

Scattered Blossoms

By

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Scattered Blossoms

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Dedication

To my dearest Randi Leigh
who took me to Nikko
when the blossoms and the snowflakes waltzed
in the gentle springtime breeze.

Reviews

“This dramatic story brings to life the closing days of World War II. John Wood captures the courage, faith, and honor of average citizens - American and Japanese - amidst the chaos and brutality of war.”

- Garland Tucker, Author, *The High Tide of American Conservatism*

“John Wood has created a wonderful story which incorporates real history with romantic fiction in such a way to grab the reader immediately. It’s a truly beautiful story of World War II, incorporating ethic, racial, and religious themes, while drawing the reader to the main premise of humanity, we are all the same and made in the image of God. John is blessed with a natural storytelling style in which his words roll over the pages carrying the reader to natural curiosity and wonder. It’s a magnificent book and I highly encourage the reader to take to heart the underlying promise that love perseveres over everything else. As Paul wrote in First Corinthians, ‘So now faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.’”

- Colonel Gary I. Gresh, US Army Retired, Author, *Vietnam Soldier*

“Captivating, heart-rending, riveting, spiritual are but a few words to describe this outstanding book - *Scattered Blossoms* ! Through poignant creativity, John Wood built a transformative bridge between fiction and reality. As a boy during WWII, a combat veteran of Vietnam, and a ‘born again’ Christian, I deeply appreciate this wonderful gift.”

- Colonel Richard Toliver, USAF Retired, Author, *Uncaged Eagle*

Author's Foreword

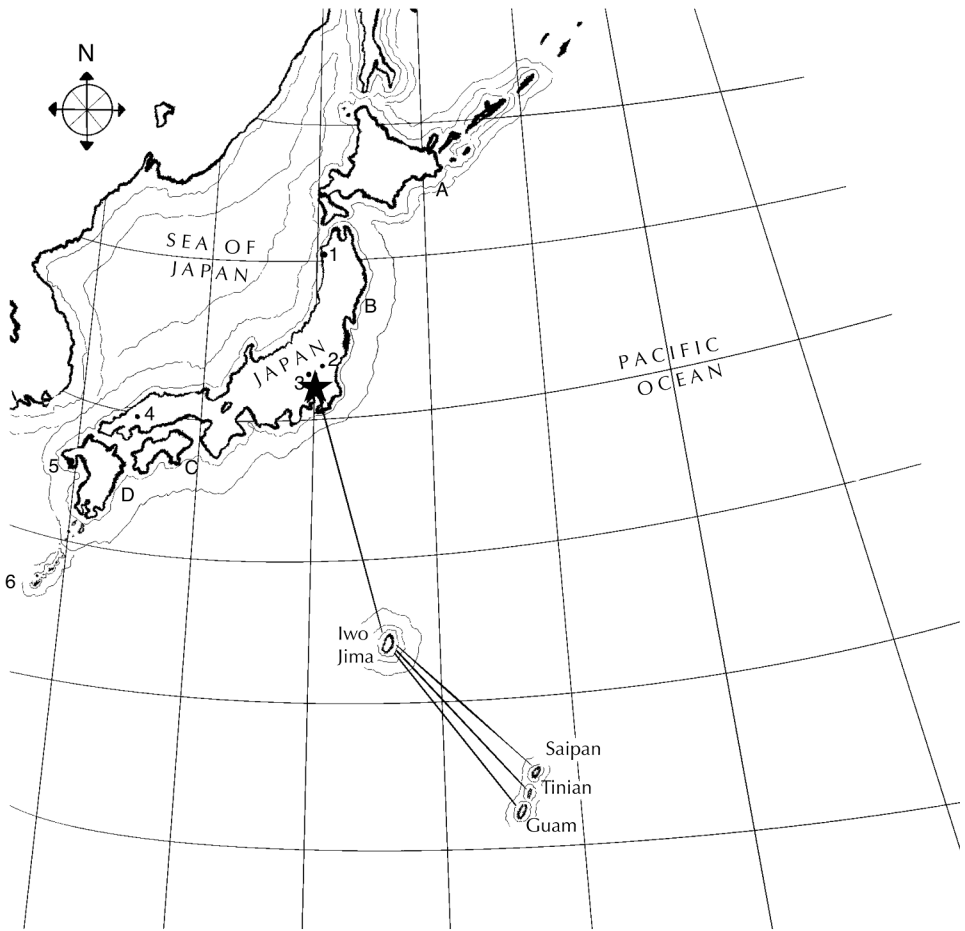
The cherry blossom is the unofficial national flower of Japan. Cherry trees bloom during Hanami, or cherry blossom viewing time, from late March to late May, depending on the location in the archipelago—celebrations of Hanami date back perhaps a thousand years. Symbolic of springtime, to the Japanese, they are a reminder of the transitory nature of life. Small, beautiful, delicate, and ephemeral, the pink and white blossoms last only two weeks, then scatter on the breeze and linger briefly on the ground before fading away. In World War II, Kamikaze and other suicide volunteers were compared to the falling cherry blossoms, pure and radiant, dying for their homeland. The blossoms' beauty inspires awe, poetry, and paintings. Their beauty is a time all too fleeting.

