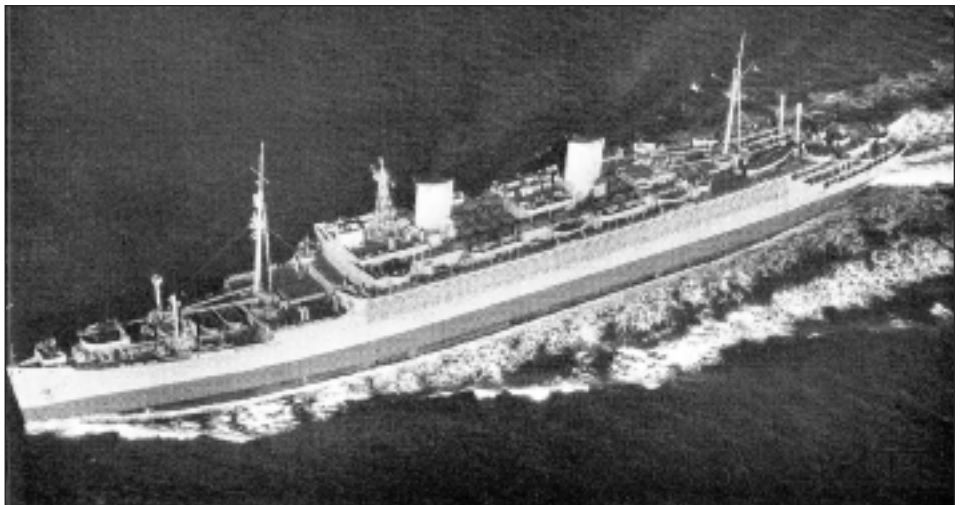


## Naval Operating Base “Cactus” and Coast Guard Operations in the Battle for Guadalcanal

by William H. Thiesen, Ph.D., Coast Guard Atlantic Area

If any battle marked the turning point of World War II in the Pacific, most experts agree that the six-month land, sea and air battle for Guadalcanal was the one. Even though the U.S. Navy had triumphed in early June 1942 at the pivotal naval battle of Midway Island, the struggle for Guadalcanal proved the first true test of all branches of the American military against determined Japanese forces within enemy-held territory. Called “The Canal” by the men who fought there, Guadalcanal was the first Allied amphibious operation of World War II, first of the navy’s “island-hopping” operations and a laboratory for testing the latest amphibious tactics and landing craft designs. It was also the campaign where the Coast Guard forged a relationship with the U.S. Marine Corps that continues to this day. The two services worked side-by-side to defeat the enemy and a Coast Guard coxswain or beach master was often the last comrade a marine might see before heading into enemy territory.

The Coast Guard had served with distinction in missions supporting the war effort well before the August 1942 Guadalcanal campaign and even before the December 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. For example, the Coast Guard participated in pre-war Neutrality Patrols escorting Allied convoys in the Atlantic and it oversaw the Greenland Patrol in air, sea and ice operations. At Pearl Harbor, the cutter *Taney* put up an anti-aircraft barrage against enemy aircraft and performed harbor and anti-submarine patrols alongside the navy. In January 1942, the Coast Guard-manned transport *USS Wakefield* delivered



*An aerial photograph of the Coast Guard-manned troop transport USS Wakefield, which evacuated civilians from Singapore early in the war, and returned to the South Pacific to deliver marines to New Zealand for the Guadalcanal Campaign. (Courtesy of the U.S. Navy)*

Allied troops to Singapore, evacuated many of the island’s civilians and shot down the service’s first enemy aircraft. And, Lieutenant Thomas Crotty served as a demolitions expert in the Philippines, fought the Japanese at Corregidor in the spring of 1942 and died in an enemy prison camp located north of Manila.

