



Douglas Albert Munro – Why Guadalcanal

“Saving Lives”, War Plans Orange, Rainbow 5, and Higgins Boats

Seventy-five years ago, on September 27, 1942, Douglas Albert Munro, a 22-year old Coast Guard Petty Officer and Signalman First Class died in combat on the Pacific Island of Guadalcanal. How did it happen, why was he there and why were American forces there?

Douglas Albert Munro was born on 11 October, 1919, in British Columbia, Canada to an American father, James Munro and an American citizen (originally British) mother, Edith Fairey Munro. The family subsequently moved to South Cle Elum, Washington, where Douglas and his sister, Patricia, grew up and went to school. (1)

After the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, Doug Munro made the decision to enlist in the military service. Considering both the Navy and the Coast Guard, he settled on the Coast Guard because, as he said, “The Coast Guard is focused on saving lives, not taking them.” (2)

On the day that he was inducted, 18 September, 1939, Doug Munro met the man who would become his best friend in the Coast Guard – Raymond J. Evans. Doug and Ray

met by chance as they walked up the steps of the Seattle Federal Building on the way to the Coast Guard induction center. (3)



Douglas A. Munro



Raymond Joseph Evans Jr.

After a very brief “training” stint at Port Angeles, Washington, and three tours on the Coast Guard Cutter Spenser on “Neutrality Patrols” in the North Atlantic as Signalmen third class, Doug and Ray transferred to the Coast Guard-manned, Navy, attack transport USS Hunter Liggett in New York harbor. (4)

The Hunter Liggett and its sister attack transports, Dickman, Leonard Wood, Wakefield, Alcyone, and Betelguse, left New York in mid-1941 and steamed south towards Onslow Bay and New River North Carolina, arriving there in early July, 1941. (5)



USS Transport Hunter Liggett (APA-14)

Each of the transport ships was fitted with about 15 Higgins boats (landing craft) originally developed by Andrew J. Higgins for use in oil company and civilian humanitarian rescue operations in the shallow-water swamps of Southern Louisiana. Doug and Ray were interested in working on those Higgins boats.

As part of the continuing evolution of the Navy and Marine Corps' amphibious warfare strategy, the Higgins boat was brought to the attention of the Navy and Marines by the Coast Guard at a time when the Higgins boats were exactly what were needed in early 1941.

Prior to that time, troops and supplies had to be delivered to an invasion beach by small, ship's boats, a process which had proven to be unreliable and which was unable to maintain the delivery of troops and supplies on an timely basis.



Ship's boat delivering troops to shore at Gallipoli 1915

At the beginning of the 1940s the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps had very little experience with small boats, such as the Higgins Landing Craft, whereas the Coast Guard had been using small boats to rescue people since the formation of the U.S. Life Saving Service in 1871. Because of their long and extensive experience, the Coast Guard was called into service by the Navy and Marine Corps early in the WW-II pre-invasion practice exercises. (6)



Higgins LCP(L) boats

The Higgins boat landing craft fit well into the elements of the strategy and tactics developed by Admiral Thayer Mahan in the 1890s in his work on “The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783,” and his other writings. In his extensive work at the Naval War College, Mahan explored the long history of the projection of national policy by superior sea power across naval power nations.

By the 1930s, Mahan’s teachings and theories were naval warfare gospel, and were followed by most major naval powers around the world until WW-II. The development of aircraft carriers, air power and new classes of submarines during WW-II modified much of Mahan’s theories of the importance and impact of sea power. (7)

Building on Mahan’s theories, beginning in 1907, the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps developed “War Plan Orang,” one of several strategies originating at the Naval War College at the time. “War Plan Orange” postulated the evolution of a hypothetical war between the United States and Japan. (8)

In this scenario, the Imperial Japanese Navy (the IJN) and the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) would invade countries throughout the Far-East, which they did in Korea in 1910 and Manchuria in 1931. At the same time, the Japanese Navy was pursuing a parallel strategy in which the United States was designated as the most likely “hypothetical” enemy in a future war. (9)

War Plan Orange also dealt with the American response to Japanese attacks and occupation of islands extending across the Pacific. The aggressive Japanese military developments would be predicated on their efforts to gain access to natural resources not

available in Japan and to provide a defensive ring around the home country in response to American Naval expansion.

