



Indestructible: One Man's Rescue Mission That Changed the Course of WWII

John R. Bruning

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In this remarkable WWII story by *New York Times* bestselling author John R. Bruning, a renegade American pilot fights against all odds to rescue his family--imprisoned by the Japanese--and revolutionizes modern warfare along the way.

From the knife fights and smuggling runs of his youth to his fiery days as a pioneering naval aviator, Paul Irving "Pappy" Gunn played by his own set of rules and always survived on his wits and fists. But when he fell for a conservative Southern belle, her love transformed him from a wild and reckless airman to a cunning entrepreneur whose homespun engineering brilliance helped launch one of the first airlines in Asia.

Pappy was drafted into MacArthur's air force when war came to the Philippines; and while he carried out a top-secret mission to Australia, the Japanese seized his family. Separated from his beloved wife, Polly, and their four children, Pappy reverted to his lawless ways. He carried out rescue missions with an almost suicidal desperation. Even after he was shot down twice and forced to withdraw to Australia, he waged a one-man war against his many enemies--including the American high command and the Japanese--and fought to return to the Philippines to find his family.

Without adequate planes, supplies, or tactics, the U.S. Army Air Force suffered crushing defeats by the Japanese in the Pacific. Over the course of his three-year quest to find his family, Pappy became the renegade who changed all that. With a brace of pistols and small band of loyal followers, he robbed supply dumps, stole aircraft, invented new weapons, and modified bombers to hit harder, fly farther, and deliver more destruction than anything yet seen in the air. When Pappy's modified planes were finally unleashed during the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, the United States scored one of the most decisive victories of World War II.

Taking readers from the blistering skies of the Pacific to the jungles of New Guinea and the Philippines to one of the the war's most notorious prison camps, *Indestructible* traces one man's bare-knuckle journey to free the people he loved and the aerial revolution he sparked that continues to resonate across America's modern battlefields.

Indestructible: One Man's Rescue Mission That Changed the Course of WWII Details

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From Reader Review Indestructible: One Man's Rescue Mission That Changed the Course of WWII for online ebook

Lew says

This a great story about one America's legends of WWII. P.I. "Pappy" Gunn was a remarkable pilot and innovator, who greatly contributed to the success of US Fifth Air Force in the Southwest Pacific region. It is also remarkable story of Gunn's family and what they endured as internees at the infamous Santo Tomas internment facility in Manila during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines. Pappy Gunn was truly a remarkable man.

Jane says

Stories of individual heroism and endurance, especially during WWII, always impress me. Given the subtitle, I did feel that the larger story of WWII tactics and how PI impacted them got a little lost in the personal story, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. Just not the dominant takeaway I was expecting.

Note to editor: for the love of god, it's not "a myriad of ____." It's "myriad ____." Thx.

Bonnie_blu says

3.5 Stars.

P. I. (Pappy) Gunn was an amazing aviator who accomplished prodigious feats during WW II and who changed aerial warfare forever. This book thoroughly details Gunn's accomplishments and their significance. However, it also has a great deal of information that is unnecessary for the tale, and in fact, detracts from the book. I found myself skipping about 1/3 of the text. In addition, the author writes too much as a "fan boy." This writing style comes across as pumping up Gunn's feats when this was not needed at all. The facts of Gunn's exploits are stunning and don't need the "rah-rah."

Kenneth Jr. says

World War II sea battles in the South Pacific have been widely documented in books, documentaries and films. Additionally, General MacArthur's land battles in the Southwest Pacific, especially The Philippines, are well known to those interested in Second World War history. And the world knows what happened on December 7, 1941 – in Hawaii. What hasn't been highly covered are details of what went on inside the Philippines on December 7th (8th there) and beyond. Additionally, there's a paucity in coverage of MacArthur's Far East Air Force (FEAF). This book fills in the gaps.

While taking the reader on a thriller of a ride through the experiences of an American hero, a hitherto uncovered big picture of this part of the war documents what happened in The Philippines on that fateful day and beyond, as well as the struggles to get the Fifth Airforce in a position to impart damage on the enemy rather than just send men out to their deaths in antiquated and poorly maintained aircraft. Besides being the personal story of a fighting man whose family had been interned in Manila and his fight to rescue them by

developing the tools of war to do so, the book provides great insight on the war in the Southwest Pacific from a refreshingly new perspective.

A must read for anyone thirsting for a broader understanding of World War II in this theater of operations.

Marc says

To win a war, especially a war of the magnitude of World War II, it takes soldiers who are absolutely driven to defeat the enemy, as well as tactics and innovative weapons which help those soldiers get the job done. During World War II, the United States had such a soldier: Paul I. "Pappy" Gunn.

