


A PROMISE

Oil-soaked survivors of the USS *Helena* congregate on board the destroyer *Nicholas*. Meanwhile, hundreds of the ill-fated cruiser's other survivors still afloat in Kula Gulf faced an uncertain fate.



The loss of the cruiser *Helena* was a demoralizing blow to the U.S. Navy. But the daring rescue of her surviving sailors gave the ship's story an uplifting ending.

BY MIKE STANKOVICH

The heavy rumble of naval gunfire continued intermittently throughout the hellish morning. As the sky grew lighter, the sea had become less crowded with drifting clusters of men desperate for rescue. Determined to save all of them, the two destroyers—their decks packed with hundreds of oil-coated men—stayed to the last possible moment. Finally, at sunrise and under enemy fire, they pulled out. At some point during the long, grueling early hours of 6 July 1943, a shouted promise was made to the men treading water: The destroyers would “be back” for them.

Central Solomons Battleground

The lull in offensive action in the Solomon Islands following the capture of Guadalcanal had ended. Late June and early July 1943 found U.S. amphibious forces assaulting areas of the Japanese-held central islands, including New Georgia's Rice Anchorage. Supporting Marine Raiders and soldiers ashore was a U.S. Navy task group (TG 36.1) built around three powerful light cruisers of Cruiser Division Nine—the USS *Honolulu* (CL-48), *St. Louis* (CL-49), and

almost constantly at sea, expecting combat. The time was spent patrolling the Solomon Sea to keep the ships close to New Georgia Sound—“the Slot”—a long, narrow body of water dividing the roughly east-west string of islands comprising the Solomons. It was down the Slot that the periodic nighttime “Tokyo Express” (mainly destroyers with their deadly “Long Lance” torpedoes) would make sorties to reinforce and resupply Japanese troops scattered on islands of the chain. TG 36.1 had slipped into Tulagi Harbor twice, on 3 and 4 July, just long enough to refuel the cruisers once and the destroyers twice. When they sortied from Tulagi on Independence Day, it was with orders to head west to create some fireworks with shore bombardment work.

In the enshrouding nighttime darkness of 4–5 July, the warships entered the watery cul-de-sac of Kula Gulf from the Slot. They were soon pounding the Japanese airstrip at Vila on the southern tip of Kolombangara Island with rapid fire from their five- and six-inch batteries. The cruiser column, with destroyers ahead and trailing, made the sharp left turn near the bottom of Kula Gulf and within a few minutes

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Helena (CL-50)—and screened by a revolving cast of Squadron 21 destroyers.

It had been a very tense, demanding week for the ships operating as a quick-reaction force out of Segond Channel, Espiritu Santo. Since departing their New Hebrides anchorage on the afternoon of 28 June, they had been

was sending high-capacity rounds into the enemy anchorage at Bairoko on New Georgia. One of the lead destroyers, the USS *Strong* (DD-467), was torpedoed and sunk, but most of her men were saved. TG 36.1 then headed toward Tulagi.

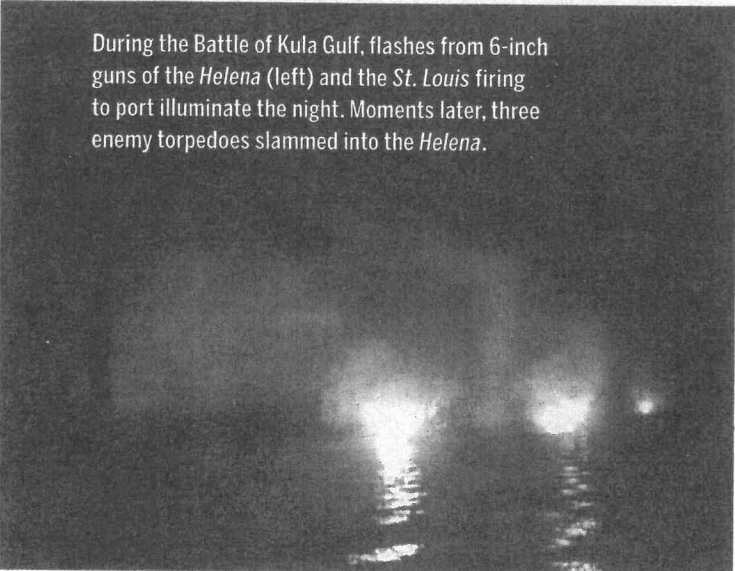
Once there, a survivor-laden destroyer entered port while the remaining five warships continued