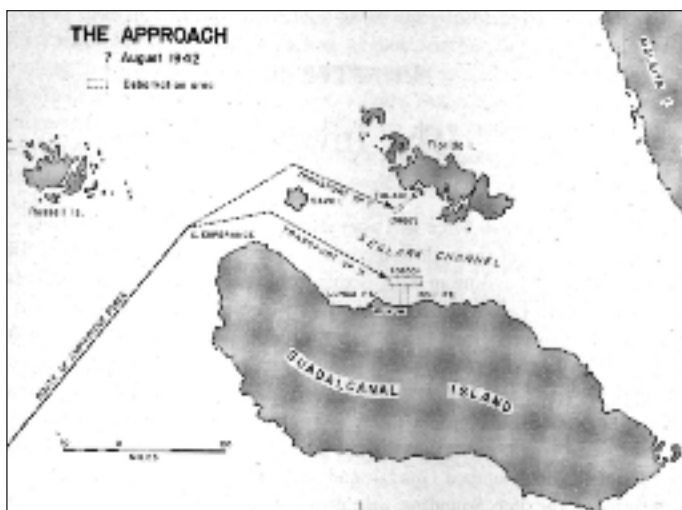
Well before the shooting war even began, American tacticians saw the need to develop an amphibious capability and they incorporated the Coast Guard’s expertise in transport and landing operations. In the spring of 1941, the navy began to prepare in earnest for the possibility of large-scale amphibious operations. It formed Transport Division Seven out of former army troop transports, including the Coast Guard-manned *USS Hunter Liggett*, *USS Leonard Wood* and *USS Arthur Middleton*.

By June 1941, the navy conducted amphibious training

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operations in the Chesapeake Bay, near Solomons, Maryland, and on the North Carolina coast at Onslow Bay. Coast Guard coxswains from lifesaving stations across the country reported for duty and demonstrated their expertise in surf conditions using the navy's newest amphibious landing craft, designated an LCP (Landing Craft Personnel) and referred to as a "Higgins Boat." The stanza from a poem composed by an anonymous Coast Guardsman on board the *Hunter Liggett*

recounted the hectic training schedule for the amphibious transport division during this busy period: "Some day will end this squirrel race, and there'll be many a smiling face, to see a cutter take its place, in Trans Division Seven."



*Chart showing the August 7, 1942, track of Task Force 62's groups "Yoke" and "X-Ray." (Courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps)*



*An APD debarking marines into Higgins Boats for the landings at Tulagi, the Allies' original target and neighboring island to the larger Guadalcanal. The APD was a World War I-era four-stack destroyer converted for amphibious landing operations. (Courtesy of the U.S. Navy)*

Japanese military advances in the Pacific continued through the summer of 1942. By July, the enemy occupied Guam, Wake Island, Hong Kong, Singapore, Southeast Asia, the Philippines and the Solomon Islands. In April, Allied naval strategists had already decided to make a stand in the Solomons at Tulagi Island. Tulagi was the capital of the southern Solomon Islands, a British protectorate and the only major settlement on those islands. The Japanese had occupied the small island with a garrison of 800

Imperial Japanese Navy troops and used it as a seaplane base for reconnaissance purposes.

Allied naval strategists later changed their assault plan to include occupying a large island located west of Tulagi, after the Japanese began building an airfield there. That island was Guadalcanal, a large tropical island with a mountain ridge stretching along its interior that experienced almost daily monsoon-like rains. Enemy aircraft flying from Guadalcanal could threaten Allied supply lines to Australia and New

Zealand. The Allies code-named the amphibious operation "Watchtower." The fighting men participating in Operation Watchtower would give it the nick name "Operation Shoestring," due to the shortage of supplies and provisions they experienced while serving on the island.

Throughout June and July 1942, Wellington, New Zealand, became a center for assembling marines, ships and supplies. The Coast Guard-manned *Hunter Liggett*, nicknamed "Lucky Liggett," departed New York on April 9, and arrived in New Zealand on May 28; while *USS*



*Rare photograph of the USS Hunter Liggett debarking troops for the Guadalcanal landings. Notice the use of cargo derricks to lower landing craft into the water. (Courtesy of the U.S. Navy)*

*Wakefield*, a larger high-seas troop transport, delivered thousands more marines by early June.