Based on misperception, arrogance and on Japanese military miscalculations of America's willingness to sustain an extended period of war, the Japanese leadership fully expected to be able to use aggressive naval and army tactics to extend their sphere of influence across much of the Pacific-rim and to force the United States to sue for peace on terms dictated by Japan.

In the scenarios created by planners at the American Naval War College, "War Plan Orange" and its successor, "War Plan Rainbow 5," America's response to Japanese aggression in the Pacific would be to "island-hop" across the Pacific destroying or bypassing Japanese naval and army forces along the way. Destroying Japanese forces would allow American to develop naval support bases, bomber and fighter based to attack Japanese forces, and to eventually isolate Japan – with or without occupying that country. (10)

However, "War Plan Orange" required a Marine Corps amphibious capability to successfully attack the Pacific island beaches and destroy the Japanese defenders. Between 1923 and 1941 the Navy and Marine Corps conducted a number of Joint Navy and Marine Corps Fleet Exercises (FLEXs I-XXII) and on occasion included amphibious unit exercises on the East Coast, in the Caribbean, on the California coast and in Hawai'i. The U.S. Army also participated in some of these exercises. (11)

Exploring the long history of worldwide naval experiences of the past, including the infamous British-led, failed invasion of Gallipoli, Turkey, during WW-I, the use of ship's boats to transfer men and supplies to an invasion beach, the Navy and the Marine Corps concluded that using ship's boats was not a workable strategy or tactic for the invasion conditions expected in WW II in the Pacific or in Europe.



Landing with ship's boats 1915

With the evolution of “War Plan Rainbow 5,” it became increasingly apparent that an alternative to ship’s boats was essential to military success, especially in the shallow, reef-surrounded waters of the islands in the South Pacific, but also in Europe.

Building on Japanese naval experience with specialized, ramped landing craft and on the work and secret research of Marine Corps Lt Col. Earl Ellis on Japanese naval practices and intentions, the U.S. Navy reached the decision to test small boats developed by Andrew Higgins as a solution to putting troops and supplies on an invasion beach in a timely manner. (12)

The landing craft designed by Higgins was the first, but not the only critical step in the solution to these problems. It was followed by the equally important development of the amphibian “Alligator” designed and developed by Donald Roebling, of the famous Brooklyn Bridge Roebling family. (13)



Roebing Alligator Amphibian 1907

The Higgins boats that were fitted to the naval attack transports that Doug Munro and Ray Evans were assigned to in 1941 were a critical element in the war to come. This connection began the next phase of the journey towards an encounter with history at Guadalcanal for Douglas Munro and Raymond Evans. It also helps to explain why Doug and Ray were at Guadalcanal beginning in August 1942.

On 1 November 1941, just weeks before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawai’i, an order was signed by President Roosevelt transferring the Coast Guard from the Department of the Treasury to the U.S. Navy, placing Doug Munro and Ray Evans in the Navy. (14)

On reaching Onslow Bay, North Carolina, Doug and Ray began training to operate the Higgins boat landing craft that the Hunter Liggett and the other transports were carrying. During the summer and fall of 1941, Doug and Ray continued to hone their skills as small boat drivers on these small boats.

On 7 December 1941, while aboard the Hunter Liggett and headed for the South Pacific and rounding the tip of South Africa, Doug and Ray listened to radio reports of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. After making a few more transits between the U.S. and the Pacific, and quite a bit of additional training on the landing craft with the Marines at New River, on 9 April 1941, Doug and Ray were headed for Wellington, New Zealand aboard the Hunter Liggett, arriving there on 28 May, 1942.

New Zealand was to be the staging area for the upcoming American invasion of Guadalcanal. Known as “Operation Watchtower,” it was to be the first major American revision to the “Germany First Strategy” that had been agreed to by President Roosevelt and the leaders of Great Britain. Roosevelt had agreed that the United States would focus all offensive efforts on defeating the Nazis and Fascists before turning to the Japanese problem. Until then, American efforts in the Pacific were planned to amount to a “containment” strategy.

