

Devil's Breath Volcano

Devil's Breath Volcano

**MacGregor Family
Adventure Series
Book Six**

a novel by

Richard Trout



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The entirety of this novel is a work of fiction and bears no resemblance to real people or events. The MacGregor teens perform daring deeds that should not be attempted by any minor without the advice and consent of an adult.



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*For
Steve, Margo, Evan, Angie,
&
Ethan Funk*

Great Kansans All!

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Prologue

South Pacific, March 1944



The two silver P-38 fighters had been on a reconnaissance mission for much longer than they had planned. As members of the 339th Fighter Squadron of the 347th Fighter Group, Thirteenth Air Force, they were deep in Japanese occupied territory in the South Pacific just north of the giant Japanese naval base at Rabaul. The flight from the U.S. air base on New Guinea to the site of the Japanese fleet was much farther than the U.S. Navy PBY Catalina had earlier reported. Even with two big Allison engines with a seven hundred-mile range, the P-38s had been extending their time over the Bismarck Sea, passing over New Ireland, a Japanese stronghold. Running low on fuel, they began to scan the seas for a flat atoll that was big enough to land where they could wait for refueling. Suddenly the skies erupted in puffs of black smoke with large bangs that rocked their aircraft.

Peering down through the clouds around them, they realized they had flown over a small fleet of Japanese cruisers, tankers, and troop ships steaming to the naval base at

Rabaul to reinforce the weary Imperial Japanese Army. The anti-aircraft guns on the ships began to hammer the clouds, hoping that a piece of shrapnel would luckily pierce a fuel tank and down the two American fighters.

"Shark's Leader Two, did you see that?"

"Roger, Outlaw. Guess we can't land down there right now," Shark's Leader Two replied.

"Roger, wait, I think I just got hit. I'm losing some oil out of the starboard engine. Yep, there goes the red light. Losing altitude," Outlaw said as he rolled the P-38 over on its side to drop out of the clouds and into full view of the Japanese ships below.

As he rolled, he looked to his right and saw an emerald green coral island to the south of the Japanese ships. Later he would learn that it was Simbari Island.

"I'm pointing her toward that island down there. Run some interference for me," Outlaw said.

"Roger, Outlaw. Maybe they'll retrain their guns my way," Shark's Leader Two said and banked the opposite direction.

Shark's Leader Two's P-38 did catch the attention of the small battle group, and they redirected their fire as Outlaw went into a dive. Lt. Gary Bridwell, U.S. Army Air Corps, could not believe his eyes when he leveled out at the same moment a Japanese heavy cruiser was clearing the end of the atoll. Bridwell flew his wounded plane right at it. Without hesitation, he dropped down to the deck, the surface of the ocean, and took aim at the ten thousand-ton cruiser *Kako Maru*. Just barely skimming the ocean waves, he came in head-on to the Japanese ship too low for her deck guns to sight in on him. As he engaged the trigger on his 20mm canon, he pulled up just enough to strafe the tower and shatter all of the windows in front of the Japanese naval command. Five of the officers were hit and dropped dead instantly with the others diving for cover. As he flew the P-38 straight down the main deck, he noticed a Japanese submarine moored to the portside of the ship

trailing oil. Suddenly the main deck exploded. The fireball jumped into the sky as the ship began to blow apart.

"Shark's Leader Two, this is Outlaw. Looks like I got another one, and she's going down."

"Good shooting. But before you break your arm patting your back, you should know I spotted a torpedo in the water on the starboard side just before the explosion. Must be a friendly sub down there," Shark's Leader Two said.

"Thanks for the confidence. I think I found a landing strip on the beach. It looks like it's a mile long and winds may be just right. Peel off from the fight and head home. We don't need two pilots stranded out here," Outlaw responded.

"Roger, but I can't figure out this Japanese submarine action. They're frantically trying to separate, but it looks like it's too late. She's going down with the cruiser. Their unlucky day, I suppose," Shark's Leader Two replied as he began to circle well out of range of the ships.

"Outlaw, looks like they're continuing southward. You'll be safe so just lay low. I'm going to radio in coordinates as soon as I'm far enough away so the Japs don't decide to send in a force after you," he said.

