

**“THE
FIGHTIN’EST
SHIP”**

940.935 M874f (2)

Keep Your Card in This Pocket

Books will be issued only on presentation of proper library cards.

Unless labeled otherwise, books may be retained for two weeks. Borrowers finding books marked, defaced or mutilated are expected to report same at library desk; otherwise the last borrower will be held responsible for all imperfections discovered.

The card holder is responsible for all books drawn on this card.

Penalty for over-due books 20 a day plus cost of notices.

Lost cards and change of residence must be reported promptly.



Public Library
Kansas City, Mo.

Keep Your Card in This Pocket

REPRODUCED BY BUNLONE CO., K. C., MO.

KANSAS CITY, MO PUBLIC LIBRARY



0 0001 0337355 1

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”
The Story of the Cruiser *Helena*

 Also By HUGH B. CAVE

LONG WERE THE NIGHTS

The Saga of PT Squadron X
in the Solomons



“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

The Story of the Cruiser “Helena”

By

LIEUTENANT C. G. MORRIS, USNR

With

HUGH B. CAVE

ILLUSTRATED

DODD, MEAD & COMPANY

NEW YORK

1944



COPYRIGHT, 1944,
By DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY, INC.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
NO PART OF THIS BOOK MAY BE REPRODUCED IN ANY FORM
WITHOUT PERMISSION IN WRITING FROM THE PUBLISHER

★ ★ ★ ★

THIS BOOK IS MANUFACTURED UNDER WAR-
TIME CONDITIONS IN CONFORMITY WITH
ALL GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS CONTROLLING
THE USE OF PAPER AND OTHER MATERIALS

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO THE OFFICERS AND MEN, LIVING AND DEAD,
WHO SERVED ABOARD THE GALLANT CRUISER
"HELENA"

Contents

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	<i>Something to Remember</i>	I
II	<i>How to Catch a Warship</i>	14
III	<i>Skipper in a Coal Bag</i>	21
IV	<i>Prelude</i>	28
V	<i>Moving Up</i>	38
VI	<i>The Battle of Cape Esperance</i>	46
VII	<i>Torpedo Planes</i>	59
VIII	<i>"Take the Big Ones First!"</i>	74
IX	<i>The Battle of Guadalcanal</i>	85
X	<i>St. Helena</i>	99
XI	<i>"Enemy Installations Were Bom- barded . . ."</i>	110
XII	<i>The Happy Helena</i>	123
XIII	<i>"And Troops Were Landed . . ."</i>	134
XIV	<i>"Enemy Ships Sighted . . ."</i>	143
XV	<i>The Last Battle</i>	153
XVI	<i>The Sea</i>	163
XVII	<i>The Rafts</i>	172
XVIII	<i>The Rescue</i>	182
	<i>Log of the U.S.S. Helena</i>	190
	<i>The Helena's Skippers</i>	192

** CHAPTER ONE **

Something to Remember

“WE don’t want to be spectacular. Spectacular people are likely to shine today and be dull tomorrow, and we can’t have that. We must be good, very good, always.”

Lieutenant Commander Irving T. Duke, USN, a stout, jolly man with an aim in life, mildly waved a hand to press home his point. He almost never raised his voice. Patient beyond belief, he liked to say the same thing over and over, quietly, with gentle emphasis, so that his men would listen and remember.

Lieutenant Commander Duke was a few months before my time. In fact, he left the ship before ever she saw action. But he belongs in the first paragraph of any story of the United States Cruiser *Helena*, because it was he who founded the original “Helena Gun Club,” and from his persuasive training grew the power and punch that made his ship one of the fightingest men-o’-war that ever scoured the seas. That is what the conservative United States Navy has called her. And that is what she was when she died “with her boots on” in the now historic Battle of Kula Gulf, waged in the early morning hours of July 6, 1943, against a superior Jap surface force in the Northern Solomon Islands.

Duke was gunnery officer when the *Helena* hoisted

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

her commission pennant at the New York Navy Yard in September, 1939, under the command of Captain Max B. DeMott, USN (now retired), of Jamestown, Rhode Island. On her shakedown cruise, which took the cruiser to Montevideo, Uruguay, and gave her men a glimpse of war in the shape of the scuttled German pocket battleship *Graf Spee*, the commander and his associates in the gunnery division worked out their theories.

“We want to be consistent,” he told his men. “Not sensational, but consistent. All I ask—all I insist upon—is that we get a better than average percentage of hits every time. And to do that, we must know our guns.”

That was important. Very important. A fighting ship, Duke insisted, was no better than her guns, and the guns in turn were only as good as the men who manned them.

The *Helena* bristled with weapons. She carried a grand total of fifteen 6-inch guns in her main-battery turrets, and under Duke’s patient instruction they acquired the voice of a mighty organ chord of doom. In her secondary battery she carried eight 5-inch guns which packed almost as potent a punch and could be used against enemy aircraft as well as surface ships. She was swift and lean and rugged: a 10,000-ton fighting ship designed to roam far from home and handle herself in any emergency.

Ironically, the Japanese themselves were responsible for the existence of this slim, six-hundred-foot ship of war. She and her sister light cruisers were our Navy’s reply when the Japs, by cunning manipulation of treaty limitations, produced their Mogami cruisers in the early 1930’s in a bid for naval supremacy. We answered that

SOMETHING TO REMEMBER

furtive challenge not by exceeding treaty restrictions, but by compressing tremendous fire power into small, swift greyhounds, and placing this power in the hands of men who pridefully developed every component of it. The soul of any ship is in the men who fight her, and we had the men.

Lieutenant Commander Duke was one of them. Lieutenant Joseph P. "Jeeves" Fulsom, his main battery assistant, and Lieutenant (now Lieutenant Commander) Warren Boles were others. These men knew the *Helena's* guns. They knew what could be done with that awesome store of power. On the shakedown cruise and during fleet gunnery exercises, they everlastingly drilled the *Helena's* gun crews.

"Consistency—that's what we want," the commander insisted. "That way we'll be the fightingest ship in the fleet." Again and again he said it, gently but with emphasis, determined to win for the ship that coveted title.

The officers and men loved every good-humored pound of him. They smiled at his weakness for prowling at night about the wardroom pantry, in search of tidbits to keep his weight at "normal," but worked night and day to be as good as he begged them to be. The *Helena* never lost the inspiration he so gently pressed upon her in those early days of her schooling. It was Irving Duke who groomed her for what the Navy has called her "hell-roaring career."

The commander had been assigned to other duties by the time his thorough teaching first paid dividends. Commander Rodman D. Smith, USN, was "gunnery boss" of the ship when, on December 7, 1941, the Japs paid

"THE FIGHTIN'EST SHIP"

their surprise visit to Pearl Harbor. The *Helena* was there that Sunday morning. In fact she was their number one naval target.

The Japs did not mean her to be, of course. Their principal objective was the battleship *Pennsylvania*, flagship of the fleet. Some of their pilots, shot down that day, were found to be carrying charts upon which the position of the *Pennsylvania* was marked with a red arrow.

But the flagship had been moved into drydock for an overhauling, and it was the *Helena's* hard luck to be where the queen of the fleet was supposed to be. Those red arrows on the Japanese maps pointed straight to the *Helena*.

Bombs had been falling on Hickam Field for about five minutes when the first enemy torpedo planes swept in over Ford Island to strike at the harbor. The Japs sped across the channel in close, low formation and loosed their torpedoes.

Their aim was not particularly good. With a little of the right kind of luck, the *Helena* might have escaped damage. All but one of the torpedoes fired in that first swift attack missed the mark by comfortable margins.

That one torpedo, correctly aimed but released from a poor angle of approach, should by all logic have hit an ancient wooden mine-sweeper, the *Oglala*, moored directly in its path. But it didn't. It freakishly slipped under the *Oglala* and continued on course to explode in the *Helena's* forward engine room. So tremendous was the blast that the *Oglala*, untouched by the torpedo itself, turned turtle and sank with her wooden bottom completely crushed by the under-water concussion. Later she

SOMETHING TO REMEMBER

was raised and repaired.

That torpedo was the first to hit Pearl Harbor, and the *Helena*, despite her wounds, was the first cruiser in the fleet to give the Japs an answer. While officers and men struggled with the dead and wounded in her demolished engine room, the ship's anti-aircraft guns defiantly blazed away. Like the rest of Pearl Harbor, the *Helena* was caught by surprise, but she recovered quickly and almost at once was furiously fighting back.

She was an angry ship. A warship is a personal thing, not a mass of inanimate steel. It is made of men and moods, loyalties and friendships. The Japs could not with impunity do what they had done to those men in the *Helena's* engine room. The ship's gunners, trained by Lieutenant Commander Duke, went to work to even the score. "Ordinary guys" got blazing mad and were heroes.

In one of the 5-inch mounts a young coxswain named George Keating—not a big boy, but rugged—stepped into the "hot caseman's" slot. His job there was to snatch the ammunition cases as they came from the guns, and toss them out the scuttle. A hot caseman wears heavy asbestos gloves to protect his hands, because those empty cases are as wickedly hot as the thundering guns from which they are ejected.

Keating didn't have any gloves. There had been no time to look for any. He handled the smoking ammunition cases without them, and thought about his hands later. He was called a hero when it was over, and Admiral Nimitz pinned a decoration on him for his bravery. But before the Japs put that torpedo into George Keating's ship, George was just an ordinary fellow who liked

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

to clown around and talk like Mortimer Snerd on the radio, and always crinkled his eyes shut when he grinned.

Ira Sykes was another who got mad. He was a tall, long-limbed lieutenant from Texas, in charge of an after gun director. When the torpedo exploded in the engine room and crippled the ship’s power, Sykes’ director ceased to function and he was peeved. The Japs had no right to put his battle station out of commission at a time like that.

Ira clambered up on top of the director, the highest point he could reach, and spread his long legs apart and brazenly brandished a .45 at the planes overhead. It was funny in a way, this lanky Texan yelling defiance and firing a revolver at the Emperor’s pilots. But it was not an isolated case of courage, because the same violent anger was erupting all over the ship. The *Helena* was hurt and bitter. Within her was welling a hate for the Japs which never subsided, not even when she died in Kula Gulf nearly two years later.

Not all the ship’s personnel were aboard when the enemy hit Pearl Harbor. Some were ashore, at home with their families. But the absentees were not long away from their battle stations, once the bombs began to fall. They came from all directions, afoot and by car. They came in a hurry, “on the double.”

Lieutenant Boles—a Marblehead, Massachusetts, man—was at home with his wife, Harriet, and his two small sons when the attack began. He was romping with the youngsters on the lawn. There’s a picture for someone’s memory book: this tower of a man, well over six feet and as ruggedly handsome as he is high, legging it across

SOMETHING TO REMEMBER

the lawn to his car while the two tykes stare at him with eyes like saucers. They thought he was crazy.

Warren Boles drove pell-mell over the crowded roads and brought his car to a screeching halt on the pier. His long legs carried him swiftly to his battle station in Spot One, high up under the *Helena's* crow's nest. But the ship's main batteries were silent that Sunday. Against the enemy marauders she could use only her lighter weapons and anti-aircraft guns. Boles pitched in where he was needed.

Several days later, when the show was over, he started for home to find out how Mrs. Boles and the youngsters had come through the ordeal. The car was on the pier where he had left it. He stepped on the starter and the motor responded without protest. But before he had driven a hundred feet, a headlight fell off, then a fender clattered to the ground and a wheel rolled away. Literally shaken to pieces by the concussion of the bombs, the car came apart under him. Boles got out and walked.

The Japs were gone then. The torpedo planes had crippled the fleet and fled, and the last bomb had long since burst on Hickam Field. Pearl Harbor picked itself out of the rubble and dazedly took stock. The *Helena* and other ships of the fleet cleared away their wreckage and looked at their wounds.

The *Helena's* luck had been both good and bad. Bad, because the torpedo which had hit her should by all rights have hit the *Oglala* instead. Good, because a hit of such magnitude in her forward engine room should have sunk her—and it hadn't. Her engine room casualty list was long—more than forty men killed and a hundred others

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

seriously injured—and in later attacks still more of her men had been hurt by bomb fragments on deck. But the angry breath of her guns had kept the Japs at bay and burned six, probably seven, enemy planes from the sky.

Her gunnery had been superb. Lieutenant Commander Irving Duke could be proud of his gunners. Her skipper, Captain Robert H. English, USN, of Washington, D. C., was justifiably proud of his ship. She had demonstrated her ability to “take it.”

Could the ship be repaired? Her engineering officer, Commander Elmer C. Buerkle, USN, said she could be, and no one disputed his verdict. Commander Buerkle knew the *Helena* as well as any other man aboard her. Perhaps even a little better. He loved every inch of her, and his energy knew no bounds.

He and his crew rolled up their sleeves, made out a list of the miracles to be performed, and set about getting them done. Not too long later, running on one engine but under her own power and asking no assistance, the crippled *Helena* limped out of Pearl Harbor en route to Mare Island Navy Yard in California.

It was not a pleasure trip. Even the weather took a back-handed slap at the battered ship and piled up mountainous seas for her to buck. But her engineers swarmed over the patched-up engine, holding it together with injections of sweat and *Helena* spirit. Commander Buerkle went without sleep to watch over his patient. The *Helena* made port.

When she stood out from Mare Island six months later, the *Helena* bore no scars of her Pearl Harbor

SOMETHING TO REMEMBER

experience. Except for the drabness of her war dress, she was the same sleek cruiser which had been commissioned at New York in '39. Many of her personnel were new, but they were *Helena* men now, their loyalties established, spirits high.

While out of action at Mare Island, the ship had undergone some changes of command. The war was young; officers were being shuffled about in an effort to place each man in his proper niche. Captain English was relieved by Commander (Now Captain) Gerald D. Linke, USN, of Plainfield, New Jersey, who served as acting commanding officer until Captain (now Rear Admiral) Oliver M. Read, USN, of Yemassee, South Carolina, took over. When the *Helena* steamed out of San Francisco for the South Pacific with her last steel plate welded into place and her new engines tested in a brief shakedown, Captain Read was her skipper, Commander Linke her executive officer.

Her assignment was to convoy a detachment of Seabees to the South Seas and escort an aircraft carrier rushing planes to the Pacific war front.

Much had happened in the Pacific during the *Helena's* enforced stay at Mare Island. Wake and Guam were in the hands of the Japs. The campaign in the Philippines had ended in disaster. Singapore had fallen. Borneo, Sumatra, Java had been engulfed by the enemy in a head-long southward drive, and the Japs were pouring into New Guinea and the Solomons with Australia their objective.

We were on the defensive, working frantically to

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

create a series of island bases from which to defend our lines of communication with Australia. American troops had been dispatched to Australia and New Zealand; American Marines and airmen were being rushed to strategic areas in the South and Southwest Pacific. Logistical problems of staggering magnitude had to be met. The enemy’s advance continued.

In May, 1942, the Allies were at last strong enough to strike back. In the Coral Sea battle of May 7-11, an enemy force of warships and transports was met and defeated by Allied naval and air units near the Louisiade Archipelago, and the enemy’s advance bases on New Guinea, Rabaul and Bougainville were subjected to repeated attacks by army bombers. The Japs paused to adjust their plans and regroup their forces.

Early in June the enemy again moved to the attack, this time striking at the island of Midway with a powerful naval force including carriers. American carrier planes and land-based air units met the foe and stopped him in the now historic Battle of Midway.

These two encounters, the Coral Sea and Midway Battles, swung the balance of naval power in the Pacific back into Allied hands and checked the Japanese offensive. Then on August 7, American Marines led by Major General (now Lieutenant General) Alexander A. Vandegrift delivered the first offensive land blow for the Allies by swarming ashore on Guadalcanal and Tulagi to halt the Jap’s southward drive through the Solomons. The Battle for the Solomons, a three-dimensional conflict of unprecedented fury, began that day in August.

In the Battle for the Solomons, the Japs scored first

SOMETHING TO REMEMBER

with a naval victory of such magnitude that the recovery of our forces was little short of a miracle. The encounter occurred in the early morning hours of August 9. Allied transports at Guadalcanal and Tulagi were unloading men and supplies. Standing by to protect them was a force of cruisers and destroyers. An enemy force of warships, sighted hours before, was thought to be too far away to be dangerous.

But the Japs arrived ahead of schedule. Under cover of darkness they circled Savo Island, between Guadalcanal and Tulagi, and attacked with shells and torpedoes before an answering shot could be fired. The attack never attained the dimensions of a naval engagement. The enemy delivered his paralyzing punch too quickly. When he retired, he left the Australian cruiser *Canberra* and the American cruisers *Astoria*, *Quincy* and *Vincennes* in sinking condition behind him. No one could deny that the Japs had won round one, decisively.

Round two of the Solomons campaign was Japanese, also. The prize was the aircraft carrier *Wasp*, sunk by enemy torpedoes September 15.

The *Helena* was deep in the South Pacific then. Her trip from a West Coast port had been uneventful, and upon discharging her convoy duties she had been ordered to make two quick runs to Guadalcanal. That done, she was assigned to the task force with which the *Wasp* was operating. She was there when the *Wasp* died.

That tragic day in September, the *Wasp* and her escorting warships—the *Helena* included—were cruising the Coral Sea, awaiting an expected Japanese attack upon Guadalcanal. Reports indicated that an enemy naval

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

attack was imminent. The *Wasp* and her escorts were ready for action.

But the enemy encountered by the Allied force was not a surface foe; it was a submarine pack which lay in wait for the carrier and attacked with torpedoes, without warning. There was no battle. Mortally hit by three torpedoes, the year-and-a-half-old carrier burst into flames and was torn by her own internal explosions. Beyond saving, she was given the *coup de grâce* by her own destroyers.

It was the second time the *Helena* in her brief career had seen death and destruction wrought by Jap torpedoes. She stood by now, in peril of being torpedoed herself, to take aboard survivors. Grim in the presence of death and awed by the spectacle of a mighty ship in flames, her men broke open their sea bags and passed out clothing to the rescued.

There was little extra space aboard the *Helena* as she turned about and made for a South Seas base. Her own men numbered nearly twelve hundred, and with more than four hundred of the *Wasp's* crew jammed into her cabins and passageways, elbow room was at a premium. And that old hatred for the Japs, born at Pearl Harbor and smoldering silently ever since, now flared anew. The *Helena* craved action. Her men talked of little else and prayed for the day when the ship's guns would set their words to music. The enemy was rampant. The *Helena* had not fired a shot since Pearl Harbor.

Loaded with survivors, she put into port, where men on the decks of other American warships greeted her with somber gaze. “Here comes the 50,” they said.

SOMETHING TO REMEMBER

Fifty—five-zero—was the *Helena's* number.

No cheers welcomed her. She was not then the "fightingest ship in the fleet." She was a rescue ship, bleak and grim, bringing tidings of disaster.

But there were some at the base who, hearing of the *Helena's* coming, were elated beyond words. In fact, there were nine of us. We had chased her across a good part of the Pacific and when at last we saw the gleaming white "50" on her bow, our relief was profound. At last, after weeks of searching, nine of the *Helena's* officers, including myself, Chick Morris, had found our ship.

** CHAPTER TWO **

How to Catch a Warship

YES, we finally caught up with the *Helena* in the South Pacific, and if you will forgive a brief digression at this point, I'd like to tell you something of the time we had overtaking her.

For me the chase began at Northwestern University, in Chicago, where I had been studying gunnery, seamanship and navigation, waging a private little war of my own with a stack of Navy textbooks. I didn't have a Navy background. Before the war, I had been a reporter and radio writer in Boston, and director of news and special events at WBZ. In the Navy, before requesting duty at sea, I had been radio officer in Public Relations. Now, in July, 1942, I was handed a set of orders instructing me to report aboard the U.S.S. *Helena*, "wherever she may be." She was supposed to be at a West Coast port, so I said farewell to the textbooks and got aboard a train.

The first man I met on the train was a chap named Hollingsworth. Ensign (now Lieutenant jg) Sam Hollingsworth. Later we called him "Fightin' Sam" because he clawed his way to the center of every wardroom discussion and loved nothing better than an argument. He had the berth opposite mine on the train, and before

HOW TO CATCH A WARSHIP

long we got around to discussing the weather and introducing ourselves. I told him eventually that I was bound for the West Coast to find the *Helena*.

Sam blinked at me and said, "Well, what do you know! Me, too!" He was an ex-lawyer from Washington, D. C., and said he had fought so many judges that he was reasonably sure of being able to handle himself in any dispute with the Japs; and he looked as if he could, too. Later, he proved it. Sam was slight and had a quick smile, but knew his way around. He even enjoyed the life-and-limb ordeal of getting through to the diner. It was a little hard to believe he had a wife and a youngster at home in Washington.

Later that day we bumped into a fellow whom Sam had known before the war. Koerner was his name. He hailed from Pennsylvania and had been a lawyer, too, before enlisting in the Navy. "Ozzie," Sam called him. Ensign (now Lieutenant jg) Osborne Koerner. He was slender, then, with cheerful pink cheeks that gave him the look of a youngster of seventeen. Later on he filled out, got chubby, and looked more like the thirty he really was. The war proved good for Ozzie. He got fat on it.

Where was Ozzie going? Why, to report aboard the *Helena*! "It's a diminutive world, even in war time," he solemnly declared. "If this sort of thing happened in a movie, I'd make remarks."

We made plenty of remarks when we arrived on the West Coast, because the ship for which we were looking was not there. She had left, we were informed, several days ago, and at the moment was en route to "somewhere in the Pacific."

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

Being faintly green in the mysterious ways of the Navy, we stood around looking foolish. As I remember it, we stood around for several days, looking a little more foolish every day. Nothing in our orders had prepared us for the fact that the *Helena* might not be where the Navy had told us to look for her.

Eventually some kind soul steered us aboard a ship and advised us not to worry. “Worry in the Navy,” he said, “will get you exactly nowhere.” The ship was a little different from the fighting cruiser we had pictured; in fact she was an old United Fruiter, beamy as a barge. But at least she was going somewhere and we could go with her. So on August 7, the day the Marines landed on Guadalcanal, we steamed out of a West Coast port bound for Pearl Harbor, with a fat gray blimp overhead to protect us from enemy submarines.

“Heaven only knows,” Sam Hollingsworth said, “what’s going to become of us.”

We were in pretty good spirits then. A day or so later, however, we suddenly became very much and very soberly aware that a war was going on. That was when we heard the news of the sinking of those four Allied cruisers off Savo Island.

Ozzie and Sam and I looked at one another. Four cruisers in one brief skirmish. *Four* of them. The *Helena*, we remembered, was a cruiser too.

At Pearl Harbor there was no time for a Cook’s Tour. The aircraft carrier *Hornet* was about to depart for the South Pacific. The campaign on Guadalcanal was not going too well. Our Marines were holding Henderson Field and a small adjacent strip of the island, but the

HOW TO CATCH A WARSHIP

issue was far from settled and reinforcements were desperately needed. The destruction of those four cruisers had left the enemy in control of the sea lanes, and we needed warships in the area. We needed them quickly.

Ozzie, Sam and I and other *Helena*-bound officers left Pearl Harbor aboard the *Hornet*, and during the next few days got our first taste of Navy life at sea and our first feeling of being actually in a war zone. It was strange and a little confusing. The *Hornet* was a fighting ship, just back from the Battle of Midway. Her men talked a fighting language. They hadn't liked those radioed reports of the Savo Island losses. Not a little bit. Many of them had friends or acquaintances aboard the lost cruisers.

As we boiled along at high speed with our escort of cruisers and destroyers, bound for the region of the enemy's successes, the *Hornet's* men talked of "getting even" and "squaring things for those guys." All over the ship the men were sore. Their pride was hurt. They tried to explain away the Allied defeat, which to them was a wholly American defeat and therefore humiliating, by saying belligerently, "Those Japs aren't that smart; they must have got a lucky break. Man for man, ship for ship, we can lick 'em seven days a week. They slipped in another sneak punch and got away with it again. But it will be the last!"

Yes, they'd been hurt where American boys like least of all to be hurt—right in the middle of their pride—and the *Hornet* was a sullen ship, flexing its wings to give the Japs a sting. We sat in on many a bull session with the fliers in their rooms, and they talked not of the

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

wonders they had performed yesterday at Midway but of what they were determined to do tomorrow. Impatiently they reached for the future. For many of them the future came to an abrupt and tragic end October 26 when the *Hornet* herself was sunk by Japanese airplanes.

But we were not long on the carrier. After eighteen days of riding her, we were transferred again. And again we jumped from ship to ship in the damndest places, at the craziest times—sometimes in the middle of the night. We rode on a million gallons of aviation gasoline for a time. We called at island ports of which we’d never heard before.

In forty-two days we traveled on nine different ships. One of them a very ancient repair ship which had been damaged at Pearl Harbor near the *Helena*, and another the newest ship in the fleet, the battleship *South Dakota*. It was an experience and an education. We even journeyed on a Marine transport to a forward base, only to find that the *Helena*, Lord love her, had again refused to wait for us. Ships at war, like time, wait for no man.

But at the South Sea base, on the morning of September 18, which incidentally was the third anniversary of the *Helena’s* commissioning, the sun shone warmly through the porthole over my bunk and a voice flowed in with the gleam of it. “Here comes the 50!”

Five-zero! I reached for the porthole and pulled myself up, unwilling to be convinced that our will-of-the-wisp chase had at last come to an end. But there she was, slim and lovely despite the somber gray of her war paint. There were the bristling guns we had heard so much

HOW TO CATCH A WARSHIP

about. There was the bold white "50" shining on her bow!

With Ozzie and Sam and the rest, I clambered into a small boat a few minutes later, a seabag slung over one shoulder and a fine feeling of contentment under my belt. We had chased the *Helena* so long. We had plagued the men of a dozen ships with questions about her. It was a luxurious feeling to walk her deck at last, after all those frantic weeks of wandering on strange ships, living out of a canvas bag, sleeping on anything, and being an "officer without a ship."

Someone said the usual things to us—"Glad to have you aboard! We'll show you the wardroom"—and then I found myself shaking hands with a six-foot-three lieutenant whose room I was to share. He was the *Helena's* assistant gunnery officer, Warren Boles, the man whose car had come apart under him at Pearl Harbor.

"Come on," he said. "I'll show you around."

As we prowled about the ship he told me quietly that she was not usually quite so crowded. "We just came in," he said, "with survivors from the *Wasp*." That sobered me, and the feeling under my belt was not so jubilant. But we looked at the *Helena's* guns, all fifteen of those long, steel snouts jutting from the main turrets fore and aft, and I said, "I can't wait to see and hear them fire."

Warren put on a semi-solemn expression which I learned later was characteristic. "Have you ever heard fifteen 6-inch guns go off in unison?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Not yet."

His expression became a little less solemn. As a gunnery officer he knew a good deal about the power and

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

the bellow of the *Helena's* weapons. And he knew, which I did not—then—that the witches' brew in the South Pacific was swiftly coming to a boil, and the *Helena's* guns would soon be thundering.

“It's something to hear for the first time,” he said. “Just be careful which way you jump.”

** CHAPTER THREE **

Skipper in a Coal Bag

WARREN BOLES walked into the radio room a few days later and bent himself over my chair. He was wearing that semi-solemn look again.

“Do you still want to hear the *Helena's* guns in action?” he asked.

I said I did.

“All right. But remember—the first time is always the worst. We’re going to have some test firing.”

A few minutes later the ship’s loudspeaker system sounded the usual warning, “Stand by to open fire!” I was to hear it a good many times in the following months, but Boles was right—the first was the worst. Some of the radio shack gang cocked an eye to catch my reaction. They had been through it, and knew. Rebel Sandridge, one of my radiomen, rolled a fat nickel stogie in his mouth and airily waved a hand. “Nothin’ to it,” he said. Rebel’s bright black eyes and contagious grin were a *Helena* legend.

I sat there wondering what it would be like. You can’t help that. You think of those whopping big guns topside, and you *know* your brains will rattle when they go off. You furtively watch the clock, counting the seconds, until presently you realize that the radio room is very quiet

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

because everyone else is waiting, too. They’ve been through it before, but automatically they hold their breaths. All except Rebel. Fond of playing tough, he sits in a slouch at his typewriter, the phones cocked rakishly on his head. “Huck Finn,” I used to call him. Gunnery practice, huh! Wait until the real thing comes along!

But you wait just as tensely for the first thunderclap of those 6-inch guns in practice. You feel like a kid watching the fuse of a giant cannon cracker, except that there is nothing to watch in Radio One except the creeping hands of the clock and the expectant faces of the men.

Then you jump. The whole ship is enveloped in one shattering blast of noise, and you jump like hell. Some of the boys laugh because they knew you would do it. They jump, too, though. They always will at the first salvo, no matter how many times they hear the loud-speaker’s warning and set themselves. No human nervous system can be trained to accept that torrent of sound without flinching.

But presently everything is fine again. The guns are still thundering, the ship still quivers, but you are back to normal. It was only the first salvo that bounced you out of your chair and exploded a bomb in your brain.

The boys are typing again. There are schedules to keep. Rebel has just knocked out a dispatch and is waving it in front of your eyes, eager for it to be right because he’s a sober kid, really, and every message is of tremendous importance.

“Is it okay?” he begs. “Did I make any mistakes?”

You look around, aware of the rumble of the ship’s guns. The typewriters jiggle on the tables. But the boys

SKIPPER IN A COAL BAG

just pound the machines a little harder to hold them down, and everything is okay, even Rebel's dispatch.

On deck the gunners are soberly at work, going through a training routine which is now as familiar to them as eating and sleeping. One of the ship's planes streaks by, towing a target sleeve, and the secondary batteries and machine-guns come alive with a chatter which sounds shrill and womanish against the fat bass of the main turrets. Turrets and mounts are ant-hills of activity, every man as deadly in earnest as though the sea out there were crowded with enemy warships, and the sky with planes.

They seldom make mistakes. That old inspiration instilled by soft-spoken Lieutenant Commander Duke, plus everlasting rehearsal, has made each turret team as quick and slick as precision machinery. Sweating, grimy men swing their arms with the grace of ballet dancers to maintain the flow of ammunition from magazines to guns. No one has to tell them the importance of their jobs. And even in practice the *Helena* hits her targets with commendable regularity. She has a bull's-eye complex.

The ship was cruising now. Steaming out from base with ammunition and supplies replenished, she had joined a carrier task force led by the *Hornet* and was operating in the Coral Sea. Day and night she patrolled those disputed waters, ready to intercept the enemy if he attempted to strike in force again at Guadalcanal.

It was a waiting strategy designed to make the most of the limited strength possessed by the Allies in the South Pacific. Admittedly we had not yet recovered from

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

Pearl Harbor. The Japs had more than we had and could risk more than we could. It was their move. But the *Helena's* task force stood ready to thwart the move—or try to—when they made it.

Radio reports were all of a kind during this period of watchful waiting. From pilots of reconnaissance planes came word that the Japs were gathering their strength at Rabaul and Bougainville, to strike at Guadalcanal. They had to be stopped, no matter what the cost. Guadalcanal was no longer merely an island in a group of islands. It had become a bloody line on the map of strategy across which the enemy must not be permitted to advance.

In September the *Helena* escorted a converted carrier into the area to bolster the island's air strength. Now through hot days and black nights we patrolled within striking distance, just beyond reach of enemy “snooper” planes but ready to move up at top speed when our own pilots flashed the word that the Japs were “in the Slot.” The Slot was that bloody battlefield of ocean extending from Guadalcanal northwest to Bougainville, with the island chain of Santa Isabel and Choiseul on one side, New Georgia on the other. It was the way the Japs would come.

We talked about it constantly. Even in the coding room, where Lieutenant (now Lieutenant Commander) V. W. Post and the rest of us in communications spent many an hour sweating over bits of garbled messages, struggling to piece them together and make sense of them, the talk was always of the impending clash with the enemy's warships. Were we good enough? None of

SKIPPER IN A COAL BAG

us knew. We had never been through the real thing.

On September 23, while prowling the Coral Sea with her task force, the *Helena* received word that Captain Read had been assigned to other duties. Our new skipper was to be Captain Gilbert C. Hoover, USN, commanding officer of the destroyer squadron escorting us at the time.

We had heard of Captain Hoover. He hailed from the old sea-faring town of Bristol, Rhode Island, and wore the Navy Cross for extraordinary heroism. *Helena* officers who had met him were excited and eager at the prospect of having him aboard. "He'll fit," they predicted. "He'll be a *Helena* man the minute he puts a foot on our deck."

The word went around, of course. A new skipper is an event. Anticipation and speculation rustled in the ward-room and crew's quarters, and there was buzzing aplenty in the junior officers' bunkroom below the communications platform. The *Helena* had been blessed with grand skippers, every one of whom had handled the ship with the affection and devotion her men appreciated. Would Captain Hoover be like that?

At the appointed time the destroyer flagship came alongside. It was a beautiful morning. The sun blazed on the water so brightly it hurt the eyes of the men lined up on deck for a look at their new commanding officer. Snowballs of cloud sat serenely in the sky. The sea was a slow blue roll and there were white birds flying.