steaming for the Coral Sea and more patrolling. However, a midafternoon dispatch had them reversing course to intercept a "probable" Tokyo Express run into Kula Gulf. A couple of hours after sunset, two destroyers, the USS *Jenkins* (DD-447) and *Radford* (DD-446), joined their sisters, the *Nicholas* (DD-449) and *O'Bannon* (DD-450), in the screen protecting the cruisers.

Missing Cruiser in Kula Gulf

Steaming at 29 knots up the Slot, TG 36.1 was off northern New Georgia at midnight. At 0137 on 6 July, under a moonless and cloudy sky, the first of several surface radar contacts was made on some ships exiting Kula Gulf. Battle

During the Battle of Kula Gulf, flashes from 6-inch guns of the *Helena* (left) and the *St. Louis* firing to port illuminate the night. Moments later, three enemy torpedoes slammed into the *Helena*.



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Formation "A"—a column of ships with destroyers leading and trailing the cruisers—was ordered by the officer in tactical command, Rear Admiral Walden Ainsworth in the *Honolulu*. Just shy of 0200, the line of U.S. warships commenced firing on Japanese targets leaving Kula Gulf. In the middle of the cruiser line, the muzzle flashes of the *Helena*'s 6-inch rifles were extraordinarily bright aiming points for the enemy (the cruiser had expended her flashless powder).

Five minutes after opening fire, the *Helena* was struck by torpedoes. Following at 1,000 yards, the *St. Louis* had to turn to the right to avoid her. The *Helena* slowed to a stop as the sea fight swirled past her shattered hulk. Ripped open by a trio of Long Lances, the cruiser sank slowly enough to allow her men to scramble overboard. But they struggled to swim in the heavy, clinging fuel oil that gushed from the *Helena*'s ruptured hull and rose to the water's surface. The few life rafts cut adrift quickly were occupied by oil-slimy men with other sailors clutching the attached lifelines, all hoping for U.S. warships to return and retrieve them.

About an hour after the *Helena* was hit, Admiral Ainsworth ordered the *Radford* to make a radar sweep for enemy ships in Kula Gulf. As the destroyer commenced her search,

the *Honolulu*, north of the gulf, vainly tried to contact the missing *Helena* by signal blinker. Later, during a second sweep of the gulf, the *Radford* bathed a radar contact in a searchlight beam from 3,100 yards—it was the raked bow of a broken ship. At 0332, *Radford* observers identified the number "50" on the drifting bow and the search for survivors began. The *Nicholas* was ordered to assist and reached the survivor area moments before the *Radford*. Both destroyers lowered volunteer-crewed whaleboats and commenced rescue operations.