"Good thinking, Shark's Leader. I'm sure they would come after me if they thought about it long enough. O.K., I'm touching down, good traction, beach slope is minimal, see you later Bill. Outlaw out," Bridwell responded, fighting to keep the aircraft straight on the wide beach of the island with his starboard engine shutting off just after touch down.

"You picked one with a sizeable peak, probably an old volcano. That will help with the rescue. See you soon," Capt. William Pfleiderer said and pointed his P-38 toward the secure allied landing strip on the Solomon Islands to the southeast.

The silver P-38, nicknamed by the Nazis as the forked-tail devil, whizzed down the beach with the pilot pulling hard on the rudder to correct for the slant of the ground, one dead engine, and a crosswind. The idea was to keep the plane dry.

As Bridwell reached the end of the beach next to the lagoon, he saw a break in the palm trees and drove the P-38 between them into a small clearing in a grove of trees and tropical plants. As the prop spun to a stop, he crawled out of the cockpit and stepped out onto the wing. He unfastened his parachute and tossed it into the open canopy. He quickly drew out his army-issue Colt .45 and loaded a round in the chamber, listening for any sound. Confident there were no enemy troops close by, he holstered the pistol and jumped to the ground.

Once on the ground, he walked down to the beach where he could see the wounded cruiser break through the barrier reef into the lagoon about a thousand yards from the beach. The small submarine slipped beneath the waves first, with the larger cruiser crushing down on top of it as it flipped over on its side. Bridwell thought for a minute that he might have company, but a series of explosions soon took care of that, or so he hoped. He sat down on the beach and watched until the last vestige of the Japanese warship was submerged two hours later. Lucky for him the lagoon's deepest end was exactly where the ship had crushed through the coral reef and entered the lagoon, or the cruiser would still be sitting half out of the water.

He walked back to the P-38 and climbed up to the cockpit where he reached inside and retrieved a small shoulder bag that contained basic first-aid supplies, C rations, and replacement ammunition for the Colt .45 he had holstered under his left shoulder. He found one quart-size tin full of fresh water and knew right away that finding more water would be his biggest challenge.

Suddenly he heard the roar of another P-38 overhead. Bridwell looked up and immediately recognized the numbers of Shark's Leader Two and that his fuselage was on fire and smoking heavily.

The wounded fighter made a sharp bank at the end of the lagoon and then dropped to within three feet of the water.

Capt. William Pfleiderer lowered his landing gear, and the P-38 hit the water and was quickly pulled in nose first, creating a huge column of water that rushed across the top of the cockpit dousing the fire.

Bridwell's heart pounded rapidly as he watched the warplane begin to sink to the bottom of the lagoon. He started running down the beach to a spot parallel to where the plane went down. When he got there, he was reaching down to pull off his flight boots when Shark's Leader Two's head popped up in the blue lagoon. Bridwell yelled and waved, and Pfleiderer waved back and began to swim to the beach.

Within a few minutes, he was walking out of the tropical surf. The men embraced as they met.

"Great landing," Lieutenant Bridwell said.

"Thanks. That one they don't teach in army flight school. Only the navy boys get that kind of training," Captain Pfleiderer replied and began to pull off his wet gear.

"How'd you get hit?" Bridwell asked as they began walking back toward the P-38 in the clearing.

"I made it about an hour from here, and then my engine started smoking. I must have taken a hit when you did, but it was a slow leak. I didn't know how far I could make it so my best chance was to turn around and come back. I followed the smoke trail left by the sinking cruiser. Thank goodness she was slow going down. Are there any survivors we're going to have to deal with?" Pfleiderer asked.

"I didn't see any swim away or make it to shore," Bridwell replied. "But there was a lot of smoke."

"Good. Does your radio still work?" Pfleiderer asked.

"Yes it does, but we'll need to wait a few hours to let the Japanese ships get farther away. We don't need any angry Japanese coming back to get even," Bridwell said.

"I agree. Let's get the P-38 camouflaged so it's not spotted by a Japanese patrol plane. This island is sitting right on the main naval corridor of the Bismarck Archipelago and New Guinea," Pfleiderer said as they reached the fighter plane.

