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Preserving Our History For Future Generations

DOUGLAS MUNRO AT GUADALCANAL

by Dr. Robert M. Browning Jr.



*"Douglas A. Munro Covers the Withdrawal of the 7th Marines at Guadalcanal."
Artist: Bernard D'Andrea*

The Coast Guard's first major participation in the Pacific war was at Guadalcanal. Here the service played a large part in the landings on the islands. So critical was their task that they were later involved in every major amphibious campaign during World War II. During the war, the Coast Guard manned over 350 ships and hundreds more amphibious type assault craft. It was in these ships and craft that the Coast Guard fulfilled one of its most important but least glamorous roles during the war--that is getting the men to the beaches. The initial landings were made on Guadalcanal in August 1942, and this hard-fought campaign lasted for nearly six months. Seven weeks after the initial landings, during a small engagement near the Matanikau River, Signalman First Class Douglas Albert Munro, died while rescuing a group of marines near the Matanikau River. Posthumously awarded a Medal of Honor, he lived up to the Coast Guard's motto--"Semper Paratus."

Douglas Munro grew up in the small town of Cle Elum, Washington. Enlisting in September 1939, Munro volunteered for duty on board the USCG cutter *Spencer* where he served until 1941. While on board he earned his Signalman 3rd Class rating. In June, President Roosevelt directed the Coast Guard to man four large transports and



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serve in mixed crews on board twenty-two naval ships. When word arrived that these ships needed signalmen, Munro, after much pleading with *Spencer's* executive officer, was given permission to transfer to the *Hunter Liggett* (APA-14). This 535 foot, 13,712 ton ship, was one of the largest transports in the Pacific. She carried nearly 700 officers and men and thirty-five landing boats including two LCTs. In April 1942, the "Lucky Liggett" sailed to Wellington, New Zealand, to prepare for a major campaign in the south pacific.

On 7 August 1942, the United States embarked on its first major amphibious assault of the Pacific War. After the successes at Coral Sea and Midway the United States decided to counter Japanese advances in the Solomon Islands. These islands form two parallel lines that run southeast approximately 600 miles east of New Guinea. Tulagi and Guadalcanal, both at the end of the chain were picked for an assault. Guadalcanal was strategically important because the Japanese were building an airfield, and if finished would interfere with the campaign.

Eighteen of the twenty-two naval troop carrying ships attached to the campaign's task force carried Coast Guard personnel. These men were assigned an integral part in the landings--the operation of the landing craft. Many of the Coast Guard coxswains had come from Life-Saving stations and their experience with small boats made them the most seasoned small boat handlers in government service.

The Coast Guard manned transports played a prominent role in the initial landings at Guadalcanal, Tulagi and other nearby islands. As the task force gathered, Munro, now a signalman first-class, was assigned to temporary duty on the staff of Commander, Transport Division Seventeen. During the preparations for the invasion, Munro was transferred from ship to ship, as his talents were needed. The task force rendezvoused at sea near the end of July and on 7 August the *Liggett* led the other transports to their anchorage off Guadalcanal. *Hunter Liggett* served as the amphibious force command post until the Marines secured the beaches.

At the time of the invasion, Munro was attached to the staff of Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner on board *McCawley* (APA-4). Munro made the landing on Tulagi Island where fierce fighting lasted for several days. About two weeks later Munro was sent twenty miles across the channel to Guadalcanal where the Marines had landed and had driven inland. One of the bloodiest and most decisive battles ensued. The Americans quickly seized the airfield on the island but for six months both the U.S. and the Japanese poured troops onto Guadalcanal in an attempt to gain control and force the other off.

After the initial landings at Guadalcanal, Munro and twenty-four other Coast Guard and Navy personnel were assigned to Lunga Point Base. The base was commanded by



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Commander Dwight H. Dexter, USCG, who was in charge of all the small boat operations on Guadalcanal. The base, situated on the Lever Brothers coconut plantation consisted of a small house with a newly constructed coconut tree signal tower. Munro was assigned here because of his signalman rate. The base served as the staging area for troop movements along the coast. To facilitate this movement, a pool of landing craft from the numerous transports lay there to expedite the transportation of supplies and men.

A month into the campaign, the Marines on the island were reinforced and decided to push beyond their defensive perimeter. They planned to advance west across the Matanikau River to prevent smaller Japanese units from combining and striking American positions in overwhelming numbers. For several days near the end of September, the Marines tried to cross the river from the east and each time met tremendous resistance. On Sunday, 27 September, Marine Lieutenant Colonel Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller embarked three companies of his 7th Marines in landing craft. They planned to land west of the river, drive out the Japanese, and establish a patrol base on the west side of the Matanikau.

