

Background/Big Picture/Context

Late summer of 1944. The United States Navy had just won the Battle of the Philippine Sea in late June, and had, at least for a while, eliminated the IJN as a far-ranging mobile naval force. In the afterglow, plans for the invasion of the Philippines accelerated.

Next steps, capture islands which would allow staging air power to directly support the invasion of Mindanao: in the Palau Islands (Peleliu and Anguar), and in the Netherlands East Indies (NEI), Molucca Islands, which were also the natural pivot where advance could go west to Borneo or northwest to the Philippines, or both.

Nimitz's Third Fleet would tackle the Palaus while MacArthur's Seventh Fleet would take on Morotai.

Japanese defense of the southern approaches to the Philippines hinged on Halmahera, which boasted 31,000 defenders and nine airfields. A tough nut indeed, due both to the forces there and the highly defensible topography and shape of the island, and the additional supporting air power in the NEI area, specifically Ambon, Ceram, and the Celebes. MacArthur realized he could take nearby Morotai, lightly defended, quickly establish a strong air power presence, and easily protect it from the Japanese on Halmahera. Without the threat of major units of the IJN, a force of PT-boats would be sufficient to interdict any attempts to retake Morotai by infiltrating men and supplies by barge, their only remaining option. Air power could then dominate the area, neutralize the strength on Halmahera, suppress the remaining Japanese strength, land-based air distributed in the NEI, and support further advances west toward Borneo.

The concept was another classic leapfrogging, leverage, and isolating plan, which had brilliantly allowed US forces to avoid so much hard slugging and exploit US advantages in naval power, mobility and amphibious skill, and leave large numbers of Japanese to wither on the vine.

Morotai is a comparatively small island, 695 square miles of mostly hills, off the bigger Halmahera, which is ten times its size, in the northern Molucca's, west of the Vogelkopf, the head of the New Guinea "turkey," halfway from the Vogelkopf to Manado on the northern tip of Celebes Island. Halmahera is shaped like a letter K: its two northern arms almost embrace Morotai from the south.¹

After an air campaign had reduced Japanese NEI air power from 400 to about 80 planes, both islands were invaded the same day, September 15th, 1944.

U.S. Forces

Task Force 77, commanded by RADM Dan Barbey (Commander VII Amphibious Force), is tasked to take Morotai. He has 71 amphibious vessels of all sizes: APA's, APD's, LCI's, LST's, LCT's and an LSD, shepherded by 12 destroyers, lifting 68,200 Army combat and service troops.

The amphibious group was teamed with a Close Support and Covering Group, commanded by Rear Adm. Russell S. Berkey, of 2 heavy cruisers, 3 light cruisers, and 10 destroyers.

Barbey's close air support was provided by 6 CVE's screened by their own 10 DE's, designated Task Group 77.1, commanded by RADM Thomas L. Sprague. The Task Group, fielded 108 fighters and 54 torpedo bombers.

Strategic air support was provided by the Fifth Air Force, coordinating with the Thirteenth Air Force, the Royal Australian Air Force Command, and the land-based planes of the Allied Naval Forces.

Four Motor Torpedo Boat (MTB) squadrons, 41 boats, accompanied the invasion force, MTBRons 9 and 18 operating from tender USS *Oyster Bay* (AGP-6) and MTBRons 10 and 33 from tender USS *Mobjack* (AGP-7).⁴

The Carriers

TG 77.1 was divided into two carrier units.

TG 77.1.1, commanded by RADM Thomas Sprague COMCARDIV 22), consisted of four *Sangamon* class escort carriers:

USS *Sangamon* (CVE-26),
embarking CVE Air Group 37 (CVEG-37),
VF-37, 21 F6F-5
VT-37, 9 TBM-1C
USS *Suwannee* (CVE-27),
embarking CVEG-60,
VF-60, 22 F6F-3
VT-60, 9 TBM-1C
USS *Chenango* (CVE-28),
embarking CVE-35,
VF-35, 17 F6F-3
VT-35, 8 TBM-1C
USS *Santee* (CVE-29)
embarking CVEG-26,
VF-26, 24 FM-2
VT-26, 9 TBM-1Cⁱⁱ

They provide about 84 fighters and 35 torpedo bombers.

TU 77.1.2 commanded by RADM Clifton A.F. Sprague (COMCARDIV 25), consisted of two *Casablanca* class escort carriers:

USS *Fanshaw Bay* (CVE-70)
embarking VC-66, 16 FM-2 Wildcats and 12 TBM-1C Avengers
USS *Midway* (CVE-63)
embarking VC-65, 12 FM-2s and 9 TBM-1Csⁱⁱⁱ

Midway was renamed *St. Lo* in October 1944 in order to make the name Midway available for the first ship of the new class designed to replace the *Essex* class.

They provide about 28 fighters and 21 torpedo bombers.

Wildcats: FM-2 Versus F4F

Grumman's Wildcat, while superseded by the Grumman F6F Hellcat and the Vought F4U Corsair on the big decks of the *Essex*-class and the nine ships of the *Independence*-class light carriers (CVL-22-30), still claimed a place aboard the *Bogue*-class (11 USN hulls) and *Casablanca*-class CVEs (50 hulls, CVE-55 through CVE-104), which were too small to handle the F6Fs safely. The four ships of the small and relatively unique *Sangamon*-class CVE-26-29), built between the Bogues and the Casablanclas, were large enough to operate Hellcats, and 3 of the four did.

Grumman was not able to manufacture Wildcats at the rate demanded by the Navy, so, the company licensed General Motors to help build them. By the time GM was awarded the construction contract, the Grumman Wildcat was the six guns F4F-3 version, with a 14-cylinder (two rows of 7) Pratt & Whitney R-1830 rated at 1,200hp, and General Motors, Eastern Aircraft Division went into production to make these, designated FM-1 by the system of the day (F-fighter, M- General Motors builder, -1, the first variant of the first fighter built by General Motors. The Grumman Wildcat, F4F-3, was the fourth fighter built by Grumman, and the third variant of that fighter).

