

A GRIZZLY from the CORAL SEA

By Tom Lea

For one man in the wartime Pacific, a grizzly bear was big medicine.

Combat artist Tom Lea spent 66 days on the USS Hornet (CV-8) off Guadalcanal in the fall of 1942 on assignment for LIFE magazine. He left her just days before she was lost on 26 October in the Battle of the Santa Cruz Islands. In 1943, by then on assignment in China, Lea reminisced about the carrier and her crew with Darrell “Berry” Berrigan, the Associated Press correspondent in Chungking. Following is part of Lea’s reflections.



The Chinese-American Institute of Cultural Relations seemed rather mellow. Berry was wiping up the last of the gravy with his latest french fry when he asked, “What about that trick four bits again? You a coin collector?”

“Nope. But I think a lot of this one. It’s my lucky piece.”

“I never saw one before.”

“It’s a grizzly from the Coral Sea.”

“How do you mean? It’s a California commemorative half dollar.”

“It’s a silver bear I carry in my pocket, and California has nothing to do with it.”

Berry was a nice guy. He didn’t say “Roger.” He just grinned and said, “Please go on.”

It was right after the *Hornet* (CV-8) boys had hit Bougainville. We ran up close one rainy October morning and caught the Japs with their pants and anchors down. It was tense and touchy those days. The Marines on Guadalcanal were getting kicked around, and the Navy was having no picnic.

In the middle of September when we joined the *Wasp* [CV-7] force hoping for a crack at the Jap carrier forces farther north, the Japs very neatly caught us with a submarine attack. There were torpedoes all over the ocean that afternoon. When the smoke had cleared, the *Hornet* was the only U.S. carrier left fighting in the whole Pacific. [A Japanese submarine missed the *Hornet* but sank the *Wasp* on 15 September 1942.]

Our admiral and our skipper were taking big chances right in the Japs’ teeth, and in doing that risking our only carrier, our only movable airport, desperately needed in the Solomons deal. A radical change of course in the middle of the night brought sound sleepers right out of their bunks with flashlights and shoes in their heavy hands.

All 24 hours of the day before the one I’m going to talk about we had been at General Quarters. Lunch in the wardroom was a luxury after the long GQ, but the atmosphere was hardly one of genial relaxation. Eddie Harp, the chaplain, sat next to me. I said, “Eddie if I ever hit a beach again the first thing I’m going to do is get plastered.” He looked owlish through his glasses and answered, “You have my ecclesiastical sanction.”

Across the table sat Herbert Jackson, communications, a strictly professional lieutenant commander, Annapolis, ’29; but also strictly a warm and humane man. Something like you, Berry. That’s why I’m telling you about the bear. [Lieutenant Commander Edward B. Harp Jr., was in fact the ship’s chaplain, but “Herb Jackson, Annapolis ’29” was actu-

ally Lieutenant Commander Oscar Dodson, Annapolis ’27, the *Hornet*’s communications officer, who had helped Lea and *LIFE* correspondent John Hersey adjust to the ship’s routine. For some reason, Lea changed his name in the story, although he used actual names, with a second major exception, for most of the others he mentioned.]

Herb’s Coins

Herb had a round face and a good-humored eye. He was filling a certain conversational void with a disagreeable subject, which was the long lack of mail. “All I got in the last mail,” he was saying, “was a coin catalogue. Interesting, but damn impersonal. Say, when are you coming down to see those coins I have?” he suddenly asked me.

“Anytime you say. Herb, the *Hornet* is a hell of a place to store valuable coins if I may say so,” I said. “If I’m going to see them, I just might ought to hurry some.”

