

A FULL LIFE



By

MICHEL POULIN

A FULL LIFE

A MIXED ALTERNATE HISTORY, SCIENCE-FICTION AND FANTASY NOVEL

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE AND SEX, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION AND THE WORDS AND ACTIONS OF PERSONS IN IT WHO EXISTED OR STILL EXIST DO NOT REFLECT HISTORICAL REALITY.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to my THREE PROUD WOMEN and is the fifteenth novel in the Nancy Laplante Series. Its action happens in a parallel timeline, Timeline 'C', thus this is basically an alternate history novel with a mix of fantasy and science-fiction. It describes the adventures of Ingrid Dows, a veteran American fighter pilot, senior military commander, astronaut and aircraft designer who drastically changed the World for the better while serving the United States during the course of six decades. With most of the enemies of the United States having been utterly defeated during the past years and decades, mostly thanks to her, Ingrid is now free to live as a civilian but is still keeping busy with the two loves of her life: aircraft and piloting. Ingrid's other love in life, her daughter Nancy, is continuing to climb the success ladder in the world of music and singing, while young U.S. Marine Corps servicemember Greta Visby continues to rise quickly through the military ranks.

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THE MAIN BATTLE TANK – STILL RELEVANT OR IN NEED OF EVOLUTION?

TABLE OF CONTENT

CHAPTER 1 – BACK TO CIVILIAN LIFE	6
CHAPTER 2 – UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES	26
CHAPTER 3 – AT THE TOP OF THE CHARTS	30
CHAPTER 4 – A NEW KID ON THE BLOCK	35
CHAPTER 5 – IN THE CROSSHAIRS	46
CHAPTER 6 – A CRUCIAL DECISION	78
CHAPTER 7 – REASONS TO CELEBRATE	82
CHAPTER 8 – BAPTISM OF FIRE	93
CHAPTER 9 – PACIFIC CAULDRON	103
CHAPTER 10 – A FAMILY CHRISTMAS	143
CHAPTER 11 – NEW ASSIGNMENT	147
CHAPTER 12 – MANAGING PARENTHOOD AND WORK	167
CHAPTER 13 – INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	170
CHAPTER 14 – BACK IN LE BOURGET	185
CHAPTER 15 – REMEMBERING PAST INCARNATIONS	191
CHAPTER 16 – THE SCOURGE OF TERRORISM	199
CHAPTER 17 – BORDER WAR	222
CHAPTER 18 – CRUSHING THE CARTELS	264
CHAPTER 19 – A BRIGHT KID	287
CHAPTER 20 – BACK IN CAMP LEJEUNE	297
CHAPTER 21 – FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL	310
CHAPTER 22 – A TOUGH SET OF REQUIREMENTS	317
CHAPTER 23 – A NEW MIDDLE EAST SHIT PIT	327
CHAPTER 24 – A NEW PRESIDENT	374
CHAPTER 25 – THE MIRACLE WORKER	383
BIBLIOGRAPHY	390

CHAPTER 1 – BACK TO CIVILIAN LIFE

08:17 (Seattle Time)

Wednesday, December 12, 2001 'C'

Chief Aircraft Designer's office

Port Angeles plant of Hiller Aircraft Corporation

Port Angeles, Washington State, U.S.A.



Ingrid Dows was finding herself to be quite busy, now that she was out of uniform for good (hopefully) and back at her civilian job as Chief Aircraft Designer and Primary Test Pilot for the Hiller Aircraft Corporation. The three last months spent by her in Afghanistan at President Bush' request had caused her 'in' basket pile at Hiller's Port Angeles plant to grow quite spectacularly and she now had to put up some long hours trying to cut it down to a manageable size.

She was reading through a flight test report done on the latest Hiller SKYTRUCK completed at the Port Angeles plant and awaiting commercial certification when her telephone rang, making her pick up the receiver.

"Ingrid Dows speaking!"

