



ROBERT LUDLOW FOWLER, 3RD
1937

Robert Fowler spent six years at St. Paul's, entering the First Form in 1931 and graduating in 1937. He greatly loved the School and he had many devoted friends there, for he was a person of unusual soundness and charm. Neither enthusiastic nor cynical, proud without a trace of arrogance, unambitious without being indifferent, he was, even as a boy, a shrewd and kindly judge of people and of things. He was a good scholar. He rowed on the Halcyon crew of 1937 and at Harvard he was No. 4 in two Varsity crews, of which the first, the crew of 1939, after defeating Yale went to England and won the Grand Challenge Cup in the Centennial of the Henley Regatta.

He began his naval training in the spring of 1941, some months before graduating *cum laude* from Harvard. After a six weeks' cruise on the battleship *New York*, he went to the Midshipmen's School on the *Prairie State*, graduated in September, then was sent to the Torpedo School in Newport, Rhode Island, and to the Fire Control School in Washington. Early in 1942, he was assigned as Torpedo Officer to U.S.S. *Duncan* (DD-485). At that time he was still an Ensign, but he was later promoted Lieutenant (j.g.).

The *Duncan* had a short tour of duty in the Atlantic, and then in June, 1942, she sailed for the Southwest Pacific. She operated for a while in the New Hebrides, near Espiritu Santo, before joining a force of cruisers and destroyers stationed south of Guadalcanal under the command of Rear Admiral Norman Scott.

On the afternoon of October 11, 1942, Japanese naval forces were reported in the "slot" between Choiseul Island and the New

Georgia Group. That afternoon also, seventy-five Japanese planes bombed Henderson Field. Admiral Scott moved North with his force, reached the northwestern end of Guadalcanal at about ten o'clock that night, and waited. The Japanese were sighted at a few minutes before midnight and the American force immediately attacked. Aboard the *Duncan*, Fowler "accurately set up his torpedo director and in firing the first torpedo secured the first torpedo hit on a hostile cruiser."¹ Several Japanese ships were sunk or put out of action in less than five minutes. But the engagement, known as the Battle of Cape Esperance, continued for nearly half an hour, and before the Japanese retired, nearly all the American ships were hit, some badly and worst of all the *Duncan*. A shell burst near her torpedo director, killing several men and critically wounding Fowler. Several more shells hit the *Duncan*, uncontrollable fires broke out and she had to be abandoned.

"Everyone, including the wounded, went over the side," wrote the captain to Fowler's father, "and Bob, although unconscious, was gotten into a life-suit and supported by some of the others. The whole crew remained in the water until early Sunday morning [Oct. 12], when they were picked up by the destroyer *McCalla*. Every medical attention was given to the wounded on the *McCalla*, but Bob died the following day."

Fowler was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross "for extraordinary heroism and distinguished service," and in 1943 a new destroyer escort was named for him. At the *Fowler's* commissioning, her captain said in his speech: "If we need inspiration for the job ahead, we need look no further than the example of Robert Ludlow Fowler." The words still have their application. Everything that it fell to him to do he did well. In every human association of which he had been a part, family, school, or crew, and we may well believe aboard the ship on which he was an officer, he had in his effortless way been a source of good sense, of good humor and of happiness.

Fowler had married Patricia Rosalind Cutler in January, 1942. Their son, Robert Ludlow Fowler, 4th, was born four months after his father's death.

¹From the citation accompanying the posthumous award of the Navy Cross.