

17 MAY 1997

## FIRST SAVO - THE LOST BATTLE

Victories are remembered and celebrated, while defeats tend to be pushed under the rug of history. Nevertheless, defeats are history too, and some of the most inspiring acts of human bravery, courage and selfless sacrifice in all of the long annals of American military achievement are to be found here.

Here too are to be found hard lessons that would not have been confronted - may not even have been understood - until the price for ignoring them is presented.

The first battle of Savo Island in the British Solomon Islands was fought in the early hours of August 9, 1942, between two Naval cruiser forces, Japanese vs. American/Australian. Some might say that it was a purely naval battle, and therefore not an integral part of Marine Corps history, but Marine aviators died in this naval battle, and that makes it forever a part of our history.

The survivors, Navy and Marine, who took part in this first offensive operation by the United States against Japan in World War II are passing now, and it is fitting and proper that the full story of this lost battle be told from their eyewitness viewpoint, while there are witnesses still alive to tell it. I write as a Marine aviator who survived that battle; I was there, and you can vicariously live the experience with me.

How would any military historian, or indeed almost any World War II vintage Marine, answer the question "When did the first Marine pilots get to Guadalcanal?" Their answer would almost certainly cite the arrival of John L. Smith's VMF-223 and Dick Mangrum's VMSB-232 on the 20th of August, 1942. They came direct from the Hawaiian islands, flying off the Jeep carrier Long Island. Theirs was a climactic arrival.

It brought jubilation to the hearts of the beleaguered Marines around Henderson Field; Marines who up to this time had had to bow their backs and impotently curse and endure the lashing of repeated Japanese air attacks from fortress Rabaul, without any real means of fighting back against these scourges.

This answer is understandable, but incorrect. None of the many books which have appeared since World War II covering this operation have apparently been aware of the fact that there were indeed Marine aviators present from the very beginning of the battle of Guadalcanal - a desperate encounter forever memorialized in Marine Corps history and symbolized by the battle streamer attached to The Marine Corps Colors marked "Guadalcanal".

Even the formidable Admiral Morrison in his outstanding history of Marine Corps Aviation, which is exhaustive in its coverage of the events of that critical period of Marine Corps aviation history, makes no mention of it. Nor does Edwin P. Hoyt cover it in his "Guadalcanal". Thomas G. Miller's excellent book "The Cactus Air Force" also seems unaware of it .

Even at this late date then, justice and a concern for the accuracy of the historical record of Marine Corps operations in World War II requires that the record be set straight and the facts recorded for posterity. Marine aviators gave the last full measure of devotion here, far in advance of their more famous counterparts in the "Cactus Air Force" at a later date. Their presence at this battle and their sacrifice are put on record here. The fighter strip at Turtle Bay on Espiritu was named for two of them: Kirby-Schuessler field. As long as the Marine Corps exists and cares for its dead; as long as any member of old VMO-251 is alive; as long as courage and sacrifice are revered anywhere, their memory will remain ever green. May God rest their souls!

This account of the landings which took place on August 7 and the hellish events of the early morning hours of August 9, 1942 is recorded here as it was lived by these five Marine pilots who were attached for temporary duty to the fleet for this operation - "Watchtower". This is also the story of the few non-flying Marines regularly assigned to the ships' Marine Detachments, who endured the same hell and survived - some of them. But mainly this is the story of five young Marine pilots and their introduction to war - at First Savo; at Guadalcanal.

The five pilots were members of Marine Observation Squadron 251 (VMO-251), then newly arrived overseas from the United States (10 July) on the troop transport Heywood. They had been set down at Tontouta Air Base on the Free French island of Noumea, New Caledonia. On 23 July in accordance with plans developed at three and four-star level in Hawaii these five were temporarily detached from their home squadron at Tontouta for service with the fleet for the original assault on Guadalcanal.

The pilots were Captain William R. Campbell, USMC, and Second Lieutenants Roy T. Spurlock, Robert Todd Whitten, Carl Schuessler, and William P. Kirby, USMCR. They were in position to observe with awe the firing of the 8-inch diameter main battery shells from U.S. heavy cruiser Quincy, which opened the battle of Guadalcanal, B.S.I., on August 7, 1942. This was just after good daylight had appeared.

Of these five Marine pilots, three were assigned to the US heavy cruiser Astoria. Two - Second Lts. Carl Schuessler and William P. Kirby - had been separated from the rest and were assigned to the heavy cruiser Vincennes. They were destined never to leave it. They would be killed nine days later in Admiral Mikawa's Japanese cruiser attack on our cruisers; a battle now known as the First Battle of Savo Island, and one of the worst tactical defeats ever recorded in the annals of the United States Navy.

The third Marine pilot, 2nd Lt. - Later Colonel - Robert Todd Whitten, has died of natural causes since World War II. He was a member of that 1942 class of Marines who are now rapidly passing from the scene, and who have now handed the baton to another young and equally eager class of young Marines whom they so much resembled in their own youth.

The fourth pilot, our peerless leader, was Captain William R. Campbell - now Colonel, USMC, Retired. Unfortunately he is now medically handicapped and is unlikely to chronicle these events for us. I am therefore one of the two Marine pilots left alive who have the knowledge to write the history of these events as an eyewitness observer. And at age 76 it occurs to me that I had best be getting on with it if this evidence is not to be lost to Marine Corps archives and memories forever.

On December 7, 1941 - the day which we heard President Franklin D. Roosevelt say will live in infamy - I was one of a sizeable group of new Naval Ensigns and Marine Corps Second Lieutenants at North Island; aviators who had recently graduated from the U.S. Navy flight schools and who had come together in ACTG\* at NAS San Diego for advanced training in current fleet type aircraft. These were almost universally Reserve officers who had signed on for four years service after graduation from flight school, and who had signed a pledge not to get married until the end of the four years!

Following the Pearl Harbor debacle, some of us were directed to fly anti-submarine patrols along the West Coast, while the instructors flew regular combat air patrols with live ammunition out of North Island. In those days absolutely dependable rumors had it that the Japanese Navy was forming up just off the coast to attack us! North Island was severely blacked out. If the Japs had truly been out there they had only to pick out the black bulls-eye in the middle of the lights of San Diego, and that would have been NAS San Diego!

\* Advanced Carrier Training Group

When the jitters died down we continued training in fleet type planes and manuevers. The highlight of our training was our qualification as carrier pilots, which consisted of five arrested landings aboard a Navy carrier. When the brand new carrier HORNET arrived in port, after a close shave with a German submarine on the way down the East Coast, we were put aboard and sent to sea for three days to qualify.

As a sidelight on history, the Hornet was then commanded by Captain - later Vice Admiral - Marc Mitscher, the future greatest air task group commander in the Pacific. As a further footnote these fledgling pilots who qualified on Mitscher's Hornet this day were the very same ones who laid thousand pound bombs on the flight decks of the Akagi, Kaga, Soryu, and Hiryu during the battle of Midway, June 4, only weeks later.

Following this qualification cruise mysterious orders arrived for the young pilots, Navy and Marine, who were assembled at San Diego. Rumor had it that a quota of our group of pilots were to be sent to Pearl Harbor, and all who were designated to go were to draw 782 (field service) gear and be prepared to leave immediately. The selection was made in accordance with seniority, based on the number of our flight class in flight school; lower numbered classes were senior and were therefore the first chosen. As it happened, the quota was filled and selection was cut off just before my flight class was reached.

By that much did I miss being a part of that magnificent group of young and eager Marine pilots who went to Pearl Harbor and thence to Midway Island with such high hopes. Almost to a man they were slaughtered in the battle of Midway, while flying the outclassed Brewster F2A fighter, and the antiquated old dive bomber, the Vought SB2U3, against the then far superior Zero fighter. Honor to them all! They died with little chance to succeed, but they tried anyway. They went out doing their full duty to the death. There is no greater way to die.