On July 22, 1942, under the command of Rear Admiral Richmond K. Turner, the combined fleet for Operation Watchtower, Task Force 62 (TF 62), departed for the theatre of operations under sealed orders. *Hunter Liggett* served as flagship for TF 62's Transport Group "X-Ray," under overall navy command of Commodore Lawrence Reifsnider. Commanded by Coast Guard Captain Louis W. Perkins, the *Liggett* carried 700 troops and nearly forty landing craft. Transport Group "Yoke"

served as a second group in TF 62. Several other entirely or partially Coast Guard-manned transports served in Yoke.

On July 27, TF 62 visited Koro Island, Fiji, to stage a rehearsal landing, which proved a failure. However, the fleet's circuitous route from Wellington by way of Fiji and very cloudy weather hid the fleet's movements from enemy

aircraft and submarines. Allied aircraft had been bombing Japanese forces in the Solomons for several days before the approaching d-day and the enemy units stationed there had received no forewarning from their command regarding a potential attack. On August 7, 1942, exactly eight months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the invasion fleet approached their target and the first Allied amphibious operation of World War II was set to begin.

On the morning of August 7, TF 62's Transport Group Yoke passed north of the small volcanic Savo Island and landed 3,000 marines at Beach Blue on Tulagi. APDs landed many of Yoke's troops. The "APD," also known as a "fast attack transport," was the navy designation for a World War I-era



*A faded image of marines landing on Red Beach, Guadalcanal, on August 7th. The Japanese troops and civilian airfield workers on Guadalcanal were far outnumbered by the marines and fled to the cover of the island's jungle interior. (Courtesy of the U.S. Navy)*

four-stack destroyer converted to carry a company of marines and four landing craft. It served as a prototype for later purpose-built amphibious transports, such as LSTs, LCTs, and LCIs. Within two days, the marines had secured Tulagi with only two-dozen Japanese prisoners left of the former enemy garrison. The U.S. Navy awarded Silver Star

Medals to Coast Guard coxswains Glen Harris, Dan Tarr, William Sparling, and Harold Miller, who endured withering fire to land the marines' First Raider Battalion on the small island. These Coast Guardsmen served as landing craft coxswains on the APD *USS McKean*. Coast Guard personnel would serve throughout the Solomons on these APDs and their respective landing craft.

Approximately twenty miles away from Tulagi, just off the beaches of Guadalcanal, the heavy cruiser *USS Quincy* began shore bombardment of enemy positions. The case of the *Quincy* serves as a testament to the tenacity of the struggle for Guadalcanal both on land and at sea. Coast Guardsmen on board the transports were awed by the destructive power unleashed by the heavy cruiser on Japanese shore positions the morning of the landing; however, within twenty-four hours this formidable American warship, only a few weeks out of its homeport of San Diego, would settle to the bottom of aptly named Iron Bottom Sound. It would be the first of many warships, from both adversaries, sunk due to enemy action.

By approximately 9:00am, waves of troops from the First Marine Division came ashore at Beach Red, Guadalcanal. The marines' total strength of 11,000 greatly



*Photo of newly promoted CDR Dwight Dexter after his return from the South Pacific. This cover image from the March 1943 Coast Guard Magazine shows Dexter displaying a captured flag taken from an enemy soldier.*

outnumbered the combined numbers of the small Japanese military force and over 1,000 construction personnel assigned to build the enemy airstrip. The Japanese beat a hasty retreat from their shore positions into the island's dense jungle interior.

Fortunately for the marines, the unsuccessful rehearsal landing at Fiji was not an omen of things to come. By D + 1, the marines had fulfilled the mission by capturing the partially completed enemy airstrip, and establishing a defensive perimeter around it and their beachhead. The same day, the Coast Guard-manned *Hunter Liggett* experienced its first bomber attack. It shot down four Japanese "Betty" bombers—two per side—and sustained no damage from the enemy attack.

At the Koro Island rehearsal, the task force's tacticians had decided to establish a landing craft base or boat pool operation on Guadalcanal. The base would maintain and operate a fleet of landing craft to ship troops and supplies between the transports and the islands. At 2:30pm on D + 1, Coast Guard Lieutenant Commander Dwight Dexter came ashore from the *Liggett* with thirty Coast Guardsmen



*A rare aerial photograph of N.O.B. "Cactus" at Lunga Point, Guadalcanal. (Courtesy of the U.S. Navy)*

to establish Naval Operating Base (NOB) "Cactus" (Cactus being the code name for Guadalcanal), or NOB Cactus.

