

Hello and welcome to another episode of DE Classified. My name is Tyler, and today I am going to lead you on an adventure into the South Pacific to speak about the heroics of New Orleans class cruiser USS San Francisco and our namesake Frank O. Slater.

INTRODUCTION

Frank's short life

Born in Fyffe, Alabama, December 19th, 1920, Frank Slater was one of twelve children born to Mr. James L. Slater and Mrs. Nora Slater. The son of sharecroppers, Frank grew up in rural Dekalb County, Alabama. Frank enlisted in the United States Naval Reserves on Feb 20th, 1942. Upon completion of basic training Seaman 2/c Frank Slater was transferred to the Receiving Station, Pearl Harbor for reassignment. Seaman 2/c Slater would serve aboard USS San Francisco (CA-38) from April 4th, 1942, to November 12, 1942, the day that he was killed in action when a Japanese Mitsubishi G4M "Betty" bomber crashed into his battle station. The heroic men of the 20mm battle station continued to fire until the moment of impact.

More detail concerning Franks life here!

Frank's service aboard San Francisco

Frank Slater's first journey on the New Orleans-class cruiser USS San Francisco (CA-38) was when the vessel departed Oahu for San Francisco in the escort convoy 4093. At the end of May, she headed west, tasked with escorting the convoy PW 2076, which consisted of transports carrying the 37th Army Division, destined for Suva in the Fiji Islands and special troops destined for Australia.

USS San Francisco ventured west with destroyers USS Laffey (DD-724) and USS Ballard (AVD-10) to escort convoy 4120 to the Fiji Islands. From there, she sailed to rendezvous with the Solomon Island Expeditionary Force.

Operation Watchtower- the allied offensive against Guadalcanal and Tulagi opened on the morning of 7, August, 1942. Throughout the day of the landings and the remainder of the month of August, San Francisco helped cover General Alexander Vandegrift's marines in the CACTUS area. Task Force 18 was under command of Rear Admiral Norman Scott, whose flagship was the San Francisco.

On September 3rd, 1942, CA-38 ventured into Noumea, New Caledonia to resupply with fuel and provision, five days later she departed to cover reinforcements moving up Guadalcanal. After the initial landings on 7 August 1942, the SAN FRANCISCO remained in the Solomons area as part of a covering force of cruisers and destroyers. She then returned briefly to her former role as a carrier escort for the WASP and HORNET.

WASP TORPEDOING

On 11 September 1942, TF18 joined along with the USS Hornet's TF17, both refueling at sea the following day. At about 1450 on September 15th, USS Wasp was torpedoed in the infamous "torpedo junction", which was a scouting line of submarines deployed by Admiral Yamamoto to inhibit American convoys travelling between Noumea, Espiritu Santo and Guadalcanal. Ian W. Toll writes of the torpedoing, "the first struck home just forward of the island. The powerful blast lifted the entire ship and hurled her forward, flinging two F4F Wildcat fighters into the sea" (Conquering Tide 109,). Of the six torpedoes fired by Japanese I-19, five had struck American ships, three struck the carrier Wasp. The after-action report from USS San Francisco details the incident, "the time of

the torpedoing of the Wasp, the task force (18) was in cruising disposition one, with Wasp (guide) at center. Axis 340. Circle spacing 1000 yards. Cruisers on circle 2 1/1: San Francisco 045; Helena 135; Salt Lake City 225; Juneau 315.

San Francisco along with the Salt Lake City prepared to take the carrier in tow however, by 1520, the fires were uncontrollable, and whaleboats were dispatched from nearby destroyers to begin rescuing survivors. Cruisers formed on the San Francisco and maneuvered clear of the Wasp at high speed. Destroyers Duncan, Lansdowne, Lardner, Laffey, and Farenholt rescued survivors while destroyers and light cruiser Juneau made depth charge attacks to eastward of Wasp in the suspected submarine area. 18. The crew of the Wasp were seen assembling aft and it appeared that abandon ship was commenced about 1513. The destroyers did an excellent job of rescuing survivors. Among those rescued were Rear Admiral Noyes and Captain Forrest Sherman USS Lansdowne was tasked with torpedoing the jagged steeled hull. On September 23rd San Francisco along with Salt Lake City, Chester, Boise, and Helena became TF 64, a surface screen attack force under the command of Admiral Norman Scott in the San Francisco.