The four-engine Boeing B-29 Superfortress was the largest bomber flown in combat in World War II. Its cigar-shaped fuselage, with its bulbous nose, was 99 feet in length with a wingspan of 141 feet. Fully armed, it weighed 86 tons. It carried a crew of eleven men into combat. It flew as high as 37,000 feet and had a range of 4,260 miles. It cruised at 277 miles per hour but could reach 380 miles per hour. The crew spaces were fully pressurized. On the night of 9 March 1945, 279 B-29s sortied against Tokyo, the capital of the Empire of Japan, scattering 1,665 tons of incendiary bombs targeted at cottage industries and armament factories. The resulting firestorm consumed almost sixteen square miles of the city and killed an estimated 100,000 people. Operating from the islands of Guam, Saipan, and Tinian in the Mariana chain, the XXI Bombardment Command firebombed sixty-seven Japanese cities in 1945. Modified B-29s delivered the atomic bombs against Hiroshima on 6 August and Nagasaki on 9 August 1945. The US Strategic Bombing Survey estimated that as many as 300,000 people died in all the air raids against the home islands. The Emperor and the Cabinet of Japan accepted the Allies' terms on 15 August 1945, averting a catastrophic invasion of Japan and battles of annihilation that probably would have cost millions of lives. The XXI Bombardment Command on Guam controlled three bombardment groups of four bombardment wings each. Each wing was composed of three squadrons, each with approximately 17 B-29 bombers.

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The 509th Composite Group flew from, Tinian Island. Its specially designed B-29s delivered the atomic bombs. The city of Nikko lies approximately 73 miles north of Tokyo. It is the site of the Toshugu Shrine, the burial site of Tokugawa Ieyasu, founder of the Tokugawa Shogunate (c. 1600-1867). Tamozawa Imperial Villa was a refuge for the Imperial family during World War II. The city escaped bombing raids. An Anglican Christian Church has been there since the late nineteenth century.

Author's note: While Tokyo time was one hour ahead of the Mariana Islands; for the sake of simplicity, all times in this story conform to Japan's clock. Times and dates will conform to the military standard twenty-four hour clock. For Japanese names, the author uses the Western convention of first name, then last name.



★ Tokyo

1. Akita
2. Nikko
3. Kumagaya
4. Hiroshima
5. Nagasaki
6. Okinawa

Islands

- A. Hokkaido
- B. Honshu
- C. Shikoku
- D. Kyusu

B-29 Flight Paths from Mariana Islands to Japan

Cast of Characters

In Nikko, Japan, March 1985

Asaka Okita, a gracious, yet enigmatic host

Riko Sumiko Kurita, his daughter, and her husband Saki

The Rev. Shiro Yamaguchi, a deacon

A visitor from America

In Prewar Nikko, Japan

Dr. Makato Fujita, a physician; his wife Sumiko, a nurse

Yuki, their daughter

Michi Mitsuko, Yuki's younger cousin

An American medical missionary family

Mr. Nakamura, a stranger with a suitcase

In the Mariana Islands, 1945

Captains Sam Reid and Dallas Wade, B-29A pilots and best friends from college days.