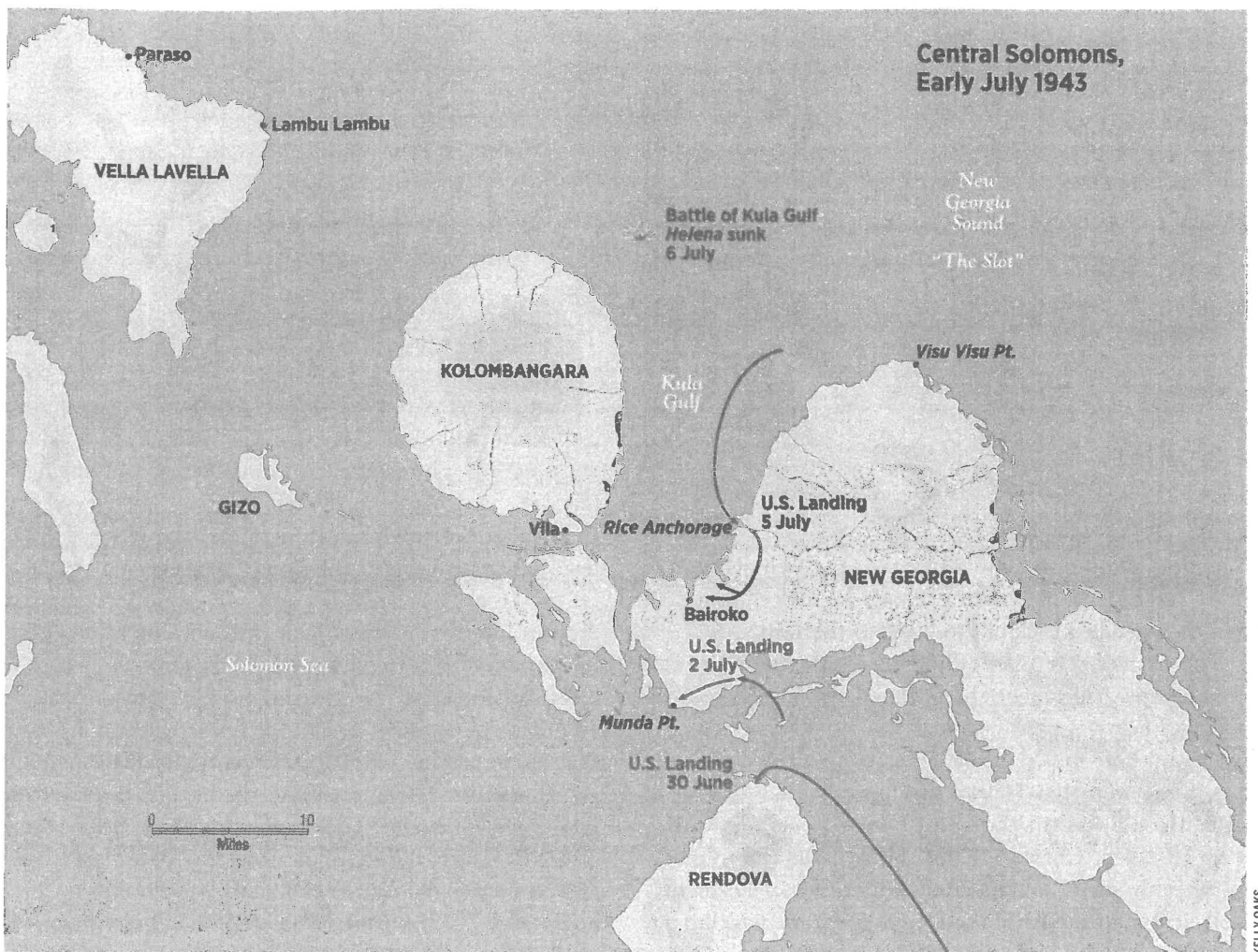
Ordeal of the Survivors

The task group, less the *Nicholas* and *Radford*, departed for Tulagi at 0430; time was precious and dawn (with the inevitable marauding enemy aircraft) was just over two hours away. Obviously, the longer the destroyers could remain in the area, the more men they could snatch from the sea and the Japanese, but the drifting survivor field was right where the enemy warships were. Thus, that night's battle action likely was not over. Both destroyers made numerous radar contacts, all presumed hostile, over the following hours. Time and again they quickly had to get under way, leave the vast survivor field, and charge off to attack an enemy ship or ships. They fired their 5-inch main batteries; they fired torpedoes; they dodged torpedoes. And after each engagement, they doggedly returned to pull men from the sea.

The survivors thrashed about in the black, choking oil, most held afloat only by their bulky kapok life vests. For the majority, the struggle was mercifully short, thanks to their rescuers. The dauntless destroyermen worked furiously, helping sailors climb up the oil-slippery cargo nets draped over the ships' rails as multiple reports of approaching Japanese warships deluged their skippers. The intermittent sniping continued between the destroyers and various seaborne enemies. There were near misses but no damage to the U.S. ships. Ultimately, with sunrise only minutes away, the destroyers were forced to leave the area.

During the start-and-stop fighting, some men were left clinging to the destroyers' rope nets when the ships' engine rooms went to full power. While some of them had climbed high enough to escape the rush of bow-wave water and eventually were able to clamber aboard, others were washed back into the sea. One of the latter was popular Commander Elmer Charles Buerkle, the *Helena*'s executive officer. Buerkle, one of the few commissioning officers who had remained on board the cruiser, had flected up from assistant engineering officer, and was known for the fairness, even temperament, and hardy laugh that brought him respect from all. When he fell back into the sea he was without a life jacket; the dedicated officer then drifted into oblivion.

