

THE BATTLE OF VELLA GULF
AUGUST 6 - 7, 1943

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Battle of Vella Gulf
August 6, 1943-August 7, 1943

World War II is undoubtedly one of the most significant events in world history, an event that forever changed the world and collective memory. The story of World War II is one comprised of many individual experiences that made it so special; it is a story best told through the actual combat experience of the brave men who served heroically, not for power or conquest, but to defend and uphold the value system of the remarkable group of men and women collectively known as, "The Greatest Generation"¹. There are so many great-untold stories of valor and courage that they get lost in the shadow of the more popular and recognized battles, but they are not diminished in importance or significance. All the while the number of surviving veterans who could share such stories is rapidly diminishing because of the passing of time. However it was because of these lesser known battles and the brave men who fought in them that the larger ones were possible and that is why their stories need to be shared and honored. The battle of the Vella Gulf is one such event, and while not a huge strategically important victory it was a significant psychological victory that showed the Navy and the rest of the world what the American soldier and the American spirit is capable of achieving when properly motivated and determined.

Before one can understand the battle, one needs to understand the events leading up to it. The battle of the Vella Gulf took place in an area located between the islands of Vella

¹ Tom Brokaw, The Greatest Generation, (Random House, 1998)

Lavella and Kolombangara in the Solomon Islands (nick named the “Slot”²) and the battle formed part of the United States, “Island Hopping Campaign”. The campaign’s primary objective was to reach mainland Japan, to end a war that had started as direct result of the Pearl Harbor bombings that occurred on December 7, 1941 and brought America into the war. At this point the Japanese had one of the most feared naval fleets in the world and their submarines were a constant threat to any military or commercial vessel operating in open waters.

To understand the significance of the battle one needs to understand the context in which it happened and the events that immediately preceded it. The event in question is the infamous Kolombangara campaign and the PT-109 incident of August 2 1943, which involved the former president John F. Kennedy. Essentially the battle was a huge naval defeat for the US, both tactically and psychologically. It involved fifteen American Navy PT boats being completely defeated and unable to successfully engage the Japanese fleet. The fifteen American boats were loaded with 60 torpedoes but when they fired at the enemy they observed only a few explosions, which did not necessarily mean hits³. Many of the torpedoes exploded before reaching their targets or traveled at the wrong depth, so no enemy ships were sunk. The boats were then ordered to return to command but the boats equipped with radars shot their torpedoes before their retreat. When they left, the remaining boats, such as PT 109, were left without radar, and because of poor communications, were not aware that the other boats had already engaged the enemy and that they were retreating from the battle.

² <http://www.vella-gulf.navy.mil/site%20pages/about.aspx>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PT_109

PT 109 while trying to gain its bearings and reconvene with the fellow ships, was effectively attacked and was rammed by an enemy Japanese Destroyer causing it to be literally “split it into two” causing Kennedy and other survivors to abandon ship and try to swim to the nearby shores for safety. What made the defeat even worse was that the fellow American ships that were along side PT 109, (the PT 169 and 162), were unable to protect or even assist the 109 from the approaching Japanese Destroyer. PT 169 fired two torpedoes that missed the destroyer completely, while PT 162's torpedoes failed to fire at all⁴. Both boats then turned away from the scene of the action and returned to base without being able to check for survivors. The defeat resulted in the future president to become stranded and lost while the overall battle made it appear to the rest of the world that the American Navy was weak, ineffective and incapable of defending themselves from the mighty Japanese war machine.

This set the stage for the battle of the Vella Gulf. The moral of the fleet was relatively low because they had not yet to definitively win a naval battle against the Japanese navy and the Japanese were continuously winning battles with what seemed to be little or no effort. The overall commander of the battle was Commander F. Moosbrugger from the Navy and he was in charge of Task Group 31.2. Task Group 31.2 consisted of two separate divisions referred to as Division A-1 (DIV. A-1) and Division A-2 (DIV. A-2). Division A-1 consisted of the USS Dunlap commanded by Lt. Cdr. C. Iverson, the USS Craven commanded by Ltr. Cdr. F.T. Williamson and the USS Maury commanded by Cdr. G.L Sims. Division A-2 was overseen by Cdr. R.W Simpson and consisted of the USS Lang commanded by Cdr. J.L Wilfong, the USS Sterrett

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PT_109

commanded by Lt. Cdr. F.G Gould, and the USS Stack commanded by Lt. Cdr. R.A Newton.

On August 4, 1943 command group 31.2 (CTG 31.2) reported to headquarters on Guadalcanal that while sweeping the Vella Gulf area, assisted by a group of MTB's (Motor Torpedo Boats), they became aware of possible Japanese naval activity in the region. Due to the discovered information, a conference was convened onboard the USS Dunlap at Purvius Bay on August 5, 1943 in order to make plans to deal with the reported Japanese vessels in the region. The personnel attending the conference were Commander F. Moosburger, (the commander of CTG 31.2), Commander R.W Simpson, (Commander of the Destroyer Division A-2 from CTG 31.2), Commander R.W Culvert, (Commander of Motor Torpedo Boat (MTB) Flotilla One), Lieutenant Commander H. Warrow, (MTB squadron Commander) and Lieutenant McCure, (Intelligence Officer MTB Flotilla One).

At the conference, the said individuals discussed and planned many scenarios to effectively deal with the Japanese fleet and even created a battle plan for a large-scale operation with many combined military units from the varying branches. Unfortunately the large scale operation that had been mentioned was not put into effect because more urgent matters presented themselves and needed to be attended to⁵, however the information received and the tactics discussed proved to be highly beneficial and important in the later actions of the battle that was to later take place.

⁵ The Battle of Vela Gulf 6-7 August 1943: Commander Task Group 31.2. Commander Frederick Moosbrugger. Action Report, Enclosure [C] Narrative pg 1

The following day of August 5, 1943 CTG 31.2 received orders to depart Tulagi on August 6 at 12:30 along with both Divisions A-1 and A-2 and proceed directly to the Vella Gulf area to search for and intercept the Japanese fleet. The ships were ordered to make sweeps of the area but to be mindful of possible mine fields and if by 02:00 on August 7 no Japanese vessels were spotted then they were to head north to Purvis at maximum speed. Later that day, naval command received new additional information regarding the Japanese presence and informed CTG 31.2 that they had reason to believe that the Japanese would try to reinforce the Vella area at midnight on August 6, 1943 using destroyers, cruisers, and submarines. Luckily the conference that was previously held had prepared the fleet for such a scenario and they were quickly able to outline a battle plan during the night of August 6. The senior member of staff, Captain Doyle, was impressed by the proposed plan of attack and agreed to put it into action. The morning of August 6 the commanders of the vessels from CTG 31.2 and the other high ranking commanding Navy officers had breakfast at 09:30 and discussed the final aspects of the battle plan. The breakfast conference was highly beneficial, both strategically and tactically, because it allowed for any doubtful or unclear points to be cleared up and fully explained, while at the same time making it possible for all the commanders to prepare for all possible contingencies that may be encountered.