Master Sergeant John "Pop" Warner, Flight Engineer,
B-29 Bomber *Lake Blackshear*

Tech Sergeant Michael "Dixie" Short, Radio Operator,
B-29 Bomber *Lake Blackshear*

First Lieutenant Al Rocco, Bombardier,
B-29 Bomber *Lake Blackshear*

First Lieutenant Bill Meeks, Navigator,
B-29 Bomber *Lake Blackshear*

Tech Sergeant Larry Wynns, Central Fire Control Operator,
B-29 Bomber *Lake Blackshear*

Staff Sergeant Tony Costa, Radar Operator,
B-29 Bomber *Lake Blackshear*

Sergeant Steven Lewis, Tail Gunner,
B-29 Bomber *Lake Blackshear*

Flight Officer Leslie Hodges, Co-Pilot,
B-29 Bomber *Lake Blackshear*

Major Maxwell “Max” Adams, assistant operations officer,
Photo Recon Squadron.

First Lieutenant Richard Thomas, Pilot designee,
B-29 Bomber *Pitch Black*

Tokyo Area, 1945

Major Matome Tanaka, an ambitious and ruthless Kempeitai
(Secret Police) officer

Master Sergeant Saito, Tanaka’s assistant

First Lieutenant Masao Gunji, medical student,
Imperial Japanese Army Hospital and School

Dr. Kyoji Yahara, a senior doctor at the Imperial Army Hospital

A lost child in a firestorm

The Phantom Tiger, Imperial Japanese Army fighter pilot

Akio, a teenage fighter pilot trainee

Lieutenant Colonel Fujihara Nakamura, a Kempeitai officer and
his wife Ana Oshima

Lieutenant Michio Ida, a Kempeitai officer

Southern Kyushu Military Airfield and Okinawa Area Waters, April 1945

Kenji Ozawa, a teenage Kamikaze pilot trainee

Lieutenant Commander Skipper Orser, US Navy Intelligence Officer

Michi Mitsuko, Imperial Japanese Army Kamikaze pilot instructor

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*In these spring days with the tranquil light
encompassing the four directions,
why should the blossoms scatter
with such troubled hearts?*

Ki no Tomonori, Poem #33*

*... they will be like the morning mist,
like the early dew that disappears...*

Hosea 13:3a

*Fujiwara No Teika, *Pictures of the Heart: The Hyakunin Isshu in Wood and Image*. Translation by Joshua S. Mostow. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2015. P 240. Used by the translator's permission.

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Prologue

Tokyo

0105 Hours, Early Morning, 10 March 1945

As the firewall advanced, the young woman sensed that she was trapped. The inferno raged before, behind, and to the right of her. A blanket of hot, acrid smoke blocked the other side. Her thick, protective clothing smoldered from the intense heat.

The water she used to soak her turban and outer garments had evaporated. She despaired that her attempts to elude this night of horror had been in vain, as were those of hundreds of terrified victims she had passed on her flight. As the fires continued to spread with a surreal rapidity, fanned by the late wintry winds, new silvery needles of incendiary bombs fell from the darkening and droning heavens.

Running along with the masses of men and women, young and old, with children trying to escape, she had seen people suddenly combust as if soaked in flammable fluid and ignited by a mere spark. Then, staggering, screaming, and falling, they died horribly.

Accepting the futility, she no longer tried helping. Her professional instincts from her medical training and religious convictions were overwhelmed by her urge to survive. There was only the impulse to run, and try to find a safe place, some refuge in a turbulent sea of boiling flames. Hell itself could be no worse – or perhaps even hotter. The pavement seemed to be melting beneath her feet.

Her breathing became more difficult as the heated smoke-clogged air seared her throat and lungs. Her eyes seemed to be melting shut. Her mouth yearned for just a sip of cool water.

She stumbled a few more steps then heard a strange wail above. She looked skyward and beheld the inexplicable image of one of the low-flying silver bombers flying upside-down, illuminated by the bright orange flames. As

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it passed into the glowing smoke clouds, she offered a prayer for the doomed enemy crew.

