

## DOUGLAS A. MUNRO

A World War II Hero from Cle Elum

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The United States entered World War II immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Douglas Munro of South Cle Elum, Washington, had volunteered for duty with the United States Coast Guard in September 1939 and was well trained and on hand to help with an amphibious landing of marines on Guadalcanal. In the early stages of the war the United States had been unprepared and things had gone badly. But by midsummer 1942 the United States had begun the counterattack and the island of Guadalcanal became the setting of some of the fiercest fighting in the South Pacific.

On September 27, 1942, three companies of the Seventh Marine Division set out aboard landing craft in an attempt to land, drive out the Japanese, and establish a patrol base on the west side of the Matanikau River on Guadalcanal. The unopposed marines pushed inland more than 500 hundred yards before being confronted by an overwhelming Japanese force. The marines, under intense fire, were driven back to the beach and, unless rescued, would have been wiped out. Signaller First Class Douglas Munro, who was in charge of the original landing, volunteered to lead a small armada of landing craft to evacuate the troops. As the marines on the beach boarded, the Japanese began firing from the ridges overlooking the beach. Munro, realizing that the men were in extreme danger, maneuvered his boat between the enemy and the heavily laden landing craft leaving the beach. All 500 hundred marines, including 25 wounded, managed to escape. Nine of the ten landing craft made it off the beach safely, but one got hung up on a sandbar. Munro directed another craft to pull it off. Soon the landing craft was free and heading out to sea. While the guardsman continued to cover the withdrawal by firing on the enemy, he was hit by machine gun fire and fatally wounded. For Munro's leadership and heroism, President Franklin D. Roosevelt awarded him the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest commendation that can be conferred by the United States government. But Doug Munro's story should be told from the beginning.

Douglas Albert Munro was born October 11, 1919, and raised in South Cle Elum, Washington, where his father, James Munro, served as manager of an electrical substation operated by the Milwaukee Railroad. The substation was a critical link in the Milwaukee system. Trains from the east switched from electricity to steam at Avery, Idaho, and back to electric engines at Othello, Washington, then continued westward over the mountains to the Puget Sound region. The South Cle Elum substation was crucial in the process as it essentially downloaded high voltage and converted it to lower and safer voltage levels to drive the Milwaukee engines.

Doug, as his friends called him, graduated from Cle Elum High School in June 1937. A captain in the Coast Guard Reserve, Doug's father was active in Cle Elum Post 166 of the American Legion.

The legion sponsored the "Sons of the American Legion" Drum and Bugle Corps. The corps had about 20 snare drummers, a bass drummer, and about 30 buglers. The participants ranged in age from five through fifteen, with James Munro as their director. Young Doug Munro had an excellent background in music, playing in the band and orchestra throughout his high school years and in his college band. Because of Doug's interest and experience in music, he became music director and march leader for the corps.

The corps practiced its music and close-order drill twice weekly, except when there was too much snow on the ground. The practices were held on the parade ground adjacent to the Milwaukee substation in South Cle Elum. The Drum and Bugle Corps marched and played in the late spring and early summer in civic events throughout the state, such as the Spokane Lilac Festival, Puyallup Daffodil Festival and Ellensburg Rodeo parade. My brother Tom and I played snare drums, and because I was one of the smallest boys in the corps, I always marched in the front row. My drum was about as big as I was; after marching and playing for five or six city blocks, I would grow tired and begin to lag behind. Doug Munro would come up behind me, lift my drum with his left hand, and place his right hand in the small of my back, nudging me back in line with the formation.

After graduating from high school, Doug attended Central Washington College of Education (CWCE) in Ellensburg from the fall of 1938 through spring quarter of 1939. Doug chose CWCE—being only about 30 miles from home—so that he could continue his leadership responsibilities with the Drum and Bugle Corps. Doug's work with the corps throughout his high school and college years gave an early indication of his leadership potential.

In the late summer of 1939, with the ominous threat of war on the horizon, Munro did some research into the responsibilities of the various branches of military service and decided that the Coast Guard was his cup of tea. He told his sister that he chose the Coast Guard because it was dedicated to saving lives. Just 20 years old and a man of small stature, Doug spent a week stuffing himself with enormous amounts of food in order to gain the extra pounds needed to bring him up to the Coast Guard's minimum weight standard. That accomplished, he headed for his physical, passed it, was inducted, and reported to his first duty station at Port Angeles. At enlistment he weighed 136 pounds and stood 5'8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" tall. Following training Doug volunteered for duty aboard the Coast Guard cutter *Spencer*, where he served until 1941. While aboard the *Spencer* he earned his signalman third class rating.