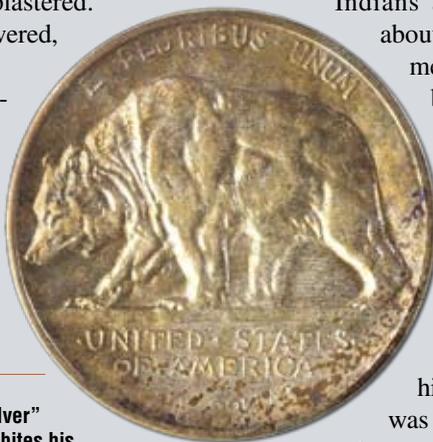
To which Herb answered: “Let’s knock off after we’re through eating. I’ll break them out—like to look at them again myself. Of course I haven’t got my real collection aboard here. These are just some Greek and Roman pieces I wanted to study when we left Norfolk.”

The wardroom was emptying when I followed Jackson down the passageway to his room. He initialed some flimsies [carbon copies of messages on thin, tissue-like paper, hence the name “flimsy”] on the board by his door, telephoned radio central, and then unlocked his metal desk drawer and brought out a nice mahogany box. Opened, it had little black velvet trays in it, and the coins were sitting in little black velvety wells cut to their various sizes.

I don’t know anything about coins, but some of them were beautiful. Herb handled them and named them for me. The way he held them in his hand I knew what he thought of them. There were some little gold and silver pieces with horses and chariots. Herb was partial to the ones with galleys, triremes. But I liked the little owls from Athens. They were wonderful. Professor Jackson explained to me why Astarte had such big tits.

“These animals, Herb,” I told him, “the lucky signs on coins of Athens and Corinth, they remind me of the Indians at home. Ever know anything about Indian medicine, fetishes in the medicine bag?” Herb was a Texan, but he was a town and farm boy from around Waco and he said he didn’t know a thing about Indians or chousing cows or West of the Pecos.

“Well,” I said, “every Indian warrior carried an animal fetish in his medicine bag, a part or a symbol of the animal that was his secret medicine, his power, that was revealed to him during the lonely dreams of his novitiate fasting. That animal was connected with his power in this life and the next. It represented a warrior’s potency to cope



TOM LEA; COURTESY OF THE U.S. ARMY CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY/COURTESY ADAIR MARGO GALLERY

DEFENDING THE SHIP Fighter pilot Lieutenant A. C. “Silver” Emerson, executive officer of Fighter Squadron (VF)-72, bites his lip as he bears down on a Japanese aircraft threatening the *Hornet*. Tom Lea called his California half-dollar (right) from Lieutenant Commander Oscar Dodson his “Grizzly from the Coral Sea.”



FRIENDS IN WARTIME Combat artist Lea (left) and *LIFE* magazine correspondent John Hersey (right), who later won the Pulitzer Prize, became good friends with Dodson, the carrier's communications officer.

COURTESY OF JAMES LEA

with the mysteries of life, of war, of nature, of death. Sometimes I wish I'd been an Indian in the great days with horses on the plains. When I was a kid I dreamed of it. And you know, I even knew, always, my medicine animal if I'd been an Indian."

Battle Stations!

I let him ask me what it would be, and I had just opened my mouth to say when the boatswain's pipe screeched through the loudspeaker in the passageway, and the boatswain's mate of the watch rasped, and the tone of his voice was not routine: "General Quarters! General Quarters! All Hands! Man Your Battle Stations!" and the general alarm screamed its penetrating sonic scream.

Herb slapped shut the mahogany box, jammed it in the desk drawer, locked it, grabbed his life jacket and tin hat, and I said, "See you later!" I had to run about 40 yards of crooked passageway and up two decks to my room for my gear and my sketch books and then climb more than 80 steps on narrow crowded ladders to the signal bridge before the bulkheads locked me in. Brother, I was in a hurry.

A General Quarters like that is something on a carrier expecting trouble. There's nothing funny about guys hurrying to stations carrying their gear and maybe stuffing into a pocket what they have figured they will take with them over the side. You can hear more than 2,000 pairs of feet pounding the iron decks and ladders, going to the places they'll be when something happens, while the ship heels over on 50-dollar turns changing course. You can hear the big bulkhead doors banging shut and being dogged down and the damage control boys slamming their long wrenches to valves on the lines.