"Our lucky day," Bridwell replied.

The two aviators began ripping and tearing foliage and tossing it over the wings first. Then they built up piles of palm leaves until they had covered the fuselage and tail sections. As the sun set in the west, they bedded down on the big fronds of palms covering the beach and shared the container of fresh water.

Three hours of darkness had passed when a splashing noise down the beach awakened them both. The pilots were trained soldiers so they moved carefully and quietly to look up from where they had been sleeping. The moon was full, and the beach was illumined for a hundred yards.

"Japanese sailors in a raft," Bridwell whispered and reached for his Colt .45.

"I count five or six," Pfleiderer said and pulled his gun out from under the palm fronds.

"I bet they escaped from the submarine. Looks like they're going to camp on the beach tonight, which means by daylight we'll be in full view," Bridwell whispered.

"That's for sure. Let's move slowly into the tree line. Inch in there carefully. Keep your gun ready," Pfleiderer said, being the senior officer by one grade.

Carefully and at a snail's pace the aviators pulled and pushed their bodies across the soft sand that seemed more like powdered sugar. After an hour of crawling, they had only moved fifty feet and were now behind a continuous row of palms. The six men of the Imperial Japanese Navy had started a fire and were busily eating and drinking from the supplies they had brought with them.

"They're going to find the aircraft first thing in the morning, and there goes our radio," Lieutenant Bridwell said sullenly.

"Not if we go down there and neutralize them," Captain Pfleiderer replied.

The two pilots took their Colt .45 automatics in their left hands and grasped their right arms together.

"Good luck," Pfleiderer said.

"Same here," Bridwell replied.

"Check your weapon, and be sure the exchange is clear of any sand. We've got three full clips each," Pfleiderer said.

"That's enough for our own little war," his wingman replied.

"We've got two approach choices. Move down the tree line quietly or back out to the lagoon and come in from the water side," Pfleiderer noted.

"I vote for the tree line," Bridwell answered.

"I agree. The moon is too bright for a sea assault. Let's go," Pfleiderer said.

The two aviators moved deeper into the tropical foliage taking each step carefully. On the occasion they stepped on a dry branch and heard a snap, they would freeze to see if the Japanese had heard the noise. Checking their watches, they had moved through the tree line in roughly an hour and were now about fifty feet from the campfire and the sleeping Japanese.

Pfleiderer held up his left hand and motioned that there were six men, all with weapons. Bridwell nodded, and they moved within thirty feet of the enemy. Neither pilot had made a noise, but one of the Japanese sat up quickly and looked around. He unholstered his Nambu Type 14 8mm pistol, loaded a cartridge, and released the safety. The Americans pointed their Colts directly at the sailor who they could now see was wearing an officer's uniform.

The Japanese officer poked at two others quickly, and they awoke in a stir. He put his index finger to his lips, signaling for them to be quiet. Pfleiderer pointed to Bridwell and motioned for him to take the one on the right and he would take the one on the left. Bridwell nodded and came up partway out of his crouch. A dry branch snapped under his flight boots, and the Japanese started yelling orders at the sleeping men. Within seconds, all six men were awake and brandishing their weapons.

Pfleiderer took deadly aim and shot the Japanese officer before he could see him. Bridwell pulled the trigger on another submariner who moved, and the bullet caught him in the arm. Then there was a hail of bullets into the tree line as the other four sailors began shooting randomly. Pfleiderer picked off one of them and Bridwell another before having to drop to their bellies to avoid the heavy fire. There were only three men left alive, including the wounded one.

As the two U.S. pilots paused to change their clips, they heard what they had feared. One of the Japanese barked an order, and they all jumped up, yelling "banzai," and began charging toward Bridwell and Pfleiderer.

They heard brush rustling as the sailors rushed into the tree line directly at them. Bridwell stood up and shot one point-blank from five feet as the sailor's Arisaka Type 38 rifle released a round over his shoulder, just clipping Bridwell's ear, causing blood to spurt everywhere. Just then, the wounded sailor, who had watched from where the muzzle flash had been, quickly fired three rounds, all embedding in the trunk of a palm tree in front of Bridwell.