During the said conferences many assumptions were made and each was taken into consideration and possible counter measures were also discussed. Some of the assumptions were that:

- There was remote possibility of enemy submarines in the area
- The Vella Guld region was not mined

- That enemy troops would be carrying barges equipped with the equivalent of 40 m.m guns, located in the Gizo Strait area, close to the fringing reefs north and east of Gizo island, in the Blackett strait area, and close to the western shore of Kolombangara island⁶

The commanders also took into consideration the direction and location where the Japanese vessels would presumably enter the region. They believed that the enemy vessels would enter from one of two possible locations: the first being from the north through the Vella Gulf to the area of Vanga Point, Sandfly Harbor, Tongo, or Black strait, the second, being through the Wilson and Gizo Straight⁷. This second scenario however seemed less likely because American motor torpedo boats, (MTB's), had been active in that location for awhile and had been actively engaging enemy vessels, so the first scenario was considered the most likely and the Group and command prepared accordingly.

With all the information given and a battle plan finalized, CTG 31.2 began to prepare and ready the men. CTG 31.2 realized that enemy cruisers may be present and that the enemy force may consist of two separate attack groups. Even with all the unknown possibilities and outcomes that lay before them, both command and CTG 31.2 were confident because they were well prepared and had certain variables working in their favor. They had the element of surprise and would exploit it at every possible chance and they believed that their gunfire would be superior to that of the Japanese.

⁶ The Battle of Vela Gulf 6-7 August 1943: Commander Task Group 31.2. Commander Frederick Moosbrugger. Action Report, Enclosure [C] Narrative pg 2

⁷ The Battle of Vela Gulf 6-7 August 1943: Commander Task Group 31.2. Commander Frederick Moosbrugger. Action Report, Enclosure [C] Narrative pg 3

The final plan selected was highly detailed and carefully prepared and took into account almost all possible scenarios that the American ships would theoretically face. The plan was as follows: to pass through the Gizo Strait in column of their Divisions A-1 and A-2, at a speed of 15 knots when entering Vela Gulf after sunset. 15 knots was the chosen speed because it produced a wake difficult for enemy scouts to detect, produced little noise which allowed for stealth-like travel⁸, and would allow the Divisions to arrive at their desired location at the time of 23:26 which would enable them to arrive before the Japanese expected entrance time of midnight. When the divisions entered the area in question they would keep a distance of 4,000 yards away from each other and Division A-2 would sweep the area for enemy barges when they were within a mile or two of the Gizo reefs. Division A-2 was equipped with 40 m.m guns and five-inch artillery and was intended to serve the inshore Division as backup protection while monitoring the shores and engaging any possible barges. Division A-1 was equipped with torpedoes as well as 40 m.m guns and was intended as the offshore Division to engage any destroyers or other large vessels arriving earlier than expected.

As previously planned, CTG 31.2 intended to arrive at their destination opposite of Venga Point at 23:30 so if the Japanese fleet arrived at the expected time of midnight they would be in a perfect position to engage and surprise the enemy. Another benefit to their arrival time was that it would allow the battle to take place close to the shores of the gulf and the large landmasses would act as interference and hopefully make the enemy radars to operate less effectively. When the Japanese vessels were to enter the area it was agreed upon that Division A-1 would first approach the enemy vessels and come to

⁸ The Battle of Vela Gulf 6-7 August 1943: Commander Task Group 31.2. Commander Frederick Moosbrugger. Action Report, Enclosure [C] Narrative pg 3

effective torpedo firing range and fire their torpedoes. Once the torpedoes were fired, Division A-1 would relocate to a location of about 10,000 yards away from their previous firing location and wait and watch the torpedoes hit their intended targets and then would either shoot their heavy artillery rounds at the hopefully wounded vessels or continue to fire torpedoes, depending on how effective the first assault had been. After the first engagement both Division A-1 and A-2 were to be on full alert and be prepared to engage the possible second force of the Japanese vessels, as had been discussed and planned for during the planning conferences. The Japanese navy was known for their use of two separated attack groups so it was essential that the American vessels be prepared in case a second force did indeed appear so not be surprised and caught off guard. During Division A-1 actions Division A-2 was to serve as protective cover for A-1, so if Division A-1 were to start to take enemy fire they would then engage the enemy using their five inch artillery rounds as a diversion, however if A-1 was not taking enemy fire then they would also fire upon the enemy vessels after they were struck by the torpedoes in order to inflict as much damage as possible.

With the plans set and the ships and men both properly prepared CTG 31.2 departed Purvis Bay at 11:30 on August 6, 1943, which was actually one hour earlier than the originally discussed departure time. The earlier departure time was needed because the U.S.S Maury was limited to a top speed of 27 knots because it was experiencing engine trouble and it was essential that the Group arrive together at the desired location on schedule. At 21:59 the ships all arrived at their strategically planned location (8° 03' S-156°41' E) and slowed to fifteen knots and then waited eagerly for the Japanese vessels to arrive. At 23:33 the USS Dunlap made radar contact with an object or objects entering

the Vela Gulf area. The contact was spotted on the radar at a bearing of 359°T making it 23,900 yards from the American Vessels. The protocol was for the Dunlap to request radar verification from the other ships in the Group before any tactical or offensive actions could be taken. While waiting for verification other contacts were spotted on the Groups radar screen and three distinguishable objects appeared to be about 19,000 yards away and were traveling at a speed of 25 knots. Then at 23:36, three minutes after the original radar contact, the USS Craven verified it as legitimate contact and then Commander Mossburger ordered the entire Group to ready torpedoes and begins to engage the approaching enemy vessels.

