



LION TYLER MILES

1928

Lion Miles, Executive Officer of U.S.S. *Asheville*, was, in all probability, the first Alumnus of St. Paul's to die as the result of enemy action in the Second World War. His tragic record illustrates the fate of thousands of devoted men in the Western Pacific, after Pearl Harbor, in the days when for lack of equipment and coordination, the Allied forces were disintegrating under the overwhelming blows of a well-prepared enemy.

The gunboat *Asheville*, like all the other American warships in the Western Pacific in 1941, was obsolete. A small, slow, unarmored, light-draft vessel, built for island cruising in the Caribbean and not intended for the open sea, she had been so damaged in a typhoon off the China coast in July, 1941, that she had to be towed to Manila for repairs. She remained in the Philippines, in the Inshore Patrol, until, when Cavite was destroyed, she was ordered to Soerabaja in Java along with her sister ship, the *Tulsa*, and two old minesweepers, the *Lark* and the *Whippoorwill*. This "task force," as it was called, reached Soerabaja on Christmas Eve and was at once ordered to Tjilatjap on the south coast of Java, as quite useless for the battles about to be fought in the Java Sea.

The Dutch commander at Tjilatjap at first moored the *Asheville* and the *Tulsa* so that their guns commanded the harbor entrance and brought their crews, all but a few men, ashore to reinforce his garrison in the event of an amphibious attack. He was expecting some destroyers for convoy duty. But in January, as the destroyers had not come, he sent the old gunboats to sea, equipped with depth charges

they were too slow to use without danger to themselves. From then until the end of February they escorted convoys to Sumatra and to Australia, hunted submarines and searched for survivors. Meanwhile one battle after another was lost to the North of Java, and hope of reinforcement died out at Tjilatjap. It became more and more evident that Java would soon be overrun and that its brave Dutch defenders would of necessity be left to their fate.

On March 1, all American vessels in the vicinity of Java were ordered to make for Australia, and that afternoon the *Asheville* left Tjilatjap in company with several other small American warships. On the 2nd, she was obliged by engine trouble to fall behind. On the 3rd, two of the other ships, by then many miles away, received radio messages from her that she was being attacked by enemy surface vessels. Nothing could be done to help her and on March 4, the Japanese announced that she had been sunk. For years nothing else was known.

The *Asheville's* one known survivor died a prisoner of war at Makassar. Before he died, he told his fellow-prisoners that many of the old gunboat's officers and men were killed in her last action, that some of those who were left managed to abandon ship just before she sank, and that then three enemy destroyers came up; one of which threw out a rescue line. Only one man was taken aboard. The rest were left in the water.

March 4, 1942, would have been Lion Miles' 32nd birthday. He came to St. Paul's a First Former in 1922 and left in the spring of his Fifth Form year to enter Annapolis, at seventeen. At the School he was on the Isthmian football and track teams, and he was an editor of the *Horæ*. His poem, "The Tower of Endless Farewells," which he read at the Library Supper, was awarded the Williamson Medal. Most of his contributions in prose and verse—there were no less than nine of them in his last year—reveal an early interest in the sea and in the East. One of them, "Zamboanga," published when he was sixteen, describes the seas through which fifteen years later the *Asheville* was to pass on the perilous retreat from Cavite to Soerabaja.

Not long after graduating from Annapolis, Miles had married Elizabeth Innes. Their son, Lion Gardiner Miles, was born in 1934.