We slowed to a speed of ten knots, and the destroyer beat along beside us, matching our pace, separated by fifteen feet or so of soft-green water. *Helena* men heaved a line from the quarterdeck, and agile hands on the

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

destroyer caught it, made it fast. A moment later Captain Hoover’s men had rigged a canvas coal bag to the line and the captain himself was clambering into it.

That was how “Hoover of the *Helena*” first boarded his ship—squatting in a coal bag slung on a line between his old and new commands. He wore an aviator’s leather jacket and a jaunty overseas cap. Democratic as a boot, he waved his free hand to the curious men at the *Helena*’s rail.

The men were delighted. They liked the way he “came over the side.” They liked his looks and his grin. They liked the cut of him. His expression plainly said he was proud to be coming aboard, and that was all they needed to know.

Late that evening, as communications watch officer, I went to the new skipper’s cabin with some messages from the radio room. The Marine orderly opened the door to announce me, and Captain Hoover looked up from the chair in which he was sitting. The hour was late and he was tired. He still wore the aviator’s jacket. But he was poring intently over blueprints of the *Helena*, studying his ship, getting to know her.

“What’s your name?” he asked pleasantly.

“Morris, sir. It’s good to have you aboard.”

“I’m glad to be aboard. You’ve a good ship here,” Captain Hoover said gently.

“We think so, sir.”

“I know you do. Sit down.”

You knew he was the right man for the *Helena*. Five or ten minutes of “shooting the breeze” with him, there in the quiet of his cabin, was all any man needed to be

SKIPPER IN A COAL BAG

sure of that. He was not a big man; neither short nor tall, stout nor slender. In his leather jacket he looked a little like a middle-aged suburbanite about to go for a walk in the woods, with a trout rod tucked under one arm. But that room was a calm and confident place, mellowed already by the captain's personality. Captain Hoover belonged in it. And it was important for the *Helena's* men, every last one of them, to know that, because they loved their ship and could not have been content under a skipper who did not share their loyalty.

** CHAPTER FOUR **

Prelude

IT was October, and the first of the red letter days on the *Helena's* calendar was not far distant. The ship had been ordered to the vicinity of Guadalcanal again, to patrol and wait. The tempo of radio traffic had quickened noticeably. Decisive action appeared imminent.

Those were bright moonlit nights, lovely as a travelogue, but dangerous. On the foc'sle, where the "Junior Board of Strategy" gathered every evening to read the flag hoists and discuss the possibilities of our seeing some action, you could see to play cards by the incredible whiteness of the moon. But the enemy could use that moonlight too. Lurking submarines might find it helpful in silhouetting a target.

One night it happened. Our task force was on the prowl as usual. The sea was silver, the night shimmering with light. Lieutenant Sam Leiman, USN, conning the ship, anxiously scanned that glittering sea through the pilot house port holes. Suddenly he spotted the wake of an enemy torpedo.

It was a strange sight in that peaceful night. The fish was five feet or so under the surface. The eruption in the water was visible a long way off—a rushing streak of soapsuds topped by a high white feather. In the moon-

PRELUDE

light the phosphorus in that speeding feather of foam gave off sparks like a Fourth-of-July rocket.

But Sam did not pause to admire it. "Torpedo wake on the port bow!" he yelled. "Emergency right rudder, full speed ahead! Sound General Quarters!"

We were lucky that time. Apparently we had run into a nest of subs, because even as the General Quarters buzzer aroused the ship, Sam sighted a second torpedo approaching us from such an angle that the same submarine could not possibly have fired it.

The *Helena* heeled over, artfully dodging. One of the torpedoes streaked past our bow and exploded—so close that a hail of shrapnel screamed over the *Helena's* forward deck. The other trailed its phosphorescent tail past our stern, missed another ship in the force by a heart-beat, and hit a cruiser.

Oddly, some of us had been talking about torpedoes just before the Jap turned these two loose on us. Below, in my room, we had been sitting around with our shoes and shirts off, cursing the heat. Even at night it was always hellishly hot near Guadalcanal, and you could feel the sweat wriggling over you from head to foot. The steel bulkheads were massive and close. The cabin air was stale. Space was at a premium.

Someone said, "We'd be in a fix down here below the water line if a torpedo ever smacked us. Ever think what you'd do?"

I said I'd thought about it often. "We wouldn't do much of anything," I said.

"I suppose not, but it gives you the willies sometimes, thinking about it," someone else said. "You're so damned

"THE FIGHTIN'EST SHIP"

hemmed in. No room to move. I feel better on deck these moonlit nights."

"We've got men on deck to watch out for torpedoes."

"I know. They had lookouts on the *Wasp*, too."

A lot of torpedo talk went on in that room. The men who dropped in of an evening to sit around and "bat the breeze" were evidently torpedo minded. And why not? You were conscious always of the gray steel walls and the fact that an enemy fish *could* make the room its target. We called our living quarters "Torpedo Junction." Ironically, later, they were.

I looked at the clock and it was 9 P.M., time to hit the sack. That was when the GQ buzzer sounded. We poured out of there, every man to his battle station on the double, and the ship was swarming with people in a hurry by the time I arrived topside.

Across the sea, seemingly a long way off, a ship was burning. She was one of ours, the cruiser hit by the second of those two torpedoes. The other ships in the force were weaving and turning at top speed, churning the moonlit water to a froth as they swung into evasive maneuvers. The *Helena* herself had changed course and was speeding for safety.

We evacuated that perilous area quickly, every man alert and nervous at his battle station. It is an unpleasant sensation, knowing there are enemy subs lurking in the sea through which your ship is blindly seeking a route of escape. More of those torpedoes may already be hissing through the depths.

We saw no more torpedoes that night. Our force scattered, leaving a destroyer to seek out the enemy and as-

PRELUDE

sist the crippled cruiser. A day or two later the cruiser limped into port for repairs.

The *Helena*, too, returned to port, but her stay was short. Refueled and resupplied, she hauled the hook less than twenty-four hours later and stood out again on patrol.

These were days of tension. All of us knew that this weary cruising could not last forever. The Japs would strike—they had to strike—but when? The ship's officers talked of nothing else. The Foc'sle Club, shooting the breeze at sunset hour, milked the subject dry. Captain Hoover was restless. Commander Charles Carpenter, USN, the ship's navigator, paced the bridge incessantly, scowling until his Charlie Chaplin mustache bristled like the armament of a porcupine. Sam Maslo, "Sobbin' Sam the Fire Control Man," gloomed about the ship and predicted dire things.

"We'll catch it sure," Sam groaned. "They got twenty ships to our one. They'll murder us." Perhaps he didn't believe it, but when he solemnly shook his head and screwed his ruddy face into a vision of grief, you thought he did.

All day we remained on the alert for air and submarine attacks, and all night the submarine watch continued. The *Helena's* anti-sub planes patrolled constantly. Tired, tense and apprehensive, we caught our meals when we could, and stuffed them down in a hurry, hating the moonlight and remembering what enemy torpedoes, boiling silently out of nowhere, had done to other ships in those dangerous waters. And always it was wickedly, depressingly hot. Nowhere could a man escape the smoth-

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

ering blanket of heat.

Long range Navy PBVs were out as usual, patrolling in wide arcs to the north and west of us, daily reporting the gathering of enemy forces. Suddenly on the morning of October 11 they reported the enemy on the move. Into the *Helena's* radio room poured a flood of messages—reports to the flagship of the force; relayed information from Comsopac; orders, requests for information; new reports from the planes—all in a steady, chattering stream that kept the typewriters hopping. All morning long, officers of the communications division were in and out of the coding room, breaking down the rush of traffic, sorting it and speeding it to the captain and department heads.

The Japs were on the move again. There was no longer any doubt about that.

The tempo increased hourly. PBVs from our advance bases ranged far over Jap-controlled waters and Jap-held islands, extending their search for information. The success or failure of our counter blow was largely in their hands.

“Twelve enemy ships—six cruisers, six destroyers—course one-two-five, speed thirty. Am shadowing.” Somewhere in the upper reaches of the Slot, a Navy PBV had discovered an enemy force of warships on the move. Tired men, perhaps out on patrol for ten or twelve hours already, tightened their belts, shook off their weariness and prepared to keep an eye on the Japs until relieved—or until a swarm of angry Zeros swooped from the clouds to make the sky too hot for them.

Brave boys flew those PBVs. In their tireless patrols

PRELUDE

they had saved many a survivor from sunken ships, many a pilot whose luck had run out over some remote sea. And on October 11, as the opposing forces of the Battle of Cape Esperance maneuvered into position, the PBY men supplied our surface ships with amazingly accurate intelligence. All that day they continued to ferret out the enemy and shadow him.

Three or four times an hour, as communications watch officer, I dashed topside to the skipper's cabin on the bridge that afternoon with urgent messages, battle plan dispatches, orders from Admiral Norman Scott aboard the flagship *San Francisco*. There in his compact little cabin, the bulkheads lined with charts and his desk stacked high with official papers, Captain Hoover was without question the calmest man on the *Helena*. It was, in fact, something more than simple calmness. On entering that cabin from the feverish bustle of the ship, you sensed a kind of loneliness. You felt the pressure of the responsibility upon the man who sat there hour after hour, thoughtfully planning the attack of his ship—our ship.

This was, after all, the *Helena's* first significant engagement. Her guns when they spoke would be thundering at enemy ships for the first time. Her officers and men were already waging that battle within themselves, measuring their mettle, wondering how they would shape up in action.

"Good afternoon, Morris." Captain Hoover still had time to nod pleasantly as he accepted the dispatch board. "The latest dope, eh?"

He held the board in steady hands and studied the

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

messages, frowning a little under bushy brows. He made notes on a pad, then handed the board back and turned in his chair to look at the big Solomons Area charts on the bulkheads. They were punctured with tiny holes from the points of instruments, spotted everywhere with small red dots denoting enemy sub and ship positions. How many hundreds of times they had been erased, corrected, brought up to date was impossible to guess, but they were charts with a history, as thumbed and worn as a well read book.

The captain rose and carefully marked the latest reported position of the enemy, then corrected the line on the chart denoting the probable course the Japs would maintain after dark, when our planes would no longer be able to shadow them.

“Are we going in, Captain?”

“It looks like it,” he said, “if they don’t change their course. We’re closing fast.” He traced with his finger the progress of the Jap fleet from the time it had first been sighted. Our own course was marked there, too. Obviously we were maneuvering to strike when darkness fell. The two lines on the chart were twin fuses, smoldering toward each other. When they met there would be an explosion.

“Yes, I think we’ll see some action,” Captain Hoover said. He was intent again on the papers piled upon his desk, and looked up only briefly to add, “Show these dispatches to the department heads.”

Commander Rodman Smith, the gunnery officer, was a seasoned Navy man, tall and husky, with never much time for pleasantries and now none at all. In his cabin

PRELUDE

he studied gunnery charts, books, ammunition data, the hundred and one items that make up a ship's ability to hit with speed and precision. The commander was not an easy man to work under. As grim as his guns, he was sometimes as explosive as the shells that were slammed into them. But he got results.

He glanced at the dispatch board, initialed it, passed it to Lieutenant Boles, his main battery assistant. "Captain seem to be worried?" Boles asked.

I shook my head. "Not a bit."

"Are we going in?"

"He says it looks like it."

"I hope so," Boles said. "The men need something to shoot at." He said it matter-of-factly, but if it is possible for a man six-foot-three to grow taller, Boles grew taller. His hatred for the Japs was no synthetic thing. Many of the *Helena* men killed at Pearl Harbor had been his close friends.

I made the rounds and hurried back to Radio One to check dispatches which had come in during my absence. The watch officer waved a sheet of paper.

"This one just came in. It's an urgent, but garbled all to hell. I can't break it." He knew how important it was—today, of all days—for every message to make sense. All of us in the radio room knew that.

We worked on it. Like a number of others it had been mangled by atmospheric interference and the operator had not been able to get every letter. Words and parts of words were missing. With messages reduced to the briefest possible form to begin with, it was like solving brain-twisters to make sense out of these incomplete dis-

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

patches. But we worked on them, and nine times out of ten we broke them.

So it went, hour after hour. All afternoon the PBYs shadowed the enemy down through the Slot and filled the air with reports of his progress. At Admiral Halsey’s South Pacific headquarters these messages were sifted and evaluated, sent back to the ships of our force with comments and instructions, even though our own radio men had received them already.

It was late now. The afternoon had been hot but beautiful, the sea calm, the sky clear. In the distance the blue-tipped peaks of Guadalcanal were plainly visible as we steamed north, then west, maneuvering to be ever in the vicinity but never too close. There was danger always, of course, that Japanese snoopers might spot us. Not until dark could we proceed without fear of being sighted.

I went topside to the foc’sle. We were moving west, straight into the sun, the air so clear and still that the whole visible world seemed splashed with sunset colors. It was good to stand there and watch the ships of our formation steaming through that placid sea. And I was not alone. Other men were thinking the same thoughts.

Some were sitting around the anchor windlasses. Others were parked on the bitts, quietly “batting the breeze.” One man was asleep on the steel deck, and another, nearby, was deep in a magazine of Western stories. The Foc’sle Club watched the flag hoists, reading our orders for the night, and speculating—always speculating.

Then suddenly the sun was gone, the shimmering lights

PRELUDE

of the afterglow paled and the sky was heavy with overcast. And now, in a magical maneuver, our entire force swung into a single line. In the lead were slim destroyers. In the line stood the heavy cruiser *San Francisco*, flagship of the force, the *Salt Lake City*, the *Boise* and the *Helena*, with destroyers at the tail of the procession. Fighting ships, all of them!

Shortly after this change of formation, we went to General Quarters. There was no signal, only the passing of the word. The time had been set long before. In the coding room I peeled off my shirt and settled down to supervise the routine traffic.

There was little to do. Our search planes had returned to their bases and had nothing more for us. The ships of the force were observing radio silence, lest the Japs pick up some scrap of talk and be warned of our intentions. Traffic was light.

But we waited, all of us, for word from the flagship that Admiral Scott had decided to engage the enemy. Nothing yet was official. Nothing would be official until, by faint signal lights from the *San Francisco*, we received the admiral's last minute decision.

It came at last, relayed over the loudspeakers from signalmen on the bridge.

"We are going in. Scott."

** CHAPTER FIVE **

Moving Up

ADMIRAL SCOTT'S message was medicine for frayed nerves. We knew now what to expect. The score of men jammed into the crowded steel cell of Radio One were all at once at ease.

Blond Thomas Sims, an eighteen-year-old radio "striker" from a farm town in Alabama, blinked his big blue eyes and remarked, for everyone, "Well, I guess that's that." Chief Radioman Alborn adjusted his cap—he always wore that cap—and calmly began checking his equipment. He checked the "Joe pot" (the coffee pot) too, because no matter how much of a purgatory the shack became—and it was one hundred degrees already with the doors dogged and ventilation cut off—we were going to want hot coffee.

There was scarcely room in Radio One to breathe. All radio and battle circuits were manned. There was little, if any, air. The shack had the moist, sweaty smell of a crowded dressing-room, and now and then one of the men would accept a relief and throw himself down in a corner to "flake out" for a while.

I went into the coding room, and that, too, was crowded. All traffic had been cleared up, and the officers were squatting on the deck, playing rummy. I joined

MOVING UP

them. But there was one trouble with the rummy game. Lieutenant J. V. Cooper, the supply officer, had to bound up every few minutes to answer calls for coffee, sandwiches and fruit for the crew. Men get hungry and thirsty during a long alert. They also get tired. Many are jammed into small, airless niches where it is impossible to stretch an arm or leg.

We awaited the zero hour. On the bridge, Captain Hoover peered into the dark at the long white line of suds kicked up by the ships in formation. He spoke frequently to his "talkers," who phoned his orders to the battle stations. The ship—the whole ship—was Captain Hoover's responsibility.

With him on the fighting bridge, standing by to interpret any messages received by blinker or TBS (talk between ships) from the flagship, was Communications Officer Lieutenant Michael Tyng, USN. A deck below in the pilot house was the ship's navigator, Commander Charles Carpenter, USN, who would be called upon to make split-second decisions of tremendous importance when, at the height of battle, friendly and enemy ships milled about in darkness. In battle and at General Quarters, Commander Carpenter was Officer of the Deck.

Signalmen, helmsmen and talkers stood by. Messengers came and went, hurrying when there seemed no real need to hurry. But it was difficult now to recognize these men. Dumpy and fat in fireproof goggles, steel helmets, "Mae Wests" and gloves, they resembled visitors from Mars. They moved awkwardly, handicapped by the flash-proof gear they wore to protect them from enemy fire and the *Helena's* own guns.

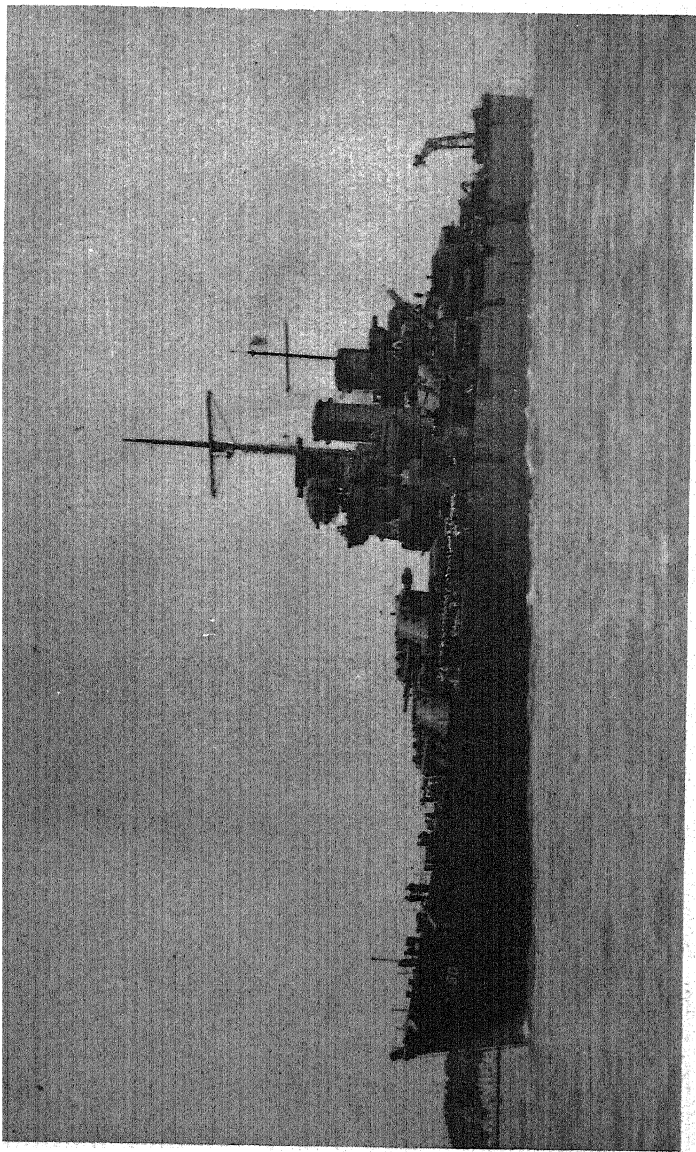
“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

Other responsible officers were stationed at strategic points over the ship, awaiting the captain’s orders. Gunnery Officer Smith was beside Captain Hoover on the fighting bridge. Lieutenant Boles was high up in the Main Battery Control Station. Director Control Officer Lieutenant (now Lieutenant Commander) Jim Baird, USN, was awaiting action in Sky Forward, in control of the secondary battery. Lieutenant Commander Jack Chew, USN, was on the fighting bridge as Air Defense Officer. Deep down in the ship, the plotting room officers and men stood ready to manipulate the vital fire control gear.

We were going in. Last minute preparations for any eventuality were rushed to completion. Pharmacist’s mates worked with the doctors to set up auxiliary dressing stations. First aid men checked their gear. Damage control gangs were at their repair posts, ready to rush rescue and repair equipment to wherever there might be need for it. In the turrets, the gun crews waited behind armor plate. The heat radiated as from an oven, and when the loudspeaker growled at the men to “relax but be ready for instant action,” their relaxing was mostly mental. There was no room for anything more.

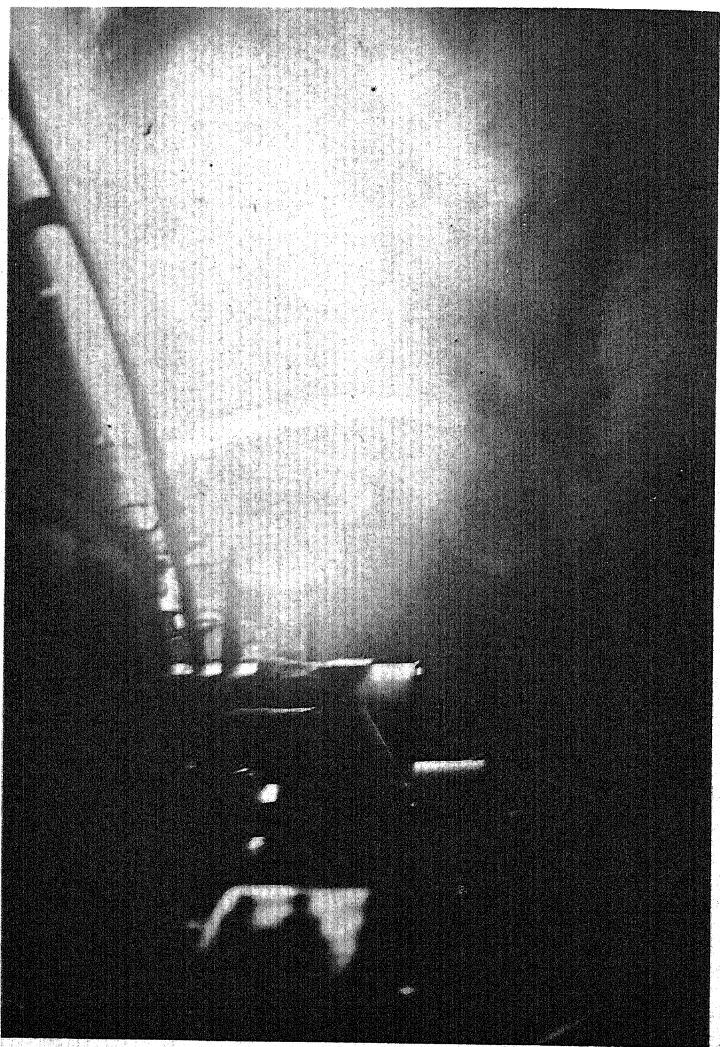
It was now ten o’clock. We in the coding room were watching the clock with increased alertness. Unless the Jap force had changed its course after dark, we should meet them between eleven and twelve. The hands of the clock seemed weighted. The minutes were longer than hours.

The voice of the captain’s talker interrupted the rattle of the radio shack typewriters. “Radio One—Fighting Bridge—give us latest contact reports!”



THE U.S.S. HELENA

Official U. S. Navy Photograph



Official U. S. Navy Photograph

DESTROYER'S GUNS BLAST JAPS

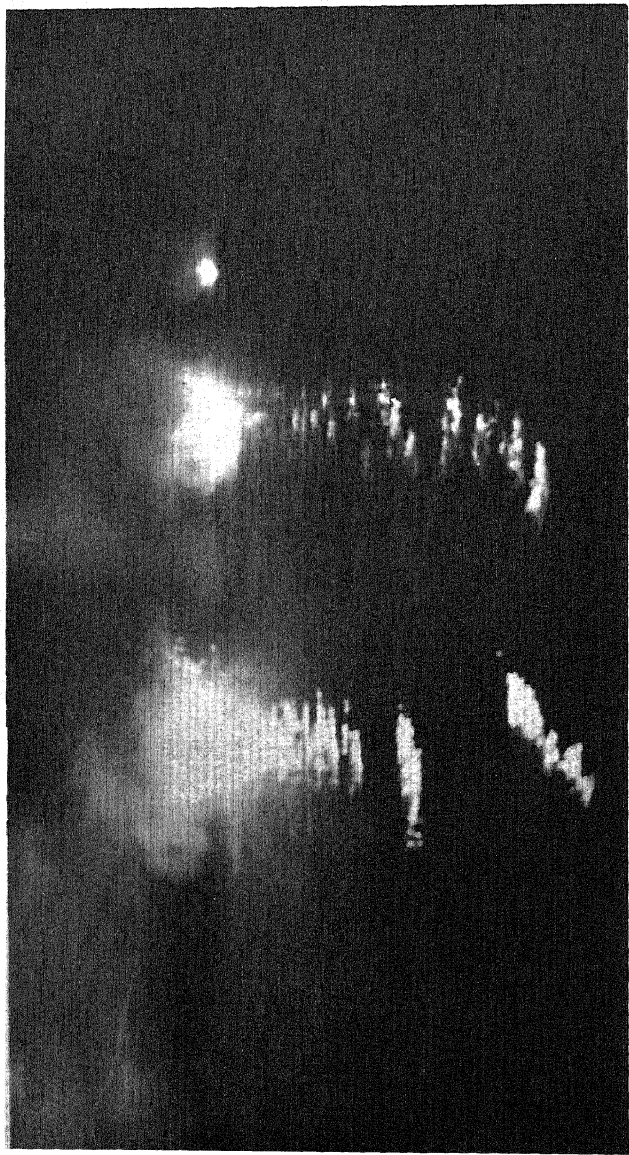
In the blackness of night, a U. S. destroyer's guns bombard enemy's Kula Gulf installations



Official U. S. Navy Photograph

FLASH OF BATTLE SILHOUETTES GUN CREW

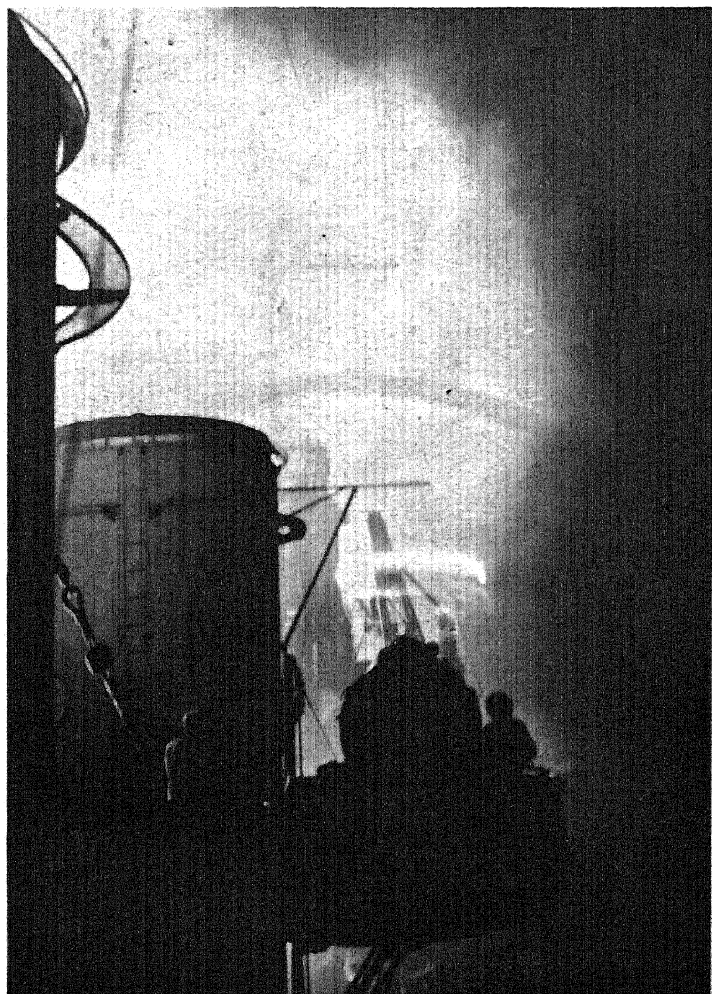
Manning 1.1 anti aircraft guns aboard a U. S. cruiser during the height of the battle, these men were momentarily spotlighted in the flash of another ship's guns



Official U. S. Navy Photograph

HELENA DEALS HER LAST BLOW TO THE JAPS

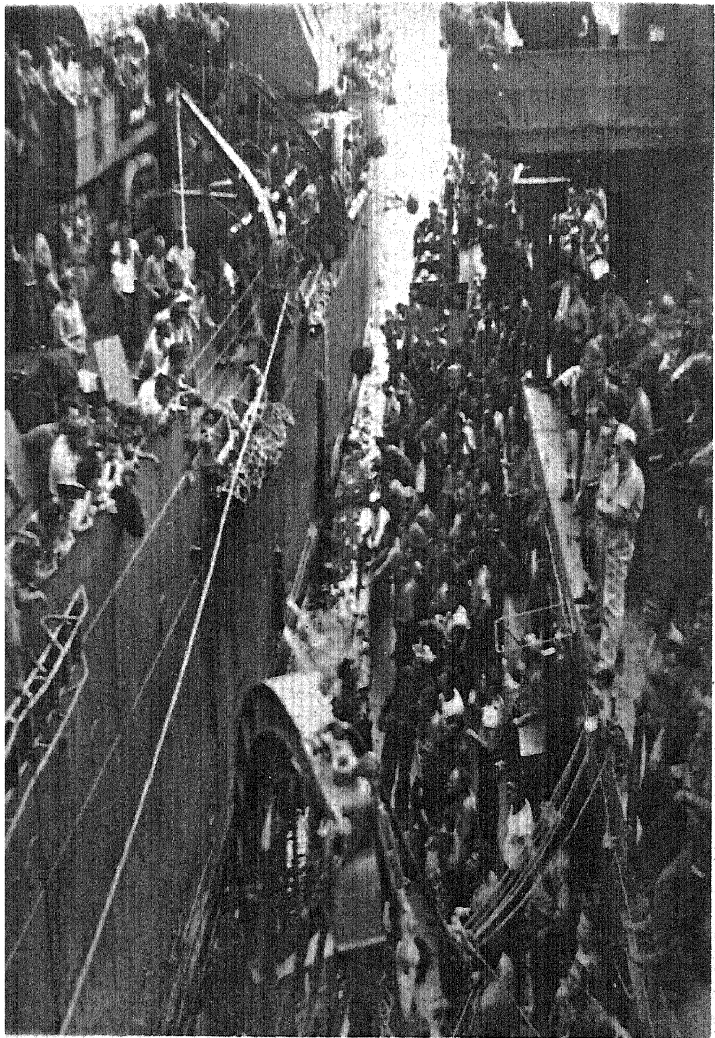
Guns blazing, the U.S.S. *Helena* (visible through the smoke of battle), fires her last salvo at the Japs in the night Battle of Kula Gulf, July 5, 1943, before being struck by enemy torpedoes



Official U. S. Navy Photograph

LIGHTS OF DEATH AND MERCY

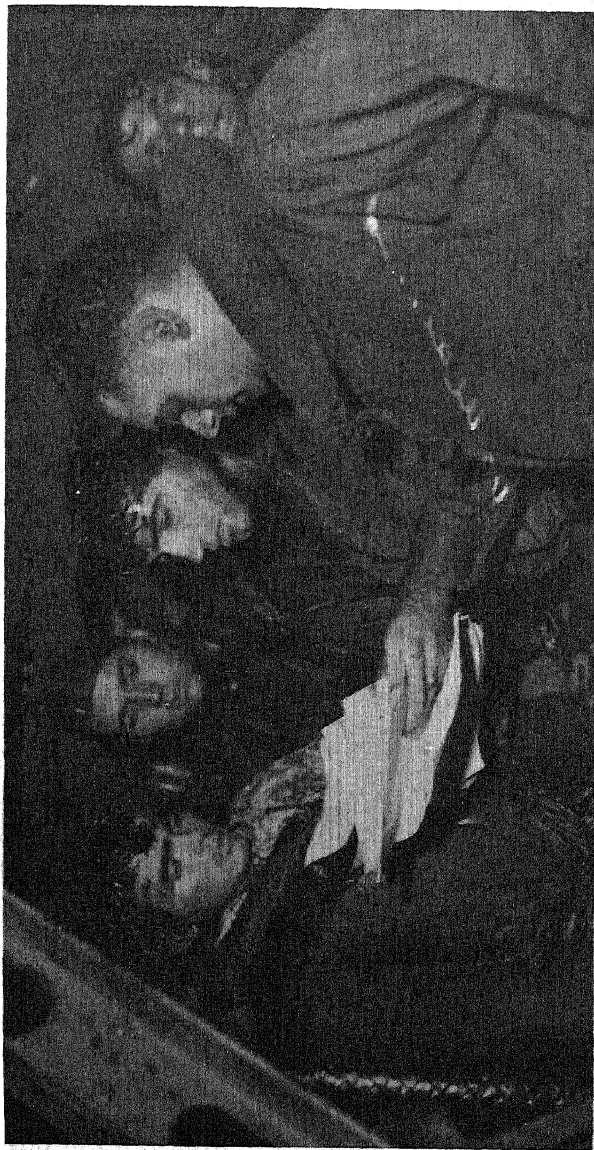
Powerful rays of this searchlight, combing the waters of Kula Gulf for survivors of the torpedoed *U.S.S. Helena*, are "whitened out" by the glare of explosions of the ship's heavy rifles as they continue to blast Japanese vessels in the night engagement



Associated Press Photo

HELENA SURVIVORS REACH PORT

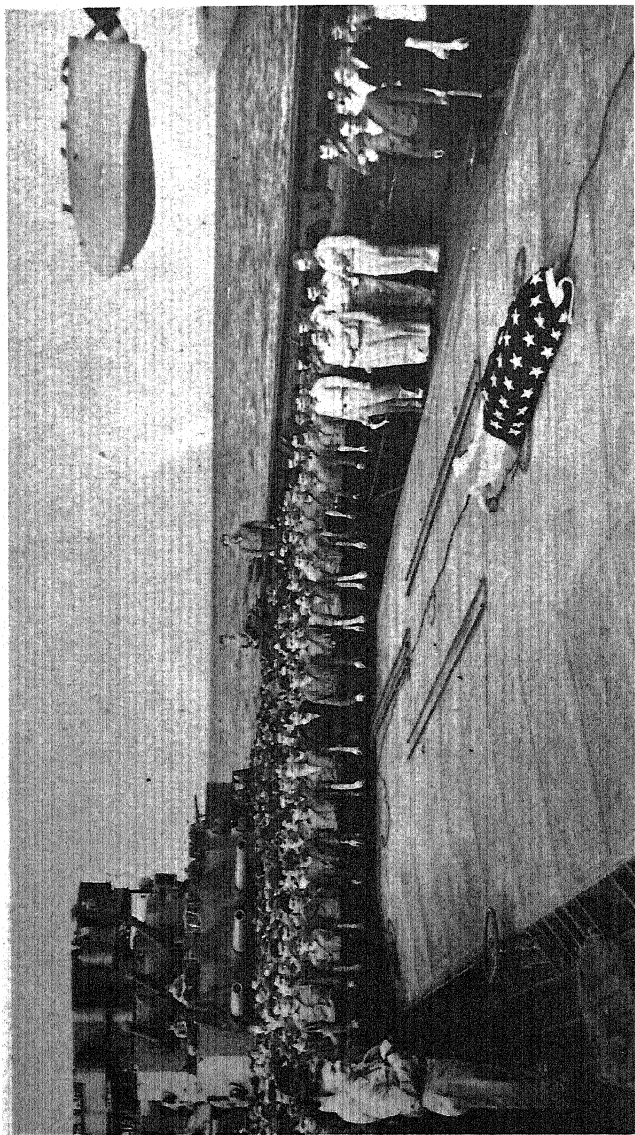
Survivors of the U.S.S. Helena, sunk in the battle of Kula Gulf early in July, line the rail of a rescuing destroyer



Official U. S. Navy Photograph

IN AT THE DEATH

Their elation at being rescued darkened by the loss of their beloved ship, oil-smeard crew members of the *Helena* talk over her last minutes as they "report in" on a sister ship after the Battle of Kula Gulf, July 5-6, 1943



IN MEMORIAM

Funeral services for one of the *Helena's* sailors, who died aboard a rescuing warship, are held on one of the U. S. cruisers which participated in the American victory over the Japanese in the Kula Gulf

Official U. S. Navy Photograph

MOVING UP

It was a routine request. There had been no word from outside since Admiral Scott's announcement that we were going in. But it served to break the tension. The reply went back, "Fighting Bridge—Radio One—nothing to report." And we watched the clock again.