Upon completion of Advance Carrier Training Group's syllabus, the Marine pilots remaining were reassigned to a regular Marine squadron - VMO-251 - then forming on North Island under Major - later Major General- John N. Hart.

Ostensibly an observation squadron, VMO-251 was actually a full fledged fighter squadron armed with Grumman Wildcat F4F-3 fighters, with four .50 caliber Machine guns apiece. As was the custom at that time these F4F-3s were hand-me-downs from the Navy. In fact these were the very same planes which my Navy ACTG pilot friends had used to qualify as carrier pilots on the USS Hornet, while I and four more Marine pilots were qualifying in Brewster F2As.

These F4F-3s were turned over to the Marines when the Hornet returned to port in San Diego. I saw these planes taxied to the VMO-251 flight line when the ship docked. The Navy was being rearmed with the new F4F-4s, which had six .50 Cal. machine guns instead of four.

These F4F-3s are the same planes which appear in the Paramount picture called "Wake Island", now familiar to the late night TV screens. By a quirk of circumstance, VMO-251 provided the Marine Aviation pilots and ground support personnel for this classic story of one of the most inspiring defensive stands ever fought.

The acquisition of these semi-obsolete F4F-3s by VMO-251 was to play an unforeseen but controlling part in the future assignment of VMO-251. Due to the fact that VMO-251 was already overseas on New Caledonia in July of 1942, armed with these obsolescent combat planes, it was held at high command levels that VMO-251, a superb squadron which had originally been slated to go into Guadalcanal as the first fighter squadron to defend the airstrip, was not properly equipped for the task.

It was considered more practical to bring in a new squadron already armed with the new Grumman F4F-4s than to rearm VMO-251 with the new model Wildcats, which would have had to be shipped to them overseas by using bottoms already in stringent shortage.

At this point all Marine fighter squadrons were made up primarily of young pilots just out of Navy Flight Schools at Pensacola, Jacksonville, and later Corpus Christi. All were theoretically equally well trained - and equally green as far as combat experience was concerned.

For this reason the call went to Captain - later Colonel - John L. Smith's VMF-223 and Major - later Lieutenant General - Dick Mangrum's VMSB-232, both of MAG-23; and history was made there which will forever reflect honor on those sent in to Guadalcanal in lieu of VMO-251. Had VMO-251 been allowed to inaugurate operations there as planned I have no doubt that an equally brilliant record would have been forthcoming. VMO-251 had the quality.

VMO-251, although prey to this headquarters decision, was a unique squadron. Nothing like it has been seen since. It was prepared to operate unsupported and without resupply for six months. Each of its fighter aircraft was equipped with camera mounts for reconnaissance, in addition to its fighter role. The squadron had a complete integral radar operating center within it. It was equipped to operate independently, and to open and operate its own airstrips, which it did twice. Its personnel and its state of training were unsurpassed.

The caliber of personnel in VMO-251 is indicated by the fact that from the ranks of that one squadron came at least nine full Colonels, one Brigadier General, two Major Generals, and Charles H. Hayes, Lieutenant General, Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps.

One of our corporals, Glen Keithley, received a battlefield

commission and rose to the rank of Major, and one of our Master Technical Sergeants, Robert G. Straine, rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel before he retired.

It was to VMO-251, then at Tontouta airbase in French New Caledonia, that the order went out on 23 July, 1942 to furnish five pilots for unspecified duty. The five of us were simply told to pack our bags and to be ready to leave within the hour, with no information as to where we were going or what we going to do once we got there.

An hour later we were riding down the road in the back of a stake-body truck, closely pursued by the black clouds of mosquitoes which infested the island, on our way across the spine of lower New Caledonia to a destination which turned out to be the beach encampment of our old friends from Samoa - Lt. Col Merritt A. Edson's First Raider Battalion. We reported to and were briefed by a very sharp Marine Major, Sam Griffith, the Exec of the first Raiders.

Lying off the end of a very narrow and rickety dock was an old WW I destroyer, with only two of its stacks remaining. A short while later, after an adventure with that dock, we were safely aboard the destroyer, the USS Colhoun. This was now classified as an AG; a destroyer from which half the engines and boilers had been removed, and the space filled with lines of bunks five layers deep used to carry Marine Raiders on their amphibious operations. The Colhoun was one of a group of four such AGs modified for carrying raiders. The others in the group were the Little, the Gregory, and the McKean. Although we did not know it at the time the Colhoun was to succumb to a Japanese air attack within a matter of weeks.

The Colhoun was an old World War I design. Her bow had little flare. It cut down into the water like a sharp knife, and green water was known to roll right up the forward deck



and smash against the bridge windows in heavy weather. We often thought submarine pay would not be inappropriate for its crew.

Our small group of five Marines achieved a strong sense of comradeship between ourselves, and also with the ship's Captain and the officers of the LTC Edson's 1st Raider Battalion while we were aboard the Colhoun. We would have liked nothing better than to stay on her together for the assault we now knew was to be made on Guadalcanal - a place absolutely no one had ever heard of. We did not know then that the Japs had picked it for us by starting to build an airfield there.

Five days later, we suddenly noticed other ships gathering around us. Three huge aircraft carriers rolled in over the horizon. Six heavy cruisers showed up with many transport ships, including the transport ship Heywood, which had brought VMO-251 from San Diego to Noumea, New Caledonia, and then had left hurriedly to go to New Zealand to pick up part of the troops which were now slated to go ashore on Guadalcanal or Tulagi on 7 August.

The Heywood was a former passenger/cargo ship. It could cruise steadily at 17 knots, and its Captain Knowles was a former submariner. He was an ardent submarine enthusiast with firm convictions that eventually all ocean cargo would be transported on submarines! In today's climate he could yet be right, and if so he was far ahead of his time!

Destroyers and other ships besides the Heywood showed up at the rendezvous, until I was able to count 73 altogether, the most awesome assembly of ships of war I had ever seen in my life. I was secretly amazed that this many ships could all find this one little spot in a vast ocean of water - at the same time! My impression was that with this mighty assemblage of force we should simply head straight out for Tokyo Bay! (I was young and inexperienced in those days.)

This assembly spelled the end of our small group's togetherness on the Colhoun, for within a couple of hours we found our group separated. Two of us, Carl Schuessler and Bill Kirby, were taken with their gear by a small boat to the heavy cruiser Vincennes. We never saw them again.

This is a time for paying tribute to Carl Schuessler and Bill Kirby. Bill was a friendly, quiet, handsome, and impressive young Marine pilot. He joined us at North Island after graduating from flight school. He was easy to get along with, was highly thought of in the squadron, and certainly would have made his mark in the Marine Corps had he been allowed to live.

Carl Scheussler was equally well accepted in the squadron, but had a more flamboyant personality. He was a fine physical specimen, having at one time I understand been a professional acrobat. He was somewhat unconventional in his ideas. He was something of an idol to our enlisted men on the transport ship Heywood, having on one occasion walked up the ladder from the main deck of the ship to the bridge - upside down on his hands! This of course attracted unfavourable attention from our Ship's Captain Knowles. He considered this as conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman, and forbade any further displays of this nature!

All of us had purchased personal hunting knives before we left the States, which we wore constantly. We were all in awe of the size of Carl's hunting knife. It was of the dimensions of a small machete, and while we were aboard the Colhoun Carl would sit on the deck with some of Edson's Raiders and sharpen this knife incessantly, announcing that he was going to cut the gizzard out of the first Jap he met. The Colhoun's captain observed that he had never before met anyone who spent all his time sharpening knives, and he wondered if all Marines were that bloodthirsty!

