



## Grim Reaper Diplomacy

*From "The Grim Reapers" by Lawrence Cortesi*  
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**1st Lt. Bob Strickland was highest ranking officer left in 3rd B.G. when USAAF stripped the Reapers of all Rank. Strickland took the 3rd overseas in Jan. 1942**

In 1930, the 3rd Attack Group designed its informal insignia, the famed white skeleton holding a blood tipped yellow reaper. With the insignia also came a new vernacular—the Grim Reapers. (Ed: This of course came from the 13th Aero Squadron, first designed in 1918 by Lt. Earle Richards and later approved by the War Department on 14 February 1924.)

On 7 December 1941, the men of the 3rd Attack Group were shocked when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. "Everybody was tight," 1st Lt. Bob Strickland said, "especially when we heard that the Japanese were making amphibious landings all over the Pacific on one island after another. We had been trained to attack such amphibious landing craft. So, we expected to be among the first air groups to leave for combat in the Pacific."

However, instead of moving overseas, the 3rd endured six weeks of confusion. The Army Air Force pulled Lt. Col. Melville and every other ranking officer

out of the group and reassigned them throughout the country to train new air units. By mid-January, Strickland, a 1st Lieutenant, found himself in command of the 3rd. His squadron commanders were of equally low rank: 1st Lt. Virgil Schwab, 8th; 2nd Lt. William Orr, 13th; 1st Lt. Don Hall, 89th; and 1st Lt. Bennett Wilson, 90th. The Reapers were probably the only air group in the world with no officer above the rank of 1st lieutenant.

The 3rd Group's personnel left Hunter Field (Savannah Ga.) for overseas on 12 January 1942—minus their planes. "They need them here for training," some Air Force underling in Washington told Strickland. "But you'll have new A-20's waiting for you in Australia by the time you get there."

However, the 3rd Group complement arrived safely in Brisbane on 25 February 1942, the first new U.S. air unit to reach the Down Under continent. But, they saw little of Brisbane, as army trucks whisked the airmen from the docks during the dead of night to the Ascot Race Track outside the city. Strickland and his airmen were dumped on the green inside the oval, where they pitched canvas tents to live in.

The Grim Reapers found neither planes nor equipment waiting for them and the airmen lolled impatiently at their improvised camp. When Strickland phoned Far East Air Force (FEAF) headquarters in Melbourne to inquire about his planes, FEAF gave him an encouraging response: "The 3rd will be getting B-25's, Lieutenant, and they are on their way." But, no planes arrived. Instead, the AAF transferred the group by train from Ascot to Charters Towers, 420 miles north of Brisbane. As the group departed, an aide at FEAF made Strickland a glowing promise: "Charters Towers is a beautiful new airfield and your Mitchells will arrive there shortly after you do."

For two weeks, the group waited for their planes and Strickland finally phoned Melbourne to ask about the long promised aircraft. This time he got a shocking reply.

"Lieutenant, nobody knows anything about your planes. When and if your B-25's reach Australia, we'll let you know."

The 3rd Group personnel were stunned. Was this the



end result for the descendants of World War I heros?

Grounded on a desolate plain in Northern Australia with only wind and dust as company? A combat air unit in name only? After 20 years of training, had the Grim Reapers crossed the ocean to wallow in idleness, while the Japanese swept through the Pacific? Bob Strickland cursed; without planes or equipment and without the prospect of action, the morale of his men would disappear.

During the first three weeks at Charters Towers, with no aircraft or equipment, the men occupied themselves by scrounging for lumber to put wooden floors in their four man tents; or they built frame structures to replace the pole tents for their operations, and orderly rooms. However, this work soon grew monotonous. The men wanted to fly. Strickland, meanwhile, continually phoned FEAF headquarters, pleading for some aircraft. But, he always received the same disconcerting answer:

"Maybe next week."

Each passing day increased the frustration. They knew the Americans had been overwhelmed in the Philippines, in the East Indies and in Java. They had also heard that Japanese troops had overrun New Britain, parts of the Solomons, and most of New Guinea, the large tropical island across the Coral Sea from northern Australia. The enemy, under the command of General Huroyoshi Hyakutake, had also occupied Lae and Salamaua, less than 200 air miles from Port Moresby, the last Allied base above Australia. If Moresby fell, the Down Under continent itself would be exposed to Japanese attack.