The ship was close to Guadalcanal, south and west of Cape Esperance on a course calculated to hurl us head-on at the Japs. We were not maneuvering now, but plowing an arrow-straight gash through the shrouded sea. Over the loudspeakers, at ten-thirty, came the warning, "Expect to contact enemy soon. All hands prepare for instant action!"

We were ready. There was nothing to prepare.

At eleven came the same report, followed by a pause. Then: "Enemy expected momentarily!"

The clatter of the typewriters—four or five of them now—ceased momentarily while those words rumbled from the speaker. Then it resumed. Battle or no battle, radio schedules had to be copied and no important code message could be missed.

A few minutes after eleven, we heard the first report of actual contact with the enemy. The loudspeaker blared the awaited message without prelude or preamble. "Enemy contacted! All hands stand by for action!"

The ship sucked in a breath. The Japs had come down as expected. They had not changed their course. Our force of cruisers and destroyers, outnumbered but eager to fight, raced in single file through a calm sea, under a heavy overcast, to meet the enemy. The peaks of Guadalcanal loomed close and dark.

How many ships the Japs had, no one knew. Officially

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

we may never know. At various times throughout the day, reconnaissance planes had reported seven, then ten, then twelve. Some were heavy cruisers, others destroyers. All were loaded with troops—troops that must be landed that night if the Jap bid to retake Henderson Field was to succeed. The Japs on the island, already committed to a major drive through the jungles, were counting on those ships for assistance.

The speakers blared again. “Enemy contact!” All of us in the radio and coding rooms held our breaths for a moment. But nothing happened, and we relaxed again. Rebel Sandridge blinked his black eyes and said gleefully, “It won’t be long, boys. Don’t get impatient!”

“What about battle clothing?” someone asked. We had been too interested in the rummy game to think of that.

But we didn’t don any battle clothing. Not then. The room was too hot, and the thought of struggling into ten or twenty more pounds of gear was not enticing. The torment would not be worth the added protection. But some of the men, veterans of Pearl Harbor who knew what a flash burn could do to unprotected flesh, did roll down their sleeves, and most of us followed suit.

Helmets? To hell with them. If a Jap shell hit Radio One, we’d get it anyway, helmets or not. We were tough. We could take it. (We were green then. Very green. In later engagements we treated our battle gear with a good deal more affection.)

“Enemy contact!”

We stared at the bulkheads and at one another. “What are we waiting for?” someone said. “Do we have to see

MOVING UP

the whites of the bastard's eyes?"

We were waiting for something, that was certain. How much *closer* were we going to get before opening up?

It was too much, even for the "tough guys." Some of the boys snatched up their battle gear and hurriedly put it on. The Japs were evidently sound asleep out there, but if they woke up and put a shell into us at that range, we would know all about war in a couple of seconds. We were deep within firing range now, literally on top of the enemy. The talker circuits were as laden with business as a suburban switchboard on Saturday night.

"Enemy contact!" Nothing in that voice from the fighting bridge gave a hint of the drama that was unfolding. The speaker was reciting figures, not describing the awesome spectacle of two powerful fleets of warships rushing to a head-on collision in the black of night.

In Radio One we were very quiet. Call it the calm before the storm or what you like—we tightened our belts, pulled in our guts and forgot to breathe while waiting for the roar of the guns.

Over TBS a message flashed now from the *Helena* to the *San Francisco*. "Request permission to open fire!" It meant we were on the target. We had a Jap in our sights. But the reply from Admiral Scott was "Wait."

Why wait? With opposing fleets steaming headlong at each other, the first blow was of tremendous importance. Properly struck, it could throw the enemy into confusion and smash his power to resist.

Captain Hoover tried again. "Request permission to open fire!" Lieutenant W. D. Fisher, signal officer, relayed the request over the TBS.

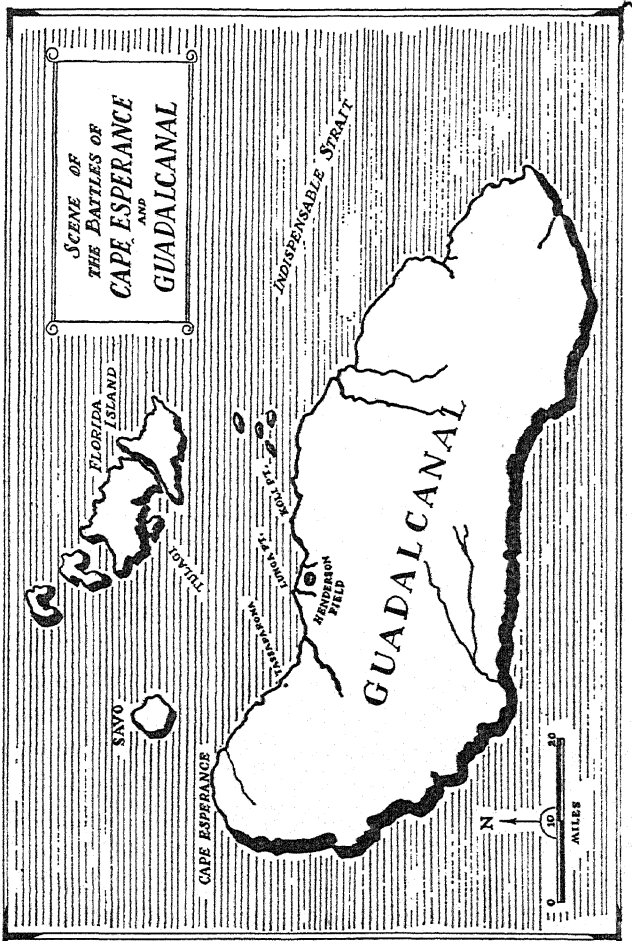
“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

What happened then was one of the most dramatic misinterpretations of signals in naval history. The flagship received Lieutenant Fisher’s message and promptly replied, “Roger.” It was not permission to open fire. It was merely the *San Francisco’s* signal officer saying, in effect, “Okay. Your request is understood.”

But “Okay” can mean “Go ahead,” also, and in Fisher’s book that’s what it meant. Without hesitation he flashed the word to Captain Hoover. “Permission granted!”

A moment later the *Helena’s* battle-phone circuits carried the order from Captain Hoover that blew the lid off the Battle of Cape Esperance.

“Open fire!”



SCENE OF
THE BATTLES OF
CAPE ESPERANCE
AND
GUADALCANAL

FLORIDA ISLAND

SAVO

LOVIEL

CAPE ESPERANCE

HENDERSON FIELD

GUADALCANAL

INDISPENSABLE STRAIT

0 10 20
MILES

N

** CHAPTER SIX **

The Battle of Cape Esperance

THE *Helena* rolled up the curtain that night. At fourteen minutes before midnight she overtured the action with a bellowing blast from her 6-inch guns, all fifteen of them in full voice and thundering in unison. Her target was a Jap destroyer.

The night had been still and inky black a moment before. Now suddenly it was a blazing bedlam. The *Helena* herself reared and lurched sidewise, trembling from the tremendous shock of recoil. In the radio shack and coding room we were sent reeling and stumbling against the bulkheads, smothered by a snowstorm of books and papers from the tables. The clock leaped from its pedestal. Electric fans hit the deck with a metallic clatter. Not a man in the room had a breath left in him.

The Jap destroyer, caught by surprise, had no chance to fight back. Ripped apart by the blast, she rolled over on her side as though tossed by an upheaval of the sea itself. Small fires appeared along her hull, running redly from bow and stern to meet amidships. But she went down too quickly for the flames to gain much headway.

She sank in just ninety-eight seconds, no trace of her remaining except a flaming pool of oil above the roiled waters of her grave. During that ninety-eight-second in-

THE BATTLE OF CAPE ESPERANCE

terlude the *Helena's* guns were never silent, and not a Jap shell was fired in retaliation.

Over the ship's loudspeaker system shrilled the elated voice of Commander John Morrow in Central Station, relaying the word from Fire Control. "We've got one already!" he shouted. "She's burning! She's gone!" Commander Morrow was the last man on the *Helena* you would expect to jump for joy. No one on the ship had ever before heard him in high gear. He was the man who sat through dinner night after night in the wardroom, so quiet that one was amazed, on looking up, to find him sitting there.

All over the ship, men cheered. Commander Morrow's voice had reached them all, the engine and boiler room gangs, repair crews, medicos, everyone. We had downed our first Jap. Now the other ships in our speeding formation were on their targets, lambasting the startled enemy.

The Japs *were* startled; no doubt of it. Shells exploded in their midst from every ship in our task force before they were able to man their guns. When they did return our fire they were scattering to collect their wits, and tossing shells over their shoulders in a kind of frantic desperation.

On the *Helena's* fighting bridge, Captain Hoover and the "men from Mars" eagerly searched the sea for a second victim, and found one quickly.

"There's a cruiser afire to starboard!" the skipper said. "Get on her!"

With one Jap to her credit in so short a time that she herself was a little light-headed, the *Helena* turned her

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

guns now on victim number two. This one was a heavy cruiser, under fire from other ships in the formation and burning brightly, a black silhouette against the red backdrop of her raging flames.

The Jap was game, though. As she zigzagged crazily through the night, plowing a phosphorescent furrow in the sea, her gunners ranged one of our ships and she fought back with determination.

Shells from the *Helena's* guns reached out for her through the dark, arching across a sky streaked with flames and searchlight beams. To the men topside the shells seemed to loop through the sky with bewildering lack of haste—glowing balls of fire soaring lazily to the target. But when they fell, the Jap was under them, and all those hours of rehearsal were worth the time and trouble.

The turret teams functioned with flawless rhythm. Shells flowed from magazines to muzzles in machine-gun fashion. This was not salvo fire. It was not a series of thunderclaps interspersed with intervals of silence and reprieve. It was the continuous, uninterrupted deluge of destruction for which the *Helena* was to become famous.

The Jap did not sink. She was blown to bits on the surface by the *Helena's* pounding. Fiery chunks of her soared skyward and fell hissing into the sea, or exploded horizontally above the water in ragged rockets, too low in the night to be the comets they resembled. The “men from Mars” on the *Helena's* fighting bridge were wide-eyed at the spectacle.

They were not alone in their amazement. Up in Sky Forward, Director Control Officer Jim Baird stood erect

THE BATTLE OF CAPE ESPERANCE

in his hatch to check the accuracy of the ship's fire. "Jungle Jim" hailed from DeWitt, Iowa, and had been a star tackle for Navy. Big, placid as a teddy bear, he had enormous shoulders and a habit of not getting excited. But he was excited now. Not even in practice had the *Helena's* gunners been so consistently "on the beam."

Jim took off his helmet. Sky Forward was a tough station, but he had to wear phones up there and the helmet annoyed him. With a stop watch in one hand he recorded the *Helena's* hits, and shook his shaggy head because he could not believe his own score sheet. Searchlight Officer Ensign Adams, at his side, could not believe it either. Adams put his head out of the hatch for a look and promptly hauled it back again. The *Helena's* own guns were too hot for him.

Down in the engine room a veteran sea-dog called Pappy Jones, who had climbed up through the ranks to become chief warrant machinist, found the *Helena's* thunder too much for his curiosity. Pappy made his way topside and undogged a hatch to see for himself what was going on. He saw a piece of Jap cruiser rocketing skyward through smoke and searchlight beams, and re-dogged the hatch in a hurry.

"My God!" Pappy said. "One look at that is enough to last a man a lifetime!" In a daze he went back to his engines.

"Check fire!" was the command now from Rodman Smith. The *Helena's* 6-inch guns were silent for a moment; only her secondaries and machine-guns continued to shake the night. But that in itself was almost too much for human eardrums. The men topside did no more talk-

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

ing than was necessary. Every word had to be shouted into the ear of the man it was meant for.

The Japs, despite their confusion, were doing their frantic best to put up a fight, and now, as the battle was joined in earnest, it became obvious that these men of the Imperial Navy were no second-string foe. They were veterans, well trained, not easily panicked. Their gunners had been good enough to sink four Allied cruisers August 8, and now at last they were finding our range.

“Shells bursting to starboard!” croaked the loudspeakers. The voice was that of Commander Morrow again, in Central Station, but now he was calm. Only *Helena* shells bursting on a Jap target could excite Morrow. Jap shells were just annoyances to be reported in routine fashion.

“Shells to port!” The Jap gunners were coming close. Too close. Our own gunners worked them over as at twenty-five knots or so we boiled along in formation, nearing the prearranged point of our turn.

“Shells over stack!” Morrow reported. And then, not quite so calmly, “There’s a ship burning up ahead. It’s the *Boise*! She’s been hit!”

We blinked at that one in the radio room, and grins quickly faded from triumphant faces. The *Boise*, skippered by Captain “Iron Mike” Moran, was a ship we knew well. Except for a few minor details of topside construction, she was a sister of the *Helena*. We had played baseball with her men at Noumea, batted the breeze with them at Espiritu Santo.

With word of the *Boise’s* misfortune, the elation in the coding room and radio shack suffered a setback. The

THE BATTLE OF CAPE ESPERANCE

battle had been a game until then. We had pulverized a Jap destroyer and helped to batter a Jap heavy cruiser to bits. Our gunners were sinking Japs with apparent immunity, and the only disconcerting thing in Radio One was the fact that one of our 5-inch mounts, located against the coding room bulkhead, was jarring our fillings loose every time it hurled a challenge at the enemy.

Now we looked at one another and were silent. Even the continuing thunder of the guns could not drown out Commander Morrow's words. "The *Boise's* afire!"

But the battle could not wait for the *Boise*. The *Helena* and our two 8-inch gun heavyweights, the *San Francisco* and the *Salt Lake City*, were pounding the night apart, and the scattered Japs were doing their best to find an answer. It was still a good best. No one then or later belittled the enemy's efforts.

The *Boise*, battered and blazing, dropped out of formation as the rest of us steamed on. Something like a head-on collision between heavy freights' must have occurred if the enemy had maintained his formation, too, but he was ablaze and scattered. The night was blotchily lit by flames from half a dozen burning Jap ships.

Through the glare of these fires, other ships moved in silhouette, splashing the darkness with the bright white lightning of their guns. And above, the swift ghosts of our planes roared to the attack, dropping flares to guide our gunners.

On the *Helena's* bridge, Captain Hoover and his assistants had picked up target number three for the men in the turrets. A Jap cruiser to starboard was trying to sneak away in the dark. The flames of battle licked out,

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

momentarily lit her up, and Captain Hoover gave an order to his gunnery officer. A moment later the *Helena’s* guns were “on target” and Lieutenant Boles, in Spot One, gave the turret gangs the order to “pour it to ’em.”

They poured it. Once more that continuous torrent of fire reached out to redden the night. The fleeing Jap was smothered and lost headway. As flames burst from her innards, other ships in the formation found her a tempting target and they too poured steel into her.

Somewhere in the midst of that action the gang in Turret Four discovered where heroes come from—which is to say that a hero is the fellow who has been working and living beside you, unnoticed, all the time. They had a hang-fire. The shell had been slammed into the breech, the firing key had been pressed, but nothing had happened.

A hang-fire is a potential block buster in a phone booth. You don’t know why the gun didn’t go off until you “open her up and look”—and what happens then may be an explosion that will mangle the turret and everyone in it.

It was up to Turret Officer Sam Leiman to say what should be done about the hang-fire in Turret Four, and Sam said, “Open ’er up!” Then with Chief Turret Captain John Colman, he did the opening.

For a heartbeat of time the future of every man in that steel cubicle was anyone’s guess. But their luck held. Colman hauled the hot shell case out and heaved it over the side, and a moment later Turret Four was adding its voice to the tumult again.

But the ship herself was suddenly in peril. Off to port

THE BATTLE OF CAPE ESPERANCE

the blazing *Boise* was an Independence Day bonfire, turning night to day as she limped out of line, apparently done for. The *Helena* had to pass between her and the enemy, and was silhouetted by the *Boise's* flames.

It was a bad moment and the Japs were quick to take advantage of it. Once more Commander Morrow's voice came crisply through the speakers, reporting shells to port, shells to starboard. Then, her main batteries still trained on the Jap cruiser, afire to starboard, the *Helena* made her turn and the enemy's opportunity was gone.

On the fighting bridge, sharp eyes picked out target number four, an enemy light cruiser trailing the heavy on which the big guns were finishing their work. The order from Captain Hoover went out over the battle circuits.

"Cruiser escaping to starboard!"

"Shift target!"

And from Lieutenant Boles in Spot One: "Set 'em up in the next alley. Pour it to 'em."

"Set 'em up in the next alley, huh?" growled Turret Trainer Chuck O'Connor. "What are we doin'—knockin' over duckpins?"

Not duckpins. The *Helena*, her secondary batteries adding to the din, was matter-of-factly pulverizing target number four. Number three was down. In a few minutes number four, under fire from at least three ships in the formation, was hopelessly battered and doomed to follow. Flames everywhere painted the sea a sultry, smoking red.

Everywhere in that eerie glow were swimming men.

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

The flashes of the guns revealed them clearly, hundreds of heads bobbing in the water, struggling to escape the blazing oil of sunken ships. Most of the enemy’s ships, now afire, in flight or sinking, had been jammed with troops. Secondary fire from our ships, reaching out to range the remaining Japs, whipped the water to froth and wrought havoc.

In the midst of the holocaust Commander Morrow’s voice came again through the speakers. “Fire,” he reported, “on main deck aft.” The voice was calm. It was the Morrow voice we knew in the wardroom. “Repair parties proceed at once to put it out.”

Had we been hit? In Radio One we thought so. For more than twenty minutes we had been slammed about by the blast of the ship’s guns. Our heads buzzed and our ears rang like telephone switchboards. For twenty minutes there hadn’t been a moment of silence as the battle raged. It seemed unbelievable that any ship, even ours, could go through such a conflict without stumbling into at least one enemy punch.

But we were wrong. The fire was caused by a hot shell case ejected by the gang in Turret Five, whose turret officer was “Mickey” Riley, USN, of Minneapolis. The danger was real enough. The brilliant blaze on deck dangerously illuminated the ship, and the ventilation system blew flames and smoke back into the turret, where exhausted men had little enough air as it was. But the repair party was not needed. Chief Turret Captain Oscar Point was out of his cubicle before they arrived.

Ignoring the danger of flashback and concussion, Point

THE BATTLE OF CAPE ESPERANCE

snatched a small hand extinguisher and ducked under the guns to stop the spread of the flames. He checked them and kept them checked until Chief Aviation Machinist's Mate Robinson and some of the damage control gang arrived on the double with a fire hose, and washed the blazing case over the side.

"The fire on the main deck aft," reported Commander Morrow calmly, "is out."

The battle had passed its climax. By 12:20 the enemy's fire had been reduced to sporadic blasts from individual turrets. All but two of his ships—destroyers which had turned tail and fled into a curtain of darkness—were sunk or sinking. By 12:30 the last Jap gun had been silenced and total darkness once more covered the sea. The silence, incredibly complete, was broken only by the throb of the *Helena's* engine-room machinery as with the rest of the force she came about and set her course southeast for home.

There was time now to take stock of ships and personnel, and to weigh our losses against those of the Jap. We had suffered one certain casualty. The *Duncan*, a destroyer with a battlewagon's heart and courage, had swung out of formation at the height of the battle and lunged into the enemy's force to launch a torpedo attack. Enemy gunfire had knocked her out, but not before she had accounted for a Jap cruiser and damaged a destroyer. Behind us now, another of our destroyers was painstakingly sweeping the area in search of survivors.

Then there was the *Boise*. When last seen, she had been ablaze on the horizon, apparently done for.

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

So we had lost the *Boise* and the *Duncan*, a light cruiser and a destroyer. What about the Japs?¹ They had brazenly steamed into the area with an estimated ten to twelve ships. Two destroyers had escaped. The others would never again answer the Emperor’s roll call.

Thus, in the first naval surface action of any consequence since August 8, we had dealt the Japs a thorough beating and had repaid them in part, at least, for the loss of those four Allied cruisers.

We had done more than that, really. We had prevented the enemy from reinforcing his troops on Guadalcanal at a time when even a few thousand additional Jap troops on that island would almost certainly have meant the end of Allied resistance. We had held the line on the map of strategy.

How much of the victory belongs to the *Helena*? No one can say for certain. Naval warfare in the black of night is not a matter of individual ships rushing about on solo missions, attempting to pile up scores. It is a collective proposition, team against team. There is inevitable confusion. You have an enemy in your sights and open fire on him, maintaining the fire until he is eliminated—

¹ Navy Department communiqué No. 149, in which the Battle of Cape Esperance was first reported, listed the Japanese losses as four destroyers, one heavy cruiser, one transport. In a later account of the battle, released by the Navy November 19, 1942, the *Boise* alone was credited with helping to sink two heavy cruisers, one light cruiser, and three destroyers. In a third release, dated October 24, 1943, the enemy’s losses were placed at four cruisers, four destroyers, and one transport. The exact number of Japanese ships destroyed in this engagement will perhaps never be known, but the latest Navy release probably tells the most nearly correct story.

THE BATTLE OF CAPE ESPERANCE

but when he goes down, other ships may be on him also and entitled to share the credit.

The *Helena* had opened fire first and had certainly sunk an enemy destroyer without assistance. She had helped to sink at least one other destroyer and two cruisers. But her men would paint no "scoreboard" on her wheelhouse. They were content when their skipper was awarded the Gold Star emblematic of his second Navy Cross for their ship's part in the battle.

But the night was not yet over. As the *Helena* steamed southeast toward a nearby base, her crew remained at General Quarters. We had been at battle stations since dusk the evening before, and were hot, tired and dirty. Some of us were so weary we could scarcely stay on our feet. But we were content. Our ship was unscathed and there were no casualties.

Only when we remembered the *Boise* were we less inclined to boast of our prowess. The thought persisted that what had happened to the *Boise* might have happened as easily to any other ship.

It was about six in the morning when a voice boomed through the "squawk box" again. "Unidentified ship," it reported, "approaching to starboard!"

The *Helena's* men were already at their stations; they had only to shake off their weariness, stiffen their legs and prepare for action. Aboard the other ships in the formation the same thing happened. An unidentified ship in that area had to be a Jap ship, because the disposition of Allied units was known and charted.

But suddenly the loudspeakers boomed again. "It's

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

the *Boise!*” was the report. “The *Boise* is back!”

It was the *Boise*, her signalman frantically blinking her identification. She appeared to be in a bad way, down five feet at the bow, but she was doing twenty-five knots and apparently required no assistance. Back from the grave—the *Boise!* As she took her place in line, the cheers that echoed across the water to her from the *San Francisco*, the *Salt Lake City*, the *Helena* and their escorting destroyers must have gladdened the hearts of her weary crew, because she had been hurt and hurt badly. More than a hundred of her men had been killed.

Soon after the reappearance of the *Boise*, the all-night vigil aboard the *Helena* came to an end and the men secured from General Quarters. But they were on tap again to a man, all grins and good humor, when the formation steamed into a Pacific base a short while later. Happy men crowded the life-lines, proud of their ship and the reception she was getting.

News of the victory had reached port ahead of them, and now every ship in the harbor joined in a jubilant salute to the victors. This was something the *Helena's* men had dreamed of while slogging away at gunnery drills and counting those endless days of patrol. This made it all the more worth while.

** CHAPTER SEVEN **

Torpedo Planes

THE *Helena's* stay in port was too short to provide much rest for the crew, but there was time, nevertheless, for a mild celebration. Mostly it took the form of breeze-batting and kidding among the men themselves. Groups gathered to re-fight the battle and recall the sidelights.

One who came in for some high class ribbing was a little lad named Dupay, chief turret captain in one of Lieutenant Jim Salassie's 5-inch mounts. Dupay, it seemed, had earned himself a reputation as a trapeze artist. The periscope in his mount was too high for him, and to watch the battle he had been forced to swing on the 'scope itself. He'd done a lot of swinging.

"But dammit," he complained, "I couldn't see a thing even then! There was too much shooting going on!"

Another thing that bothered Dupay was the fact that his mount had been on the disengaged side of the ship throughout the entire conflict. He craved action. He had nursed those guns for months. But he hadn't fired a shot.

"What you ought to do," the boys advised, "is turn that no-good mount into a 'gedunk stand' and peddle pop and cigarettes. That way you'd get some use out of it."

"Wait," Dupay retorted. "Just wait."

Jungle Jim Baird was kidded, too—for having re-

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

moved his tin hat up in Sky Forward. The director control gang had used it for a refuse pail and filled it full of orange peels and candy wrappers during a lull in the battle. Jim had put it back on without inspecting it first.

Commander Carpenter, the ship’s navigator, was ribbed—but gently—for storming around the bridge and yelling for a life jacket when all the time he’d been wearing one. And for shouting “Where’s Sweeney?” every other minute when Chief Quartermaster Sweeney, his right hand man, had been at his side constantly.

These were the little things, remembered now in detail and passed from group to group, often distorted beyond recognition before they got very far. But it was good for the ship’s morale. Anything was good that contributed to the story of the enemy’s defeat. The more it was discussed, the more confident were the men that next time, too, the *Helena* would come out on top.

But it was not all kidding. The pilots of the *Helena’s* two little biplanes were not ribbed for having hovered daringly over the enemy formation, dropping flares—or for putting their planes down on the sea in pitch darkness, to ride the water until daylight made it possible for them to return to the ship. Nor was Captain Hoover kidded for something he had said to a jittery seaman on the fighting bridge, when Jap shells were bursting uncomfortably close. A skipper who would pause at a time like that to put a fatherly hand on a boy’s shoulder and say, “Take it easy, son; we’ll get you out of this,” was a skipper to be regarded with affection.

The battle talk did not last long. Reports were coming in, indicating that the enemy was regrouping his forces

TORPEDO PLANES

in the northern islands, still determined to retake Guadalcanal. As soon as we had unloaded our empty ammunition cans, provisioned ship and refueled, we were ordered out again. Once more our task force, the most famous of all South Pacific task forces, returned to the Solomons area to be ready for a Jap thrust.

But the Japs took their time, and not much happened in the Solomons during those late October and early November days. On Guadalcanal our Marines, still awaiting reinforcements, had consolidated their positions around the airfield and resigned themselves to the job of halting frequent Jap attempts to put them out. They could do little else. By day they were bombed relentlessly, despite really remarkable work by a handful of pilots who forced the Japs to pay a frightful price. By night they were subjected to shelling by small, swift units of the Jap fleet based at Bougainville—the Bougainville or Tokyo Express, so called—against which American PT boats maintained a nightly patrol. But the Japs refused to be discouraged.

Heavier units of Allied sea power could not be sent against the Express. True, the ships of our force often steamed into the area, and on October 30 we stood off Lunga Point and Kokumbona for hours while our big guns hurled shells into the Jap positions on the island, but we lacked the numerical strength for any nightly excursions and were forced to husband our power for counter thrusts at the enemy's major moves. One such move had been thwarted. A second was in the making.

The patrols continued. At intervals the force returned to a base, but the stays were short and the base had little

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

to offer in the way of recreation. With Guadalcanal still an issue and the enemy denying us its use as a base of operations, the little port was still the most forward of our Pacific outposts and therefore the most primitive.

Seabees—the men of the Navy’s Construction Battalions—were on hand, nonchalantly performing their customary miracles of construction, but the port still consisted of little more than mud, coconut trees, lizards, heat, smells and sweat. The men played baseball on coral diamonds that tore their shoes and clothes and hamburgered their hands. Now and then they saw an ancient movie. Usually they remained aboard ship and threw a party.

These were the first of the “happy hours” which in time earned us the nickname “Happy *Helena*” or “Happy *H*” and endeared us to every other ship in the fleet. The featured attraction, of course, was the band. Chief Bandmaster Simpson led the *Helena’s* musicians, and the unit was certainly one of the best in the South Pacific. There on the quarterdeck, usually at sunset hour when the thoughts of most of the men were on home and wives and sweethearts, the band offered music of all kinds, to suit every mood and taste. Many of Simpson’s musicians had played with big-time orchestras back home. The bandmaster himself was a musician of long standing.

It was hot, always hot, but morale went up a mile when the *Helena’s* band performed. Officers and men gathered quickly. Captain Hoover was an ardent listener. Men from other ships, and from stations ashore, came over to listen.

That piece you are hearing now, nostalgic and dreamy,

TORPEDO PLANES

is one of Simpson's favorites, and maybe it's a little too much for some of the boys who didn't get a letter at mail call today. But wait a minute. Young Remus, the handsome blond kid up there with the perpetual smile, is getting ready to give his drums a workout. The boys love Remus. He's terrific. His drum solos have a magic all their own, and before you know it, toes are tapping and grins are very much in evidence. Remus can exorcise the blues almost as quickly as mail from home!

Another medicine man for the blues is mess attendant Hayes, a tall, slim, good-looking lad from Louisiana. That flapping piece of adornment around his middle is a skirt he picked up somewhere, and the way that boy's feet fly is a caution! He brings the house down every time. You'd never know, watching Hayes' enormous grin, that he is one of the *Helena's* ace ammunition passers—but he is, and he gets as big a kick out of passing the ammunition as he does dancing. After the Cape Esperance set-to he came in to straighten up my room, and when I asked him how he'd done, he rolled those eyes, grinned that grin, and replied, "Ah really threw 'em out! Boy, Ah really did!"

So it goes. The heat is unbearable, rising like smoke from the steel decks, but the crew sings, the messboys dance, the band plays, and sometimes there are boxing bouts. The grinning faces of the men are streaked with grime and sweat, but the *Helena* is in high spirits. Everyone from the lowliest rating to Captain Hoover applauds with enthusiasm. It is a little like being home for a holiday.

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

Then the holiday is over and the ship stands out on patrol again.

