

# LCDR Dwight Hodge Dexter and Guadalcanal's “Naval Operating Base Cactus”

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Cover of the March 1943 U.S. Coast Guard Magazine reads: 'Jap Trophy-Comdr. Dwight Dexter, USCG, displays autographed flag taken from Jap soldier.'

If any battle marked the turning point of World War II in the Pacific, most experts agree that the six-month land, sea and air battle for Guadalcanal was the one. Initiated on August 7, 1942, Guadalcanal became a killing field that consumed thousands of men, hundreds of aircraft and dozens of front line warships. Even though the U.S. Navy had triumphed two months earlier in the pivotal naval battle at Midway, the struggle for Guadalcanal proved the first true test of all branches of the American military against determined enemy forces within Japanese-held territory. After Guadalcanal, the Allies would remain on the offensive for the rest of the war while the Japanese fought a lengthy retreat all the way back to the home islands.

During the Guadalcanal offensive, the United States Coast Guard served an important role through its specialties in maritime transport, amphibious landing and small boat operations. At Guadalcanal, the Coast Guard worked seamlessly with its Navy and Marine Corps counterparts and, for the first time in its history, commanded and manned a U.S. Naval Operating Base (NOB). Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Dwight Hodge Dexter, later rear admiral, commanded NOB Cactus, the code name for Guadalcanal's naval operating base. At its peak, NOB Cactus included about thirty LCPs, also known as Higgins Boats, and a dozen bow-ramped tank lighters. About fifty officers and enlisted men manned the operation, which included an odd collection of coconut plantation buildings, home made shacks, tents and dug out shelters for surviving air raids, naval bombardment and artillery shelling.

During Dexter's tenure as commander of NOB Cactus, from August 8 to November 5, 1942, Coast Guard personnel received a considerable number of combat awards and official recognition. These medals and ribbons included, Dexter's Silver Star Medal and four Silver Stars awarded to Coast Guard coxswains for combat landing operations in neighboring Tulagi. Official recognition received by other NOB personnel included the only Medal of Honor awarded to a Coast Guardsman, two Navy Crosses and a Bronze Star Medal. All who served at NOB Cactus received the Presidential Unit Citation due to their temporary assignment to Guadalcanal's First Marine Division commanded by Major General (later Marine Corps Commandant) Alexander Vandergrift.

By 1942, Dexter had been associated with the Coast Guard for nearly twenty years. He was the son of Dr. Edwin Dexter, who served in government diplomatic posts in Central America and Europe. In his early life, Dwight moved to various

locations with his parents; however, in 1922 he received an appointment to the Coast Guard Academy. He returned to civilian life after two years at the Academy, but he re-entered the service as an ensign in 1926. For the next fifteen years, he served on the East Coast and in the Caribbean on board the Coast Guard manned Prohibition enforcement destroyer, USS PATTERSON, and the Coast Guard cutters CHAMPLAIN and MARION. After these sea assignments, he spent five years with the Coast Guard Rifle and Pistol Team, including three as commander. Early in 1941, as the prospect for war appeared imminent, Dexter received an appointment with Commander, Transport Division 3. After the December 1941 outbreak of the war, he transferred to the staff of Commander, Transport Group, South Pacific.



*An artist's depiction of the N.O.B. Cactus mission to save an ambushed marine battalion at Point Cruz, Guadalcanal. Official recognition for this Coast Guard operation included a Medal of Honor, two Navy Crosses, and a number of Purple Hearts. Franklin D. Roosevelt later recognized all members of Dexter's Coast Guard unit with the Presidential Unit Citation as part of the First Marine Division.*

American naval strategists drew a line in the sand at Guadalcanal because enemy aircraft flying from that island could threaten Allied supply lines to Australia. In 1941, the navy began to prepare for the possibility of large scale landing operations. It formed Transport Division 7 out of former army

troop transports, including the Coast Guard-manned HUNTER LIGGETT (APA-14). Throughout the fall of 1941, Transport Division 7 conducted amphibious training operations in the Chesapeake Bay and along the North Carolina coast. A stanza from the poem of an anonymous writer on board the HUNTER LIGGETT recounted the hectic training schedule during this period: "Some day will end this squirrel race, and there'll be many a smiling face, to see a cutter take its place, in Trans Division Seven." In April, the LIGGETT made its way to Wellington, New Zealand, to join in the build-up for the invasion. On July 22, the LIGGETT put to sea as the flagship for Transport Group X-Ray of the landing force. The invasion fleet staged practice landings on the Koro Islands, off Fiji, and rendezvoused with a protective fighting fleet in preparation for the invasion.

On the morning of August 7, exactly eight months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the first American amphibious landing of World War II was about to begin. The cloud cover of the previous days and circuitous voyage from Wellington had hidden the fleet's movements from enemy aircraft and submarines, so Japanese forces on Guadalcanal received no forewarning of a potential attack. The invasion fleet entered Sealark Channel near the landing beaches and the front line warships began shore bombardment of enemy positions on the island. The waves of Marines coming ashore greatly outnumbered the combined strength of Japanese military forces and civilian construction personnel responsible for building the military airbase, so they beat a hasty retreat from their shore positions into the jungles of Guadalcanal's interior. Within a day of the landings, the Americans had fulfilled their initial goal in capturing the partially completed enemy airstrip and establishing a defensive perimeter around the airfield and beachhead.