Lt. Cmdr. Dexter established his headquarters in the former manager's house for the Lever Brothers coconut plantation, at the tiny village of Kukum, near Lunga Point. Dexter was a natural leader and he was devoted to those under his command. When the enlisted men on board the *Hunter Liggett* heard that he would command Guadalcanal's small boat operations, many volunteered to serve with him. The number of

NOB Cactus personnel would grow to approximately fifty, including a handful of navy enlisted personnel. This would become the first and only known case of a Naval Operating Base manned and run primarily by Coast Guard personnel.

Near Dexter's headquarters, the men built a small tool shed for servicing their landing craft and machinery. This they needed desperately because the landing craft were in constant need of maintenance and repair. Coast Guard signalmen Douglas Munro and Ray Evans built a signal tower out of coconut logs next to the headquarters shack and used the tower for Aldis lamp signaling during the day. They also built a makeshift five-by-eight foot shelter below the tower from packing crates and a tent roof. The rest of Dexter's men lived in similar accommodations located nearby. A dugout shelter located near the headquarters building held about a dozen men while smaller bomb shelters were located among the other tents and shacks.

During the first three months, NOB Cactus endured numerous air raids and enemy bombardments. Periodically, Japanese naval vessels and submarines would cruise offshore under cover of darkness to shell American-held positions. And, of the thirty artillery attacks that NOB Cactus personnel experienced, many of the shellings came from "Pistol Pete," a Japanese naval gun concealed in the jungle highlands and used to bombard the American-held airfield, named Henderson Field. This enemy artillery piece heavily damaged the signal tower Munro and Evans erected next to NOB Cactus headquarters.

NOB personnel also endured over 110 bombings by Japanese "Betty" bombers and this number did not include



*Photo showing an LCVP, which had lines similar to an LCP, or Higgins Boat, but boasted easier access between the cargo bay and the beach. (Courtesy of the U.S. Navy)*

“Washing Machine Charlie,” an enemy floatplane that circled over Guadalcanal for hours every night dropping bombs on American positions to disrupt the occupants’ sleep. Dexter maintained a captured three-barreled Japanese machine gun, nick named the “Chicago Piano,” which he kept handy for air attacks. He managed to shoot down at least one enemy aircraft with it. Between the bombings, artillery attacks, frequent torrential rains and nightly naval battles on Iron Bottom Sound, Coast Guard personnel began to call to the nearby lagoon the “Sleepless Lagoon.”

At its peak, NOB Cactus supported nearly fifty watercraft, including over thirty LCPs (also known as Higgins Boats) and LCVPs, and a dozen LCMs. The LCP (Landing Craft Personnel) was the first purpose-built American landing craft. It had no bow ramp and carried two air-cooled Lewis machine guns in the bow. It could hold thirty-six men, had a top speed of nine knots, and men had to debark over the sides of the boat. The LCVP (Landing Craft Vehicle/Personnel) had similar hull lines to an LCP, but it had an armored bow ramp and carried no guns up front. It could carry up to thirty-six men, supplies or a jeep, and the ramp allowed easier access from the cargo hold to the beach. The LCVP quickly superseded the LCP in

becoming the most common small landing craft of the war. The LCM (Landing Craft Mechanized), also known as a “tank lighter,” was a larger version of the LCVP. It could carry a larger load of troops and supplies than an LCVP, or a large military vehicle or light tank.

During the initial stages of the Guadalcanal campaign, there were no patrol craft to defend against enemy submarines, so for the first ten days NOB personnel fitted a landing craft with depth charges set for fifty feet deep and conducted nightly anti-submarine patrols. During one of the first nights on patrol, a Japanese mini-sub lit up the landing craft with a flood lamp. The sub crash-dived and the landing craft crew sped away missing the opportunity to be the first landing craft in history to sink a submarine! On another night, a



*Supplies landed on the beach at Guadalcanal by landing craft. Dexter’s men and watercraft kept critically needed supplies flowing to the First Marine Division fighting in the jungles of Guadalcanal. (Courtesy of the U.S. Navy)*

Japanese destroyer ran down a NOB Cactus anti-submarine patrol, machine-gunned the crew and left them for dead. The only survivor, a coxswain who played dead by floating face down in the water, later found himself alone in the dark and treacherous water in the middle of Iron Bottom Sound. He had to swim thirteen miles in order to reach the safety of American-held Tulagi.