In order to speed production, however, while cranking out FM-1s, GM made changes, notably forging/stamping out parts which had previously been cast or welded. This lightened the overall weight, and the GM decision to reduce the .50-cal guns from six to four, further lightened the aircraft. In the interim, the Wright R-1820, a 9-cylinder, single row of cylinders engine with an extra 150 horsepower was fitted replacing the P & W R-1830.

The combination of reduced weight and extra horsepower made the FM-2 a hotter aircraft than the F4F-3. (the number after the R in Navy engine nomenclature is the cylinder capacity in cubic inches, like cars, 350 cubic inches, 400 horsepower, Pontiac GTO, for example). GM built 880 FM-1s and 4400 FM-2s.^{iv}

US Navy CVE Classes

The first US Navy CVE was USS *Long Island* (CVE-1), converted from a merchant ship, and one additional of the "class" was built, HMS *Archer*, sent to the Royal Navy. *Long Island* was used as a ferry and training carrier on the west coast out of San Diego.

Another singular CVE was USS *Charger*. Before the Bogue class, a four-ship class of small escort carriers was built for the RN, also built on merchant ship hulls. Named Avenger class by the RN, one, USS *Charger* was returned to the USN and designated (CVE-30) when it came back. Small, *Charger* was only used by the USN as a training carrier in the Chesapeake Bay.

Displacement of 8,300 tons,
Full Load Displacement: 13,527 tons
Length of 492 width 66,
Flight deck 418 by 70 ft
Speed 16.5 kts
Aircraft 15

Bogue class CVE 42 ships, 11 USN, 31 RN

Bogue class was the first substantial class of escort carriers. Built on the cargo ship hulls. Of the first group of Bogues, ten were built for the US Navy (CVE-9, 11, 12, 13, 16, 18, 20, 21, 23, 25,) and eleven built for the Royal Navy. A further group of 24 were built, the first for the US Navy, *Prince William* (CVE-31), and 23 for the RN, sometimes called the ***Prince William class*** or the ***Repeat Bogue class***.

The Bogues saw combat as ASW Hunter-Killers in the Atlantic, and did some ferry service in the Pacific. Their aircraft and escorts sank at least 47 U-boats. *Bogue* herself did some limited ASW in the Pacific, sinking two IJN submarines.

The specifications of both groups of Bogues were the same.

Standard Displacement: 9,800 tons
Full Load Displacement: 15,700 tons
Length: 496 by 70
Flight deck 437 by 80 ft
Speed 18 knots
Aircraft: 12 Wildcats 9 Avengers.

Sangamon class CVE

Also between the first and second groups of Bogues, four CVEs were built on the hulls of oilers, called the *Sangamon* class (CVE-26, 27, 28, 29). These ships were deployed as combatants throughout their wartime service, but were too slow to operate with the fast carriers, leaving that business to the *Independence* class CVLs.

Standard Displacement: 11,400 tons
Full Load Displacement: 24,275 tons
Length: 553 by 75
Flight deck: 502 ft by 85 ft
Speed 18 knots
Aircraft, 31-33, 22 Hellcats and 9 Avengers

Casablanca class CVE

This was the first class built from the keel up as aircraft carriers. 50 were built for the US Navy (CVE-55 through 104). They were used as combatants, ferries, training carriers, mostly in the Pacific.

Standard Displacement: 7,800 tons
Displacement: 10,900 tons
Length: 512 by 65
Flight Deck: 474 ft by 80 ft
Speed: 20 knots
Aircraft: 28 Wildcats Avengers

Commencement Bay class

Last class built. Came on line at the end of the war, with 18 being eventually commissioned, CVE-105 through 122. Only four saw combat during WW II, although most were commissioned before the war ended. Essentially, a Sangamon class in specifications, but built from the keel up as an aircraft carrier. Several saw extensive combat in the Korean War.

Standard Displacement: 10,900 tons
Full Load Displacement: 24,275 tons
Length: 557 feet Width 105 feet
Flight Deck: 501 ft by 80 ft width
Speed: 19 knots
Aircraft: 33 Hellcats, Corsairs, Avengers

Independence class Light Carriers. CVL-22 through 30

Nine carriers were built on the hulls of light cruisers. Longer than even the Sangamon class, they carried about the same complement of planes, but had the speed to run with the *Essex* class fast carriers. They were designated light carriers, to differentiate them from the slower escort carriers before and to come.

Standard Displacement: 11,000 tons
Full Load Displacement: 15,100 tons
Length: 662 x 109
Flight deck: length 552 ft by 73 ft width
Speed: 31 knots
Aircraft: 33-34, 23-26 Hellcats 8-9 Avengers

The Story

call signs

Invasion day was marked by negligible resistance on Morotai itself. Task Group 77.1 covered the landings, bombing Morotai of course, which was lightly defended, but also ranging out to pound Japanese installations on Halmahera.

With the landings well in hand, the second day was marked with more suppression on Halmahera.

At 0655 on the morning of September 16th, Ensign Harold A. Thompson of VF-26, embarked in USS *Santee* (CVE-29), part of a seven-plane FM-2 sweep of Halmahera, was shot down by heavy hostile fire while attacking three Japanese barges east of Lolabata point, in Wasile Bay (in the inner side of the easternmost of the two northern arms of the island). He was blown out of his exploding Wildcat, his parachute opening at about 250 feet,^v and splashed into the bay near the barge whose AA had probably shot him down. "I nosed over for my dive, Next thing I remember I was tumbling head over heels in the air." Thompson later related.^{vi} Helped to stay low in the water by a torn and only partially inflated Mae West,^{vii} he ducked as much as he could to avoid being seen and allowed the longshore current to carry him parallel to shore and away from the barges. He then used the cord keeping his signal mirror attached to his person to tie a tourniquet to slow the bleeding of his badly mangled hand.