From the first of November it was apparent that the Japs were again planning a showdown. Activity was observed at Rabaul, Bougainville, and Truk, and was reported even from the Marshall and Gilbert Islands to the northeast. To get this information, American pilots flew daily through some of the worst weather of the entire South Pacific campaign, and repeatedly fought their way through swarms of Zeros. They did a courageous and remarkably effective job. Hour after hour their reports poured into the *Helena's* radio room.

At a time like that, a warship's radio room is first cousin to a beehive, and the men of the *Helena's* communications division had their work cut out for them. A constant crackle of code pours from the receiving apparatus lined along the bulkheads. The men at the typewriters, most of them in their shirtsleeves, some of them shirtless, beat out a rattling accompaniment on their machines. Sweat trickles from under the earphones and is soaked up by black, bushy beards—because some of the boys have given up shaving.

Day and night this seeming bedlam continues without respite. Coded orders come in from Comsopac and Cincpac, which itself is naval code meaning Commander South Pacific and Commander in Chief Pacific. Orders come from Washington; traffic streams in from all points of the compass. Without delay this unending wave of war talk must be decoded, sorted, and relayed to the proper people aboard the ship.

TORPEDO PLANES

The ship's heart beats in her radio room. Her main arteries extend from there, carrying the flow of intelligence without which she could not be informed and alert. Nothing must interfere with this flow. Atmospheric conditions may be poor, reception may be atrocious, tropical storms may fill the air with static, but the men with the earphones must make no mistakes. Mistakes cost lives and lose battles.

The strain in the *Helena's* radio and coding rooms was tremendous as the South Pacific storm clouds began to gather again. We in communications saw the Japanese move shaping up. We had at least an idea of the size of it. What we knew had to be kept to ourselves, of course, but when we walked into the wardroom at chow-times, we were always looked at very carefully. If our spirits were up and we did any clowning, the wardroom relaxed. If we were tired, tense, in a hurry to get back to the job, the others had a pretty good idea that trouble was brewing.

It began brewing in earnest about the end of the first week in November. By then it was apparent that the Japs were planning a final, conclusive attack on Guadalcanal. They had assembled a staggering number of transports, cruisers and destroyers, and at least one of our pilots had spotted enemy battlewagons.

But it was we, after all, who made the first move.

At dawn of November 10, the *Helena* hurriedly left base with a small force of cruisers and destroyers and steamed northward once more toward the Solomons, while from another base on a parallel course moved a fleet of transports jammed with troops. Our job was to

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

cover the transports to Guadalcanal and stand by to protect them while the troops were disembarked. Flagship of the task force was again the heavy cruiser *San Francisco*, and in charge of the force was Rear Admiral Daniel J. Callaghan.

The run was uneventful until, at five o'clock on the morning of the twelfth, we entered Lengo Channel off the southeast coast of Guadalcanal and encountered enemy submarines. They were detected before they could strike, and our destroyers broke formation to attack them.

One, at least, was believed sunk. Some of us on the *Helena's* foc'sle watched in anxious silence as the destroyers hurled their depth charges. A moment later we saw white fountains of sea tossed up by the explosions, and then oil and debris which were evidence enough that one less enemy sub would answer the roll.

Our fleet of transports, commanded by Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, swung in formation toward the Guadalcanal shore and dropped anchor. The task force stood out beyond them in the twenty-mile-wide channel between Guadalcanal and Tulagi, forming a screen. Then very slowly we beat back and forth, back and forth, bombarding the island.

There was something fantastic about that morning to most of us. Despite the thunder of the ship's guns and the knowledge that the enemy might strike in force at any moment, the war seemed remote and not quite believable. The sea was like glass. The sky was clear and bright. A brassy sun dripped heat and set everything to shimmering, and the air was lifeless.

TORPEDO PLANES

There had been no call to GQ. The gunners fired as though at rehearsal—as though Guadalcanal were a target being towed past for their convenience. With Jim Salassie, I clambered up to the searchlight platform to see the show, and though the sun seemed hotter, the air more stifling up there, it was an excellent balcony seat. Through binoculars we watched the parallel wakes of hundreds of landing craft speeding between the transports and the beaches. We saw artillery bursts from enemy positions in the jungle—puffs of smoke dissipating in the sunlight above the trees. And now and then we saw bright pin-points of light in the gloom of the jungle itself, which meant that Japs and Americans were firing at one another with rifles. But still it did not seem real.

The *Helena's* guns, with those of the *San Francisco* and the destroyers in our group, calmly lobbed shells into the Jap positions, and we watched them explode. For more than an hour our bombardment mowed down the island's coconut trees and drilled tunnels in the jungle. Seabee bulldozers might have done the job as well, but hardly with such fantastic speed. And as the shells burst upon impact, spraying shrapnel for yards around, we watched enemy troops scrambling in panic up the hill-sides. We watched them die.

Back and forth the formation cruised, while closer to shore the smaller destroyers maintained a parallel course, adding to the destruction with their 5-inch guns. Hundreds of Japs were killed on Guadalcanal that morning. Later we were told that our concentrated pummeling of the enemy's positions helped materially to slow the tempo of attacks on Henderson Field.

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

Lunch was a little like a picnic, the men in high spirits, only a few chronic grouzers complaining of the heat and tortured eardrums. Sam Hollingsworth and Ozzie Koerner talked law, whenever Sam could stop bragging about the grand gang of men he had on the forty-millimeter guns, which were his special province. Dick Herman—Ensign (now Lieutenant jg) Richard O. Herman of New York—one of the best-read men on the ship, became involved in an argument about—of all things—the relative merits of Sinclair Lewis and Charles Dickens. Jungle Jim Baird, suffering from prickly heat, went about asking in his mellow western drawl what a man could do to get rid of it. But there wasn’t a real worry in the wardroom.

After lunch the bombardment continued. The shells plowed up the island again and the Japs went on dying, while American troops continued to swarm ashore from the transports.

The *Helena* suffered only one casualty, and that was slight indeed. Jim Baird, directing the fire from his post in Sky Forward, again removed his tin hat and laid it down beside him, and the director control gang slyly filled it with cigarette butts. They called it the “division ash tray.”

But there was trouble in the making. Jap calls for assistance had gone out by now, and shortly after one o’clock in Radio One we pulled from the coding machine a message that changed the complexion of things.

The message told us that a large force of enemy bombers was coming toward us. It was from a patrol

TORPEDO PLANES

plane beating above Jap-held islands to the northwest of us.

At once our long line of transports hauled hook and got under way, maneuvering into formation so that our screening warships could afford better protection. But the report of enemy interference was premature, and after an anxious interlude of waiting the troopships resumed unloading. A short time later the operation was again interrupted.

This time the report was an urgent, from Admiral Halsey's headquarters, again warning us of an attack.

Again the transports stood out from shore and turned southward into waters more suitable for large-scale maneuvering. In accordance with a prearranged plan, they formed a circle and maintained that formation while the destroyers and cruisers wove a protecting ring around them. Henderson Field sent up fighter planes to patrol the skies, and at two o'clock aboard the *Helena* the call to General Quarters was sounded.

Lieutenant Commander John Chew, the *Helena's* air defense officer, had his work cut out for him now. At his battle station on the fighting bridge, he scanned the sky closely while awaiting word of the enemy's coming. He hadn't long to wait. About twenty minutes past two the Combat Information Center, CIC, reported the first enemy planes.

Chew passed it on through his talker to twenty-two-year-old Jim Salassie up in Sky Forward, who in turn relayed it to Jim Baird. A moment later the fighting bridge was "on the phone" again.

"Planes identified as enemy. Do you have a solution

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

plot? Are you on them?”

And over the ship’s loudspeaker system, to all battle stations: “Jap torpedo bombers coming in fast and low. Get ready to open fire!”

The murmur of the oncoming planes swelled to a roar. The sky was full of Japs. On the bridge, Jack Chew awaited the nod from Gunnery Officer Smith and Captain Hoover, and got it.

“Commence firing!”

The Japs caught it from all directions that day. Every ship in the *Helena’s* task force, and all the guns on the transports, opened up on them at once, 5-inch and 3-inch weapons pounding like sledge-hammers in a rock quarry, 40-millimeter and 20-millimeter guns growling a savage accompaniment. From above, the Henderson Field fighter planes descended like plummeting birds, silver in the sun. It was all over in ten minutes, but in those stampeding seconds, drama piled upon drama.

The Japs were not good. We on the *Helena* had thought they would be. We had heard of their devastating torpedo plane attacks in other engagements, and when this swarm of big, twin-engined planes first appeared like locusts in the sky over Florida Island, many a man aboard the *Helena* drew a deep breath to slow the pounding of his heart. But the enemy had been hurling his best pilots against Guadalcanal since August, and the little Nip fliers at the controls this afternoon were scared. Many were kids, and those who were not kids were suffering severely from combat fatigue. The boys from Henderson Field, weary themselves but always

TORPEDO PLANES

ready for a fight, plunged into the Japs and had themselves a field day.

We heard them over the radio, on fighter plane frequency, as they ripped open the Jap formation. We heard them yelling and cussing as only fighter pilots know how to cuss.

"Give 'em all you got, Joe! Give 'em hell!"

"Watch it. He's coming in on your port quarter!"

"Look out, look out, he's making a run on you!"

"Nice work. You got him. He's smoking like hell!"

"Look at him go! You hit him in the belly! That's the end of that son — but good!"

"He's on the run. He's baggin' ass. Get on top of the bastard and finish him!"

The Japs did not hold their formation long. Those not scattered by our fighter planes lost their nerve, or seemed to, when they encountered the circular wall of fire flung out by our ships. Few had the courage to plunge into that curtain of steel and drop their torpedoes. Most of them at the crucial moment turned away, losing speed and presenting themselves as individual "pot-shot" targets for the ships' gunners.

All over the sky they came apart in gaudy explosions, trailing smoke and flames as they fell into the sea. The few who fled in panic were cut down with merciless, assembly-line precision by the fighter pilots waiting above them.

The Japs scored but one hit—and died doing it. Whether or not the pilot of the enemy plane that plunged into the bridge of the *San Francisco* was deliberately giving his life for the Emperor, no one will ever know.

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

The plane was in flames and had certainly been hit hard—probably by the *San Francisco’s* own gunners. Seemingly out of control, it continued to come on, swerving erratically in the face of withering fire from the cruiser’s after machine-guns.

The gunners stuck to their posts, pouring steel into the wobbling Jap until it seemed certain he must disintegrate, but the riddled plane was still in one piece when it struck the *Frisko’s* deck. The ship’s gunners were buried under flaming wreckage.

This grim sideshow to the main event, claiming the lives of nearly a score of men and severely injuring others, dulled the glitter of the American victory. Nevertheless it was a victory. On all sides the sea was littered with smoking debris—all that remained of the thirty-odd torpedo bombers which less than ten minutes before had so confidently attacked our formation. Jap pilots clung to rubber rafts or paddled helplessly amid the wreckage of their planes. Our destroyers, weaving in among them, lowered boats to pick them up.

Many of them would not be rescued, and we marveled at their determination to die. In the water not far from us, two hapless airmen clung to a floating wing, one of them about thirty years old, the other no more than sixteen. A rescue boat approached, offering assistance.

The youngster was willing enough. Almost pathetically he held out his hands. But his companion seized him angrily by the neck and yanked him back, slapping his hands down. While the boy struggled to free himself, the big fellow produced a pistol and shot him. Then, swimming away from the rescue boat, he turned defiantly

TORPEDO PLANES

and shot himself. We saw it very clearly.

By 2:30 the show was over. The *San Francisco* had transferred her injured men to a transport, the sea was clear and calm again, and our fleet of troopships had resumed their business of unloading. The task force stood by to cover.

Aboard the *Helena* we had suffered one casualty. A lively lad named Kincaid, renowned for his jokes and curly black hair, had to be treated for burns and shock. He was manning a 20-millimeter machine-gun, one of the hottest guns on the ship because just over his head was the belching muzzle of a 5-incher. The flash of the larger gun had burned him, searing his face, hair and hands.

But no one was aware of young Kincaid's injuries until the attack was over, and by that time his machine-gun had knocked down an enemy bomber. Later, when we returned to base, he was awarded the Silver Star.

** CHAPTER EIGHT **

"Take the Big Ones First!"

ALL afternoon the little landing boats had scurried back and forth between the fleet of transports and Guadalcanal, carrying men, equipment and supplies to the beaches. It was an orderly, though hurried, operation—a race against time, with little enemy interference. Because, of course, the troopships had to be out of there before dark, whether unloaded or not. They could not be left overnight in such an exposed area, in danger of attack by submarines.

Our plan was simple enough. If the transports were emptied by sunset, they would up anchor and proceed back to port, steaming through the night under the protection of the cruisers and destroyers of our task group. If troops still remained aboard, the ships were to proceed eastward into the safer waters of the Coral Sea, circling until daybreak when they could return in safety to finish the job. In either case it looked like a comparatively easy job for those of us on the warships, even though we had received hints of an impending attack from the Japs in the form of a warning of "possible enemy movement."

Half an hour before sunset the transports were under way, their decks cleared of troops. We moved along with them, through a sea deceptively calm. The talk on the

“TAKE THE BIG ONES FIRST!”

foc'sle was of a job well done, and we knew that the Marines on Guadalcanal must be grateful.

“It won't be long now,” Sam Hollingsworth reflected aloud, “before the Japs are forced to abandon Guadalcanal altogether. Then we'll be moving up through the Slot toward Bougainville, pounding the enemy's bases on New Georgia and Kolombangara.” Sam liked to speculate and was more often right than wrong in his predictions. He had studied the charts of the Solomons area so often that every island, every coral reef and bay, was photographed in his mind. “Kula Gulf,” he said, “is going to be a tough nut to crack. Very tricky proposition. A ship in Kula will be like a bug in a bottle.”

“If you ask me, we'll catch plenty of headaches before we ever get that far up the Slot,” said Red Cochrane. Red—Lieutenant Richard L., USN—was a son of Admiral Cochrane, Chief of the Bureau of Ships, and he was one of the reasons the *Helena* was a happy ship. Not given much to clowning, he hit his stride during our solemn discussions of strategy. “The whole Slot,” he continued thoughtfully, “is made to order for submarine traps, and the Japs have enough subs to make the most of it.”

“Amen,” said Jack Chew.

We plowed along in formation, the sun dropping placidly into the sea astern of us. Down in the junior officers' bunkroom, Swede Hanson's phonograph poured out music, rhythmic and loud, and between records we heard the sound of a harmonica. It was an astonishingly sweet harmonica, played by a young gunner's mate, Warren,

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

who had lightened many a condition watch with his melodies.

Everything was just right: a difficult job well done, the weather pleasant, evening shaping up, the heat no worse than usual. On the signal bridge, Chief Flood was hoisting his flags with the zip and zeal for which he was renowned, and we watched him while batting the breeze. The flags and halyards meant a lot to the chief always, and he haunted the bridge to be sure they were just right. Any time you glanced up there without seeing him, something was likely to be wrong.

This evening there was nothing in the flags to arouse much concern, and the Junior Board of Strategy peacefully disbanded. I went to the radio room, where Rebel Sandridge, parked at a typewriter with the familiar stogie cocked in his mouth, stopped work to grin at me.

“Have a sandwich, sir?” Rebel asked.

He had three of them, and they were the biggest sandwiches in the world, bulging with cold roast beef. Rebel always knew where to round up something to eat. When the urge possessed him, he would wander down to Boilers Forward, or to “Vaps,” the fresh water evaporators, and put the squeeze on the chiefs there. Ask him how he did it, and he would answer with a broad, goofy grin, “Oh, I get around!”

I bit into the sandwich. “Look, sir,” Rebel said, with some hesitation. “Would you have time to read something I wrote the other night?”

“Something you wrote?”

“Well . . .” He took a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it over, his grin slightly sheepish. “It’s

"TAKE THE BIG ONES FIRST!"

a poem, sort of. To my girl. How it happened, I was stretched out on deck, on the communications platform, and the moon was big as a house and I got to thinking about home. You know how it is. A nice night like that, with the moon up there, you wish the folks back home could be here for a while just to see it. Especially your girl. So I came back into the shack and wrote her a poem."

I knew about Rebel's girl but was not too eager to read the poem he had written to her. It was a little like censoring a man's secret thoughts. But he insisted, and so I read it. And it was good.

That was the surprising thing about Rebel. He clowned around, grinned at danger, smoked big cigars and loved to act tough, but every now and then you had a glimpse of something inside him that shone like a watch-dial in the dark. The same was probably true of many others aboard the ship, but despite the cramped quarters and lack of privacy, a ship is really a big place and you get to know few of its personnel intimately. Some men, of course, are known to everyone. All the officers and men knew Commander Buerkle. He had the heartiest, loudest laugh on the ship, and was now our acting executive officer, taking the place of Commander Linke, who was ill in port. (Later, Commander Buerkle became exec.) Everyone knew Bandmaster Simpson. Many knew Jungle Jim Baird, who had a kind word for everyone and used to greet me, always, with "How's my boy Chick?" (Jim had the room next to mine, and it was customary, in the morning or after a bit of "sack time" in the afternoon, for the one who waked first to thump on the bulkhead

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

and call out, “Get up!”—the answer to which was usually a reluctant “Yup.”)

Swede Hanson, too, was well known—almost as well known as his phonograph. Baseball was Swede’s first love, but his luck in the games at Noumea and Espiritu Santo was usually bad, and the ship really felt for him. When he did have a lucky day, it was cause for celebration; then on the faces of total strangers you’d see broad grins and be greeted with the gleeful comment, “Swede got a hit today!”

There was young Warren, with his educated harmonica. And Chief Flood with his flags. And “Red,” the head laundryman, who suffered the torments of the damned during those sweltering, smothering days near Guadalcanal when hot steam transformed his laundry into a private little hell. And Jake Powell, the chief fire controlman, who nervously gnawed at his fingernails but knew more about morale-building than a psychology professor. There was a chief watertender the boys called “Jelly Belly” because he weighed three hundred pounds and was everlastingly happy, especially when eating. And P. C. Foster, the ship’s philosopher. And the two galloping dominoes experts, Garner and Gore, who used to give five-dollar bills to the colored messboys just to see how wide their eyes would bulge.

You couldn’t know everyone. The ship was too big. Sam Hollingsworth knew hundreds of the men by name, but was an exception. Most of us found a few special friends and had to be content.

I sometimes think that in telling the story of a warship and her men, one should invent a purely fictional char-

“TAKE THE BIG ONES FIRST!”

acter and call him Joe Smith or something equally simple, and keep him continually in the picture. He would be tall and short, skinny and fat, sun-tanned and pale. He would talk with a lazy southern drawl and a quick New England twang, with a mid-west accent and Brooklynese. He would be scared sometimes and incredibly brave at others, a fanatic on saving the world from destruction, a matter-of-fact guy doing a job that bored him stiff. He would read Shakespeare and Superman, write long, beautiful letters and two-line notes beginning, “Dear Ma, I am okay.” In him would be a little of everyone aboard the ship, and thus you would overlook no one in telling the story. Joe Smith would be a handy man to have around.

So I read Rebel Sandridge’s poem and was sure his girl would like it. Then I hurried into the coding room to break a message, and forgot about poetry for a time. Because the message was a late report from one of our search planes. It read that several large groups of Jap capital ships and transports were heading our way. And we had expected a peaceful night!

From that moment on, it was the old story. The reports came in with increasing rapidity and were rushed to Captain Hoover. Department heads were notified. The ship buzzed with activity and began to vibrate like a beehive jabbed with a pitchfork. Yet it seemed fantastic. The reports themselves were unbelievable.

Except for slight variations in wording, the messages were all the same, warning of the approach of large Jap formations. Somewhere near the head of the Slot our night-prowling Catalinas—“Black Cats” they were

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

called—had spotted the enemy on the move and were trailing him. But what an enemy! If the reports were accurate, the whole Japanese South Pacific fleet was on the way!

And then, unaccountably, the flow of radio traffic dwindled to a mere trickle. Perhaps the weather in the upper reaches of the Slot had kicked up, as South Pacific weather so often does, and the pilots of our searching Cats were having trouble with rain squalls or heavy overcast. Whatever the answer, they apparently lost contact and could no longer supply adequate information on the enemy’s progress. We knew the Japs were on the move but could only guess at their whereabouts and were not sure of their intentions.

The situation was ticklish. One report had estimated the Jap strength at forty-eight ships, including heavy cruisers and at least two battlewagons! With our light force of cruisers and destroyers we were no match for this armada. We were designed to derail the Tokyo Express, not to wade into the entire Jap Navy!

But the enemy had to be stopped, regardless of size. The bigger he was, the more desperate became the need for halting him. For if he succeeded in putting troops ashore on Guadalcanal from that many transports, our own move to reinforce the island would be trumped. On edge and silent, we waited for Admiral Callaghan’s decision.

It came with the admiral’s own announcement that the Japs were on the way and we were “going out to meet them.”

It was dark now. The force moved up into Indispensa-

"TAKE THE BIG ONES FIRST!"

ble Strait, on the prow with feelers extended. Destroyers led the long battle line, guiding us westward past the shore of Guadalcanal toward Savo Island—for if the Japs came down the Slot as expected, they would have to round Savo on their way to the Guadalcanal beaches.

We proceeded in single file. Following the destroyers were the cruisers, including the bantamweight *Atlanta*, commanded by Admiral Scott. We were a veteran group. Although not always operating together, we had seen action enough to give us confidence even in the face of such opposition as the Jap was reported to be sending at us. Some of us had fought in the Battle of Cape Esperance. Some had escorted the *Hornet* to Bougainville, to bomb the Jap strongholds at Faisi and Buin. Others had been in the Battle of Santa Cruz, October 26, when the *Hornet* went down. Still others had taken part in the initial assault on Guadalcanal. Now we searched for the Japs near Savo Island, failed to find them, and prowled the seas off Cape Esperance, awaiting their arrival.

At midnight there was still no word of the Japs' coming, and the significance of those early reports began to fade. The men relaxed a little at their battle stations. Up on the bridge, Commander Carpenter calmly shot stars while Chief Quartermaster Sweeney scowled at a stop-watch. "Let's get this one, Sweeney!" the commander sang out. "What's that one, Sweeney?" You could hear his good-natured bellow all over the ship. But if you looked closely, you saw that despite his good humor and apparent lack of tension, the commander was never far from his two life jackets, even while shooting stars.

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

In the radio room there was little traffic, and by one o'clock we had convinced ourselves that the early reports were false alarms. In the coding room a rummy game was again in progress. Ensign Johnny Cochran of Norfolk, Virginia, just out of Georgia Tech, chewed the rag with Lieutenant Cooper, also a Georgia Tech man, and their discussion of Tech's football prowess made the possibility of a scrap with the Japs seem remote indeed. Down in Dupay's turret, the boys were again advising their turret captain to turn his mount into a gedunk stand.

The Japs wouldn't come now, we said. They had to be out again before daylight, or our fliers from Henderson Field would pulverize them. They'd be crazy to take that chance. (But the Japs didn't intend to take that chance. This time they planned to eliminate the danger of air assault by occupying Henderson Field themselves.)

We were completely relaxed, wondering when we could secure from GQ and hit the sack. The hands of the clock hovered near two A.M. Suddenly the loudspeakers shocked us to attention.

“Enemy ships sighted!”

Over the battle phones went CIC's report of estimated range and bearing. No wasted words now. Time was suddenly of tremendous importance, and every syllable was precious. Up in Director Control, officers and men were instantly on the alert, tracking the swift ships closer and closer while calling out the figures on the instrument scale. Down in the plotting room, the ship's mechanical brain absorbed their reports and mulled briefly over a hundred and one other sets of figures. Without the mechanical brain, the ship would have required the services of a gi-

“TAKE THE BIG ONES FIRST!”

gantic office staff of mathematical wizards, for the computations involved were beyond imagination. We were a ship of war bristling with guns, bulling through the dark at high speed, rushing to meet an enemy force moving with equal rapidity in the opposite direction; yet each of the *Helena's* fifteen big guns had to be centered on a target and held there.

The speed of our ship, the speed of the target, the force and direction of the wind—these were elementary. But what about the sudden, unexpected variations of the enemy's course, caused by the carelessness of the fallible human being at her helm? What about the minute variations in the fire-power of the *Helena's* own guns, the temperature and barometric pressure and the scores of other calculations which had to be taken into consideration? The list was longer than an income-tax form, and if computed by human minds it would have taken as long to figure. But the plotting room, manned by Lieutenant (jg) Steve Washburn and Lieutenant (jg) Joe Griffin and their crew, required but an instant.

It was incredible, really, but a ship of war is an incredible thing throughout. The turret trainers had their orders now, and the big guns moved almost in unison with a sinister kind of slow-motion rhythm. Down in the magazine, husky boys pushed the powder up to mates who took it without a ripple of wasted motion and fed it to the guns. The shells were ready to move in an endless chain up the tubes and be rammed home. The eye would scarcely be able to follow these movements during the battle, so swiftly and with such apparent lack of effort did the *Helena's* turret crews function. No wonder these

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

men wore their rating badges proudly and walked the streets of liberty towns with a tell-tale swagger!

“Turret One ready! . . . Turret Four ready! . . . Turret Three ready! . . .” It was a race to see who would report most rapidly to Gunnery Officer Smith on the fighting bridge. Last man in was a goony-bird!

The ships of our force were heading westward in a long, straight lance aimed at Savo Island. Guadalcanal was on our left, Florida on our right, both islands dimly visible as blurred, velvety shapes rising from a blacked-out sea. The Japs had descended through the Slot as expected, speeding eastward past Savo on their way to the Guadalcanal shore. They came in two separate lines, while a third line, consisting mostly of transports and escorting destroyers, closely followed.

Our own battle force boldly continued on course and steamed between the Jap lines, in a maneuver as uncomplicated as that of a train rushing headlong into a tunnel. The tunnel was not of great breadth. Its mouth was but three miles wide—point-blank range for even the smallest ships involved. But Admiral Callaghan and his staff had decided to do the unexpected and to do it quickly, and so we steamed into the dragon’s mouth with every man at every gun on every ship holding his breath and waiting for the inevitable eruption.

A moment later from Admiral Callaghan came the order, “Take the big ones first! Commence firing!”

** CHAPTER NINE **

The Battle of Guadalcanal

“HOLDING their fire while closing the range,” reads an official Navy release describing the Battle of Guadalcanal, “the United States craft moved steadily toward their unsuspecting foe and steamed between the enemy’s two flanks before the Japanese detected their presence. A cruiser stabbed the darkness with her searchlight, found the *Helena* and opened fire. The *Helena’s* main battery, meanwhile, had been trained on the same cruiser and had gotten the range. The *Helena*, as in the Battle of Cape Esperance, was the first United States ship to fire.”

There was a little more to it than that! We had the range, yes, and were ready. As ready as well trained men and a ship with a fighting heart can be. But when from the leading ship of the enemy left flank a blinding flood of light leaped out to engulf us, the heart of the *Helena* momentarily stopped beating. “Haile” Salassie said later in describing that instant, “For those of us topside it was one hell of a minute—like sitting in the front row of a theater with your pants off when the house lights are switched on!”

But the Jap’s gunners were not as apt as her searchlight men, and it was the *Helena*, not the Jap, that

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

opened fire. We had been holding that same cruiser in our sights, awaiting the word. No word was needed now. It was kill or be killed. In a thundering fragment of time the night was such a bedlam of explosions that men on the neighboring islands complained later of having been shaken like jelly.

The Jap’s searchlight was blasted to bits quickly, but in a moment more she supplied another kind of light. Smashed by the *Helena’s* main turrets, she exploded into a smoky orange bonfire. How high into the sky that tower of flame extended, no one can say, but the brightness of it was unbelievable. It changed the complexion of the battle in an instant, turning night into a sinister kind of day. Still maintaining her course and speed, the blazing cruiser charged past our formation like a hurt and infuriated bull, her flames bathing ship after ship, ours as well as theirs, with light. Then under the *Helena’s* continuous pounding she began to sink.

The *San Francisco*, meanwhile, had opened up on the leading ship of the enemy’s right flank, a second heavy cruiser, and was working her over. The *Frisco’s* 8-inch guns, nine of them, laid the Jap wide open with the terrible efficiency of a meat cleaver, and she, too, burst into flames. Both the *Helena* and the *Frisco* quickly shifted their fire to other targets, and then, with every ship in our formation belaboring the enemy, the battle broke apart and lost all sense of sanity.

Our destroyers, leading us in, had sped from formation to rush at the Japs with torpedoes. The *Atlanta*, too, swept out of line, her 5-inch guns spitting a giddy pattern of fireworks. The rest of us stayed in single file,

THE BATTLE OF GUADALCANAL

led now by the *San Francisco*, and as we continued at high speed through the "tunnel," Jap ships were afire on both sides of us. We were silhouetted like witches speeding across a Hallowe'en moon. The Jap gunners found the range, and the battle was on in full fury.

No one man can paint a complete picture of that hair-raising holocaust. It was too huge. The enemy is thought to have had two battleships, three heavy cruisers, four light cruisers and ten destroyers in his main force, with additional destroyers guarding the troopships behind, and with our vessels tearing this huge force apart there were scores of guns in action in an area less than three miles wide! The men whose job it was to distinguish between friendly and enemy ships were blinded by gun flashes and confused by burning ships which lay dead in the water. Other ships, blazing just as brilliantly, rushed through the night like giant torches held aloft by invisible swimmers. It was a picture too vast for the imagination, and even when it was over no man could quite put the flaming bits of the puzzle together or be sure of what he had seen. That is why so many conflicting reports of the battle have since appeared—why details differ and viewpoints vary.

The *Helena*, her main batteries having disposed of a heavy cruiser in four and a half minutes by Jim Baird's stop-watch, turned now upon a destroyer and cut loose with her secondaries. The destroyer, too, exploded and burst into flames. In the glare of her fires, her men were seen leaping into a sea already crowded with struggling humanity.

Ahead, one of our own destroyers, trapped by enemy

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

gunfire after firing her torpedoes, was aflame and dying, and the *San Francisco* had tangled with a battlewagon to starboard. The *Frisco's* 8-inch guns kept up an ear-splitting argument with the Jap across a bridge of blazing sea about two thousand yards wide. Hit and severely mauled, the Jap giant nevertheless scored heavily with her more powerful weapons. One of her salvos raked the *Frisco's* bridge, high above the waterline—either because her aim was poor or because her big guns could not be depressed sufficiently to place their shells where they would inflict real damage.

They did damage enough. Admiral Callaghan died there in the tangled steel of the *Frisco's* bridge. So did Captain Cassin Young and many other brave men. The ship's steering gear was partially demolished, she had no compass, her flag bridge was wrecked and many of her officers were dead or injured; yet she continued to fight. Her guns knocked out the Jap. Then as she staggered along, an enemy destroyer boiled out of the dark, thinking her an easy victim, and the gallant *Frisco* knocked her out too. At which point Lieutenant Commander Bruce McCandless, having accepted responsibility for the ship, ordered her out of the battle and sent her limping toward the channel between Cape Esperance and Savo. As she went, the over-eager Japs to right and left of her poured shell after shell at her fleeing shadow but succeeded only in battering one another.

The *Frisco* found her escape route blocked, however, and under fire again from an enemy ship lying to across the channel, she turned about. It was a maneuver that called for courage. Close to the Guadalcanal shore, be-

THE BATTLE OF GUADALCANAL

tween the Jap right flank and enemy shore guns, she faced the task of crawling through treacherous waters with most of her steering gear out of order and her charts destroyed.

Perhaps she would have succeeded without assistance; perhaps not. At any rate, she suddenly found a friend when she badly needed one. Up behind her out of the night came the *Helena* . . . and how the *Helena* happened to be there at that moment is one more dramatic chapter in the book of battle.

We had put away two victims, a heavy cruiser and a destroyer, when during a momentary lull in the battle Captain Hoover and his men on the fighting bridge observed a line of enemy ships to starboard. Our secondaries ranged one of these ships immediately and crippled her with a burst of 5-inch shells which struck her squarely at the waterline. She was apparently a destroyer. At the same time a cruiser in the Jap formation opened up on the retiring *San Francisco*.

The *Frisco* had been hurt and was seeking a lane of escape. She came about, in no condition to take on so formidable a foe, and the *Helena* moved in to give the Jap gunners the contest for which they were asking. For a few blinding moments the Battle of Guadalcanal was reduced, insofar as the *Helena* was concerned, to a private, point-blank duel between our gunners and those of the enemy cruiser.

We were hit in that duel, but the continuous fire of the *Helena's* main-deck guns cut the heavier Jap down to size very quickly. There was little left of her except smoke and flames when she died.

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

The *Helena* turned away. She had sunk four enemy ships and now her guns were silent as she felt her way warily past friendly vessels to engage the Japs again. We had been hurt, but not badly. Our forward turrets were shrapnel scarred, and shells had crashed into Battle Two and the stack. An electrician’s mate named Harris—a slight, blond, likeable lad of twenty-two, from Philadelphia—had been cut almost in two by shrapnel which ricocheted from the steel deck up through the searchlight platform on which he was lying. Others were injured up there, but Harris alone had been killed. Dick Herman—he of the bookish debates in the wardroom—helped the wounded men down from the platform as the ship closed in again to resume the fight.