Cape Esperance

On the night of October 11th-12th, Scott's warships of TF64 ambushed a Japanese column of three cruisers and two destroyers as they headed into Iron Bottom Sound to bombard Henderson Field. The surprise attack destroyed a Japanese cruiser and a destroyer, while also heavily damaging another cruiser. Japanese Rear Admiral Aritomo Goto was critically wounded and later died. Scott lost a destroyer, USS Duncan and suffered damage to the cruisers Boise and Salt Lake City. In his book "The Conquering Tide" naval

historian Ian W. Toll writes “this short vicious fight, which would pass into history as the Battle of Cape Esperance, a tactical victory for the Americans but not by the margins they initially believed. Later that same night, Admiral Tanaka would commence his landing of troops and supplies including several artillery pieces near Cape Esperance. Two nights later the Japanese surface force would pour down the heaviest barrage upon Henderson field.

On October 15th, San Francisco resumed operations in support of the Guadalcanal campaign. On October 28th, Admiral Scott transferred to the USS Atlanta, allowing Daniel J. Callaghan, the commanding officer of the San Francisco when the United States entered the war, to return to his post and raise his flag as commander of Task Group 64.4 and TF 65

SAN FRANCISCO BEGINS TO COVER AGAINST Japanese TROOP LANDINGS

On the 31st of October, the newly designated TF 65 departed Espiritu Santo, the ships again headed into the Solomons to cover troop landings and supply ships heading for Guadalcanal. Bombardment missions in the Kokumbona and Koli Point areas followed.

On the 6 Nov, the transport group completed unloading, and the force retired, arriving at Espiritu Santo on the 8th. On the 10th, *San Francisco*, now flagship for TG 67.4, got underway again toward Guadalcanal.

Just before noon, a Japanese twin-float reconnaissance plane began shadowing the formation.

The force arrived off Lunga Point, the site of Henderson field on November 12th, 1942, and the transports commenced unloading. (From Richard B. Frank Guadalcanal, 431) A shore battery barked at the transports and drew replies from the light cruiser Helena and supporting destroyers.

As the American men and material began to stream ashore, Lieutenant Commander Mitzi (I can find no record of him anywhere) on Mount Austen sent a report back to Rabaul. On Mitzi's alert Yamamoto's Chief of Staff Admiral Matome Ugaki prepared the 11th Air Fleet to strike with sixteen torpedo armed Mitsubishi G4M "Betty" bombers and thirty Mitsubishi A6M "Zero" fighters.

However, amply warned by Coastwatcher Paul Mason and radar, Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner got his ships underway and prepared to repel an air attack as twenty F4F's and eight P-39's scrambled into action.

Historian Richard B. Frank writes, at 1405 the Japanese materialized over the green stripe of Florida's jungle and split into two groups, one swinging out to the northeast and the other banking to the southeast to bracket the transports. Turner saw these aerial jaws open and countered in the style of a matador. First, he presented the broadsides of his ship like a red cape to the northeastern group. As Turner desired, the Japanese flight plunged prematurely into an attack before the second unit achieved position. With the first flight committed to an assault, Turner swerved his ships hard to port only to offer only their narrow sterns as targets. All the torpedoes missed. This brilliant cacophony of an air to sea brawl saw gray ships spew illuminating tracers at the mortally wounded aircraft spewing into the ocean abyss. A plane, already ignited by the destroyer McCawley, bore into the

San Francisco. Sailors manning a 20mm battery around the after-control station were still firing when the plane smashed directly into their positions. The fuselage warped the splinter plating, and the wings splashed flaming gasoline over Battle two and destroyed the after-fire control radar. The burning Betty caromed off the San Francisco's superstructure and splashed into the sea. The dead included every member of three of the four 20mm crews. (Frank, pg. 431).