I don't know about the bloodthirsty part, but I heard later that Carl, having no battle station assigned on the Vincennes at General Quarters, (nor did we on the Astoria) manned the rear seat machine gun on one of the scout planes sitting on the catapult and had shot down an attacking Jap plane with it! I cannot vouch for the authenticity of this story, but it is pure Schuessler all the way!

Like the Midway pilots, they were cut down in their dawning. We missed them. The Corps missed them.

The remaining three of us, "Soupy" Campbell, Todd Whitten, and myself found ourselves assigned to the heavy cruiser Astoria. This ship looked like a city compared to the little Colhoun from which we had come. Since we were supernumeraries and with the ship crowded with wartime crew and extra personnel besides us, we were quartered on canvas folding cots in the Captain's outer cabin - a long room with a magnificent conference table where the Captain could entertain as many as twenty guests for dinner, in happier times. Along one side of the compartment was a 12 foot mahogany sideboard filled with beautiful sterling silver flatware, given to the ship as a commissioning present by the City of Astoria, Oregon, for which the ship was named.

There were overstuffed furniture and floor lamps as well, all fastened to the floor for obvious reasons. The Captain's desk was here, with a very large sheet of plate glass as a desk top. All of this in little more than a week would be resting on the bottom of Ironbottom Sound, along with the flesh and bones of hundreds of men.

We found that we were on board for the purpose of flying as rear seat observers in the cruiser's scout planes - SON type

biplanes manufactured by the now defunct naval aircraft factory in Philadelphia, PA.

Their maximum speed was about 100 Kts. in a 90 degree vertical dive with engine wide open! We found out about being shot off the catapult - a wrenching experience! We also learned about how to land on the sea and how they got those things back aboard the cruiser. We learned how the other half lives! Fascinating!

The fleet wasted no time getting under way for its practice area, Koro Island in the Fiji group. The practice invasion 28 to 31 July, 1942 consisted of throwing a few shells into the island, followed by a few boatloads of Marines who did not remain very long ashore. The Admirals and General Vandegrift pronounced this dry run operation a fouled-up mess, though it looked all right to me from my vantage point high above in a cruiser scout plane.

For the first time I was able to see our ships both above and below the water line. The water was so crystal clear and calm that it seemed the big ships were floating in nothing but air. What a sight!

10 days later four of these magnificent cruisers would be smashed and lying on the bottom of ironbottom sound, off Guadalcanal, and a fifth would be lying up against an inadequate dock at Tulagi for emergency repairs, with its bow torn off by a Japanese "Long Lance" torpedo. There would be hundreds of casualties throughout the fleet. So much for heading right out for Tokyo!

The fleet headed out bravely for Guadalcanal from the Fijis, on 31 July. On 7 August 1942 at two o'clock in the morning, Guadalcanal time, we went to general quarters. Steaming along in the dark we arrived at Lunga Point just at daybreak, a clear day. At about 0630 the show opened with a big bang. Shore bombardment by the Quincy was quickly joined by every ship in the fleet, including my own, the Astoria. I found our Captain,

W. G. Greenman, loved to fire simultaneous 9-Gun main battery (8-inch guns) salvos, but I didn't share his enthusiasm for it. The concussion and the noise were overpowering to a novice like me. I learned also what such salvos could do to our own ship. Paint cracked and flaked off; insulation came loose; battle lanterns and bulbs broke, and generally the ships quarters looked like someone had trashed a house no one had lived in for years.

I found that the concussion was so powerful that my leg would involuntarily be jerked off the deck when the guns fired. Our maps showed that the Japs had artillery pieces on or about Lunga Point, and we expected some return fire from the shore, although it quickly became obvious that the Jap garrison on Guadalcanal had taken to their heels at the first shell. (Not so on Tulagi, or Gavutu, or Tanambogo as we learned later. They stayed to fight to the death since they had little space to retreat to). I later heard that there were unfinished meals still on the table in Tulagi and the next day when our Marine ground troops reached the airstrip on Guadalcanal.

The Jap shore defense guns on Guadalcanal were never able to fire a shot at the fleet, if they ever existed.

I have already mentioned that it was our job to observe the battle area from the back seat of the cruiser scout planes and report any enemy activity back to the Commanding General on the ship during the initial stages. There was little to report, since it was obvious that the Japs had fled to the jungle as soon as the ships appeared, and there were no organized areas of resistance as far as I could see.

That was to come later, when the Japanese Col. Ichiki's detachment was sea-lifted from Guam to Guadalcanal to drive these upstart Americans back into the sea from whence they came. This was the same Ichiki Battalion which had been originally assigned to go ashore on Midway island and destroy the garrison

there after the Jap striking force had taken care of any resistance from any source.

My radio call sign was Unit Easy Three. The Unit Easy part was the cruiser Astoria, and the three was our particular scout plane. I wish to report right here that I did not report to the ship (the Astoria) nearly as often as I wanted to. I had a lot of resistance from my front seat pilot. He strenuously objected to the fact that his transmitter had to be turned on for me to report. Used too much juice or something.

Anyway there was little to report, except that there was little to report. We were circling very low (about 150 feet) over the erstwhile Jap encampment near the airstrip when a machine gun opened up on us. Naturally it was well hidden, and we could not see where it was coming from, but I assure you we could hear it - every round! This was the first time I had ever been shot at with intent to kill. Not a pleasant experience, but only a fleeting shadow of what was to come to us the second night hence.

When the first carrier planes screamed down on Tulagi they hoped to destroy the radio transmitter before the Japs could warn Rabaul that the attack was taking place. They failed, and word was flashed to Rabaul that many ships were in the roadstead and invasion was taking place.

Admiral Mikawa, commanding the Japanese 8th Fleet at Rabaul, took immediate action. Cobbling together a scratch force of 6 Heavy cruisers, one light cruiser, and 1 destroyer, he embarked in heavy cruiser Chokai and set off down the Slot for the waters off Lunga Point, at Guadalcanal, meanwhile dispatching what air strength he could muster to attack the shipping in the invasion fleet. These arrived about 12:30 or so over the amphibious group. I shall never forget the silver of those "Betty" bombers directly overhead in formation silhouetted

against the blue sky over Guadalcanal. The carrier fighters were vectored out against them. Our cruiser, the Astoria, was performing violent turns to confuse their bomb aiming. Many smoke palls followed stricken bombers and not a few of our defending fighters down to the water. This attack was quickly over and the invasion continued.

Getting supplies ashore in those early days was more difficult than it became later when landing ships were developed which could belly up to the shore and discharge directly onto the beach. We were dependant on the genius of old Andrew Jackson Higgins, who had designed and built the famous Higgins Boat. It was not the best answer, but it was the best we had then, and thank God for him. What a work horse that old boat was!

A large group of these boats was standing off the shore at any given time, awaiting space to land and unload. This was the famous "Higgins boat Navy" which was a sworn enemy of Jap soldiers swimming to shore later in the Guadalcanal campaign when their ships were sunk underneath them by aerial attack by our planes. A Jap who did not get ashore was one less Jap to face in the next attack on the perimeter. The Higgins Boat Navy was dedicated to seeing that he did not get ashore to continue the war!

Since the Guadalcanal operation became a contest of resupply beginning immediately, these Higgins boats were of the essence in our successfully hanging on to this embattled island. A great debt is owed to Andrew Higgins, to the U.S. Navy, and to RADM Richmond Kelly Turner, the Amphibious Force Commander, in this respect. I never really admired "Kelly Turner". I regarded him as a stubborn, arrogant busybody who routinely interfered in other peoples' business, and there is no question his highhandedness in the Navy Department just before Pearl Harbor was a major factor in our being caught there with our defenses down on Dec. 7, 1942. (See Admiral Leighton's

definitive account "I Was There").

But be that as it may, Admiral Turner was a potent and effective amphibious force commander at Guadalcanal and throughout the Pacific, and his contribution must not be minimized.