Topside, the airdales on the flight deck are running and pushing their hearts out getting the Wildcats aft ready to launch immediately to augment the combat air patrol. The gunners are loosening up their guns, wiggling them like stubby fingers across their full traverses. Up in the

island, the air officer puts on his iron hat without taking his eyes from his study of the flight log. The captain steps from the wheelhouse chewing an unlighted cigar while a boatswain shuts the battle ports. In the charthouse the old chief quartermaster stows his own private knotted emergency line behind a handy transom, ready for going over the side. "These may be tough times, sonny."

All around the carrier the cruisers and cans are closing in, forming the emergency protective screen, ready for the circling war dance around their queen. Starting-cartridges pop at the command "Start engines!" on the flight deck, where the fighters' propellers begin to turn with a roar and the carrier turns into the wind to launch them.

And up on the signal bridge where my station was, in the whistling wind at the top of the island, the signalmen, quick-change artists, are going nuts with their popping flags in the windy sunlight and their click-clacking shutters on the signal lamps. The admiral is talking to his ships.

Well, the Japs didn't come in on the *Hornet*. They knew all about us, too. There was plenty of time for them to use a radio before our fighters knocked down a two-engine snoopster back on our port quarter. We saw it explode in midair with one of those bright pink flashes. When it hit the water it sent up a long column of brown smoke over our fantail. [Lieutenant A. C.] "Silver" Emerson knocked another one down a few minutes later. I did a portrait of Silver. He's dead now. [See sidebar]

The old man kept the *Hornet* buttoned up, and us at our stations. It gets tedious as hell standing around on an iron deck with a let-down feeling. I think adrenalin gives you a kind of hangover.

Doughnuts and Coffee

About 1730 the bomb elevators opened up from the flight deck and we could see the mess boys down there handing up the buckets of doughnuts and coffee for everybody topside. The chief signalman sent two boys down for our share, and they came up with our supper, smoking coffee that put curly hair on your teeth, and damp doughnuts.

Word passed that the ship would stay buttoned up all night, and we groaned and kissed goodbye any thoughts of our nice soft sacks below decks.

I never saw anything like the sunset that night. The sea was almost flat calm, but the sky was banked high with



A Man Named Silver

“Silver” Emerson was the executive officer of Fighter Squadron (VF)-72, which was part of the *Hornet*’s air group. He was lost on 4 February 1943 the day after the squadron arrived on Guadalcanal while leading a strike against Japanese destroyers coming down “the Slot.”

After seeing Tom Lea’s painting of Emerson on the cover of the April 1995 issue of the Naval Institute’s *Naval History* magazine, Claude R. Phillips Jr., a squadron mate, wrote a letter to the editor that was published on page 3 of the magazine’s June 1995 issue: “No one in the strike group saw Al go down. It was our best guess that he took a direct hit from one of the destroyers’ AA fire. There was a swarm of Zeros around, but Al was too good a pilot to be caught from behind. His charisma was evidenced by reason of Tom Lea having selected him for a portrait out of all our squadron pilots. It was a terrible shock to all of us in VF-72, because Silver was surely the most competent pilot in our squadron. . . . Seeing the cover picture flushed memories that lay dormant or suppressed these many, many years along with wonder of why it all had to be so.”

—Lieutenant Colonel Brendan Greeley Jr., USMC (Ret.)

LIEUTENANT “SILVER” EMERSON Lea made this portrait of A. C. Emerson and a ready-room sketch of Silver (second from right) describing how he brought down a Mitsubishi.

thunderheads and low curtains of rain. The color of the sunset was the most intense I have ever seen. And it was in reverse. Instead of a dark sea and colored sky; it was the other way around. The sky was a brooding purple like a bruise, and the ocean a bloody red. The red bounced up and fired our faces against the dark sky. There was something eerie about that sea of blood.