Division A-1 immediately went into the pre-arranged battle formation and prepared to fire all their available broadside torpedoes and aligned themselves at 335°T. Once the ships were in place, four other distinct contacts were spotted by the S.G radars, (the new radar system being tested with the Group), at a distance of 15,000 yards away and they appeared to be in column formation indicating that they were indeed enemy Japanese vessels. Immediately the torpedo officers began to issue track angles and waited for the confirmation orders to fire. At 23:40 Commander Moosbrugger gave the orders to fire and from 23:41 to 23:42 Division A-1 fired 24 torpedoes from ranges of 4,800 to 4,300 yards away. At this point of the attack there had been no verified visual confirmation of enemy vessels and the ships were strictly going off the information and coordinates they understood from the radar systems. Surface visibility was reported to be less the 4,000 yards at the time when the first torpedoes were fired.

At 23:44 Division A-1 reported to the other ships that their torpedoes were deployed and on their way to the enemy contacts. Commander Moosburger then ordered the ships

of Division A-1 to turn and move to a secondary location so they would be clear of any possible enemy torpedoes and prepare for further assaults on the enemy ships. Once Division A-1 fired its torpedoes and arrived at their secondary location, Division A-2 changed course to match and be prepared to cover and protect the other ships with their artillery rounds. At 23:46 a sound operator reported that he heard a torpedo explosion even though none had been visually seen yet which caused confusion among the group command because it did not seem to be logical for that to be happening. However before anyone could start to give explanations or assumptions, three large explosions were seen in succession, one right after another moving from left to right followed by another series of seven to ten other explosions.

Immediately after witnessing the explosions Division A-2 took action and implemented their part of the originally formulated plan and began to fire their five-inch battery artillery into the flaming and damaged enemy vessels. Division A-2 however soon had to change the plans and began to concentrate their collective fire on a destroyer that they spotted to the west of the flames. They continually fired upon the ship and at 23:51 they reported to Division A-1 that the newly discovered target had been severely damaged and that it had turned over and sunk. While firing the five-inch artillery, the USS Stack, (Division A-2), reported that it saw another ship through the flames and fired four additional torpedoes at the newly discovered ship.

Division A-1 now reassured that there was no threat from enemy torpedoes or other secondary Japanese attack groups, then changed course and at 23:56 began to fire their artillery rounds and joined in to the gun fight. CTG 31.2 was amazed at how effective their assault plan was proceeding and realized that the surprise attack had caused the

Japanese to enter complete havoc and confusion. Commander Moosbrugger enthusiastically described the assault as such:

“The whole area was a great mass of flames and explosions which continued without interruption under the continuous pounding of our forces until all the enemy except a few survivors had perished”⁹

At 23:55 Commander Mossbrugger ordered the Groups flagship the USS Dunlap to open fire on the contact that the USS Stack had just fired torpedoes upon. The Dunlap along with the Craven and the Maury fired at the spotted vessel and observed hit after hit, effectively damaging their target. The enemy vessel was able to fire some rounds of its own but only for a short period of time and in small bursts, because none of the enemy rounds came into any contact with the American Group. Division A-2 reconvened and also fired upon the enemy vessel and at 00:00 hours the ship was torn to pieces and sank in the water. It was at this time that CTG 31.2 knew that the battle was won and it was only a matter of time before the remaining enemy contacts would be destroyed or surrender.

Only one contact was left visible on the group's radar screens but when visually verified, it appeared to be a Cruiser, (the Group was not completely positive of its exact classification at such time), that was severely damaged and was already covered in flames and in the process of sinking. At 00:08 CTG 31.2 ordered Division A-1 to go past the flaming area of enemy vessels and proceed north in order to take position near the northwest entrance to Vela Gulf so they could engage and any other Japanese force if they were to come through the area. While Division A-1 was patrolling the entrance to

⁹ The Battle of Vela Gulf 6-7 August 1943: Commander Task Group 31.2. Commander Frederick Moosbrugger. Action Report, Enclosure [C] Narrative pg 6

the Gulf Division A-2 followed the original battle plan and began to patrol the surrounding area in order to do any last minute "mopping up". At 00:17 Division A-2 spotted an enemy Destroyer just past the flaming remains of a sinking Cruiser and noticed that the Destroyer appeared to be moving slowly. Division A-1 when alerted began to reposition themselves in order for them to fire upon the vessels, however before the ships could correctly align themselves and prepare their guns for attack, Division A-2 instantly and accurately opened fire on the approaching enemy destroyer. Division A-2 collectively fired their five inch artillery on the Japanese Destroyer and continued to fire until a large explosion was noticed to the rear of the enemy vessel causing it begin to take on water and start to sink.

At 00:20 Commander Mossburger ordered the Group to sink what was left of the previously spotted enemy Cruiser and at 00:22 Division A-2 fired six additional torpedoes at the wounded enemy vessel. When the cruiser was effectively destroyed and the remains sunken, Division A-1 reported that the entrance to the Gulf was clear and that no other contacts being spotted on any of their radars. Commander Mossburger then ordered Division A-2 to search the area for any survivors in order to retrieve them for humanitarian and intelligence gathering purposes. After two intense and thorough hours of searching, no enemy survivors were spotted, so the ships were ordered back to rejoin with Division A-1 at 02:00. CTG 31.2 then confident that their work was complete and the battle was indeed won left the Vela Gulf with a strong sense of accomplishment and overwhelming pride.

CTG 31.2 knew the battle was won and were ecstatic about the outcome but it was not until the battle was over and all the tactical information came in that they fully

realized how impressive and monumental their victory had been, not only for them but also to the American military as a whole. During the battle, the Group had no way of knowing the names of the ships they destroyed or its commanders or the exact number of Japanese personnel who died in the assault, so they did not know the full extent of their victory. The force that CTG 31.2 had engaged was a later to be identified as a force of four Destroyers, (no Cruisers were present, so the "Cruiser" from the attack was indeed a destroyer), under the command of Captain Kaju Sugiura. The destroyers that were defeated were later identified to be the Hagiikaze, (the flagship), the Arashi, the Shigure, and the Kawakaze. The Japanese eventually reported that approximately 1,210 of their men were killed in the attack while another 310 were able to escape and reach shore and eventually arrived safely to Kolombangara¹⁰. The Americans on the other hand suffered no loss of life or ships and were not even struck by a single enemy shell.