The first day on Guadalcanal was busy. Marines' personal gear was left on board ship when they made the assault landings at Tulagi and Guadalcanal. Here their effects stayed and here they were when Admiral Turner ordered the transport fleet to leave the now unprotected island at five o'clock in the afternoon of 9 August. And in the next few days here it was that these personal effects were broken into by Navy personnel while stored on the ships, and much material stolen. The sleazy side of heroism. These people are always with us, it seems.

The night before the attack on Guadalcanal was not a restful one for anybody. General Quarters was at 0200 for everybody. Then a day of excitement, air raids, maneuvering, and general stress. The second day brought more heavy air attacks, more unloading at a breakneck pace, and unrelieved stress. This fact should be remembered, for it played a controlling role in what followed that second night.

A particularly heavy air attack on the second day, August 8, was expected based on information from the coast watchers. At any rate our Captain Greenman decided he did not want his scout planes on board his ship when the attack came because of the fire hazard they represented. It was my turn in rotation to fly when the ship's aircraft were to be "dispersed",

We were catapulted when the ship came into the wind. We found that other ship's Captains were of like mind, for there were five cruiser float planes up there milling around. Joining in formation we crossed over to the Tulagi side and then back



across the sound to the island of Guadalcanal. As we slowly flew away from Tulagi I looked out over the rudder to the rear. Suddenly, over Florida Island came a large formation of Jap Aircraft. I counted them to be 14 Zeros and the rest "Bettys", 51 planes altogether. They were streaming across our stern, and I fully expected to see one or more of the zeros detach themselves to come over and take care of us sitting ducks. Suddenly I saw a lone plane headed right at us from where they were.

I opened the cover of the one lone .30 Cal. machine gun available to the rear seat gunner in an SOC or SON, pulled the gun into position, looked at the 1/64 inch cloth armor plate protecting me, and prepared to sell my life dearly.

Not my time to go, praise God! When the plane reached us I found it was one of our carrier dive bombers, a lone SBD, who was running from the Jap planes even as we were. The Japs ignored us completely, and I am alive to write this account.

Not many of the Japs are, however. It was a field day against the low flying "Betty" bombers. At least 15 were destroyed, and undoubtedly more disappeared on the long way back to Rabaul.

But the stress level on the ships' crews mounted, and more hours went by without sleep. The reckoning was only a few hours away.

At 2300 that evening aboard ship I was told of the Jap fleet coming down the slot from Rabaul, and that we could expect attack sometime tonight or tomorrow morning. We expected attack at daybreak, since no one knew then of the Japs preference for night battle. But to be on the safe side The Captain directed that the ship go to General Quarters at 0230. This would give us about four hours before daybreak to get ready.

General Quarters on board the Astoria was signalled by playing the "Boots and saddles" bugle call on the ship's loudspeaker system, followed by the heavy continuous "clang, clang, clang" of a fire bell. I went to sleep on my cot in the Captain's sitting room expecting to be awakened by GQ at 0230.

The fleet at Guadalcanal was not dilatory in preparing for the Japs. The plans were excellent. There were two entrances from the slot into "Ironbottom Sound" because Savo Island sat about halfway between Cape Esperance, the western end of Guadalcanal, and Florida Island. In the middle of each entrance the cruiser group commander, Australian Rear Admiral V.A.C. Crutchley had posted a destroyer, whose duty it was to intercept any enemy force, and especially to give warning of their approach, so the the rest of the force would not be caught napping, an unfortunately very applicable term in view of what happened.

The rest of the plan appeared to be the best that could be devised with the forces available, and I have never heard any officer criticize his solution. I will have some comments on this plan at the end of this paper. Blocking each entrance behind the picket destroyer were placed three of our 8-inch gun heavy cruisers and attending destroyers, armed with guns and torpedoes. The Southern force was to consist of the Officer in charge, Admiral Crutchley in heavy cruiser HMAS Australia, with two more heavy cruisers, HMAS Canberra and USS Chicago in support. To block the Northern entrance, between

Savo and Florida Island, Crutchley had posted three more heavy cruisers, USS Quincy, Vincennes, and Astoria. This was the Northern force, and it was the last cruiser force available to operation Watchtower in the Solomons.

It is possible that this plan would have worked out well, but we will never know, since it was the execution which failed, and not necessarily the plan itself. Things simply went awry from the beginning. As an example, the Astoria had radar, which could be expected to back up the picket destroyers in giving early warning of the approach of the enemy. The radar chose this night before midnight to stop working, and repairs were still underway when the avalanche hit and stopped all work on it forever. The Chicago in the Southern force also had radar, but there is no record of its having warned of the approach of the Jap fleet. Possibly another mechanical failure.

Everything went wrong that could go wrong.

First, Admiral Fletcher's announcement that he was withdrawing his three carriers from the area immediately, and in fact had already done so on the pretext of refueling requirements, left the force hanging by their fingernails without air protection. This was one more indication that CNO, Admiral King, was right when he questioned the aggressiveness of Admiral Fletcher even before the Midway operation, and Admiral Fletcher's virtual abdication of command to Admiral Spruance in the later stages of that battle points a telling finger in this direction.

Admiral Fletcher's early and unjustified removal of his carriers from the Guadalcanal operation left the whole operation in a most critical situation. This runout in turn dictated an immediate reconsideration of the transport group's vulnerability when the carriers left. In fact, had Admiral Mikawa known of Admiral Fletcher's precipitate departure on the afternoon of

August 8 the ensuing battle of First Savo Island would have turned into the complete destruction of Operation Watchtower, the loss of the whole First Marine Division reinforced, the loss of both surviving cruisers, the loss of every transport ship we had there with all of their crews, the loss of thousands of additional lives, and the removal of our only existing capability for offensive action against the Japanese for at least a year. This would also have continued the myth of Japanese invincibility, with serious political and morale consequences back home.

A conference to discuss Fletcher's bombshell was set up on Kelly Turner's flagship McCawley, located with the transport group off Lunga Point, about midnight of August 8.

Second, instead of using a destroyer as a taxi to get to the meeting, Admiral Crutchley pulled his own cruiser, the Australia, out of line and used it to get to the meeting site, and at the end of the meeting decided to remain with the transport group for the rest of the night rather than return to his post with the Southern group blocking the Cape Esperance-Savo Island entrance to the anchorage. This left the southern group with only two cruisers, HMAS Canberra and USS Chicago, and two destroyers, to oppose the seven cruisers and one destroyer the Japs were about to throw at them.

Third, the picket destroyers simply failed to do the absolutely vital job they were supposed to perform. The Jap cruiser force approached the destroyer Blue, guarding the southern entrance, and spotted her immediately. The Blue continued her leisurely patrol, attempting neither to fight nor run away. Clearly they were all asleep at the switch. Here the cumulative effect of the previous days and nights of stress and lack of sleep presented its bill, and it was paid in blood. The lookouts simply failed to see the Jap fleet.

Fourth, as mentioned above, the radar equipment on two of the cruisers was inoperative for whatever reason.

The Japs, not believing their good fortune, and not wishing to alarm the US ships before the time, passed quietly by the Blue and approached the Southern force unseen and unannounced; a force already dogged by the same lack of rest and sleep, and in any case completely unused to night attacks and night operations. The stage was set for a debacle, and it ensued.

Fifth, when the Japs were in position to attack and were at last seen by the defending cruisers and destroyers there is a convincing argument that one of our own destroyers, commencing the battle, launched four torpedoes of which one, by the most incredible coincidence and bad luck struck HMAS Canberra full in the side. The Canberra, which had just gone to Action Stations, was awake, manuevering at full speed, and at full battle readiness when the torpedo struck. Instantly all power failed in the Canberra, struck in precisely the right place on the hull to bring this about.