His fellow VF-26 pilots, including his wingman, Jack Kenyon,^{viii} led by LT W.P. Thayer, immediately aborted their attacks on the barges and set up to protect Thompson. Another division of VF-26 FM-2s returning from a different attack mission, led by LTJG A. A. Roberts,^{ix} saw the plane explode, and Thompson's chute blossom briefly – he timed 14 seconds. He immediately joined his six squadron mates over their friend.^x At 0920, with Thompson having drifted several hundred yards away from the barges to close by a small tee-shaped pier, a Navy PBY arrived overhead and attempted an approach to the Ensign treading water. Unable to weather the crossfire arc of intense hostile fire from the shore, it managed to drop a one-man raft before shearing off. The raft fell amidst the Japanese on the shore.^{xi} The lumbering Catalina came around for a second try and the timing was better. The raft landed 50 yards in front of Thompson and drifted right to him perfectly, gaining the unbounded admiration of Harold Thompson for the Dumbo.^{xii} Despite the useless hand and lacerated left leg,^{xiii} he was able to inflate and board the tiny raft. Suddenly, he was no longer the pawn of the current, which had been pushing him parallel to the beachline, but the pawn of the wind, which wanted to push him ashore: he was unable, with only one arm, to prevent his raft from being carried toward the beach from which a significant portion of the hostile fire was coming. He maneuvered under the end of the pier. The other members of his flight remained above him, strafing Japanese gun positions and keeping him in sight.^{xiv}

Thompson's loyal fellows inevitably began to run short of fuel and ordnance. At 0930, flight leader Thayer, reluctantly had to bingo his Wildcats to the *Santee*, back to mother, low state.^{xv}

Four VC-66^{xvi} FM-2s from USS *Fanshaw Bay* (CVE-70), led by LT J.P. Fox, were diverted from their attacks on Lolobata airfield to relieve them. Mississippi gentleman, Lieutenant (jg) DeLoach Cope recalled when they got the word, they each still had one bomb and enough fuel and ammo to help out until others could be mustered to relieve them.^{xvii} They strafed the beach, and paid particular attention to anyone attempting to creep out the pier to get at Thompson.

Thomas Phillips 12/7/13 12:42 PM

Comment [1]: From LT J.P. Fox after action report evening 16 Sep '44
VC-66 flight was to check in with "Knuckle" when airborne for instructions.
Rendezvoused with "One Quantico" enroute to the scene. This should be VF-37
"Wallstreet" (CSA) called "One Quantico" enroute to Wasile Bay with instruction to report to "Martini 489."
"Martini 489" is clearly PT-489. The boat or Preston, who was skipper MTBron-33.
"21 Ambush" is leader of planes over Thompson when "One Quantico" and VC-66 arrive. VF-35 and VF-60 were together overhead so it must be one of them.
:Smokey One/Two/Three" are the smoker TMBs from VT-26
VC-66 flight was to check in with "Knuckle" when airborne for instructions.
Rendezvoused with "One Quantico" en route to the scene. This should be VF-37
"Wallstreet" (CSA) called "One Quantico" en route to Wasile Bay with instruction to report to "Martini 489."
"Martini 489" is clearly PT-489. The boat or Preston, who was skipper MTBron-33.
"21 Ambush" is leader of planes over Thompson when "One Quantico" and VC-66 arrive. VF-35 and VF-60 were together overhead so it must be one of them.
:Smokey One/Two/Three" are the smoker TMBs from VT-26

From USS Midway Action Report:Knuckle Two is TG77.1.2
Derby is USS Midway ## Derby is Midway aircraft Trolley is USS Shelton (DE407), torpedoed and lost
Vacate is USS Rowell (DE403)

After about an hour, around 1030, Thompson decided to leave the shelter of the pier, perhaps afraid the Japanese could get out to him by wading under the pier out of sight and protected from strafing runs. Further down from the pier was a small vessel, described as a lugger, covered with palm fronds and other vegetation cuttings to camouflage it.^{xviii} Thompson struggled from the end of the pier to the anchor chain of this vessel and tied himself to the chain, the bulk of the craft blocking the view of anyone from the beach. Fortunately, nobody was home.

As the morning ended, the *Fanshaw Bay* men were relieved by fresh planes from other carriers, including four VF-60 Hellcats from *Suwannee* (CVE-27), six VF-35 FM-2s from *Chenango* (CVE-28), led by LTJG H.E. Magnusson,^{xix} and six fighters led by the irrepressible LT Thayer, of VF-26 returning to their downed squadron mate. The word was out and everyone seemed to be pitching in to accomplish the rescue and keep faith with their fellow aviator.

Around noon another Navy PBY tried to land and pick Thompson up, but like its predecessor, was driven off by heavy fire.^{xx}

Ensign Paul W. Lindskog of VF-60, was part of the Lufbery circle around Thompson's position, with the Hellcats and Wildcats diving in pairs on the gun positions and troops below them. He saw his squadron mate, Ensign William P. Bannister veer out of the circle and glide down into the bay to a successful ditching about 100 yards from Thompson's position.^{xxi} Bannister stayed in his seat, right hand on the stick and left on the throttle, as the plane filled with water and sank away. Lindskog and fellow pilots could see him below the surface as he went out of sight, making no effort to escape, either incapacitated by hostile fire or the violence of the ditching. Shortly thereafter, Lindskog himself took a near miss near his nose from a 5" gun emplaced at the base of the pier. He rolled in on it and shredded everything around the gun, wiping out the gun crew, but took a hit in the process. He pulled up and turned toward the middle of the bay, set up and successfully ditched his failing Hellcat about a mile from Lolabata. He cleared the cockpit, and struggled into his raft, which was only half inflated and was bending in the middle like a wet cigarette. Finally aboard, more or less, and half submerged, "Woody" Lindskog spent the next half hour or more paddling steadily to keep from being blown onshore like the wounded Thompson had been.^{xxii}

