

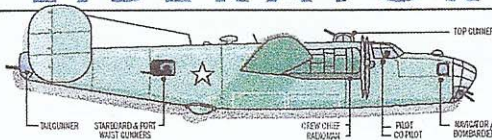


In Nov. 1941, in order to attend photo training school in Florida, George Brown leaves Hawaii. One week later, the Japanese attack. After graduating in April 1942, George is stationed in San Diego, where he meets and marries the attractive Esther Iru on Sept. 6, 1942. Five weeks later, George ships out to the Solomon Islands. Lumbering down the North Island runway in a fully-loaded PB-4Y, George wonders if the plane will ever leave the ground. The co-pilot fails to lower the flaps and it takes extraordinary flying by pilot Gordon Gray to clear Point Loma.

Sgt. George H. Brown, April 1942; age 23

The Marine Corps version of the B-24, the PB-4Y is a modified long-range reconnaissance aircraft, with extra gas tanks that gives it more than 14 hours of flying time. The route to the war takes the PB-4Y to Hawaii, Johnston Atoll, Fiji, and New Caledonia before finally arriving in Espiritu Santo. With the capture of Guadalcanal's Henderson Field, the Marines fly into the Northern Solomons. On a bright day in January 1943, George sits daydreaming in the rear of a PB-4Y, returning from taking some important photos of a new Japanese airfield on New Georgia. He's thinking of an onion sandwich and a shower. It's been like any other mission...

PB-4Y LIBERATOR



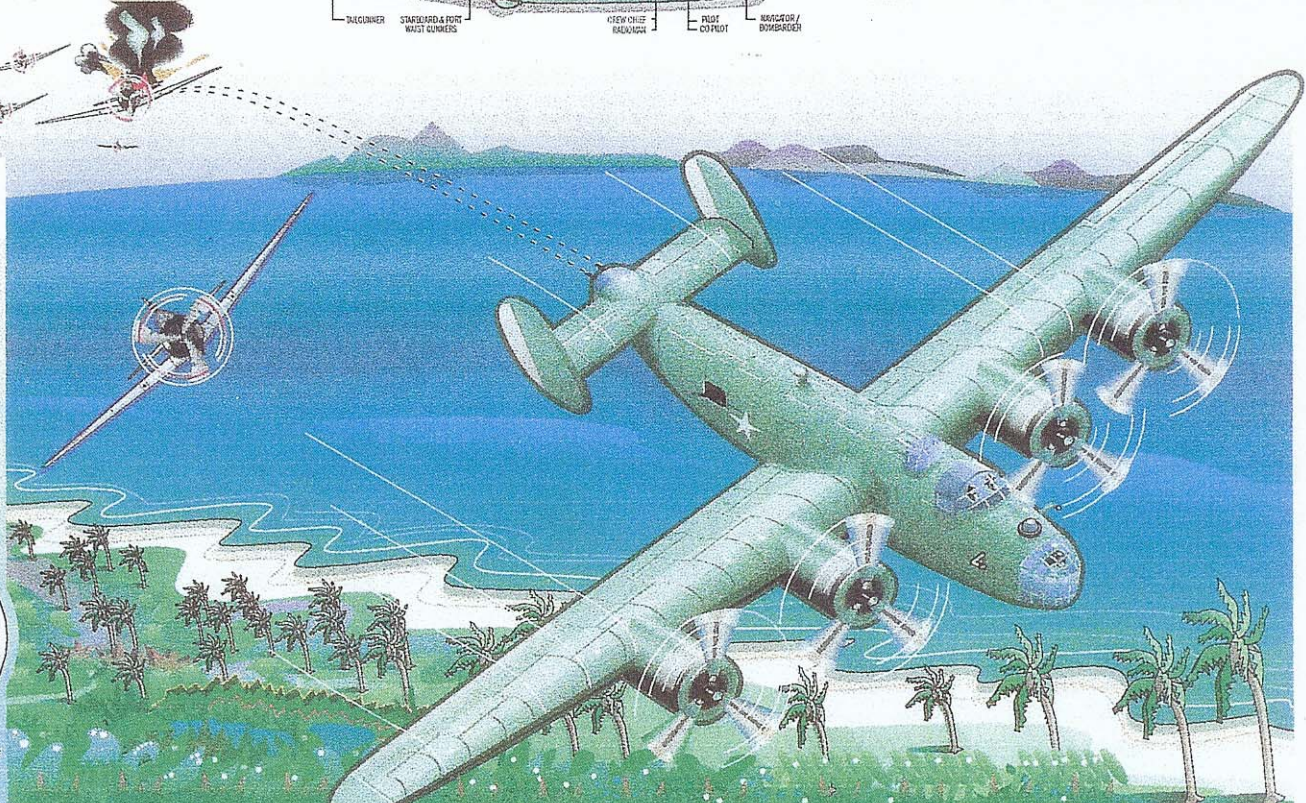
1 George sits uncomfortably as the lone PB-4Y dances above the teal waters of the Solomon Islands. He's gotta pee. Damn these long missions. Suddenly, the tailgunner calls over the intercom, "Looks like Zeros at 6 o'clock!" Excitement bursts through the plane. The co-pilot says, "Take it easy boys, these are probably our planes." But at his starboard waist-gun position, George swings out his 50-caliber gun. He just caught a glimpse of diving fighters, they had red circles on the side.

