

U.S.S. Suwannee

ALL THIS AND MOROTAI TOO

24 September 1944

(Submitted by LaWanna Hartsell Lewis, whose grandfather, Hildreth Leland Upton served aboard the Suwannee. So far we have not been able to determine who wrote this piece, but will keep trying to find out.)

Just two years ago today, at Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Co. in Newport News, Virginia, Rear Admiral O.L. Cox accepted the U.S.S. SUWANNEE for the Navy. The ship was placed in full commission under the command of Capt. J.J. Clark. Originally scheduled for commissioning a month later, the ship was rushed to completion in order to be available for impending operations. On October 1 she left Pier 9 at the Newport News Shipyard and headed out for what was later laughingly called a "shakedown cruise". During the next two weeks we depermed, ran the degaussing range, calibrated the compass and R.D.F., fired several gunnery practices, landed planes aboard (and had our first TBF go into the catwalk), took aboard ammunition and provisions and after an inspection by Mr. Gates, the Asst. SecNav for Air, reported ready for sea.

On October 17 we left N.O.B. Norfolk and entered the high seas for the first time, bound for Bermuda, B.W.I. Soon after anchoring in Murrays Anchorage off Hamilton, Bermuda, it became apparent that we were to participate in an assault operation. Rumors of a strike at Dakar ran rife but soon after setting sail again an announcement was made that we were to participate in the long heralded second front in the vicinity of Casablanca. The carrier force consisting of the SUWANNEE, RANGER, SANGAMON and SANTEE was scheduled to support amphibious landings until an airfield was secured and 70 P40s from the Chenango could be catapulted and sent ashore. We carried 39 planes, an unprecedented load for a CVE, and successful operation was problematical since the catapult had been decommissioned and there was no assurance that wind conditions would be favorable. We soon rendezvoused with the "greatest amphibious force in history".

The voyage to Africa was completed successfully and the convoy arrived on schedule after running through the German U-Boat picket line along the coast of Africa without loss. "D" Day, Sunday, November 8, was much similar to the numerous "D" Days that we have since participated in. Psychologically, however, the first is always the worst, and it was with much relief that the end of the day found us relatively unscathed. The landings had been successful and the SUWANNEE bombers had assisted in silencing heavy shore batteries and the French battleship "Jean Bart". Two French submarines in Casablanca Harbor were sunk by aerial attack and French cruisers and destroyers which attempted to clear the harbor to fight were mortally wounded by gunfire from our ships, assisted by SUWANNEE TBFs. Shortly thereafter, we struck the keynote for the successful war against the German U-Boat menace by being the first CVE to sink a submarine. A flight of TBFs of VGS-27, led by Lt. Cmdr. Nation, sighted a fully surfaced medium sized German submarine and successfully attacked with depth charges. On the

morning of November 12, French forces in Casablanca capitulated. Threatened by General Patton's armored division to the east, by the guns of U.S. battleships and cruisers to the west and by Suwannee planes overhead, the French forces surrendered. At 1226 Admiral Hewitt sent word that our mission had been completed and we set course for Bermuda again.

The trip home was extremely uncomfortable for most of the green crew since a 59-knot gale blew almost continuously bringing on the roughest weather we have ever experienced. It was in this storm that the Medical Department officially went into commission by performing its first major surgery -- a successful appendectomy on C.R.E. Murray Alexander; Lt. Cmdr. Delaney and Lt. Burwell operated in spite of the heavy pitch and roll (27 degrees maximum). After a short stop in Bermuda (and one liberty) the Suwannee proceeded to Norfolk, where we stayed just long enough for all hands to have a 48-hour liberty before shoving off on Dec 5 to join the Pacific Fleet.

On December 11 and 12 we passed through the Panama Canal without incident (and without liberty) except for a tangle between the signal yardarm and a control tower. The Canal authorities wouldn't cooperate by removing the control tower, so we officially put the C and R Department into commission. The yardarm was removed about midnight amidst much confusion and the close supervision of the First Lieutenant from the roof of the control tower. The passage across the Pacific was marked by our first crossing of the Equator and the 180th Meridian and our first Christmas at sea (with no mail buoy in the vicinity). We engaged in numerous star shell and searchlight practices at night under the tutelage of Admiral Giffen, on the Wichita, and long debates were held on the advantages of being fully illuminated at night in submarine water. On January 4, 1943 the veterans of the South Pacific Forces watched in amazement as we steamed into Noumea, New Caledonia with the officers and crew at quarters in whites. We were unimpressed by our new surroundings except for the reassuring sight of the big old "Sara" (U.S.S. Saratoga) sitting peacefully at anchor in spite of the numerous rumors of her sinking.