It was American Admiral Ernest King, Commander in Chief of the U.S. Naval Fleet who argued that to delay implementing offensive operations against the Japanese in 1942 ran the risk of allowing the Japanese to consolidate their hold on the Pacific, which could disrupt supply routes and communications lines between the U.S., Australia and New Zealand.

When the Japanese invaded and took control of Guadalcanal and the adjacent islands of Tulagi, Florida and Gavutu in the southern Solomon Islands, and began building landing strips in early May 1942, it was clear that the Japanese were pursuing the strategies predicted in “War Plans Orange and Rainbow 5.”

In response to these threats, Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall and Navy Admiral Ernest King approved the planning of the first land-based offensive, island hopping strategies of “War Plans Orange and Rainbow 5,” to make the Pacific the focus of American military attention. It would be the opening move in the strategy to defeat Japan.

On 23 July, 1942, the Joint Chiefs of Staff authorized the initiation of Operation Watchtower, the invasion of the islands of Tulagi, Florida, Gavutu, Tanambogo and Guadalcanal to destroy the Japanese forces in those areas and to establish air bases needed to support a continued strategy to defeat all Japanese forces in the Pacific. The Operation Watchtower invasion was scheduled to begin on 1 August, 1941, but, because of the time needed to assemble the thousands of troops, supplies and transports, the invasion date was delayed until 7 August, 1942.

On 22 July, 1942, the invasion force at Wellington lifted anchor with Doug Munro onboard the flagship McCawley and Ray Evans on the Hunter Liggett. Over the next couple of days that task force was joined by the remaining elements of the invasion force, making the entire armada some eighty ships strong.

Doug and Ray were now committed to the invasion of the islands and to driving the boats that would deliver the Marines to the beaches. On 7 August, 1942, Douglas Munro drove his landing craft filled with Marines from the 1st Marine Raider Battalion toward Tulagi Island while Ray Evans did the same but was headed to Guadalcanal with the first wave of the 5th Marine Regiment.



Map of Guadalcanal and surrounding islands

On D-day at Guadalcanal, the American commanders planned to initially deploy some fifteen thousand troops in the initial invasion force across five invasion points, and to keep another five thousand troops in reserve.

On the reef at Tulagi, Doug lowered his boat's front ramp and his first group of Marines deployed into the combat zone beyond the beach. Two more runs between the McCawley and the beach and all of the Marines scheduled for this operation were ashore. Doug then

beached his landing craft and went ashore to act as a signaller for the communications between the Marines on the island and the commanders on the McCawley.

Ray Evans transferred the first wave of Marines from the Hunter Liggett to Guadalcanal by driving his landing craft onto the beach to deliver one small contingent of the eleven-thousand Marines scheduled to be in the Guadalcanal invasion force that day.

Once all the Marines were ashore on Guadalcanal, Ray was assigned to help transfer the mountains of supplies building up on the beaches to supply depots inland. The replacement of ship's boats with Higgins Landing Craft was working well and paying great dividends in the efficient delivery of troops and supplies.

On 9 August, 1942, at the order of Lt Commander Dwight Dexter, the first Coast Guard officer to ever be placed in charge of a Naval Operations Base (NOB), Doug Munro was transferred from Tulagi to Guadalcanal to help with the boat operations and transfer of men and supplies. Doug returned to serve with his best friend, Ray Evans. Doug and Ray were now both on Guadalcanal, driving their landing craft and supporting the efforts of the Marines.

On 12 September, the operational commanders on Guadalcanal were informed that there was a growing concern among some senior naval leaders that the American forces could not defeat the IJN and IJA forces on Guadalcanal and that a general withdrawal was being considered.

But, on 18 September, a newly formed naval task force anchored off the island, four thousand fresh Marines arrived, a number of Navy planes were delivered to the American air strip at Henderson Field, and a number of Marine planes also arrived at the American air strip. Also, and very significantly, among the new Marines landing at Guadalcanal that day was Lt Col. Lewis "Chesty" Puller, a living legend in the Marine Corps.

The American forces had been on Guadalcanal for five weeks and the combat situation remained tenuous, at best, with both the Americans and the Japanese bringing in reinforcements, the Americans by day and the Japanese by night.

