

The Long Blue Line: BM1 Sutphin, Attack Transport *Wood* and bloody Saipan

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His courage and conduct throughout were in keeping with the highest traditions of the naval service.

Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Bronze Star Medal citation for Clarence H. Sutphin, Jr.

Seventy-six years ago, the Coast Guardsman honored above, Clarence Sutphin, served as landing craft coxswain on board the attack transport USS *Leonard Wood* (APA-12). By the end of World War II, Sutphin would be a decorated war hero, battle-tested landing craft operator and survivor of Saipan, one of the Pacific War's bloodiest combat missions.

In November 1941, just weeks before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, 18-year-old Sutphin enlisted in the United States Coast Guard. He was born in 1923 and grew up in Valley Stream, Long Island. At Central High School, he wrestled and played football and baseball, however, he also enjoyed sailing and fishing and worked as a deckhand on fishing smacks and pleasure boats. So it was only natural that he would join a military service known for its small boats and watercraft. After enlisting, Sutphin attended boot camp at the Coast Guard Yard, near Baltimore. He then received orders to the North Carolina coast to train in amphibious operations and landing craft, also known as Higgins Boats.

In May 1942, Sutphin reported on board the *Leonard Wood*, where he would spend the next three years of his life. One of many Coast Guard-manned attack transports, the *Wood* saw action in some of the war's bloodiest amphibious operations. In November, Sutphin and the *Wood* served in the landings in North Africa, the second Allied amphibious operation of the war. In July 1943, Sutphin landed troops from the *Wood* in the invasion of Sicily. After Sicily, the *Wood* crossed the Atlantic and transited the Panama Canal to participate in the Pacific Theater of Operations. In November 1943, Sutphin landed troops in the Gilbert Islands, including the capture of Makin Island. And, in early 1944, he landed troops in the Marshall Islands, including the invasions of Kwajalein Atoll and Eniwetok Atoll. Over the course of these amphibious operations, Sutphin advanced through the ranks of boat operators from Seaman 2/class to Boatswain's Mate 1/class.

Early in 1944, the *Leonard Wood* had begun preparations for its next amphibious operation. Allied and Japanese military leaders knew that American long-range bombers could reach the home islands from the Marianas and both sides planned for one of the hardest-fought battles of the Pacific War. Allied strategists labeled the operation "Forager," which targeted the Mariana Islands of Saipan, Guam and Tinian. With 600 ships and 128,000 troops, Forager would be one of the largest invasions in the Pacific War and test Allied amphibious capabilities.

On Thursday, June 15, D-Day for the invasion of Saipan, the *Wood* positioned itself off the beaches and prepared to disembark its landing craft. By 7:30 a.m., all boats were away and landing operations commenced. The landing zone included nearly four miles of beaches on the southwest side of the island. By 9:00 a.m., in spite of heavy enemy mortar, artillery and machine

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gun fire, Sutphin and his fellow landing craft operators had rushed 8,000 marines onto the beaches.

For the rest of June 15, Sutphin and *Wood's* landing boats defied death by running back and forth to the beaches to land troops, ammunition, water, food, blood plasma and medical supplies. In spite of stiff enemy resistance, the beachhead held and, over the course of the day, Sutphin and the fleet of amphibious craft had put ashore an additional 12,000 troops. By nightfall, Saipan held 20,000 U.S. troops or about two-thirds the number of Japanese troops occupying the island.

That evening, and for some nights to come, Sutphin anchored his landing craft with a boat pool of two dozen other Higgins Boats off of the landing zone. At night, using a secret password, a Navy patrol craft would check each boat and update the crews about possible attack by Japanese swimmers or suicide boats deploying from the island. The landing craft were subject not only to armed swimmers and suicide boats, but nightly air attacks. One of Sutphin's boat crew would stand watch while the others tried to rest, however, sound sleep was unknown during the Battle of Saipan.

From sun-up to sundown, Sutphin worked on the beaches and ran his boat back and forth to the transports. There was only one channel through the island's reef to reach the beaches, so once he entered the reef, there was no way to lay offshore and escape enemy sniper fire. He relied on the experience he gained through landings in North Africa, Italy and the Southwest Pacific to avoid coral reefs, enemy machine gun fire, and near misses by mortars and artillery. Those hazards, as well as sniper fire, forced him to steer his Higgins Boat on bended knee behind the boat's steel plating.

During the battle, Sutphin helped oversee boat operations, including landing, loading and salvaging landing craft. He braved intense enemy fire to save others, including swimming a towline to a landing craft stranded on a reef and targeted by enemy mortar fire with five Americans trapped on board. After rescuing that boat, he saved another stuck on the beach that was targeted by Japanese artillery. While on the beach dodging mortar rounds and sniper fire, Sutphin came to the aid of eight marines struck by a direct hit. After finding five men dead and three seriously wounded, he provided first aid to the survivors and moved them out of the firing line to the nearest aid station.

During Saipan's D-Day and D-Day+1, the landing zone had been a killing field. American forces focused their fire on land, but the Japanese hailed down artillery, mortar, machine gun and sniper fire everywhere from the reef to the beaches. After the first two days, the *Leonard Wood* departed the landing zone to escape attack by enemy ships and aircraft. On June 24, it returned, dropped the remainder of its cargo and treated 350 wounded troops before gathering up its landing craft and sailing for friendly shores.

It took nearly 30 days to defeat the enemy on Saipan. Of the 70,000 American troops landed on the island, about 5,000 were killed and over 20,000 wounded. The final count of Japanese dead was nearly 30,000, almost the entire force garrisoned on Saipan. These dead included the Japanese general in charge of Imperial Army forces and famed Japanese admiral Chuichi Nagumo. Both flag officers committed suicide in the final days of the battle. It was an inglorious

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end for Nagumo, who had commanded powerful Japanese fleets at the battles of Pearl Harbor, Midway Island and Guadalcanal.

During the months after Saipan, Sutphin and the *Leonard Wood* went on to participate in amphibious operations in the Palau Islands and the Philippine landings at Leyte and Lingayen Gulf. By the time Sutphin left the *Wood*, he had become the senior enlisted man overseeing *Wood's* Landing Boat Division of nearly 20 landing craft while serving as a guncrew member and master-at-arms. As Boatswain's Mate 1/class he had high marks in nearly all aspects of his work and was recommended for advancement to Chief Petty Officer, but all chief positions in his rating were filled at that time.

In June 1944, the conclusion of the war was more than a year away with some of the bloodiest battles yet to come. However, the capture of Saipan, and the nearby islands of Tinian and Guam, marked a turning point. The islands were not only strategic Japanese strongholds, they could support air fields for Allied bombers able to strike at the heart of Japan. These bombers included the famed B-29 *Enola Gay*, which flew from Tinian to Hiroshima initiating the Atomic Age of modern warfare and helping end the Pacific War.

Clarence Sutphin stayed with the *Leonard Wood* through May 1945. In his three years on board the transport, he had participated in all of the *Wood's* eight major amphibious operations. These spanned the globe from North Africa to the Philippines and aided in the defeat of Vichy French, German, Italian and Japanese military forces. For his "exceptional bravery under fire" on the beaches of Saipan, Sutphin received the Bronze Star Medal from the Navy with a medal citation signed by famed Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz. Sutphin was a hero of the long blue line and will be honored as the namesake of a Coast Guard Fast Response Cutter.