But still, no planes for the 3rd or for the 22nd and 43rd Bomb Groups whose personnel had also reached Australia and sat idle at their airfields.

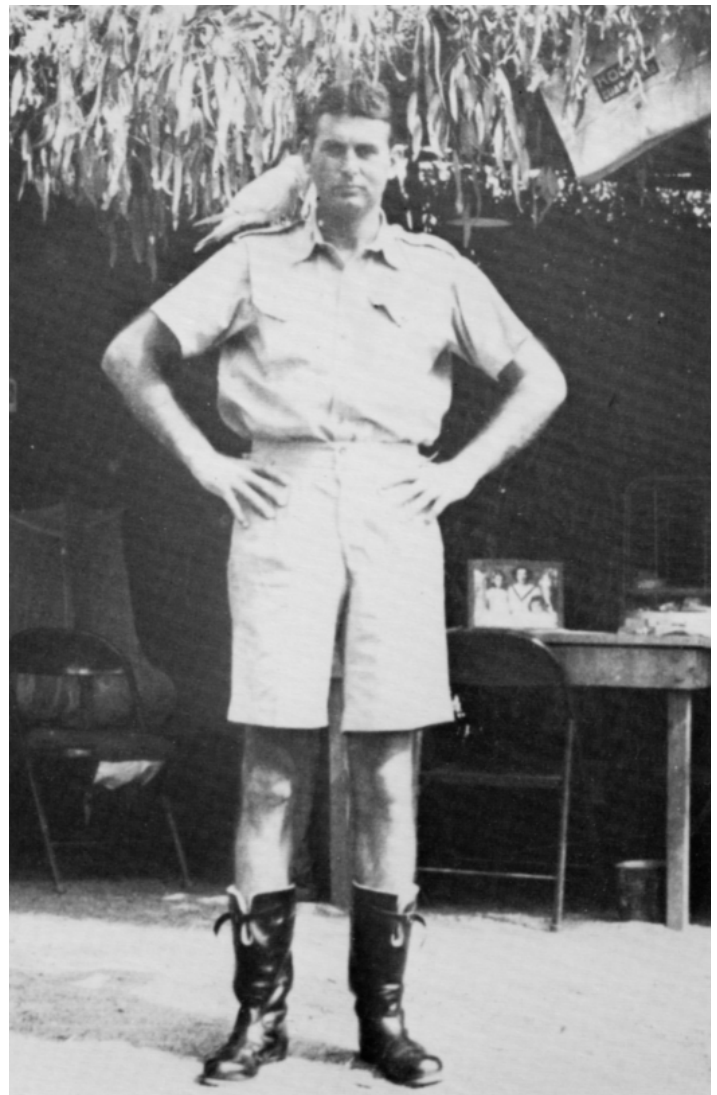
Finally, on 25 March 1942, 42 officers and 62 enlisted men arrived at Charters Towers with shopworn A-24 dive bombers. The newly arrived men and aircraft were the remnants of the 27th Bomb Group that had suffered near annihilation during the early fighting in the East Indies. Under USAFIA SO 18, these newcomers had been assigned to the 3rd Bombardment Group (L).

The 27th had arrived in the Philippines without aircraft in November of 1941 and when war broke out the personnel had been evacuated to Java where they finally obtained Douglas A-24's to begin operations against the Japanese. However, by March of 1942 the Allies had lost the Indies, forcing American and Australian forces to retreat into Australia. General

George Brett, commander of FEAF, had placed surviving U.S. airmen into the air units that had recently arrived from the States. He assigned Lt. Col. John Davies and his 27th Group stragglers to the 3rd, designating "Big Jim" Davies the new group commander.

The men at Charters Towers viewed these strangers with a sense of awe, for Davies and his flyers had seen extensive combat under the worst conditions fighting with few planes, many of them obsolete, against extremely heavy odds.