With the tactical situation so forbidding for a flying boat rescue, the dilemma was reported up the chain of command in a situation report to Rear Admiral Daniel E. Barbey. Barbey contacted PT tender *Oyster Bay*, and asked MTB Squadron 33 commander, LT Murray Preston,^{xxiii} for help.^{xxiv} Preston solicited volunteers from two boats, PT 489, from his own squadron, and PT 363, from MTB Squadron 18, to see what they could do to help the rescue. 100% of the crewmen quickly stepped forward and Preston boarded 489 with his intelligence officer, LT Donald Seaman, and 498's skipper, LT Wilfred Tatro.^{xxv} Tatro led the two boats out at 1350.^{xxvi} They drove down the ever-narrowing vee between the two upper arms of the Halmahera K toward the four-mile-wide narrows entrance to Kao Bay beyond which was the downed airmen in a side cove to the east: Wasile Bay.

Still four miles from the narrows, they were taken under fire by a heavy gun firing from the western shore. They turned east, sprinting at 41 knots across a suspected minefield to try to slip down the far shore from the gun, only to be taken under fire by three heavy guns from the eastern shore. At around 1500 in the afternoon, the two boats were forced to abort the penetration.^{xxvii}

Thomas Phillips 7/5/12 2:50 PM

Comment [2]: Escorted by two destroyers, who signaled "good Luck" and turned back shy of the narrows.. "Small Task Force in Action To Rescue One U.S. Flyer" General Headquarters, New Guinea, Sept 16 (Delayed) (A.P.) two identical clippings sent from unidentified newspapers to Betty Preston by Phyllis Tullock, Newport, R.I. and Mrs. Williamson, New Jersey, both dependents of PT sailors serving with Preston.

Thomas Phillips 9/17/12 3:30 PM

Comment [3]: Quote from Preston: "We didn't have time to worry about mines, although we knew this water was heavily mined, both with Japanese mines and U.S. mines.. "Small Task Force in Action To Rescue One U.S. Flyer" General Headquarters, New Guinea, Sept 16 (Delayed) (A.P.) two identical clippings sent from unidentified newspapers to Betty Preston by Phyllis Tullock, Newport, R.I. and Mrs. Williamson, New Jersey, both dependents of PT sailors serving with Preston.

As they retired back up the vee and out of range of the coastal guns at the narrows, help arrived in the form of LT J.P. Fox, returning after the morning's mission, leading six VC-66 FM-2s.^{xxviii} Fox contacted Preston and offered support if they would try it again. Preston agreed, and as the two PT-boats turned around and began another approach to the narrows, Fox proceeded to Wasile Bay joined by six F6Fs of VF-37, USS *Sangamon* (CVE-26) and relieved the fighters of VF-35 and VF-60, each plane, offgoing and incoming, carefully making a pass overhead Thompson's position to pinpoint him. [Ensign Merville G. Knackstedt, en route to the rescue scene in the VF-37 group from *Sangamon*, was forced down with a engine failure \(oil starvation\), and survived the bailout.^{xxix} \(He would not be rescued until the next day, having been lost to sight of his wingman in whitecaps as dark closed in.\)](#)

After the relief was completed, Fox left VF-37 fighters to cover Thompson, and took his five chicks back to the narrows.^{xxx}

With the arrival of this additional firepower, Preston started through the narrows again. It took an interminable 20 minutes, with the guns blazing away from both sides, to pass through the straits and enter Wasile Bay. The coast artillery guns on both sides of the narrows were disturbed in their efforts to turn back the PT boats again by repeated strafing attacks of the FM-2s, with a division assigned to the east side at Lolobata Field, and the other assigned to the guns of Boebale Island which lined the west side of the heavily gunned narrows. Deloach Cope, flying wing again on J.P. Fox, watched the PT boats dodge and weave, with large caliber shells sending up tall geysers in front and behind the boats. One time he thought one of the boats had been hit for sure, but she emerged out from under the waterfall which had risen just barely beyond, and so close aboard she could not been seen for a moment. Their wakes streamed long behind them as they made maximum speed.^{xxxi}

The two plywood boats finally made it inside Kao Bay, and turned east, rounding Lolobata Point, immediately entering circular Wasile Bay, which is no more than seven miles across, only to find themselves still under fire from different guns located on both the northern and southern coasts, the closest being at Lolobata Point. Just at this time, the 12 fighters were joined by seven VC-66 TBMs,^{xxxii} and three TBMs from USS *Sangamon* (CVE-26). The *Sangamon* Avengers were specially configured "smokers" which could lay a smoke screen: pilots LT Aaron Katz, LTJGs George O. Stouffer and Dwight D. Long.^{xxxiii} Each bird could deploy one smoke wall.

Immediately, George Stouffer swooped down and laid a smoke screen west to east right off the beach at Lolobata Point, masking the view of the enemy gunners. On a day of great courage, this maneuver may be among the most dangerous: the pilot must fly very low, 50 feet above the water, across the face of the enemy guns, on a straight and level course in order to deploy the smoke effectively, resisting the pilot's instinct to jink, dodge, bob and weave as tracers flashed past. This critical act allowed the PT boats to proceed into Wasile Bay and approach the east coast and the general location of Harold Thompson.