We ranged a fleeing cruiser and set her afire as she fled. We raked a destroyer with our lighter guns until she, too, exploded in flames and smoke. It was a bit fantastic. You found a target and sank it. Over the battle phones came the order, “Shift target!” You found another Jap. The turret crews went into action again with scarcely a pause to wipe the sweat from their faces. Jim Baird, in Director Control Forward, adjusted his sights. The big guns swung into position and bellowed, the ship shuddered, and another Jap burst into flames in the midst of a scene of destruction already lit by blazing ships everywhere. Never before in the history of naval warfare had so much been destroyed so quickly in so small an area.

By now, of course, all semblance of order had vanished and the battle had become a series of dogfights. Even the commands which crackled over the battle circuits of indi-

THE BATTLE OF GUADALCANAL

vidual ships were without pattern. "Full speed ahead! Fire to starboard! Shift target! Get the one on our port bow; he's firing on us! Full speed astern!" were the orders from the *Helena's* bridge as we pursued and engaged the scattered enemy, while from Spot One came the jubilant chant of Warren Boles, "Set 'em up in the other alley! Pour it to 'em!" and from the men themselves, "Jeez, that was a big one! Look at it blow up!"

Savo Island, reddened by battle-flames, was dangerously close to us when we made our turn. Now we came about, guns silent again, seeking something else at which to fire. The conflict had passed by us in that part of the area; the Japs that were left had fled out past Savo on their way back up the Slot. But our destroyers were dealing terrible destruction among the enemy transports which, ghosting in behind their escort of warships, had swung toward the beach. Many of the troopships were ablaze; others vainly attempted to flee. One, wallowing westward through the inferno, literally leaped from the sea and exploded in mid air when hit by a torpedo.

Farther down the line, one of our ships—later identified as the *Juneau*—was slugging it out with a Jap twice her size. A salvo from the Jap roared over her, red against the night, missed her completely and fell on another Jap ship beyond. Then the *Juneau's* torpedoes hit home and Jap number one was afire, exploding as she sought to retire.

The little *Juneau* "poured it on," raking the enemy's deck and superstructure with her 5-inch guns. That was all she had, but her gunners were superb, and the Japs, returning the fire, seemed unable to depress their larger

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

guns enough to cause serious damage. A featherweight with whirlwind fists, the *Juneau* put up a magnificent fight until a torpedo sent her reeling. Then, out of control, she zigzagged wildly through the night.

That she missed a head-on collision with the Jap was a miracle, and that she was not blown out of the water by Jap number two was a miracle also. Shells ripped into her bridge and stack, shattered her searchlights and covered her deck with wreckage. A shell burst in her sick bay, killing her wounded and many of her medical personnel. But still her guns spoke and she drunkenly maintained headway, boiling through a sea filled with bobbing Jap heads. Suddenly she sped from the glow of the burning Jap into darkness, and became a black shadow rushing at the *Helena*!

Only quick work on the *Helena*'s bridge averted a collision. Captain Hoover's shouted command, "Hard right rudder!" came without a second to spare. The *Juneau* lurched past us as we heeled over, and an instant later she was gone again in darkness, her part of the battle over.

We turned again into the Japs. But our part in the battle was over, too. A ship loomed in the blackness off our bow, and at the order, "Shift target!" our big guns swung to center her. She was a sitting duck.

But the order to fire was not given. Perhaps it was intuition, perhaps Captain Hoover saw something which others on the bridge did not; at any rate, he hesitated. A moment later a blinker gun flashed from the target's bridge. She was the wounded *San Francisco*.

It was Lieutenant Commander Bruce McCandless who

THE BATTLE OF GUADALCANAL

flashed the *Frisco's* identity, and his heart at that moment must have been well up in his throat. Later, in a magazine article, he wrote, "Captain Hoover, may he live forever, took a second look before letting us have it!"

Now at last the acting commanding officer of the battered flagship was able to report the *San Francisco's* damage to a senior officer. He did so by means of the same blinker tube, and the *Helena*, with Captain Hoover assuming command of the force, moved ahead of the *Frisco* to lead her out to safety.

The battle itself was about over. Of the huge Japanese fleet which had steamed down the Slot hours before, little remained except a few blazing hulks upon the water. Remnants of the fleet fled in disorganized rout, firing at one another in confusion as they went. The rest, including many of the transports, had been sunk.

We, too, had suffered losses. The miracle was that against such opposition we had not suffered more. When at dawn the ships of our force rendezvoused at the appointed place and proceeded toward home, several were missing, and the procession was grim. Those of us who had come through the battle were in bad shape. The *San Francisco* was riddled with shell holes, her superstructure mangled, her casualty list long. The *Juneau*, which had appeared again out of nowhere as the battle ended, limped crookedly along with her damage control people still frantically working to keep her afloat, her deck a shambles, her sick bay filled with dead and wounded. The destroyers, too, had taken a grisly pounding. The *Helena* alone had come through with only minor hurts.

Despite the calm sea, the glittering hot sun and the

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

white birds flying, it was a desolate dawn. Utter exhaustion reddened the eyes of the men still alert at their battle stations as we limped toward home. Though we had won a stunning victory, there was no jubilation. Weariness had dulled the spirit. When at last the night-long watchfulness came to an end, many of the men threw themselves down without taking a step. It mattered little where they were, so long as they could sleep.

At eleven A.M.—Friday, the thirteenth of November—the *Helena’s* crew gathered aft on the main deck where lay a canvas bag draped with a flag. The men removed their caps, and some of those who faced the sun closed their eyes for a moment to shut out the glare. At Captain Hoover’s side stood Catholic Chaplain Murphy, a Bible in his hand.

The chaplain finished the burial service and Captain Hoover moved a step forward. He spoke briefly, as he might have spoken in the calm of his cabin. A moment later the body of young Harris, killed by shrapnel on the searchlight platform, slid gently into the sea.

The *Helena* steamed on. Captain Hoover returned to the bridge. Tired men went about their work again.

But the Battle of Guadalcanal was not yet over. One more chapter remained to be written, and it was ghastly and grim. It was also terribly brief.

We had been moving through that calm sea for some time, the *Helena* at the head of the line with the *San Francisco* on our port quarter, the *Juneau* on our starboard quarter, the damaged destroyers deployed in a screen. At times the *Juneau*, her steering mechanism apparently in bad shape from the pounding she had ab-

THE BATTLE OF GUADALCANAL

sorbed, appeared to be dangerously close to us. Many of us aboard the *Helena* watched her uneasily as with her bow deep in the water she struggled to keep up.

Suddenly without warning she leaped from the sea in a blinding burst of light. A single vast thunderclap exploded within her. Before there was time to cry out, even to speak, the valiant little cruiser was hidden in a tower of smoke that shot skyward as though spewed from a volcano. All we saw of the ship herself was a 5-inch gun turret, completely intact, hurtling through the air high above the *Helena's* stack.

It was not real. To those of us watching, who had only just begun to relax and feel alive again after a night of unbearable tension, it was the end of all the world, a physical and mental shock beyond comprehension. No one moved or spoke. Stricken, we watched the monstrous black blossom of smoke with a terrible fascination, waiting to see what would be under it when it lifted.

Nothing was under it. Nothing at all. The *Juneau* had vanished as though she had been a mirage. Only a discolored, oily patch of sea, slightly less smooth than the calm waters around it, marked her grave. Torpedoes from a lurking submarine had struck the little ship in some vital spot and destroyed her in a matter of seconds. She had blown up like a tin can hurled aloft, in fragments, by a giant firecracker.

It was almost too much for many who saw her die. A man needs some kind of mental and physical reserve to accept such a disaster when not prepared for it, and we had exhausted our reserve during the night. This was not good. It was a shock to over-taut nerves and morale.

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

In battle, with hell erupting on all sides, a man conditions himself to accept such things; but the battle had been over for hours, the sea had been peaceful, the sun shining, the white birds flying, and men’s thoughts on peace and relaxation. Many a man aboard the *Helena* walked the decks for the following few hours in a kind of trance, brooding and frightened.

The man who felt it most, perhaps, was Captain Hoover himself. He and Captain Lyman K. Swensen, skipper of the *Juneau*, had been classmates and the best of friends.

Yet despite this tragic finale to the battle, our side had won a great victory. When conflicting reports of the all-night engagement are finally fitted properly into the whole sprawling picture, it may be considered the greatest naval victory of the war, perhaps of any war. “There was nothing like it in World War I or the Spanish American War,” Admiral Nimitz later declared. “Undoubtedly the Japanese plan was complete capture of Guadalcanal. I think they brought down everything they had.”

We had lost Admiral Callaghan, Admiral Scott, Captain Young, and many other gallant men. We had lost the *Atlanta* and the *Juneau* and four destroyers—a large part of our small force of ships. But we had crippled the Jap fleet severely, and as the remnants of it fled toward Bougainville, American airmen gave it a further pounding the following morning, while rescue craft from Guadalcanal worked over the scene of the night’s encounter in search of survivors from our ships which had been sunk. Hundreds were saved.

Late that afternoon, November 13, the Japs tried

THE BATTLE OF GUADALCANAL

again, sending down a heavy cruiser and six destroyers to bombard the island. As darkness fell they were set upon by PT boats of famous Squadron X—five tiny thunder boats—which turned them back with a blistering high-speed torpedo attack. The cruiser was hit and crippled. A destroyer was sunk. At dawn, planes from Henderson Field finished off the cruiser as it limped back to Bougainville.

Still the Japs were undiscouraged. More of their troop-laden transports, this time a whole sprawling fleet of them, beat southward all that day despite relentless attack by our planes. Many were sunk. Others were left blazing and helpless. But the rest came on, and once again the soldiers and Marines on Guadalcanal dug in on the beaches to repel an expected invasion. When darkness fell the Japs closed in, led by a battleship task force of great strength.

They were met this time by Admiral Lee, with an American force of battleships—one of them the 16-inch gun *South Dakota*—and destroyers. Only four of the enemy troopships reached shore. These were found the following morning beached at Tassafaronga, about seven and a half miles west of our Guadalcanal holdings, and were destroyed. Of the escorting force of warships, nothing of importance escaped. We had lost two destroyers. The Battle of Guadalcanal, a three day holocaust, was over.

What was the score? Again we cannot be sure. The text of the Navy communiqué covering those three bloody days and nights conservatively places the enemy's losses as follows: Sunk or destroyed: 1 battleship, 3 heavy

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

cruisers, 2 light cruisers, 5 destroyers, 8 transports, 4 cargo transports. Damaged: 1 battleship, 6 destroyers. Certainly the Japs suffered no less than that. Nor does the Navy communiqué take into account the estimated 20,000 to 40,000 enemy troops who perished aboard the sunken transports.

Our own loses were the light cruisers *Atlanta* and *Juneau*, and six destroyers. And we had once again held the line on the map of strategy.

Said the Japs, in a short-wave broadcast recorded by the Federal Communications Commission in New York: “The Battle of the Solomons is proving fatal to the American Navy. The Japanese have the Americans where they want them and mean to keep them there until no American warship is left in active service.”

Said Prime Minister John Curtin of Australia: “The battles are not over but the enemy knows he has been fighting, and I am grateful to the United States for the magnificent forces it has used in this important theater.”

And from General Vandegrift, commanding the Marines on Guadalcanal:

“The battered helmets of the fighting forces on Guadalcanal are lifted in deepest tribute to Rear Admirals Callaghan, Scott, Lee and Kinkaid and to their forces who, against seemingly hopeless odds, did, with magnificent courage, attack and drive back the first hostile stroke and make later successes possible.”

** CHAPTER TEN **

St. Helena

LONG before our battle-weary group reached a nearby base, the *Helena's* repair crews were at work, swarming over the ship to put her in shape again. Though we had not been hurt badly, there were a thousand and one minor ailments that required attention.

Our stack was full of holes. Our searchlight platform was scarred and twisted. And now we learned that a shell had gone through the pyrotechnic locker, forward. Fortunately it hadn't exploded there amid the rockets and signal flares, or the whole forward part of the ship might have been blown out with a fireworks exhibition to rival the Fourth of July. By some freak of chance the shell had been deflected back up through the deck and had burst on the foc'sle, amid hundreds of empty ammunition cans which now looked like Simple Simon's sieves.

But miracles become commonplace aboard a fighting ship, and most of us, though fully aware of what might have happened had the shell exploded sooner, merely shrugged the thought aside. Next time we might not be so lucky; therefore, why talk about it? Next time we might get what the *San Francisco*, for instance, had got.

At the base I went across to the *Frisco* to pick up some dispatches, and found her crew busy with the task of

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

removing the injured men to shore. The ship herself was a fantastic jungle of twisted steel, her quarterdeck slippery with blood and piled high with wreckage. You moved about very carefully, watching your feet. Not all the dead had yet been removed.

It seemed probable, in view of the frightful damage done to the big cruiser’s superstructure, that the Jap battlewagon which raked her had been armed, not with armor-piercing shells, but with high explosive missiles intended for the bombardment of Guadalcanal. Which meant, if it were true, that the Japs had been unaware of our presence and expected no naval opposition to their assault upon the island. We talked about this in the *Helena’s* wardroom and got nowhere. That is the trouble with naval warfare, especially at night. So many questions remain unanswered.

On Monday, November 16, the Plan of the Day contained the following message from Rear Admiral Turner: “In dissolving this task force, I express the wish that the number designating our group in the future be reserved for groups of ships as ready for high patriotic endeavor as you have been. Although well aware of the odds which might be against you, I felt that your chance of night attack on November twelfth was the time when fine ships and brave men should be called upon to their utmost. For your magnificent support of our brave troops on Guadalcanal and your eagerness to be the keen edge of the sword that is cutting the throat of the enemy, I thank you. In taking from the enemy a tool of strength far greater than that which you have expended, you have more than justified any expectations. For our lost ships

ST. HELENA

whose names will be enshrined in history, and for long cherished comrades who will be with us no more, I grieve with you. No medals however high can ever possibly give you the reward you deserve. With all my heart I say, 'God bless the courage of our men, dead or alive.' "

So our task force, the fightingest group in the South Pacific, was to be no more. But we had expected it and were not too grieved. Refueled and partly repaired, the *Helena* stood out to sea again and headed southward for New Caledonia and a rest.

We had earned a rest. For months we had prowled the seas, tense and ready for action. Twice we had been through the blazing hell of night battle with superior enemy forces. Our list of victims was long now, and Captain Hoover was to wear still another Gold Star in lieu of his third Navy Cross. We were proud of our skipper, our ship and ourselves.

But we were tired, very tired. The base was heaven.

With my best friend, Lieutenant Commander Victor Post, I went ashore that morning to walk the streets of the little town. It was a quaint place, small and very French, but to us it was a metropolis. We did the shops, where under the Cross of Lorraine, insignia of the Free French Government, you could buy almost anything American. We strolled past the little movie houses. But what we wanted most was to look at the flowers and the small French houses with their tiny backyard gardens. And so before long we were outside the town proper and climbing a hill that overlooked the harbor.

It was so damned good to be walking on solid ground

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

again! You went slowly, appreciating every step, almost tasting the earth with your feet through the soles of your shoes. All those days, weeks, months of ocean, and now something brown and firm that you could pick up in your fingers and look at—that you could feel and smell. And because it wouldn’t last, you had the most aching desire to keep walking, walking, walking, just to feel it under your feet.

The flowers were lovely. The little cottages with their gay little yards were lovely. The sun and the warmth and even the sight of the sea from the top of the hill were lovely. We soaked it up in silence.

I suppose Vic, who is slight and wiry, witty and pleasant, was thinking of Redwood City, California, where he lived. I thought of Boston and a beautiful girl, and of the boys at WBZ where I had been director of news and special events. I thought of the folks at home in New Hampshire.

We came presently to a small and very old church, a Catholic church, up there on the top of the island just under the sky. We stopped before it without a word. I should not like to speak for Vic, but I myself am not more than a conventionally religious man; yet when we had stood for a moment watching the sun on ancient stained glass windows, it was I who said, “Let’s go in.” Down below in the harbor our ship lay quietly at anchor after slugging her way through a large part of the Japanese fleet, and we owed it to her and to ourselves, I felt, to kneel for a moment and say thanks.

After the bright, blinding sunlight, it was almost dark

ST. HELENA

inside the little sanctuary. We paused by the door and I whispered something—something quite irreverent, I recall, about having walked in on the middle of the picture, with the ushers all asleep. Vic did not answer. Someone out of sight was playing on a very old, asthmatic organ, the low notes of which caused the ancient floor to tremble. There were candles burning at the altar, and one old lady knelt praying at a bench near the front. She was the only visible person present.

Above us, as we slipped almost guiltily onto one of the worn benches, the hand-hewn rafters were festooned with dusty cobwebs that looked like Spanish moss.

How long we stayed there I don't remember. Not long, probably. I prayed, I think. I knelt and thought of guns thundering in the dark, of ships burning and men shouting as they leaped into oily water. A prayer of thanks and gratitude was hidden somewhere in those thoughts, if not put into words. And I was on my knees, whether praying or not, when I became aware of the sunlight again.

The sun had fingered a row of windows which before had been in darkness, and now in bright golden bars it filled the church with warmth and light.

I looked up at the windows, and one in particular held my attention. You looked at it because you had to—because in a strange way it beckoned. I had said nothing to Vic, yet he, too, was very still, staring, and his lips were moving.

From where we sat, the streaming sunlight clearly illuminated the inscription on the glass, beneath a haloed

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

figure whose face and outstretched hands shimmered with light. It read: “St. Helena.”

That day, back home, was Thanksgiving Day.

The *Helena* was not long at the base, but she did stay long enough for Captain Hoover to be assigned to other duties. The ship said good-by to him proudly. He had taken us almost unscathed through the Battle of Cape Esperance and the Battle of Guadalcanal, two of the most violent night engagements in naval history. He had been devoted to his ship and his men. But war is in too big a hurry to consider personal feelings, and “Hoover of the *Helena*” was needed elsewhere.

Our new skipper was Captain Charles P. Cecil, USN, of the little town of Flat Rock, North Carolina—a veteran Navy man who had little to say at first, but said it well. No doubt he sensed the *Helena’s* love for the leader she was losing. He seemed to, and was respected for it. With Captain Cecil in command, the ship left port a few days later.

But something else had come aboard at the base, too. A rumor. Where it originated, no one could say. It passed from mouth to mouth as rapidly as the ship’s crew had passed the ammunition on the night of November 12. We were going home! Back to the States!

The men put aside their weariness and straightened their shoulders. They wore grins that had not been hauled out of storage for weeks. In the wardroom and crew’s quarters, on the quarterdeck and the foc’sle, there was talk of home towns and families.

“Now me, the first thing I’m gonna do when I get

ST. HELENA

back to Turner Falls . . .”

“Brother, you can have Turner Falls. Lead me to Brooklyn!”

“You suppose they’ll give us time enough for a guy to get clear across the country to Connecticut?”

“If you’re goin’ to Connecticut, you better plan on walkin’. Those trains are so loaded with civilians . . .”

It was wonderful.

But we didn’t go home. Back we went, instead, to another base, back to the old familiar stamping grounds in the Coral Sea, to patrol and wait, patrol and wait.

Rumors of that kind are dangerous. They serve only to lift a man from the daily routine which has become second nature to him, and then, having blown up his hopes, they prick the balloon and let him down into the depths of cynicism. For a time the *Helena* was not too happy a ship as she prowled the Coral Sea. Her morale had suffered a serious setback and she was sullen. Someone had played her men a dirty trick which they rightfully resented.

The ship herself was not in the best of shape, either. Her engines were weary and cranky from more than sixty thousand sea-miles of labor. There were times, even in waters suspected of harboring enemy submarines, when we had to slow to a crawl while Commander Buerkle and his engine room gang, below in their vast, noisy underworld, made repairs that could not be postponed. The ship’s bottom was fouled with barnacles. She needed an overhaul. But, instead, she beat back and forth like a tired old woman walking a treadmill, covering the same dangerous waters day after day and night after night—

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

on guard, always on guard.

Our planes played an important part in this arduous job of patrol. We carried two of them—SOC biplanes of an old but excellent design, especially suited to anti-submarine patrol work. But the men who flew these planes had to be heroes. The *Helena* was no *Hornet* or *Wasp*; she had no flight deck from which the little SOCs could take off and to which they could return in comparative safety. The planes had to be shot from the ship by catapult and retrieved by crane, and it was a difficult, dangerous business. Our four pilots played a continuous game of tag with death.

These were the boys who had flown their flimsy little airplanes above the Japanese force and dropped flares to guide our gunners the night of October 12. But their assignments, though always dangerous, were not always so spectacular. Daily they ranged far out over the sea on patrol, to search out enemy ships and subs. More than once they left the ship in bright sunlight, only to find her wallowing through dirty weather and high seas when they returned with their gas tanks empty. Then they had to put their flimsy craft down and wait—bounced about like empty beer cans—until the crane could swing them aboard.

They had a right to be high-strung and nervous, but they were not. Senior Aviator Tex O’Neal, tall and rangy, almost too big to crowd himself into an SOC’s little cockpit, was a Texan of the type you see in Hollywood westerns. You found him striding about the wardroom in his helmet, leather gloves and uniform, sometimes grouching a little, always ready for an argument, but hoarding a

ST. HELENA

grin beneath his scowl. The Navy had cheated Tex. He should have been allowed to wear chaps and spurs, with a six-gun holstered at each hip. "What the Sam Hill," he'd say, "at least we get off the ship once in a while. That's more than you Joes can say!"

Tex was an Annapolis man and could fly with the best of them. In port he liked nothing better than to put his little biplane into what he fondly called a "power dive," and zoom down over the ship's stacks while the men on deck dived for the nearest open hatch, roundly cursing him. Later, in April, he was ordered to report to the admiral of the task force as senior flag aviator, and Lieutenant (jg) "Patches" Perry became the *Helena's* senior flier.

Patches had a little of that uncontrollable zest, too. About twenty-four years old, he hailed from Arizona and was a graduate of Arizona State College. When a practical joke was perpetrated in the wardroom, you looked for Perry and usually found him wearing a tell-tale grin. He wore the same grin, though with a tense twist to it, while waiting in the cockpit of his plane for the neck-wrenching slam of the catapult.

One day, about an hour after Patches had been "shot off" on anti-submarine patrol, he came up on the plane radio with a message for the flagship. "Have just sighted enemy sub which crash dived as I approached. Am dropping smoke bomb. Will trail." He gave his course and speed, and the admiral hurriedly dispatched destroyers to the scene. I was on the bridge at the time, as assistant signal officer, and saw the geysers shooting skyward in the distance as the destroyers dropped depth charges.

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

Soon over TBS came the message: “Believe we have sunk sub. Surface of water contains debris.” Later it was confirmed, and Patches Perry was called to the *Helena’s* quarterdeck where he was awarded the Air Medal. Sinking a Jap sub was important business.

The routine patrols were also important, and daily these two fliers, with Lieutenant (jg) Donald Gift and Lieutenant (jg) Hallenburg, winged out over the sea. Daily they returned. Their record was remarkable. Despite bad weather, faulty gas gauges and interfering Zeros, the *Helena* lost not a pilot nor a plane during her entire career.

Now with December nearly gone, the men watched the calendar as the Coral Sea grind continued. One evening at sunset hour, as the ship pursued a zigzag course south of Guadalcanal, the entire ship’s company assembled on the main deck aft.

We had seen few evenings more beautiful than that one. The setting sun was huge and fiery red; the afterglow draped banners of shimmering light over a peaceful sea. Thoughts were naturally of home—not of bustling cities or of wet rings on a seaport bar, but of mellow rooms colored by the lights on Christmas trees. It was Christmas Eve.

We were in submarine waters, and the everlasting watch for enemy raiders of course continued without interruption. North of us, the men on Guadalcanal were crawling through stinking jungles to squeeze out the Japs. Still farther north, the Jap navy was stirring the witches’ brew again. But the *Helena’s* band played and her men

ST. HELENA

sang carols. The chaplain read Christmas poems in a voice that rang out across the water with a resounding challenge.

The Japs that night were probably bowing in obeisance to Tokyo, reassuring their bespectacled little Emperor of their eagerness to die for him. Aboard the *Helena* we sang "Silent Night" and "Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem," while the ship's propellers churned and her engines throbbed and the lookouts stood vigilant against enemy torpedoes.

"Silent night, Holy night . . ."

** CHAPTER ELEVEN **

“Enemy Installations Were Bombarded . . .”

EARLY in January, 1943, Allied strategy in the South Pacific began definitely to shift to the offensive, and plans were under way for a northward drive through the Solomons.

True, the bitter and at times almost hopeless struggle for Guadalcanal was not yet over; but the Japs there were in retreat, the enemy's major drives to reinforce his troops had been thwarted, the Tokyo Express had been hard hit by our nocturnal torpedo boats, and the end was near. Now we were thinking beyond Guadalcanal. The lines of strategy on the chart lengthened to grasp at Bougainville, with feelers extended to touch at Jap installations on the intervening chain of islands.

On nearby New Guinea, also, the Japs had been pushed back. From their farthest point of advance only thirty miles from crucial Port Moresby—a point reached in mid-September, 1942—they had been driven across the Owen Stanley Mountains to the northeast coast. By early 1943 they had been rooted out of their coastal holdings as far north as Buna.

Obviously our ultimate aim in both the Solomons campaign and the New Guinea offensive was the capture of the important base at Rabaul, on the northern tip of the

“ENEMY INSTALLATIONS WERE BOMBARDED . . .”

island of New Britain. A study of the map makes that very clear. In the Solomons this meant first a drive to liquidate New Georgia and Bougainville.

The new year was not far along when the drive began. On the afternoon of January 4, the *Helena* and her task force steamed westward to begin the softening of enemy bases. Our destination was the Jap stronghold at Munda, jutting into the sea on the jungle-clad, westernmost peninsular tip of New Georgia. Standing off the southern shore of the island, in Blanche Channel, we poured shells that night into the Jap airfield, then repelled a brief attack by enemy dive bombers and headed for home.

On January 24, we struck again. This time the operation was fraught with possibilities of disaster, even though our immediate task, as before, was merely to stand off shore and shell the enemy's installations. The danger lay in the location of our targets—Vila, on the island of Kolombangara, and nearby Stanmore Plantation, where Jap ships prowling down from the north at night deposited men and supplies for transportation to Munda.

There was no approach to these objectives from the south, through Blanche Channel. Therefore we were faced with the job of steaming up through the Slot, rounding the northern tip of New Georgia at Visuvisu Point, and stealing in upon our targets through the gulf itself.

Kula Gulf is a sailor's nightmare, a blind alley, a dead-end street. It was prowled by Jap subs and guarded by Jap planes operating from Kolombangara and Bougainville on the west, New Georgia on the east. We could

VELLA
LAVELLA

KOLOM-
BANGARA

VILA

ARUNDEL

WANAWANA

KULA GULF

VISUVISU PT.

RICE ANCHORAGE

ENDODAI INLET

BAIROKO

MAUNDA

RAMADA BAY

VIRU HARBOR

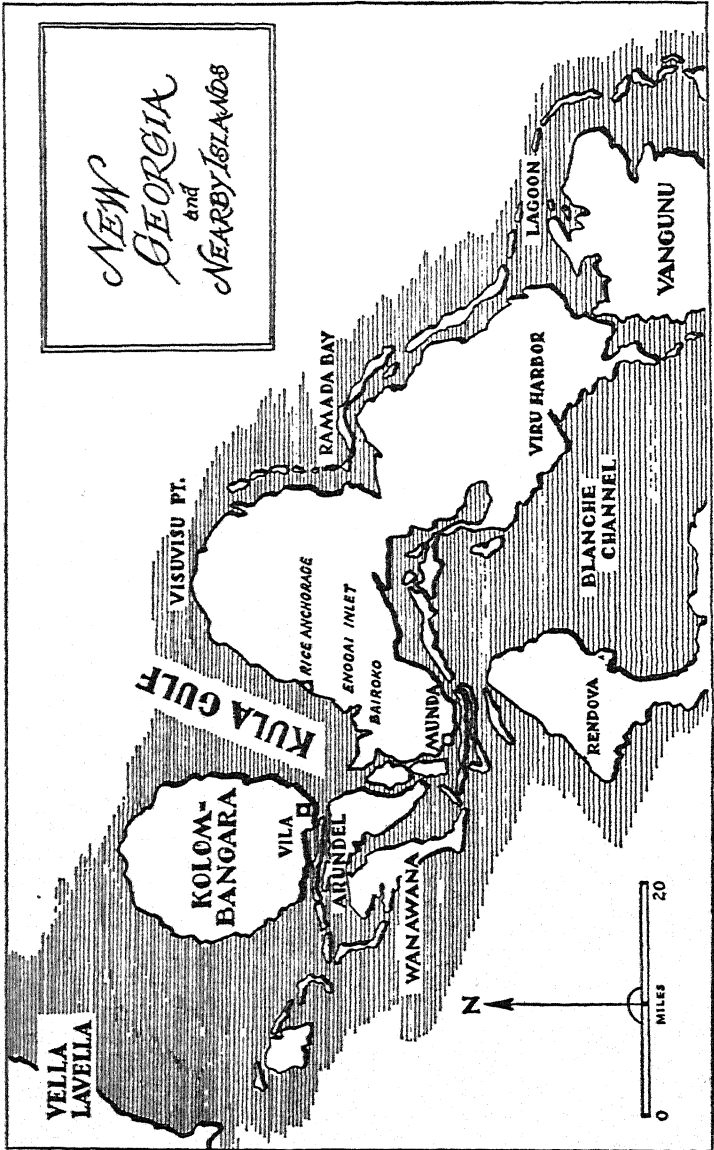
BLANCHE
CHANNEL

RENDOVA

LAGOON

YANGUNU

*NEW
GEORGIA
and
NEARBY ISLANDS*



“ENEMY INSTALLATIONS WERE BOMBARDED . . .”

hardly hope to catch the enemy asleep in so many places at once, and our chance of retiring without punishment was remote, even if the attack itself were successful. Worst of all, we were scheduled to arrive in full moonlight, because an effective nocturnal bombardment cannot be carried out in total darkness. The Japs would love that moonlight!

At sunset we skirted the treacherous reef off the eastern end of New Georgia and nosed up toward Ramada Bay in single file, destroyers boldly leading our light force of cruisers. In charge of the adventure was Rear Admiral Walden L. Ainsworth, a veteran Navy man of whom the little town of Wonalancet, New Hampshire, may well take off its hat in tribute.

Aboard the *Helena* we knew well enough what we were up against, and as the dusky ridges of New Georgia blurred past to port, dark against the darkening sky, we thought again of the charts we had studied so intently but a few hours before. It is not difficult to memorize a chart when you can translate its lifeless lines into a mental picture of enemy airfields, gun emplacements, and lurking submarines. We knew what Kula Gulf would look like. We knew that after turning southward past the probable peril lurking beneath the surface at its mouth, we should have to steam for an hour or more straight into the Solomons' darkest death trap. It was not a subject for light-hearted conversation. The men were quiet and tense at their battle stations.

In the radio room there was little to do but wait. The ships of the force were of course observing radio silence, and traffic of all kinds was light. On the bridge, the cap-

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

tain and his department heads were silent, too. They had discussed the operation down to its minutest detail. Nothing remained but to hold the ship to the split-second schedule decided upon.

That was the key to the entire venture—split-second timing. We knew to the instant when our ship would enter Kula, when our guns would range the target and begin thundering, when we were to make our turn and begin the retirement. All this was down in black and white. Now and then, over the loudspeaker system, our progress was announced to the hundreds of men below decks who were forced to depend on eyes other than their own for information.

“We are nearing Visuvisu Point . . .”

“We are turning into Kula Gulf . . .”

Into Kula Gulf. We were to see a lot of Kula in the coming months. We were to take this sort of thing almost for granted, with scarcely a glance at the shrouded, lumpy ghosts of New Georgia mountains on our left, the shore of Kolombangara on our right. Tonight, though, uneasy eyes probed every detail of these strange surroundings, as well as the sea beneath and the sky above.

“There was a poem I read once in school,” Tom Sims said, grinning at the radio gang. “That wasn’t so long ago either, I guess. Maybe you know it. *‘Will you come into my parlor?’ said the spider to the fly . . .*”

Chief Alborn poured fresh water into the Joe pot and measured a generous portion of coffee. It was going to be a hot, black brew. “If you fellows wouldn’t look so hard at maps, you’d know less and relax more,” he observed.

"ENEMY INSTALLATIONS WERE BOMBARDED . . ."

"Of course you never look at a map, Chief?"

Alborn yanked at his cap. "Sure I do. That's the trouble."

The moon was high now and bright. It whitened the protruding snouts of the guns and silvered a line of surf in the shallows along the island's shore. We were close enough at times to see the feather-duster tops of individual palm trees, and the boys at the twenty- and forty-millimeter guns trained their sights on them just to keep in practice and limber their stiffened muscles. Standing or sitting or crouching in one position for hours on end, with nothing to see but shadows sliding by and nothing to hear but the changeless hiss of a disturbed sea can be hard work, even to youngsters who are used to it.