Davies was a big man, tall and muscular, with a ramrod straight posture, deep set blue eyes, and a granite face. His very physical appearance drew respect from other men. Even Davies' soft monotone voice carried an air of authority and confidence. Further, the airmen of the 3rd would find Davies' dedication, courage, and



**Col. John "Big Jim" Davies took command 1 April '42, and turned the 3rd into the most menacing air unit the Japanese had seen in the SWPA.**



audacity even more dazzling than his physical appearance.

Big Jim, from Piedmont, California, had graduated from the University of California in 1928 and he had joined the USAAF as a cadet pilot. He had served air units, including the 3rd, and by mid 1941, had risen to the rank of major. In November, he became commander of the 27th Group and led the unit to the Philippines. The group had suffered agony during the early months of the war because of the overwhelming enemy opposition.

Now Big Jim had returned to the 3rd, the unit that had taught him tactical low level air attack techniques.

Davies did not officially become the 3rd Group commander until 2 April, but as soon as he arrived at Charters Towers, he called his officers into conference. "I don't want anybody to think I have ill feelings towards any of you newcomers from the States. But, I feel that the experienced personnel should assume leadership positions. I'm therefore assigning Captain Floyd Roberts as commander of the 8th Squadron and allotting him the A-24's. Captain Herman Lowery will command the 13th, Captain Roland Hubbard the 90th, and Lt. Hall will remain in command of the 89th. As soon as our B-25's arrive, they'll be assigned to the squadrons with no aircraft,"

Strickland and the others said nothing. If they were disappointed in losing commands, they also recognized Davies's logic in placing combat tested veterans into leadership jobs. Davies did ask Strickland to accept the position as group executive officer, since the lieutenant knew the men of the 3rd quite well, and he could offer valuable assistance to Davies. Strickland agreed.

"I'll notify FEAF Headquarters to put through your promotion to captain immediately," Davies consoled Strickland.

Among those who arrived at Charters Towers with the 27th Group was a maverick from the old Fifth Bomber Command, Captain Paul "Pappy" Gunn. He had been known to confiscate supplies without permission, to fly combat without orders, and to engage in other unauthorized activities. But, Gunn was so adept at repairing planes that higher ups had overlooked many of his shenanigans. At age 44, Gunn was probably the oldest active combat pilot in the area.

Pappy Gunn would become a household word in the Pacific, earning the name Mad Professor for his antics and innovations that helped to reverse the Allied fortunes during the Papuan campaign. Pappy had operated a

commercial airline in the Philippines, but his business had collapsed with the Japanese invasion of Luzon. His wife and four children had been captured and interned by the enemy, but Gunn had escaped. Because of his flying experience and his ability to service aircraft, the USAAF had given Gunn a spot commission as captain.

When the Japanese overran the Philippines, Gunn escaped and joined the 27th in Java. Here, he flew combat missions for Big Jim Davies, who had been desperate for pilots during the East Indies campaign, and who had not worried about Gunn's age, so long as he could fly and drop bombs.

On 27 March, a few days after Davies took over the Reapers, Gunn came into Big Jim's office and grinned. "Johnny, there's a couple dozen B-25's at Batchelor Field in Melbourne."

Davies was surprised and asked if the executive officer had heard anything. Strickland shook his head. He had not heard of any aircraft reaching Australia for consignment to the 3rd Bomb Group. Davies then turned to Gunn with a frown.

"They aren't exactly ours," Gunn said. "I think they've been allocated to the Dutch Air Force, but from what I hear, they'll never use them because they have no pilots. The planes are just sitting there, and we've got a war to fight. Why don't we go down and get them."

Davies grinned. "You mean steal them?"

"They said our planes were on the way," Gunn shrugged. "Who's to say those Mitchells aren't ours?" He leaned close to Davies. "Go see Eubank; he's a friend of yours. Tell him your planes are at Batchelor Field and you'd like an authorization to pick them up."

"You're crazy, Pappy," Davies said.

"All I know--those Aussies could sure use aerial help up in New Guinea. We could give them plenty with 24 Mitchells."