2 The tailgunner gets loose with his twin-50s as the sweeping targets still more than 700 yards off. Smoke and flame explodes from the lead Zero. Pilot Gordon Gray comes on the intercom. "Hang on boys, we're going down to the deck."

3 Screaming in protest, the Liberator begins a 250 m.p.h. power dive. George is caught off guard and crashes against the fuselage, losing his headphones and slamming back to the deck.



Dazed, leaning against the angled, vibrating deck, George knows he was about to die, knew it more than his own name. Suddenly, George feels the 4Y making a groaning, life-saving recovery.



4 George peeks out the port and, incredibly, he sees palm trees whipping past. The PB-4Y is just 50 feet above the lagoon—a low that the engine vortex is sucking water off the surface. He stands up and damps his headphones on light. The power dive caught the Zeros off guard, but everyone knows the lumbering 4Y can't outrun the nimble Zeros. The attack will soon begin.

5 Impressed by the tailgunner's accuracy, the Zeros fly past the 4Y to attack head-on. George fires his 50 at targets visible for only seconds. The Zeros start riddling the swaying 4Y. Metal tears off, rivets whine. Machine guns rattle in a ceaseless symphony of sound. Smoke angers. Gray sends a distress call, "May Day! We are under attack."



6 To bring more fire power toward the front, Gray wears the crew he is going to try the "tail-up maneuver." The nose dips, allowing the top twin-50s better aim at the attacking Zeros. This maneuver calls for deft flying. As the nose dips, George is bounced up and down in the back of the plane. It feels like riding a lurching bronco. The Zeros press the attack. After a particularly violent dip, George is thrown to the deck just as a torrent of 20 mm shells rip through the plane. The PB-4Y shudders. George sees a bullet hole in the bulkhead right where he had been standing; the bullet would have exploded his head like a ripe watermelon.

7 Laying on the deck, George hears screaming, cursing. Flesh tipping from bone. Pilot, co-pilot, navigator get hit; their red blood splashes against the gray-green sides of the tormented plane. Crew chief Poppy Gaudle grabs the yoke, while Gray stems the bleeding from his left arm. The navigator grabs his head. The co-pilot is ripped from chest to leg. George hears, "Skipper's been hit." He wonders if he should bother to get up and return to his gun. Is this it? Will he never return to his young wife?



8 But the powerful and tough Liberator carries a sting of its own and the Zeros are taking a brutal beating. Smoke plumes from severed fighters. With Poppy Gaudle holding it level, the throttle to the firewall, the 4Y roars toward Guadalcanal. Once again Gray's call goes out, "May Day! May Day! Need assistance." Finally his answer, "F-4s have scrambled, are reaching your position." And then on the horizon appears Henderson Field and the formidable sight of a squadron of F-4 Hellcats. The Zeros break off the attack, running from the fierce F-4s. Out of nine, three Zeros are confirmed down.



9 "Skipper, the landing gear's hydraulics are out and the nose wheel won't come down." "Use the hand crank, Poppy." The cries of the wounded fill the plane and then Poppy says, "Skipper, the wheels come down only part way, it won't lock. It won't hold on touchdown." "PB-4Y, Henderson Field, be advised your nose gear is not down, repeat not down... go around... repeat, break off landing and go around." "Negative Henderson, we have wounded on board, must land immediately." Seconds later Gray addresses the crew, "Boys, we're taking it down, prepare for crash landing." Dropping toward the field, the PB-4Y comes in low and slow... 100 feet, 50 feet, 20, 10... George feels the softest touchdown he can ever remember, the wheels kissing that metal runway like a body's cheek. Then the nose drops. 33 Sharp Sparks fly as the nose bounces along the metal gutting. Crashes the scorching swell of metal on metal. Bill George's son. The Liberator tips slowly out of control, slides toward a coconut grove... it goes to hell... then comes to rest in the weeds. An ambulance races toward the plane. As George sits, breathing heavily in the hot muggy sunshine, he has one overwhelming thought: I'm in the war now!



POSTSCRIPT: Within two months Gordon Gray was back flying Liberator. George always recalled that a moment long with soaring wings and his young wife's face. Gray married Poppy in December just along the rest of their lives in the Solomons. From the 1940s, George Brown and Gordon Gray lived again at Santa Ana, California, where they both regularly attend the same church. That particular PB-4Y now again, but not only the Marines put a 375 horsepower in the nose—the 4Y's engine is the most powerful of attacking Zeros.

The artist would like to thank Don's Mints for their valuable help.

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Drawn by Scott Brown
Son of George Brown (Photo LAB)