CTG 31.2 had fired exactly 34 torpedoes and no less than 800 rounds of five-inch artillery¹¹ but more importantly than the artillery strength; the battle implemented certain new technologies that proved to be undeniably beneficial and would be used in future naval battles. The battle definitively showed the navy and the world that American torpedoes were equal to if not better than those of the Japanese and that when properly used they were a highly effective and devastating tool. The battle also implemented the use of flash-less powder for the artillery and its effectiveness could not have been more beneficial. It added to the stealth and surprise of the attack and would soon become commonplace when future night attacks were to be performed. However the most significant and important tool of the battle was the S.G radar system, which proved to be

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Vella_Gulf

¹¹ The Battle of Vela Gulf 6-7 August 1943: Commander Task Group 31.2. Commander Frederick Moosbrugger. Action Report, Enclosure [C] Narrative pg 16

more effective and advanced than the radar systems the Japanese were implementing.

Commander Moosburger stated that:

“The fact that the enemy gave no indication of being aware of our presence leads to the belief that the Japanese vessels are not equipped with radar comparable to our S.G radar.”¹²

He also noted that the close proximity of coastal land in the Gulf did indeed make radar detection difficult but the S.G radar was still able to work effectively and accurately.

Many useful and beneficial tactical lessons learned from the battle, were soon implemented as common practice in future nighttime naval attacks that followed. One of the most significant lessons learned was that a thorough understanding and proper planning prior to an assault, is highly beneficial and leads to a complete and coordinated assault, culminating with the destruction of enemy forces. The intense planning allowed for all the ships to be properly prepared for all reasonable scenarios and guaranteed that they would not be caught off guard or be surprised. The battle further proved that surprise attacks effectively throws the enemy into complete chaos and confusion and when added to night operations with low surface visibility, the enemy is almost completely ineffective and defenseless against torpedo and artillery assaults. The use of nearby coastal land was also recognized to be strategically important because it acted as interference and made the enemy radar systems less accurate. The effectiveness of the torpedoes was also learned to be greater if combined with night and surprise attacks. The final tactical lesson learned was that when torpedo attacks were assisted with secondary cruiser artillery

¹² The Battle of Vela Gulf 6-7 August 1943: Commander Task Group 31.2. Commander Frederick Moosbrugger. Action Report, Enclosure [C] Narrative pg 13

coverage, (as seen with Div A-2 serving as cover for Div A-1), the combined effectiveness and destructive ability of both, is greatly enhanced.

The only real deficiency noticed had to do with radars, not the actual systems themselves but rather the casing they were housed in. The radars were noticed to be susceptible to being made inoperative due to the shock and vibration of gunfire from the ship's artillery. Commander Moosburger believed that the devices lacked the proper shock proofing material needed to relieve the problem. Commander Frank Gardner Gould of the USS Sterett from Division A-2 stated that

“The S.G radar worked admirably during the firing. It was out of operation for a total of about 10 seconds as the overload relay was thrown out once by the shock of gunfire. Resetting the relay restored operation immediately”¹³

Other than that one small material deficiency, every aspect of the battle was an overwhelming success and was a definitive example how proper planning and communication can and will result in victory.

The battle was a monumental success, but it would not have been possible had it not been for the meticulous planning by the Military commanders, and the precise implementation and execution of those plans by the rank and file soldiers who served courageously and honorably during those events. Fredrick J. Sherman is such a man and served in this battle, as well as many others, and witnessed everything and has incredible first hand accounts and memories of the attack. Mr. Sherman fought in both the Atlantic and the Pacific campaigns for the United States Navy, having served on board the USS Sterett from January 1942 to December 1945. An interesting side note is that the Sterett

¹³ USS Sterett (DD407): Report of Action, for night of 6-7 August, 1943. Commanding officer Frank Gardner Gould. Enclosure [A] Narrative pg 6

as both a ship and a name has been part of the United States military history for over 230 years.

The Sterett identification comes from the namesake of Lieutenant Andrew Sterett who was the son a Revolutionary war military Captain John Sterett, but more importantly fought successfully in both the Quasi War and the Barbary War. He is remembered most however for his actions in the Barbary wars where he was able to successfully defeat a Tripolitian ship after faking surrender twice and being able to defeat 30 of the enemy ships. Even more impressive was the fact that the ship he was commanding, the USS Enterprise, suffered no casualties at all. In his honor there have been four ships named after him¹⁴, with the Sterett from the battle of the Vella Gulf, (USS Sterett DD 407), being the second American vessel to carry the historic name.

Mr. Sherman was only eighteen years old at the time of the battle but was already a seasoned battle veteran and had been fighting in the Atlantic and Pacific theaters for a full year prior to the events in the Vella Gulf. Mr. Sherman's first hand accounts of the battle are unique, honest and may not be politically correct by today's standards, however they truly show what the American soldier and spirit was like during the war. Mr. Sherman was a signalman first class onboard the USS Sterett during this time and was stationed on the bridge and witnessed the full battle with his own two eyes. When asked about his emotions during the battle and if he was afraid or nervous he responded,

“Well, in combat you tend to be very cool and collected and try to remain in perfect shape because they taught us to behave like that, there was no excitement, no bullshit; its either they are going to get me or we're going to get them, I relied on everyone and hoped that they use their talent and I use mine and things would go in our favor”

¹⁴ <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Andrew-Sterett>

He then noted that success was the only option because they were essentially surrounded on all sides, because the Sounding Islands in the Gulf were under Japanese control. He further stated, "Either we get the enemy or they're going to get us, one way or another. They would get us if we didn't get them first, because both islands were occupied by the Japs".

When remembering the battle itself, he also noted how effective the strategy was and how the surprise assault was a huge success and stated that, "we definitely caught them with their pants down and opened up on them with everything but the kitchen sink". Mr. Sherman was also somewhat emotional while recounting the attack because a year prior in November 1942, the Sterett along with himself and the men he was serving with, were involved in another serious encounter with the Japanese that almost cost them their lives. They survived but many of their close friends serving on surrounding escort ships, were not as fortunate. After the Vella Gulf battle, he recalled that his attitude and that of his shipmates was euphoric and said, "We were very happy to give some payback to the Japs because they cleaned us out a year before and now it was time to return the favor". He recalled the battle was very dark and there was no visibility and recalled the imagery of the battle like this:

"It was like seeing 6 or 7 buses, then all of sudden the buses got hit by our fish, (torpedoes). Then, a series of big and loud explosions of fire. Kind of like if dynamite had just gone off in front of you and then, well after awhile there were no more buses. We didn't see any survivors jump off and go in to the water but at this point we didn't care about any and were just glad we got them good".