This rendered the Canberra, an extremely capable and aggressive ship, absolutely helpless to resist the formidable force arrayed against her. A Japanese torpedo then struck the USS Chicago, demolishing her bow and finishing her as a viable defensive force.

Sixth, as the destruction of the Southern force was being viciously carried out by the invading Jap fleet, attempts were made over the TBS (Talk Between Ships) to warn the Northern force that the Japs were already upon us. At that precise moment the Southern force's warning could not get on the radio circuit, because it was already in use by the Tactical Control Ship of the Northern Force transmitting steaming instructions to the other ships of the Northern force. The Northern force had been steaming in its assigned defensive area in a square pattern

of 15 minutes on each side of the square, but because the set of the current in the pass was pushing the group out of position it was necessary to offset this by steaming fifteen minutes longer before turning on the next leg. Instructions for this routine change over the TBS net effectively blocked the warning that the Southern force was so desperately trying to give to the Northern force.

This meant that the Northern force, equally tired and sleepy, continued at Condition 2, a force readiness of a less-than-maximum level, with half the crew at the guns and few of those really alert, with none of them expecting an attack for three or four hours yet. There was no warning that anything was wrong until the one destroyer with the Jap fleet turned on its searchlights and illuminated our three cruisers. Instantly when the lights were turned on heavy shells from seven big Jap cruisers started exploding aboard all our ships, at almost point blank range. The time was a little after 0200, August 9, 1942. My wakeup by our GQ came all right, but about a half hour before we were to commence to get ready to repel the Japs.

The next few pages can be skipped by those who have tender sensibilities, and the narrative will be picked up at a later point, on page 37. War is not nice - it is ugly, and in some cases hideous; it is not for the squeamish, and it does not ask you if you are ready for it when it comes on you.

As a small town man I had never seen spilled blood or appalling injuries before. I was not prepared for the sights I saw. I found that mercifully our Lord God has given us a defense mechanism when our senses are overwhelmed by too much, too soon. I found that after a certain level has been reached, the body sees and acts, but the shock no longer registers. This is not callousness. Compassion for the dead and wounded are still there, but life goes on. What you see becomes a norm, and you have to accept it and work with it.

My first consciousness that there was something wrong was when I heard muffled explosions from some distance away from the ship, closely followed by terrific bangs outside the entrance to the room I was in. Almost instantly the General Quarters alarm sounded. I sat up in the cot and reached for my clothes. I remember it took forever to get dressed, or so it seemed. By this time there was no doubt in my mind what was happening. There were heavy crashes all over the ship, instantly followed by the sound of sand and gravel being flung against the bulkheads, and the sound of heavy metal barrels bounding down stairways.

I later determined that the sound of steel barrels bounding downstairs was the sound of many shells coming aboard unevenly and exploding on some part of the ship. The "sand and gravel" I heard was the sound of myriad pieces or fragments of exploding shell casings penetrating the steel bulkheads of the compartments of the ship. I know this was so because the steel walls of the Captain's sitting room in which I had been sleeping were perforated with so many holes that it would have been quite easy to read a newspaper inside by the light from a burning 5-inch ready shell locker on the deck just outside our compartment.

Indeed the walls of our room looked like swiss cheese, there were so many holes in them. All of these steel shards and fragments had passed through the room where I was flat on my face pressing as hard as I could into the metal deck plates. It was not funny at the time, but I am reminded of the famous quotation in one of Mauldin's cartoons from World War II, where Willie says to Joe "I cain't git no lower, Joe. Me buttons is in the way!"

Why I was spared when so many were not is a mystery to me, but my guardian angel was certainly on duty that night!

As I was pressing my buttons into the deck during this terrible fifteen minutes or so I heard a terrific crash just above the overhead, and instantly my back and legs were torn and stung in a multitude of places. I knew I was hit badly, and I wondered how long it would take for me to bleed to death. Finally mustering up courage to feel my back to see how bad it was, I found no blood at all! In fact I was not wounded at all!

What had happened to me could be traced back to the fact that the Astoria was one of those cruisers built around 1930, called "treaty cruisers". Year by year all of our ships - Astoria included - had received repeated coats of paint to prevent rust. Over the years this paint layer had accumulated, until it was a half inch thick or more on the bulkheads and on the overheads. A heavy Japanese shell had struck the 5-inch broadside and antiaircraft gun mounted on the next deck above my cabin. The explosion put such pressure on the deck at that point that the paint underneath it on the ceiling of my quarters had been heated red hot and broken into small pieces the size of a quarter or 50-cent piece, and these flung with great force straight down onto the deck below, where I was lying on my face. I found many pieces of this paint all around me, still very hot.

This problem was to plague many other ships than the Astoria during the war, and eventually all the interior paint was ordered removed from our ships before battle.

The lads serving this open, unprotected 5-inch gun overhead had taken the full blast of the shell, which actually broke off the gun barrel when it struck. I later counted fourteen young sailors lying at this gun position. They all appeared to have died instantly from shell fragments.



Finally no more shells seemed to coming aboard, and I believed it was safe to stop making an impression on the steel deck with my face. I went through the door into the cross-ship compartment just aft of the Captain's cabin. Before the battle I had noticed that this compartment was equipped with the largest first aid cabinet I had ever seen, mounted on the bulkhead.

This compartment was designed to be a major first aid station for the ship in the event of battle, and it had obviously been used for this purpose during the attack a few minutes before. Sadly it had been also a death trap for every wounded man brought there, as well as for the corpsmen attending to them. There were 46 bodies there, strewn about in contorted positions, like discarded rag dolls - not one was alive.

It was obvious what had happened. Just aft of the Captain's cabin on our side of the ship was the ship's Executive Officer's office, with a door opening into the transverse passage where the first aid station was located. A heavy Jap shell had punched through the outer wall of the ship and had passed out through the door to the Exec.'s office into the first aid station. There it had exploded, killing every man there, wounded and whole.

At this time men heading for this first-aid station began to wander into the open door of the Captain's cabin, looking for help. Like all supernumeraries I had no battle station assigned and I had taken no active part in the battle so far, but here was an immediate need and opportunity to do something to help. There were no Corpsmen to criticize or instruct, and something had to be done, so I did it. I used every clean skivvy shirt and piece of cloth I could find from my parachute bag luggage to bind up horrible wounds and make compresses to stop massive bleeding.

The wounds were terrible; beyond anything I had ever seen

in my life. For example one of the victims was a tremendous black man, whose size and muscular development would have made him an instant candidate for middle line-backer for the Chicago Bears. As it happened I knew him. He was a mess attendant in the officers' wardroom, where he dealt out ham sandwiches to the officers late at night after the Mess had closed. He had previously told me that his job at General Quarters was as a shell handler. The Astoria used brass cased shells for its five-inch guns. These were very heavy to pick up, and he was ideal for the job.

But on this night human flesh was not standing up to red hot pieces of thick and jagged steel shell casings from five and 8-inch shells exploding nearby and being flung like bullets at people whose only protection was a T-shirt or navy dungarees. My mess attendant friend had been hit by two of these. The point of his shoulder looked like some 10-foot giant with steel clawed fingers had grasped his shoulder and ripped a great hunk of flesh from his shoulder. His left forearm had a smaller wound - only a five inch wide by one inch deep chunk of flesh had been torn out. Every man who came in was bleeding and sorely wounded in some place or places on his body.

I had no antiseptics to cleanse the wounds, but I did the best I could for them all, as long as I had anything left to bandage them with. They did not get professional medical care, then, but there may be some of them alive today because of my efforts. I could at least stop the bleeding. Bless their hearts!

They are all heroes in my book. Admiral Nimitz said it best afterwards when he said "Uncommon valor was a common virtue." I heard accounts of men being blown off the guns, and getting up off the deck and going right back to keep it firing. I saw courage in the face of horrible wounds that was hard to believe. I saw one man dressed in standard navy dungaree battle costume with most of his armpit and ribcage on that side ripped

away, who was sitting on a ship's bitt enthusiastically cursing the Japanese.