In June 1941, with war looming, President Roosevelt directed the Coast Guard to man four large transports and ordered guardsmen to serve, along with navy personnel, aboard other navy vessels. When the call went out for signalmen, Munro was given permission to transfer to the *Hunter Liggett*. The *Hunter Liggett* carried nearly 700 officers and enlisted men, in addition to 35 landing craft personnel (LCPs), or Higgins boats, and two landing craft tanks (LCTs).

In early August 1942 the United States embarked on its first major amphibious assault of the war in the Pacific. After initial battle successes at Coral Sea and Midway, the United States decided to counter the Japanese advances in the Solomon Islands. These islands form two parallel lines that run southeast approximately 600 miles east of New Guinea. Tulagi and Guadalcanal, both at the end of the chain, were picked for assault. Guadalcanal was strategically important because the Japanese were building an airfield there and, if finished, it would interfere with the Pacific campaign. Eighteen of the naval troop-carrying ships that were

attached to the campaign's task force carried Coast Guard personnel aboard. The Coast Guardsmen were assigned an important task in the amphibious landings—the operation of the landing craft. Many of the guardsmen had come from life-saving stations, and their Coast Guard experience made them the most seasoned small-boat handlers available to the navy. Hence, Doug Munro's assignment to temporary duty on the staff of the commander of Transport Division 17.

During preparations for the invasion of Guadalcanal, Munro was transferred from ship to ship as his talents were needed. The task force rendezvoused at sea near the end of July, and on August 7 the *Hunter Liggett* led the other transports to their anchorage off Guadalcanal. The ship then served as the command post until the marines secured the beaches. At the time of the invasion, Munro was attached to the staff of Rear Admiral Richmond K. Turner on board the USS *McCawley*. He made the landing on Tulagi Island, where fierce fighting lasted for several days. On September 20 he volunteered to lead a search and rescue mission after a navy divebomber was forced down off the coast of Savo Island. Munro and several crewmen set out in a small powerboat in search of the downed pilot and his gunner. Unaware (due to radio silence) that the aviators had been picked up by a flying patrol boat, Munro and his companions braved intense enemy fire in their efforts to save the airmen. As their boat maneuvered to within 300 yards of the beach, Munro and his small crew heard the angry buzzing of bullets from enemy machine guns firing at them. By zigzagging the small craft, he brought his crew back with only minor injuries.

Weeks into the campaign, the marines on Guadalcanal were reinforced and decided to push beyond their defensive perimeter. They planned to advance west across the Matanikau River to prevent smaller Japanese units from combining and forcefully striking American positions. For several days they tried to cross the river from the east, and each time they met tremendous resistance. On Sunday, September 27, Marine Lieutenant Colonel Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller embarked three companies of his First Battalion, Seventh Marines, in landing craft. They planned to land west of the river, drive out the enemy, and establish a patrol base on the west side of the Matanikau. Doug Munro, just two weeks short of his 23rd birthday, took charge of eight LCPs and two LCTs transporting Puller's men from Lunga Point to a small cove west of Point Cruz.

The marines landed with the support of the destroyer USS *Monssen*, which laid down a covering barrage with her five-inch guns. The 500 unopposed marines pushed inland and reorganized on a ridge several hundred yards from the beach. They were then struck by an overwhelming Japanese force and had to pull back. In the meantime, Munro and his boats had returned to their Lunga Point base. Word soon arrived at the base that the marines were in trouble and were being driven back toward the beach. The marines had no functional radio, so they had to improvise. Flying overhead, Second Lieutenant Dale Leslie spotted the word HELP spelled out with the marines' undershirts on a ridge not far from the beach. He radioed the message to another marine unit, and soon Colonel Puller, realizing that his men were isolated and under fire, embarked on the *Monssen* to personally direct covering fire to protect his men. At the Lunga Point base the same boats that had put the marines on the beach were assembled to extract them. Munro, who had taken charge of the original landing, volunteered to lead the boats back to the beach.

The Higgins boats were blunt-nosed, 36-foot-long wooden craft, and none was heavily armed or well protected. They had plywood hulls, were slow and vulnerable to small arms fire, and were armed with only two .30-caliber machine guns. As Munro led the boats ashore, the Japanese fired on their small craft from the ridge earlier abandoned by the marines, and from positions east of the beach. The intense fire from the strong, interlocking positions disrupted the landing and wounded a number of the nearly defenseless crewmembers in the boats. Despite these obstacles, Munro led the boats ashore in shifts of two or three at a time. He and a crewmember provided covering fire from an exposed position near the beach. As the marines re-embarked, the Japanese pressed toward the beach, making the withdrawal more dangerous with each passing second. Munro skillfully maneuvered his boat to act as a shield between the advancing enemy and the withdrawing marines. The entire landing force, including 25 wounded, managed to escape.