Fifteen men were killed, 29 wounded, one of those men was our namesake Frank O. Slater. The entire attack lasted only eight minutes from 1412-1420.

Firsthand account from Lieutenant Junior Grade John Wallace: As planes started to be shot down, Wallace watched as one dropped its torpedo at the SAN FRANCISCO's starboard bow. The ship turned sharply to port, which then put the plane on her starboard quarter. Wallace reported, "About the time I expected that torpedo to hit, (it missed), our antiaircraft 20mm guns behind me, right outside my battle station started to really kick them out. I looked out toward the starboard quarter and what I saw was a Mitsubishi "Betty" bomber coming right at me with its starboard engine smoking. I just had time to duck inside the outer door when a tremendous explosion knocked me all the way up to the forward side of secondary conn and I lost consciousness."

The plane hit the starboard edge of the antiaircraft platform, skidded across it, and then fell off the port side and into the sea. All eleven men on the platform were killed instantly. Eleven other men were killed in the attack and twenty-nine were wounded, including Wallace (who was awarded a Navy Cross for his efforts in rescuing wounded men from his battle station despite his own injuries). The men on the antiaircraft platform all received posthumous Navy Crosses for maintaining fire on the plane until it crashed on

their position. They were: William F. Cates, George R. Eisele, George I. Falgout, Andrew J. Gandy, Eugene F. George, Albert T. Harris, Harry J. Lowe, Jackson K. Loy, William T. Powell, Frank O. Slater, and John L. Williamson. Each of these men had a destroyer escort named in his honor.

The wounded were transferred to the attack transport *President Jackson* just before the approach of an enemy surface force was reported. The covering force escorted the transports out of the area, then reassembled and returned. At about midnight, *San Francisco*, in company with one heavy cruiser, three light cruisers, and eight destroyers, entered Lengo Channel.

Plane crash from the San Francisco's After-Action report

1. U.S.S. SAN FRANCISCO was covering landing operations on Guadalcanal on 12 November 1942 when attacked by Japanese torpedo planes. The covering force, including the SAN FRANCISCO got underway to execute evasive maneuvers. During the subsequent engagement, at 1415, a Japanese torpedo plane started an approach off the starboard quarter. This plane was taken under fire by the MCCAWLEY and set afire. It jettisoned its torpedo prior to the release point and then crashed against SAN FRANCISCO's after control station and fell into the water on the port side. The resulting fire destroyed the after-control station, damaged battle II, and caused the loss of about thirty-five officers and men who were manning these stations. The loss of the personnel, in addition to the damage to the after 8" director, was particularly serious in the action which followed that night.

2. Landing operations were halted on the evening of the 12th and all ships withdrew from the area. Combatant units were reassembled and returned to the area during the evening. About midnight, SAN FRANCISCO, in company with one heavy cruiser, three light cruisers, and eight destroyers entered Lengo Channel. The force speed was 18 knots. The sky was overcast, the moon had set, and the night was dark. Visibility was fair to good, and the wind was about 10 knots from the southeast. A slight sea was running. SAN FRANCISCO's planes had been sent to Tulagi, all inflammables removed from exposed stations, and the vessel was ready in all respects for night action.

Casualties of Nov 12, 1942

15 killed

20-30 wounded

The SAN FRANCISCO's crew began repairing the damage caused by the crash immediately after the air attack, but those efforts were abandoned that night when the ship and its fellow cruisers and destroyers steamed into the Friday the 13th, cruiser night action off Guadalcanal.