I saw many leg wounds where great chunks of the leg had been removed, leaving their feet and calves hanging on by tendons and strips of flesh. I saw many people sitting on the deck with their back against a bulkhead, with one foot standing up at the normal angle, and the other shoe with a foot inside but little visible above the top of the shoe except tendons and threads of flesh. I cite here two sad instances of this. At one point I passed close by a young man of about 18, sitting on the deck with his back against the barbette for No. 1 Main battery Turret. He was a fine looking young man. He was the type whom I could see as a star high school fullback. Whatever he had been he now appeared to be in his own little world of shock - and well he might.

He had a terrible wound, although it did not seem to be bleeding badly. A large piece of jagged steel had struck him in the upper thigh. It had broken the heavy femur, or thigh bone, and had removed most of the thigh down to the knee. At intervals he would reach down and touch the sharp jagged edge of the femur, and would then wince as though someone had hit him in the face with a baseball bat. He had the typical transparent, waxen skin that most of the wounded seemed to have. Possibly this is a sign of heavy loss of blood coupled with severe shock. It was such as to give you the impression that you could see a quarter inch down into the skin.

The other incident occurred when Todd Whitten and I were handing wounded men down from the wings of the bridge deck to the main deck. One of these had the same thigh removal as in the previous instance. The foot was attached to the leg only by a few tendons. Todd told me that one of the wounded men we carried to the rescue ship had had just such a wound, and when the man looked at his foot, which was attached to the

leg only by a tendon, he ordered Todd to "cut that thing off". Since all Marine aviators carried a sheath knife on their belt in those days, Todd was able to accomodate him.

A serious fire in the officers' Wardroom on the deck below the main deck had started and was roaring upwards throughout the whole bridge and out the very top of the highest bridge where the "Chicago Piano" 1.1s were located. Ammunition was exploding right and left and we were in serious danger from cooked-off rounds of our own cased ammunition in the ready lockers alongside the guns. These stray rounds of ammunition were flying about in all directions.

The fire was so hot that checkered steel floor plates were melting and dripping like water. Captain Greenman did not wish to flood his magazines, but the ship was afire from the bridge back to the stern of the boat deck, over the airplane hangar. The fires were fueled by thick coats of paint which had accumulated over the years, as well as anything else which was flammable, including aircraft and gasoline supplies.

From the bridge back to the stern, as far as I could see from the foredeck there was no main deck left; nothing but a deep hole and fire where once had been two of our four large 5-inch 38 Caliber broadside and antiaircraft guns on the starboard side of the ship.

It was hard not to notice the slow drip of blood from the bottom entrance to the No. 1 Main battery turret. It was plain what had happened to those poor Joes. The turret had been turned to face the Jap fleet. A Jap eight inch shell had struck the face of this turret head on, with part of it overlapping the starboard side armor of the turret. The frontal armor of the turret was eight inches thick, and the side armor about three inches thick. The Jap shell had punched a hole in the 8-inch thick frontal armor, had torn out a five foot long

strip six inches wide in the side armor, and had then deflected into the turret and exploded, killing every man in the turret.

As Mauldin's Willie said to Joe when looking at some tanks going by "I wouldn't want to be in one of them things. A movin' foxhole attracts the eye."

A word about people. In any such situation there is stress multiplied. We did not know where the Japs were, out there in the dark; the ship was afire over much of its length; we did not know whether the magazines would explode under us at any second; we were in no case to fight anymore - we had nothing left to fight with; we certainly could not hide, afire as we were; we could see no help anywhere.

In such a situation every man is subconsciously listening for the command "abandon ship". (As The immortal Satchel Paige would say it, "living on a bullseye ain't restfull). It usually occurs that someone hears a noise that sounds like "abandon ship". He immediately repeats it in a loud voice; it is picked up by others and instantly runs like wildfire all over the ship. I heard it loud and clear that night on board the Astoria.

I had all the maps and codes for the air operations portion of "Watchtower", and I had been given a canvas bag weighted with lead weights in which to keep them. I was instructed to throw these overboard if it became necessary to abandon ship. I therefore went back into the Captains's cabin and retrieved this bag. I walked over to the edge of the deck and looked down at that dirty black water down below. I jettisoned the weighted bag overboard, but made an independant command decision right there that I was not going to jump into that water until the ship sank under me. Tragically, forty of fifty men made a different decision and jumped overboard.

By this time a furious Captain Greenman had made himself

heard, demanding to know who had given that order, saying that he had given no such order, and to belay that. The abandon ship calls died out, and it was well they did, for of all those who jumped overboard we eventually rescued only three. We could hear their cries for help from the darkness but the destroyer which was later searching for them could not find them in the darkness and the waves, even when the destroyer's searchlights were turned on.

At about 0330 in the morning a destroyer pulled up alongside. We did not know if we were about to be assisted or slaughtered. The Captain, sitting on a bitt with his back soaked with blood from many small shell fragments, ordered his signal chief to make contact with them, which was done using a small signalling device with a light on one end and looking somewhat similar to a shotgun, with a stock and a trigger for flashing light signals in Morse code.

By God's mercy the destroyer turned out to be the D. Worth Bagley, a refugee from the Southern force. Captain Greenman then ordered the Bagley to come alongside and take off wounded from the Astoria. This he did, with excellent seamanship. Four heavy planks were run across from the Astoria's fore deck to the destroyer, and transfer of the wounded began. Carrying wounded was something we able-bodied pilots could do, and we did as long as any wounded remained on the deck of the Astoria.

It is my belief that Captain Greenman intended only to transfer the wounded aboard the Bagley, but when the transfer was essentially complete two destroyers opened fire with heavy guns on each other at almost point blank range about a mile away in the dark. This would have been between 0345 and 0400, as I recall. Since this could have been the resumption of the battle if this were indeed what it seemed to be, the Captain quickly ordered the non-wounded onto the Bagley and we pulled away from the burning Astoria about 0430, as I recall.

It is quite evident that this heavy firing was a case of two of our own destroyers firing into each other, since we now know the Japanese fleet had simply rounded Savo Island after destroying both of our cruiser guard forces and set a course Northwest for their immediate return to Rabaul. With the surviving American/Australian ships in view of the conditions of darkness and lack of information as to the whereabouts of the Jap fleet it was shoot first and identify later. At any rate the firing did not last more than a few seconds, and peace (?) descended once again. The Bagley used this time until after daylight to search for those who had jumped overboard when the fake abandon ship order had been passed. We heard many cries, but could find woefully few of them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Daylight was a blessing, but brought even more shocks.

Most of us, myself included, were undoubtedly in a state of shock, although we might not have recognized it as such at the time. On reflection, I can recognize the symptoms by my efforts to keep warm. I found a nice warm place between the stack uptakes on the deck of the Bagley, and I gratefully used it until the day warmed up. The day had dawned gray and cool, but later turned into a beautiful day, with calm seas.

To this was added the barren outlook over the harbor. Gone was the massive assemblage of warships which had steamed so majestically together only yesterday. Now only two large cruisers broke the horizon where six had been yesterday, and one of these was smoking and disabled, dead in the water. One of our destroyers was firing into it. I immediately assumed, erroneously, that it was a big Jap cruiser, disabled in the battle and now getting what was coming to her. I so reported it to my commanding Officer when I returned to VMO-251. I jumped to a conclusion; always risky.

This turned out to be not what I thought I was seeing. The cruiser being destroyed before my eyes was what was left of a superb ship, HMAS Canberra, which had by a cruel stroke of fate been struck down without the opportunity to fire a shot. The ship's crew and survivors had been taken off and it was being sunk by our own destroyer, to prevent its falling into the hands of the enemy.