The landing craft were dispatched from Lunga Base. Douglas Munro, just two weeks short of his twenty-third birthday, took charge of ten LCPs and LCTs (tank lighters) to transport Puller's men from Lunga Point to a small cove west of Point Cruz. The Marines landed with the support of the destroyer U.S.S. *Monssen* which laid down a covering barrage with her five inch batteries shortly after twelve o'clock. Major Ortho L. Rodgers, commanding the landing party reached the beach in two waves at 1:00. The 500 unopposed Marines pushed inland and reorganized on a ridge about 500 yards from the beach. At about 1:50, approximately the same time they reached the ridge, their gunfire support was disrupted by a Japanese bombing raid. *Monssen* had to withdraw to avoid seventeen high level Japanese bombers. Unfortunately, this occurred at the same time that the Marines were struck by an overwhelming Japanese force west of the river. This situation deteriorated when Major Rodgers was killed and one of the company commanders was wounded.

After the Marines landed, Munro and the boats returned to Lunga Point Base. A single LCP remained behind to take off the immediate wounded. Coast Guard petty officer Ray Evans and Navy Coxswain Samuel B. Roberts manned the craft. They kept the craft extremely close to the beach to take off the wounded as quickly as possible. The Japanese, meanwhile had worked behind the Marines and without warning a machine gun burst hit the LCP parting the rudder cable and damaging the boat's controls. After jury rigging the rudder, Roberts was struck by enemy fire and Evans managed to jam the controls to full ahead and sped back to Lunga Point Base. Unable to stop, the LCP ran onto the beach at 20 mph. Roberts later died but won the Navy Cross posthumously.



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As Evans arrived at the Lunga Point base, word arrived that the Marines were in trouble and were being driven back toward the beach. Their immediate plight had not been known. The bombing raid had driven *Monssen* out of range to visually communicate with shore. Furthermore, the three companies of Marines had failed to take a radio and were unable to convey their predicament. Using under-shirts they spelled out the word "HELP" on a ridge not far from the beach. Second Lieutenant Dale Leslie in a Douglas SBD spotted the message and passed it by radio to another Marine unit. At 4 P.M. Lt. Colonel Puller, realizing that his men were isolated, embarked on *Monssen* to direct personally the covering fire for the marines who were desperately trying to reach the beach.

The landing craft had meanwhile been readied at Lunga Point Base. Again, virtually the same boats that had put the Marines on the beach were assembled to extract them. Douglas Munro, who had taken charge of the original landing, volunteered to lead the boats back to the beach. None of these boats were heavily armed or well protected. For instance, Munro's Higgin's boat had a plywood hull, it was slow, vulnerable to small arms fire, and was armed only with two air-cooled .30 caliber Lewis machine guns.

As Munro led the boats ashore the Japanese fired on the small craft from Point Cruz, the ridges abandoned by the Marines, and from positions east of the beach. This intense fire from three strong interlocking positions disrupted the landing and caused a number of casualties among the virtually defenseless crews in the boats. Despite the intense fire Munro led the boats ashore. Reaching the shore in waves, Munro led them to the beach two or three at a time to pick up the Marines. Munro and Petty Officer Raymond Evans provided covering fire from an exposed position on the beach.

As the Marines reembarked, the Japanese pressed toward the beach making the withdrawal more dangerous with each second. The *Monssen* and Leslie's Douglas "Dauntless" dive bomber provided additional cover for the withdrawing Marines. The Marines arrived on the beach to embark on the landing craft while the Japanese kept up a murderous fire from the ridges about 500 yards from the beach. Munro, seeing the dangerous situation, maneuvered his boat between the enemy and those withdrawing to protect the remnants of the battalion. Successfully providing cover, all the Marines including twenty-five wounded managed to escape.

With all the Marines safely in the small craft, Munro and Evans steered their LCP off shore. As they passed towards Point Cruz they noticed an LCT full of Marines grounded on the beach. Munro steered his craft and directed another tank lighter to pull it off. Twenty minutes later, the craft was free and heading to sea. Before they could get far from shore, the Japanese set up a machine gun and began firing at the boats. Evans saw the fire and shouted a warning to Munro. The roar of the boat's engine, however, prevented Munro from hearing and a single bullet hit him in the base of the skull. Petty



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Officer Munro died before reaching the operating base, but due to his extraordinary heroism, outstanding leadership and gallantry, Munro posthumously received the Medal of Honor.

The Coast Guard continued to provide valuable service in all theaters of the war. The Coast Guard's motto "Semper Paratus" provided inspiration and guided other men to perform heroic acts demonstrating that they were indeed "Always Ready."