"Ingrid, this is Jeff Hiller, calling from our corporate headquarters in California. I just got a call from the Filipino defense minister, Wido Rudowo. He was calling on behalf of three governments: his own plus that of Indonesia and Vietnam. I don't want to speak too much on the phone about the exact purpose of his call but suffice to say that those governments are looking for your expert opinion about a common defense need they have. This may in fact possibly attract to us a development and design contract for our company if they find your advice attractive, so I am counting on you to blind them with your aircraft design skills brilliance. A joint delegation of nine persons should land at Port Angeles late this afternoon aboard a chartered private jet."

Ingrid briefly chuckled at the words used by the owner and CEO of the Hiller Aircraft Corporation.

"I will serve them my best bullshit, Jeff. Do you have an estimated time of arrival and the registration number for that incoming flight?"

"A precise arrival time, no! However, I was told that it will be an Air Philippines chartered GULFSTREAM II executive jet. They will come to discuss with you about a new light combat aircraft."

"I will be ready for them, Jeff. Thanks for the advanced warning."

"My pleasure, Ingrid. Could you take care of reserving hotel rooms in Port Angeles for those visitors? That delegation counts seven men and two women. Individual rooms would probably be preferable for them: while they are coming as one delegation, their governments were not always on the friendliest terms in the past."

"I served and fought enough around Southeast Asia to know about their history, Jeff. I will put on my best diplomatic face for them."

"Good! By the way, your adopted daughter Hien is still the American ambassador to Vietnam, if I remember well, right?"

"Correct! She is doing a hell of a job there and she makes me most proud, so be sure that I will do my best not to offend any of the members of that visiting delegation."

"Excellent! Well, I will leave you at that. Just keep me posted on the results of their visit."

"I will, Jeff." replied Ingrid before hanging up. She was then thoughtful for a moment while she mentally reviewed what she knew about the latest military and political developments from Southeast Asia. The composition of the incoming delegation was by itself a serious clue for her about what they wanted to discuss with her. Normally, little common linked Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam...little except their mutual suspicions about Chinese geo-political goals concerning the South China Sea. Despite the fact that the American forces in the Pacific, which were at the time under Ingrid's command, had taught China a severe lesson in the past, China had recently started to rebound and to start again to cause trouble around the South China Sea. Thus, those three countries were most probably looking to strengthen their military capacities to counter any Chinese bullying around their respective waters and their exclusive economic zones, or EEZ. With that in her mind, she started consulting her work computer, scribbling down notes for herself as she went.

19:52 (Seattle Time)

Immigration and customs counters, international arrival hall

William R. Fairchild International Airport, Port Angeles

Harry Gleason had been a U.S. immigration agent for over twenty years and had seen about every possible kind of foreign visitor pass by his control wicket in the past. He had also been working for a good six years at this airport and was accustomed to the kind of mix of visitors one could expect to come to the Seattle area. However, the group he was now processing, while all having valid visitor visas, was most unusual in its composition. Not only the seven men and two women traveling together were from three different countries which rarely mixed together but their high political and military status made it even more unusual, not to say suspicious. He however kept a neutral expression and a polite tone of voice as he looked up from the passport presented to him by the small Asian man now standing in front of his counter.

“And what is your military rank, if I may ask, Mister Ngo?”

“Lieutenant general.” answered the Vietnamese man in his fair English. Gleason digested that information for a second: this was the third general officer in the group he was checking out, one each from Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Three of the other men were government cabinet members, again from the same countries, while the remaining one man and two women had presented themselves as either political aides or secretaries.

“And what is the purpose of your group’s visit to Port Angeles, General Ngo?”

“We came to consult one of your experts in aeronautics from the Hiller Corporation about a problem common to our three countries. Hiller has a very good reputation about solving aviation-related problems.”

“That they do, General Ngo.” recognized Gleason, who then stamped Ngo’s passport and gave it back to the Vietnamese man. “Have a nice stay in the U.S.A., General.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Gleason watched the man walk away from his counter and join up with the rest of his group, which had arrived in a Filipino executive jet half an hour ago. That group may have been a valid one but its composition still made Gleason wonder about it. Grabbing his telephone, he called the Seattle office of the F.B.I.¹, intent on advising the agents there about this unusual group of visitors.