Resigned to her fate, she sought forgiveness for her sins and those dying about her. She prayed for the safety of her family and the man she loved, who ironically might be in one of the planes wreaking deadly havoc on the city this horrible night. Then, stopping and breathing slowly, almost serenely, awaiting her immolation, she heard the pitiful cry of a small child.



Above Tokyo Bay *0120 Hours, 10 March 1945*

Twice, the night-fighter had flown closely around the American bomber as if daring it to fire its deadly accurate defensive weapons and was now satisfied he had verified the name on the nose of the fuselage; the lone pilot skillfully positioned his plane parallel and a few feet higher than its left wing.

Just out of range, the experienced aviator, known to his colleagues as the Phantom Tiger, knew he could easily dive on her and loose a deadly burst from his cannons into the fuel-laden wing, inflicting a fatal wound that would cause her to plunge to the waters below.

Though climbing, the bomber was ascended slowly at three thousand feet, a low altitude highly conducive to night fighter's maneuverability. Yet the Tiger held back, sensing the conflict, the contradiction between duty and mercy.

Such emotions, he believed, were an unnatural Japanese trait. Duty told him to dive and fire, yet something, perhaps moral intuition, forbade him to kill this particular crew. Suddenly, the voice of his young wingman blared through his headphones,

“Lieutenant, I am going in for a head ram. Please tell my family I died

bravely. Banzai!”

Like many young Japanese pilots, short on flying skills, he possessed the desire to die heroically by crashing his plane into an enemy ship and aircraft. The seventeen-year-old flyer now saw such an opportunity. With no prior combat missions and few flying hours in his abbreviated training, the impetuous wingman was willing to pay the supreme sacrifice thus ensuring his soul would be enshrined in Tokyo’s Yasukuni national sanctuary commemorating Japan’s war dead.

The fool!

The more experienced lieutenant searched the sky ahead, looking for his fellow pilot, and saw him coming, silhouetted against a cloud ahead, diving straight down on a trajectory that likely would result in a tremendous collision of metal and fuel three thousand feet above the surface.

Duty and commitment, skill and conscience, contradictions needing instant resolution, he edged his fighter over, aiming to the front of the B-29’s nose. He knew he had but two and a half seconds as he fired a steady burst from his cannons. A brilliant fireball erupted in front of his canopy, momentarily blinding him as he yanked hard on his yoke to pull his fighter up and away.

The forces generated in the maneuver caused him to black out for a few seconds. When he shook his head clear, he was rolling over in an arc. Leveling out, he searched the sky but saw only pieces of flaming debris falling below into the dark sea.

As he headed for his base on the Kando plain, he mentally wrote his report that stated his young wingman sacrificed himself and downed a B-29.

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One

Nikko, Japan
March 1985

Why I was returning still eluded me. A weekend break from business meetings in Tokyo, my first time on Japanese soil since 1939, provided the opportunity. The invitation to visit appeared sincerely extended. Yet an enticing impulse drove me to take this journey back into the home of my childhood, back to my coming of age.

The train journey gave me time to reflect on the question. After all, the last time I had seen Japan was forty years ago, and then I saw it from about twenty-five thousand feet. Through the carriage window, afar off, I could see the peak of Mount Fuji floating above the clouds, sun-rays basting its snow-covered cone. I recalled the times I observed it from the air on my flight paths of destruction. Had it caused any longing, then? No memories came to mind.

Was this short excursion supposed to answer a hidden longing? Maybe, too much of that time had been buried in my consciousness. Perhaps, I had told myself, it was merely nostalgic curiosity. Maybe, I just wanted to see my old homestead again. Maybe, I just wanted to see how the landscape had changed since my departure. And possibly, I could learn what had happened to the people I had known — and loved — as a child, to see my parents' graves, to be again where I had laughed, played, studied, and wept and developed a sense of self. But that thought seemed so contrived that it held no real chance of answering my deeper thoughts.

More likely, the honest answer would be that I was seeking closure, of haunting memories of a time that seemed surreal or illusory. Was I seeking closure on a time destroyed by time itself, and, of course, obliterated by the war that had been over and done four decades ago?