We crept along at half speed, wondering if Jap eyes on the Kolombangara shore had discovered us—if little men were running through the jungle with news of our coming, and enemy guns were being trained on us. The moon was so damned bright! The shore was so close! Our wake was a glittering gash so long that only the blind could fail to spot it!

"We are nearing Rice Anchorage," the loudspeaker informed us. It was after one o'clock. One A.M. In Boston and New York, if you discounted the difference in time, people were sitting in restaurants and bars, discussing the shows they had seen. In quieter country towns, the sidewalks had been rolled up long ago.

"We are off Bairoko Harbor . . . All hands stand by!"

Lookouts, peering red-eyed at the creeping shoreline, had picked our target out of the bewildering maze of

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

shadows. Which is to say they had spotted certain familiar shapes against the sky—certain moonlit mountain peaks for which they had been searching. The target itself was not visible, but it had been photographed by our planes, and we knew that when the ship reached a point from which Peak A was directly in line with Landmark B, our objective lay a known number of yards from the island’s edge in a known direction.

Now, as in battle, time was suddenly of great importance and no words were spent foolishly. In the plotting room, the ship’s brain hummed speedily through a labyrinth of figures. The big guns swung into position. Shells moved up into the turrets and powder cases were rammed home in the breech. The captain, the gunnery officer, the director control officer and the hundreds of cogs in the *Helena’s* human machine were ready.

The captain consulted his watch, the second hand of which marched with quick little hops toward zero hour. He glanced briefly along the shadowed line of ships moving in perfect co-ordination along the broad white traffic stripe of the *Helena’s* wake. It was a beautiful thing to see. Flawless. The skipper’s gaze returned reluctantly to his watch and he began counting. One, two, three, four . . .

“Commence firing!”

The gun muzzles spat a breath of flame and the ship slithered sideways. Thunder burst jaggedly in the quiet night. The captain put his binoculars to his eyes and turned to study the target.

You have seen photographs, perhaps, of night bombardment. Many are excellent, but even the excellent ones

“ENEMY INSTALLATIONS WERE BOMBARDED . . .”

do not tell the whole awesome story—not even when exposed on color film to recreate the unbelievable brightness of the gun flashes and the strange spectacle of monstrous colored flowers, predominantly orange, bursting into bloom along a line of ghosting gray ships. Every ship in the line is hurling its thunder and the night shudders as though made of jelly, warm jelly, pressing against a man’s hands and face and body and trembling there in shocked surprise.

It is a crazy quilt, a World’s Fair exhibit of the electrical wonders of the future, a trick photograph of summer lightning, a kindergarten blackboard after a drawing session with orange and yellow chalk—it is a little of all these things in one, with everywhere parts of rushing ships silhouetted sharply and blackly against the flashes of the guns, and the guns themselves revealed as jet fingers pointing imperiously at the target.

The weirdly beautiful pattern of lights staggers the imagination. So does the noise, but the noise becomes changeless after a moment; it hurts the ears and smothers a man’s power to think, but the very immensity of it soon reduces the element of shock. The lights, on the other hand, flash across the sky in endlessly changing design, now formless and supernatural, now amazingly geometric. Tracers stab thin fingers of flame through the dark. Flares balloon gaudily and drift earthward like drops of syrup from a fiery pitcher. It is beautiful and fascinating, and in Kula Gulf in the early morning hours of January 25 it was devastating.

Up in Spot One, Warren Boles fingered the firing keys, intent upon the small lights which flashed to inform him

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

the turrets were ready. The organ he played was a sinister one. Its tubes were the jutting gun snouts below, and the music was a monstrous thunder. Boles knew every tube of that organ intimately. He knew the capabilities of every unit in his choir—every man in the crowded steel cubicles who made the thunder possible. The *Helena’s* fire was tremendous and continuous.

In Director Control, Jim Baird eyed the crimson comet tails looping from the guns. His job was to check the accuracy of the ship’s fire—a difficult job at any time and a hundred times more so tonight because every ship in the line was pounding the same small target area. Jim’s talker, an Ohio youngster called “Dead-Ready” Barron who had come to us from the destroyer *Benham*, was at his side every minute, waiting to relay any corrections.

“We’re over,” Jim said. “I can see the tracers. Bring ’em down one.”

“Down one!” Barron repeated into the phone.

“All right, hold it.”

“Hold it!” said Barron.

Jungle Jim could see more than the tracers. In the glare of the ship’s own guns he could see Captain Cecil, Commander Smith and the signalmen, talkers and others on the bridge. He could see the men at the machine-gun stations and the AA crews in their mounts amidships. The bursts of orange light shone briefly on the steel helmets these men wore, and lit their faces, agleam with sweat. To Jim they were figures in flashlight photographs, queerly stiff and stilted. But that suspended animation was an illusion.

Ashore, one small patch of the island of Kolomban-

“ENEMY INSTALLATIONS WERE BOMBARDED . . .”

gara—one important patch upon which the Japs had built an airfield and erected a supply base for their installations at Munda—was furiously ablaze from the high explosive shells raining down upon it. Jim Baird could see that, too, very clearly from his lofty station.

Our job three weeks ago had been to smash the Munda airstrip. Tonight our task was to reduce Vila and Stanmore Plantation to such a degree that the Japs would be a long time lugging in new hangars, new planes, new fuel tanks, and new men to make Munda efficient again. To do this we had been forced to send cruisers and destroyers into the cul-de-sac of Kula Gulf, at risk of losing some or all of them to the enemy. Obviously, before undertaking such a venture, the admiral and his staff at South Pacific headquarters had weighed the issue carefully to determine whether the risk involved was worth the results likely to be obtained. That is war.

The results we obtained were not readily evaluated. Not, at least, during our brief stay in Kula Gulf. Later, when our patrol planes winged north from Guadalcanal to take photographs, they reported great damage; and a sudden falling off in enemy air activity in the vicinity of Munda indicated that they were right. But in Kula Gulf that morning we could only guess.

Our shells were landing with great shuddering crumps in the midst of the target area, and the jungle there was violently ablaze. Smoke and flames reached high into the sky, with a roar that was audible above the thundering voices of our ships' guns. There were explosions too tremendous to be the bursting of shells: explosions that hurled palm trees and chunks of earth and bits of Jap-

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

built structures high into the air—and perhaps bits of Japs also. There was one deafening roar, accompanied by a leaping tower of fire, that must have marked the end of a gasoline dump and caused the Emperor’s people much concern. But we were some distance from all this and still steaming along in formation on a split-second schedule, and we could be sure of nothing except that the Japs were catching wholesale hell.

Then suddenly our guns were silent, as though the sound track in a theater had broken down in the midst of a furious battle scene.

We came about, still in perfect formation, still in a long gray line. Turning, we left a moonlit wake in the sea that might have been drawn with a luminous compass. The raging fires on Kolombangara were now on our left instead of our right as we pushed northward. That was a break for the lookouts on the port side. Lookouts must keep their eyes ahead, always, which calls for tremendous self-discipline. If they forgot to do so on the *Helena*, Ozzie Koerner would remind them, and Bandmaster Simpson, supervisor of lookouts in Control Forward, would relay Ozzie’s reminder.

We steamed north. The leading destroyers increased their speed and the cruisers closed up the gaps. The job was done. All that now remained was to get out of Kula Gulf and down through the Slot into friendly territory.

But that was a large order. By now, surely, the Japs had recovered their wits sufficiently to send out a radio call for assistance.

They had, indeed, but if American assistance had been that long in coming from bases as close as Buin and Faisi,

“ENEMY INSTALLATIONS WERE BOMBARDED . . .”

there would have been some blistered ears and crimson faces the following day! For the Japs were slow. Their golden opportunity was past and we were out of Kula Gulf, in an area where it was possible to maneuver, when the planes came.

We expected them, and they were detected before ever they reached us. Over the loudspeakers went the warning, “Stand by for air attack!”

We were still at battle stations, though relaxed a bit now and filled with a warm glow by the success of our venture. Tense nerves had unbuttoned as soon as the ship put Kula Gulf behind her. Now we were well along the coast of New Georgia, beating eastward through alternate patches of moonlight and rain.

It is difficult to make rhyme or reason out of the weather in that part of the Solomons. The mountainous islands certainly have something to do with its whimsies. The blistering heat perhaps affects it also. Whatever the answer, you could stand on a bridge bathed in moonlight and yet see a ship ahead, in the same formation, plunging through a torrential downpour. The area was a checkerboard of weather, the black squares splashed with rain, the red ones aglow with light. The *Helena* was on a red square when the loudspeakers blared their warning of impending air attack. Before the Japs could strike, we had plowed into the center of a rain squall.

They searched for us. We heard them growling back and forth above us. But though our anti-aircraft gunners were on them and itching to open fire, the order was not given. We could have hit some of those planes—the boys were sure of it—but our fire would have revealed us. The

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

Japs found us soon enough when we emerged from cover. With recklessness born of frustration and impatience, they hurled their torpedo planes at us.

But there was scarcely time for the attack to materialize before we were in the rain again—a different pocket of rain this time—and the exasperated Japs were again impotent. Our gunners had fired a few bursts. Other gunners on other ships had done the same. One of the Japs had plunged into the sea, trailing smoke, and some of the others had dropped bombs; and that was all.

So it went, exciting at first but growing tiresome to tired men who had been at battle stations since dusk the evening before. The gunners craned their necks upward and watched the sky hungrily, praying for a chance to knock down some Japs because that was their job and this was the moment for which they had been trained; but the rest of us wished heartily that the Japs would give up and go away. Eventually they did.

The ship relaxed. The moon seemed a bit brighter and the rain had washed away the cordite fumes and powder smells of the bombardment. Ahead of us the destroyers plowed along, cutting a broad white arrow aimed at home. Behind us lay Kolombangara, still reddening the sky with flames from the wounds we had opened. The mission was over.

You read about it, perhaps, in your newspaper. “On the night of January 24, United States naval forces bombarded enemy installations in Kula Gulf.” It was probably not on page one, but tucked away somewhere for the edification of those who digest a paper thoroughly.

Well . . . that’s what happened.

** CHAPTER TWELVE **

The Happy Helena

NOT long after bombarding the Japs on Kolombangara, we returned to Kula Gulf to pound the enemy's installations at Enogai Inlet and Bairoko Harbor. In both these places the Japs had invested much time and a great deal of money to establish themselves. The guns of the *Helena's* task force laid waste their efforts.

All these bombardments—Munda, Vila, Stanmore Plantation, Enogai Inlet, Bairoko Harbor—were effective; there can be no doubt of it. They were carried out under a tropical moon which enabled us to line up our targets and do a thorough job. To further their effectiveness, the Navy's ubiquitous patrol planes—the "Black Cats" again—were assigned to assist us, and our own pilots often elected to go along with them for the ride. Operating in close conjunction with our warships, the Cats hovered over the targets to give us "spots," calling out instructions over the radio.

Two thousand feet up, these fliers watched the bursting high explosive shells and checked us throughout the bombardments. "Up five zero!" they would chant, oblivious to their own danger from attack by enemy planes as they circled like buzzards above the blazing jungle. "Down two zero . . . You're on, right on . . . You're

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

giving 'em hell! . . . Terrific! . . . You're right on the target!" They deserve a tremendous amount of credit.

Enemy aircraft were active, too. We were usually attacked by torpedo bombers on the way out. But the weather helped us. The area was never without its check-board pattern of rain squalls, and Admiral Ainsworth became so adept at using these squalls, guiding us at top speed from one to another to the confusion of Jap pilots, that some of the men began calling him with profound respect, "Chief Rain-in-the-Face."

The Jap pilots were not stupid. They trailed us diligently and plunged to the attack whenever we were visible long enough to be targets. At times, correctly guessing our course, they flew on ahead of our formation and dropped flares to light us up. But when they did attack, they were met by a torrent of fire from AA gunners who had waited a long time and were eager for a fight. The *Helena* shot two torpedo planes down in flames. Other ships in the force increased the total.

There was danger, always, of enemy attack from other quarters: from submarines, from swift little torpedo boats—the Japanese version of our marauding PTs—and, of course, from the Japanese fleet. Trapped in Kula Gulf by the Jap fleet, we might have paid a high price for our audacity.

But not all was tension and turmoil. The excursions had their lighter moments as well. At the start of one bombardment, Jungle Jim Baird in the Director Control Station was overlooked when the word went out through the battle phones, and was not informed of our readiness to open fire. Without warning, the *Helena's* fifteen 6-inch

THE HAPPY HELENA

guns bellowed beneath him, and Jim lurched erect with his arms flying.

"My God!" he shouted in consternation. "We've been torpedoed!"

For weeks afterward, whenever Jungle Jim showed his face, the classic greeting was, "Watch out, Jim, we're being torpedoed!"

On another occasion an intrepid goony-bird selected the *Helena's* after 5-inch director for a perch a moment or two before we opened hostilities. The first salvo so froze the poor creature with fright that it was unable to move, and throughout the bombardment it remained paralyzed. Paralyzed, that is, except for internal organs which functioned all too well and occasioned some fine grousing and buckets of hot water the following morning, after the bird, recovering, had flown away.

"That goony," said one of the clean-up squad disgustedly, "had a bomb-bay big as a B-17!"

Meanwhile, the failure of Japanese naval forces to strengthen and supply their troops on Guadalcanal had resulted in loss of the island, and on February 9 the last of the Guadalcanal Japs was rounded up. We could use the island now for a base in our drive toward Bougainville. Navy Seabees, at work there for months, had already enlarged the existing facilities and were transforming Tulagi, as well. The harbor at Tulagi was of major dimensions.

Late in February, American forces took the first northward step by seizing the Russell Islands, next above Guadalcanal in the Slot. Other steps were imminent. It

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

was to soften the enemy’s resistance to these moves that Admiral Ainsworth’s task force, including the *Helena*, continued its nocturnal pounding of the Kula Gulf installations.

Then one day the *Helena* received good news. We were going to Australia. We had earned a rest.

Australia! It wasn’t home, but at least it was a liberty port—the first in eight months! And this time the good word was no mere rumor; it was official.

What a lift! The men began grinning again, kidding one another. Beards came off. The band rehearsed some sparkling jive, just to be ready for any eventuality. Swede Hanson’s phonograph came to life in the junior officers’ bunkroom with a din to wake the dead. Commander Carpenter strutted about the wardroom, twiddling his mustache and wondering where in port he could buy a cap with “scrambled eggs” on it.

Baby Duck Bernd, a curly-headed kid from South Dakota, pestered the veterans of the crew for details on the conformation and disposition of the Australian gentler sex. Jelly Belly smacked his lips and went about saying, “M’m. All those things to eat!” The boys even stopped kidding Dupay about his “gedunk stand,” and Captain Cecil wore a smile that apparently wouldn’t come off.

We steamed south. For a day only we stopped at a major base, then pushed on again. Spirits were high and not even the violent storm through which the ship slogged her way could dampen them. Before long the boys were lining the rail, cheering the Australian coast line and waving at imaginary young ladies who waved back imag-

THE HAPPY *HELENA*

inary lace handkerchiefs.

We were twenty days in the Australian port—time for every man to enjoy ten carefree days ashore. It was the next best thing to being home. Street cars, taxicabs, pavements, people: these were miracles in a magic wonderland after you had looked at an ocean too long and heard the same voices saying the same things too long in the cramped quarters of a fighting ship. The boys made good their promises. Some went ashore for a beer, and had ten. They were entitled to ten times ten for what they had done to Tojo. Swede Hanson bought some new records. Jelly Belly stuffed himself. Commander Carpenter found the hat he wanted, complete with scrambled eggs, and was proud as punch in it. And the morning we sailed, one of the ship's yeomen provided the final happy touch by arriving triumphantly at the dock accompanied by two very charming young ladies attired only in their nighties.

The Happy *Helena* had never been happier. No one groused when we hauled anchor and shoved off once more for our old stamping ground. Not even the heat could dull the edge of gay spirits. Morale had never been higher.

"Morale" is an overworked word, I know. Like many another war word and phrase, it has lost most of its meaning through constant repetition and will probably mean nothing at all by the time the war has ended. The dictionary defines it as "State of mind, as of soldiers, with reference to confidence, courage, etc." But morale on a warship has a hundred and one ingredients.

One important component is the relationship between men and officers. Officers theoretically are human beings

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

blessed with better than average schooling and intelligence. Unfortunately there is not always time in war to determine whether or not they are blessed, as well, with compassion and tolerance. On the *Helena* we were remarkably fortunate. Understanding and affection existed to a wholesome degree in nearly everyone from the captain to the lowest rating. Loyalty to the ship herself was partly responsible, but loyalty to a ship exists only when her men are loyal to one another. The men *are* the ship. Any soul possessed by the vessel herself—and a ship does have a soul, of course; let no one deny that for an instant!—is a complex thing derived from the men who live aboard her, soaked up as a blotter soaks up water.

The *Helena's* officers, particularly the division heads, uncannily knew when to work the men a little harder or to rest them a little longer. They knew it because they knew more about the men than merely their names. When in port—and port life is as important to a ship as sea life—the crews were allowed to exhaust themselves, if they wished, at games. On the dirty coral ground of Espiritu Santo, baseball games of World's Series importance were played whenever the ship dropped her hook for a sufficiently long time in the harbor. Physically, the players suffered torments. The sun was nearly always a blow-torch, and the sharp coral fragments left many a man with injuries which caused him anguish for days afterward. But no one for a moment entertained the thought of forbidding the games on the grounds that they were detrimental to the men's health.

Instead, rivalry between ships was encouraged, and officers eagerly volunteered as umpires. The fields were

THE HAPPY HELENA

named for big league ball parks at home. Here, for a time, sea-weary men could forget war and be home once more in spirit, watching a ball game between the Yanks and Red Sox or knocking out grounders in a corner lot. If baseball was not what they wanted, there were basketball and softball games, facilities for handball and a dozen other sports.

The men loved it. Scratched and dirty, exhausted by their efforts under a broiling sun, they poured a tremendous amount of energy into these hours of recreation, and for days thereafter they had something solid and good to "bang their gums" or "chip their teeth" about.

The *Helena* actually had little port life, but made the most of what she had. Ball games and "happy hours," concerts and movies—these were the makings of a happy ship. These, soaked up in port, supplied a good part of the morale which carried the ship through patrols and night battles and dangerous sorties into enemy waters.

Men make their own morale, too, by their associations aboard ship. A kid from a rural crossroads town may find it a bit strange, at first, to be thrust among hundreds of other men from hundreds of other cities and towns, having nothing in common, nothing to talk about. But the routine of shipboard life soon brings this youngster into close contact with his mates, and into extremely close contact with a small handful of them.

He makes friends. Before long he is seeking out some special buddy to kill his spare time with, or getting a special group together for a game of pitch or blackjack. Weeks pass, months pass, and his life with these men becomes almost more normal to him than the life he left

"THE FIGHTIN'EST SHIP"

behind. He shares memories with his mates now, and can indulge in a sailor's most beloved pastime, the fine art of reminiscing.

"Remember the time back in such and such a place," he says, "when Joe had a beer too many and . . ."

"Remember that Susie gal," he says, "who walked out on Eddie back in . . ."

He and his buddies are always happying themselves with such memories.

He is ingenious, too, in using his head and his hands. He learns that a warship in the midst of an ocean is not Main Street back home, with its two or three theaters and wide variety of stores. He can buy certain items essential to his well being; he can even have ice cream and candy, and perhaps see an occasional movie; but there are hundreds of articles he cannot buy—things which the Navy, with all its elaborate structure for maintaining the standards of living, has not seen fit to provide for him. These he must make for himself.

He learns to sew buttons on his shirt and patch his pants. He acquires a kind of belligerent pride in the appearance of his clothes, even of his work dress. He "takes a reef" in his trousers and makes himself an artistic belt from which to dangle his locker key. The chances are he makes a knife, because American sailors are traditionally fond of knives.

Back home it was a jackknife which Joe Smith lugged about in his pocket or on the end of his key ring. Aboard ship the jackknife becomes a sheath knife—a handy thing to have around, Joe is told, in case of sharks. The next letter Joe writes to the home folks contains the request,

THE HAPPY HELENA

"Please send me a sheath knife!" but he seldom has the patience to await a reply, and before long he has acquired an old file, a discarded saw blade or a length of rusty steel, and is making himself the knife he wants.

Knives were a fetish aboard the *Helena*, and many were works of art worthy of the finest craftsman. Many a boy employed his leisure time for days on end, shaping and sharpening a blunt piece of metal until it satisfied him. It seldom satisfied him until he had rubbed it to gleaming perfection with emery paper and fashioned an edge with which a razor blade was dull by comparison. Then he usually made an ornamental handle for it (Young Bailey, our "ice cream man," even shaped a gorgeous handle out of glass!) and tooled a leather case to protect it from the salt air.

No officer worth his salt ever discouraged this sort of thing. In fact, many of the *Helena's* officers caught the fever themselves and scoured the stores in Australia for knives of their own.

Morale, then, is not the simple thing some of our commentators would have us believe. It is as complex as a ship herself, as sensitive as a barometer, built upon discipline, intelligence and plain human understanding. Most of all, perhaps, it is influenced by mail.

Mail from home meant everything to the people of the *Helena*, officers and men alike. At mail call the ship quivered with excitement and burst into a community shout. Even the Mail Petty Officer reacted with gusty elation as he scrambled to get the sacks open and distribute their contents.

At sea—and we sometimes received mail at sea, even

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

in dangerous waters—this elation was inflated into a kind of gay delirium. After days, weeks of tension, the men tired and homesick and wondering glumly when next their turn in port might come, the word would spread that we were rendezvousing with, say, a tanker, to refuel. Eager eyes then watched the horizon, and a moment after the tanker was sighted, the whole ship knew it.

Men lined the rail, waiting. To hell with the war. They were individuals now, not cogs in a machine. They were kids and gray-haired oldsters from Wilmington, Delaware, and Burlington, Vermont, wondering if wives and sweethearts and mothers and brothers were aware of their tremendous yearning to hear from home.

Will there be any mail? They wait to find out. They shuffle their feet, tug at their clothes, try to think of something smart to say to conceal their eagerness. When the line is cast across to the tanker, they are silent and tense. When the mail bags begin to slide over that line, they cheer.

It is a little like a scene in a madhouse then. Every man at the rail audibly counts those precious sacks as they come aboard. Ten, fifteen, twenty—the count rises to a chant. Twenty bags of mail! The word travels like wildfire to less fortunate mates who could not be present at the ceremony. Grinning kids shoulder the bulky sacks and march off with them, effecting an elaborate parade step in honor of the occasion. Down to the post office go the precious bags, for the stuff to be sorted. Then the mail call. To hell with the war! Here’s mail! And here is morale with a capital M.

Morale, finally, is no secret thing, smoldering under

THE HAPPY HELENA

a mask to explode unexpectedly. It is readable in men's faces, subject to analysis in their talk and movements. The letters they write are perhaps the most accurate barometer of all.

Censoring letters can be a chore. Sometimes it is, when a man has stood long watches and is tired. But it can also be a thrilling and humbling adventure. Censoring hour aboard the *Helena* took place in the wardroom, with officers seated about the long tables and the mail piled high in front of them. It was an hour of varied moods, at times like a trip to the circus, at other times like being in church.

Somehow it seems less than decent to laugh at jokes not intended for you—but the wardroom often rocked with laughter during censoring hour, because the *Helena* possessed a sense of humor that would not be confined. Somehow it is not proper to share a man's grief—but I have seen tears at censoring hour, too. I have heard poems read aloud for their beauty, and gems of wisdom so apt that you felt it a shame not to copy and preserve them.

And sometimes, when reading a letter written by some youngster who in the business of war had been quite overlooked, you sat for a moment in contemplative silence, realizing anew the importance of the thing for which he and you were fighting.

** CHAPTER THIRTEEN **

"And Troops Were Landed . . ."

THE *Helena* was but a few days out of Australia when Commander Bean, our senior medical officer, called the bridge one morning and spoke to the captain. The sea was rough. The ship was pursuing a zigzag course to lessen the danger from submarines. Commander Bean was perturbed.

"I need a steady course, Captain," he said. "The ship rolls too much with this infernal zigzagging."

The skipper was obviously startled, because Doc Bean, with his wavy gray hair and robust figure, had never been seasick a day in his life and looked as though he never would be. Doc had come to us from the *Hornet* after she was sunk. He liked to call himself, with a wry smile, a *Hornet* veteran, because he had been a member of that ship's company exactly one day when she went down.

Doc explained his concern briefly. "I've a youngster in sick bay," he said. "Bad appendix. Got to take it out. Hard to operate with the ship plunging about like this."

"When do you want to operate?"

"In ten minutes."

The captain looked at his watch. "In ten minutes we'll be on course ——," he said, "and we'll hold it for twenty minutes. Longer than that would involve too much risk."

"AND TROOPS WERE LANDED . . ."

"Good," said Doc.

Ten minutes later, the *Helena* stopped her infernal can-canning and settled down to be a lady. Doc went to work. Five of his allotted twenty minutes were still unused when he telephoned the bridge. "Finished," he said cheerfully. "Everything fine."

The *Helena* zigzagged again. Before we reached the base for which we were headed, Doc's patient was sunning himself on deck.

We were not long at base, and there was uneasiness aboard when the ship departed. Our orders were to proceed to the Solomons to rendezvous with a task force in the vicinity of Guadalcanal.

We were to make the trip alone, without escorting destroyers—without even one escorting destroyer—and those were still dangerous waters. True, the Japs' last hold on Guadalcanal had been crushed, but the Coral Sea was still disputed territory. We were a lonely ship on a lonely ocean, jittery and scared, with lookouts doubled and every man doing a bit of lookout duty on his own initiative. But the Japs were evidently busy elsewhere.

We joined our task force at Guadalcanal and once more swung into the routine of patrolling. Not until April 7 was that routine seriously interrupted.

Apparently the enemy's intelligence was working well that morning. We had steamed into Tulagi to refuel and were sitting there in Tulagi Harbor as placidly as ducks on a pond, when the airwaves spat a warning of enemy activity.

"A large number of enemy bombers flying toward

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

Tulagi,” read the message we took from the coding machine. It brought the gang in Radio One up with a jolt!

Uneasily we awaited Admiral Ainsworth’s orders, and eyed with misgivings the cramped and crowded area in which we were assembled. Tulagi Harbor was no place for an American task force if Jap bombers were streaking through the sky to plaster us. Even the Coral Sea was no picnic ground under such conditions.

The Coral Sea south of Guadalcanal, however, would undoubtedly be the scene of the battle. That was our stamping ground; that was where the Japs would swoop down on us if we were lucky enough to clear Tulagi Harbor in time.

But Admiral Ainsworth had other ideas, and his radioed orders left us stupidly staring at one another. We were not to steam south into the Coral Sea. We were going in precisely the opposite direction—up into the Slot!

Some of us wondered, privately at least, if the admiral knew what he was doing. Perhaps he was counting on the weather, which had been typically explosive for the past few days. But South Pacific weather was damned unreliable!

The admiral was indeed counting on the weather—but on Japanese mental rigidity as well. He showed then, as he showed later in the Battle of Kula Gulf, that he could outguess the Japs.

The Emperor’s bombers, 108 strong, did not look for us in the Slot because we were not supposed to be there. They swept serenely through the rain clouds beneath

“AND TROOPS WERE LANDED . . .”

which our ships were hiding, and used up their precious gasoline vainly searching for us in the Coral Sea. Nine times out of ten we should have steamed south from Tulagi into that very area. We should have done so this time, too, if led by a man with less imagination.

For hours the Japs hunted us. Then in disgust they turned back to Bougainville, unloading their bombs on Tulagi to be rid of them.

This time, when they passed overhead, we needed no rain clouds to afford protection. We knew from reports received by radio that the growling swarm of Jap hornets was stingless and impotent. We showed ourselves and gave them the old-fashioned Bronx cheer, thumbing our noses at Tojo's red-faced airmen. That day, April 7, was a red-letter day in Admiral Ainsworth's log.

But now for the *Helena* the campaign in the Solomons became a process of waiting. We were ordered to a base, and our port stay was long. American bombers struck repeatedly at New Georgia; naval task groups hurled tons of shells into enemy installations in the central and northern Solomons; but the *Helena* was idle. Plans were being shaped for the invasion of Munda, and we were to take part in that invasion.

It was to be no hit-and-run affair, this assault. Behind it were the best naval and military brains in the Pacific, working under Admiral Halsey. Collaborating with him were Lieutenant General Millard F. Harmon, commander of the Army forces in the South Pacific, and the combined staffs of both men. The plan, when drawn, was submitted to General MacArthur and received final ap-

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

proval in Washington from the chiefs of staff.

Some of this elaborate preparation, but far from all of it, we were aware of. Rear Admirals Richmond Kelly Turner and T. S. Wilkinson—the former had commanded amphibious operations in the assault on Guadalcanal—were to lead the amphibious forces. Rear Admiral George H. Fort was to command the fleets of landing craft which stormed the beaches. Major General Oscar W. Griswold had been assigned the command of Army forces ashore, and Vice Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch was to command the co-operating air forces.

It is important that these men be known and credit be given them, for the New Georgia campaign was an operation of tremendous difficulty and vital significance. The Japanese had built up New Georgia as the bastion of the Central Solomons. The Central Solomons were the outer defenses of Rabaul. We had to smash those defenses. They could not be hopped and left behind intact to menace our supply lines.

Meanwhile, the war elsewhere was mounting in fury. Allied troops on New Guinea had pushed beyond Buna in a drive through the jungles toward the Jap bases at Salamaua and Lae—jumping-off points for an assault upon New Britain. Far to the north, American troops had taken Attu. In North Africa, the Germans and Italians had been squeezed into their last-ditch stand on Cape Bon Peninsula and forced to surrender, and on the European continent British and American fliers were unloading bombs with increasing vigor on targets in Germany.

This was the picture, then, when the New Georgia

“AND TROOPS WERE LANDED . . .”

campaign blew the lid off the lull in the Solomons. We were a happy ship, but restless. The weeks in port had made us eager for action. Now in utmost secrecy, our destination still unrevealed to all but the department heads and those of us in Radio One who had decoded certain significant messages, we steamed northward to carry out our assignment.

The New Georgia campaign began about an hour before dawn, June 30, when American troops, equipped with the latest weapons for jungle fighting and attired in harlequin suits of camouflage, pushed ashore at Viru Harbor on the southern end of the island. The landing was unopposed. Simultaneously, other forces effected a landing on the island of Rendova, about five miles south of the main Jap base of Munda across the treacherous Munda Bar.

The Rendova invaders met with opposition, and the landing had to be accomplished in the face of machine-gun fire from the beach, while escorting warships were shelled by enemy guns at Munda. The destroyer *Gwin* was damaged during the operation.

The Jap garrison, however, was soon crushed; the machine-guns were silenced. Our engineers were soon setting up heavy guns, including 155-millimeter Long Toms, the muzzles of which, aimed at Munda, were belching shells a few hours later.

Before many more hours had passed, the Japs struck back. An enemy attack by bombers and torpedo planes cost us the 7700-ton transport *McCawley*, formerly the Grace Liner *Santa Barbara*, which was sunk by torpedoes

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

off Rendova. Little loss of life was reported. The Japs were driven off by American airmen, who struck viciously and chalked up a high score. Other American flyers, meanwhile, were methodically bombing Rabaul and Bougainville, as well as enemy bases in the Kula Gulf area, to pin down the Jap air force.

On Friday, July 2, Allied warships shelled enemy holdings on New Georgia, aided by bombers and dive bombers, while our forces at Viru Harbor and on Rendova consolidated their positions.

Early Saturday morning, in darkness, a Jap naval unit of three light cruisers and four destroyers steamed down from Bougainville and shelled Rendova until opposed by an American naval force of approximately equal strength. The Japs turned tail without a fight.

On Sunday, July 4, Allied ships shelled and occupied Vangunu while American airmen continued their relentless assault on enemy installations, and our artillery on Rendova maintained its pressure on Munda.

That night, shortly before midnight, a long gray line of Allied transports, cruisers and destroyers steamed into Kula Gulf along the now familiar sea route to the enemy’s New Georgia strongholds.

The *Helena* was one of those cruisers.

No moon silvered the sea. The sky was overcast and black as tar. Back home—if you discount the difference in time again—the folks were lighting Fourth-of-July rockets and listening to the din of firecrackers. We were expecting a different kind of din. Kula Gulf was still and dark as a grave, and aboard the *Helena* we were on edge, taut to an abnormal degree, attempting to quiet our

“AND TROOPS WERE LANDED . . .”

jumpy nerves by telling one another that we had done all this before without a hitch.

But tonight was different. Tonight was invasion night.

Held to a slower speed than usual by the transports, we ghosted on into the gulf, intently watching the deeper darkness of the island's peaks and awaiting the thunder of Jap shore guns. But it was our own guns that spoke first, after all. Once again the long line of ships belched a broadside, hurling tons of explosives into Enogai Inlet and Bairoko.