Captain Pfleiderer took aim, and with two rounds, the Japanese sailor fell to the beach dead. Bridwell turned to his right and killed the last sailor, who had dropped to his knees to shoot Pfleiderer from his blind side. Bridwell then rushed from the tree line and started pulling the weapons away from the dead men quickly, just in case they were indeed still alive. Pfleiderer followed. With the noise gone and only the crackle of the campfire left, there was an eerie silence.

"Good job, Lieutenant," Pfleiderer said.

"Same to you, Captain," Bridwell replied.

Both men clasped hands, realizing that while they had the edge of surprise, a wild shot from a Japanese weapon could have easily ended their lives. After dragging all of the bodies into the dense foliage, they pulled the black rubber raft next to the P-38 and covered it with palm leaves.

"All of them had submariner badges on. Must have been

in the conning tower and took the emergency ride to the surface. Couldn't have been twenty feet under," Bridwell said.

"Yes, but if they sustained damage to the bulkhead from the rupture in the cruiser, the rest of the crew couldn't have survived," Pfleiderer said.

"I agree. I just hope we're right," Bridwell responded as he dragged the last dead sailor into the bushes.

Once back at the beach, they doused the fire and gathered up the rations and bottles of water.

"Here, take a drink," Pfleiderer said and handed the bottle to Bridwell.

Bridwell took one drink and spit it out.

"Sake," he said.

"Are you kidding? They put rice wine in their survival gear," Pfleiderer said and took a drink. "It's too dry. Dump it out. We don't need something that will make us feel worse. But test each bottle to be sure it's not water."

A few minutes later, they had found five bottles of water out of the eight bottles in the boat and by the campfire.

"Let's collect the weapons and bury them down the beach away from here in case we need them," Bridwell said.

"Good idea," his commanding officer replied.

Once the weapons had been covered with foliage, the two aviators returned to the beach near the now blackened campfire. Sitting down, they began to eat the rations brought ashore by the Japanese submariners.

"The stars are so bright here near the equator. Reminds me of Tucson in the desert," Pfliederer said and took a big gulp of water. He could still taste the salt from the ocean.

"Funny how we both grew up in dry country. You in Arizona, me in Western Oklahoma, and here we are in the middle of the ocean," Bridwell said and took a bite of a cookie of some sort.

"Life gives us strange twists. Just when General MacArthur is about to put the hammer on the Imperial Japanese Army, we are sent out for a routine patrol flight.

So here we sit. If nobody picks up our signal tomorrow, we might just sit out the war here," Pfleiderer said.

"Or longer," Bridwell replied and drank more water.

Laying back on the soft sand of the beach, they both closed their eyes with their last sight being the bright stars of the Southern Cross. Soon they were both asleep, and a few hours later, they were awakened by birds flying overhead as the sun came up. The beach was littered with flotsam and jetsam from the sunken cruiser and submarine. It was mostly just debris from the ship, which was useless to them, but of great curiosity to the birds who were always looking for a free and easy meal.

"We better move inland just in case we get some curious visitors. Let's send one message before the batteries go dead and hope for the best," Pfleiderer said.

They walked toward the army fighter and uncovered it enough to get to the cockpit.

"This is Shark's Leader Two, mayday, mayday. Zero two dash two eight south by one five two dash one one east. Signing out. We'll try it again tomorrow," Pfleiderer said and grabbed a flare gun from inside the cockpit.

"O.K., let's move out," Bridwell said and began following an imaginary trail in the dense foliage.

"I suggest we move toward the high peak in the middle of the island. That would be where the greatest collection of freshwater might be," Pfleiderer proposed.

"I'm right behind you," Bridwell replied and touched the wounded ear that they had bandaged the night before. It throbbed as they walked in the early heat. Their steps created a path through the trees and tropical plants.

"Look ahead. A natural trail," Pfleiderer said.

The two aviators, with Japanese packs on their shoulders holding food and water, walked over to the path that was at least one-meter wide. They gave each other a puzzled look as they took out their guns. Walking more slowly, they were annoyed that the birds of the tropical forest

announced their presence with each meter they traveled.