With their decks packed with hundreds of survivors, the *Nicholas* and *Radford* headed toward Tulagi. Between them,



he destroyers had wrested 745 men from fate's fickle grasp. Yet there remained fully one-third of the *Helena's* complement still adrift in the dangerous waters of the Slot.

The destroyermen departed with heavy hearts, but they resolved to return for the many men left behind, including even of their own boatmen. They knew what might await their brothers-in-arms. By mid-1943 any U.S. serviceman involved in Pacific combat understood—through reports, personal observation, or simple scuttlebutt—that their intractable and brutal Japanese foes could be expected to cruelly abuse, torture, and even kill their captives. The *Helena* had been a very well-known, popular, and hard-fighting ship of the South Pacific Force, and it was imperative that her men be recovered. Consequently, the Navy pulled out all stops to extricate the remaining survivors, and in doing so made a resounding statement.

There were two groups of survivors hoping for a ship to return for them. A large cluster of men gravitated to the floating bow of the sunken cruiser but eventually left it behind after a passing Navy bomber dropped some inflatable rubber rafts. That group was led by Lieutenant Commander John L. "Jack" Chew, the *Helena's* combat information center officer and assistant gunnery officer. They were com-

pletely at the mercy of wind and current, drifting westward with the oil and debris field.

Commanded by the cruiser's skipper, Captain Charles P. Cecil, a smaller group of 81 survivors, with the seven destroyer boatmen on board three motor whaleboats, purposefully were making their way east toward New Georgia. Later that day, they made landfall on the north shore of the island near Visu Visu Point. Well after dawn the next morning, they were retrieved by two destroyers. The USS *Gwin* (DD-433) and *Woodworth* (DD-460) had been dispatched in a daring two-ship dash up the Slot to search for survivors. With all the rescued on board the *Gwin*, and the whaleboats burned, the two destroyers high-tailed it to Guadalcanal, where the survivors were transferred to a waiting transport.

Stranded on Vella Lavella

That left Lieutenant Commander Chew's group, which became more strung out with the slow drift toward Japanese-occupied Vella Lavella Island, northwest of Kolombangara, and became ever smaller as exhausted men floated away during the following two long days and nights. On the morning of 8 July, Chew and two others decided to swim for the

During a large group of survivors' weeklong stay on Vella Lavella, Lieutenant Commander John Chew kept the sailors and Marines busy with a routine of exercise and cleaning their jungle campsite.



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

island; the rest stuck with the rafts and paddled in that direction. During the late afternoon, the swimmers were picked up by local natives in a canoe who took them ashore and then paddled back out to bring in the rafts.

The natives, who spoke Pidgin English that Christian missionaries had taught them, hated the Japanese, murderers of many of their people. They led all the men they brought ashore into the hills for safety. By the end of the day, there were 104 *Helena* survivors, including several in bad condition, in the small jungle camp where they were all taken. Chew soon got things organized to maintain health, safety, and naval discipline. Major Bernard T. Kelly, the commander of the *Helena's* Marine detachment, organized a police and security force with his five enlisted Marines and a few recruited sailors. Food was scarce for everyone, but the locals shared their meager resources with the survivors.

Other survivors were farther west, around the bend of the coast, but contact between the groups was limited only to messages. A missionary on the island made radio contact with an Australian coastwatcher. It was not very long before command decisions were being made.

On 14 July, two destroyer transports (APDs) of Transport Division 12 were ordered on standby in Tulagi Harbor. The next morning, they departed for Guadalcanal's Koli Point to rendezvous with four destroyers of Captain Thomas J. Ryan's Destroyer Squadron (DesRon) 12. The six ships, TG 31.2, got under way in the early afternoon, headed northwest. The USS *Dent* (APD-9) and *Waters* (APD-8) formed in column with the *Mauzy* (DD-401) trailing and the other three destroyers—the *Taylor* (DD-468), with Captain Ryan on board; *Gridley* (DD-380); and *Ellet* (DD-398)—spread out around the column. They pointed their bows toward Vella Lavella and “the rescue of *Helena* survivors.”