Pappy had served in the U.S. Navy for several years before retiring and moving his family to the Philippines and becoming a founding member of Philippine Air Lines. Along the way, he learned how to fly and how to fix almost anything that flew. When the Japanese attacked the Philippines in December, 1941, he was made a part of the USAAF and assigned a wide variety of missions around the islands: flying supplies to various places, moving personnel to and fro, attacking the Japanese when possible with the meager forces at hand, and keeping the tiny amount of aircraft available to him flightworthy. It was during one such mission where he ended up in Australia and the Japanese closed off his chances to return to the Philippines and rescue his family. As it turned out, this was to have a far-reaching impact on the way the war progressed in the Pacific.

Since he couldn't rescue his family, Pappy became a man possessed with the idea of defeating the Japanese as soon as possible. To this end, he waged a maverick war on his own: stealing supplies at gunpoint, "acquiring" planes which were slated for other places and making modifications which weren't approved by a higher authority. Eventually he caught the eye a few like-minded individuals and began converting existing bombers into gunships which would devastate anything in their path. One of these individuals was General George Kenney, the new commander of the 5th Air Force. An innovator himself, he and Pappy were kindred spirits who worked in cooperation to make the 5th AF a more potent and feared fighting force. The fruits of their labors were on full display in early 1943 when a convoy of Japanese ships attempting to land reinforcements in New Guinea was annihilated by the new gunships which Pappy helped create. From then on, the Japanese remained firmly on the defensive and never gained the upper hand in the Southwest Pacific.

But this book isn't just about Pappy and his battles against the Japanese. He was an extremely devoted, loving husband and family man to his wife and four children. Leaving them behind in Manila when the Japanese invaded caused him untold mental anguish and provided the maniacal drive to defeat the Japanese. His family ended up being held prisoner in Santo Tomas, a university in Manila which was converted into a prison. Lack of food, diseases, cruel Japanese guards and untrustworthy fellow inmates provided a never-ending stream of obstacles to survival for the Gunn family. While they didn't know what had happened to Pappy, they always held out hope he would arrive to rescue them.

This book reads like a novel at times and some of the stories about Pappy's exploits are acknowledged as being unconfirmed, but that doesn't stop the flow of the narrative. John Bruning has woven a fantastic story together from a multitude of sources, one which is inspirational, entertaining and educational as well. I've read dozens of books on the 5th AF and the air combat over the Pacific, and I learned a few things from this book. A welcome addition to my library!

Robert Davidson says

This is a great read about a "broke the mold" American pilot and his wartime story in the Pacific with his family imprisoned by the Japanese. A page turner.

Curtis Taylor says

This is by far one of the best historical, adventurous, and horrific Military Aviation book that I have read on WWII. From a Sailor's aviation experiences to being part of the Army Air Force this is a story of "P.I." (Pappy) Gunn and his family during the Japanese evasion and capture of the Philippines. As a family man living Manila working with the beginnings of the Philippine Airlines, Pappy learns how quickly the events of Dec 1941 transformed his life. Through his desire to reach his now captured family who were caught behind the enemy's lines during the fall of Manila, Pappy Gunn now becomes a powerful force of ingenuity in the development of weapons of warfare to combat an advancing enemy. To say that Pappy Gunn was driven is an understatement. His whole being was for the one purpose, to rescue his family and the Japanese Military was in his way. Betrayal by his own Country, attacked by the Japanese, restricted by the Army Supply System, Pappy's own will and love for his family created one of "Our" Nation's Greatest Hero's and one most of us have never heard about..... Hand Salute, Pappy. Well done, Shipmate. Great story.

Jim Gallen says

Some stories are just too good to be true, but they are. Some figures are too wild, too undisciplined, too out of the mold to achieve greatly, but they do. Such is the story of Pappy Gunn, World War II pilot, a knight of the air who fought his own war against the Japanese and his superiors and the family he flew to reunite.

Pappy was a retired Navy pilot running the small Philippine Airlines when the Japanese attacked across the Pacific. Joining the Army Air Force, he made the decision to fly out one more set of officers thinking, erroneously, that he would be able to return to Manilla to bring his family to safety.

"Indestructible" is really two stories in one. One is the gruesome story of Polly Gunn and their two sons and two daughters' survival in a civilian prison camp in the Philippines. The other is Pappy's desperate struggle to free them. Flying throughout the Southwest Pacific from Australia, across New Guinea, to other islands and, eventually, returning to the Philippines, Pappy strained every fiber in his body to advance the front toward Manila. He obtained parts and supplies, sometimes by armed robbery. He modified B-25s by adding machine guns that made them much more effective attack machines. His alterations were accepted by the brass and changed the nature and course of the war in the Pacific.