¹ F.B.I.: Federal Bureau of Investigation. The American federal government agency in charge of enforcing laws pertaining to federal level. The F.B.I. also is in charge of counter-espionage and anti-terrorism operations.

The nine Asian visitors, all wearing good quality civilian clothes, were processed quickly at the customs counters after retrieving their suitcases, with the customs agents there making only perfunctory searches of their luggage. As soon as the group exited the arrival area and walked into the public part of the small airport, they spotted at once a young and beautiful woman holding high a small sign saying 'Hiller guests welcome!'. Major General Anwar Sukarno, who commanded the Indonesian tactical Airforce, couldn't help stop for a moment while eyeing the young woman, then whispered to his secretary, a young woman named Putu Sarawan.

"Remind me again about the age of General Dows, Miss Sarawan."

"She is now 76, General."

"Seventy-six... A most extraordinary woman indeed in many respects. She is also said to be able to speak dozens of languages. Do you know if she can speak Indonesian?"

"I am not sure about that, General."

"Well, we will know soon enough. We do all speak fair to good English anyway. Let's go meet her."

Ingrid, recognizing the group at their ethnic mix, lowered her sign and went to greet it with a big smile while speaking to them in English.

"Welcome to Port Angeles, ladies and gentlemen. I presently speak to you in English but know that I can speak Tagalog, Cebuano, Vietnamese, Javanese and Balinese. However, my Javanese and Balinese date back from a couple of millenniums, so is probably hopelessly quaint by today's standards in Indonesia."

"We are all proficient in English, General Dows, so we can continue in English." replied Sukarno. "I am Major General Anwar Sukarno and I came with Air Minister Suparman Prabang and with my secretary, Miss Putu Sarawan."

"I am Lieutenant General Ngo Minh Wa, Commander of the Vietnamese Air Force." said in turn the older man of the group. "With me are Deputy Defense Minister for the Air Force Tran Le Toan and his aide, Mister Nguyen Binh Minh."

"Pleased to meet you." replied Ingrid in fluent Vietnamese before facing the last trio of the group, who she could recognize by their ethnic look as being Filipino, speaking to them in Tagalog.

"And you must be the Filipino delegation, I presume."

"Correct, General Dows. I am Major General Jesus Alba, Commander of the Filipino Air Force. To my left is Deputy Defense Minister for the Air Force Antonio Villanueva, along with his secretary, Miss Carmen Santiago."

"Welcome all to Port Angeles. If you will follow me, a minibus is waiting outside to drive you to your hotel. You must be quite tired by your long trip across the Pacific."

"Indeed, General Dows." replied Ngo.

"Please, simply call me 'Ingrid', all of you. No need for formalities with me: I am a very informal woman."

"Then, Ingrid it will be."

Next, Ingrid led the group outside to the taxi waiting lane, where a minibus marked as belonging to the Hiller Aircraft Corporation was parked, with a driver waiting behind the wheel. As the driver helped load the group's luggage inside the minibus, Ingrid spoke to her older visitor.

"Have you eaten supper yet, General Ngo? Are you hungry?"

"We ate a couple of sandwiches in the plane but I wouldn't mind having a more substantial meal tonight, if that is possible."

"Then, once you will have a chance to drop your luggage in your rooms, I will guide you to a good little restaurant I know, so we could all eat together."

"Uh, a few members of our group are Muslims. Does your restaurant have a menu compatible with Muslim dietary rules?"

That question made Ingrid smile widely to Major General Sukarno.

"Don't worry, General: you will feel at home at the Sabai Thai. It is a good Thai restaurant with a very varied menu. It is one of my favorite restaurants in Port Angeles, along with the 'Toga's Soup House Deli & Gourmet' Restaurant."

"Sounds good to me, Ingrid."

"Excellent! One thing before we go to your hotel, the 'Red Lion': I realize that you may want to keep discreet about the reasons for your visit to Port Angeles, so I would counsel that we don't discuss business until we are in a truly private place, like my house, or my office at the Hiller plant."

"A good idea, actually." approved Ngo, who then climbed aboard the minibus with the rest of the delegation.