When we withdrew the transports and supply ships, as we would clearly now have to do, along with what was left of the escort force, and without the carriers to support us, the Japanese would clearly own the ocean around the embattled and surrounded Marines at Tulagi and Guadalcanal for some time. The enemy would be back, in force, to try to finish the job.



Operation "Watchtower" could have been more appropriately named Operation "Shoestring". We did not have enough force in the area to start with, and First Savo had deprived us of almost all of what we had.

Right here is the difference between the Guadalcanal operation and all the rest of the desperate battles fought by the Marines and the Navy throughout the rest of World War II and since, until Chosin Reservoir. At Guadalcanal we were outgunned and outmanned in terms of potential enemy strength. After Savo there was no U. S. Navy surface force left in being anywhere in the South Pacific that we could call on for guaranteed assurance that we would prevail on Guadalcanal. There is strength and confidence in knowing that if your enemy resists beyond your expectation you can simply turn up the burner a notch or two and the issue is already a foregone conclusion. There was never a doubt that we would take Iwo Jima or Peleliu or Saipan or Okinawa. But until late 1943, when America's industrial might began to flex its muscles, Guadalcanal was to depend for survival on fortitude, guts and desperate chances.

In 1942 there was doubt whether we could hang on in Guadalcanal. In 1950 there was doubt we could come out of Chosin Reservoir, against terrible odds and under horrible conditions. Only the Marines, supported by the sacrifice of our Navy's selfless heroes such as Admirals Scott and Callaghan and their men, could have pulled a victory out of Guadalcanal in 1942 - or Chosin in 1950.

The cost of our defeat at Savo was written on and under the water next morning. The water was full of the flotsam and jetsam of sunken ships. Pieces of wood; paper; empty life jackets; life jackets occasionally supporting live men, but mostly empty or embracing dead men; brass shell casings floating base up; a floating trash dump of men and things. Under the surface the first of many ships, American and Japanese, that

were to rest on the bottom of what is now known as "Ironbottom Sound" were lying on the ocean floor. These great dead ships are forever manned with some of the nation's finest young men, who fought their ship until they were overwhelmed, and died with her. Blood and iron.

The Astoria had lost a key member of its medical staff. One of our doctors was out of action due to a large wound in his abdomen, but I believe he lived. We did have access to other doctors, and their skill was certainly needed. The officers' wardroom on the Bagley had several large dining tables. These were quickly put end to end and became operating tables. A line of wounded waited outside the starboard entrance to the wardroom. A second entrance from the port side into the wardroom became the exit. Wounded were taken in at the starboard entrance, operated on as necessary, and carried outside through the port doorway and lined up on the port side to await transfer to better medical facilities.

The vast majority of the wounded were victims of jagged pieces of steel shell casings flung about by the shell explosions. These in many cases simply removed great chunks of flesh. They caused most grievous tears and lacerations, particularly to legs and arms. As these were amputated they were placed in 30 gallon galvanized trash cans. I counted ten of these large cans without lids lined up at the port rail waiting a suitable moment for burial at sea. All of these were unmistakable evidences of what war really is. Each was full of feet with socks still on, hands, arms, legs, knees - body parts no longer of any use to the numbed donors lying on the deck behind the wardroom.

Of all the casualties, the burn cases could be said to be the worst. When a shell or a torpedo explodes, there is an instantaneous wave of white hot gases radiated from the center of the explosion. This wave is intensely hot but lasts only

for a small fraction of a second. If it strikes bare skin, as when the victim is dressed only in a pair of undedrwear shorts in or out of his bunk, a massive second or third degree burn is inflicted, but even a thin T-shirt or pajamas or any other covering at all will give protection from the burn. In other cases the burns were inflicted by the fires on the ship, which were intense.

We had many burn patients. Some looked like albinos; every part of their skin was a snow white blister or raw flesh. They could only be made more comfortable by drugs before they died. It was an amazement to me that they could still be alive, but life is tenacious. Just in moving some of them the flesh would come away from the bones. Others had burns on only half their body surface. We could hope that these would mostly survive, especially since they were shortly to be lifted and transferred to the President Jackson, a very large passenger liner from the American President lines, with a large medical support capability.

One of the personal blessings which the daylight brought was the sight of scores of additional survivors of the Astoria's crew, gathered on her fantail, just as we had gathered on the foredeck. They had spent the night there, without our knowledge. I have already related that we could see nothing of the stern of the ship for the fires in between. As our destroyer eased up to rescue them, Captain Greenman was already busy selecting men in the various fields of expertise required to run a ship of this size. He selected a group of a hundred men or so to go back aboard the Astoria with him to try to get power restored and get her underway.

This was a noble and courageous effort, which came to naught, for the Astoria already had a substantial list. A large pool of oil was floating in the passageways of the ship; the steam lines were ruptured in many places; the bridge was a burned

out shambles, and the Astoria was continually taking in more water from the many shell hits at or below the waterline. Sadly, about 1130, the salvage crew had to be taken off, and the Astoria rolled over and sank, manned by her own gallant dead, of which many were friends I had made in the short time we were with the ship.

As we approached the Astoria to rescue those on the fantail, I had a good look at the Astoria. I quickly saw that there was not a square yard of surface anywhere on the ship that did not have a hole of some kind or size punched through the steel! How anyone had survived was a serious question. I saw large areas on the sides of the ship where those same layers of paint I talked about earlier had caught fire and burned like torches, contributing a final blow. One body which had fallen half over the edge of the boat deck had been literally carbonized by the flames running up the side of the ship. Many dead were still lying as they had fallen, and were buried with the ship, with the prayers of those who looked on.

But damaged, burned, and sinking as the Astoria was, she was still majestic and courageous to me. Surprised she was, but she still managed to fire nine main-battery salvos at the Japanese ships. One of these had put the Chokai's No. 1 Turret out of action; had wrecked her operations room; had killed 30 men and destroyed Mikawa's charts of the area. Thus Astoria contributed substantially to Admiral Mikawa's decision not to attack the transports and finish the job. May her memory last!

Having rescued the last of the survivors of the Astoria and carrying the work crew ready to go back aboard her, the Bagley then approached the big transport President Jackson. Wounded were once again transferred, this time to the Jackson, by slings and stretchers. All survivors of the Astoria not needed to go back aboard the Astoria to try to save her were also transferred to the Jackson at this time, about noon.

Our three Marine Corps aviators went aboard the Jackson also, and were shown to a stateroom redolent of palmy peacetime days on a Pacific cruise, with a plate glass shower, carpets on the deck and thick innerspring mattresses on the beds.

From about noon to five p.m. (1700 hours) we had little to do except talk to other survivors. It was here that I heard of the super job Commander Truesdell, the gunnery officer on the Astoria, had done when the shells started coming aboard. Here also I was told that the Astoria had fired nine main-battery (8-inch guns) salvos at the Japs before being overwhelmed with gunfire from seven Jap cruisers. There was no mention of anyone else other than the Captain as being a factor in the Astoria's dying efforts to lash out at the Japanese. The Exec was at his battle station in the aft secondary control station, over the boat deck, and escaped with the people on the afterdeck after the battle.

One account I read several years later substituted the ship's first Lieutenant, LCDR Topper, in Truesdell's place as the hero of this action. To this I can only say NO WAY! What took place there was totally in line with Truesdell's character. It would have been totally out of character for LCDR Topper.

The events which took place on the Astoria's bridge when we were first attacked were described to me by personel on the Astoria's bridge AT THE TIME IT HAPPENED. The report I received was within a few hours of the actual events, and I have no cause to believe it inaccurate. The Officer of the Watch at the time was Commander Truesdell, the Astoria's gunnery officer. When the searchlights were turned on us and shells starting raking the ship Commander Truesdell read the situation instantly. He ordered General Quarters sounded, called the Captain who was asleep in his sea cabin on the bridge, and ordered those already at the guns to commence firing on the searchlights and accompanying ships.