Herb Jackson came topside from radio central to see how his signalmen were, and we stood there and watched the bloody sea turn to ink. Suddenly in the west I spotted the new horned moon, a thin fingernail of fire.

“New moon, Herb,” I said. He was facing aft on the starboard side and when he looked out abeam he saw the moon over his left shoulder. It was the last new moon he ever saw from the *Hornet*. At that moment, I think he knew it.

“I don’t like what’s coming in to the coding room,” he said. “I didn’t like that this afternoon, either. Things aren’t shaping the best way. It looks like the Japs are getting ready to send their heavy stuff down to Guadalcanal.”

“You mean they’re at last bringing out their carriers for a slugfest with us?” I asked.

“Hell no—I wish they were. No, I’m talking about battleships and heavy cruisers. I can’t figure their carrier plays. Apparently they are waiting for something. The Marines are taking a pasting meantime. Our carrier has got to put in more licks. But I don’t see how we can hit those battlewagons and cruisers without putting the *Hornet’s* tail in a crack. Oh well.”

Herb went on, “Hello, Puck [Lieutenant Puck Pucket]. Say, those were soggy doughnuts you gave us tonight, Mr. Mess Caterer.”

“I know it, Mr. Jackson,” said Puck. “We baked 10,000 of them last night, just in case. They weren’t very good, but at least we had something on hand when this came up this afternoon.”

“I know it. I’m just kidding,” Herb said. “When are you going to have us some fried chicken and ice cream?”

“Well sir we’re really going to have some on the 21st [October 1942] Birthday party. It seems like a lot longer than that since we were at Norfolk on Commissioning Day, doesn’t it, Mr. Jackson?” [The *Hornet* had been commissioned just one year earlier, Captain Marc Mitscher commanding. Mitscher was selected for admiral just before the Battle of Midway and relinquished command to Captain Charles Mason after the battle.]

“It does, Puck—well—that chicken and ice cream will be something. Will we have a birthday cake?”

“Yes, sir, with one little pink candle.”

Lieutenant Pucket, being mess caterer and in the paymaster’s department, didn’t have specific battle duties. He could pick his own station, and he had chosen the signal bridge so he could always see what was going on—like I had. Puck had a fine mind and a warm heart. He was good company even when your feet hurt at General Quarters.

“You boys going to make yourselves comfortable on the bridge tonight?” asked Jackson, and without waiting for an answer added, “See you later when my desk is clean.”

So the sun went down and the clouds began to clear to show the stars, the strange stars I never saw when I looked up from a bedroll in the Bosque Redondo by the Rio Grande. Puck and I didn’t say much. We leaned against



THE SIGNAL BRIDGE Lea called this piece “Shape against the Sky” (see figures on the sponson at lower center). It was the battle station for Lea, Hersey, and Dodson. Their friend, Puck, the mess caterer, often joined them there when the carrier was at General Quarters.

TOM LEA, COURTESY OF THE U.S. ARMY CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY



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THE QUICK-CHANGE ARTISTS At General Quarters, “the signalmen are going nuts with their popping flags in the windy sunshine,” Lea wrote. “The Admiral is talking to his ships.”

the iron splinter-shield on the gun-director platform, and felt the dark sea, and the sky, and the war.

An hour later, when Herb Jackson reappeared up the dark ladder from the navigation bridge, he joined us quietly and we just stood there against the damp iron, looking into the darkness. Down on the flight deck we could make out the sprawling shapes of the tired airdales, sleeping on their lifejackets by the planes. Not far from where we stood, the signalmen were huddled on the step just forward of the flag bags, talking in low slow voices. There was a hush over everything that seemed to give the huge dark *Hornet* a mysterious destination.

Far below, the black water seethed as it slid past. On that leg of her zigzag course the *Hornet* was running be-

“PUCK” WAS “QUACKIE” Perhaps because he was killed, the name of John M. “Quackie” Quackenbush—here, as a University of Washington Naval ROTC Midshipman—appears as “Puck” Pucket in Lea’s story. Quackie died after a Japanese aircraft crashed into the carrier’s signal bridge in the Battle of Santa Cruz on 26 October 1942. Dodson survived because he had been standing behind one of the mast’s tripod legs. Lea and Hersey had both left the ship before the battle and would clearly have been in the line of attack.