At this moment, Army Air Corps First Lieutenant Jarvis T. "Yag" Yagla, aircraft commander of "*Daylight Special*," an OA-10 (the USAAF designation for the PBY-5A Catalina) of the 2nd Emergency Rescue Squadron (ERS), arrived overhead.^{xxxiv}

He had been vectored down to Wasile Bay from his rescue station orbit near Morotai to assist with the rescue of two downed Hellcat pilots. Upon approaching the bay, Lieutenant Yagla and his crew had a panoramic vista of the action at Lolobata: a swarm of Navy planes over two PT boats heading toward the shore off Lolabata, so he continued to the second "snafu," (the

2nd's name for a downed airman) out in the bay, one mile west of the beach.^{xxxv} He saw that the pilot was being targeted by shore batteries, which were not able to locate him effectively as he bobbed up and down, in and out of view, in the high chop. Yagla went right in, successfully landing in the rough seas without damaging his plane.^{xxxvi}

Lindskog exhausted from his incessant paddling, suddenly saw the Catalina, "the most beautiful plane the Navy ever had," serenely approach at its stately 95 knots and come in for a landing. The flying boat approached and threw Lindskog a line from the nose hatch. Lindskog grabbed it and let the line pull him inboard so he could grab the strut and avoid the whirling prop which was bobbing no more than two feet above the water. He passed down the side of the big plane, missed the grasping hands of the crew and was forced under when he came to the end of the line and began to be dragged by the plane which continued to taxi, not daring to stop in the face of the shelling. He had to let go or drown.^{xxxvii}

As Yagla taxied around in a circle, one dual-purpose gun shell exploded 100 feet astern of his aircraft. He came back around, but only repeated the same frustration when the crew again failed to grab Lindskog as he passed the waist blister. After a third try, a big crewman got a one-hand purchase and hauled Lindskog out of the water with such force, he fetched up against the glass of the blister on the opposite side, cracking it.^{xxxviii} Yagla heard the crewmen aft yelling to get the hell outta there before the gunner found the range and away they went. The crew, the bird, and the "snafu," a very happy Woody Lindskog, all escaped without injury.^{xxxix}

Yagla returned to the PT boats to see how they were progressing with the first downed pilot (Thompson). Despite the smoke screen blocking the guns at Lolobata Point, the closest guns, the boats were still taking heavy fire from the Japanese. Yag joined with the swarming Navy planes and attempted to cover them and suppress the fire against the boats as they advanced, but was himself driven off by the heavy fire. Realizing he was basically in the way of the more agile swarm of carrier planes, he left the rescue to the PT boats and the support to the Navy carrier planes.^{xl}

Down below the OA-10, the PT boats were in a battle royal. The shore batteries, and anti-aircraft guns, the fighters and Avengers, were all firing furiously as Tatro conned PT 489 in on the anchored cargo ship and LT Hershel Boyd's PT 363 zigzagged behind her contributing its own 40mm and .50-cal machine gun covering fire, and dividing the hostile fire. But PT 489 would have to close to within 150 yards of the shore to reach Thompson's raft.^{xli} Not a maneuver they should expect to survive.

Will Tatro's PT-489 started a high-speed run which brought the boat perilously close to shore, but they apparently could not locate Thompson, so he reversed course and raced away.^{xlii} Stouffer contacted them by radio and alerted them to follow him. He then flew over Thompson's location and dropped a smoke marker to pinpoint him.^{xliii} All this activity stirred the Japanese defenders to greater action.

To DeLoach Cope, it looked like the beach was on fire from the tracer bullets coming up. TBM turret gunner AMM1 Don Banks kept steady fire at the Japanese end of the pier to keep them from getting a line of fire angle around the bulk of the cargo ship to hit Thompson. VC-66 FM pilot Dean Birdsong ran out of ammunition but continued to 'buzz' the Japanese to keep them down." VC-66's ARM1c Bob Kennon recalls how he felt during the rescue mission as he looked down from his TBM radioman's position and saw what the PT boat crews were going through and what they were doing. Kennon thought "how brave those shipmates were that were manning the PT boats." He could have said the same of the men in the blue planes.^{xliv}

The problem now was how the PT boats could survive the near-point-blank fire of the numerous guns arrayed across the arc of the shore. The solution was more smoke. VT-37 smoker, LTJG Dwight D. Long, made another daring run along the shore line beginning at the northern coast artillery position, and, and extending down the beach and out to sea over Thompson. Blessedly, the breeze came to a standstill and the smoke settled onto the northern gun positions and the lugger, completely obscuring them, and masking the PT boats from the view of the troops ashore.^{xlv}

Approaching the palm frond-covered lugger (keeping a wary eye on such a potentially dangerous ambush site. What might those fronds be hiding?), it was apparent that the long day had left Thompson unable to help himself out to the PT boat (he could not get the knot undone with one hand, and had lost his knife in his violent bailout.^{xlvi}), and as PT-487 stopped about five yards from Thompson, LT Don Seaman, Preston's intell officer, realized that someone would have to go get him. Without a gun or crew job, he felt himself the logical one to do it, and dived over the side as Motor Machinist Mate First Class Charles M. Day did the same. Together they swam to the raft, towed it and Thompson back to the stern of 489, where helping hands, hoisted them all back aboard.^{xlvii}

With several fires alight from the air attacks and the point-blank fire of the PT boats, the 40mm gunners added a parting gesture as they raced away, raking the lugger which had sheltered Thompson and leaving it ablaze. To Cope it was "almost like a movie, everything was done to perfection."^{xlviii}

As the PT boats withdrew from Wasile Bay, the battle was not over; the guns at Lolobata Point were waiting for them as the original smoke screen in front of them had dissipated. LT Aaron Katz then took his turn, replenishing the smoke screen where Stouffer had first laid it, and the boats cleared Lolobata Point somewhat unmolested, at least by the south-facing guns at the Point. Fire still came from the relatively distant southern shore of Wasile Bay. But they still had to get back out the narrows to open water.

