you, Charles," Mead answered as he settled into the too familiar high backed wicker chair left vacant at the table where his team was finishing off a plate of barely identifiable hors d'oeuvres.

Chandler Morse observed, "Sounds like you've been here before, Amos."

Mead didn't respond for a second, his eyes looking to the chair near the potted palm in the corner of the bar. "What? Oh, yeah. You could say that, Chandler."

The next morning the Mead team arrived back at the airfield in the same bus with the flight crew that would be hosting them on the flight to India. It was a quiet ride, induced by some introspection, but mostly by sleepiness after too long a dinner and too short on bunk time.

Trooping together, carrying only their overnight ditty bags, the two teams entered the operations building. Most headed directly to the coffee pot with its remnants of the overnight eye-opener concoction. Specifications. Hot. Black. And strong.

The pilot and navigator leaned on the counter as they listened to the weather briefing.

The radio operator stepped over to Mead and said, "You guys are it for passengers. Don't rightly know who you are, but your travel priority is right up there with MacArthur's."

Wetmore chimed in, "Right, regular VIP's we are."

"Roger that, Commander. But we're not wastin' a perfectly good trip on you. We're loaded to the gills with stuff the OSS has req'd," the crewman said.

Chandler Morse added, "Bloody OSS. Very demanding blokes, what?" He emphasized a cockney twang not his own, engendering laughs from the team, with the air crewman not really catching the drift.

"Saddle up, people," the aircraft commander pilot ordered. "We're going flying."

On the way to the tarmac, each of the Mead team was outfitted with his A-4 harness, chest pack parachute, and Mae-West flotation gear. As they approached the plane they were directed to wait at the base of the ladder by the co-pilot who was completing his walk-around inspection and signing the Form F, Weight and Balance calculations, handed him by the unit cargo specialist.

The pilot approached Mead and the team and instructed his flight-novice passengers, "Gentlemen, this flight will be a little different than your journey down from Hawaii. We've got a seventeen-hundred-mile leg to Darwin, and then we're headed up into *Indian country*. The radio operator will be briefing you on signal bells ... bailout, fire and the like ... and how to use those lovely web harnesses you're almost into. So load up and let's get to it!"

The C-87 transport plane that would carry them into harm's way was a four engine converted B-24 Liberator bomber. The bomb bay doors and gun mounts were gone. Seven windows along each side of the fuselage provided a little view and light for the passengers. Usually up to twenty-five. Today only four. Unneeded seats were removed and ten thousand pounds of war materiel tied down on pallets behind them.

Amos Mead mused idly, *with a top speed of three hundred miles per hour and a range of three thousand miles, the flight to Darwin should be about six hours and a half tank of gas*, not sure if he was right.

But the thought process taking his mind off of the fact that.

I don't like to fly!

Darwin

Northern Territory
Australia
12°40' S - 130°9' E

The radio operator, reported a difficult time getting RDF radio bearings for the navigator to aid in his course corrections to Darwin. A fair worry when there were virtually no charted landmarks to help.

Flying across the north of the vast red interior of Australia was an experience in itself, with only the occasional sighting of a cattle station hundreds of miles from their nearest neighbor. In the heat of the day the fliers saw a dust storm racing over the desert far to the south. Weird rock formations and huge salt lakes, but precious little vegetation to the south of their flight path, kept their attention until the last few hundred miles before Darwin where the swamp lands and estuaries started.

Finally, nursing the intermittent radio-direction bearings from Darwin, the pilot of the special mission C-87 was in sight of the airfield. Clearing approach with the military tower, he first buzzed the field to be sure it was free of kangaroos and wallabies. A circling turn to the left brought the aircraft around onto final approach and landing. They would remain overnight, refuel and be off at first light for the dangerous over-water flight to India and the Team's connections for travel on over the *hump* to Kunming.

The ungodly climate at Darwin featured rain and humidity to the point of feeling like you were drowning. The pilot was well aware that this humidity meant that the buildup of thunder clouds took place very rapidly. An early morning departure was the best insurance.

Overnight accommodation was in a wooden building set up on supports above the ground to allow some ventilation, its spindly wooden legs standing in cans of reeking oil to prevent termite damage. It was easy to see that Darwin was a fairly primitive town, with not much in the way of social opportunities - apart from expeditions to nearby creeks suitable for swimming. But after discussions with a local rheumy-eyed gadabout regarding *salt water crocs the size of a lorry*, Mead and the others were satisfied to eat a good meal and get some rest.

If they could sleep at all on the soggy sheets.

They were not very far from the war.

On 19 February 1942, one hundred eighty-eight Japanese planes had launched against Darwin, whose harbor was full of Allied ships. It was the largest Japanese attack since Pearl Harbor. On that day there had been twenty-seven Allied ships in the harbor and approximately thirty aircraft at the Darwin Civil and RAAF airfields, one of which had the C-87 parked for the night.