A couple of hours after the ships had departed Guadalcanal, another quartet of destroyers slipped out of Tulagi Harbor. With orders to be the distant screening force for the

other group, these four *Fletcher*-class destroyers—the *Nicholas*, *O'Bannon*, *Radford*, and *Jenkins*—had been nearby when the *Helena* was sunk, as well as at the Battle of Kolombangara, fought just two nights earlier. With DesRon 21 commander Captain Francis X. McInerney still on board the *Nicholas*, they were keeping their promise to return for the men that the *Nicholas* and *Radford* were forced to leave behind.

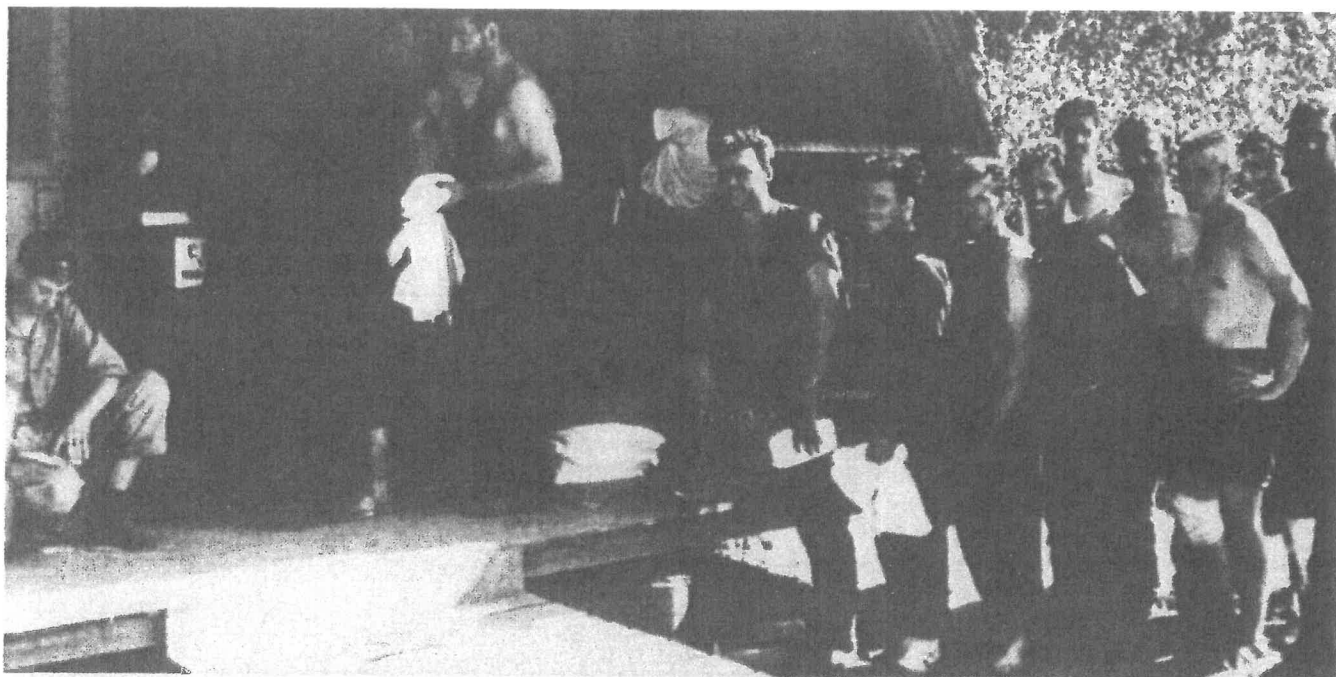
Dangerous Rescue

The survivors had been on the island for seven days when word was relayed to Chew that he and his men were to be extracted early the next morning. Plans were made for the trek down the hills and through the thick jungle to Lambu Lambu Cove. They started out in midafternoon, hoping to make it through the jungle before sunset but not wanting to arrive at the beach too early in case the Japanese interfered. There was some confusion getting everyone together on the beach, but they all eventually made it to the rendezvous location, leaving them with nothing to do except nervously wait.