When asked about his emotions after the battle and the realization that it was a huge victory, both tactical and psychologically, he humbly stated:

“Well we knew we had won when they didn’t fire back at us and we were happy that our radar was definitely superior to the Jap’s radar. We were just happy when it was over and glad they didn’t fire first. It’s just a fortunate fact of life that we got them first when they could have just as easily gotten us if we had been spotted by their radar. Would have spoiled our surprise. Everyone was happy, kinda like winning a football game. It was one of the best things for us because before that the Japs had been kicking the shit out of us but now we got them back and it was definitely the turning point of the war in that specific location. Everyone was very happy. No one died, because normally there are always huge casualties in these sort of deals”.

Mr. Sherman continued to fight in the Pacific theater after the Battle of the Vella Gulf and he continued to fight bravely and heroically while narrowly escaping death on a number of other occasions, until the war was officially ended in 1945. Occasionally, he will reminisce and look back on his actions during the battle of the Vella Gulf and World War II. He remembers the events with pride and a deep fondness for the close friendships he made during the War, several of which did not survive. He views it as a job that every soldier had to do. It was their duty and he does not see anything extraordinary about his actions, even though he deserves much honor and respect because he truly is a hero who fought bravely and selflessly to protect the freedoms that we as American hold dear, but many times take for granted. It is because of him and all the other soldiers that served defending our country that we as Americans, can enjoy the freedom we have today.

The battle of Vella Gulf has become legendary in the eyes of the United States Navy and has been used as a definitive example on how to properly prepare and engage an enemy force. The battle had become so revered and honored that there have been two Navy vessels and a coat of arms named and created in its honor. The first ship to carry the name was the USS Vella Gulf (CVE-111), which was a Commencement Bay-class escort carrier, commissioned on August 9, 1945. It weighed 11,373 tons, carried 34 aircraft, and was able to carry 1,066 men. The ship won a Battle Star for air strikes

against Rota and the Pagan Islands in the Marianas in July 1945¹⁵ and also participated as an occupying force in Japan after that country officially surrendered on August 15, 1945. Shortly following, it was deactivated and decommissioned on 9 August 1946.

The second USS Vella Gulf (CG-72) is a Ticonderoga class missile cruiser and was commissioned on July 12, 1993. It weighs 9,600 tons and can carry 33 officers and 327 enlisted men¹⁶. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the ship was sent as both support and defense while also engaging in humanitarian efforts off the coast of New York. One week later, it was sent as part of the Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Battle Group, to the Mediterranean, and South-Asia as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. Since then it has been active in many naval missions all over the world, Somalia being the most recent, and to this day, is still in active service.

In the end the Battle of the Vella Gulf was a huge success and truly was a turning point in the war both strategically and psychologically. The battle while not well known and understood was a monumental success and truly did help lead to the eventual American victory and put an end the war that had taken the lives of many brave and heroic men and women. The battle showed the Japanese and the world that the American Navy was strong and capable of effectively and decisively defeating the Japanese and other possible nations in torpedo warfare. The battle on the other hand was strategically and psychologically devastating to the Japanese. In twenty months of war their destroyers had never been bested in a night torpedo action.¹⁷ Within a week after the battle the Japanese realized that Kolombangara could not be held and commenced preparations to evacuate the forces they had built up at such effort and cost. American destroyers fought

¹⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Vella_Gulf_\(CVE-111\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Vella_Gulf_(CVE-111))

¹⁶ <http://www.vella-gulf.navy.mil/site%20pages/facts.aspx>

¹⁷ http://www.microworks.net/pacific/battles/vella_gulf.htm

Japanese destroyers five times more, (at Horaniu, three times off Kolombangara and at the Battle of Vella Lavella) before they achieved another victory at Cape St. George.¹⁸

The battle showed what was capable with proper planning and clear understanding between both commanders and crewmen. The battle was won not only because of the proper planning and superior technology but also as result of the actions of the brave men who fought and served during the events, in order to protect and preserve the American way of life and ensure that it will continue to thrive.

¹⁸ http://www.microworks.net/pacific/battles/vella_gulf.htm

Primary Documents

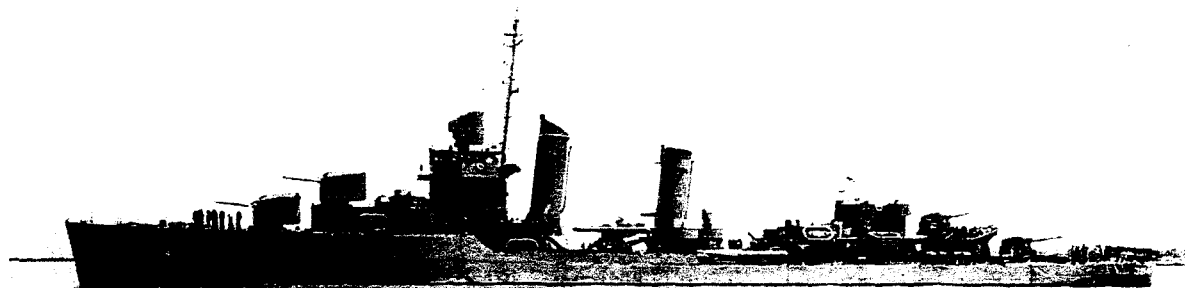
- Reproductions of Original Records: *The Battle of Vella Gulf 6-7 August 1943*, Commander Task Group 31.2. Commander Frederick Moosbrugger. Action Report. Destroyer History Foundation Post Office Box 1695. Bolton Landing, New York 12814
- USS Sterett (DD407): *Report of Action, for night of 6-7 August, 1943. Deck Log Book*, Commanding officer Frank Gardner Could. Destroyer History Foundation Post Office Box 1695. Bolton Landing, New York 12814
- The first hand accounts of Frederick J. Sherman, United States Navy signalman first class USS Sterett (DD-407)

Secondary Documents and Websites

- Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation*, (Random House, 1998)
- <http://www.vella-gulf.navy.mil/site%20pages/about.aspx>
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PT_109
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Vella_Gulf
- <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Andrew-Sterett>
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Vella_Gulf_\(CVE-111\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Vella_Gulf_(CVE-111))
- <http://www.vella-gulf.navy.mil/site%20pages/facts.aspx>
- <http://www.destroyerhistory.org/destroyers/vellagulf2008.html>
- http://www.microworks.net/pacific/battles/vella_gulf.htm
- <http://www.destroyerhistory.org/goldplater/crest12.html>