The group first went to the Red Lion Hotel, situated along the shores of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, where Ingrid helped her visitors to take possession of their rooms, which amply satisfied their new occupants. Then, after they had taken the time to drop their bags in their rooms and since they were getting quite hungry, they loaded back in the minibus, with Ingrid leading them in her Pontiac TRANS AM sports convertible, drove to the Sabai Thai Restaurant, situated a short distance away, close to the airport. While the interior decoration and furniture was not what one would call 'impressive', the Thai menu and the food itself met with the warm approval of Ingrid's guests. Following Ingrid's advice about not discussing business in such a public place, her guests kept to anodyne or personal subjects. Major General Anwar Sukarno, consumed by curiosity about her, was one of the first to ask her a personal question while enjoying his plate of crispy duck.

"You said that your Javanese and Balinese is quite antiquated, Ingrid. From which century was your Indonesian past incarnation?"

Ingrid stopped eating for a moment as she concentrated on long-past souvenirs.

"My oldest incarnation as an Indonesian was 2,000 years ago, in Java. I was then a man named Tambali who built canoes out of tree trunks and produced stone tools for a living. He was married and had five children. He was killed by a falling tree when he was 45. My second incarnation as an Indonesian was as a fruit merchant named Tarumadam, who lived some 1,200 years ago on the island of Java. He was married, four children and drowned during a Tsunami."

"And what about your past Filipino incarnations?" asked Carmen Santiago, the secretary of the Filipino deputy defense minister.

"I lived only once in the Philippines, some six centuries ago. I was then a woman named Malitanang, who lived in a tiny fishing village on the island of Mindanao and who was married to a fisherman. She was the mother of two children and died at the age of 23, from a tropical fever. Before your Vietnamese colleagues could ask, I lived once as a Vietnamese, a modest farmer who lived some 250 years ago in the village of Gia Rai, in the Mekong Delta. His name was Tran Qui Khiem and he was married, with five children. Like Malitanang, Tran died of a tropical fever."

"So, you lived as both a man and as a woman during your past incarnations, correct?" said Antonio Villanueva, making Ingrid nod her head once.

"Correct! Out of my past 71 incarnations, they were fairly equally split between those I lived as a man and those I lived as a woman. From what I know of the past

incarnations remembered by my late adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante, this seems to be a common pattern concerning incarnations.”

“And what was the oldest incarnation you can remember, Ingrid?” asked Villanueva.

“My first ever incarnation was as a nomad woman named Amdir, who lived in the Sumerian Basin some 7,000 years ago.”

“It sounds like you mostly lived humble lives, Ingrid. Were you ever someone of importance?”

“Oh, I was a person of privilege or power a few times in the past, Antonio. My most powerful past incarnation was as Emperor Wou-Ti, of the Chinese Han Dynasty, who reigned some 2,100 years ago. Under his reign, the Chinese Empire reached its largest expansion and he succeeded in repelling the barbarian Xiung-Nu invaders from the North. I was also once a rich Ukrainian aristocrat who died in the Sixteenth Century and was also Aïsha, the third wife of the prophet Mohammed, who ended up dying as a reclused widow.”

Her last sentence had the effect of a lightning bolt on the three Indonesians eating at her table, all of whom were Muslims.

“You were the wife of the Prophet?” asked excitedly Anwar Sukarno, restraining with difficulty the volume of his voice. “Would you accept to tell us about your life with the great prophet Mohammed?”

“I will, but at a later date, once you will have rested from your long trip and once we could have discussed business tomorrow in my office at the Hiller plant. There is however something I can tell you all right now about my incarnations: despite all the scientific and technical progress us Humans did during the past millenniums, we are still basically the same kind of creatures, capable of both the best and the worst. Unfortunately, our weapons are now so powerful that we could now destroy ourselves and this planet if we don’t learn to control better our potential for violence.”

Her nine guests could only soberly nod in agreement at that affirmation.

09:11 (Seattle Time)

Thursday, December 13, 2001 ‘C’

Ingrid’s work office, Hiller aircraft plant

William R. Fairchild International Airport, Port Angeles

Ingrid greeted with a smile the nine members of the Asian delegation as they were guided into her office by her secretary.

"Good morning to you all. I hope that you had a good night's sleep?"