Cruiser Night Action of November 13th

At 0125 on the 13th, the enemy force was discovered about 27,000 yards to the northwest. Rear Admiral Callaghan's task group maneuvered to intercept. At 0148, *San Francisco* opened fire on an enemy cruiser 3,700 yards off her starboard beam. At 0151 she trained her guns on a small cruiser or large destroyer 3,300 yards off her starboard bow. USS San Francisco opened fire under the belief the vessel was an enemy ship. However, this turned out to be the friendly light cruiser USS Atlanta, which after the discovery the fire ceased. Unfortunately, not before the Atlanta was badly damaged.

Lieutenant C. Raymond Calhoun from the escorting destroyer Sterrett, was reminded of a “no holds bar room brawl, in which someone had turned off the lights and everyone started swinging in every direction.

At 0200, *San Francisco* trained her guns on a second battleship the Hiei. At the same time, she became the target of a cruiser off her starboard bow and of a destroyer which had crossed her bow and was passing down her port side. The enemy battleship joined the cruiser and the destroyer in firing on *San Francisco* whose port 5-inch battery engaged the destroyer but was put out of action except for one mount. The battleship put the starboard 5-inch battery out of commission. *San Francisco* swung left while her main battery continued to fire on the battleships which, with the cruiser and the destroyer, continued to pound *San Francisco*. A direct hit on the navigation bridge killed or badly wounded all officers except the communications officer. Steering and engine control were lost and shifted to Battle Two. Battle Two was out of commission by a direct hit from the port side. Control was again lost.

Control was then established in the conning tower which soon received a hit from the starboard side. Steering and engine control were temporarily lost, then regained. All communications were dead.

Soon thereafter, the enemy ceased firing. *San Francisco* followed suit and withdrew eastward along the north coast of Guadalcanal.

Seventy-seven sailors, including Rear Admiral Daniel J. Callaghan and Capt. Cassin Young and all other officers on the bridge leaving only Lieutenant Commander Bruce McCandless, who took the conn for the rest of the battle. For his conduct, McCandless, was awarded the congressional Medal of Honor. One hundred and five had been wounded. Of seven missing, three were subsequently rescued. The ship had taken 45 hits. Structural damage was extensive, but not serious. No hits had been received below the waterline. Twenty-two fires had been started and extinguished.

At about 0400, *San Francisco*, all her compasses out of commission, joined *Helena* and followed her through Sealark Channel.

At about 1000, *Juneau*'s medical personnel transferred to *San Francisco* to assist in treating the numerous wounded. An hour later, *Juneau* took a torpedo on the port side, in the vicinity of the bridge. "The entire ship seemed to explode in one mighty column of brown and white smoke and flame which rose easily a thousand feet in the air.

The *Juneau* literally disintegrated." *San Francisco* was hit by several large fragments from *Juneau*. One man was hit, both his legs were broken. Nothing was seen in the water after the smoke lifted.

On the afternoon of 14 November, *San Francisco* returned to Espiritu Santo. For her participation in the action of the morning of the 13th, and for that of the night of 11 and 12 October, she received the Presidential Unit Citation. On 18 November, the cruiser sailed for Noumea, and, on the 23rd, she got underway toward the United States. She

reached San Francisco on 11 December. Three days later, repairs were begun at Mare Island.

Ending From a Dekalb County, Alabama newspaper- “Because somewhere in the Solomons a Dekalb county boy kept pouring bullets into a Japanese plane until it crashed, flaming, into his station, his mother will be the sponsor at the christening of a destroyer escort vessel to be named for that boy.” When Mrs. Slater learned that some ships have been christened with water, she expressed the hope that the christening committee allow her to use water from the well Frank dug to christen USS Slater (DE-766). Below the family well, Frank wrote the date of completion in the wet concrete... November 13th, 1939, exactly three years before he would be buried at sea.

From Medal of Honor recipient Commander Bruce McCandless to Mrs. Nora Slater

In the letter McCandless wrote: “I know how poor must seem any words of ours trying to console the loss of your son, but he and his comrades, who died so that others might live, and his ship might be saved, have your undying admiration and respect. If ever a person died like a man, your son, Frank, did.”