As I stepped off the train onto the Nikko station platform, a strange longing threatened to overwhelm me. Was it an old familiar odor or the alpine air that triggered the emotion? The scenery had not caused it since I saw

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nothing I recognized.

Whatever it was, a strange aching cloud of wanting and sadness enveloped me. I almost stepped back on the train. I recalled what the American author Thomas Wolfe had written so many decades ago – something about not trying to go back.

At least not back to the home, I knew as a child with all the people and events that were part of my youth. But then, I already knew it would not be the same. It would never be the same. How could it? I finally gathered my senses and walked in the direction of my childhood home.

Despite the obvious late afternoon chill, I carried my parka. My wool sweater blocked the crispness from the penetrating breeze that gently scattered the cherry blossoms, mingling them with a light snow shower – the strange beauty of floating organic pink petals and soft frozen sparkling water crystals waltzing together in the afternoon air.

I knew the house would be there. I had already communicated with the present owner, who graciously invited me to come. As I crossed the Daiya River, I paused to enjoy the view of the water flowing gently beneath the bridge.

Suddenly, mesmerized by the gentle ripple of water flowing over the rapids, the memory of a terrifying day gripped me. Torrential rains had caused the bank to overflow. It was a day, not long before my relocation to the United States, when two teenage boys displayed a serious lack of judgment.



Nikko, Japan
Late April 1939

I asked Michi what would happen if he was called up in the military draft. He answered without hesitation that he would request aviation training.

“Are you concerned about the aggression in China?”

He seemed puzzled momentarily. Then he realized I was speaking of Japan's, not China's, hostility.

"No," he said finally. "They started this. We need to settle it justly."

"What about the atrocities by Japan's Army at Nanking?"

"That's rubbish. Chinese propaganda fueled by Western interests."

"Michi, my father saw pictures of brutal reprisals against innocent women and children. And so did Mama Sumiko and Dr. Sumiko."

Michi said nothing. I could tell he was becoming angry.

"I do not believe those pictures are true."

"But the testimony of so many witnesses – Christian witnesses ..."

"No!" he answered emphatically. "They are mistaken. My countrymen would not do such a thing. I just know it."

We were silent as we neared the river's bank. Clearly, Michi did not want to talk on the subject. He was troubled but defiant.

"What about you," he said finally, "when you get back in America?"

"The United States does not have a military draft, at least not now. My parent's home country is isolationist."

"If your country is forced into a war, will you join your army?" He regarded me with knowing eyes.

"I suppose I will have to." After a moment, I added, "I also will seek pilot training." Michi laughed.

"Maybe we will be allies."

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I chuckled and said, “Now somehow, I doubt that.” The waters surged through the narrow riverbed. We knew there would be no fishing today. We stood on the bank, entranced by the water’s relentless flow.

“You really should not listen to Western propaganda,” Michi said, staring into the waters.

I am still unsure what happened, but he pivoted toward me to say speak. His foot slipped, and, arms wheeling, he tumbled into the torrent.

Momentarily stunned, I dove toward the bank and grabbed Michi’s jacket collar. Panic etched on his face, he turned and thrust his hand toward me. I grabbed and held his slippery wrist. Our grips weakened, and I knew I would soon lose my friend.

The chocolate waters swirled angrily around the lad like a hungry monster trying to devour its prey. Michi’s ebony hair clung to his face. His eyes a moment before displayed abject fear, now only resignation.

“Let me go,” he gasped. “Save yourself!”

“No!” I shouted above the roar.

Then Michi let go and slipped under the maelstrom of churning water. Horrified, I kicked off my shoes and jumped into the torrent.

Two

Nikko

March 1985

The vision vanished as I heard the word,

“Konnichiwa.”

It was the soft voice of a woman. I turned and beheld an elderly, smiling Japanese lady dressed in a traditional kimono. Bowing, I responded politely. She bowed and walked on past me. I watched her briefly, then turned, and continued my journey. As I walked along only a few minutes passed before I recognized the street.

At first, I thought little had changed in the neighborhood, except the trees and bushes had grown taller and wider, and the street must have been paved after the war. The cherry trees still guarded my path, sentinels to a trail into my long-lost past.