The egress was worse than the entry. The Japanese knew the vulnerable PT boats had to come back out the way they had come in - it was a cull-de-sac after all - and they were ready, more than ever. As the boats approached, the firing began. It was another 20-minute zigzagging 41-knot run back through the narrows and the mine field. Although the planes had the positions located from the trip in, the exact positions of some were very difficult to see, as the barrels were depressed to aim at the PT-boats and muzzle flashes were difficult to spot under the camouflage and vegetation. The shelling was intense, with big shells dropping as near as ten yards from the boats. But no more fighters were needed back over by the burning piers and the lugger, and there were ten Avengers to add to twelve Hellcats and Wildcats.

The bombers and strafers completely silenced the guns on Boebale Island, the strong point which was the western side of the narrows. And the bombs, rockets, and machine gun fire must have been sufficient, because when the boats opened the range and were able to slow, having been under crossfire for two and a half hours in broad daylight, they discovered that, incredibly, the boats were holed with only superficial damage and no one was wounded to add to the wounded Thompson, who had endured running the gauntlet down below having his wounds tended - they were serious enough that they couldn't wait any longer.

The men of the VC-66 rescue group returned to *Fanshaw Bay* tired, to face a night recovery: the first night shipboard landing for at least one of the young fliers, Dean Birdsong.^{xlix} Some had been in the air as much as eight hours. Don Banks remembers: "No celebrating, no

Thomas Phillips 7/5/12 2:57 PM

Comment [4]: Gunner David Friedman. Chicago Tribune Sept 19, 1944 "P-T Boats Fight Japs All Day; Save Chicagoan" by Arthur Veysey (Chicago Tribune Press Service. WITH P-T BOATS OFF MOROTAI, Halmahera Island, Sept 16 [delayed].

Thomas Phillips 7/5/12 3:10 PM

Comment [5]: "We have him! His name's Thompson and he's in good shape.. "Small Task Force in Action To Rescue One U.S. Flyer" General Headquarters, New Guinea, Sept 16 (Delayed) (A.P.), probably correspondent Asahel Bush, based on an identification as him being at HQ in an article about Tatro sent by Judy Davidson from Newport.. two identical clippings sent from unidentified newspapers to Betty Preston by Phyllis Tullock, Newport, R.I. and Mrs. Williamson, New Jersey, both dependents of PT sailors serving with Preston.

backslapping, no handshakes: we all just drifted back to our rooms and bunks and did a lot of thinking - a lot."ⁱ

But others immediately recognized it for what it was. Rear Admiral C.A.F. Sprague, commanding the task force, remarked that this had been one of the most daring and skillfully executed rescues of the war.^{li} All told, forty-eight Hellcats, Wildcats, Avenger T-bombers, and some Avenger smokers, plus the several flying boats, supported this rescue.^{lii} Four carrier planes were lost in this rescue action, with two airmen killed, certainly indicative of the desperate nature of this valorous effort in the face of a determined and dogged enemy which opposed the rescue with guns of all calibers. With the PT boats, they had kept faith with a downed shipmate and the imperative to leave no man behind.

For this action, Lieutenant Arthur Murray Preston received the Medal of Honor, and the two PT boat skippers and the two swimmers, were decorated with Navy Crosses.^{liii} As for the rescued ENS Harold A. Thompson, his Wasile Bay experience lasted about eleven hours. Thompson's comment when it was over was, "Sure was a wonderful show to watch."^{liv} Must have been something to watch all right, whether from the water or from the air. Heroism never to be forgotten.

As a postscript, Merville Knackstedt, who had ditched because of a mechanical failure, was plucked from the sea the following day by none other than PT 489, whose skipper, Will Tatro, suffered a freak injury as his boat accelerated away with their prize when a wrench flew into his face embedding itself in his forehead. He and Knackstedt shared neighboring beds in the sick bay of USS *Sangamon*.^{lv}

ⁱ MTBRon 9 hull #s 126, 154-157, 159-162, 187, MTBRon 10 hull #s 116, 124, 125, 163, 167-171 and 174 MTBRon 18 hull #s 148, 362-371 MTBRon 33 hull #s 488-497

ⁱⁱ TG77.1.1 Ship's aircraft complements from Index for Location of U.S. Naval Aircraft (1942 through September 1945) seen 9-13-2012 at <http://www.history.navy.mil/a-record/ww-ii/loc-ac/1944/sep/19-9-44.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ VC-66 and VC-65 plane numbers from <http://navysite.de/cve/cve70.htm> for VC-66and <http://navysite.de/cve/cve63.htm> for VC-65

^{iv} FM data provided by Captain Rich Dann, USNR, via e-mail 14 September 2012. Captain Dann is author of Wildcat Walkaround, Walkaround Series #4, Squadron/Signal Publications.

^v While Thompson thinks he was at 500 feet, his chute descent was timed for 14 seconds, which is 250 feet for a QAS seat parachute of the day which had an 18 fps descent rate. Tom

^{vi} Chicago Tribune Sept 19, 1944 "P-T Boats Fight Japs All Day; Save Chicagoan" by Arthur Veysey (Chicago Tribune Press Service. WITH P-T BOATS OFF MOROTAI, Halmahera Island, Sept 16 [delayed].

^{vii} Chicago Tribune Sept 19, 1944 "P-T Boats Fight Japs All Day; Save Chicagoan" by Arthur Veysey (Chicago Tribune Press Service. WITH P-T BOATS OFF MOROTAI, Halmahera Island, Sept 16 [delayed].

^{viii} Undated 1975 Christmas card to Betty Preston mentions Kenyon identifying himself at a Deadalions dinner.

^{ix} Commander Task Group 77.1 Report of Morotai Operation 10 Sep - 7 Oct 1944, Enclosure C, pg 1

^x VF-26 After Action Report, 16 September 1944 Narrative.