At 14:30 on August 8, 1942, Dexter came ashore with the first two-dozen Coast Guardsmen to serve at NOB Cactus. He set up his headquarters in the former manager's house for the Lever Brothers coconut plantation, which was located within the Marine's

defensive perimeter on the shoreline at Lunga, east of Lunga Point. The white frame structure was in good condition considering the naval bombardment that had softened up the area the day before. Near Dexter's headquarters, the men built a small tool shed for servicing their landing craft and machinery. They also built a signal tower out of coconut logs located next to NOB Cactus Headquarters. Below the tower, a makeshift shelter built of packing crates with a tent roof housed signalmen Douglas Munro, posthumous recipient of the service's only Congressional Medal of Honor; and Ray Evans, later recipient of the Navy Cross. The rest of Dexter's men lived in similar shelters or tents, but all kept close to the all-important log reinforced dugout bomb shelters.



*Dexter's men and landing craft kept critically needed supplies flowing to the First Marine Division on Guadalcanal.*

NOB Cactus held a variety of titles. In the Presidential Unit Citation awarded to the First Marine Division, Reinforced, the word "Reinforced" refers to the Coast Guard unit. NOB Cactus also formed part of Transport Division 7 and it had the moniker of "Local Defense Force and Anti-Submarine Patrol, Guadalcanal-Gavutu." These names indicate the variety of missions carried out by Dexter's unit. NOB Cactus's primary mission remained the running of supplies and troops from the transports to the beaches of Guadalcanal; however, Dexter's men

and landing craft performed far more missions than merely supplying the troops. They provided an important radio and communications link between land forces and offshore vessels. They navigated the waters of Guadalcanal and islands as distant as sixty miles to land troops behind enemy lines and retrieve them whenever necessary. They inserted reconnaissance teams led by British Colonial Forces officers behind enemy lines. In the aftermath of aerial dogfights over and naval battles on nearby Iron Bottom Sound, NOB watercraft took to the open ocean to retrieve wounded Americans and Japanese prisoners. For a time, NOB personnel fitted their landing craft with depth charges and conducted nightly anti-submarine patrols. Coast Guard personnel also pitched in to defend American positions by serving artillery pieces and providing infantry support. The men even trawled off enemy-held beaches, catching fresh fish to supplement the menu of the troops at the local mess hall.

The men of NOB Cactus used the bomb shelters frequently due to the aerial bombing, naval shelling and artillery bombardment that took place on a regular basis. Under cover of darkness, Japanese naval units from the nearby enemy base at Rabaul, New Britain, regularly attacked Guadalcanal and its defending U.S. warships. The men on the "Canal" suffered through daily enemy air attacks, which tore up the American airstrip and prevented transports from lingering off the beaches for any length of time. In fact, Dexter maintained a captured Japanese three-barreled machine gun, referred to by a British observer as a "Chicago piano," to defend against air attacks until the ammunition finally ran out. During the initial stages of the campaign, enemy artillery and sniper fire also hounded the men at NOB Cactus. The Japanese salvaged a deck gun from one of their grounded ships and mounted it in the jungle highlands commanding the airfield. Using this gun, nicknamed "Pistol Pete" by the Americans, the Japanese lobbed several rounds at American positions every day until an American air attack finally silenced the gun. After dark, the Japanese also sent aircraft over Guadalcanal to bomb American positions and eliminate

the possibility of enjoying more than a few hours of uninterrupted rest. Due to the constant shelling and bombing, the NOB Cactus crew decided to name the nearby lagoon, "Sleepless Lagoon."

Dexter was a natural leader who was devoted to his men. When the enlisted men on board the HUNTER LIGGETT heard that Dexter would command Guadalcanal's small boat operations, several volunteered to serve with him. During his command of NOB Cactus, he made sure the men had plenty of food and supplies and trained them in air raid drills, digging foxholes and the use of a slit trench for cover. One of the men wrote that Dexter was a "I felt I could stand the bombings, shellings, and artillery so long as he was there. He gave us the feeling of safety that only good officers can give to their men." In the condolence letter to Medal of Honor recipient Douglas Munro's parents, Dexter referred to Munro as "one of my boys" and, later in the letter he wrote that "[Munro's] loss has left a very decided space in which I feel will never be filled . . . ." Referred to by the men simply as "Commander," the men even took Dexter fishing on one of the landing craft sensing that he had become overly stressed by his command duties. He caught one so big that it bent the fishing hook and got away.

Like many who served in the early part of the Guadalcanal campaign, Dexter contracted malaria. In November 1942, when the disease finally got the best of him, Dexter rotated back to the United States. He had earned the respect and admiration of those who served under him at NOB Cactus and some of the men broke down and cried when he finally departed for home. Dexter's Silver Star Medal citation aptly concludes, "By his courage in the face of great hardship and danger, he set an example which was an inspiration to all who served with him." By the time of his departure, the battle for Guadalcanal had entered its fourth month, but by then the Americans had become experienced jungle fighters and secured their position on the island. The defeat of Japanese forces on the Canal appeared assured by late 1942 as elements of the U.S. Army relieved the malaria-ridden First Marine Division. By early February 1943, commander of U.S.

forces on Guadalcanal, U.S. Army General Alexander Patch declared the island secured of all Japanese military forces.

Dexter returned to the United States having lived through a lifetime's worth of vivid and often horrific experiences. For the remainder of the war, he rose through the officer ranks at bases within the United States. His post-war assignments included a tour in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where he lived with his parents as a child. He also served as commander of the high-endurance cutter DEXTER (no relation to his family). In September 1959, Dwight Dexter retired from the service as a rear admiral. For thirty-five years, he had served in the Coast Guard with distinction both in combat and in peacetime.

*Note: This article is dedicated to Commander Ray Evans (USCG ret.), Guadalcanal veteran and Navy Cross recipient, whose first-hand recollections provided much of the information for this story.*

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