Munro steered his LCP offshore. As he passed Point Cruz he spotted an LCT full of marines grounded on a sandbar. He guided his craft toward it and directed another LCT to help pull the craft off. Twenty minutes later both were heading out to sea with Munro's boat remaining behind to provide covering fire for the withdrawal. One of Munro's crewmen saw a line of waterspouts heading toward the boat. It was Japanese machine gun fire. The crewman shouted a warning to Munro, but the roar of the boat's engine prevented him from hearing, and a single bullet hit him at the base of the skull. When out of range and after momentarily regaining consciousness, he asked just one question: "Did we get them off?" Assured that the troops were out of harm's way, Munro smiled, and then he died. In recognition of his bravery and heroism, he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor and the Purple Heart, and two of his crewmen won Navy Crosses.

On October 27, 1942, a month after Munro's death, his parents received an official letter from the Navy Department advising them of the Medal of Honor award. On May 27, 1943, they received their son's Medal of Honor from President Roosevelt in a ceremony at the White House.

Munro's commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander D. H. Dexter, sent a personal letter to Mr. and Mrs. Munro containing the following passages:

On Sunday the 27th of September an expedition was sent into an area where trouble was to be expected. Douglas was in charge of the ten boats which took the men down. In the latter part of the afternoon the situation had not developed as had been anticipated and in order to save the expedition it became necessary to send the boats back to evacuate the expedition. Volunteers were called for and true to the highest traditions of the Coast Guard and also to the traditions with which you had imbued your son, he was among the first to volunteer and was put in charge of the detail. The evacuation was as successful as could be hoped for under fire. But as always happens, the last men to leave the beach are the hardest pressed because they had been acting as the covering agents for the withdrawal of the other men, and your son, knowing this is so, placed himself and his boat so that he could act as the covering agent for the last men, and by his action and successful maneuvers brought back a far greater number of men than had been even hoped for. He received his wound just as the last men were getting in the boats and clearing the beach. Upon regaining consciousness his only question was, "Did they get off?" and so died with a smile on his face and the full knowledge that he had successfully accomplished a dangerous mission. In the year and a half that I have known Douglas I have grown to admire him and through him, you. He was the true type of American manhood that is going to win this war and I

hereby promise that I will make all efforts to call on you whenever it is my privilege to be near Cle Elum and to pay homage to you as the parents of Douglas...

Munro's heroism and self-sacrifice are now part of our nation's history, the history that each new Coast Guard volunteer learns the first day he or she is in boot camp. His story is also recorded in an exhibit at the United States Coast Guard Academy's museum in New London, Connecticut.

Douglas Munro was buried on September 28 on Guadalcanal. After the war his remains were brought home and interred, with full military honors, at the Laurel Hill Memorial Gardens Cemetery in Cle Elum. His grave site includes a special monument honoring his life and heroism, and a flagpole from which the United States and Coast Guard flags fly daily. The grave is surrounded by concrete pillars supporting a large anchor chain taken from a Coast Guard ship. His parents, Edith and James Munro, are also buried within the enclosure.

The monument includes a bronze engraving with an abbreviated version of Munro's Guadalcanal story and announces that the Coast Guard cutter *Munro* was named in his honor. But the Munro story does not end there.

In the fall of 1942 Congress established the Women's Reserve of the Coast Guard. SPAR, the name given to the women volunteers, was an acronym of the Coast Guard's slogan and its English translation: "Semper Paratus—Always Ready." On November 23, 1942, just two months after her son's heroic death, Edith Munro became one of the first of approximately 10,000 women who volunteered to serve their country as SPARs. On May 27, 1943, she completed her training at the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut, and was commissioned a lieutenant junior grade (LTJG).

At 48, older than most other women volunteers, LTJG Munro was assigned to the 13th Coast Guard District and took command of the SPAR barracks in Seattle. She also served as the Women's Reserve personnel officer and had duties that took her to Long Beach, Houston, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia. Promoted to lieutenant on July 1, 1944, she served until her retirement on November 1, 1945. Even in retirement Mrs. Munro continued to represent the Coast Guard at important military events and ceremonial functions, including the commissioning of the navy destroyer escort *Munro* in 1944, and the Coast Guard cutter *Munro* in 1972.

On September 27, 1999, 57 years after the heroic death of Douglas Munro, a ceremony to honor him was held at the cemetery in Cle Elum. The event, attended by over 1,500, featured the dedication of a new flagpole at the Munro Memorial, the unveiling of the new Veterans Memorial Wall constructed near Munro's grave, and a proclamation by Governor Gary Locke. The Memorial Wall lists the names of over 700 local veterans, both living and dead, who served in the military. The new flagpole displays the American flag, the United States Coast Guard flag, and the Missing In Action/Prisoner Of War flag that honors the servicemen and women still missing in action or who were prisoners of war.

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