"We did!" answered Lieutenant General Ngo. "My brain is still a bit fuzzy from the time zones switching but I am ready to discuss business with you."

"Excellent! Let's sit around my coffee corner. Would you like some coffee or tea?"

The delegates looked at each other before nodding their heads and stating their individual preferences, which were noted down by Ingrid's secretary. The group then moved to the discussion corner in Ingrid's office, where the usual low coffee table had been temporarily replaced by a large, round table surrounded by seven swiveling chairs, with three more chairs set against a wall for the three aides and secretaries of the delegation. Ingrid then decided to wait until the ordered coffee and tea had arrived before starting to discuss serious things, thus looked at the three general officers and three ministers sitting at the table.

"Let's wait for your beverages to be served before discussing business. So, what do you think of Port Angeles and the Seattle region so far?"

"That it looks nice, with the nearby mountains and the Strait of Juan de Fuca giving it a beautiful natural background." answered Major General Jesus Alba, the commander of the Filipino Air Force. "However, while the local climate is about as humid as that in the Philippines, it is much colder, I must say."

"The view we have from our hotel rooms, which are close to the shore, is most relaxing." added Deputy Defense Minister Antonio Villanueva. "The service at the Red Lion Hotel is also very polite and efficient."

"I am glad to hear that, Minister Villanueva." said Ingrid. "Aah, here are your coffee and tea."

"That was fast!" said Major General Sukarno as Ingrid's secretary rolled a service trolley next to the table and started serving cups around. That made Ingrid smile with malice.

"I anticipated the need for hot beverages and had full pots of coffee and tea prepared as soon as I saw your minibus arrive."

Ingrid waited until everybody had a chance to take a first sip and until her secretary had left before addressing the men around the table.

“Good! Time to get into serious things. First off, what caused your respective governments to send you here to consult with me?”

As the senior officer present, Lieutenant General Ngo Minh Wa spoke first, his expression now most serious.

“First, let me say that our three governments, while quite disparate in terms of political orientations and policies, realized that they had a few identical military needs and also faced mostly similar threats. To be totally frank, our three countries also happen to have limited financial capacities when it comes to buying and operating military hardware without severely impacting important social and economic projects. So we agreed to join together in order to constitute what would be a more interesting customer to major aircraft manufacturers and thus be able to ask for a dedicated aircraft design. In terms of common threats, we are all facing a resurgent and increasingly bullish Communist China, which is pushing more and more its weight around the South China Sea. We also face persistent and wide threats from pirates, smugglers and illegal fishing vessels, thus need to enforce our sovereignty over our waters and economic exclusion zones, or EEZs. That in turn means the need for a sizeable and efficient maritime patrol capability, both from the sea and from the air. However, as you well know, aircraft can cover much larger areas much faster than ships when patrolling and identification is involved. Once detected from the air, ships and boats deemed to be either hostile or engaged in illegal activities can then be challenged by our ships called in by our surveillance aircraft. Normally, simple maritime patrol aircraft can do that job quite efficiently. Unfortunately, many of those hostile or illegal boats, like pirate skiffs and fishing boats, have taken to chasing our patrol aircraft away with rifle and machine gun fire and have become quite brazen in that respect. All three of our nations have also been facing a growing number of instances when Chinese so-called ‘coast guard’ ships have tried to intimidate our own fishermen away from prized fishing grounds inside our EEZs and are also blocking to us access to potential oil or gas deposits, claiming those waters to be Chinese waters. I know that the American government has been supportive of our rights to those waters but we need to be able to police adequately our EEZs ourselves. Thus, we need to reinforce our maritime patrol and law enforcement assets in order to better protect our waters. Unfortunately, typical existing maritime patrol aircraft are quite expensive to acquire and even more expensive to operate, so we need a more affordable, yet practical solution to our patrol needs.”

At that point, Major General Jesus Alba jumped into the conversation.