Davies flew immediately to FEAF ADVON headquarters in Brisbane to see General Eugene Eubank who had been a Philippines acquaintance of Davies when Eubank commanded V Bomber Command. Eubank welcomed Davies' visit until he learned the colonel's mission.

"If you give me an authorization," Davies said, "I'll take a load of pilots down there to pick up the planes. Gunn says he can have them ready for combat right away."

If I'm not mistaken," Eubank said, "those Mitchells are consigned to the Dutch."



"They said our planes were on the way," Davies said. "It wouldn't be your fault if we picked up the wrong planes; if we mistook those B-25's for the planes Washington promised us."

Eubank pursed his lips. "I don't know; that wouldn't be by the book."

"When did we start going by the book?" Davies asked, as he leaned closer to the general. "We could do an awful lot of damage up in New Guinea with those ships."

Eubank grinned again. "What've we got to lose except our necks, and we won't have those anyway if those Nips keep coming on the way they are."

After the 3rd Group commander got the authorization, he flew quickly back to Charters Towers. He rounded up 24 pilots, including himself, Pappy Gunn, and Bob Strickland. When the mail plane landed, Big Jim and his airmen were waiting on the field. After service crews unloaded the cargo, and while tankmen refueled the aircraft, Davies and his men climbed aboard. When the pilot and co-pilot returned to the plane, they were surprised to see 24 pilots crammed inside.

"Colonel," the pilot asked Davies, "What's going on?"

"We're going to Melbourne to pick up our B-25's," Big Jim said. He showed the pilot the authorization from General Eubank.

"Okay," the transport pilot shrugged. "We'll be making a stop at Archer Field in Brisbane to refuel. We should reach Melbourne about 1700 hours this afternoon."

The C-47 then took off for the 900 mile trip to Batchelor Field, stopping briefly at Brisbane. By 1700 hours, the Gooney Bird was landing. Most of the Reapers had slept during the trip so they were well refreshed to fly the "hot" bombers back.

With a nonchalant air of authority, Davies presented his authorization to an American OD Officer at the field. The duty captain, like others around the base, knew little of high level decisions concerning allotments, strategies, or operations. "I wondered who the hell owned these planes," the officer said. "They've been sitting here a couple of weeks."

The captain did not question the authorization. In fact, he called an ordnance NCO to check the fuel supply and to warm up the planes. After a hot meal, the 3rd Group pilots boarded the B-25's. At 1830 hours, as the sun began setting below the Melbourne River, they took off. By 1900 hours, the last B-25 was droning northward.

Not until 2100 hours did somebody at Batchelor Field discover that an Air Corps Lt. Colonel had taken off with 24 unauthorized B-25's. The OD officer had talked about the incident in casual conversation during an evening bull session and he was overheard by two staff officers who knew the bombers had been consigned to the Dutch. Within a half hour, the shocked twosome were frantically making phone calls up and down the east coast of Australia to determine how Davies had shammed an authorization to pick up the planes.

Meanwhile, Davies stopped at Brisbane's Archer Field to refuel. But, before the 3rd Group pilots could take off, the base commander and a squad of MP's met them with fire in their eyes.

"Colonel, Sir," the major said, "I have orders from FEAF to hold these planes here in Brisbane and to detain you and your men. Your authorization is invalid and nobody can reach General Eubank to verify your orders."

"Major," Davies said, "I have a written authorization and you know that under AR regulations a signed order supercedes an oral one."

"Are you questioning General Eubank, Major?" Pappy Gunn suddenly blurted.

The base commander rolled his tongue around his lips.

"We need those planes, Major," Davies said soberly.

The base commander looked at the pilots in their cockpits wearing a mixture of apprehension and supplication on their faces. Davies' argument about the written authorization was a weak one, for the major had authority from FEAF VIP's. He squinted at the B-25's, their fuselages shaking from warming engines--like anxious greyhounds ready to pursue game.

"As soon as we get these planes to Charters," Pappy said, "we'll have them hitting Lae and Salamaua within a couple of days."

The major looked at the middle aged Mad Professor. "Are you Captain Gunn?"

"Yes."

The major grinned. He knew Pappy's reputation,

"Yes", he said, "I suppose you will have those planes ready in a couple of days."

