

The Mighty “H” Did Not Survive



Harold Schuh

My Father, Harold T. Schuh will always be my hero. He served on two ships during WW2, the USS Helena CL50 and the USS Houston CL81. Both were torpedoed. One sunk and the other limped back to the states. The Helena fought in 13 engagements, which my dad fought in the last 12, the first was Pearl Harbor. I would like to tell you about the last engagement he participated in on the Helena. Every man on this ship were heroes, they worked as one unit and that is what made her the fighting's ship in the Navy.

The following italicized paragraphs are in my father's own words, he will help tell the story of this engagement.

We were going to bombard New Georgia to protect our troops that were landing on Munda Island.

On July 5th a Monday, The Helena and six other war ships sailed into Kula Gulf and did a night service action bombardment of the Villa airstrip to help our troops landing on Munda Island. This was the first major invasion of the New Georgia Islands. After midnight on the 6th, the service action bombardment was a success.

We were coming out of Kula Gulf and heading back to New Hebrides when we received a hurry up order at 1615 to reverse course and head back down into Kula Gulf. Coast watchers and scout aircraft had reported enemy ships around New Georgia, and we were heading back down into Kula Gulf to intercept

them. We patrolled for an hour and a half, and our radar had a clean screen. We had started our turn to come back out of Kula Gulf, when 11 enemy surface targets appeared on our radar.

The Japanese were in two groups. The nearest and right-hand group consisted of six or seven destroyers. The second group and farthest away consisted of four larger ships, possibly Cruisers. The decision was made to open fire on the nearest group of destroyers and when done reverse course and attack the bigger ships.

At 0154 July 7th the task force commenced firing. The Helena's main battery fired off its port side towards a destroyer, sinking it. The secondary battery fired on another destroyer and sank it too. Both the main and secondary batteries now shifted to a new target, a cruiser and the Helena was pounding it with shells.

Our flash less powder had been used to bomb the airfield, so every time we fired, we became a target to any enemy ship. Our targets were clearly distinguishable on both our radars; SG and Fire Control and we fired for seven straight minutes. In nine minutes, we had sunk three ships. The Helena was firing on the destroyer coming at us, and at four miles she disappeared from our radar. We don't know if her timing was perfect and she let loose with her torpedoes or if one of our first targets got us, but before the skipper could turn the ship into the oncoming torpedoes, the first one hit us.

At 0203 the first torpedo hit our bow. No one notice it at the time, but it sheered 110 feet off the ship. The bow was completely severed from the ship. We were doing 25 knots when it hit, the Helena stopped dead, just like hitting a brick wall. I flew up and bounced off the overhead, all the drawers flew out of the desk and anything on the work benches was gone. We no more got settled, and wham another torpedo hit behind us two minutes later. Another minute past and a third torpedo hit. When the last two struck, all of us knew the ship was damaged, we could hardly stand up and we were completely in the dark.

We were dead in the water.

Within three minutes after the third torpedo hit, my Lieutenant Commander told me to see what happened, he said "I know we've been hit! See how bad it is!" I was on the sound power phone trying to find out what happened and our situation. No water was coming into our compartment yet. I kept calling "Bridge, central station, bridge, central station", finally they answered me. The guy on the other end yelled, "Abandon ship, get the hell out of there we're going down."

We're at the bottom of the ship, there are men in the auxiliary fire room, radar station and our central station, about 86 of us in the area. My Lieutenant Commander said "Harold, get us out of here!" We had no power or lights, only a couple flash lights. I started out, the wrenches for the dogs on the latches were gone. I had to hammer those with my fist and with the palm of my hand. I reached the third hatch. Everyone was in a line behind me, and I heard yelling "Come on Harold, get going, get going!!!!". When I got to the last hatch, I saw one of the dogs turn and I knew there was someone on the other side. It was Tony Tonnerrelli, my good friend. He said, "Come on Harold, get out of there!" Being below deck on every battle I only heard what was happening. I was now on topside, and I saw the battle of my life. By this time, the deck was six to eight feet from the water, which is normally 20 feet. When I reached the main deck, the fight had been going on for nine minutes, the battle lasted one hour and 48 minutes. No other ships at that time were aware the Helena had been sunk.

It was deafening on deck and Tony yelled at me "What are we going to do? I can't swim!" I told him; we're not going down with this damn thing. Come on I'll get you a kapock (life jacket)." I knew exactly where they were, I got him one and he also had a rubber life jacket on. I told him "The kapock would last for a good while and when it gets heavy, kick it off and squeeze this on the rubber life jacket and it will blow up. It will hold you for at least another 72 to 80 hours." I told him to come with me we'll go over the side together. We both left the ship at the same time and the minute we hit the water, I no longer could see or hear him. The sea was heavy with oil, we were lucky there were no fires. I swam away from the ship as far as I could, so when it went down it wouldn't suck me with it.

The bow including all of turret one was blown off. The remaining part of the ship was breaking apart at about the number two stack. The middle of the ship quickly sunk. I turned around and watched it go down. Our ship when it finally gave up and started down, was just 27 minutes from the time the first torpedo hit. The ship was in three pieces. The stern was the last part to go down, it was sticking up with her screws straight in the air before she made her final plunge.

The Flag Ship was calling the Helena with no response and at 0313, 43 minutes after she sank, ships were sent back to look for us. The bow of the Helena was finally illuminated with search lights. The Radford reported sighting the bow of the Helena sticking straight up out of the water, a message was sent back "Sorry to report object sighted is CL-50 Helena". At 0335 the Radford and Jenkins was standing by to pick up any survivors. Between picking up survivors the destroyers went back and forth battling other Japanese warships.

I was in the water close to nine hours before being picked up by the Radford. Toni was not so lucky he was in the water holding onto a rubber raft for 72 hours. In her short life the Helena sank nine Japanese war ships and badly damaged five others.