NOB Cactus served as an important communication hub between land forces and offshore vessels. During the day, signalmen Douglas Munro and Ray Evans operated Aldis lamps from the coconut-log tower to waiting offshore transports. These Allied ships sought protected anchorages at night, and signaling at night was prohibited anyway since it attracted shellfire from patrolling Japanese warships and submarines. The NOB headquarters also used radios and Morse code to communicate with its landing craft. By mid-August, NOB Cactus also initiated mail and shuttle service across the eighteen-mile stretch of water between Guadalcanal and Tulagi. On the inaugural date of this service, a Japanese I-boat submarine surfaced, chased the Higgins boat and shelled the landing craft with its deck gun. The NOB boat nearly lost the deadly race before Tulagi’s Marine Corps artillery opened fire and chased off the Japanese I-boat. After that, Guadalcanal’s command discontinued the service until air cover



*Image of SM1 Douglas Munro, hero of Point Cruz and the only Medal of Honor recipient in the history of the U.S. Coast Guard. (Courtesy of the U.S. Navy)*

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could protect the landing craft over the twenty-mile transit between the islands.

NOB Cactus's Coast Guard personnel performed rescue missions just as they had back in the United States. Whenever possible, NOB landing craft would set out following the periodic nighttime naval battles on Iron Bottom Sound to rescue floating Allied sailors and Japanese prisoners, and retrieve bodies for burial on Guadalcanal. When aerial dogfights took place over the water, NOB watercraft also took to the open ocean to retrieve downed American pilots and capture Japanese aviators shot down by the Americans. In one case, a NOB landing craft rescued a downed American pilot and then tried to rescue a Japanese pilot the American had shot down. The enemy aviator tried unsuccessfully to shoot the American pilot using a water-logged pistol and then tried to shoot himself. Next, the frustrated enemy pilot tried to swim into the landing craft's propellers; however, the Coast Guard crew managed to pull him on board the boat before he could hurt himself.

NOB Cactus's personnel performed a multi-mission role with their various watercraft. In addition to the missions listed above, NOB boats collected supplies from the water left by sunken Allied transports. NOB men caught fresh fish to supplement the Guadalcanal diet by throwing hand grenades into schools of local fish and collecting the dead ones. NOB Cactus even positioned its landing craft in the middle of Iron Bottom Sound at night, nearly ten miles from either side of the body of water, to serve as early-warning picket boats to identify Japanese naval patrols.

Dexter's men and machines also supported marine patrols and combat operations conducted along the shoreline. For example, NOB landing craft landed marine units on the distant Russell Islands, located sixty miles across open ocean, and retrieved the marines after each

patrol. By September 1942, NOB watercraft began supporting reconnaissance missions composed of native scouts and marines. British Colonial Forces officer Martin Clemens led these nighttime operations and Lt. Cmdr. Dexter detached SM1 Evans to oversee their water transportation.

NOB watercraft also transported larger troop movements. For example, on September 27th, NOB Cactus landing craft delivered Colonel "Chesty" Puller's marine battalion behind enemy lines at Point Cruz. Point Cruz was an enemy stronghold, located along the coast west of NOB Cactus and the Japanese used this position to observe NOB operations. After landing the marines, SM1 Ray Evans

remained behind with a landing craft to take off any wounded troops. Enemy fire from shore wounded his coxswain, so Evans returned to NOB Cactus to deliver the wounded crewman. When he arrived at NOB, Evans joined a flotilla of landing craft led by SM1 Doug Munro returning to Point Cruz to evacuate Puller's battalion, which had run into an enemy ambush. Using their machine guns, the landing craft fought the Japanese at