The hot tropical dawn found the bleary-eyed passengers traipsing toward the parked C-87, sodden hair and dark stained armpits hinted that they would welcome the relative coolness ... even cold ... of some altitude.

High on the wing of the aircraft the crewman was busy inspecting each fuel tank. He'd already checked the tanks added on board the aircraft needed for the

extra distance they had to fly. Darwin to Calcutta was nearly eight hundred miles beyond the normal range of the C-87 and there was very little room for error.

A major hazard of tropical flying was condensation of water in the fuel tanks and it was imperative to check for this before takeoff. More than one aircraft had been lost from water-fouled fuel.

The pilot waved at the bedraggled group as he came out from beneath the fuselage, having completed his walk around. He said with a grin, "Good morning, gentlemen. I trust you slept well."

Sergeant McIntire mumbled, "Yeah, same as you I suppose."

Each man stepped carefully up the dripping rusted steps of the temporary truck-mounted access stairs that wobbled just enough to induce vertigo in an un-rested flier, which meant everyone in this group.

Onboard, the pilot stopped in the narrow center space separating the two cramped pairs of seats where the team was finding a suitable roost for the coming day, saying with a tone of authority, "I can't guarantee a smooth flight, you guys. In fact, it could get damn rough, so double check your gear for security."

What the pilot knew all too well was that flying north across the equator always meant flying through the inter-tropical front of very unstable weather that lies parallel to the equator. To the north of the equator during the northern latitude summer, and to the south of it for the other six months, it meant that massive thunder clouds could build up during the day, rising to twenty-five thousand feet and more, making it difficult and dangerous to climb in search of their tops. Even though the pilot had wisely chosen to try and cross early in the morning, he knew it was a matter of luck as to whether they would fly through the calmer parts of the cloud formations, or whether they would run into violent vertical air currents. He didn't share this information with Mead and his team. They seemed to be stressed enough without asking them to think about the possibility of the adrenaline pumping experience of flying headlong into the front wall of a threatening thunderstorm cloud formation.

On his last run from Darwin to Calcutta he'd encountered severe turbulence so dramatic that the rate of vertical rise and fall caused such dangerous and radical flexing of the wings that he was forced to descend close to the surface of the Andaman Sea, where he had to remain for several hundred miles. At this height he was not able to maintain radio contact, and if he'd ditched into the sea he would have disappeared without trace.

Again, the pilot decided not to confide in Amos Mead.

He'll find out soon enough.

One by one, at the rapidly rotating hand signal of the ground crewman with a fire extinguisher at the ready, the four Pratt & Whitney R1830-43 Twin Wasp radial engines of the Air Transport Command C-87 Liberator Express roared to life, initially belching blue-black smoke as they ignited all fourteen cylinders, finally smoothing out the deep, throaty Hamilton Standard propeller rotations into a melodic, pulsating roar.

Answering the crisp salute of the ground crew, the pilot released the parking brake and lurched toward the active runway, cleared for immediate take off. The

rumbling of the large rubber tires on the rough taxiway blended with the whine of deploying flaps and the pulsing engines to send a message of the excitement of flight to the strapped-in passengers.

McIntire, Wetmore and Morse sat erect in their seats, this time more keen to the process because they knew that from here on was the unknown. And the enemy.

Mead, as usual, gripped the seat's arms, clenched his eyes shut, and hummed his mantra, *I don't like to fly, I don't like to fly.*

The rumbling stopped as the aircraft paused at the end of the runway for a full engine run-up and checks of flight control surface deflections. Then the engines' roar climbed to a palpable crescendo, gulping fuel like a thirsty water-deprived man in the desert, converting energy to propeller-scooping motion, and sending shivers through the airframe, poised for its initial transition from a grounded, dead-weight metallic tractor cushioned by rubber tires, to an airborne, majestic, wing-flexed bird cushioned by thin air.

The lurch forward signaled brake release, and the pressure driving them deeper into their seats increased as the journey into the unknown began. Breathing was shallow as the rumble of the wheels on the crackled runway increased, steadied, then went silent as the giant aircraft took flight. Now the gentle nose-up and swaying side to side told them that a positive rate of climb had been achieved.

Maintaining twenty-seven-hundred rpm and forty-one-inch manifold pressure settings on its engines, the behemoth moved through ninety mph, responding to the pull back on its elevator-deflecting control yoke, and winning a metal-machine versus force-of-earth-gravity battle, surrendering itself to the sky in triumph on its straight, outstretched, suddenly graceful-appearing wings. Deeper breathes were drawn as the whine of the retracting, drag-inducing, still-spinning undercarriage, ceased and their world settled into the droning rhythm of flight.

Climbing away from the rising sun, the pilot turned the half-round control yoke in his grip to the right, dropping the right wing and beginning a smooth climbing right turn toward the northwest and out over the Timor Sea. Almost fourteen hours of tedious flight lay ahead, at least those aboard hoped it would be tedious. The time-worn truism of flight, *hours of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror*, was known to all of them.

Weather, or a Japanese fighter pilot, could contribute to the latter.