^{xi} Chicago Tribune Sept 19, 1944 "P-T Boats Fight Japs All Day; Save Chicagoan" by Arthur Veysey (Chicago Tribune Press Service. WITH P-T BOATS OFF MOROTAI, Halmahera Island, Sept 16 [delayed].

^{xii} USS Santee Action Report - Morotai Operation, Enclosure C, pg 10

^{xiii} Medical report

^{xiv} "Report 6-2 - Rescue in Wasile Bay" from "At Close Quarters," by Captain Robert J. Bulkley, Jr., USNR (Ret) at www.ptboats.org/08-0-05store-01-books.html sighted by author Tom Phillips 2/23/2010.

^{xv} VF-26 After Action Report, 16 September 1944 Narrative.

^{xvi} VC-66 was equipped with the FM-2 Wildcat and the TBM Avenger, both manufactured by General Motors, Eastern Aircraft Division. In the WW II Navy system, the "M" denoted the plane was built by General Motors.

Thomas Phillips 7/5/12 2:35 PM

Comment [6]: "It is like coming back from the dead." Quote from Chicago Tribune Sept 19, 1944 "P-T Boats Fight Japs All Day; Save Chicagoan" by Arthur Veysey (Chicago Tribune Press Service. WITH P-T BOATS OFF MOROTAI, Halmahera Island, Sept 16 [delayed].

Windows User 4/20/12 8:04 PM

Comment [7]: I wonder if this was a .50-cal wrench? How could a wrench be propelled that hard from the acceleration of a PT boat? After action report from Knackstedt says he was rescued by USS Hopewell.

The squadron consisted of 31 officers (16 Wildcat pilots, 13 Avenger pilots, an Air Intelligence Officer, and an Aircraft Maintenance Officer) and 38 enlisted men (26 aircrewmembers and 12 support personnel – mostly aviation maintenance checkers) from page 60 of LOOKING BACKWARD Don Banks – One TBF Turret Gunner's Story By Stephen A. Banks, CDR, JAGC, USN (Ret.), 2008 by S.A. Banks

^{xvii} Phone interview of DeLoach Cope April 10 2012 by author Tom Phillips

^{xviii} Kiplinger calls it a cargo ship. Fox calls it a barge. Birdsong says perhaps a small inter-island "steamer" or ferry, another carrier report a tug, VF-37 calls it a fishingboat, another a "SugarDog" the Navy aviator slang for a small freighter, the PT boat report calls it a lugger. Perhaps the surface Navy guys should get the nod over the aviators.

^{xix} With Magnussen were LTJG K.F. Wilderson, and Ensigns R.A. Bingham, Jr., R.O. Bodell, T.E. Glass, and S.E. Morris.

^{xx} "Report 6-2 - Rescue in Wasile Bay" from *"At Close Quarters,"* by Captain Robert J. Bulkley, Jr., USNR (Ret) at www.ptboats.org/08-0-05store-01-books.html sighted by author Tom Phillips 2/23/2010.

^{xxi} USS Suwannee Action Report, Morotai Operation CVE27/A12-1(95-hr) Serial 073 pg. 3, 2 Oct 1944

^{xxii} Phone interview of Paul Lindskog, October 23, 2011 by author Tom Phillips.

^{xxiii} Preston was a graduate of Phillips Academy, Andover, then Yale with a BS in economics, then attended University of Virginia for Law.

^{xxiv} "Small Task Force in Action To Rescue One U.S. Flyer" General Headquarters, New Guinea, Sept 16 (Delayed) (A.P.) two identical clippings sent from unidentified newspapers to Betty Preston by Phyllis Tullock, Newport, R.I. and Mrs. Williamson, New Jersey, both dependents of PT sailors serving with Preston.

^{xxv} Tatro graduated Warwick Technical HS, Warwick, Rhode Island, went to Fordham and was captain of football team and an all-star lineman. Then played for Providence Steamrollers. "Warwick PT Skipper Makes Dash To Rescue Flier in Japanese Bay" newspaper clipping sent by Judy Davidson from Newport. Body of the clipping attributes info to be from Asahel Bush at HQ New Guinea.

^{xxvi} Rescue mission of a fighter pilot shot down in Wasile Bay on 16 September 1944 – report of, by Ensign H.A. Gregg, Commanding officer (temporary) PT-489, dated 17 September, 1944.

^{xxvii} <http://www.militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=21011> sighted by author Tom Phillips 29 March 2011

^{xxviii} Fox's wingman LTJG W.D. Cope, second section LTJG J.K. MacDonald and Ens. S. Morris, Jr. second division leader LTJG D.J. Birdsong, LTJGs S. Takis, J. McNeeland, and M.W. Barrett. MacDonald experienced a rough runner and was stood off over water with Morris as escort, so six fighters, so six of eight launched proceeded. From LT J.P. Fox Report of Rescue Mission September 16, 1944

^{xxix} Researched by Mr. Fabio Peña Mainer Aircraft Carriers & Escort Carriers Archives, NavSource via e-mail to author Tom Phillips 21 February 2010.

^{xxx} Phone interview of DeLoach Cope April 10 2012 by author Tom Phillips

^{xxxi} The CVE Piper, the newsletter of the Escort Carrier Sailors and Airmen Association "FANSHAW BAY Rescue Mission" Sept/Oct 2006, pg 25

^{xxxii} Pilots were LTs A.J. Mayer and J.P. Klaus, LTJGs H.I. Mayo, I.W. Clark, JR., R.A. Weaver, G.W. Brown, F.T. Stevens. No crewmen of VC-66 were recorded in the source document but AMM1 Don Banks was flying with Stevens and ARM1 Bob Kennon was flying with Mayo. CTG 77.1 War Diary

^{xxxiii} Crewmen AOM1 H.V. Hemenway, AOMB1 L.F. Kotecki, AOM2 T.J. Cunningham, ARM1 R. Fretac, ARM1 V.E. Thomsen, ARM2 D.P. Gebel. Who was in which plane unknown but listed in CTG 77.1 war diary of rescue participants in possible pairs: Firetag and Cunningham, Gabel and Kotecki, Hemenway and Thomsen. Pilots listed in order: Katz, Stouffer and Long.