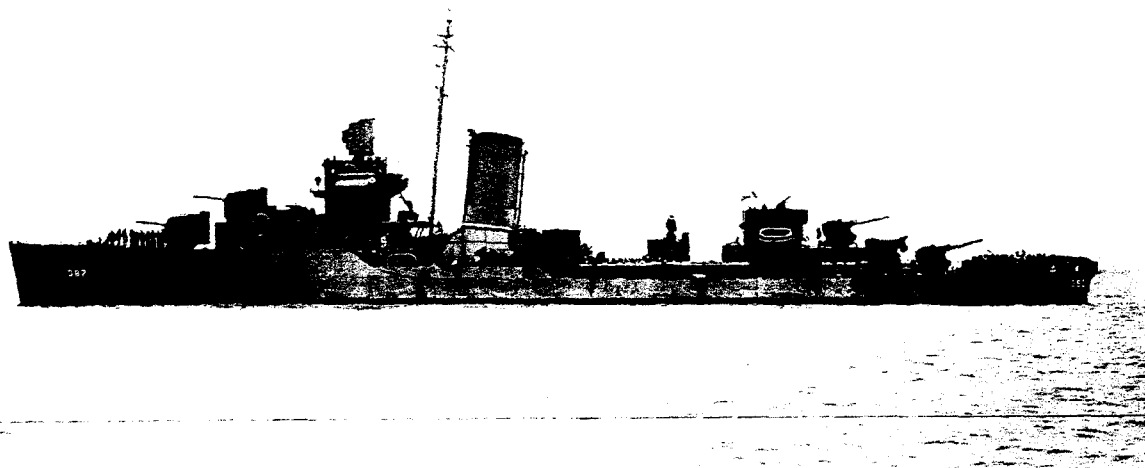
Ships of CTG 31.2

USS Dunlap (USS-384)

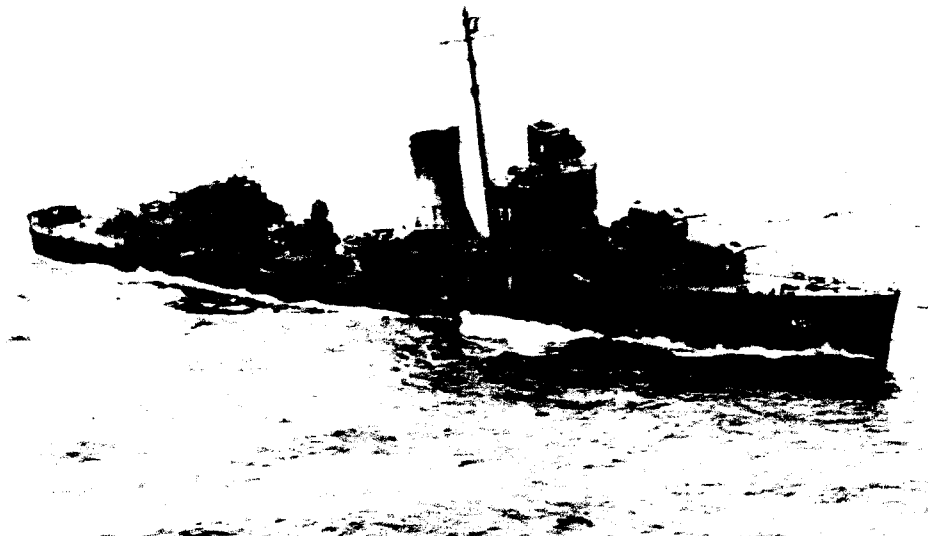


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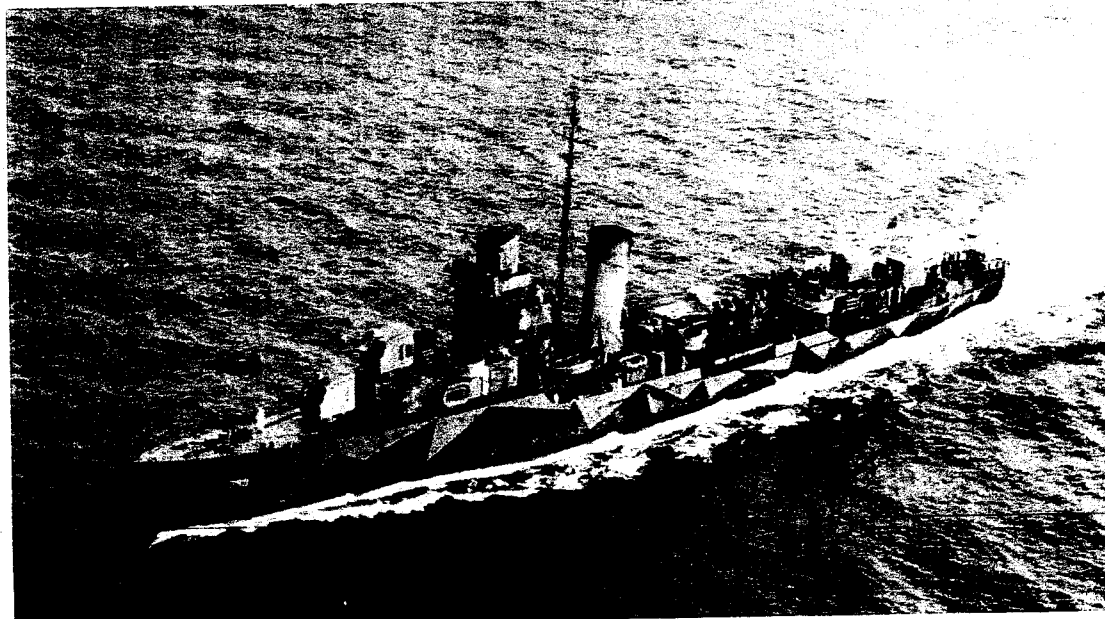
USS CRAVEN (DD-382)