I stood before the roofed wooden gate of the scene that was etched into my memory. To the left was a newer gate large enough for an automobile to pass. Taking a deep breath, I opened the gate, into the small yard, I noted the landscaping was still familiar. My father and his host had seen to it that an experienced gardener kept it neat and inviting.

To know that practice had not changed in five decades brought a strange, wistful, yet comforting sentiment. The house, large by Japanese standards, appeared the same as far as I could see.

The roofline displayed the gentle curve I remembered, but the roof itself now consisted of expensive Hinoki bark. Knocking on the front door and then pulling the bell chain, I waited expectantly, my heart beating a little faster. A shuffling sound permeated the wooden portal.

The door cracked and finally opened to reveal a woman, perhaps in

Author's Afterword

The idea for *Scattered Blossoms* leaped into my head during a visit to Quebec City in 2017. I was thinking about the day my wife Randi and I had spent in Nikko, Japan, during Hanami in March 2001. The memory of snow and cherry blossoms dancing together in a gentle breeze became vivid in my reflections. Then, searching the internet, I found the poem quoted at the beginning of my story. Suddenly, the idea for a story germinated. I recalled a book I had read – *Downfall*, by Richard B. Frank – in which he relates the firebombing mission on Tokyo on the night of 9-10 March 1945. The story began writing itself in my mind. I trust the reader sees the connection between the scattered cherry blossoms and the scattered lives of the people in the story.

When we were youngsters, growing up in Crisp County, Georgia, my brother and I used to crawl around inside a World War II B-29 bomber (I later learned it was an F-13 reconnaissance bomber) in the Georgia Veterans State Park at Lake Blackshear, about nine miles from our hometown. That airplane has since been removed to a fenced-in enclosure to prevent vandalism. I learned from Park officials that the plane had flown out of Guam, and the crew received the Distinguished Flying Cross after flying through a typhoon on just two engines. This airplane is named *The City of Lansford*, after the small town in Carbon County, Pennsylvania. The citizens of that area raised money to have a bomber named for their town. I also remember seeing the mothballed B-29s sitting next to the highway whenever we passed by Robins Air Force Base in the early 1950s.

I have loved B-29s from the days of my youth. In researching material for this story, I read several books on the bombers and their missions in World War II. Many of the action described in *Scattered Blossoms* is based on accounts of the missions flown out of the Mariana Islands. I also gleaned ideas about the Kamikaze mission from stories in several history books on the war in the Pacific. Other books that shaped my thinking for this story include *Mission to Tokyo* by Robert Dorr, *I Saw Tokyo Burning* by Robert Guillain, *Bringing the Thunder* by Gordon Bennett Robinson, Jr, *Japan's Longest Day* by The Pacific War Research Society, *Behind Japan's Surrender* by Lester Brooks, *The Last Mission* by Jim Smith and Malcolm McConnell, *Inferno* by Edwin P. Hoyt,

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Whirlwind by Barrett Tillman and *Blankets of Fire* by Kenneth P. Werrell.

The sub-theme of racial hatred by both the Japanese and Americans in the war era is particularly relevant today. How we see the “other” shapes our perspectives when they become enemies or neighbors. It is even worse when we dehumanize them. In the Asia-Pacific war, that racial animus went both ways.

I also learned that there is an Anglican Church in Nikko, Japan. Known as *The True Light Church*, it was originally built of wood in 1899, rebuilt in stone in 1914.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Professor Joshua S. Mostow, University of British Columbia Department of Asian Studies, for his permission to use his beautiful translation of *Ki no Tomonori's Poem 33*.

I also am deeply grateful to:

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And my wife, Randi Leigh, who is a loving nitpicker and encourager.



John I. Wood and *The City of Lansford*, Lake Blackshear, Georgia

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About the Author

John I. Wood is a retired career Army officer who served four years in Asia. He commanded at company, battalion, and brigade level. A graduate of the U. S. Army War College, he also served on the school's faculty before retirement. He and his wife Randi served together as missionaries in The Anglican Diocese of Egypt. They live in North Carolina. John is working on a second novel.

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