"So much for a stealth approach," Shark's Leader Two said.

"No kidding," Outlaw replied.

Soon the path disappeared, but it was obvious where it had once been, the dense foliage having grown over it again. The elevation of the island path began to climb slowly until they reached a thick growth area and, putting their guns away, started pushing and pulling at the bulky bushes. Suddenly they broke free into a clearing and were startled by the giant stone statue that stood before them.

"Someone used to live here," Bridwell said first.

"From the condition of the path, it's been many years, maybe decades or more," Pfleiderer replied, dropping the heavy pack to the rock surface of the small clearing. The two pilots walked around the giant monolith with a man's face cut into it and then looked around the clearing.

"I remember seeing something like this in a magazine when I was in college," Bridwell said. "It's like one of those big stone faces on Easter Island in the eastern Pacific."

"Maybe Polynesian like we saw when we were stationed at Hickam in Hawaii?" Pfleiderer replied.

"Yeah, maybe, or one of the other groups of native people that used to live on these islands before the war," Bridwell answered back.

Shark's Leader Two, Capt. Pfleiderer, walked around to the back of the giant stone face and stepped back into the dense foliage.

"I've got a hunch," he said as he disappeared into the trees.

Bridwell found a large boulder and sat down. Fifteen minutes passed before Pfleiderer returned to the stone clearing.

"Get your pack and follow me. You won't believe this," he said to Bridwell and stepped back into the brush.

In less than five minutes, they were standing in another clearing at the base of the tallest peak on the island, an ancient volcano. A small freshwater stream ran through the middle of the clearing. The clearing was decorated with

more monoliths and carvings on the face of the rocky cliff in front of them.

"Must have been a ceremonial circle of some kind," Bridwell noted.

"Take a look at this," Pfleiderer said from the side of the clearing.

Bridwell walked over and stood next to him where there was a small opening in the trees. The two were awed that they had been climbing up the hidden trail and were now looking out across the beautiful blue lagoon from nearly five hundred feet above the beach.

"No wonder I'm tired," Bridwell said.

"Me too. We began climbing the minute we left the beach," Pfleiderer said.

"Yes, sir, Captain," Bridwell replied and saluted.

They quickly filled their water containers and drank too much too fast, causing them to sprawl out on the ground. Suddenly the noise of an aircraft flying over the lagoon could be heard, and the two men gave each other a startled look. They stood up just in time to see a U.S. Navy PBY Catalina flying five hundred feet over the lagoon.

"They made our radio message," Pfleiderer announced as he hurriedly took the flare gun from the Japanese pack.

With a sharp aim, he fired it through the opening just as the PBY made another pass over the lagoon. The pilot of the navy rescue aircraft tilted his wings back and forth, in acknowledgment that he had seen the flare. After one more pass, the big grey PBY began to settle down on the smooth surface of the lagoon, awaiting its passengers to appear on the beach.

Halfway down the mountain, Pfleiderer fired another flare to show their progress.

"Captain, they're almost to the beach," a sailor said from the back of the PBY.

"Break out the raft and go get them and hurry. We have to assume a nearby Japanese aircraft or ship may have detected our arrival. Be quick," he ordered.

"Aye, Captain," the sailor responded.

By the time the PBY's raft touched the beach, the two pilots were running out of the tropical tree line toward them, their packs still hung over their shoulders. Once they arrived at the raft, they tossed in their packs.

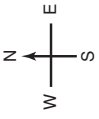
"We're glad to see you guys," Shark's Leader Two said to the sailors.

Soon the raft was next to the open side door of the PBY, and the pilots and the sailors were all inside.

"Welcome aboard soldiers," the PBY pilot said.

"Thanks Captain, good to be aboard," Outlaw replied.

The two aviators looked at each other and then grasped hands and smiled. They knew they had lived to fight and face death another day.



Admiralty Islands

New Ireland
Island

Bismarck Sea

New Britain

Solomon Sea

Karkar Island

Long Island

Cape Gloucester

Devil's Breath Volcano

Chungrebu

Papua New Guinea

Port Moresby

Indonesia