The Japanese represented a well-trained, disciplined and brutal fighting force that would willingly fight to the death rather than surrender. On their side, the Japanese had been at war for more than ten years and had learned much about jungle fighting over that time. By comparison, the Americans, to some extent, were green recruits learning their trade.

After five weeks of fending off Japanese suicide attacks, air and naval bombardments, the heat, disease, and a lack of adequate food and supplies, the main objective of the Marine commander, Major General Archer Vandergrift, was to extend the limited Marine perimeter to the west across the Mataniku River.

In addition to giving the Marines more room to maneuver, extending the perimeter west of the Mataniku River would take Henderson Field out of the range of Japanese artillery, allow for safer American air operations and would add to the natural defenses of the American position.

On 24 September the American and Japanese commanders on Guadalcanal both had the same idea in mind – attack. The Americans wanted, and needed, to expand their toehold on the island and the Japanese commander wanted to annihilate the American threat. Both commanders were preparing plans to initiate attacks.

Japanese radio intelligence had intercepted communications that indicated that the Americans were preparing an attack. The Japanese Commander, General Kiyotaki Kawaguchi, issued orders to position forces to repel this threat.

In the meantime, American commander, General Archer Vandergrift, and his staff had planned a series of “modest operations” to expand the Marine perimeter to the west. Lt Col. Lewis “Chesty” Puller and his 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, recently arrived on Guadalcanal, were selected to lead the American mission. (15)

Puller’s 900 man battalion moved out on the afternoon of 23 September and had made contact with Japanese forces the next afternoon. On 25 and 26 September, Puller’s troops came under fire from Japanese forces and the Marine headquarters sent additional troops to assist Puller.

On the morning of 27 September, Puller’s forces again came under heavy fire from Japanese troops. At noon, Japanese Zeros and Betty bombers entered the fray and attacked Henderson Field, disrupting the American headquarters radio network.

Because of the poor communications situation, American headquarters was left with the false impression that the Marines had reached their objective on the west side of the Matanikau River and were engaging the Japanese forces.

To support those Marines in the battle with the Japanese, orders were issued for three companies of 1/7 Marines to proceed by boat from the Lunga Point base to a beach west of Point Cruz to attack the Japanese from the rear in a pincer movement.

On the morning of 27 September, Marine commanders met with Lt Commander Dwight Dexter (USCG), the NOB commander, to coordinate the landing of the three companies of Puller's Marines to the west of Point Cruz. Commander Dexter put Doug in charge of the boat landing operation. Doug and Ray, in separate boats, along with several other landing craft loaded the three Marine companies, rough 500 Marines, onto the landing craft and headed for the insertion point.

With covering fire-support from the destroyer Ballard, the landing craft turned for the beach. As they approached the shore, the Japanese air raid that heavily damaged the Marine communications equipment forced the Ballard to cease its support for the mission. At that time, Doug also noticed that the planned landing beach was blocked by a reef. He and Ray identified an alternative landing location and headed for it.

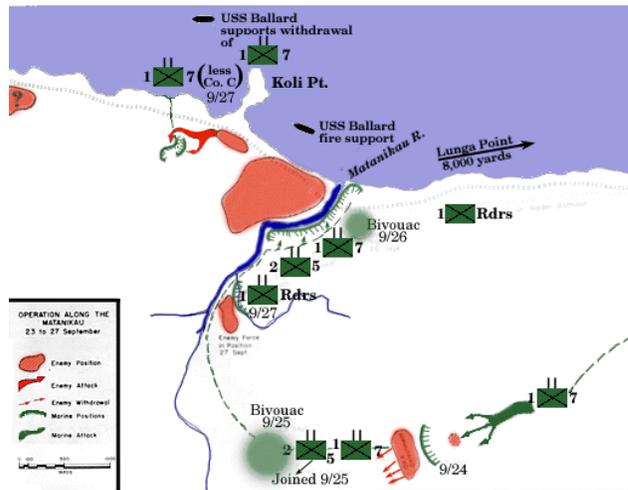
Once the Marines were ashore they immediately headed up the hill while Doug and most of the landing craft, as planned, headed back to the base at Lunga Point. Only Ray kept his boat on station in the landing area in case there was a need to evacuate wounded.

