

War Era Story Project 2012

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The Sinking of the World War II Troop Ship *S.S. President Coolidge*

October 26, 2012 was the 70th anniversary of the sinking of the *S.S. President Coolidge* troop ship.

On October 26, 1942, at about 9:30a.m., as the ship entered the harbor at Espirito Santo, New Hebrides (now called Vanatu), there was a loud explosion. About 25 seconds later, there was a second explosion. The troop ship had struck two mines as it entered the harbor. The ship sank in about 55 minutes.

Aboard the ship was the 172nd Infantry Regimental Combat Team consisting of about 5,000 soldiers. The regiment had been separated from the 43rd Infantry Division. The rest of the division had gone on earlier to New Zealand. The combat team consisted of infantry, field artillery, medics and other units. The rumors were that we were headed to Guadalcanal to relieve the Marines who were having a tough time with the Japanese.

My company, HQ 3rd BT was on KP duty. Some of us were below deck peeling potatoes and working on other vegetables. I had gone up on deck for some fresh air at about 9:15a.m. There was land all around us and we were about 100 yards from shore. I remarked to one of the fellows that we seemed to be going pretty fast. He asked me if I had ever been on a ship before. I said, "Yes, the Staten Island Ferry and the Palisades Interstate Ferry."

I was on the way down to my KP job when the second explosion took place. I was spun around by the Navy men fleeing the engine room and wound up on the deck. I, as well as most fellows, lost a lot of personal belongings: family pictures, rifles, gas masks and many other items. I saw life preservers sinking in the water and very few life boats had been dropped in the water. Our colonel gave orders to abandon ship. The *Coolidge* was so tilted that I stepped onto a naval vessel with other GIs and was taken to shore. As we landed from the naval vessel, the Navy fellows gave some of us cigarettes. It was the first time I ever smoked.

I always felt that if we had hit two mines a few miles from land, many of us would not have made it that day. I also wondered how the Japanese mines had gotten so close to shore. Fortunately, loss of life was limited to two people, a lieutenant in the field artillery, and a naval sailor. I understand that a court martial was held and that everyone was exonerated.

Oh yes, we got to Guadalcanal eventually, in February or March of 1943. The *Coolidge* was never raised and is used as a scuba diving resort at the present time.