It is a cliché to say that a history reads like a novel, but this one really does. Often that just means that the prose is so captivating that you cannot turn it down but must see what comes next. "Indestructible" takes writing to the next level. Not only did I want to know what happened next, but the action was so beyond expectations that I had to keep reminding myself that this really happened.

I do not want to reveal too many details in order to maintain the suspense for you. Author John R. Bruning has crafted an entrancing tale that entertains as it educates. This belongs in the library of every student of the Pacific Theatre of World War II as well as any fan of an exciting read.

John says

One of the most reader friendly books on World War II history I have ever read. I put aside another book I was reading until I finished this one. If this were a novel, I would still rate it 5 stars. I cared about the characters and wanted to know what happened next. Cannot wait to see this movie.

Second half, as a retired history teacher who has a Filipina wife this book struck home. The early part of the war in the western Pacific has not been documented well. This book places that time in history on a personal level. Bless the author's daughter who had him write a book as a birthday present.

Peter says

Paul Gunn, called “Pappy” or “P.I.” was born in 1899 and raised in extreme poverty in rural Arkansas. His father was murdered when P.I. was small and P.I. earned his chops as a bootlegger smuggling moonshine over dark and poorly made roads in a self-built car, at night and without lights. He enlisted in the Navy as a mechanic before WWI, received his pilot’s wings a few years later, served as an enlisted Naval pilot, and retired in 1937 as a Chief Petty Officer. He then became general manager and chief pilot for the newly formed Philippine Airlines, flying and servicing its passenger planes, and building a reputation as an outstanding all-weather pilot with keen knowledge of the Philippines. When WWII began he joined the Army Air Force as a Captain, eventually rising to a colonelcy.

John Bruning’s biography—*Indestructible: One Man’s Rescue Mission that Changed the Course of WWII* (2016) is the story of P.I.’s unusual life, and of an era in aviation long past. It begins in late 1941 as dark war clouds blacken in the Philippines. Gunn is living in Manila with his family—wife Polly, daughters Connie and Julie, and sons Paul and Nathan, when he is assigned to fly an “important person” to visit a mining operation in which he had interests. The VIP was Joseph Stevenout, a longtime Philippine resident, businessman, and communications expert who had been conscripted by Douglas MacArthur as an Army major. The mission was not to see a mining operation—it was to inspect construction of a secret radar facility. And they would fly into the teeth of a borderline typhoon in a Beech Staggerwing, a fabric-covered biplane.

An accident on landing would strand P.I. at their destination at a most unfortunate time—on the morning of December 8, 1941 Philippine Time (December 7, 1941 California time). While Gunn was stranded on that remote Philippine island, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Midway Island, and the Philippine Islands. Clark Field, near Manila and adjacent to Gunn’s house, was severely damaged by Japanese bombs. Gunn was soon back in Manila with his family, but life would never be the same again as both he and the family dodged Japanese bombs and troops.

P.I. quickly joined the Air Force as a Captain, ostensibly as a ferry pilot but really to use the Philippine Airline’s planes—several ten-passenger Beech 18s and two six-passenger Beech Staggerwings—to deliver people and materiel throughout the islands. This morphed into becoming the commander of Air Transport Command—a fancy title for “guy who moves things around by air.” This gave P.I. authority over anything aeronautical in the Philippine Islands. He used this to cobble together a system for transporting men and materiel. This was the foundation of a wartime parts supply system for damaged planes, which he and his crews would also repair. At one stage he even commandeered a war-worn B-17 for his own use, among

which was bombing Japanese ships.

After the Army lied to him about their intentions in Manila, a lie that separated Gunn from his family back in Manila or yers, Gunn went rogue. His forte was illicitly obtaining parts for damaged warplanes, flying them to the damaged planes in his company's airliners, installing them, and returning the planes to service. He was essentially a one-man air force and his exploits became legendary, especially his thefts of airplane parts from Army warehouses at gunpoint. Throughout all of this his primary goal was to get back to Manila and his family, but each subterfuge he created to do this was thwarted by events.

The Gunn legend was enhanced by his participation in a theft of a squadron of new B-25 "Mitchell" bombers from the Dutch in the Philippine area. The Dutch had purchased these from North American Aviation Company but disputes about the deal had developed after they were delivered to an Australian airfield; the bombers sat unused until Gunn and his associates happened by. Gunn cajoled his men into stealing the entire squadron of B-25s. Then, when some important items, like the Norden bombsights that the planes were supposed to have, were found missing, they returned and commandeered the sights from the Dutch supply officer at gunpoint. Pappy was now commander of a squadron of brand-new high-tech bombers—which he immediately modified to extend the range and add firepower. His experiments with the B-25 would alter its construction for the benefit of all.