A burst of enemy machine-gun fire hit Ray's boat, critically wounding the coxswain and damaging the throttle cable. Unable to do more at the landing point and with a fatally wounded crewmate, Ray headed his boat back to the Lunga Point base. Having to run his landing craft onto the beach at Lunga Point base, Ray with, the assistance of Doug and base medical corpsman, moved the Navy crewman, Samuel B. Roberts, from the boat.

At the landing site, once the Marines were ashore and headed up the hill away from the beach, the Japanese allowed the Marines to pass through the first lines of the Japanese ambush and then attacked them from all sides with the overwhelming force of a trap the Japanese had reportedly been preparing for the past three days.

Completely surrounded and having left their radios behind, Puller's 1/7 Marines had no way to call for help or to alert headquarters of the situation, Adding to the crises, as they moved up the hill, their commander, Marine Major Otho Rogers, was killed instantly by a Japanese mortar round. (16)

Completely surrounded by overwhelming enemy forces, and without any way to communicate with Marine headquarters or the Navy support elements, the fast thinking Marines resorted to using their undershirts to spell out “HELP” on the hillside. That message was spotted by 2nd Lt. Dale Leslie flying his SBD over the area and he reported the message to headquarters. (17)



Map of the Matanikau Action, 23–28 September. Green represents U.S. Marine units and movements and red Japanese positions and actions. Point Cruz is misidentified as "Koli Point" and the [destroyer USS Monssen](#) that supported the operation is misidentified as [USS Ballard](#).

His men on the hillside in immediate danger of annihilation, Puller engaged the assistance of the destroyer Monssen to lay down supporting fire to allow his troops time to fight their way to the beach.

Meanwhile, at Lunga Point Dexter had received the word about the plight of Puller’s 1/7 Marines and sent Doug and Ray back with a group of 24 landing craft to pick up the desperate troops fighting their way back to the beach. With well-timed covering fire from the Monssen’s 5-inch guns, and guidance from Lt. Leslie in his SBD, the landing craft approached the extraction point where the Marines had gathered. (18)

In spite of the withering Japanese mortar and automation-weapons fire, Doug maneuvered his landing craft parallel to the beach and provided protection for the Marines in the water while Ray returned fire with the landing craft’s machine guns. Loading nearly five hundred Marines into the landing craft, Doug and the other boats headed back to the Lunga Point base.

After assisting one boat aground on the reef, Doug again headed to Lunga Point base. Ray then saw a spray of waterspouts headed toward Doug and yelled to warn him to get down, Doug did not hear Ray, and he was hit in the back of the neck by one round, falling to the floor of the boat. Ray took the helm and headed back to Lunga Point. (19)

Back at the dock, with Ray at his side, Doug looked at Ray and asked, “Did they get off.?” Not hearing Ray’s reply, 22-year old Douglas Albert Munro was gone, but in his heroic actions that day he and his team saved the lives of nearly 500 men who would live to see another day. (20)

Doug Munro was buried in the Marine Cemetery on Guadalcanal the next day. He was returned home to Cle Elum on 5 March, 1948, and was interred at the Laurel Hill Cemetery near his boyhood home.

In recognition of his ultimate sacrifice for the Marine Corps, Douglas A. Munro was nominated for and awarded the Nation’s highest award for valor in combat – the Medal of Honor (MOH). Commander Dexter conjectured that the letter of recommendation was written and sent up the chain of command by Marine Lt Col. Lewis “Chesty” Puller whose troops Doug and his men saved from certain death. (21)

Fourteen men were awarded the Medal of Honor for bravery above and beyond the call of duty in the fighting on Guadalcanal – 8 Marines, 2 Navy officers, 3 members of the Army, and 1 Coast Guard Petty Officer. Seven of those brave men were awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously, and six were enlisted men. Ray Evans was awarded the Navy Cross for his bravery on Guadalcanal on 27 September, 1942.

After Doug died, his mother, Edith, joined the S.P.A.R.S. – the Coast Guard equivalent of the Army’s WAAC and the Navy’s WAVES. Edith joined the S.P.A.R.S. as a Lieutenant Junior Grade. On 27 May, 1943, the same day that Edith was inducted into the S.P.A.R.S., Edith and James Munro were escorted into the Oval office where President Roosevelt awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously to Douglas A. Munro and his parents accepted the award on his behalf.