*An artist's depiction of the N.O.B. Cactus mission to evacuate Chesty Puller's ambushed marine battalion at Point Cruz, Guadalcanal. Official recognition for this Coast Guard operation included a Munro's Medal of Honor, two Navy Crosses, and a number of Purple Hearts. Franklin D. Roosevelt later recognized all members of Dexter's Coast Guard unit with the Presidential Unit Citation as part of the First Marine Division. (Courtesy of the Coast Guard)*

close quarters and managed to evacuate most of the marine battalion. Munro lost his life trying to protect the last marines evacuated by NOB Cactus boats; and, on the recommendation of Vice Admiral William "Bull" Halsey, he posthumously received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his valiant efforts, the only such medal awarded to Coast Guard personnel.

Despite all of these important operations, NOB Cactus's foremost mission remained the running of men and supplies from offshore transports to the beaches of Guadalcanal.

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NOB Cactus's operations ensured the survival of the troops by keeping open this important lifeline of supplies and fresh troops to the island. During Guadalcanal's six-month campaign, American transports made numerous roundtrips to New Zealand to re-supply the troops on "The Canal." These shiploads were landed using watercraft from NOB Cactus and landing craft provided by each transport.

By November 1942, the first wave of marines and Coast Guard personnel had served on Guadalcanal for three months. Many servicemen had been lost in action, including at least five NOB Cactus men, such as Douglas Munro. Those who contracted malaria lost a great deal of weight, were no longer fit for duty, and had to rotate back to the United States for rehabilitation. Included among this group were SM1 Evans and Lt. Cmdr. Dexter. Nevertheless, by this time the battle for Guadalcanal had reached its climax and the defeat of Japanese forces on the Canal appeared likely.

In early December 1942, U.S. Army General Alexander Patch relieved Marine General Alexander Vandergrift and the battered First Marine Division received the Presidential Unit Citation from Franklin D. Roosevelt. The "First Marine Division, Reinforced" received the award and the word "Reinforced" honored support units, such as the Coast Guard's NOB Cactus and its personnel. For their heroic efforts at Guadalcanal, NOB Cactus's personnel also received two Navy

Commendation Medals, numerous Purple Heart Medals, a Bronze Star Medal, two Silver Star Medals, one Navy Cross, and one Medal of Honor. In addition to Douglas Munro's posthumous Medal of Honor, SM1 Evans received an ensign's commission in addition to his Navy Cross, while Dexter received a promotion in rank and the Silver Star Medal. And, by February 1943, General Patch declared the island secured of all Japanese military forces.

After Guadalcanal, the Allies would remain on the offensive for the rest of the war while the enemy fought a lengthy retreat all the way back to the Japanese home islands. In the Pacific theatre of operations, the Coast Guard participated in amphibious operations, such as Tarawa, Saipan, Iwo Jima, Guam, Okinawa and many others. Coast Guard personnel also operated hundreds of army and navy supply ships that supported the troops and fighting fleets in the Pacific. In late summer and fall of 1945, Coast Guard manned ships participated in Operation "Magic Carpet" and transported thousands of troops back to the United States. And, on January 1, 1946, the Coast Guard returned to its place within the Treasury Department having provided nearly 250,000 personnel to support the war effort.

In the battle for Guadalcanal, the Coast Guard fought alongside other U.S. military branches as it had in every conflict since 1790. Coast Guard personnel pitched in to help defend Marine Corps land positions by digging in gun emplacements, serving artillery pieces and providing infantry support. In fact, the greatest single loss of life in the Coast Guard's history occurred at Guadalcanal late in the war, when the attack transport *USS Serpens* exploded and killed more than 200 Coast Guardsmen. And Coast Guard personnel serving at Guadalcanal received dozens of medals for heroism and devotion to duty, making the battle for Guadalcanal one of the most honored Coast Guard combat operations in service history.



*Ray Evans receiving his Navy Cross for action seen at Point Cruz. Evans would receive further recognition with an officer's commission. (Courtesy of the Coast Guard)*



*In November 1945, the U.S. Postal Service issued the Coast Guard stamp showing landing craft and transports to commemorate the service's role in World War II amphibious combat operations.*