After officially reporting to ComSoPac for duty, we soon got underway and headed for Havannah Harbor, Efate, where we were destined to spend seven months. On January 17, the Suwannee moored to the now famous "Buoy 14" and prepared for tremendous operations with the South Pacific Force. On January 21, 1943 F.W. MacMahon took over command from Capt. Clark who went back to assume command of the new Yorktown. On January 27 we received orders to get under way to rendezvous with and provide coverage for several transports filled with Army troops under the command of General Patch. The Army was finally moving into Guadalcanal and it was rumored that the advance elements contained two U.S.O. shows, material for an officers club and a hand laundry.

This comparatively simple operation ended up tragically for the force under Admiral Giffen, who was subjected to a dusk torpedo attack off Guadalcanal and the USS Chicago, under tow and escorted by 5 DDs was again attacked and sunk in spite of coverage by Suwannee, Chenango and Enterprise planes. The Suwannee and Chenango narrowly averted a dusk attack, by 15 Jap bombers, by running into a weather front where

the enemy failed to make contact. At this time word was received that the Jap fleet was at sea and would attempt to reinforce Guadalcanal; the Suwannee, Chenango, Sangamon, four cruisers and four old battleships joined up under Vice Admiral Leary and proceeded to the vicinity of Vanikoro Island to protect the northeastern approaches to the Solomons. All indications pointed to the possibility of an engagement and all 15 TBFs were on deck in condition, 11 loaded with torpedoes. Admiral Leary sent word about 0200 one morning, "I expect to contact the enemy at dawn." The enemy never did materialize, however. Instead, 20 Jap destroyers ran down to Guadalcanal and evacuated troops rather than reinforce their garrison. Shortly thereafter, the capture of Guadalcanal was announced as being completed.

It was during this cruise off Vanikoro that CarDiv 22's first commander took over. Rear Admiral Mason, former skipper of the Hornet, was transferred to the flagship (Suwannee) at sea by breeches buoy. After the retirement of the Tokyo Express we returned to port for a short stay and then successfully covered the movement of troops in the occupation of the Russell Islands in the Solomon group. At the conclusion of this operation we returned to Efate, took aboard the new commander, Admiral McFall, and sat at Buoy 14 till about 10 August except for a week of covering troops for the occupation of New Georgia. During this period the squadrons, VT and VF 27, were sent to Guadalcanal for two long periods during which they amassed an impressive combatant record. Early in August, we received the glorious news that we would soon depart for "Uncle Sugar" for yard availability. In no time at all we were learning all over again the pitfalls of life in the _____ and fighting the "battle of Market Street." Also in no time at all we arrived in San Diego, took aboard VF and VT 60 and set out for the occupation of the Gilbert Islands, which marked the first step of a whole new phase of Pacific warfare.

The Suwannee and Air Group 60 have been engaged almost continuously since October 1943 in the support of amphibious operations. Except for a short stay in San Diego, where Capt W.D. Johnson took over command, the duty has been severe but most satisfactory. The past year has seen the fall, in rapid succession, of Jap garrisons at Tarawa, Apemama, Kwajalein, Eniwetok, Aitape, Hollandia, Saipan, Tinian, Guam, Morotai and (soon) Peleliu. The Suwannee and her sister ships have the unique distinction of having participated in every major amphibious operation in the Pacific, except the present one at Peleliu. We have proven ourselves to be invaluable support for these operations and we have successfully completed operations of such length and intensity that they taxed the endurance of all hands. The squadrons have outfought and outlasted all other carrier based squadrons in the fleet and in doing so have established operation records that should warm the heart of every strong advocate of a carrier.

Navy Statistics give a fair idea of the relative intensity of our operations during the past year as compared to the first year. When Air Group 60 came aboard, the Suwannee had something less than 2000 landings. Lt. Cmdr. Feilback made the 2,000th and now the figure stands at 6369. When we arrived in San Francisco on September 10, 1943, we had logged slightly more than 40,000 nautical miles. We now have 121,200. Twelve officers and 313 men who were about for the commissioning ceremony (plank-owners) are still aboard (now considerably saltier). Our longest cruise, during the Gilberts Operation, took

31 days 21 hours and 24 minutes and covered 10,812.16 non-stop miles. On that trip we also crossed the equator 27 times. Our _____ crossings now total 5_ with 9 crossings of the 180th Meridian. Aircraft operating from the Suwannee have dropped approximately 500,000 pounds of bombs and fired 350,000 rounds of 50-caliber ammunition. The signal force has handled about 18,000 messages by blinker and semaphore. About the same number of radio messages have been written up while 10 times that number have been copied. The officers and men have consumed 2,000,000 pounds of food. The squadrons of Air Group 60 had flown 16,000 hours at the end of the Marianas campaign and had an average of 420 hours per pilot. One hundred and forty one combat missions had been flown up to that time with an additional 830 combat sorties.

THE END

(If anyone reading this has a copy of the original article and can help me fill in the blanks, please let me know, using either the "Contact" button on ussuwannee.org or by posting on the Facebook page USS Suwannee CVE 27.)