The Japs came to life then. Now along the shore their guns began to talk back. But we had the men to attend to such difficulties. The 6-inch weapons of our cruisers poured blast after blast into the enemy's gun positions, silencing their fire. Our destroyers darted back and forth, their lighter weapons seeking out the batteries which had been more cunningly placed. After half an hour, the only bursts of fire to light the brooding jungles of New Georgia were those caused by our own bursting shells.

But suddenly one of our ships, boiling along in line, burst into flames and exploded. The island itself must have trembled to the shock of that explosion. The sea did, and the *Helena* did. In a moment the gallant little ship—the new, 2100-ton destroyer *Strong*—was hopelessly ablaze and sinking. A prowling submarine had torpedoed her.

We on the *Helena* had no means of knowing the fate of her men, though we saw the destroyer *Gwin* break off the action to go to her aid. Later we learned that many had been saved. But war does not wait upon human feelings, and our job then was to cover the landing of troops

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

from the transports. They swarmed ashore at Rice Anchorage into what a Marine Corps photographer, Technical Sergeant Edward Adolphe of New York City, described as “the damnedest, blackest hole you ever saw—right in the jungle.” Three miles south lay their objective, Enogai Inlet. The landing itself was unopposed, except by jungle and festering swamp.

Back and forth, slowly, beat the *Helena* and her task force, covering the landings. The Jap batteries were silent. The little landing boats sped swiftly between transports and shore, in darkness so intense that only their phosphorescent wakes were visible.

Then it was over. From Admiral Ainsworth came the order to retire, and the long gray line of ships moved northward. An hour or so later we were out of the gulf, out of danger.

** CHAPTER FOURTEEN **

“Enemy Ships Sighted . . .”

JULY 5, 1943, is a date remembered well by *Helena* men. All that morning we steamed eastward from our mission in Kula Gulf, down through the Slot past the green hills of Santa Isabel, the tiny Russell Islands, Florida and Guadalcanal. It was wickedly hot. The sea was a mirror, and from the jungled slopes of the islands rose waves of heat that shimmered in the brassy sky. Even when the sun stopped climbing and began to descend, we wiped the sweat from our faces and longed for relief.

In the coding room that afternoon the hours dragged interminably. I went on watch at twelve. At two, with the worst of the run behind us, the *Helena* steamed in line south of San Cristobal, bound for a spot in the Coral Sea where she would rendezvous with a tanker to replenish her fuel. The heat was still with us.

You felt it seeping through the steel bulkheads, smothering the air to the deck as under a blanket. The men sat in their undershirts, listless, tired from the grind of the past twenty-four hours. But we were not doing too much grouching. Satisfaction showed in the occasional quick lift of sagging shoulders or the flash of a smile.

“We did a good job last night,” Vic Post said. “A hell of a good job.”

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

“You can say that again.”

We knew we had done a good job. The troops we had put ashore at Rice Anchorage would be on their way to Enogai Inlet even now. Soon they would be closing in on Munda, aided by others who had swarmed across the Munda Bar last night from Rendova Island, to land at Zanana. Despite the loss of the *Strong*, the expedition had been highly successful. It had been a dangerous operation, fraught with elements of potential disaster, yet none of the troopships entrusted to our care had suffered damage.

Now as the *Helena* boiled along, proud and satisfied, her radios buzzed with the usual routine—reconnaissance reports, weather reports, the hundred and one items necessary to keep a fighting ship informed and ready for action.

None of us knew, when I stepped from the radio shack shortly after two P.M. with a handful of messages to be decoded, that one of those dispatches was the opening note of a storm which would explode twelve hours later into the great Battle of Kula Gulf. It was like any other dispatch—a crackle of code plucked from the crowded ether and typed on regulation paper by a tired man in shirtsleeves. Even when decoded it was not too impressive. Something about enemy ships in the Shortlands. The Shortlands were far up the Slot, off the southern tip of Bougainville, miles from our position.

Twenty minutes later, however, the message came through again, this time tagged “urgent.” Those enemy ships were causing our reconnaissance pilots a lot of concern.

"ENEMY SHIPS SIGHTED . . ."

"It won't affect us," I remarked to Vic Post. "We couldn't possibly get back up there to intercept them now."

But I sensed action when I saw the look of concern on Captain Cecil's face as he read it. Watching him, I felt that old, old tingling of nerves. You can't explain that feeling. It is a tense bristling of mind as well as body, a porcupine lifting of quills, impossible to analyze.

We knew, of course, that the Japs would do their utmost to trump our New Georgia invasion. We knew that a force of enemy ships in the Shortlands could mean only one thing: the Tokyo Express was on the move again with troops and supplies for the Munda garrison. But it was not our concern this time. We were out of it.

Then swiftly the storm clouds gathered, as messages sped across South Pacific skies to marshal American forces. Through the maze of routine in the radio room flashed further "urgents" from the men who shape history. The storm was bigger than we had thought. Hundreds of miles separated the *Helena* from its core, yet the skies above us blackened, grew ominous, and we held our breaths. We no longer talked of last night's affair at Bairoko. We no longer felt the heat. We waited.

In the radio shack the men were maddeningly unaware of what was going on, because most of what they typed was in code, meaningless to them. Most of it was the same old routine. But the pounding of the typewriters was a fist beating ever more loudly at a shut door, and when at last the message came, I was standing impatiently behind the man who received it. As he typed it,

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

I knew from the heading what it was, and snatched it from his machine.

The message was for us, and it was an order from Admiral Halsey to the commander of our task force, Admiral Ainsworth. The message was an order to reverse course and return to Kula Gulf!

We were going in again!

I set my own course at top speed for the bridge, but stopped short. You don't barge in on the captain of a warship in your skivvies, no matter how unendurable the heat. I snatched my shirt and wriggled into it en route, keeping the code tape crushed in my hand so that the crew, if made curious by my haste, would not see the tape and do any guessing.

Captain Cecil stood looking across at the flagship, and when I handed him the message he nodded as though preoccupied. The flagship, of course, had received it too. The entire force was coming about, and with all boilers on the line at flank speed those big, beautiful, deadly ships, bristling with guns and mobbed with fighting men, thrust their jaws again at distant Kula Gulf.

As the flagship passed us close to port, I saw the admiral of the task force pacing his bridge. My fingers were still fumbling with the top button of my shirt, and I was pop-eyed. The admiral was magnificent in an undershirt!

The *Helena* throbbed sweetly as she ate through the sea to keep her appointment. In Captain Cecil's cabin I looked excitedly at the charts while he spoke of our chances. A big man, Captain Cecil. A kindly, lumbering man with a voice that rolled and soothed and was tonic

"ENEMY SHIPS SIGHTED . . ."

for jumpy nerves. He was anxious. We might not get there in time.

"But I think we'll make it," he said. "Yep. Guess we will. Looks like we're going to meet 'em about midnight."

He traced our course on the charts. "We've enough fuel," he thought aloud. "Looks like we'll make it. See that all heads of departments are notified immediately."

I went over the ship, rounding up the department heads and reading them the dispatch. They knew nothing of the drama in the coding room or the messages rushed to the bridge. They were relaxed, some of them sleeping, all of them tired from our job at Bairoko and Rice Anchorage. Now the ship came awake with almost comical quickness. There were quick conferences. The sleepy, satisfied *Helena* became magically, in a few minutes, the same beehive of fighting men she had so often been before.

With the shift of direction and sudden piling on of speed, the crew, too, had become aware that something was up. You heard comments while striding past lifelines crowded with quizzical seamen. You turned aside to avoid stepping on some who had been rolled from choice slumber-spots by the heel of the ship.

"What's up?"

"We're going in again!"

"Hey! We're going back up the Slot!"

The *Helena* was tense again, on tiptoe. You felt it on foc'sle and quarterdeck, throughout the entire ship. A giant fist was doubling up, knuckles whitening for combat. Turbines and men vibrated together.

I wondered, as we passed Guadalcanal with the sun

"THE FIGHTIN'EST SHIP"

setting redly into her 9000-foot peaks, how many more times, if ever, we should see that familiar shoreline again. We had hated the island once. For months it had been a background for violent actions in which the *Helena* had played a major role. No man had ever expressed a yearning to see Guadalcanal again. Now the hated island was a symbol of security, the most familiar and therefore the most profound symbol we possessed. We watched in silence as the ship steamed westward, past Savo, past the Russell Islands. From the junior officers' bunkroom came the familiar sound of Swede Hanson's phonograph, grinding out some of the jive records he had picked up in Australia.

The weather had roughened; the sky was overcast and dark. We wanted that. Darkness was a thing we had prayed for often on those moonlit nights in Kula Gulf! Now, with all information in hand and the entire ship informed that we were moving up the Slot to New Georgia again, there was time for a little relaxation.

It was seven P.M. Relieved of further duties, I went to my room and hit the sack for three hours, and read my Bible. "There are no atheists in foxholes," someone has said. There are none on warships. When you have seen what an enemy shell or torpedo can do, you are not reluctant to reach for comfort.

I read the Twenty-third and Ninety-first Psalms over and over. "Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night . . . A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand, but it shall not come nigh thee . . ." Those are reassuring words. I was still studying them when Jim Baird, in the adjoining room, rapped

"ENEMY SHIPS SIGHTED . . ."

on the bulkhead and called in his western drawl, "Get up, Chick! Time for GQ!"

"Yup," I answered. "All right."

When I went on deck, I saw men thumbing the worn pages of the little Bibles that many of them carry. Toughened old seadogs, veterans of many a battle and many a crap game, were unashamedly praying. Some listened with solemn concentration while others read aloud.

Afraid? Not if you strip the word of its too glib definition and search it for the courage and nobility that so often give it a fuller meaning. The *Helena* had never been afraid. And this was the usual pre-battle scene, though today I was more than usually aware of it.

By ten P.M. the order had been given to dog all doors and stand by. We went to our battle stations. In a total blackout now the ship rushed on through the night, following the broad, boiling wake of a cruiser ahead. In Radio One, all equipment was manned, all frequencies covered. An incredible amount of stuff poured in—information, battle plans, instructions. I fed it to Captain Cecil on the fighting bridge as we neared our destination.

At eleven, the supply officers furnished refreshments. There were apples, oranges, cups of steaming black coffee for the men, groups of whom were speculating on our luck. "We're gonna give 'em hell again tonight," someone said. It was hard to realize that many of these veteran boys, successful already in two difficult night engagements, were only a year removed from boot camp. But the *Helena* had always been a proud ship, flushed with confidence.

You thought back for the reason for this, and the

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

pageant that unrolled was brilliant and bloody. The Battle of Cape Esperance, the Battle of Guadalcanal, Munda, Vila, Enogai Inlet, Bairoko Harbor, Rice Anchorage. In that year-long struggle with the enemy in the Solomons, the *Helena* had slugged it out with every foe she encountered, and had sent more than her share of Jap warships to the bottom.

“We’re gonna give ’em hell tonight!” Sure we are. You know it even though you have tightened up again and are beginning to feel scared. That kind of fear is good for a man; it keeps him alert, shakes out the mental cobwebs. You’re scared because you have seen brave ships go down, and seen men swimming over their graves. You remember the *Wasp* and the *Hornet*, the *Juneau* and the *Strong*, the *Frisco* and the *Boise* and many, many others that have died or been damaged. But you wouldn’t turn back. Tokyo won’t be reached by turning back.

That night could not last forever, even with each of its hours drawn endlessly through the teeth of tension and the *Helena* racing at full power through the dark in the most dramatic and nerve-tingling run of her career. The Japs were due in. We had passed Visuvisu Point, and now from the navigating bridge came the telephoned report that we were turning into Kula Gulf.

The ship held its breath, as it had so often before. Kula Gulf was still Jap, still the Solomons’ meanest trap. Anything might happen. The men were quiet. Silence moved on cat’s feet over the entire ship, thickening, solidifying, until its effect was uncanny.

Then, over Radio One’s communication circuit came the voice of Lieutenant Russell Gash, reporting to Admi-

“ENEMY SHIPS SIGHTED . . .”

ral Ainsworth. He was calm and almost matter-of-fact as, on TBS, he called the flagship.

“Enemy sighted!”

The palms of my hands itched and I stood up. No one spoke. Men who had been holding their breath let it out in unison and the sound was a sigh of relief. The waiting was over.

Quiet orders issued over TBS as the formation changed course and closed range. The admiral asked each ship if she were ready, and the replies were prompt. We had been ready a long time.

Nothing less than complete readiness would have won a victory that night for United States forces, for the Japs were many and powerful. Their force included two of their newest and best heavy cruisers armed with 8-inch guns, two light cruisers, and a screen of destroyers. In all, between nine and eleven ships. Their assignment was apparently to reinforce their troops at Munda and Bai-roko Harbor and wipe out as many of our own troops as possible with a bombardment. Obviously they were also to patrol the gulf against further American attempts to invade it.

The weather was made to order for them, but it was also good for us, the night pitch black and gusty with the rain squalls which in the past had served our forces so well. Even in sheltered Kula Gulf the sea was rough and ugly.

The picture then is of a powerful enemy fleet steaming down through the Slot, around the northern tip of Kolombangara Island and into the rain and darkness of Kula Gulf, while our own force, outgunned and outnumbered,

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

sped westward to intercept them. The Japs arrived in Kula first. They were in the gulf and heading northward, apparently having made a sweep of the area, when contact was established off the Kolombangara shore north of the Jap base of Vila.

The enemy came on, unsuspecting, in a stretched-out battle line. Admiral Ainsworth’s force, changing course quickly, swung at right angles across the Japs’ route and “crossed the T.” Every ship in our undergunned group was then in position to hurl a broadside at the enemy, while the Japs, in single file, could fire only their forward batteries and even then were in danger of hitting their own ships.

Now over TBS, in rapid succession, came our orders from the flagship. “Prepare to attack! . . . Cruisers take the big ships; destroyers take their destroyers! . . . Stand by to fire!”

And at last, at 1:58 A.M., “*Commence firing!*”

** CHAPTER FIFTEEN **

The Last Battle

THE *Helena* reared back on her haunches to let go her Sunday punch, and every ship in the force loosed a broadside with her. It was a simultaneous blast that blew the gulf into a monstrous geyser of white spray and fire and seemed mighty enough to topple the neighboring islands into the cauldron. The Battle of Kula Gulf was on.

We had never fired like that before. The ship seemed to know that the show tonight was of special significance. A ship *can* know such a thing, of course. Ask her captain or any of her crew! And tonight you heard, somehow, the soft voice of Lieutenant Commander Duke, the *Helena's* first gunnery officer, saying patiently amid the thunder, "We must be good, very good, always. That way we'll be the fightingest ship in the fleet." He was there in spirit.

The Japs in one of their communiqués had accused the *Helena* of using "new secret weapons—6-inch machine-guns!" Now those "6-inch machine-guns" spoke with a bellow that shook the night apart and sent thunder racing on giant feet over the islands. All up and down the line our ships were hammering the enemy.

In the radio shack there was the quickening of pulses that is sometimes called fear. There was a steeling of

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

minds against the thought that some Jap shell might come screaming through the steel plates by which we were so solidly hemmed in. But you know what such thoughts can do to you, how quickly they can shake a man, crack him, and you have shut them out so often that it now becomes automatic—muscular, not mental—and the men were outwardly calm. No one spoke. There was only the continuous, deafening crash of the guns, while the ship leaped like a shingle in heavy seas.

Just thirty seconds after the first defiant bellow, a report reached us from the bridge. “One down!” To the men topside, the death of that Jap was an unforgettable spectacle. She was a light cruiser following the destroyers which were leading the enemy line, and when smothered under an avalanche of 6-inch shells, she was torn apart as though made of paper, exploding with a blinding burst of light that shot a thousand feet into the sky. While we swung to targets behind and ahead of her, she exploded again and again, and chunks of her superstructure went shrieking through the smoke of battle.

Our fire was continuous. Other ships in our force loosed their shells in salvos, pausing briefly for breath, but for nine minutes not a heartbeat of silence interrupted the bellowing of the *Helena’s* guns, and the Japs were torn apart as though caught in a hurricane.

“Two down! There goes another!” came the word from the bridge. The speaker might have been watching workmen fell trees in a forest. But to the men on deck it was an awesome sight. The guns of our force had halted the enemy in his tracks and thrown him into confusion. He fired back wildly. Some of the shells from

THE LAST BATTLE

Jap ships at the end of the line probably fell on Jap ships at the head of it. Nearly all the shells that screamed at us fell short, hurling up columns of water.

The *Helena* had sunk one cruiser. Our second victim, a destroyer, had sped from the destructive fire of our secondary batteries and was blown up as she fled. A third Jap exploded as though by spontaneous combustion when our tornado of fire fell across her. In nine minutes the *Helena's* veteran gun crews had fired more than 1000 rounds, an all-time record, and the devastation was unbelievable.

Now our batteries, both main and secondary, concentrated on two more of the Emperor's ships, mauling them over the gulf while the Japs, in desperation, sent their destroyers darting through the inferno to launch torpedoes.

Suddenly, in the radio room, I was flung from my chair by a louder roar. At 2:07 the *Helena* had caught a Jap torpedo. In a heap on the deck of the shack I looked about in total bewilderment, unable to believe we had been hit. I reached for my headphones; they had been jolted to the deck. The ship had leaped into the air and dropped again and now was trembling—a curious, fluttering tremble, almost dainty, like that of a young girl frightened in the dark.

But her guns were still blazing. The destroyer which had rushed in to plant the fish in us was ablaze and sinking.

I picked myself up slowly, and so did the others, piled atop of one another in a fantastic heap under books and papers. The *Helena's* guns at last ceased firing and the

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

silence was a smothering thing that made breathing difficult. In that whole room there was but one sound: the soft and stealthy settling of dust disturbed by the torpedo’s impact.

I had located the headphones and put them back on, and now returned to my post, stiff-legged and strange as a man learning to walk again after a shock. The others went back to their posts, too. No one had spoken. The radio was silent. TBS had nothing for us. There was only the terrible trembling of the ship, and now for the first time a sensation of being afraid. Not of the Japs, but of the unknown.

We were getting over that, becoming calm—waiting, I think, for someone to speak and break the spell—when the second and third torpedoes hit. They struck as one, so close together that the sound was a single shuddering blast. The explosion slammed us to the deck again in the same grotesque heap. But no one cried out.

The lights died. The shock had smashed our generators and blown out the communication circuits. For a moment we struggled in darkness to extricate ourselves. Then the battle lights came on, a dim, weird glow through which the shaken dust swam redly in space.

The *Helena* was done for. I knew it. We all knew it. The second explosion had cleared my mind and I saw things very clearly. But it had to be official before orders could be issued, and so I went out to be sure.

She was listing badly, her back broken. There was water over the quarterdeck, midships. Men stood at their stations, restlessly at attention, awaiting the command to abandon ship. The ship herself, trembling in torment,

THE LAST BATTLE

struggled to warn us time was short.

Returning to the radio room I found the men there on their feet, strapping on money belts and fastening life jackets. They were bruised, shaken, their eyes glazed, but none needed assistance. We went about destroying important papers and publications. When I ordered the bulkheads undogged, officers and men filed out as they had a thousand times before when going off watch. Tom Sims, the blue-eyed kid from Alabama, grinned at me and said something. I've always wondered what he said. It was the last time I ever saw him.

It was then 2:20, just thirteen minutes after the first torpedo hit. The "abandon ship" order had been given when I stepped on deck, but there was no panic, almost no noise. And now, strangely, there seemed less need for haste.

Incredible things happen aboard a ship of war when she goes down. Aboard the *Helena*, twelve hundred men were thinking of themselves, their shipmates, and their ship. Some of what happened was only ridiculous. Much of it was brave.

A youngster named Brandt, from New Jersey, thought first of a Jap rifle he had bought on the beach. Nothing else mattered but that rifle, which was down in the armory with his name on it. He tumbled from his station on the searchlight platform and tried to rush down there after it, but was too late.

Another boy—one of the ship's poker and domino experts—tightened his money belt. The belt contained his winnings, and rumor insists that he had more than thirty thousand dollars in his possession when he went to GQ

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

that night. No one will ever know. He was not seen again.

Chief Signalman Flood, whose flags were the pride of the fleet, was at the captain’s side on the bridge. But there were no flags now. Chief Flood steadily and methodically flashed a message of distress with a blinker light, hoping vainly to attract attention to his ship’s dire predicament. With our radio gone, the blinker was our only hope.

There on the bridge was Rebel Sandridge, too, hurrying from the skipper’s cabin with an armful of confidential equipment which, under Captain Cecil’s direction, he threw over the side. He appeared to be having the time of his life.

Jelly Belly, our 300-pound watertender, lumbered up and down the oily deck in a methodical search for life jackets. Two were already fastened about him, but he sought a third. Two, he insisted, would not hold him up. But he was wrong. Two of them did hold him up, and he drifted serenely away into the darkness.

The forward engine room had been hit. All in it were killed. But in the after engine room, the crew picked itself up after the first torpedo hit and stood by until the second and third. Aware then that the ship was sinking and time was running out for them, they attempted to depart from their dark underworld through an escape hatch, but when the hatch was opened, tons of water rushed in upon them.

They managed, somehow, to shut it. But now their situation was grave. Water had filled the ship as high as the third deck, and but one means of escape remained—through a scuttle. In single file and in good order, the engine room gang climbed the ladder; and with the ship trembling in her torment, it was akin to climbing the

THE LAST BATTLE

inside walls of a factory chimney while a hurricane raged without.

They climbed. There was no panic. In pitch darkness they reached the main deck. By then the ship had settled so deeply that they had only to walk off the deck into Kula Gulf and swim to the rafts which had been thrown overside.

In the sick bay, Doctor Bean, Lieutenant John K. Wheaton, the ship's chaplain, and eight others were on duty at their battle stations. One man was killed by the explosion of the first torpedo. By the time the *Helena* received her second and third blows, the others were swimming about in water deep enough to drown them. Someone opened an escape hatch and they climbed out on deck just as the order was given to abandon ship.

Strange things happen . . .

I stood on deck, uncertain which way to turn. That warning tremble in the ship had ceased, and there seemed to be no great hurry. Men picked their way carefully through the piles of ammunition cans strewn over the deck. Others lined the rail, watching the battle in the distance. Some had gone overside, and I saw hundreds of heads in the sea—small white blurs bobbing about in the black night, seemingly suspended in space. It was hard to think of them as men. It was harder still to realize that the *Helena* was no longer in action. Beyond us the Battle of Kula Gulf raged to its climax, and the horizon was garlanded with looping streamers of fire. "Like Brooklyn Bridge," I thought.

The ship was sinking midships, her bow and stern high, belly sagging, but there was no hurry. I stood at

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

the rail, gazing at the eerie display of fireworks over there across the gulf, and the echoing thunder of the guns made me feel better about the *Helena*. We were giving the Japs a beating.

“There’s time enough,” I thought, “to go to your room for the papers you want.” They were valuable papers—to me, at any rate—and there was all the time in the world now. The ship herself had said so. She was not trembling. “Go ahead,” she said.

After eleven months on the *Helena*, I had no fear of the dark. I could have found my way over her with my eyes taped. But the deck was cluttered. Those piles of ammunition cans, the oil, the water—I had to go slowly, with a hand half lifted in front of me. On the starboard side of the foc’sle I came upon a man sitting cross-legged on the deck, and I said, “Well, it’s all over.” He didn’t know it was all over. He was dead.

My room was at the bottom of the ladder, forward of number two turret. That is, it had been. I reached for the ladder and caught myself just in time, lurched backward and stood shaking, cold and frightened again. Another step and I should have fallen into the sea, headlong.

Because nothing was there now. The *Helena’s* bow had been blown apart just where my room had been. The torpedo had gone through the room. “This is how you feel,” I thought, “when you come home one night and find only a heap of ashes where the house had stood.” And I thought of the times we had sat in that room, Ozzie Koerner and Sam Hollingsworth and Vic Post and Red Cochrane and Warren Boles and Dave La Hue and

THE LAST BATTLE

the rest of us, discussing what might happen if ever a torpedo came through the gray steel bulkheads. Well, a torpedo had come through them. And now I lost that foolish feeling of security. "Get off the ship!" I thought frantically. "Get off now!"

She was really going down fast. On the foc'sle some of the men were trying to cut away the big life rafts, and I ran to them and tried to help. Boats Linton was in charge of the group. He supervised the job and we got the rafts into the water while the sea swirled in an ugly, oily whirlpool over the quarterdeck. Boats was one of the last to quit the ship.

It was time to go. Before leaving the radio room I had snatched up my life jacket and officer's cap, and now, automatically, I jerked the cap hard on my head and leaped. It was not a tremendous jump. The water was but five feet or so below the deck. And it was warm, almost pleasant. But my weight carried me deep into it, and when my mouth filled with the warm water it was not clean and salt, but foul with oil. A man jumped on top of me with heavy shoes, and his heels bit deep below the edge of my cap. The pain was unbearable. For a moment I blacked out.

Around the bow, where I had jumped, the suction of the sinking ship was greatest. It gripped and clung, exerting a steady downward pull. Some of us fought it, throwing our arms about, but that was not good. There was too much oil. With every gasping breath you drew the sickening stuff into your stomach, and up it came with a rush. As we struck out to one of the life rafts, some of the men were terribly ill. We helped as many as we could. Others,

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

exhausted by the agony of vomiting, went under. Not many, but a few.

On the raft we had more trouble. The suction pulled us, raft and all, toward the *Helena's* sinking hull. We found a line holding us fast to the ship, and one of the men cut it—cut it with a sheath knife he had made himself, months ago—but still the suction held us. When thrown from the deck, the raft had turned in mid air and was now upside down, the paddles lashed beneath it. In that heaving sea of oil, no man could stay under long enough to release them. And so, as senior officer, I organized a hand-paddling detail—“Push, paddle, kick! Push, paddle, kick!”—which took us slowly away from the danger. We were just in time.

We saw the *Helena* go. It was a sad, an unbelievably sad moment. What does one say? Not what you might expect. Nothing smart or slick. Just the so-called “corny” phrases you have heard time and again in the movies or read in fiction.

“She was a grand ship . . .”

“She sure was swell . . .”

“So long, Baby . . .”

A queen to the last, she went down gracefully and quickly.

** CHAPTER SIXTEEN **

The Sea

THERE were hundreds of us somewhere in that crowded, night-black sea, clinging to rafts or bits of debris, floating in life belts or swimming aimlessly in the dark. Our little group clung to the overturned raft and looked at the place where the *Helena* had vanished, and felt alone, deserted, and it was the end of all the world.

And then the sea began bubbling, boiling, above the grave of our ship. We watched it, wide-eyed and alarmed. Up from the depths lurched a strange, awesome shape, a metal island all wet and gleaming, the sea pouring from its sides as it emerged. It rolled as though shaking its head; it shuddered and shook the water from its brow, and at last, sure of itself, settled down to a gentle swaying. Fifteen feet high, this gleaming thing loomed above the sea in the dark, while the sea rocked it and the waves from its resurrection rolled out to bring us its message.

It was the *Helena's* bow, her white "50" proudly standing out against the wet gray steel. Down there on the floor of Kula Gulf, under forty or more fathoms, our ship had broken in two. The strakes or keel holding her together midships had let go. This much of her—a ship's spirit proudly encased in steel and bravely holding aloft her identifying numerals—had returned to comfort us.

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

We were not alone.

Those of us who still clung to the raft gazed at her in silence. Here was something no man could fail to feel, whatever his faith. It was not a question of religion. I have talked to some of those men since, to be sure of that. By recalling lessons in ship design and compartmentation, one can explain readily why she came up. But there in the darkness of Kula Gulf, surrounded by death and loneliness and fear, such material explanations were inadequate. The *Helena* had risen in her death agonies to be sure that we were not left alone to face our fate.

It was with a sense of gratitude and humiliation that we pushed and paddled our raft toward the risen remains of the ship. Other rafts, too, sought security in the *Helena’s* presence, and soon there were several of us.

We could hope now. When the battle ended, the *Helena* would be missed. Our destroyers would surely come seeking her. And when that happened, this fifteen-foot monument of comforting steel would be more easily spotted than a scattered fleet of life rafts.

Ringed about her, we made ourselves as comfortable as possible, some in the water, some on the rafts. Jungle Jim Baird, the senior officer present, took charge, but there was little to do except wait. It was 2:30 A.M., the sea fairly calm, the water warm, the oil thick and slippery and strangling. But we did not curse the oil too bitterly. Without it there might have been sharks.

The battle continued. American and Jap ships hurled shells across the darkness, and Jap batteries on Kolombangara thundered intermittently as the hours passed. I was not conscious of fear. For four hours I clung to a

THE SEA

short piece of rope which hung over the side of the raft, and was not aware of exhaustion or even of any great expenditure of effort. But when at last I tried to let go the rope, my fingers had stiffened so rigidly about it that they had to be pried loose.

The battle ended. Admiral Ainsworth's force had wiped out all but two of the Japs, and those two had stealthily slipped away into some dark part of the gulf. Our ships retired. There was silence and a strange peace. Out beyond the gulf, the flagship asked for a roll call.

We learned later the story of that roll call. One by one the ships' names were read over TBS and checked off. But there was silence when the *Helena's* radio name in that engagement was spoken. Again and again the call went out. Then at last the truth had to be faced. In a heavy voice the TBS officer said, "I'm sorry to report, sir—the *Helena* doesn't answer."

"The *Helena* doesn't answer." Twelve times in the triumphant aftermath of major engagements, the *Helena* had promptly answered the roll. This time—silence.

On orders from the admiral, a pair of our destroyers, the *Radford* and the *Nicholas*, slipped back into the gulf, feeling their way through the dark. On the alert for the two Jap ships thought to have escaped destruction, they circled the area on a sweep. Before long one of them sighted the bow of the *Helena*.

What happened then was not the fault of the destroyer men. It was no one's fault. The object which had been sighted could not be the *Helena*; it was too small. Since nothing else American was in the gulf, it had to be Jap.

One destroyer opened fire.

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

We saw her when she did. Huddled about the *Helena’s* bow, crowded on the lashed rafts or hanging wearily in the water, we had been unaware of any movement in the darkness until the destroyer’s guns opened up on us. Then the night was ripped by flame. Shells screamed into the sea all about us.

Some of us groaned. Others swore. No man’s eyes were sharp enough to identify the ship, and most of us thought she was Jap.

We knew what that meant, if she steamed up to us. After what our Navy had done to the Emperor’s fleet, there would be no prisoners taken tonight. Machine-guns on that swift black shadow would be trained on us. A few of us might escape by swimming under water, but only a few would have the strength. And even they would be able to swim only a short distance—perhaps to Kolombangara. Ten thousand Japs occupied Kolombangara.

A little while ago, despite weariness and the fatalistic feeling that perhaps, after all, we were not going to be rescued, the men had been amazingly cheerful. They had swapped names, told where they came from, helped one another to fight off the increasing weariness. There had been a sharp, witty exchange of gags and double-talk. Now the night was a deafening hell and the sea all about us was tortured with explosions. Shells crashed into the steel monument about which we were clustered. Our little world was being hammered apart.

There was no panic, even then. One or two men let go and struck out into the darkness; the rest stared steadily at the black hulk of the destroyer. Was she a Jap? Or

THE SEA

was she one of ours, confused by the floating remains of the *Helena*?

What took place then was a kind of town meeting of the sea—a polling of opinions, orderly and without undue haste despite the destruction that felt for us from the ship's batteries. There was calm discussion of the several possibilities. If we signaled, and she was American, would she believe us? If Jap, would she strafe us?

Jungle Jim Baird called for a vote. Should we signal or not? The "ayes" won it. One man, one only, had a flashlight and miraculously it was in working order. From hand to hand it went until it reached the fingers of Vic Post. Vic was raised to the shoulders of two sturdy men on a lurching raft, and the light blinked its message. "Five-Zero. Help!" And then we waited.

There are no new ways of saying how long a minute can be. It was a long time, a very long time, because if our luck had run out, the answer to our signal would be not the small red flashes for which we prayed, but almost certain death in the roar of the destroyer's guns—men against a wall of sea, facing a firing squad of Jap 4-7s.

We waited, and the answer was a series of quick red blinks in the dark. "Friendly ship—come alongside." And then we cheered.

But there was still danger. In the dark of the gulf the two escaped Jap ships had lain in hiding, awaiting an opportune time to slip out and run for safety. These two ships, giving up the fight, had undoubtedly crept close to shore and sought security in silence. Our task force knew of their existence but not where they were. Kula

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

Gulf covers a lot of territory, and the night was dark.

No doubt there were some Jap chuckles when American shells menaced the lives of the *Helena's* survivors. No doubt Jap heads came together, scheming. Now as our two destroyers steamed up and stopped dead in the water to take us aboard, the sea about the *Helena's* bow was suddenly alive with torpedoes. Those Jap ships—and probably some lurking enemy submarines also—were seeking revenge.

It was a ticklish business. The Japs had only to point their tubes at stationary targets. Our destroyers could not linger long in such a perilous area; they could but rush in, snatch a few of us from the sea and speed out again, with all hands alert for those tell-tale white feathers of phosphorus in the wake of enemy fish. Time and again they raced in and out, while the *Helena's* men scrambled up ladders or clung to trailing lines and were pulled aboard.