Edith and James Munro in Oval Office receiving the Medal of Honor on behalf of their son

Petty Officer Ray Evan, recipient of the Navy Cross, and Doug Munro's best friend in the Coast Guard was later commissioned as an officer in the Coast Guard and retired as a Commander. Commander Evans passed over the bar on 30 May, 2013, and was laid to rest at Mountain View Memorial Park in Seattle, Washington.

Lt Commander Dwight Dexter, Doug and Ray's commanding officer on Guadalcanal rose to the rank of Rear Admiral in the Coast Guard and retired from the service on 1 November, 1959. In 1922, he had been appointed to the Coast Guard Academy but left before graduation. He rejoined the Coast Guard in 1926 as an Ensign. RADM Dexter crossed the bar on 16 January 1992.

The American invasion of Guadalcanal was the long-planned response to Japanese aggression in the Pacific. "War Plans Orange and Rainbow 5" had been part of American Naval War College plans from the early 1900s. Guadalcanal was the first American amphibious action following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the naval engagements of the Coral Sea and Midway. These three events were strategic turning points in the war in the Pacific and set the stage for the defeat of Japan.

Doug Munro joined the Coast Guard to save lives, and at Guadalcanal he and Ray and their small band of landing craft crews did exactly that. He was at the battle of Guadalcanal because the Coast Guard was assigned to the Navy by President Roosevelt

and because Japan had pursued the aggression envisioned in the Navy's War Plans, and because he was one of the best landing craft (Higgins boats) drivers in the Coast Guard. He died at Guadalcanal because he was dedicated to the American cause, loved the Marines he served and because he was willing to go "above and beyond the call of duty."

To learn more about SM1 Douglas Munro, his friends Commander Ray Evans, and Commander Dwight Dexter and all the men and women who were a part of the legend, be sure to read "Guardian of Guadalcanal – The World War II Story of Douglas A. Munro" by Gary Williams.

The life, selfless dedication to duty and ultimate sacrifice of SM1 Douglas Albert Munro are honored each year at the Laurel Hill Memorial Park Cemetery in Cle Elm, Washington on September 27. Everyone is welcome and encouraged to attend.

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- (2) Stephanie Young, "The legacy of Signalman 1st Class Douglas Munro," Pg. 4
- (3) Travis, Video interview with Commander Ray Evans regarding his Coast Guard service and that of his friend, Douglas Munro – Coast Guard Oral History Program - 1999
- (4) Williams, Gary, "Guardian of Guadalcanal – The World War II Story of Douglas A. Munro, Pg. 36
- (5) Ibid., 37
- (6) Lt Col. L.J. Kimball. "The U.S. Coast Guard at Camp Lejeune, A Brief History"
- (7) Mahan, Thayer, "The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783"
- (8) Miller, Edward S. "War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945"
- (9) David C Evans and Mark R. Peattie, "Kaigun, Strategy, Tactics, and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy 1887-1941" Pg.129
- (10) Miller, Edward S. "War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945"
- (11) Nofi, Albert A., "To Train the Fleet for War – U.S. Fleet Problems, 1923-1940"
- (12) Dirk A. Ballendorf and Merrill L. Bartlett, "Pete Ellis: An Amphibious Warfare Prophet 1880-1923"
- (13) Little, John Brandon, "The U.S. Marine Corps, Industrial Entrepreneurship, and Victory in the Pacific, 1898-1945" Naval War College, 2002
- (14) Walling, Michael G. "Bloodstained Sea – The U.S. Coast Guard in the Battle of the Atlantic, 1941-1944," Pg. 28
- (15) Burke, David, "Marine, The Life of Chesty Puller
- (16) Ibid. Pg. 123
- (17) Ibid, Pg. 123
- (18) Ibid, Pg. 124
- (19) Williams, Gary, "Guardian of Guadalcanal – The World War II Story of Douglas A. Munro, Pg. 36
- (20) Ibid, Pg. 98
- (21) Ibid, Pg. 108