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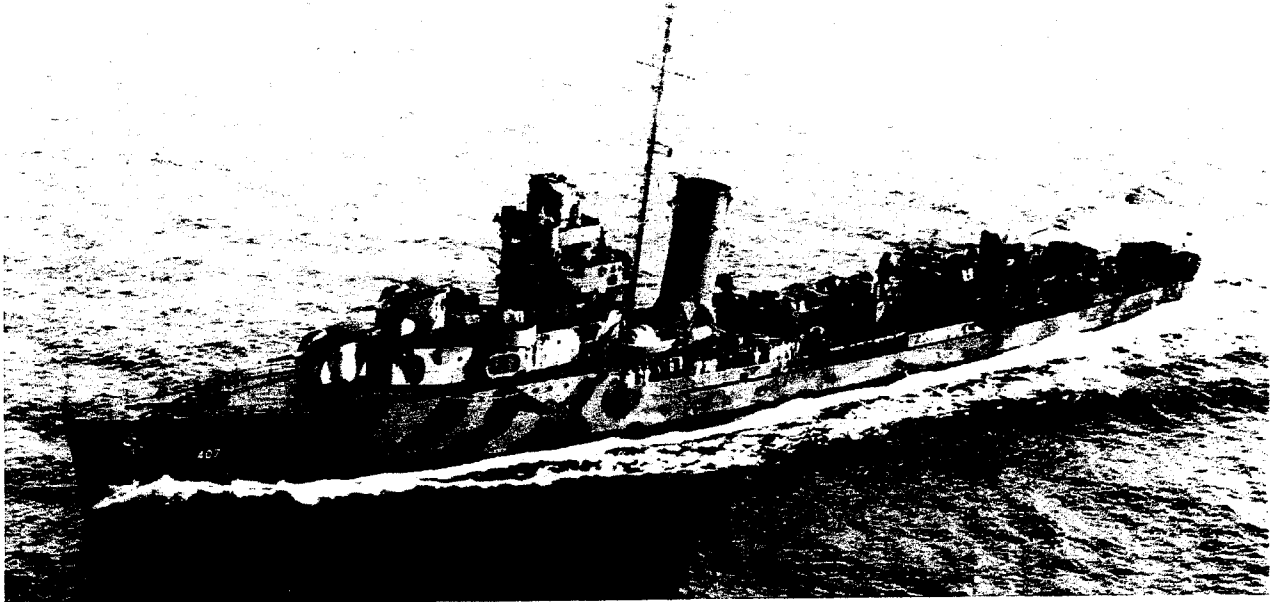
USS MAURY (DD-401)

Courtesy R.S. Crenshaw, Jr. collection.

USS LANG (DD-399)

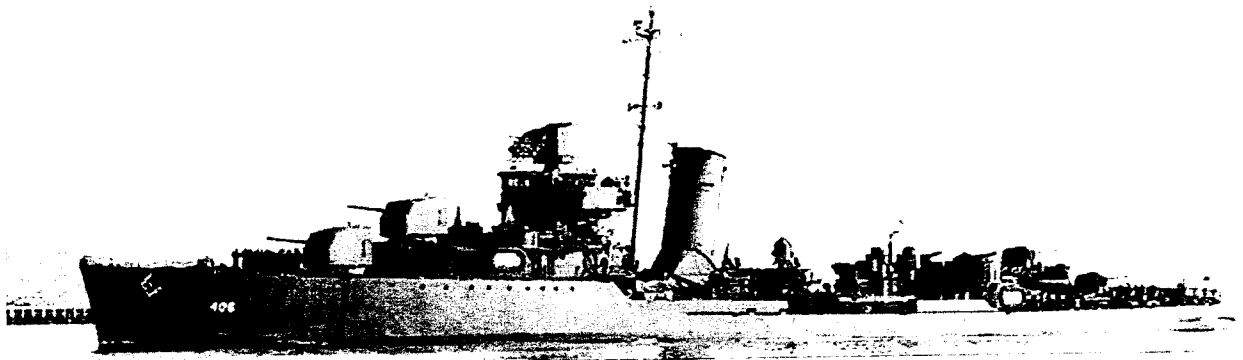
Edited by Destroyer History Foundation from NARA photo 80-G-12338.

USS STERETT (DD-407)



Edited by Destroyer History Foundation from NARA photo 80-G-12337

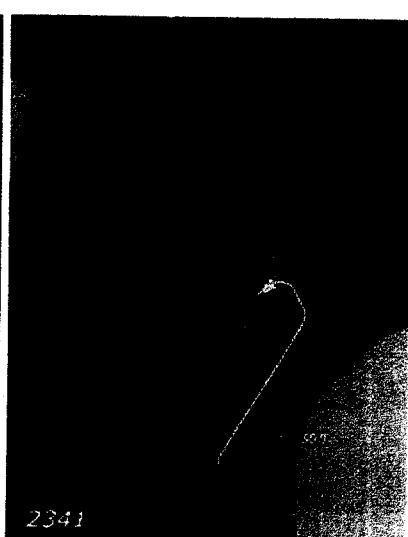
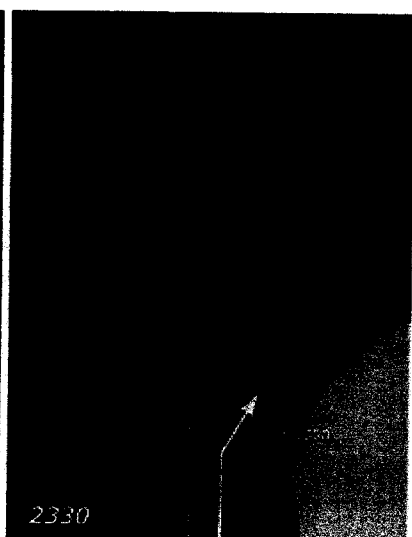
USS STACK (DD-406)