The Astoria responded magnificently. Main battery salvos began to reach out towards the Japanese ships. At this point the Captain entered the bridge and ordered "Cease fire - own ships." It was his responsibility not to make a mistake and damage our own vessels, who were of course in close vicinity, and this was certainly on his mind when he gave this order. CDR Truesdell was under no such misunderstanding. He knew these were not our ships firing on us, and he pleaded with the Captain, "For God's sake sir, let us open fire" as shell hits continued to rain on the Astoria. As the seconds that counted passed, the Captain assessed the situation and then agreed: "Own ships or not, we have to stop them - Commence firing"! By this time, under the concentrated fire of seven Jap cruisers and a destroyer it was too late. Severe hits and damage to the steam and electrical lines had shut off all power and the Astoria could no longer train and fire or operate the shell hoists. No guns could operate. The ship was helpless, dead in the water, afire from the bridge back to the boat deck next to the No. 3 Main battery turret on the stern of the ship. There were many hits at or below the waterline, and the Astoria quickly began to take on water and started to list to starboard. Only by a miracle of God were there several hundred living people aboard, though many were grievously wounded. Only a miracle of God could have caused the Japanese Commander to decide to pass out of the Sound and head toward home after such a victory, without claiming the spoils he had earned.

Aboard the President Jackson there were a considerable number of Marine wounded, many with small round holes in their bodies or limbs to show why they were there. These wounds looked inconsequential beside the horrible gaping wounds from flying pieces of heavy shells that I had just been looking at. One has to realize however that one of these round bullet holes can kill you just as quick and just as dead as any shell fragment.

The word was passed that fleet would leave harbor at 1700 (5 p.m.) that day, August 9, 1942, taking with us the sea bags and personal gear of those Marines who were now ashore at Tulagi or Guadalcanal. Admiral Turner was doing the only thing he could do to save the transports from a repeat visit by the Japanese striking force. Two days later, on a bright sunny day, the fleet dropped anchor in Second Channel at Espiritu Santos in the New Hebrides Islands South of Guadalcanal.

For the Marine pilot survivors this was the end of the withdrawal. One of the ships in the harbor was the seaplane tender Curtis, which was also the command ship for Admiral McKain, COMAIRSOPAC, the senior Navy air officer in the south Pacific. "Soupy" Campbell, our leader, went aboard the Curtis, and found that since we had left the squadron on 23 July for temporary duty VMO-251 had left Tontuta, New Caledonia, and was now stationed right there in Espiritu Santos at the new airstrip there, which eventually became the Palliculo bomber strip.

We thereupon reported to our Commanding Officer, Lt. Col John N. Hart for duty, and resumed our regular functions as squadron pilots with VMO-251. Although we continued to be armed with the obsolescent F4F-3s various members of 251 were sent into Guadalcanal over the next four months, during that savage exchange of desperate blows to decide whether the Marines and the U. S. Navy would prevail and hold the Island, or would the Japanese continue their winning roll and sweep us into the sea off Guadalcanal. By the grace of a merciful and omnipotent heavenly father, to whom be glory, majesty, power and dominion, now and forever, we prevailed.

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First Savo, like all battles in which the U. S. Navy and Marine Corps were engaged in World War II has been the subject of many hours of study by the Naval War College and many other

institutions. I do not propose to second-guess the experts when I point out problems which I saw as an eyewitness. I present these comments as one man's opinion only.

I have said that the plan of defense against seven Jap cruisers and one destroyer coming down the Slot to attack us were excellent. This was obviously the opinion of the officers on the scene at the time. There was another alternative solution, however, which would seem to me to be both feasible and to offer advantages. The plan adopted called for one picket destroyer to steam back and forth as a sentry in the opening between Cape Esperance and Savo Island, backed up by three of our cruisers, with the other entrance covered in exactly the same way. This plan meant that we could oppose the Japs' seven cruisers initially with no more than three of our cruisers, giving them an automatic advantage in fire power of two to one.

This unfavorable ratio was actually made even more unfavorable by the fact that Admiral Crutchley pulled his cruiser out of line for use as a taxi to attend the meeting called by Admiral Turner at the transport unloading area.

This left the Southern force with only two cruisers to defend against seven. Even if the picket destroyer had done its job, which it obviously did not, our Southern force would have been overwhelmed by sheer weight of metal and big guns, and after destruction of this Southern force the ratio of ~~2~~ to one would still hold when the Japs attacked our Northern force, which is precisely what did happen. This is simply old General Nathan B. Forest's dictum of "Git thar fustest with the mostest!"

No one can say what might have been with any certainty, but it seems to me that a better solution would have been to put out the picket destroyers as before in the entrances to the Sound, but to have concentrated our cruisers at a point behind Savo Island, ready to attack the Japs in the flank as



they came through whichever entrance they chose. Of course it must be factored in that the Japs had launched a float plane to reconnoiter the roadstead, and they would know of any disposition of our ships. As I mentioned before, the whole operation was a desperate chance, but Admiral King, CNO, was right to insist on it when he did.

Of all the factors which worked to our disadvantage most effectively - and literally caused our defeat - fatigue and unremitting stress have to be far and away the most important. There can be no other explanation of a force knowing that a powerful enemy force was about to attack it at any time and still being caught by surprise. The failure of our picket destroyers to maintain an adequate lookout under these conditions is absolutely unexplainable under any other conditions.

A sub-factor in this event was the fact that the Japanese Navy established here for the first time their penchant for fighting at night. They clung to this pattern during the whole of the Guadalcanal operation. This meant the United States had to adjust, and to learn to do this better than the Japanese if we were to win the battle. Our Navy did this, clumsily at first, but with greater and greater success as radar and experience came to our aid.

Another contributory factor was that the estimated 15 Knot cruising speed of the enemy fleet, based on the original sighting report, would bring the Jap force into the area at daybreak, coinciding with our idea of what was in their minds. Our 0230 planned GQ did not allow for the fact that the Japs were not required to remain at this cruising speed, which meant that even our generous allowance of time before daybreak was not enough. At the same time, if we went to GQ earlier and the Japs did not come until daybreak, it would have meant facing them in battle with crews deprived of sleep yet another night.

It seems quite obvious that after they were discovered by the New Zealand reconnaissance plane they simply cracked on another 10 Kts and confounded our time of attack assumptions, upon which our planning was based.

Finally, the key move which could have turned a tactical defeat into a rout and a strategic disaster was the early removal of the carriers. In my view Admiral Fletcher was saved from direct censure for this by the course of events, but he can claim no credit for his actions at Guadalcanal. Had his carriers been in place he could have at least evened up the score a little bit by attacking the Jap fleet at daybreak. Not surprisingly I notice that he was never given another major combat command after this battle.

I would imagine that Admiral Mikawa realized his blunder also when he was not attacked at daybreak by U. S. carrier aircraft. If they did not attack him it obviously meant that they were out of range. If that were the case Yamamoto was correct in chiding him after the battle, for he had missed the greatest opportunity of his life to really aid his country's cause by destroying the transport base anchored in the Sound. Never again would any Japanese Admiral have the opportunity to wreak so much havoc on the enemy at so little cost to himself.

The battle of First Savo was a humiliating defeat for our arms, but as always we learn more from defeat than we do from victory. We made other mistakes as the Guadalcanal campaign progressed, and we lost other battles, but the necessary changes were made in the Navy's high leadership ranks in the Guadalcanal operation - which allowed a totally different attitude to replace the atmosphere of defeat and negativism which had hitherto prevailed at high command levels in the South Pacific.

From attitude springs action. From action springs victory. First Savo triggered this change of attitude. Maybe First Savo

was not lost after all!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Roy T. Spurlock". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Roy T. Spurlock  
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