P.I.'s fleet of modified B-17s and B-25s were very effective at a new tactic also developed by Gunn—wave top attacks on Japanese ships in which the forward firepower of the planes would combine with "skip-bombing" to decimate Japanese vessels. This was first used in the Battle of the Coral Sea, and its effect was so great that word went back to the States to modify the bombers to Gunn's specifications. The planes, which had been so ineffective at high-level bombing of ships, were repurposed to a far more deadly role.

Meanwhile, the Japanese had interned Polly and his children in Manila, where they experienced severe malnutrition, disease—and, worst of all, theft and abuse by other internees. All of the, hardened up and became part of a smuggling team that brought important items into the internment camp. Did Pappy ever get back to them? Read on.

Set against the backdrop of the early days of WWII, this is certainly a wartime book but it is not about war—it is about a family caught up in war, and about a warrior who made a difference. Their story is not unique, and it is certainly more positive than the story of millions of other families in those days. It is a "heartwarming" tale of a loving family protected as much as possible by a fiercely courageous father. It is also a story of a man of a certain era—raised rural poor in a tough environment, determined to make a better life, and devoted to his family above all else. P.I. Gunn was a man just right for the early days of he war when all around him was chaotic. His ability to scrounge parts, fly long distances on dead reckoning, repair and modify airplanes, and inspire others in a theater where the U.S. started well behind the eight-ball is both dramatic and inspiring. Those were the days!

Four Stars.

Don Alesi says

I really wanted to like this book as much as my friends did. Unfortunately, the book fell short of all the accolades that were bestowed on it. I guess you want a better explanation that.

Indestructible tells the story of P.I. (Pappy) Gunn. He is a semi retired Naval Aviator who is running the Philippine Airline; PAL when the Japanese take over the Island and his wife and children are interred in a internment camp for civilians in St Thomas. Pappy winds up in the Army Airforce and is determined to rescue his family.

Unable to rescue them, he spends his time turning light bombers into ground attack aircraft which becomes the forerunner of today's A10 attack planes. All the while he is fighting the higher ups to get what he needs using a pistol instead of a pen to win the war.

If everything in this book is really true then more should be known about him. His flaws are minor and his heroics and abilities would put Superman to shame. The real heroes in the book are his wife and children who suffer under the Japanese in the camp. They are ordinary people who did extraordinary things and kept their moral compass along the way.

If anything, it peaked my interest in this part of the war and how the Japanese pushed forward and then repelled in the pacific war. Pappy Gunn was a hero and innovator but I find some of it hard to believe that he did everything that was written. Still, the book was entertaining.

Jay Reimer says

This is a gripping story which is well told. The author successfully alternates between scenes of PI's wife and children in a Manila POW camp and PI trying to win the war singlehandedly.

The good: The author keeps the action clipping along (as it actually did!) and I enjoyed as much technical content about flying as he wanted to include! He describes just enough of the carnage to make the telling authentic without making the reader feel overwhelmed by the atrocity of war (as indeed the men and women and children experiencing it must feel!) The context that propel the story forward are clear and understandable and I rarely felt lost in detail.

The "could have been better." (1) The love of PI for his wife (and vice versa) is clear but somewhat cliched in the story. It is described the same way over and over. (2) The ages of the children should be stated early in the story so the reader can picture the children. (3) Pictures and diagrams of the B-17, and B-25, etc. would have helped the lay reader understand the event better. (4) The author clearly has a background in the military as he offhandedly deals with the "101st airborne sent a battalion..." and "the 4th flight of the 3rd attack went to Cebu..." [I made up these phrases] but to a non-military person these technical details were sometimes weeds to the telling of the story. Perhaps a tree of ranks and organization would have helped (?) For sure including a map of the region to locate Mindanao, Luzon, Port Moresby, Darwin and Brisbane, etc. would have helped us arm-chair adventurers. (5) A few devices are repeatedly used and worn thin, like descriptions of PI's sleepless night. A greater variety of approaches would have kept it fresher and more authentic.

I enjoyed this story very much. I laughed at times and tears were streaming down my face at the conclusion of the story.

This book is absolutely worth reading and helps someone who is not a history buff to have a better idea of what war and WWII in the Pacific was like. At the conclusion, the book conveys to the reader the magnitude

of adjustment that Veterans and individuals directly affected by war must deal with in post-war transition. It left me stunned and sobered with a desire to participate in supporting these men and women.

