

# A Night to Remember

The Rescue of the USS HELENA Survivors  
By Rear Admiral Benjamin Katz, USN, Ret. (USNA '26)

It was minutes before 2:00 am on a dark night in July 1943 off the enemy held coast of Vella LaVella in the Solomon Islands, about 250 miles north of Guadalcanal. We were a rescue unit to pick up survivors from the cruiser HELENA and were waiting for a pre-arranged signal from the shore to let us know that the survivors were ready to be rescued.

The HELENA had been torpedoed and sunk a week earlier in a night engagement with Japanese naval forces. Many of her crew were rescued that night by two of our destroyers, the NICHOLAS and RADFORD.

An Australian Coast Watcher learned that about 150 officers and men of the HELENA had made their way to the island of Vella LaVe11a and had landed there at two separate points. He reported this to Vice Admiral R.K. Turner, Commander Naval Forces on Guadalcanal who ordered a rescue operation for the night of July 15th.

Captain Francis X McInerney, USN, (USNA '21), Comdesron 21 was placed in overall command of the operation. Captain Thomas J. Ryan, USN, (USNA '21), Comdesron 12 with four destroyers under his command and Commander John D. Sweeney, USN, my friend and classmate, (USNA '26), Comtransdiv 12 with two destroyer transports formed the rescue group. Captain McInerney was stationed to the north with four destroyers, in the Slot, and two motor torpedo boats were placed to the west, in Gizo Strait, to intercept any Japanese forces that might appear. I had command of the destroyer TAYLOR, Captain Ryan's flagship for this operation.

We departed on our mission after dark, from Guadalcanal, to avoid detection by the Japanese and steamed through waters never previously traversed by a United States man-of-war. We were to arrive off the designated rendezvous by 2:00 am and wait for the prescribed signal by flashing light from the Coast Watcher at that time. If contact were not made promptly, the rescue unit was left little discretion about waiting, as we had to leave the area to be within air cover from Guadalcanal by daylight. The decision was further complicated as the tempo of operations had greatly increased and the opportunities for another rescue attempt could not be predicted.

So we were hoping and praying that our mission would be successful.

We arrived at what we thought was the right rendezvous point about 1:30 am, and the TAYLOR moved slowly toward the shore, using both depth finding equipment and hand lead to obtain the depth of water. The three other destroyers and the destroyer transports remained offshore, patrolling the area.

The TAYLOR continued to the beach and the hour of 2: 00 was getting nearer and nearer. The moment we had been waiting for was about to arrive. Would the Coast Watcher be there? Would he make the prescribed signal? Would we accomplish our mission? Would we get out of the area before being spotted by Japanese planes which had been snooping near us?

Almost simultaneously at 2:00 am, the TAYLOR got a sounding of 5 fathoms by the hand lead and the Coast Watcher flashed his signal from the shore. Our worries about making contact were over! The TAYLOR backed off and Commander Sweeney with his APD's felt his way to the beach.

The first group of survivors was picked up quickly and the Coast Watcher guided Commander Sweeney to the point where the second group had assembled. 160 survivors were rescued, all in good condition.

We started our return to Guadalcanal at maximum speed, with the destroyers formed in a circular screen around the transports. For ships that had a practical maximum speed of 27 knots, the APD's were doing a nice 30 knots.

Daybreak found us well on our way home, a happy group to have succeeded in our mission, the survivors safely on board, and no harm done to any of the ships.

The sunrise that morning was beautiful.

Note: This was one of several missions in which I took part with my friends Frank McInerney, Tom Ryan, and John Sweeney. On a visit to Admiral W.F. Halsey, Commander South Pacific Forces, he told me that if I were to keep company with the above mentioned gentlemen; I would have to change my name, and he said "I officially change it to O'Katz".