While Chew's sailors groped their way to the beach, TG 31.2 was making turns toward the first extraction at Paraso Bay. After passing Cape Esperance on Guadalcanal, the APDs and their escorts avoided the Slot by heading west into the Solomon Sea. Their course had them passing south of the Russell Islands at about the same time that Chew's group of survivors started their jungle trek. About seven hours later, TG 31.2 passed Rendova Island from well out to sea. It was nearing midnight as the formation passed through the Gizo Strait. Rounding the eastern tip of Vella Lavella, the formation turned left, proceeded into the Slot, and ran up the island's northeastern coast.

At 0120, the formation arrived off the entrance to Paraso Bay, and while three destroyers patrolled, the *Taylor* led the APDs through the reefs ringing the bay. After 20 minutes of minimal headway and several course changes, the APDs proceeded toward the rendezvous in a cove also called Paraso. At 0155, barely making headway, the *Dent* exchanged signals “with a small boat in accordance with [the] previously arranged procedure.” The ADP slowed to a stop and lowered three of her Higgins boats. Stopped a little farther out, the *Waters* lowered her four boats, which followed the others toward the beach. Meanwhile, McInerney's four covering destroyers came within sight of Ryan's destroyers patrolling outside Paraso Bay.

A little more than an hour after leaving the APDs, the seven Higgins boats returned and moved alongside their respective destroyer transports. Once the boats were hoisted on board, the officers and men of the *Waters* were disappointed to find that their boats were empty—the *Dent* boats had embarked all 61 survivors and one Japanese prisoner who had been captured by natives guarding the Americans



NATIONAL ARCHIVES

After their daring rescue from *Vella Lavella*, *Helena* survivors line up for supplies. They would arrive back on the U.S. West Coast on 17 August, six weeks after their cruiser was sunk.

Within minutes the APDs were under way, and by 0332 they were taking station in formation with Ryan's shepherding destroyers, headed down the coast for Lambu Lambu Cove at 23 knots. Twenty-one minutes later, the *Dent* turned right at the curve of the coast and immediately slowed to five knots. Within five minutes the escorting destroyers were patrolling and the APD, lying to, had lowered her boats. The *Waters* was a few minutes behind, and her boats headed for the beach well after those of the *Dent*.

Impatiently waiting at Lambu Lambu Cove were Lieutenant Commander Chew and his men. Suddenly, around 0400, the APDs appeared from the gloom. Chew thought "it was the most wonderful feeling in the world to see [their boats] coming in." After the boats beached at the appointed spot, machine guns ready for action, the survivors and some Chinese civilians who had fled from the Japanese when they had arrived on the island, were embarked. In just over 30 minutes, the *Dent's* boats returned with most of the evacuees, followed by the *Waters's* boats at 0443 transporting the remainder. Chew was in the last boat and among the 40 who were "quickly embarked" on board the *Waters*.

Ryan's destroyers then maneuvered to take stations ahead of the APDs, which worked up to a 25-knot dash down the Slot. Shortly after sunrise, McInerney's covering force joined and assumed screening stations astern of the formation. By 0730 a large number of friendly aircraft were flying protectively overhead. On board the transports, the ecstatic and immensely relieved survivors were enjoying their salvation as well as hot soup and fresh coffee. Seven hours later, the APDs moored in Tulagi Harbor and the exhausted *Helena* survivors were transported to a camp ashore.

Dispiriting Loss, Uplifting Ending

The loss of the *Helena* was a demoralizing blow for the U.S. Navy. But the rescue had an important aspect besides the singularly critical issue of the survivors' salvation: It became a tremendous morale booster for the entire South Pacific Force. The Navy accomplished the improbable by sending thin-skinned destroyers in harm's way to retrieve the stranded U.S. servicemen in an area where Japanese forces abounded and were on high alert. Against very long odds, the successful conclusion of the survivors' saga underscored an unstated but profound pledge: Every effort would be made to recover any and all marooned Allied service personnel, no matter the circumstances. Hence, 166 Americans were saved and, undeniably, a promise kept. ⚓

Sources:

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Mr. Stankovich, a lifelong naval and military history enthusiast, is a proud Marine veteran of the early 1970s. Having made a career in procurement in the metals recycling industry, he now lives in Georgetown, Texas. He is honored that his only other published story, "The Hardest Choice," can be found in the first quarterly issue of *Naval History* (Winter 1988).