^{xxxiv} The 2nd ERS was the initial USAAF rescue squadron to get to the Pacific theater. Deployed to the SWPA, with the 5th Air Force, the squadron broken up into flights distributed to Hollandia, Oro Bay, Milne Bay, and farthest west, at Biak Island, north of the "neck" between the head and the shoulder of the New Guinea turkey. As leapfrog landings uncovered or captured sites further west toward the Philippines, the flights moved up, shifting to Middleburg Island, a stone's throw off the coast at Sansapor on the crest of the Vogelkopf, and then Morotai after it was secured.

The 2nd's inventory included nine OA-10 "flying boats", two Douglas C-47s, and one Beech C-45. The B-17s with air-deployable motorized lifeboats began to arrive in the spring of 1945 at the same time the 2nd ERS returned to the

Philippines, basing out of Puerto Princesa, Palawan, site of an infamous POW massacre in 1944. These notes from *United States Air Force Historical Study No. 95 Air-Sea Rescue 1941-1952*, pg 71.

^{xxxv} The vernacular of the day, currently perpetuated on the 2nd ERS website, referred to any downed aircraft as a "SNAFU" (Situation Normal, All "Fouled" Up) whether that aircraft had gone down through some mistake on the part of the pilot or had gone down as a result of enemy action. Clearly, political correctness was not a major concern in the midst of a global conflict.

^{xxxvi} The Army version of the PBY, the OA-10, was manufactured in Canada by Vickers Limited under license from their American cousins at Consolidated. The Canadian version of the flying boat was notoriously less sturdy than the Consolidated PBYs, the Vickers-production having skimped on the number of hull stringers called for by Consolidated.

^{xxxvii} Phone interview of Paul Lindskog, October 23, 2011 by author Tom Phillips.

^{xxxviii} Phone interview of Paul Lindskog, October 23, 2011 by author Tom Phillips.

^{xxxix} See www.pbyrescue.com/rescues/September/16 September.

^{xl} The 3rd ERS was paired with the 14th Emergency Rescue Boat Squadron (ERBS) to form the 5276th Rescue Composite Group in September 1944, and the 2nd ERS was paired with the 15th Emergency Rescue Boat Squadron (ERBS) to form the 5230th Rescue Composite Group in October 1944. In the course of their relatively short lifetime, the "SNAFU Snatchers" of the 2nd ERS rescued or evacuated 724 men, including seven rescues under fire. See www.pbyrescue.com/mission for additional details on these units.

^{xli} "Report 6-2 - Rescue in Wasile Bay" from *"At Close Quarters,"* by Captain Robert J. Bulkley, Jr., USNR (Ret) at www.ptboats.org/08-0-05store-01-books.html sighted by author Tom Phillips 3/29/2011.

^{xlii} LT J.P. Fox Report of Rescue Mission September 16, 1944, undated.

^{xliii} Air Group 37 After action Report 16 September 1944, and

www.navyememorial.org/NavyLog/NavyLogCommunitiesandReunionGroups/VC-66s-Finest-Hour--Saving-Ensign-Thompson.aspx written by Steve Banks sighted by author Tom Phillips 4/1/2012.

^{xliv} Kennon's pilot was fellow Mississippian LTJG James O. "J.O." Mayo from Quitman, Mississippi, and his turret gunner was Aviation Machinist's Mate Second Class John Hart from Los Angeles, California.

^{xlv} www.navyememorial.org/NavyLog/NavyLogCommunitiesandReunionGroups/VC-66s-Finest-Hour--Saving-Ensign-Thompson.aspx written by Steve Banks sighted by author Tom Phillips 4/1/2012

^{xlvi} Interview of Ens. Harold Thompson by A.C.S Officers of Air Group 26 Aboard USS Santee, 20 Sept, 1944

^{xlvii} <http://www.militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=21011> sighted by author Tom Phillips 29 March 2011

^{xlviii} www.navyememorial.org/NavyLog/NavyLogCommunitiesandReunionGroups/VC-66s-Finest-Hour--Saving-Ensign-Thompson.aspx written by Steve Banks sighted by author Tom Phillips 4/1/2012

^{xlix} phone interview of Dean Birdsong, 12 April 2012 by author Tom Phillips. According to astronomical tables sunset was 1823 and they landed at 1831. End of civil twilight was 1843, so it was a pinky landing but night nevertheless, which was NOT standard ops.

ⁱ e-mail from Don Banks via his son Steve to author Tom Phillips, 8 April 2012

ⁱⁱ "Report 6-2 - Rescue in Wasile Bay" from *"At Close Quarters,"* by Captain Robert J. Bulkley, Jr., USNR (Ret) at www.ptboats.org/08-0-05store-01-books.html sighted by author Tom Phillips 3/29/2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Unpublished narrative history of USS Santee by Ensign Jacqueline Holliday, USNR. Undated. Excerpts shared with author Tom Phillips by Mr. Fabio Pena and Mr. Walter Skeldon, formerly of the USS Santee.

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ "Report 6-2 - Rescue in Wasile Bay" from *"At Close Quarters,"* by Captain Robert J. Bulkley, Jr., USNR (Ret) at www.ptboats.org/08-0-05store-01-books.html sighted by author Tom Phillips 3/29/2011.

^{lv} According to William T. Y'Blood in his fine book about CVEs - The Little Giants,

^{lv} (<http://www.navsource.org/archives/03/026.htm>). Scroll down to photo # NS0302608 sighted by author Tom Phillips 3/29/2011