"I guarantee it," Gunn said.

The major looked at Davies and sighed. "Okay, Colonel, I guess a written order does supercede an oral one," as he cocked his head and the MP's moved off.

Soon, the major stood on the field and watched the Mitchells soar into the sky. He ignored a clerk who had



rushed out to the field to tell him that FEAF wanted to know if the bombers had been held as requested. Not until the last B-25 had disappeared to the north, did the base commander return to his office to call an aide of General Brett himself.

"I'm sorry, Sir," the major told the FEAF officer, "we're too late. The planes have already taken off."

"What? You let them go off with those bombers?"

"Colonel Davies had a written authorization and he left before I could determine whether or not the authorization was valid."

"You idiot," the aide cried, "I'll have your ass."

"Yes Sir."

At 2400 hours, while a deep midnight darkness hung over Charters Towers, the drone of planes prompted the men of the 3rd Group to rush onto the air strip and ignite lights. Swiftly, the B-25's touched down on the runway and taxied to the far end of the strip, while waiting vehicles led them to the revetment areas. By 0100 hours, the pirated bombers had been safely tucked away and the lights snuffed out.

Grim Reaper ground crews hugged the clean olive green surfaces of the Mitchells, almost awed by the sight and smell of the new planes. Unlike the A-24's that Davies had brought originally, these bombers did not need service, new engines, new electrical equipment, armament systems, or extensive overhauls.

In Brisbane, meanwhile, the understanding major was already confined to quarters for possible court martial because he had allowed an air corps officer to abscond with 24 new aircraft without proper authorization.

The Dutch reacted furiously, demanding that FEAF return the planes at once. However, when a FEAF officer asked if they had pilots to fly the Mitchells back to Melbourne, the NEI officer was strangely mum for a moment. He then muttered, "The Americans took them and they should fly them back."

FEAF headquarters, meanwhile, sent a frantic message to Charters Towers: "Return 24 B-25's to Batchelor Field at once." But, 3rd Group clerks said they needed to check with Colonel Davies who, unfortunately, was unavailable at the moment. FEAF probers got similar blanks from ADVON FEAF in Brisbane. "Sorry, General Eubank is somewhere in the field." Thus, the Melbourne brass could only tell the Dutch that Air Force headquarters in Australia would form a board of inquiry to look into the matter.

Not until 24 hours later did somebody at FEAF finally reach General Eubank. Eubank pleaded ignorance. He had merely allowed Davies to pick up the allotted B-25's that had apparently arrived in Australia as promised by Washington. Eubank was not to blame if the report had been false and Davies had picked up the wrong aircraft.

The aide grumbled but a moment later, General Brett was on the phone. "Gene, we could have an international incident over this thing. The Dutch are furious and if they go to the state department, God only knows what'll happen. You'll need to get those planes back to Batchelor Field."

"I can't do that," Eubank said.

"What the hell do you mean, you can't?"

"Am I in charge of FEAF planning or not?" Eubank asked.

"Sure, but what's that got to do with it."

"The Nips are building up Lae and Salamaua, and I plan to hit those bases with these B-25's. We've already made arrangements to stage them out of Moresby."

"Goddam it, Gene," Brett growled, "they'll have my ass."

"If we can hurt those Japs, it'll be worth it."

"Okay," Brett sighed. "I'll go along."

Yet, the brazenness of the 3rd Group airmen had not ended. On the same 30 March day, Captain Gunn and his engineering crews readied the B-25's for combat, but discovered that the planes did not have bomb sights. The instruments were still in Brisbane. John Davies was shattered, but Pappy promised to get them. He flew at once to Batchelor Field.

With unmitigated boldness, Gunn walked into the Dutch supply building at the base and demanded the bomb sights for the B-25's. The Dutch, already infuriated, wondered how the Americans now had the audacity to ask for anything. The request was refused. The story then prevailed in Melbourne that Pappy Gunn aimed a tommy gun at the depot personnel and ordered them to give up the bomb sights or else. Whether or not Pappy actually made such a threat with a gun is mere rumor, but one thing is certain: Gunn returned to Charters Towers with the bomb sights for the B-25's.

