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## **The Long Blue Line: Tulagi's coxswains—the Service's 1<sup>st</sup> Silver Star recipients**

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*The commanding officer considers their example, knowledge of small boat handling and attention to duty in the face of danger, contributed notably in the capture of Tulagi, and respectfully requests that these four Coast Guardsmen be commended in a suitable manner for their valorous services.*

--John D. Sweeney, Captain, USS *McKean*

In early August 1942, the four Coast Guardsmen noted in the quote above served as landing craft coxswains in the amphibious invasion of Tulagi, Solomon Islands. In the spring of 1942, the Japanese military juggernaut seemed unstoppable in the Pacific. By July, the enemy had overrun Guam, Wake Island, Hong Kong, Singapore, vast areas of China, the Philippines, Southeast Asia, the Dutch East Indies as well as the Solomon Islands. Thus, American naval strategists decided to begin their first offensive of World War II in the Solomons.

At the beginning of World War II, the Coast Guard held a monopoly on shallow water operations among U.S. sea services. In 1915, the U.S. Lifesaving Service and its surfmen had become part of the Coast Guard and their experience and skill sets in smallboat operations remained an important part of the Service after the merger. Therefore, the Navy selected these experienced surfmen to operate landing craft on board its fast attack transports, such as the USS *William McKean*.

Known as an APD or “Green Dragon” by the marines, the *McKean* was a World War I-era four-stack destroyer converted to carry a company of marines. The Navy designation of APD stood for transport (“AP”) destroyer (D”). These re-purposed warships retained their anti-submarine warfare capability, carried anti-aircraft and fore and aft deck guns, and could steam at an impressive 35 knots. Their primary mission was rapid insertion of marines in amphibious operations, so they were equipped with landing craft. The *McKean* was one of four APDs that comprised Transport Division 12 (TransDiv 12), which would insert the Marine Corps’ 1<sup>st</sup> Raider Battalion on the beaches of Tulagi, on August 7, 1942.

Each APD carried four landing craft designated LCPs (Landing Craft Personnel). Also known as “Higgins Boats,” the LCP was the U.S. military’s first operational landing craft. It had a snub nose bow supporting two side-by-side gun tubs with each position holding a .30 caliber machine gun. The helm and engine controls were located behind the tandem gun emplacements. Diesel-powered, the LCP measured 36 feet in length, could hold 36 men, but it had a top speed of only eight knots. This early landing craft design carried no front ramp, so after it beached, troops debarked over its sides or jumped off the bow. The LCP required a crew of three, including a coxswain as well as an engineer and third crewmember who both doubled as machine gunners. The LCP exposed its crew to

enemy fire, so the coxswains braved upper body, head and neck wounds from enemy snipers and machine guns. In fact, during the Tulagi offensive, one Higgins Boat coxswain was hit in the head and killed by enemy fire causing his boat to turn around and lead following boats in the wrong direction.

The four Coast Guard coxswains on board *McKean* were experienced boat drivers. A native of Chincoteague, Virginia, Daniel Tarr enlisted as a surfman and later became coxswain of *McKean*'s Boat Number 1. William Sparling was born in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, joined the service in 1939, and became a coxswain in 1941. He commanded Boat Number 2. Hailing from Detroit, Harold Miller joined up in 1939, advanced to Boatswains Mate 2/c by 1941 and operated Boat Number 3. Born in 1907, North Carolinian Glenn Harris joined the Coast Guard in 1929 and remained a surfman until 1941, when he became coxswain of *McKean*'s Boat Number 4. At nearly 35 years of age, his enlisted shipmates considered Harris an old timer. All four men received the 10-day landing craft training in New Orleans at Higgins Industries, builder of the Higgins Boat.

Tulagi proved World War II's first true test of U.S. amphibious forces against entrenched enemy forces. It was the capital of the southern Solomons and the only significant British settlement in the protectorate. The Japanese had occupied the small island in May 1942 with a garrison of 800 Imperial Japanese Navy troops and used it as a seaplane base for reconnaissance missions.

The four Higgins Boats commanded by Tarr, Sparling, Miller and Harris deployed from *McKean* with the marines of Company D, 1<sup>st</sup> Raider Battalion. Of the four TransDiv 12 APDs, sisterships *Francis Gregory* and *George Little* took up station 3,000 yards offshore of the landing area, Beach Blue. They served as salvage vessels and guard ships marking the channel into the landing area. *McKean* and her fourth sistership, *Edmund Colhoun*, sent their eight landing craft up the slot to land the Marine Raiders on Beach Blue at 8:00 a.m., August 7. The four coxswains landed the first wave of Raiders and, over the course of the next three days, delivered vitally needed equipment, ammunition and supplies.

The amphibious assault of Tulagi was the first U.S. offensive of World War II. It was also the first battle contested by determined Japanese troops, giving the Americans a taste of the horrors to come in island battles like Tarawa, Saipan and Palau. In three days of fighting, the marines captured Tulagi from the Japanese garrison of 800 Japanese, with only two-dozen surrendering. After the battle, the operational commander, General William Rupertus, claimed: "*I don't think the United States has an episode in its history that can touch what's been done here.*"

For landing the marines' first wave at Tulagi, the Navy awarded Silver Star Medals to coxswains Daniel Tarr, William Sparling, Harold Miller and Glen Harris and advanced them in their rating. They were the first enlisted men in the Coast Guard to receive the Silver Star. And, all four of these heroic coxswains will be honored as Fast Response Cutter namesakes.