A young deck officer is reminded of one of the oldest axioms of warfare — expect the unexpected.

To the Solomons Aboard the Cleveland

By Amos T. Burrows, Jr.

Something important happened during that Battle of the Western Philippine Sea which should thrill every American, yet I have rarely seen it mentioned. While I was on the USS Cleveland (CL-55), a light cruiser, I experienced it.

Before I describe how I was involved, I should tell you that I enlisted in the Navy on 1 May 1942 and was ordered to complete my Oberlin College education and to be sure to take a course in trigonometry. After nearly four-months at Northwestern University’s Midshipman School in downtown Chicago, under the Navy’s V-7 program, I was among many hundreds who were commissioned as Ensigns. When we arrived at that school, we were asked what duty we would like after graduation. I said battleship, cruiser, or aircraft carrier. My first assignment was, along with about nine other
Ensigns, to the World War I battleship USS New York (BB-34) to practice for five-weeks shooting its 14-in guns in the Chesapeake Bay.

My next assignment was to fly to the Solomon Islands area to board the USS Cleveland (CL-55), where I was responsible for the First Division with its two turrets, each which held three guns of 6-in caliber. I was smart enough to know my Chief Petty Officer, with his many years of gunnery experience, needed no more from me than my support. A light cruiser has 6-in guns and a heavy cruiser has 8-in guns. With us were Cleveland-class light cruisers Denver (CL-58), Montpelier (CL-57), and five destroyers. Each of our cruisers displaced 10,000-tons; each of the destroyers 2000-tons. When traveling each ship was at least 2000-yards (a nautical mile) from other ships. The destroyers cruising in a semi-circle were in front of the cruisers. We never cruised without periodically zigzagging in conformity to the pattern each ship was reading from written instructions, which were changed periodically. That way, an enemy sub could not predict our location in a few minutes or a few hours. It also meant it took a lot more time to go from one destination to another.

My watch station was Junior Officer of the Deck. My battle station was the Combat Information Center located immediately behind the Captain’s Bridge. That was where the Navigator had his worktable. The Executive Officer’s battle station was there. It was where radio messages were received. It also had the surface and air search radar screens. The air search radar detected planes as far out as 120-mi.

Once a minute, the radar screen rotated to search the sky to report, with a spot of light, any airplane. The screen had concentric rings, each representing about 10-mi, and also spokes of the compass to indicate direction. Within less than a minute, each spot faded away. Thus the next spot was in a slightly different position showing the direction the plane was going. It was my job to plot on a board with rings and spokes duplicating the radar screen. I had little magnets to represent planes. If the spot of light was caused by one of our planes, I would know it was friendly because it had its own brief signal of light, called IFF or “identification friend or foe.” If I saw a spot on the screen without the IFF, I was to yell “Bogey” on the assumption it was an enemy plane.

Periodically, we three light cruisers and five destroyers of Task Force 39 cruised up the “slot” to bomb hard other more northern islands. One night, after our ship’s small amphibious plane had photographed targets, we bombarded Bougainville using radar to plot our targets’ locations. Our shells caused big fires and explosions ashore. I was told this was the first time radar had been used for night bombardment.

While describing remarkable accomplishments, I should tell you our top secret computers could lock our guns on a designated target and move the gun barrels as needed to adjust for the rocking and pitching of the decks, and the changes in location of our ship.

We were in the Solomons to block the Japanese from attacking and occupying Australia. They had already bombed northern Australia.

While we were anchored in Purvis Bay, about once a week our boats would take the enlisted men to some beach where they could have cold soft drinks. At the same time, a boat would take officers to an entirely different beach where each of us could drink cold beer. Because I don’t drink, I would use that time to explore the island and to swim in the too-hot water. My guess is the air was about 120°. While we were there, I had prickly heat over every inch of my body. The water was very clear and I could see many amazingly colored fish. I would have to walk at least half a mile on sand to have the water be waist deep. I collected a lot of colorful seashells, but they lost most of their color in the air. Almost all the shells I picked up were empty. I had studied a Navy booklet, Survival on Land and Sea. I learned that there are two shells which contain a snail whose bite is comparable to a rattlesnake’s. I picked up one of those shells and quickly dropped it before its occupant could bite me.

I always took a .45 pistol and a box of ammo with me. I enjoyed shooting at coconuts high in the palm trees —
at least twice as high as our Florida palms. It was fun shooting them down but I was disappointed if the center nut didn’t spout white milk on its way down.

I found an American missionary’s grass hut. He invited me in and told me that until about 20-yrs earlier the people here were cannibals. I rarely saw them. They were very short, pot bellied and had black teeth. Even the sailors were uninterested in their women. I did find a path from the beach into the otherwise impenetrable jungle. I took the path and saw a big mean-looking Gila monster slowly crossing the path in front of me. I soon arrived in a clearing encircled by grass homes. I saw no people, because I think they were afraid of me. (Our soldiers had recently chased the Japanese from that area.) I saw a structure about 20-ft by 30-ft with no walls, but a grass roof supported by posts. There were two rows of seats made of half logs, smooth side up. Obviously a chapel. There was a crude altar, on which stood an amazingly gorgeous cross with skillfully inlaid pieces of seashells. I was most thankful that none of our crew would see it because they would sell it among themselves for many hundreds of dollars.

Aboard the Cleveland, it was rare for anyone, other than the Captain, to get as much as 4-hrs sleep at one time. Usually one was fortunate to get 4-hrs of sleep at night, a couple of hours at a time. We were working during almost all daylight hours. While bombarding Saipan, Tinian, and Guam, I slept briefly at night within about 10-ft of my battle station, lying outside on the steel deck with an uninflated life belt for a pillow. The 5-inch and 6-inch guns fired continuously rocking the ship with each salvo. Two gun turrets of three 6-inch guns each and three 5-inch gun mounts of two guns each were within 75-ft of me, firing while I slept through the noise and shocks — with possibly cotton for ear protection.

We started bombarding Saipan four-days before the scheduled 15 June 1943 D-Day, bringing our ship close to shore in hope they would fire at us so we could destroy their guns before they could shoot at our landing craft. They did not take our challenge.

An Army or Marine division had about 10,000 men. At Saipan we had three divisions. The island is about 12-mi from the southern end to the northern end. Our divisions came ashore near the southern end and fought side by side toward the north, with an army division on each side and a Marine division in the middle, pushing the Japanese to the northern end of the island. Instead of surrendering, hundreds of them jumped off the end to fall over 100-ft to their death at the edge of the ocean.

A few days later, we learned a Japanese fleet was headed toward us. While we headed east to meet them, it seemed to me there were an infinite number of Jap bodies all drifting to the east with gas-bloated genitals keeping them on their backs. War has many horrors.

Soon we were called “Man Your Battle Stations.” My radar screen showed many friendly and enemy planes mingled at about 100-mi to the east — too many to plot each one on my board. The loud speaker told us our planes would be operating at the extreme end of their gasoline supply and it would be dark by the time they could return. You need to know that during the entire war, no Navy ship ever permitted any light topside. No cigarette smoking, no flashlights, no exposure of passageway lights.

Our admiral ordered every ship to turn on every external light, including all searchlights, to help every pilot return to any carrier! He knew we were in waters full of Japanese submarines, and the number of sailors we could lose with the loss of one of our ships could easily exceed the number of airmen we could lose if none of them made it back. His decision was by far the greatest thrill I experienced in the war. I simultaneously thought we are probably the only nation with that sense of values. Would our leaders still make comparable choices?