The Real Puck

Oscar Dodson survived the attack that sank the *Hornet*, and wrote Lea on 22 November that the “mess caterer” was lost in the attack. A letter from John Hersey to Lea on 20 December, however, saying “Quackie was killed . . . standing where we used to stand when a Jap plane dove into the signal bridge,” and further relating elements of a conversation in Oscar Dodson’s stateroom with Dodson, Hersey, Lea and “Quackie” present, provided the first real indication that “Puck” Pucket might not be a real name. Hersey, a *LIFE* correspondent who later won a Pulitzer Prize, had been assigned to the *Hornet* along with Lea.

But who was “Quackie?” I am indebted to the war memoirs of George Francis, found on the *Hornet* Web site, for providing the answer. Francis, who was on board the *Hornet* as a member of VF-8 during the battle, wrote: “One of the two suicide planes hit the island of the ship, killing Lt. Quackenbush, the ship’s supply officer. . . .” That Quackenbush was the ship’s supply officer means he would have been the “mess caterer.” Lea’s use of alliteration in the choice of a nickname taken from the first syllable of the character’s last name “Puck” Pucket for “Quacky” Quackenbush seemed too coincidental not to be true, and records at the Naval Historical Center confirm that Lieutenant (j.g.) J. M. Quackenbush was the ship’s assistant supply officer. All of which leads to the conclusion that Lea substituted the name Pucket for Quackenbush, just as he substituted Jackson for Dodson. [See War Memoirs of George Francis at <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/ships/dafs/CV/cv8-Francis.html>.]

—Lieutenant Colonel Brendan Greeley Jr., USMC (Ret.)



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fore the wind and it made the air strangely still. Stack gas hung forward of the stack and made us cough. The great black ship moved only to the vibration of her screws—there was not the slightest pitch or roll to the invisible sea. The black shapes of war, the metal rigging and superstructures, seemed unfamiliar against the unfamiliar stars in the clearing sky.

Grizzly Medicine

“You haven’t told me yet what animal you’d be carrying in your sea bag if you were a Sioux sailor,” said Herb.

“A grizzly. A grizzly bear from up near the timberline would be my medicine. Getting back to those coins, Herb, is there one with a bear on it?”

“Oh, there must be. Yes, I remember. There is. Of course the bear was the strongest brute the Indians knew. Is that why he’s your medicine?”

“I don’t know. Maybe that’s the kind of medicine dream a mild and timid guy would always have. But it wasn’t just his brute force. Somehow he came to repre-

“No,” said Puck, “I’m a sailor. There’s really a kind of luck in your life to have something like that.”

“Maybe I like bears because of the picture over my bed at home when I was a little kid. It was a grizzly high on the rocks looking far out over a winding river where buffalo watered. When I was old enough to read, I found the picture was entitled, ‘Before the White Man Came.’ I remember waking up in the mornings and seeing that old grizzly standing watch. He was a friend.

“Again, maybe the reason I like a bear is because of Old Scarface, the grizzly hero of the stories my father used to make up for my brother Joe and me before we went to bed. There’ll never be anything as good as those stories in all my life again.”

The *Hornet* swung round on the other leg of her zig-zag. Suddenly the wind sang in the foretop, whipped our clothes against us, carried the stack gas aft, seemed even to brighten the stars. The Southern Cross stood high and dead ahead.

“Gentlemen, we are under unfamiliar stars,” I said. “So far from home we cannot see the greatest bear of all, Ursa Major of the northern sky.”