Worth the read! Absolutely! if you have an interest in WWII or flying or mechanical technology. Although the book was not perfect (like its protagonist) I loved it!

Relstuart says

This book lived up to its description and is written well. You care about the main character and his family.

The main character, P.I. Gunn (later known as Pappy Gunn) grew up in poverty and joined the Navy where he learned to fly. He took those skills later in life to the Philippines and helped open one of the first airlines there with his wife and four children. They had a great life until WWII came and the Japanese attacked. P.I.'s planes were confiscated and he was called back on duty. He helped ferry supplies and people around the Philippines under difficult conditions as the Japanese won the air war very quickly against the American and Philippine military forces. He was directed to fly out a group of senior leaders as the Philippines fell and he did so with the expectation that he was going to be able to come back for his family. This did not happen and he was furious with military leadership over it.

His family ended up interred in a camp. Here they suffered many of the same difficulties that POWs suffered with lack of food and mistreatment from enemy military that viewed them as enemy and lesser beings racially which made it ok to treat them worse than you would treat animals.

Pappy was a low ranking officer that could have easily become a random nobody. Instead he was driven by his towering rage toward the Japanese and military high command to figure out how to get back to the Philippines to rescue his family. To accomplish this he either needed to figure out a way to sneak back or to beat the Japanese military. He explored the first option and was able to help facilitate a brief bombing campaign in the Philippines early in the war but when that didn't work out he began to take the minimal aircraft resources he could find and figure out how to make them more deadly. He began adding more guns to aircraft and exploring tactics that would take planes down lower and increase their chances of hitting enemy ships. There was plenty of push back from the establishment and he dealt with it by either making friends in high places or pulling out his pistols and taking what he wanted from reluctant supply folks.

One of the great things about real life is that sometimes we do get people that have great odds against them and end up overcoming somehow even though the odds are against them. The war was such a big event yet this story humanizes the conflict and cuts back and forth between his family surviving and the father figuring out how to win. Story driven history like this is a great way to learn more about the events in the Pacific during WWII.

Ray says

While I enjoyed John Bruning's book "*Indestructible*", about World War II pilot "Pappy Gunn", I didn't feel it lived up to its subtitle, e.g., "One Man's Rescue Mission That Changed the Course of WWII". Part of my reason for selecting this book was the intriguing subtitle. Unfortunately for me, I'm always a little

disappointed when the Publishers description on the book jacket, or if the book's sub-title don't quite measure up to the hype, and this was the case for this book.

"Indestructible" tells the story of Paul Irving "Pappy" Gunn, an ex-navy pilot turned airline executive in the Philippines as World War II broke out in the Pacific theater. Gunn joined McArthur's Army Air Force, but was on a mission out of Country as the Japanese overran Manilla where his family was living. His wife and four children were interred in a Japanese prison camp, and the book jacket and sub-title led me to believe I'd be reading about "... a renegade American pilot" who "... fights against all odds to rescue his family--imprisoned by the Japanese". Instead, while Gunn certainly did worry about his family as the war continued, he never was able to locate them, nor was there any rescue mission planned or attempted to free his family or their fellow prisoners.

Nevertheless, the book does tell an interesting story about an inventive aviator. However, some of the tales may be enhanced. Bruning frequently mentioned that a number of the tales have been passed down over time, perhaps 100% true, perhaps legend, and "... what actually happened may never be known...", or "...no one knows for sure..." as he tells the story of this respected innovative pilot.

Gunn's importance to the war effort was not as a fighter pilot or top-gun ace, but rather as an innovator who improved armament and tactics. He fought through the administrative bureaucracy and supply limitations and worked tirelessly to improve everything he touched. One of his most important innovations was to modify the B-25 Mitchell bomber, adding multiple forward facing machine guns allowing the planes to do low-level strafing of ships and ground troops, greatly enhancing their efficiency as attack weapons. For his dedication, insights, and innovations, adding to the war effort to slow down and turn the tide against Japanese advances in the Pacific, Gunn's story is certainly one worth telling.

Chuck Barber says

P. I. "Pappy" Gunn was one of those larger-than-life, legendary types that seemed to have hit their stride in the golden age of flight. Raised in poverty, able to fly anything with wings, and able to fix anything he could fly - and make it better - he had an unbelievable capacity for work. Add to that a family held captive in Manilla, anger at the Japanese, and at the American high command for letting it happen, and a willingness to use fists and threats at gun point to get what he needed, and you've got the makings for quite a story.