“We agree with Vietnam’s assessment about the threats and needs concerning maritime security. However, the Philippines also faces another serious category of threat: insurgency. As you well know, we have been faced for decades with a persistent, serious insurgency problem from Communist-leaning guerrilla groups hiding in the jungles covering our islands, groups who also often dabble in drug smuggling and organized crime in order to finance their insurrections. Our army has been fighting hard for years to eradicate or at least contain those insurgent forces but patrolling and guarding all those jungle-covered islands is proving to be a nearly impossible task. What we need is a sizeable force of armed strike aircraft able to patrol large areas and visually detect insurgent movements and activity, then strike those insurgents hard. Simple patrol aircraft, which are typically slow, multi-propeller aircraft with light armament, just can’t do that job properly. The Philippines thus needs to acquire a capable counter-insurgency aircraft which could also patrol our waters and counter pirates and maritime smugglers. Unfortunately, existing counter-insurgency aircraft mostly lack radar and have a limited endurance on station, while buying large numbers of modern, supersonic fighter-bombers or strike aircraft is simply too expensive a proposition for my country.”

“Indonesia also faces the same kind of insurgency, piracy and smuggling threats across its thousands of islands.” said Major General Sukarno, jumping in. “If anything, the surface area we have to patrol is even larger than that of the Philippines, thus greatly complicating our job to enforce our sovereignty. To be totally frank, our army and navy are hogging much of our available defense budgets, thus leaving little for our air force to buy a sizeable fleet of long-range, armed patrol aircraft.”

“Vietnam also has a need to patrol its land borders, in order mostly to counter drug smuggling.” said in turn Ngo. “We also have to face recurring air and maritime incursions by Chinese aircraft and ships bent on claiming sovereignty over our own waters. Finally, having a direct border with China means that we must be ready to resist any future border incursion by Chinese troops. Only armed combat jet aircraft could deal with such incursions. The leaders of our three countries recently met in secret to discuss those mutual threats and agreed on a few common measures and policies, including the need for us to acquire sizeable air fleets of armed patrol jet aircraft able to counter those threats while being affordable to both acquire and operate. Unfortunately, no such aircraft with both desired capabilities and low costs exist. We came to see you about our problem because you are recognized as both a master wielder of airpower

and as an innovative aircraft designer, while Hiller has gained a worldwide reputation for producing innovative and highly efficient aircraft, thanks to you.”

Ingrid slowly nodded her head as she mentally analyzed what the delegates had told her.

“I can see and understand your problem, gentlemen. While the United States and its European allies produce excellent, high-performance combat aircraft, their military doctrines and philosophies are geared mostly towards long-range interdiction and strike missions, plus air interceptions and air superiority missions using standoff guided missiles and gliding bombs, and this mostly against top tier adversaries rather than against low-level threats. They are simply not at their best in making low-level, low-speed combat patrols over large areas, especially when it comes to detecting such hard-to-find targets as insurgents and smugglers hiding in jungles. Also, in your particular case, you need to visually identify and classify possible threats from up close, without the benefit of relying on the support of a network of long-range ground or sea-based radars and radio-listening equipment. I also agree with you that Western combat jet aircraft are too often hideously expensive to acquire and operate to make it possible for your three countries to buy an adequate number of them. Their design and development also too often take many years or even decades before they can enter service. Another point I would note is that low-level patrolling against insurgents, pirates and armed smugglers brings a high risk of getting targeted from the ground by small arms fire. Western Air force commanders typically hate to risk jets worth tens of millions of dollars to such low-level weapons operated by illegal groups. As well, your need to patrol large ocean areas clearly call for patrol aircraft equipped with radar. Most of the present light combat aircraft geared towards counter-insurgency work lack such radar capability, as you already stated. To sum it up, I agree with you that you need a new aircraft geared towards the specific needs of your three countries. Now, you must realize that such a new aircraft will need at least a minimum of equipment, sensors and weapons in order to do its job, so there will still be a floor cost to the acquisition of such a new aircraft.”

“And do you think that Hiller could design and produce such an aircraft while keeping its cost to a minimum, Ingrid?” asked Jesus Alba, his tone reflecting some apprehension.

“Yes!” answered at once Ingrid, making the men around the table visibly relax. “I can say that for a number of reasons. First off, as you said yourself, design and development of Western combat aircraft typically take long years and cost a fortune,

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