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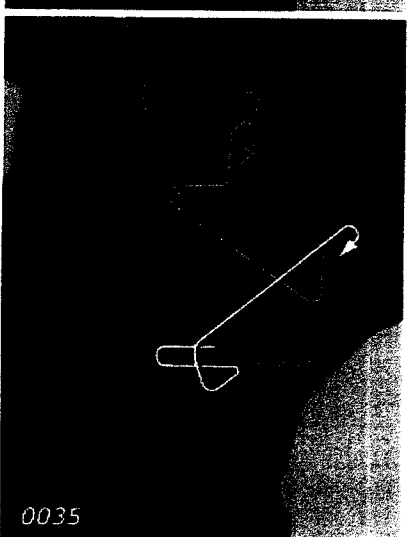
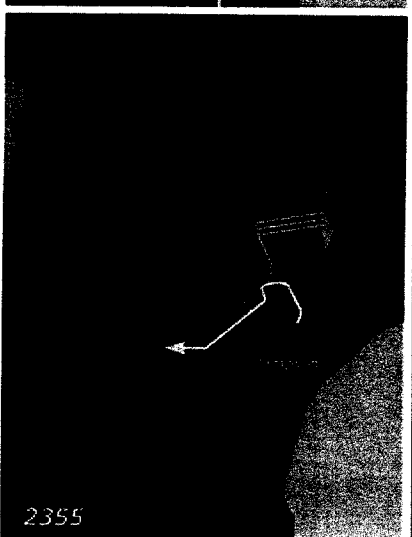
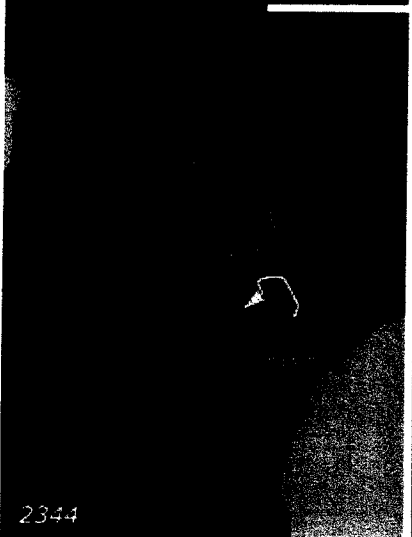
The Battle of Vella Gulf Attack Summary





2330

2341



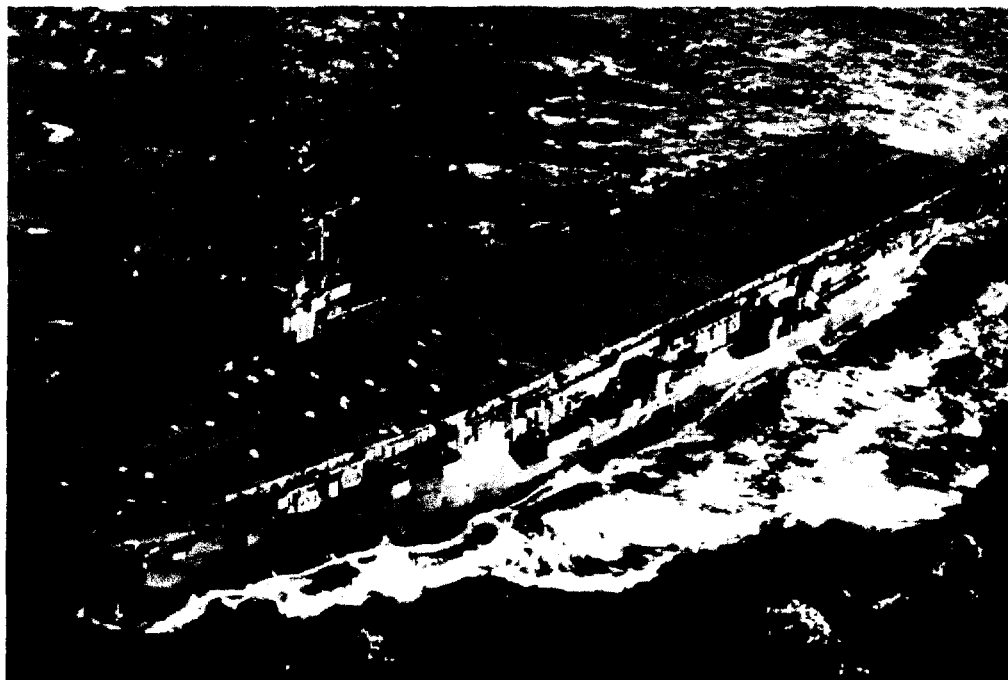
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USS Vella Gulf (CVE-111)



USS Vella Gulf (CG-72)





The Shield:

"VELLA GULF's coat of arms links the officers and men of Divisions ABLE ONE and ABLE TWO who fought valiantly at the Battle of Vella Gulf, with the crew that sails in VELLA GULF today. The commissioning pennant recalls the previous ship of the same name, USS VELLA GULF (CVE 111). Dark blue and gold are colors traditionally associated with the Navy. The Battle of Vella Gulf occurred in an area known as "The Slot" in the Solomon Islands, represented by the flaunches in the middle of the shield. The wavy division at top refers to the sea. The six U.S. Navy destroyers involved in the battle are recalled by the six sections comprising the shield, while the four Japanese destroyers, the "Tokyo Express," who were defeated at Vella Gulf, are suggested by the red discs. Dark blue alludes to the darkness of the nighttime battle. Counter-changing the colors of the shield underscores unity of U.S. Navy components; the bald eagle characterizes the U.S. victory and naval strength, past and present. The crossed swords embody the synergism of officer-enlisted teams. The trident symbolizes sea prowess and the modern weapons of the AEGIS combat system. The lightning flashes represent quick strike capabilities and allude to the advantage of radar, which was instrumental to victory in the Battle of Vella Gulf. Red symbolizes courage and firepower. The star commemorates the Battle Star awarded to the USS VELLA GULF (CVE-111) for her service in World War II."¹⁹

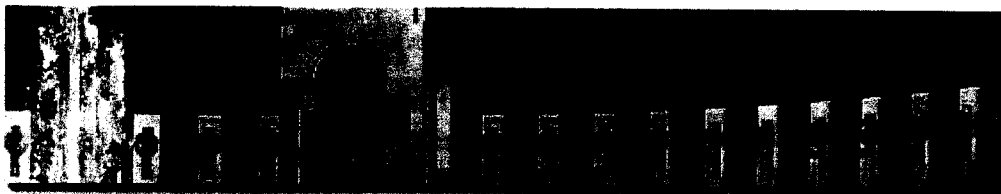
¹⁹ <http://www.vella-gulf.navy.mil/site%20pages/about.aspx>



Frederick J. Sherman 4th from the right in the black blazer with grey pants



Signalman first class Frederick J. Sherman United States Navy



World War II Honoree

World War II Veteran



Frederick J. Sherman

BRANCH OF SERVICE
U.S. Navy

HOMETOWN
Astoria Queens, NY

HONORED BY
Leonor Sherman, Wife



ACTIVITY DURING WWII

SERVED IN THE ATLANTIC AND THE PACIFIC ON BOARD THE USS STERETT DD-407 FROM JANUARY 19, 1942 TO DECEMBER 1945.