It turned out that my destination was different from Herb’s and different from Puck’s. The next two weeks were rough and tough. The Japs brought their heavy stuff down to Guadalcanal and damn near blew the Marines off the beach. *Hornet* planes were about the only thing the United States had in the air over the Solomons for a day or two. Admiral [Norman] Scott took his cruisers in one night—that was the Battle of Cape Esperance [11-12 October] that saved the Solomons for us—and the Japs got hurt and toned down some.

No More Waiting

Radio Tokyo was blabbing how the Imperial Navy had been given orders to get the *Hornet*, but they wouldn’t bring their carriers down, and the land-based stuff never got together for a full dress job on us. So we pulled out a little south to fuel. It looked like the *Hornet*, according to the dope the skipper and the admiral would give me, was in

for some more waiting before the Japs tangled again. My drawings were done, I wasn’t making a career of the *Hornet* (I’d been on her more than two months), so I decided to leave her. I had no way in this world of knowing that very moment the Japs were assembling four carrier task forces for a showdown with the *Hornet*.



THREE KINDRED SPIRITS Lea snapped this photo of *Time-LIFE* correspondent Theodore H. White (left), who went on to be the first great chronicler of presidential campaigns, and Associated Press correspondent “Berry” Berrigan in Chungking, using a camera given to him by photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White.

sent the things I feel about the country where I was born. The grizzly was the flesh and warm blood, the counterpart in creatures to old Mount Franklin, the stone-sided mountain at home . . . tonight I’d like to see a grizzly bear. Just the sight of a grizzly bear would be good for this. Sounds nuts to you and Puck. War happy.”



HORNET IS GONE Lea found out about the fate of the carrier he had been on for 66 days from Admiral Chester W. Nimitz at Pearl Harbor. As the two were looking at this bow-on view of the ship, Nimitz told Lea, “Something has happened to the *Hornet*.”

I was in the wardroom for the birthday party. The thin fingernail of a moon Herb Jackson saw over his left shoulder had waxed, grown full, and begun to wane that morning just before dawn when I stood on the bridge of another ship and watched the *Hornet* with her birds sleeping peacefully on her moonlit deck move out into the darkness. [Lea left the *Hornet* late on the night of 21 October 1942, by high-line to the fleet oiler USS *Guadalupe* (AO-32). He wrote later that he stood on the oiler’s deck watching the *Hornet* pull away until she disappeared from sight.]

Back at Pearl Harbor after a series of hitch-hikes, and some of them misbegotten, too, I was standing by Admiral [Chester W.] Nimitz’ desk showing him my drawings and he came to the one of the *Hornet* at dawn. Underneath I had inscribed a quotation from Deuteronomy, 8th chapter, 20th verse: “Moreover the Lord thy God shall send the hornet among them, until they that are left, and hide themselves from thee, be destroyed.”

‘Something Has Happened’

Admiral Nimitz looked a long time, then turned his head and said “Something has happened to the *Hornet*.” That’s how I found out.

When I got home Mount Franklin was still there. I remember standing by the window at sundown staring at a last summer’s bird nest in the top of a leafless tree, wishing for a day to spend thinking about the bird that built that nest, about the sky it lived in, and how the leaves were in the summertime. But the next morning, of course, I was painting the *Hornet*.

Not long after I got home the postman delivered a heavy envelope. Outside was the mailing sticker of a coin dealer in New York. Inside was the silver bear. Nothing else.

It was from Herb Jackson. Puck had been killed on the signal bridge about ten feet from where we talked about the bear. [The officer Lea refers to as Lieutenant “Puck” Pucket was actually Lieutenant John McDermott “Quackie” Quackenbush, the ship’s supply officer; see sidebar]

“The hot China tea has vanquished the hot China wine,” Berry was saying, “Goddam you. I wish I had a bear and a mountain.” ❄️

Lea’s story has been abridged and excerpted from *The Two Thousand Yard Stare: Tom Lea’s World War II*, edited and with introductions by Lieutenant Colonel Brendan Greeley Jr., U.S. Marine Corps (Retired), to be published by the Texas A&M University Press in October.