Then one of the Japs, recklessly bold, showed herself in a dash for freedom. She was spotted by the destroyers. From the *Radford's* bridge came the voice of her skipper, shouting through a megaphone to the *Helena* men in the water.

“Enemy sighted! We’ll be back for you! Hang on—we’ll be back!”

The little destroyers were not gone long. In ten or fifteen minutes they had closed on the fleeing Jap, which was also a destroyer, and had sunk her. From our “grandstand seats” in the oily mess of Kula Gulf, we watched the brief skirmish and marveled at the marksmanship of our destroyers’ gunners, and cheered with as much en-

THE SEA

thusiasm as we could muster when the Jap burst into flames. We cheered with even more enthusiasm when the destroyers resumed their rescue work.

The *Radford* lowered boats now, two of them. One was apparently the captain's gig, the other a motor whaleboat. While those of us who still clung to our rafts about the bow of the *Helena* scrambled to catch the lines and cargo nets thrown over the ships' sides, these two boats and others from the *Nicholas* sped into the darkness to round up other rafts which had drifted away, and to rescue swimming men who had found nothing to cling to.

A few moments later the second Jap showed herself. It happened as my turn came, and I was dangling on a line midway between the sea and the deck of the destroyer which had slowed in passing to take me aboard. The skipper shouted a warning, and some of the men on the lines below me let go, dropping back into the sea. From the bridge flashed a signal to the ship's own boats to stand clear—she was going after the enemy again.

Suddenly the gunners on the can's deck found the enemy in range and hurled a blistering challenge at her! The ship reared in the water like a kicking mule, and I swung there against her throbbing plates, helpless, battered, hanging on with God knows what. But as the ship leaped forward at top speed to pursue the fleeing Jap, I was hauled aboard.

The first man I saw when stumbling across the deck was Rebel Sandridge again. When last I had seen him, he had been helping Captain Cecil to dispose of confidential equipment on the *Helena*. Now, still having the

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

time of his life, he was galloping stark naked across the destroyer’s hot steel deck, black with oil but grinning like a Cheshire cat and yelling like a banshee.

I went to the wardroom, where others from the *Helena* had found haven before me. There we sat, aware now of what we had gone through. Aware, too, of the awful noise of the destroyer’s guns, as she and her sister ship engaged the Jap. It was almost more than we could endure.

But it ended, as everything else had. There was a brief, violent conflict in the dark, our two American cans slug-ging it out in a running battle with the Jap. The Jap was a cruiser, big game for two little cans. But the torpedoes that streaked through the gulf were American now, and our destroyers’ gun crews were superb. The cruiser was sunk as she fled.

When those two Japs settled to the floor of Kula Gulf, the battle was over. There were no more of the enemy. The Emperor had lost an estimated nine to eleven ships, four of them—two cruisers and two destroyers—credited to the *Helena*. Our side had lost the *Helena*.

Of our twelve hundred officers and men, some 750 had been rescued by the *Radford* and the *Nicholas*. Of the remaining 450, some had died aboard ship when the torpedoes struck, and some had perished in the oil-polluted waters when the ship went down. The rest were scattered in Kula Gulf, awaiting rescue which now, with dawn, seemed remote. For with the coming of daylight and the threat of enemy air attack, the *Radford* and the *Nicholas* were forced to retire.

But there was hope. The destroyers had left their

THE SEA

motor whaleboats behind, with men to operate them. Now, as dawn began to push back the frightening darkness and the complexion of the sea changed to a dirty, greasy yellow in which men clung to crowded rafts and bits of wreckage, the boats worked in among them and the destroyers' men hauled them aboard.

** CHAPTER SEVENTEEN **

The Rafts

JULY 6, 1943. That was a desolate dawn. Between New Georgia and Kolombangara, the waters of Kula Gulf were a sprawling waste of oil, littered with debris. The rising sun produced strange rainbow colors in that oily sea. It fingered the eyes of half-blinded survivors. It gleamed on the upthrust bow of the *Helena*.

One of the *Radford's* boats, loaded to the gunwales with humanity, beat back and forth with a pair of rafts in tow. The rafts, too, were crowded. But there was still room for a few more, and weary hands hauled survivors from the gulf as fast as they were found. One of the men thus saved was Captain Cecil, the *Helena's* skipper.

Out of the dawn rumbled a boat from the *Nicholas*, and a whaleboat which some of the *Helena* men had found drifting amid the debris. The little boats drew together now. Men clambered from one to another, to make the loads more even and reduce the danger of capsizing. Then the forlorn flotilla turned away in search of a landing.

Kolombangara was closest, but that island was known to be Jap infested. On New Georgia, American troops were battling the enemy, and the natives there had shown themselves to be friendly. Captain Cecil ordered a course

THE RAFTS

laid for New Georgia.

The men themselves were too sick to care. Many were half blind and deaf from the oil. All were exhausted—too tired even to scoop up the salt water and try to make themselves recognizable. Such clothes as they still wore were black and stinking.

The little fleet chugged on. Midway across the gulf, one of the rafts was found to contain some cigarettes and dry matches, and later some gallon cans of fruit were discovered floating in the oily water. The cans were slashed open and the fruit was fed to the men who seemed to need it most. It only made them vomit.

An hour later a plane was sighted. The sun glittered redly on its wing insignia, and it was thought to be Jap. "If he strafes us, go over the side and get clear of the boats," Captain Cecil ordered. "Come back when he's gone." But the plane did not strafe them. It was American. After circling them and dipping its wings in recognition, it sped away.

Throughout the morning other planes were sighted. They, too, flew over the survivors and went their way. A solitary plane of a design the men did not recognize—probably it was Jap—was seen to linger in the sky for a time above the still visible bow of the *Helena*, but it came no closer.

At dusk the little flotilla neared the northwestern tip of New Georgia, miles above the Jap settlement of Enogai Inlet. The rugged shore was forbidding; the shallow water concealed a submerged forest of spiney coral.

Were there Japs in the jungle? The *Helena's* men did not know. Finally a few of them went ashore to investi-

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

gate. They found no sign of the enemy and signaled to that effect, and the rest of the tiny fleet, reassured, crept toward shore. Exhausted men clambered from boats and rafts and waded to the beach over beds of coral so wickedly sharp that the barefoot ones could not endure the agony—they had to wait until those with shoes could stumble ashore and toss the shoes back out to them.

On the beach, Captain Cecil called the survivors together and briefly told them what he thought of their chances.

“We don’t know how long we may be here. We have no way of knowing how close the Japs may be. It’s a nasty spot. All of us will have to keep our heads every minute, and be everlastingly alert. Don’t smoke on the beach. Keep together as much as possible—don’t under any circumstances go exploring.” The captain was very tired, and as sick as any of the men, but he was still skipper of a fighting ship and these were still *Helena* men.

They set up a camp at the jungle’s edge. All available food was pooled; each man’s ration was to be two crackers, a cup of water and a small bit of canned meat per day. Even that would not last long. Coconuts, of course, were to be had for the climbing. But the jungle was not inviting—some of the men who went into it for a smoke discovered its dangers very quickly and came running out again, terrified. “My God!” one of them shouted. “The place is alive with bats as big as eagles!” The giant bats had hurled themselves at the glowing cigarettes and inflicted a nasty gash on one boy’s face.

The little group slept that night under the trees at the

THE RAFTS

edge of the jungle, wondering if the planes which had roared above them in the afternoon would relay the news of their plight, and if anything would be done—could be done—to rescue them. Among themselves the men discussed the possibility of following the island's shore south to Enogai Inlet, in search of American troops. But it was a long way to Enogai, and their feet were swollen now. Some of the men were in agony from the coral cuts, and many were still half blind from oil.

In the morning, watchers were posted, in the feeble hope that there might be something to watch for. And there was. About an hour after "breakfast," two American destroyers nosed into Kula Gulf.

The men shouted, waving their arms. Those who could still walk ran up and down the shore, signaling with their shirts. Chief Signalman Flood flashed the blinker light which had not left his possession since his frantic efforts to obtain help for the sinking *Helena*.

The destroyers went on by.

It was the end of the world. The men threw themselves down on the beach and stared hopelessly out to sea. And then, miraculously, the two ships returned, still searching, and in answer to Chief Flood's blinker, the leading destroyer blinked back.

It was the U.S.S. *Gwin* which nosed in to shore to pick up Captain Cecil and his group—the same little *Gwin* which had been battered by a Jap shell during the Rendova landing; the same *Gwin* which had paused, during the landing of troops at Rice Anchorage, to pick up survivors from the torpedoed *Strong*. Once more her wardroom had been converted into a sick bay, and the

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

men of her medical department stood ready now to serve these survivors of the *Helena*.

Not all the *Helena's* survivors were in the group led by Captain Cecil, or were picked up by the *Radford* and the *Nicholas*. Many others, when their ship went down, had swum away from the scene in an effort to get out of the oil. The *Radford* and the *Nicholas* had not time to seek them out. The Kula Gulf currents and their own efforts to reach drifting rafts or floating debris had separated them. When dawn came they were still paddling about in widely scattered groups.

Warren Boles was in one of these groups. Soon after leaping into the water, he had turned to see the ship's chaplain, Lieutenant John Wheaton, stumbling dazedly over the side. The Padre had come up from the sick bay, where the explosion of the first torpedo had slammed him against a bulkhead and badly hurt him. Boles swam to his assistance and held him up in the oily water, supporting him until a raft came near. Now, with daylight revealing the rugged peaks of nearby Kolombangara and New Georgia, the Padre lay in the raft, surrounded by men who clung to its sides. There had been more men in the little group a while ago, but exhaustion and the smothering oil had reduced their number.

They saw now what they had not seen before in the dark—the bow of the *Helena* protruding from the sea, half a mile away. They decided to swim to it, and did so, pushing the raft ahead of them. On the way they found a crate of tomato juice in gallon cans, serenely floating amid the wreckage. With sheath knives they slashed the

THE RAFTS

cans open. Then they came upon a floating crate of potatoes. The potatoes they ate raw.

The ship's bow was already well populated when they reached it. Some of the men who had paddled or swum to it soon after it emerged from the sea were still there. Their rescue turn had not come before the *Radford* and the *Nicholas* were forced to depart. Jack Chew was one of them. Sam Hollingsworth was another. Sam had spent most of his time rounding up men in the water, collecting them in groups.

Now some of the men perched on the *Helena's* bow like darkies on a rail fence, warming and drying themselves in the sunlight, while others, too tired to pull themselves up, merely clung to it for support. There was no exchange of small talk. These men had seen too many of their comrades disappear. Their own chance of rescue seemed remote.

They held a conference. Boles and some of the others, after fortifying themselves with tomato juice and raw potatoes, decided to try for Kolombangara. There at least they would have a chance for survival, provided they could keep out of the hands of the Japs. They quit the ship's bow and struck out through the oil, but while still only part way to the island they heard a plane and paused to look up.

It was an American B-24, winging out of the sun from the east. They watched it circle above the ship's bow while its crew dropped waterproofed packages to the survivors. The packages were large and there were three of them. Rafts, probably. Or food. Boles and his group held another conference. Some were still in favor of

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

going on to Kolombangara—and they went. The others turned about and wearily swam back to the *Helena’s* bow.

Two of the packages dropped by the B-24 contained small rafts, complete with equipment for inflating them. What the third contained, the survivors will never know. It sank before they could reach it. Even the two rafts, however, were gifts from heaven. Wounded men were placed in them and made reasonably comfortable. Other men clung to them—thirty or forty men to each.

The hours passed. Anxiously the *Helena* men watched the sea and the sky, certain now that they were to be rescued. But the sky remained a blistering blue, empty of planes, and the gulf was still a vast, sluggish oil slick as far as half-blinded eyes could see. As the afternoon wore on, the group held another town meeting to determine what action should be taken.

They decided to try for Kolombangara, all of them, hoping to time the trip so as to arrive in darkness. In the dark they might stand at least a fighting chance of hiding out from the Japs.

It was hard going. The blazing sunlight acted as a naked flame against eyes already tortured by oil. The heat sapped the last of their strength. Many were ill. All were hungry and thirsty. Some, along the way, let go their grip on the flimsy rafts and disappeared before their mates could aid them.

To add to their difficulties, a strong northward current caught their little flotilla as they neared the Kolombangara shore, and they had not the strength to push the laden rafts through it. The shore ghosted past, maddeningly close but not close enough. The rafts circled the

THE RAFTS

northern tip of the island and drifted on by. All hope of a landing on Kolombangara was gone. The current was carrying them, instead, toward the enemy stronghold of Bougainville.

And the oil followed them, like some evil sea-monster determined to haunt their voyage. Pulled along by the same freak suction that gripped the rafts, it clung as thickly as ever, with nowhere a patch of clean sea in which the men might wash the stinking stuff from their bodies and bathe their blackened eyes. Every movement of the sea flung the foul slime over them to smear them anew.

It was about noon the next day when these men under Jack Chew's command were hailed by a swimmer. They looked the newcomer over carefully as he approached, for Jap ships as well as the *Helena* had been sunk in the Battle of Kula Gulf, and Jap survivors, too, were still adrift in its oily waters. But this man was no Jap. He was Major Bernard T. Kelly, Jr., commanding officer of the *Helena's* Marine detachment. Apparently he had been swimming since the ship went down—nearly thirty hours.

Major Kelly had not been swimming thirty hours, but he had done his share. After the *Helena* sank, he and five other Marines had paddled about for fifteen hours, and then had found an empty raft. On this they drifted with the current until the major, falling asleep from exhaustion, lost his grip and slipped into the water. He was alone when he awoke. A pair of sharks, small but persistent, nudged his legs. He shouted, received no reply, and was heading for shore as best he could against the

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

current when Jack Chew’s flotilla came by.

A little while later the Marines’ raft was sighted, adding five more men and still another tiny craft to the fleet. Now the hours and the sea-miles slid past in monotonous succession, and the only diversion was provided by Jap pilots.

The Jap planes were Zeros. Spotting the fleet, they roared down on it, circled it, and carefully looked it over. Roaring in again just over the surface of the sea, they opened fire with their machine-guns.

“But they were not trying to strafe us,” reports one of the men. “The bastards deliberately missed us, then thumbed their nasty little noses and grinned at us. Only a Jap can grin like that, showing his teeth clear back to his tonsils. They knew, damn them, that as soon as the oil stopped following us, the sharks would take over—and if the sharks didn’t get us, the Japs on Vella Lavella would. Because by now we were drifting straight toward Vella Lavella and there wasn’t much we could do to prevent it.”

That night more men disappeared. They had hung on as long as they were able, and in the dark they fell asleep, lost their grip on the rafts, and vanished. Others kept awake by recalling bits of songs or old jokes—anything to keep them from growing drowsy. Said one man belligerently: “Anyway, damn it, this ought to be worth a trip back to the States!” And during the night the group became two groups, drawn apart by the current. The smaller, numbering about sixty men, made a landing on Vella Lavella before dawn, wading ashore over coral spines that slashed their feet to ribbons.

THE RAFTS

They were discovered at dawn by friendly natives who brought them coconut milk. Then in low, swampy ground near the island's edge they did their best, despite sickness and utter exhaustion, to set up a camp. Later they moved into a native village of sorts, and moved their wounded into a house vacated by friendly Chinese.

** CHAPTER EIGHTEEN **

The Rescue

THE remainder of Jack Chew's little fleet drifted on. Most of the men had lost all track of time by now, but it was about noon of July 8 and they had been in the sea since the early morning of July 6. The current had carried them to within three miles of the Vella Lavella shore and was bearing them past the island. A few of the stronger men decided to swim for it and seek help for their companions.

Jack Chew was in this group. So were Marine Major Kelly and Warren Boles. Boles, a strong swimmer, was caught in the treacherous cross-currents near shore and became separated from the rest.

"The last man I spoke to on the way in," he said later, "was Jack Chew. Then I kept on going, with an eye on a likely looking strip of shore where the coral might not be too bad. There seemed to be a village of some sort among the trees.

"The current was too strong, though. It swept me along the shore and when I finally got my feet down and could wade, I was a mile or so from where I'd meant to be. I walked up the beach a little distance and was too tired to go farther. Found a coconut, opened it, and

THE RESCUE

drank the milk. Then stretched out under a tree and fell asleep.

"It was still daylight when I awoke. Hoping Jack Chew and the others had made the island safely, I started down the beach again, but without shoes it was hard going; the beach was coral sand, wickedly sharp, and my feet bled. It seemed best to swim out again to where I could get a bearing on the native settlement I'd seen on the way in.

"That's what I did—went back into the sea and swam along until I could wade ashore at the settlement. But the place was abandoned. The natives had cleared out of their coastal villages and moved inland, we learned later, because the Japs shelled their villages for gunnery practice.

"I slept that night in the village, hungry as hell but reluctant to do any exploring in the dark. In the morning I heard footsteps and put my head out through the bush under which I was lying. It was a native, and I hailed him. For a minute or two we stood staring at each other, while I waited for him to make up his mind. Then he approached and we jabbered at each other until at last, by grunts and some idiotic finger-talk, I convinced him I was not an enemy. He then led me down the beach to where the other *Helena* men had set up a camp."

The group was intact when Boles joined it. Jack Chew and the other swimmers—most of them—had reached shore safely the day before and had persuaded some natives to go out and help the men still on the rafts. At first the natives were reluctant. Finally they agreed, with reservations. Armed with long, sharp knives, they looked

"THE FIGHTIN'EST SHIP"

at each man carefully before condescending to assist him. One man—slightly built Shorty Carleson, a boatswain's mate—aroused their suspicions to an almost fatal degree, but his shipmates intervened in time. Very carefully the natives washed the mask of yellow oil from Shorty's face and examined him. Only then were they convinced.

Now there were two groups of *Helena* survivors on Vella Lavella, separated by thick jungle and miles of impassable shore line. The smaller group, first to land, occupied a native village near Paraso. They were fed and rested, and makeshift clothes were found for them. Pharmacist's Mate J. G. Layton, of Remington, Texas, attended the wounded, bandaging coral cuts and treating the men for shock. Three had suffered leg fractures. Layton doctored the wounds with sulfa powder, improvised splints and bandages, and so expertly did his job that all but one of his patients recovered.

Senior officer of the larger group, located near Lambu Lambu, was Jack Chew. Under him were Boles and Major Kelly, eight or ten junior officers and about 100 enlisted men. Ahead of them was a future that held they knew not what, for though the natives were eager to help and a small group of friendly Chinese had come out of hiding in the hills to join them, the island was still Jap, and Jap patrols were everywhere.

"There was a village nearby," Boles reports, "but it was too open there, too likely to attract attention with so many of us, and so a day after the group was organized we set up a camp in the jungle. The natives built us a huge lean-to, for protection against the rain. Then we went to work on the problem of just how to let the Navy

THE RESCUE

know what had happened to us.”

How these men did let the Navy know what had happened to them is not, at the moment, a matter which the Navy wants discussed. But having “worked on the problem,” the *Helena's* officers and men settled down to the business of trying to keep alive.

For food they had to depend largely on the natives, who supplied them with taro, tapioca roots, green bananas, yams and pawpaws. A careful search of the wreckage along the shore added emergency rations and five 25-pound cans of coffee to their larder. Twice a day the cooks carefully hacked open four small cans of meat, emptied them into a pot, added the vegetables provided by the natives, and produced a stew which they called “root soup.”

“It was good stew, too,” reports Sam Hollingsworth. “Especially after we had been there long enough to get rid of the oil in our systems. For a time, though, everything we ate tasted like more of Kula Gulf.”

To reduce the danger of discovery by Japs, Major Kelly organized a guard of Marines and sailors and maintained a careful watch, day and night, around the camp.

The days went by. Jap scouting parties were sighted. Jap planes appeared often above the island, circling slowly as the alert little men inside them searched the jungle for signs of activity. It became increasingly apparent that the Japs knew of the survivors' presence.

Early one morning a Marine guard on the beach, armed with an antique rifle provided by the natives, came swiftly to attention and focused his gaze on two shad-

"THE FIGHTIN'EST SHIP"

owed objects moving shoreward a few hundred yards distant. He stared until he was sure, then sped back to report.

"Landing barges!" he gasped. "Loaded with Japs!"

The word was passed. Tired men scrambled reluctantly to their feet and gathered up their few possessions. The *Helena* men prepared to retire deeper into the hills, where they might have some chance of holding out for a time.

But as the Japs leaped from their barges and stumbled ashore, a flight of American planes appeared as though by divine command and roared down over them. Machine guns chattered. The Japs dived for the safety of the jungle. The barges, raked by the planes' fire, burned at the water's edge.

Jack Chew, Warren Boles and Major Kelly talked it over. "We'll have to move," Chew decided. "They know we're here, and will turn the island inside out to find us. We'll have to go back into the hills."

Bearded, bedraggled men pulled themselves together and began the march. But the following night, at midnight, a chosen few were back again on the beach, anxiously watching the sea.

It was very quiet. The jungle at their backs was dark and still; the sea was placid in the moonlight; the Lambu Lambu River, nearby, sliding into the sea through a wall of natural camouflage, made no sound.

A little before one o'clock, Warren Boles moved away from the others and waded into the sea, pushing a native pau-pau ahead of him. With a native guide, he clambered into the clumsy craft and paddled out through the shal-

THE RESCUE

low water—a dangerous job in the dark for a man unfamiliar with his surroundings, but Boles was the strongest swimmer and therefore the logical choice.

He paddled out a considerable distance and waited. Two o'clock came and went. Anxiously Boles looked into the darkness. At last he saw what he was searching for—two dim shapes moving along parallel with the Vella Lavella shore, about three miles out.

With a flashlight Boles blinked a signal.

Half an hour later, a pair of Higgins boats emerged from the nearer darkness—Higgins boats from the two destroyers lying to off the island. Boles abandoned his native canoe and clambered into one of them. It was commanded by a young ensign, Rollo H. Nuckles, of the destroyer-transport *Dent*. Out there with the *Dent* was another old converted four-piper, the *Waters*. With an escort of four modern destroyers, the *Taylor*, the *Maury*, the *Gridley* and the *Ellet*—the entire expedition commanded by Captain Francis X. McInerney, of Cheyenne, Wyoming—the rescue ships had completed a bold and difficult nighttime run from Tulagi, to snatch the *Helena's* survivors from under the very nose of the enemy.

Already the Higgins boats had crept up to the Vella Lavella shore at Paraso, where the smaller group of *Helena* men had established a camp. Now, with these men safely aboard the destroyers, the rescue boats moved shoreward again. With Boles showing the way, they inched through the underwater coral forest and up against the current of Lambu Lambu stream. Soon they were nosing in to what remained of a native wharf, while

“THE FIGHTIN’EST SHIP”

out from the Vella Lavella jungle, as from the grim shadows of a Doré painting, emerged a long line of men awaiting rescue.

One by one these men limped across the dilapidated dock and clambered into the boats. Some had to be helped in. Their clothes were in rags. For shoes they wore rice sacks or strips of life belts. Some wore bits of apparel supplied by the natives. But they were happy, almost too happy to believe in the miracle of their rescue. For Vella Lavella was deep inside Jap-controlled waters, and surrounded by reefs and shoals as deadly as any in the Solomons—suicide waters for which no charts existed. For the Navy’s readiness to risk a fleet of ships in such an undertaking, and for the destroyer men who had eagerly accepted the risk, the survivors of the *Helena* were devoutly grateful.

On the crumbling little dock, Jack Chew kept count as the men climbed into the Higgins boats. “One hundred one . . . one hundred two . . .”

He looked up. Marine Major Kelly was handing a rifle to one of a little group of natives standing by. Then Kelly, too, stepped aboard, and Jack Chew concluded the count. “One hundred and three.”

He shook hands gravely with the native leaders, thanked them for their help and kindness, and stepped into the last of the rescue boats.

“That’s all,” he said. “That’s the lot of us.”

A few hours later, after a dramatic return trip down the Slot, the rescued men were put ashore at Tulagi, where their shipmates, saved from Kula Gulf by the *Radford* and the *Nicholas*, and from New Georgia by the

THE RESCUE

Gwin, had also been landed. Some cherished comrades were missing—Bandmaster Simpson, Lieutenant Swede Hanson, young Tom Sims, Commander Buerkle—these and many others, and the *Helena* herself, would not again answer the roll call. But the soul of a warship is in the men who fight on her, and of the twelve hundred men who had served aboard the fightingest ship in the Navy through her thirteen engagements, more than a thousand had been saved.

They would fight again. Many of them are fighting again. The *Helena*—the Happy *Helena*—lives on.

Log of the U.S.S. Helena

- September 18, 1939. Commissioned at New York Navy Yard.
- December 7, 1941. Damaged by Jap torpedo plane at Pearl Harbor. Shot down 6 (possibly 7) enemy planes.
- September 15, 1942. Rescued survivors of the U.S.S. *Wasp*.
- October 11-12, 1942. Participated in the Battle of Cape Esperance and was credited with sinking or helping to sink 4 enemy ships.
- November 4, 1942. Bombarded Jap forces on Guadalcanal.
- November 12, 1942. Repelled mass assault by Jap torpedo planes, and shot down 4.
- November 12-13, 1942. Participated in the Battle of Guadalcanal and destroyed or helped to destroy 5 enemy ships. Led crippled *San Francisco* to safety.
- January 4, 1943. Bombarded Munda. Repelled dive-bombing attack by Jap planes.
- January 23, 1943. Bombarded enemy installations in Kula Gulf area. Repelled enemy torpedo plane attack.
- May 13, 1943. Bombarded Kolombangara, Enogai Inlet, Bairoko Harbor. Repelled air attack.

LOG OF THE U.S.S. *HELENA*

- July 5, 1943. Convoyed troops to Rice Anchorage. Bombar-
barded enemy installations in Kula Gulf and covered
landing operations.
- July 6-7, 1943. Participated in Battle of Kula Gulf and
was sunk by enemy torpedoes after destroying or
helping to destroy 4 enemy ships.
- July 8, 1943. Captain Charles P. Cecil and others rescued
from New Georgia.
- July 16, 1943. Lieutenant Commander John L. Chew
and others rescued from Vella Lavella.

The Helena's Skippers

Captain Max B. DeMott, USN, Jamestown, Rhode Island.

Captain (later Rear Admiral) Robert H. English, USN, Washington, D. C.

Commander Gerald D. Linke, USN, Plainfield, New Jersey (Acting Commanding Officer).

Captain (now Rear Admiral) Oliver M. Read, USN, Yemassee, South Carolina.

Captain Gilbert C. Hoover, USN, Bristol, Rhode Island.

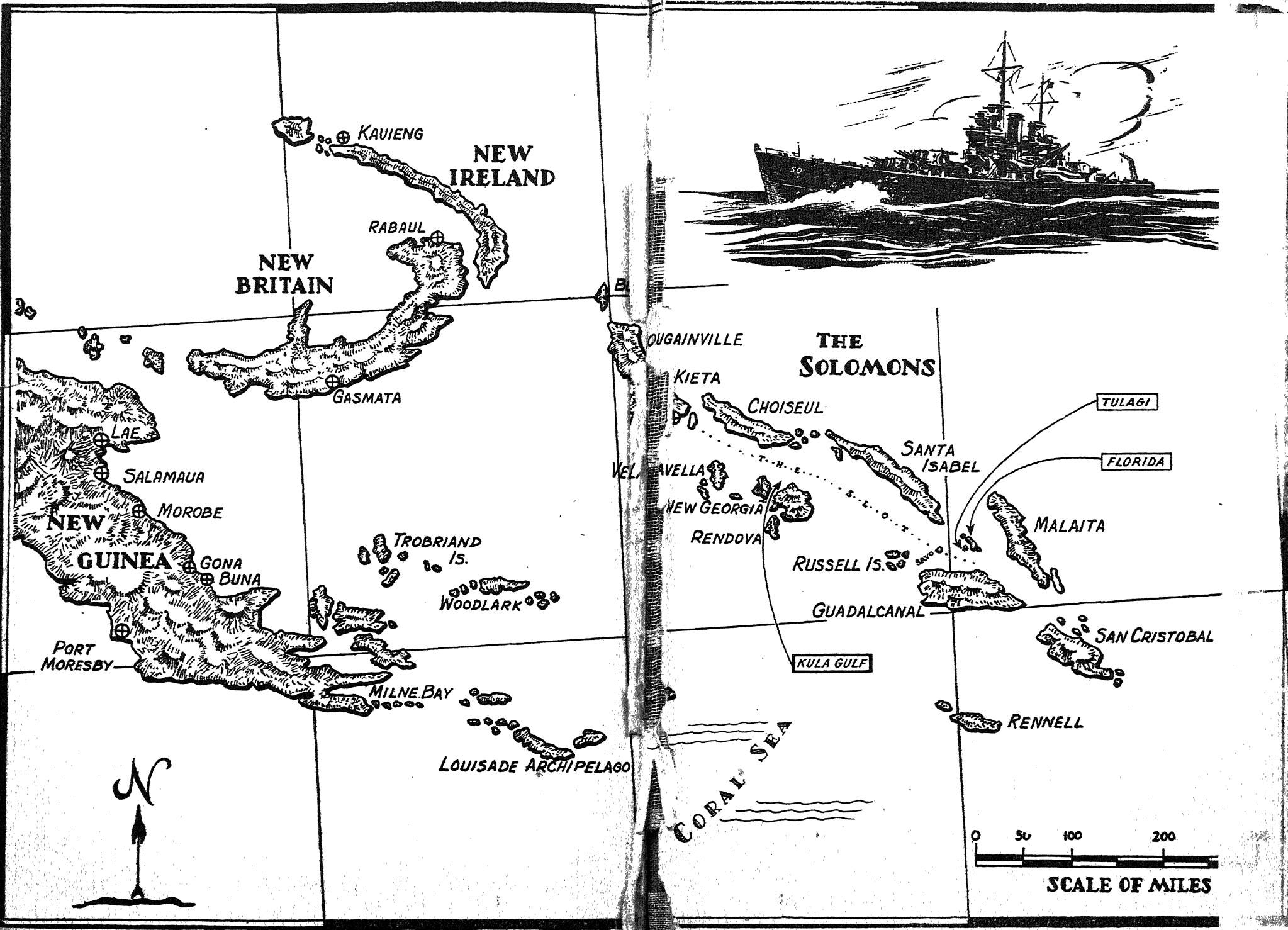
Captain Charles P. Cecil, USN, Flat Rock, North Carolina.

OUR NAVY, ever conservative, calls her "the ~~fightin~~ est man-o'-war that ever scoured the seas." The men who manned her battle stations from Guadalcanal to Kula Gulf had another ~~and more affectionate~~ name for her. They called her "The Happy Helena" and loved every battle-scarred inch of her from the proud "50" on her bow to the blistered war paint on her stern.

She fought in the Battle of Cape Esperance. She led the crippled *San Francisco* to safety through the blazing fury of the Battle of Guadalcanal. As a valiant member of the most famous task force in the South Pacific, she took part in thirteen dramatic operations. Legendary names — Lunga Point, Kokumbona, Vila, Munda, Kolombangara, Enogai Inlet and Bairoko Harbor — appear time and again in the long and brilliant record of her achievements, and the Japanese propagandists wilingly referred to her guns as "a new secret weapon."

When she went down, fighting to the last in Kula Gulf, thirteen enemy ships had felt the fury of her thunder and her name had become a legend.

This is her story, the complete record of the cruiser *Helena* and her men, told by her radio officer



KAVIENG
NEW IRELAND

RABAUL
NEW BRITAIN

LAE
SALAMAUA
MOROBE
NEW GUINEA
GONA
BUNA
PORT MORESBY

TROBRIAND IS.
WOODLARK

MILNE BAY
LOUISADE ARCHIPELAGO

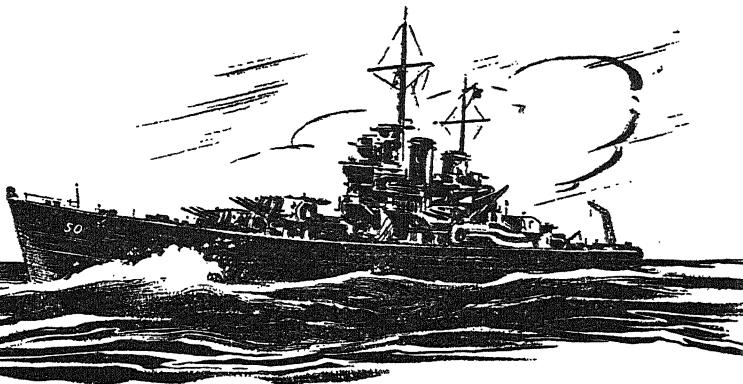
DOUGAINVILLE
THE SOLOMONS

KIETA
CHOISEUL
VELAVELLA
NEW GEORGIA
RENDOVA
RUSSELL IS.

SANTA ISABEL
MALAITA
GUADALCANAL

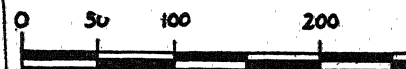
SAN CRISTOBAL
RENNELL

CORAL SEA



TULAGI
FLORIDA

KULA GULF



SCALE OF MILES



UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY



134 205

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY