

The South  
Pacific's Greatest  
Shipwreck -  
*SS President  
Coolidge*

**Michael McFadyen**

# A Short History of the SS *President Coolidge*

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Comments, corrections and suggestions welcome!

Cover Photo: MV *Malabar* aground on Long Bay, 1931

# **The South Pacific's Greatest Shipwreck - *SS President Coolidge***

A short history of the Dollar Steamship Line, Newport News Shipbuilding Drydock Company, American President Line and the *SS President Coolidge*.

**Michael McFadyen**



## Foreword

For more than 15 years I have dived a considerable number of the shipwrecks of the Pacific Ocean. Apart from the shipwrecks in my home State of New South Wales, the first wreck that I dived in the Pacific was the *SS President Coolidge*. My interest in this ship led me to find out more about its history and how it came to be sunk. A lot of the information that was available in dive publications and on film was, I soon discovered, incorrect. After amassing a great deal of information, I decided to share my knowledge, so I wrote articles for *DIVE Log Australasia* about the ship. In the mid-1990s, with the expansion of the use of the World Wide Web, I set up my own Web Site (Michael McFadyen's Scuba Diving – [members.ozemail.com.au/~diving](http://members.ozemail.com.au/~diving)) and published the articles there.

Since my first visit to dive the *Coolidge* in 1991, I have returned to Espiritu Santo in 1995, 1999, 2000, and 2002 and have done in excess of 60 dives there.

This book is a consolidation of all the articles I have written about the *SS President Coolidge* over the years, together with a very comprehensive index. I have more information about the *Coolidge* (and more photos) but space limitations on my web site and in this book limit me providing it all.

I would like to thank a number of people who have helped me. First, thanks to Kevn Green and his wife Mayumi who have taken me diving on the *Coolidge* for every one of my dives and who have given me great freedom to dive the *Coolidge* on my own. Secondly, thanks to my main buddies while diving the wreck, Eddy Labour, Daryl Gibbs, Andreas Thimm and Heinz Bendinger. It is amazing what difference diving with a great diver makes when diving a deep and potentially dangerous shipwreck makes.

Thirdly, thanks to Frances Prentice of the National Maritime Museum Library who has been of great assistance in permitting me to use the resources of the Library and who has sent me information that she has found, even when I have not asked for it.

Finally, to Barry Andrewartha and Belinda Barnes of Mountain Ocean and Travel Publications, heaps of thanks for encouraging me to write for their publications, *DIVE Log Australasia* and *Sportdiving*.

This is not meant to be a definitive book on the *SS President Coolidge*, as that has been written by Peter Stone (*The Lady and the President*).

I accept that there are errors in this book as some things included have not been able to be confirmed as correct. My intention is only to publish a few copies for my friends and a couple of libraries. I welcome comments, suggestions and corrections which can be sent to me as per the inside cover.

Michael McFadyen  
Sydney, Australia  
16 November 2003

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## Robert Dollar and the Dollar Steamship Line

The story of the SS *President Coolidge* really began in the 19th Century. Robert Dollar was born in 1844 in Falkirk, Scotland (not Dalkirk as one source states). He moved to Canada in 1857. It is also reported that by the time he was 11 he was a shore boy in a lumber camp where he endured many hardships. Perhaps this was back in Scotland. Dollar's difficult childhood likely shaped his stringent attitude toward life and work. In the years to come, Dollar developed a set of rules to which he adhered all his life:

1. Do not cheat.
2. Do not be lazy.
3. Do not abuse.
4. Do not drink.

In 1893 Dollar purchased a sawmill on the Pacific coast of the United States, and his lumber business grew. He had a son, Stanley Dollar who left school at 13 and worked in his father's lumber office. In 1893 or 1895 he acquired his first vessel, a single steam schooner called *Newsboy* from the recently bankrupt Navarro Mill, to move his lumber from the Pacific northwest to markets down the coast and in the process they established the Dollar Steamship Company. The new company had a fleet of schooners, presumably moving lumber from the owners' interests to the markets. In 1902, Dollar Steamship Company moved into international shipping running a chartered voyage to Yokohama and the Philippines.

In 1906-7, Dollar purchased a property at San Rafael, California which he renamed *Falkirk*. He lived here for the rest of his life and today the house is the Falkirk Muesum. In 1916 he purchased 100 acres in Canada at Roche Point and built a timber mill as well as a town. The town still exists today, Dollarton. In 1923 he purchased seven ex World War 1 "502 President type" liners from the US Shipping Board. In March 1925 Dollar took over an additional five "535 President type" liners from the Shipping Board (apparently they were owned by the Shipping Board but managed by Pacific Mail Steamship Company in Trans Pacific work). The cost was \$5,625,000. Even though this bid was a million dollars lower than Pacific Mail's bid, it was 100% cash whereas the latter's was cash and stock. It was decided that the Pacific Mail bid did not meet the terms of the tender and thus, Dollar Steamship Company gained itself \$30 million worth of ships and was now able to start a westbound around the world service. The ships continued to be used on the Trans Pacific service.



**Figure 1 - Robert Dollar at Xmas 1928**



**Figure 2 - Rear: (Robert) Stanley and Mrs Dollar, Robert Stanley Dollar Jr, J. Harold and Mrs Dollar  
Front: Robert and Mrs Dollar, Diana Dollar**

As would be expected, this hit the Pacific Mail Steamship Co bad and soon it was taken over by Dollar. In addition, the Admiral Oriental Line went bust and it was also now part of the Dollar Steamship Company.

The Dollar Steamship Co was now one of the most profitable shipping companies in the world but the approaching depression was to be affected. The name of the company changed in 1929 to Dollar Steamship Line Inc. Ltd.

In 1929 two more ships were purchased as round the world liners and in a huge expansion, a decision was taken to build two identical passenger liners. They were not to be used to go around the world, but they were to be the Trans Pacific sector ships. The Dollar Line was loaned more than \$5,000,000 by the US Government for this construction (the boats were to be used to carry mail and the US Government had a long history of subsidising ships that were used for this purpose). On 6 December 1930, the first of the two new ships, the SS *President Hoover* was launched by Mrs Herbert Hoover and on 21 February 1931 the SS *President Coolidge* was launched, christened by the late President Coolidge's wife, Mrs Grace Coolidge. On 1 October 1931 when the *Coolidge* was delivered to the Dollar Line, she was the largest passenger ship constructed in America (with her twin sister) at that time. Built by Newport News Shipbuilding Drydock Company in Newport News, the *Coolidge* was 654 feet 3 inches long (a waterline of 615 feet) and had a gross (displacement) of 21,936 tons.

The *President Hoover* and *President Coolidge* were built as Trans Pacific ships and the Dollar Steamship Line now had the largest fleet of passenger and cargo liners operating under US flag. An increased mail subsidy meant that the line was still operating with a good profit even though the world was in a depression. There appears to have been show shady financial deals going on around this time as the line then went to the red although Stanley Dollar and his brother Harold Dollar made quite handsome incomes (in excess of \$200,000 for Stanley Dollar one year) and the Robert Dollar Company (which was the managing agent) made a good profit.

The new boats were made to serve between Asia and the West Coast of America. The *Coolidge* entered service on the San Francisco to Far East route on 6 November 1931. Despite being launched right as the Great Depression started, the Dollar Line somehow managed to survive the early 1930s. Mr E. Mowbray Tate in his book *Transpacific Liners* tells how in 1932 he went on the fourth voyage of the *Coolidge* under the command of Captain K.A. Ahlin and found the ship very comfortable indeed. He tells that it took five days for the San Francisco to Honolulu and a further nine days on to Yokohama.

On 16 May 1932 at the age of 88, Robert Dollar died. Over 3,000 people attended his funeral as well as the Governor of California and the Mayor of San Francisco. Perhaps the best testament to his life can be repeated in his own words, written in a letter to a friend.

*In this world all we leave behind us that is worth anything is that we can be well regarded and spoken of after we are gone and that we can say that we left the world just a little better than we found it. If we can't accomplish*



**Figure 3 - It is 1928 and Robert Dollar (on his 85th birthday) greets Henry L. Stimson at San Francisco. Mr Stimson had just come off a Dollar ship from Manila on his way to Washington to take up the post of Secretary of State. Mr Stimson was Secretary of War during WWII and responsible for the development of atomic weapons**

*these two things then life, according to my view, has been a failure. Many people erroneously speak of a man when he is gone as having left so much money. That, according to my view, amounts to very little.*



**Figure 4 - Robert Dollar and  
Chaing Kai Shek, President of  
China (he was later expelled to  
Taiwan by Mao Tse Tung)**

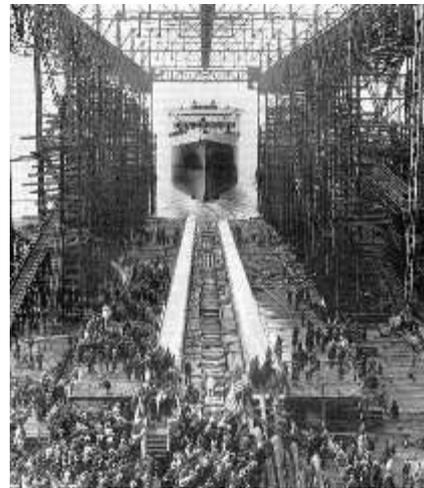
## Newport News Shipbuilding Drydock Company

The Newport News Shipbuilding Drydock Company (NNS) was founded in 1886 by railroad magnate Collis P. Huntington. Its first ship was a tugboat, *Dorothy*, which was delivered in 1891 and now sits on company grounds. Famous ships built by the company include seven battleships in President Theodore Roosevelt's Great White Fleet in the early 1900s and the battleships USS *Texas* and *Pennsylvania*, which survived both World Wars.

The company built and operated a shipyard in Wilmington, North Carolina, during WWII, producing 243 cargo ships. USS *Ranger*, the first US ship designed and built from-the-keel-up as an aircraft carrier (most were converted from battleships or other vessels) was built by NNS. Many of the famous and successful World War II aircraft carriers, including USS *Yorktown*, USS *Essex*, USS *Intrepid*, USS *Hornet* and USS *Franklin* were built in the Newport News yard.

Some famous passenger ships built at NNS include the passenger liner SS *America* (launched 31/8/39, 723 feet long and 35,440 tons) and the SS *United States* (23/6/51, 990 feet long and 45,360 tons - for a long time the fastest ship to cross the Atlantic). After the war, NNS built the USS *Enterprise*, the world's first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the USS *Los Angeles*, lead ship in a class of 28 identical nuclear-powered attack submarines (NNS has built 52 nuclear submarines since 1960), the USS *Nimitz*, lead ship in a class of nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and the *UST Atlantic* and *UST Pacific*, the largest ships built in the Western Hemisphere.

As can be seen from the above couple of paragraphs, NNS has always been at the forefront of shipbuilding using the newest technologies available. In a similar vein, the *Coolidge* was quite an enervative vessel, with some very advanced features. Powered by two steam turbines connected to two electric motors made by Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company, the *Coolidge* was capable of 20 knots with a range of 14,000 miles.



**Figure 5 - The *Coolidge* being launched on 21 February 1931**

## **The SS *President Coolidge***

Over the years the *Coolidge* carried many wealthy passengers, including Baron Henri de Rothchild, famous physician, who arrived in San Francisco on 11 May 1935. More details are contained in the *President Coolidge* ship page.



**Figure 6 - The *Coolidge* on a shakedown cruise**

However, the end was near and despite the insurance money from the loss of the SS *President*

*Madison* (\$1m when she capsized at the Seattle wharf while being repaired), the Dollar Line got more and more into debt. In 1934 and 1936 there were maritime strikes. The 1936 strike affected Dollar badly when its ships were out of action for more than three months. I think this started in November 1936. The result of the strike was that it now cost more to operate the ships and Dollar was forced to pay other (mostly Japanese lines) to carry their passengers. On 18 November 1936, one of the Dollar companies filed for bankruptcy and in 1937 the Tacoma Oriental was sold up to meet debts.

The year 1937 proved to be the beginning of the end, with some very bad incidents affecting to company and only one or two items of good news.

On 6 March 1937 while outbound from San Francisco, the *Coolidge* hit and sank the *Frank H. Buck*, an oil tanker, near the Golden Gate Bridge. The *Coolidge's* bow was severely damaged but it was soon repaired and put back into service. I was told that this voyage was the *Coolidge's* first trip after the strike mentioned in the paragraph above.

Later in 1937, the repaired vessel lowered the Trans Pacific record to 9 days, 9 hours 51 minutes on a trip from Yokohama to San Francisco. This good fortune for the Dollar Line was shortlived as on 11 December 1937, near Hoishoto Island off southern tip of Taiwan, the SS *President Hoover* ran aground. After many attempts to salvage the vessel, she was declared a total loss.

## The American President Lines

Although the Dollar Line had lasted right through the Great Depression, the effect on it was there. On 3 June 1938 the SS *President Coolidge* was arrested in San Francisco for an unpaid debt of \$35,000. A bond of \$70,000 was put up so the ship could be released for its trip to Asia. After this date, the Dollar Steamship Line Inc (as well as American Mail) were suspended from operation.

Earlier, Joseph P. Kennedy, (father of President John F. Kennedy) was appointed as the first chairman of the new Federal Maritime Commission in 1937 during which he laid the groundwork for the US merchant marine (Kennedy did not stay as Chairman for long as he became the United State's Ambassador to Great Britain in 1938). One of the first acts of the commission was to investigate the Dollar line and associated companies. The troubles in China at this time (the Sino-Japanese war was on) had caused passenger numbers and cargo quantities to drop markedly. Accordingly, income had dropped and at the same time insurance costs had gone sky high.

Eventually, the Dollar family passed ownership of the line to the Government in a swap for cancelling the debts of the line. On 15 August 1938, the commission took ownership of the Dollar line. As part of the deal, the name "Dollar" was not to be used and the jobs of all employees below the top level were kept.

However, before this occurred, on 20 July 1938 the ownership of the SS *President Coolidge* was passed onto the United States Department of Commerce. There were immediate changes. The commission appointed William Gibbs McAdoo as Chairman of the board of the new entity and Joseph Sheehan, Executive Director of the commission, became President.



**Figure 7 - The *Coolidge* at the peak of her short career**

On 1 November 1938, the new entity met for the first time. At that meeting, the name of the company was changed to American President Lines Ltd. Instead of the \$ sign that had graced the funnels of the Dollar ships, the new symbol was a white eagle. The SS *President Coolidge* stayed in service on the Trans Pacific run. Before Dollar Lines, however, American President Lines traces its ancestry to the venerable Pacific Mail Steamship Company, which operated on the west coast of North America during the California Gold Rush and pioneered trans-Pacific service to the Orient.

For the next three years the *Coolidge* continued to sail the Pacific and in mid-1940 was used to evacuate the families of US Servicemen from China and Japan as World War 2 raged in Europe and when the threat from Japan started to rise. On 16 January 1941 the *Coolidge* arrived in San Francisco with 832 passengers and in March she arrived with well over 1,000 passengers.

After World War Two started in Europe, the American President Lines ships became more involved in moving cargo and passengers to and from Europe. This led to the company increasing profits. On 27 May 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt proclaimed a state of national emergency and the defence forces started chartering the American President Lines ships. Soon the line had called a halt to its regular Trans Pacific routes and most of its ships were being used to move soldiers to expected theatres of war.

The *Coolidge* was occasionally used by the War Department on a part-voyage basis. Her first voyage on a full-time basis for the army began at San Francisco on 15 July 1941 and took her to Honolulu and Manila. After returning in late August the ship again left San Francisco in early September for Honolulu and Manila. On 1 November 1941 the SS *President Coolidge* once more sailed from the Golden Gate for the same destinations, and

was en route home, midway between Manila and Honolulu, when the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor occurred. She reached San Francisco on Christmas Day 1941.

On 7 December 1941 Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and as a consequence, the US declared war on Japan and Germany.

Within a month of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the US's entry into the war, the *Coolidge* was converted to a troopship in January 1942 even though the War Shipping Administration was not proclaimed by President Roosevelt until 21 February 1942. This brought all US shipping under Government control.

Over the next four years, the American President Lines ships were decimated by the war. At the start of the war they had 20 ships. Of these, five were lost (or nine if the same source is believed) and only three were left at the end of the war. It is not clear from books I have consulted what happened to the rest. The following is a table of what happened to some of the ships.

Ship	Sunk	Where	How Sunk
SS <i>President Coolidge</i>	26 October 1942	Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides (Vanuatu)	US minefield
SS <i>President Taylor</i>	13 February 1942	Off Canton Island	Ran aground on a reef Personal comment to author by <a href="#">Robert Turner</a> , Engineer on <i>Taylor</i>
SS <i>President Grant II</i> formerly SS <i>President Adams I</i>	26 February 1944 written off 17 June 1944	Uluma Reef, Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea	Hit reef Is apparently diveable in shallow water
SS <i>Ruth Alexander</i>	about December 10 1941	Celebes Sea near Balikpapan	Bombed by Japanese bombers
SS <i>President Harrison</i>	8 or 9 December 1941	East China Sea	Captured by Japanese and renamed <i>Kakka Maru</i> then <i>Kachidoki Maru</i>

After the war, the American President Lines was owned by the US Government. The Dollar family attempted through legal means to recover the company but was unsuccessful. A deal meant that the line was sold and the money split between the Dollar family and the US Government. The company was purchased by a group called APL Associates. The company lives on today and now is one of the biggest container shipping companies in the world. For more information, see their Web Site – see references.

## SS *President Coolidge* - The Ship

The SS *President Coolidge* was one of two identical ships (the other being the SS *President Hoover*) ordered by the Dollar Steamship Line on 26 October 1929 from the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company (NNS), Newport News, Virginia. The two ships were to be built for the sum of \$7,050,000 each and were to be the largest passenger ships (in fact, the largest non-naval ships) to be built in the United States.



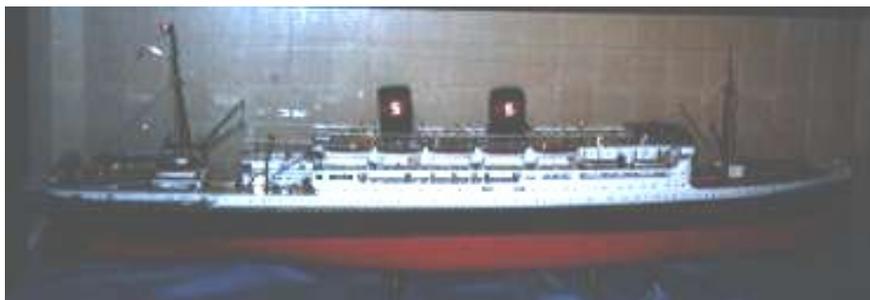
**Figure 8 – A model of the SS *President Coolidge* in the San Francisco Maritime Museum**

Photo courtesy of Richard P. Toulson, Los Altos, USA

The two new ships were designed by Carl Petersen of NNS and on 21 April 1930, the construction of the keel of Hull No 340 was started (order number 231,219). This was to be the SS *President Coolidge*. On the scale of passenger liners being built at that time in Europe, the *Coolidge* was not all that big. The ship was 654 feet 3 inches long, 81 feet wide, 34 feet deep and with a gross tonnage of 21,936 tons. Displacement was 30,924 tons and cargo capacity was 608,850 cubic feet. The *Coolidge* was powered by turbo-electric engines (more about this later) which turned twin props. A cruising speed of over 20 knots was possible and maximum speed of at least 22.2 knots.

As well as a being a passenger liner (214 to 307 First Class, 133 Special Class, 170 Third Class, 380 Steerage Class - Total 990 maximum plus 324 crew giving 1,312 people), the *Coolidge* had seven cargo holds, one of which was refrigerated. This cargo space was 633,000 cubic feet, of which about 70,000 cubic feet was refrigerated. Included in this cargo space was room to carry 100 cars. The ship had three levels above the deck and five below.

The *Coolidge* was powered by a turbine-electric propulsion setup manufactured by Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company whereas the *Hoover* was powered by an almost identical unit made by General Electric Company. In the *Coolidge*, there were 12 Babcock and Wilcox high pressure boilers (giving a total heating surface of 57,624 square feet) which were heated by fuel oil. The steam produced had a pressure of 300 lbs per square inch and a final temperature of 620°F. The steam was sent to two 14,000 bhp turbines which each then turned a 10,200 kilowatt generator running at 2,660 revolutions per minute (rpm). These generators put out 4,000 volts of three phase electricity which was then sent to two 13,250 hp electric motors that each drove a prop through direct drive. At full speed, the motors turned the props at 133 rpm.



**Figure 9 – Another shot of the *Coolidge* model**

Photo courtesy of Richard P. Toulson, Los Altos, USA

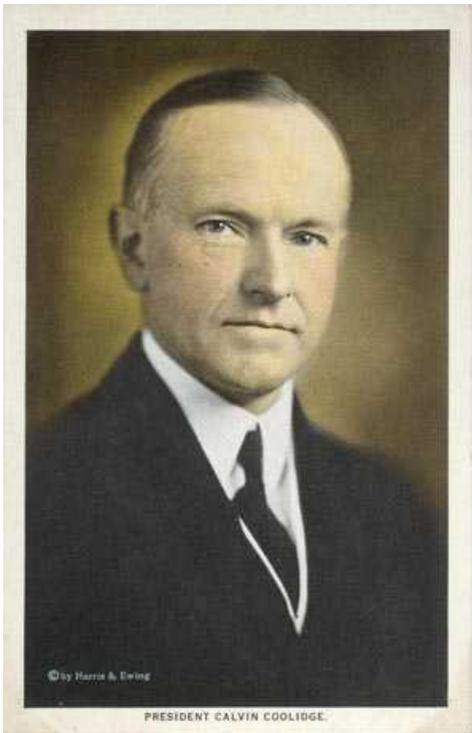
Of interest is the fact that the photograph shown on page 209 of Peter Stone's book *The Lady and the President* (see references) is either not of the control room of the *Coolidge* or it was altered at some time. The control levers in the

photo are certainly not the ones in the *Coolidge* when she sank. The ones in the photo have pull-up handles whereas those on the wreck have squeeze handles like those on old time train track levers.

The ship carried 6,240 tons of fuel oil giving the ship a range of 19,500 nautical miles at cruising speed and 14,500 nautical miles at full speed. The ship also carried 2,320 tons of fresh water and 1,181 tons of coconut oil (these tanks could also carry fuel oil and are included in the fuel oil capacity given above).

There were also four 500kw 240/120 volt auxiliary turbine-generator sets. These provided the power for lighting, room heaters, air conditioning etc throughout the vessel. There were 365 electric fans and 282 electric heaters throughout the ship. The total heater load was equal to more than half the output of one of the auxiliary generators.

The steering gear was manufactured by American Engineering Company and was powered by two 75hp motors. Power for the 24 winches came from 35hp waterproof motors. Of the 24 winches, 18 were Lidgerwood single-g geared single-drum winches capable of lifting 3,000 lbs direct at 340 feet of rope per minute. These winches served the four cargo holds accessible from the deck and hold three which is accessible from the 'tween deck of hold two (hold four only has side entry). There were also two reversible Lidgerwood compound-g geared single-drum winches serving the 30 ton boom of hold one. There were also four Lidgerwood double-g geared single-drum winches on the 'tween deck hatches of hold three and on the forward deck two Hyde automobile capstans for loading cars through the side ports. The shelter deck at aft had three American Engineering Company electric capstans. On the boat deck there were six sets of Welin-McLachlan gravity type davits. These were for raising the lifeboats and were driven by 15.5 hp electric motors. There were also two larger boat winches of 25hp.



**Figure 10 - President Calvin Coolidge**

A portrait by Harris and Ewing published as a postcard by B. S. Reynolds Company, Washington DC.

The *Coolidge* had a refrigerated cargo space of approximately 70,000 cubic feet and cold storage rooms of about 20,000 cubic feet. Just more than a half of the cargo space is cooled by the circulation of refrigerated air.

The SS *President Coolidge* was launched on Saturday 21 February 1931 by Mrs Grace Anna Coolidge (nee Goodhue), wife of (John) Calvin Coolidge (1872-1933), 30th president of the United States (1923-1929). At 11:29:45 am on that day, Mrs Coolidge smashed a bottle of water from her husband's Vermont farm (remember, this was during Prohibition when champagne was not available) over the bow of the new giant vessel. The hull of the unfinished ship slid down into the James River and was then moved to a spot adjacent to the SS *President Hoover*, her identical twin sistership. The *Hoover* had been launched on 9 December 1930 and was already well towards completion.

As is usual in building ships, the hulls had been launched without the final touches being installed (furnishings and other fittings). A photograph taken shortly after shows the *Coolidge* with one funnel in place (with the distinctive \$ sign on its side) next to the *Hoover* with both stacks in place. The ships were almost 100% identical, with the length, width, tonnage, cargo, passenger and layout exactly the same. The only differences were minor ones of furnishings and decorations (more about this soon) and the engines.

As indicated above, the only other difference between the two giants was the furnishings and fittings. Both ships had two outdoor swimming pools. One was a permanent one on Boat Deck behind the superstructure (for First Class of course) and the other a removable canvas structure that fitted as the hatch cover on Hold 6. This was for everyone else. There was also a gymnasium, a barber and beauty shop, a soda fountain, three dining rooms, two smoking rooms, two lounges (one doubling as a theatre with talking movies), three electric lifts, a library and writing room and even a darkroom for the ship's photographer. The entire ship was air conditioned (not all that common at that time).

The interiors and furnishings (done by A. F. Martin Company of San Francisco) were quite good although not as luxurious as some of the European liners of the time. The most outstanding features of the furnishings was the mural of deep sea marine life in the Library and Writing Room, the ornate Grand Stairwell leading into the First Class Dining Room (with a large mural representing countries visited by Dollar Line ships), the Continental Lounge (First Class) which had a dome of 3000 pieces of glass and the First Class Smoking Room (see photo at left).

This was probably the most impressive section of the ship's interior. At the bow end, there was a tapestry which depicted Rip Van Winkle, walnut armchairs, settees, game tables, green and vermillion rubber tiles (these are still there) and at the stern end, a verde antique marble fireplace, with an electric "fire" and topped by a decorative panel "of majolica set in a dull stainless steel frame with molded iron". This was, of course, the "Lady and the Unicorn", seen in a painting on the following page as it looks now (note the missing right hand of the Lady and the missing horn of the Unicorn). The murals on the ship were done by New York artist Frank Bergman (1898-?). I am not sure if he did all of them. He also did the murals on the SS *President Hoover*.



**Figure 12 - The First Class Smoking Room**  
Note the Lady top right

of accommodation obviously varied greatly, even within the one class. For example, First Class had four suites with their own bath and toilet, 32 staterooms shared a bath between two rooms, single cabins with their own shower and toilet, twin cabins with private or shared shower and toilet. All these cabins did not have bunks and some rooms had settees. Each First Class cabin had a heater manufactured by Westinghouse, they were carpeted and were quite well appointed. The First Class accommodation was located on Boat Deck, Promenade Deck (only two single cabins - one was where the three rows of toilets are now located), A Deck, B Deck and C Deck. The First Class Dining Room was located on C Deck



**Figure 11 - The Continental Lounge**



As was normal, the First Class passengers had the run of the upper levels of the ship, the Special and Third Class located lower down and towards the rear of the ship and the Steerage Class, located guess where, near the steering gear at the stern (obviously noisier due to the props, engines, steering gear) and rougher in heavy seas due to being furthest from the "centre of gravity" of the ship (movement on ships is worse at the bow and stern as these sections have to move most up and down when battling seas).

The cabins for these different classes

in the middle of the ship (there was also a private dining room located off the main room for small functions).

The Special Class accommodation was located on B Deck just behind the First Class accommodation. These cabins were at times used as First Class accommodation when there were more people than available normal cabins. The cabins were for three people (23 staterooms) and four people (16 staterooms). The beds in these rooms were twin single beds with fold out Pullman berths (bunks) over one or both beds. They had shared bathrooms. The dining room was located on C Deck a bit further back towards the stern from the First Class room.

The Third Class accommodation was at the stern on C Deck (and possibly B Deck). These cabins were capable of holding six or eight persons in fixed double bunks. The cabins had a toilet and shared a bathroom. They also had steam heaters. The dining room was located right at the stern on C Deck.

The Steerage Class was located on D Deck at the stern and also doubled as cargo space depending on the need at the time. This consists of six large rooms with 60 berths. It is assumed that they used the Third Class Dining Room.

Of interest is the fact that the baths (including a Japanese bath on C Deck in the Third Class area) used hot and cold salt water while the showers used fresh water.

The SS *President Coolidge* was completed on 10 September 1931 and undertook her first sea trials on that date off the Virginia Capes. The following are the results of the "Standardisation Trials" of the SS *President Hoover* conducted on 18 June 1931. The *Hoover* was displacing 24,000 tons. No "Standardisation Trials" were done on the *Coolidge*.

No of runs	Speed Knots	Average rpm	SHP
Three	15.514	94.85	8,929
Three	17.179	106.43	12,499
Three	18.411	115.12	15,764
Three	19.631	123.80	19,820
Three	20.504	131.42	24,250
Five	21.558	141.48	31,060
Highest speed	22.2	143.36	32,537

During her sea trials, the *Hoover* did a lot of tests on using varying combinations of power. They are summarised in the following table.



**Figure 13 - The Lady and the Unicorn ,First Class Smoking Room**

Date – June	17	18	19	19
Time	8 to 10 am	4pm to 12 midnight	9am to noon	12.15 pm to 2.15pm
Number of generators in use	2	2	1	1
Number of boilers in use	12	12	6	6
Revolutions per minute	99.74	134.4	101.67	103.9
Shaft horse-power	10,519	29,495	10,999	11,792
Speed in knots	16.22	20.83	16.52	16.83
Fuel oil, lb per shp per hour	0.847	0.669**	0.772	0.766

**\*\*Note:** In the table in *Shipbuilding and Shipping Record* - December 24, 1931, page 806, this figure is given as 0.0669. It would appear that this is incorrect and the figure I have placed in my table is more likely.

During the trials the two ships did an eight hour economy trial (column three in the table above). The *Coolidge* had greater shp (27,089) and faster prop rpm (136.43) during these runs. As can be seen, the ships could run quite well on only six boilers and/or one generator. In addition, the ship could operate under normal conditions using only two of the auxiliary generator units and under peak loads only three units were needed. This meant that one unit was always kept as a spare.

The *SS President Coolidge* was delivered to the Dollar Steamship Line on 1 October 1931 (almost four months ahead of the contracted delivery date of 26 February 1932) and made her maiden voyage on 15 October 1931. Therefore it took less than 18 months from laying the keel to the maiden voyage, quite an achievement (fat chance of a ship of this size being built as quickly now). This trip was from New York to San Francisco (her home port) under the command of Captain Karl A. Ahlin. As she entered San Francisco Bay she was greeted by hundreds of small vessels and there was a public reception for Captain Ahlin and his senior officers at Pier 42.

## **SS President Coolidge - A Short History**

As indicated in the previous chapter on the building of the *SS President Coolidge*, the new ship was delivered to the Dollar Steamship Line on 1 October 1931 (almost four months ahead of the contracted delivery date of 26 February 1932) and made her maiden voyage on 15 October 1931. Therefore it took less than 18 months from laying the keel to the maiden voyage, quite an achievement (fat chance of a ship of this size being built as quickly now). This trip was from New York to San Francisco (her home port) under the command of Captain Karl A. Ahlin. As she entered San Francisco Bay she was greeted by hundreds of small vessels and there was a public reception for Captain Ahlin and his senior officers at Pier 42.

The first normal trip (remember she was built for the Trans Pacific route) was from San Francisco to the Far East on 6 November 1931. Mr E. Mowbray Tate in his book *Transpacific Liners* tells how in 1932 he went on the fourth voyage of the *Coolidge* under the command of Captain Karl A. Ahlin and found the ship very comfortable indeed. He tells that it took five days for the San Francisco to Honolulu and a further nine days on to Yokohama. In early 1932 the *Coolidge* set a new record for a crossing of the Pacific (from east to west) when she steamed from Yokohama in Japan to San Francisco in just over 12 days, taking four hours and four minutes off the record set by the *Asama Maru*. The average speed was 19.5 knots. However, the fastest crossing was actually 10 days 15 hours by the Pacific Mail Line steamship *SS Korea* in 1902. The previous trip from San Francisco to Yokohama had been even quicker at a speed of 20.78 knots (not 30.78 as stated in one recent book) and an elapsed time of 11 days, 4 hours and 22 minutes.

In January 1933 the *Coolidge* set a new Honolulu to San Francisco record of 4 days, 2 hours and 58 minutes taking 14 hours off the previous record set by her sistership, *SS President Hoover*.

For all its life till the years just before the Pacific War started in late 1941, the *President Coolidge* operated on the Trans Pacific Route. Many famous and wealthy people travelled on the ship during this period. These included the famous Welsh journalist, Gareth Jones, who travelled from Honolulu on 30 January 1935 and arrived in Yokohama on 9 February 1935 (he was to die a few months later when murdered by Chinese bandits) and Baron Henri de Rothchild, the famous physician, who arrived in San Francisco on 11 May 1935.

In 1935 General Douglas Macarthur was travelling from San Francisco to Manila in the Philippines to take up a job as special US Military Adviser (really command of the Philippine Armed Forces), a special role arranged between President Quezon and President Roosevelt when he met his second wife Jean Marie Faircloth (he later called her "my finest soldier"). Macarthur was travelling with his aide (he called him his best clerk), Major Dwight D. Eisenhower (later General and President of the USA). After their marriage in New York in 1937, the Macarthurs travelled on the 10 May voyage from San Francisco to Manila on the *Coolidge*.



**Figure 14 - Jean Faircloth**

On 6 March 1937 the *SS President Coolidge* left San Francisco on its regular west bound trip to Honolulu and Yokohama (its 31st voyage). This was her first voyage since November 1936 when the 96 day maritime strike started (see the chapter on APL). On board were 678 passengers and 350 crew. As she approached the Golden Gate Bridge, a thick fog rolled in over the bay. At the same time, the *SS Frank H. Buck*, an Associated Oil tanker, entered San Francisco Bay. It is reported that the skipper of the *Coolidge*, Captain Ahlin, did not slow down when he entered the fog bank (this was disputed by the crew of the *Coolidge*. A witness, Julius Larsen, who worked for the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce as a marine lookout, heard the foghorns of both

ships as they approached his point. He reported that the two fog horns got closer to each other and he then heard a very loud crash as the two ships collided.

The United States Consul-General to Tientsin, a town in the autonomous municipality of Tientsin, northern China, (now called Tianjin), was on the *Coolidge's* upper deck when he heard the *Buck's* blast and then almost immediately saw the tanker's masts. He reported that he heard Captain Ahlin order the engines to be reversed but it was too late. Lifeboats were dropped into the water and most of the tanker's crew of 40 were safely collected by them. Eight crew and the ship's dog were rescued by a boat from the Point Bonita Coast Guard Station. The ships had collided head on and the *Frank H. Buck* was very badly damaged. Her bow was cut open by the *Coolidge's* bow and the tanker was losing oil and it was stated as being "bow down and stern up" and thought to be about to sink. However, she floated over to Lands End and went aground on rocks.



**Figure 15 - The *Coolidge* goes back to the wharf after her encounter with the SS *Frank Buck***

A concerted salvage removed most of the 67,000 barrels of oil left on board and the ship was refloated some time later. However, I have seen a photograph of a plaque from near the Golden Gate Bridge which states "The *Frank H. Buck* was rammed and sunk in 1937 by the passenger liner *President Coolidge*". It also says that the wreckage of the *Buck* and another ship can be seen at low tide.



**Figure 16 - I think this is the wreck of the SS *Frank H. Buck***

Photo courtesy of Richard P. Toulson, Los Altos, USA

The damage to the *President Coolidge* was also quite severe. The bow had been bashed in from the waterline to halfway to the top of the bow, there was a hole halfway up and the starboard side had a hole 20 feet wide. Meanwhile, the *Coolidge* had been taken first to the pier to remove passengers and cargo and then to the Bethlehem Shipbuilding Corporation Dry Dock at Hunters Point, for repairs. It was estimated that it would take 10 days to fix the ship and the cost was expected to

be about \$250,000 (this included lost fares).

After repairs, the *Coolidge* left San Francisco on 25 March 1937, by-passing Honolulu. Her next voyage to the Far East started on 10 May 1937 and by June had made up the lost time and was back on her normal schedule.

On voyage number 33 which departed San Francisco on 26 June 1937, the *President Coolidge* had onboard Mrs Spencer Tracey and her son and daughter. Spencer Tracey was busy in Hollywood making the film "Boystown" (released in 1938) for which he won his 1st Oscar. Also on this same voyage was the legendary silent film era actress Mary Pickford (known as "America's Sweetheart").

Later in 1937, the repaired vessel lowered the Trans Pacific record to 9 days, 9 hours 51 minutes on a trip from Yokohama to San Francisco. As indicated earlier, this record had stood for 35 years. This trip was a full two and a half days quicker than the official record she set in 1932.



**Figure 17 - The SS *President Coolidge* in Hong Kong Harbour sometime after November 1938 when she came under the ownership of the American President Line**

Although the Dollar Line had lasted right through the Great Depression, the effect on it was there. On 3 June 1938 the SS *President Coolidge* was arrested in San Francisco for an unpaid debt of \$35,000. A bond of \$70,000 was put up so the ship could be released for its trip to Asia. After this date, the Dollar Steamship Line Inc (as well as American Mail) were suspended from operation.

In 1938 Gaynor Edwin Field was appointed as the ship's photographer. He served on the ship till war broke out. He later ran Field's Studio of Photography and reportedly had

a lot of photos of the ship. He died in Idyllwild, (near Palm Springs, California) on 1 October 1 1998. I was unable to make contact with his family to see if they have some stories or photos that I might be able to obtain for this page.

In October 1938, the *Coolidge* was refused permission to leave Shanghai (then under Japanese control) as she had on board more than \$4,000,000 of silver. After the silver was removed, the ship was permitted to leave.

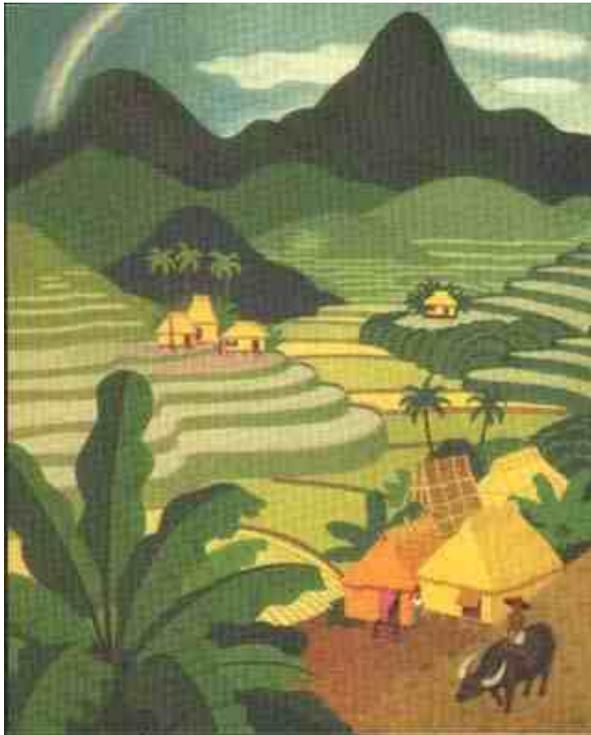
By now, the Dollar Shipping Line existed in name only as detailed in the chapter on the History of the Dollar Steamship Line. On 1 November 1938, the ownership of the SS *President Coolidge* (as well as all the other Dollar vessels) passed officially to a new Government owned line, the American President Lines Ltd. There were a couple of changes to the ship then, including removing the \$ sign on the funnels and replacing them with an eagle and four white stars and the hull was repainted grey. Despite the change in ownership, the *Coolidge* continued on its Trans Pacific run.

Captain William O. Kolhmeister was appointed as the new permanent skipper of the SS *President Coolidge* on May 4, 1939 after the Karl A. Ahlin retired. Captain Ahlin had been the ship's only captain since the vessel was launched at Newport News in April 1931.

On 12 July 1939 while on her way to Asia, the *President Coolidge* sighted a Chinese junk mid-Pacific which signalled it was short of food and water. The 29 ton craft had left Kobe, Japan on 14 June 1939 crewed by two Norwegians under a Russian captain. She was bound for San Francisco Bay where they intended visiting the World's Fair at Treasure Island. Captain Kohlmeister brought the *Coolidge* alongside the junk and provided it with provisions. On this same voyage (number 46) that the *Coolidge* collided with the Japanese freighter *Nissan Maru* on the Whangpoo River in China. A very event eventful trip! This was just over two years after the *Buck* incident. The *Coolidge* suffered minor damage and the side plates were a bit bent.

Another strange event occurred in January 1940 when the *Coolidge* was on the way from the US to Yokohama. When 700 miles from Yokohama, the ship came across five men and a women (all white) in a small boat. They were without food and after being given some supplies (food, water and medicine), the group continued on its way (wherever this was meant to be).

In October 1940 the *Coolidge* encountered a typhoon (cyclone) on a trip to Japan. There was only minor damage but five passengers were hurt. October 1940 and early 1941 saw the ship evacuate Americans from Hong Kong. On 16 January 1941, the *Coolidge* arrived in San Francisco with 832 passengers (mostly refugees/evacuees) under the command of Captain Henry Nelson. This was a new record for passengers carried on a merchant ship on a regular run. This figure was bettered on 30 May 1941 when she arrived in San Francisco with more than 1000 passengers.



Cover of the Menu at right

Dinner Menu

**Figure 18** - A menu from 13 (?) June 1941 while the ship was on the way to Honolulu

On 28 February 1941, Edward S. Crocker, First Secretary of the US Embassy in Tokyo, boarded the *Coolidge* in Kobe and travelled back to the United States, arriving in San Francisco on 13 March 1941. It is presumed that he reported to the Government on the situation in Japan, even though he was on leave.

On a trip in June 1941, the *Coolidge* encountered more than 100 Japanese war and supply ships in the Formosa Strait.

Things were definitely getting worse and on 28 May 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared a state of national emergency and just four days later, on 2 June 1941, the ship was taken over by the Maritime Commission as a troop transport for the Army. On 15 July 1941 she left San Francisco on a voyage to Honolulu and the Philippines carrying, it is resumed, troops. On 4 August 1941, a Japanese intelligence report sent from Manila to Tokyo reported "About six-hundred American soldiers have arrived in Manila on the *Coolidge*. (This was learned from the crew of the *Coolidge*)".

She returned from Manila with 250 Americans, originally intending to travel via Yokohama where she was to collect another 100 Americans but she was refused permission to enter Japan (this may not have been technically correct as a report states that she was able to enter and take home some officials, but not private citizens). The evacuees from Manila and Shanghai arrived in San Francisco on 28 August 1941.

The *Coolidge* left San Francisco on 8 September 1941 for the Orient, returning on 23 October 1941. During this trip the ship was reportedly "escorted" for part of the Honolulu to Manila section (presumably the last bit) by a cruiser and several patrol boats. The ship again left San Francisco on 1 November 1941 for Honolulu and Manila.

Rosalie Sue Hutchison was 13 years old and living in the Philippines with her parents and 8 month old brother in late 1941. Her father was working at a mine as a mining engineer. In November 1941, her father was told by a good friend that there was going to be a lot of trouble so he decided to send his family back home to the US. He was lucky to obtain tickets for his family on the SS *President Coolidge* for the trip departing Manila on 27 November 1941.

At the end of the voyage, Rosalie was presented with a fancy certificate about crossing the Equator and 180th Meriden. It is signed "Davey Jones, Keeper of the Locker Keys" and "Father Neptune, Ruler of the Raging Main" and also lists in cryptical terms many things that occurred on the voyage. These will be mentioned below in inverted commas.

The *Coolidge* left Manila on 27 November 1941 (although it may have been 28 November as I have seen this in some places and in a note written in 1942 by Mr Royal H. Fisher) under the command of Captain Henry Nelson, USNR. From a letter that Rosalie Hutchison (now Rosalie Smith) sent me in April 2002, it is apparent that the ship took a very circuitous trip to Hawaii. More about this in a minute. On board the *Coolidge* were some pandas ("Chiang Kai-shek's Pandas...") and someone described as "Heaven-Born Daughter of China". Rosalie says that there was another ship with the *Coolidge*. She thinks that it was called the *Scott*. This was in fact the US Attack Transport USAT *Scott*. It was a much slower vessel and could, she thinks, only make 6 or 7 knots so the *Coolidge* had to go that slow as well. The *Scott* probably travelled faster than this, perhaps 12 to 13 knots, but well below the *Coolidge's* normal cruising speed of about 20 knots. There was a rumour going around the ship that the *Scott* was carrying gold bullion from the gold mines in the Philippines.

Rosalie has told me that the morning after leaving Manila, she woke up and went on deck. She found that the ship, which yesterday was white, was now mostly grey, with the crew all busy painting the hull and superstructure with brushes on the end of long poles ("The Sky is Bright but our color Gray..."). In addition, the portholes were locked and the glass painted black. No-one was permitted out on deck after dark. The second day out there was lifeboat drill and all passengers were given lifejackets and told to wear them when sleeping. Rosalie said it was impossible to sleep with it on so she just put one arm through the sleeve. Life boat drills were held all the time and the showers were switched to use salt water almost as soon as they ship left Manila. Rosalie told me that she also learnt to swim on the voyage. From her description, the pool was not the main pool on Boat Deck (behind the superstructure) as this was for First Class only but the removable canvas structure that fitted as the hatch cover on Hold 6. This was for everyone else. A Catholic Priest taught her to swim in 15 minutes. She found this amazing as she had previously had lessons over a period of years without learning to swim. The Priest took her up to First Class one day and they looked at the pandas which she said were very interesting.

On 30 November 1941 the *Coolidge* crossed the Equator. On either 29 or 30 November 1941, they sighted some land, a rocky point as Rosalie described it. A ship came out to the *Coolidge* and Rosalie believes that they may have taken on fuel. Considering the dates and the fact that they crossed the Equator on 30 November 1941, the ship must have been somewhere near Indonesia.

I have also been sent copies of a letter from Josephine W. Fisher (wife of Royal) to her daughter, E. F. Fisher dated 1 December 1941. In this letter, she says that they passed Ambon in Indonesia the previous day. This is maybe where the fuel came from.

The abovementioned Equator Crossing certificate says that after the first crossing, the ship's Captain "piloted her thru Dire Straits, the Sea of Pearl...". This could be the Torres Strait between Australia and Papua New Guinea and the Coral Sea as there was a pearl diving industry here at that time.

After leaving what I presume is Ambon, the two ships travelled on a zig-zag course, changing direction every three minutes. Soon after a ship was sighted off in the distance, running parallel to the *Coolidge*. Once it came close enough for Rosalie to see sailors on the deck. This ship was the heavy cruiser USS *Louisville* and was to escort them all the way to Hawaii.

Another part of Josephine's letter reads in part that on 1 December 1941 they were "four days out of Manila, and actually coasting along the northern shore of Australia" and "on one side of us is the SS *General Scott* (once the SS *President Pierce*) and on the other the cruiser *Louisville*". She also says that they will pass Thursday Island, off the northern tip of Australia, the next afternoon.

The convoy appears to have headed due east and passed between the Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu). On 8 December 1941 the ship was at sea when "The God Mars and his Nippon vassals invaded my Realm Monday, December 8 1941." This was of course when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 but since the ship was west of the International Date Line, the date on board was 8 December 1941. The ship must still have been south of the Equator and it had not yet crossed the International Date Line. It was perhaps north of Fiji at this time. Rosalie says that the passengers were not told of this event, only learning about it when they arrived in Honolulu but Royal H. Fisher says the passengers heard of it when near the Solomon Islands.

The next day, Tuesday 9 December 1941, the ships did cross the 180th Meriden "thereby gaining another Day in our being". It was now 8 December 1941 again.

The small convoy kept on travelling east below the Equator, probably passing north of Somoa. On 9 December 1941 (according to Mrs Fisher) they were off Pago Pago in American Samoa but as the port's lights were extinguished, the *Coolidge* did not enter. On Sunday 13 December 1941 (probably very early in the morning) the ship crossed the Equator again and "Bid Farewell to my Royal Kingdom". This could be taken to mean that they were leaving the Royal Kingdom of Tonga or perhaps just a reference to King Neptune.

Apparently many of the men took to heavy drinking on the trip and on 9 December 1941 a lot of them partied to daybreak (according to Mrs Fisher).

On about 17 December 1941, the SS *President Coolidge*, USS *Louisville* and USAT *Scott* arrived in Pearl Harbor, Honolulu. The *Coolidge* had taken about 21 days to travel from Manilla to Hawaii, a voyage that normally took about 12 or 13 days.

The ships in Pearl Harbor were still smoldering and all the passengers, even those continuing onto San Francisco, had to leave the ship for a couple of days while alterations were made a small hospital on board. Rosalie and her family were to stay in a hotel but they ended up staying with some friends who were living in the armed forces barracks with their families. They returned to the ship on 19 December 1941.

On the evening of 17 December, Lieutenant Ruth Erickson, NC (Nurse Corps), US Navy, a nurse stationed at the Pearl Harbor Naval Hospital, was ordered to pack a bag and be ready to leave. With two other nurses, she was transported from the hospital to one of the piers at Honolulu where she boarded the SS *President Coolidge*. Their job, together with a number of corpsmen, was to accompany injured sailors on the trip back to San Francisco on mainland America. During the day of 18 December supplies were taken on board and the next day 125 patients were taken on board the *Coolidge*. Also taken on board were a football team from Willamette University, Oregon, who have been on an exhibition trip to Hawaii. Together with the USAT *Scott* (with 55 patients), the two ships set off late that afternoon in a convoy of 8 or 10 ships.

The *Coolidge* travelled without exterior lights and the doors and portholes were closed at night to prevent light showing. No-one was allowed on deck, even during the day. Lt Erickson reported that the 20th of December was quite chilly and they understood that the ship had travelled a fair bit to the north so as to not take a direct route to San Francisco. Rumours of submarine periscopes were rife but nothing untoward happened. All passengers

wore lifejackets the whole time. The *Coolidge* passed under the Golden Gate Bridge at 7 am on Christmas Day 1941 and arrived in San Francisco at 8 am, with 124 patients, one man having died Christmas Eve from bad burns. Two ferries met the ship and, with ambulances (perhaps some were boat ambulances), transferred the patients to the naval hospital at Mare Island as well as civilian hospitals. They arrived at Mare Island at 4.30 pm.

Lt Erickson stated that she believed that only the USAT *Scott* and the *Coolidge* entered San Francisco harbor and the other ships travelled elsewhere.

In April 2002 Rosalie (Hutchinson) Smith lives in Cedar City, Utah. She still has menus, passenger lists and other memorabilia from the voyage. After the outbreak of the War, her father subsequently enlisted in the US Army and was captured at the fall of Corregidor, sent to a Japanese Military Prison Camp and spent the war in various camps in the Philippines. He was released when the US recaptured Manila.

Royal H. Fisher even wrote a song about the SS *President Coolidge* which I have but there is no music to go with it.

By the time the *Coolidge* returned to San Francisco on Christmas Day, 25 December 1941, the United States was at war with Japan, Germany and the Axis Powers.

Within six weeks of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the US's entry into the war, the *Coolidge* was converted to a troopship in January 1942 even though the War Shipping Administration was not proclaimed by President Roosevelt until 21 February 1942. This brought all US shipping under Government control.

During the conversion, the *President Coolidge* was modified by adding guns on the bow (two) and stern (three) and 12 anti-aircraft guns. The ship was painted in normal navy standard grey and much of the fine furnishings were removed (probably all of them) and fixed features were covered up (including the Lady and the Unicorn). In addition, one single cabin on the Promenade Deck adjacent to the First Class Smoking Room was removed and a set of three rows of toilets (41 - 13, 13 and 15 I think) was installed. It was reported by Staff Sergeant Stephen Parisi (and confirmed by him to me in 2002) that there were wooden partitions four feet high between the toilets (rows or each toilet?). There is no trace of these today. In addition, the showers were converted to use salt water instead of fresh water as it was obviously not possible to carry enough fresh water for six times the normal number of passengers.

The ship was then able to carry over 5,000 soldiers.

For the next nine months the *Coolidge* was used to ferry troops and equipment across the Pacific to the war front. A report that I found on the Web claims that the 4th Air Depot Group of the US Army 5th American Air Force (USAAF) departed San Francisco on 14 December 1941 (but in reality it was 12 January 1942 - perhaps they left somewhere else on that date) on the SS *President Coolidge* and arrived in Melbourne at 1700 hours on 1 February 1942. Note that this web site is now, I think, located at <http://st.net.au/~dunn>. It was claimed that she travelled in convoy with SS *President Polk* as part of the USS *Pensacola* convoy. It is further claimed that the *Coolidge* (and *Polk*??) were carrying 125 P40 Tomahawks and five DC-3 aircraft as well as the pilots, crew and support staff. The 4th Air Depot group alone numbered 550 men. Also, the 16th Squadron of the 27th Bomber Group was also said to be on the *Coolidge* for this trip.

Another report on Peter Dunn's *Australia at War* Web Site (see references) says that the 49th Fighter Group of the 5th Air Force travelled on the voyage (most were on the USAT *Mariposa*). This site claims that the ships were escorted by the USS *Phoenix* but there is no mention of the *Pensacola* or the *Polk* as being in the convoy. As well, it is said that the 808th Engineer Aviation Battalion was also on the *Coolidge* while their equipment was on the freighter SS *Luckenbach*. This may be the SS *Nira Luckenbach* which was escorted by the USS *Tucker* in August 1942, just before the *Tucker* sank at the opposite end of the same channel where the *Coolidge* was going to sink just a few weeks later (see my book *Some*

*Shipwrecks (and Aircraft) of the Pacific*). There were also other ships called SS xxxx *Luckenbach*. It is said that the USAT *Monroe* was also in the convoy.

Another page of Peter Dunn's *Australia at War* Web Site states that the convoy was also escorted by two other (unnamed) destroyers. It says that the convoy was bound for Java in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) but they were then ordered to Brisbane but because of the fear of Japanese submarines, they diverted again to Melbourne.

Yet another page on the web, *To China and Back* (see references) says that the 16th Pursuit Squadron of the 51st Pursuit Group was also on this voyage and that they were also accompanied by the freighter SS *Sea Witch*.

As mentioned above, the first voyage of the *Coolidge* was on 12 January 1942 when she travelled to Melbourne (1 February 1942) in Australia, then Wellington in New Zealand and back to San Francisco. The ship arrived in San Francisco on 7 March 1942 and left on 19 March 1942, this time bound for Melbourne again, arriving on 7 April 1942 (see comments in next paragraph). The ship was carrying, amongst others, the 8th Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron of the 5th Air Force.

It is reported at <http://www.flash.net/~hfwright/dl29mr42.htm> that on 1 April 1942 HMNZS *Achilles* put to sea from Fiji after lunch and after being used as a training target for American P-39 fighters, she head south to the Kermadec Islands to meet the heavy cruiser USS *Chester*, which was escorting two small ocean liners (this is relative when you see the other liner involved), SS *Mariposa* (18,000 tons) and SS *President Coolidge* (22,000) and one large (huge) liner, RMS *Queen Elizabeth*, 84,000 tons, carrying an American infantry division to Australia. Reported next stop for all ships was Sydney.

In some reports it is stated that the *Coolidge* arrived in Melbourne on 17 April 1942. However, I have been contacted by Robert Dodd of Eagan, Minnesota, whose father was on this trip. He was a member of the US Army's 164th Infantry Regiment, which would later be the first army unit to fight on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. He confirms that the *Coolidge* arrived in Melbourne on 7 April 1942. Therefore, it appears that the *Coolidge* passed by the Kermadec Islands (north of New Zealand) on about 3 or 4 April 1942 and went direct to Melbourne (perhaps the rest of the convoy went to Sydney), arriving on 7 April 1942. Robert says that his father remembers staying in Melbourne for a few days on leave before departing for Noumea in New Caledonia. They did not travel on the *Coolidge* but transferred to smaller freighters for the journey, arriving in Noumea on 19 April 1942.

It is not clear what the *Coolidge* did between 7 and 20 April (see later), but it is possible that she travelled to Sydney and back, perhaps arriving back in Melbourne again on 17 April 1942 hence matching up with the reports that state that she arrived in Melbourne on that date.

It is certain that she left Melbourne again on 20 or 21 April (probably 20th) for Bora Bora in French Polynesia and arrived back in San Francisco on 5 or 8 May 1942 (probably 8th). On this trip, Manuel Quezon, President of the Philippines, and General Douglas MacArthur and his staff were aboard. The *Coolidge* was met by the cruiser USS *St Louis* off Bora Bora, Tahiti, and escorted all the way back to San Francisco. The *Coolidge* was not often escorted during the war as far as I can see so this time it was presumably because of her important passengers.

The whereabouts of the *Coolidge* for the next three weeks is not clear. On 26 May 1942 she departed San Francisco for Suva in Fiji (9 June to 16 June - why a week here?), Auckland in New Zealand (19 June to 24 June) and Suva in Fiji again (27 June). She left Suva on 2 July 1942 and travelled back to Auckland (6 July to 11 July), then to Suva (14 July to 20 July) and again back to Auckland (23 July). There was apparently another trip to Suva and she left there on 10 August 1942 and went back to Auckland arriving 12 August 1942. From here, she returned to San Francisco arriving there on 29 August 1942. The *Coolidge* had been away from her home port for over three months. The ship's location for the next five weeks is not clear.

On 6 October 1942, the *Coolidge* sailed from San Francisco for New Caledonia (20 to 24 October) and Espiritu Santo in Vanuatu. This was the ship's very last voyage.

## The Last Crossing of the Pacific

On Monday 28 September 1942, the SS *President Coolidge* was tied up at Pier 44 in San Francisco Harbor. At 1400 hours at the Armed Guard Center (Pacific) on Treasure Island, San Francisco, California, Lieutenant Chester Craig Hosmer (known as Lt Craig Hosmer), US Navy Reserve, took command of a crew of 45 men, mostly US Navy Reserve, but with some regular sailors. Lt Hosmer, later to be elected a US Congressman, was in charge of the Armed Guard Unit assigned to the ship for its next journey. Armed Guards were responsible for manning the ship's guns as well as providing security for the ship when in port. By 1600 hours all were aboard the *Coolidge*. The same day, Lt Hosmer started a Log Book entitled "Armed Guard Unit Log Book - S.S.President Coolidge". He was to keep this log right through to 17 November 1942.



**Figure 19 - Captain Henry Nelson**

Lt Hosmer immediately inspected the ship and found that there were the following guns mounted on the ship (note that he is wrong in his description of decks - I have corrected to as per ships plans):

- Two 3 inch guns forward on forecastle, one port and one starboard
- Two 3 inch guns aft on A Deck, one port and one starboard
- One 5 inch gun aft on fantail, centreline
- Two 20 mm Oerlikon machine guns in double mount starboard side of wheelhouse
- Two 20 mm Oerlikon machine guns in double mount port side of wheelhouse
- Four 20 mm Oerlikon machine guns in single mounts along starboard side, Sun Deck
- Four 20 mm Oerlikon machine guns in single mounts along port side, Sun Deck

He also inspected the magazines located forward and aft. Lt Hosmer moved into his cabin, 402 and reported it was satisfactory. Cabin 404 was for his Communications Officer. Three cabins were provided for the gunners. There must have had a few double bunks in each to accommodate 43 men, even taking into account "hot bunking" (where one man leaves his bed to be replaced by another). Later that night all but three of the 45 were granted shore liberty (the ship was guarded by Army).

Over the next few days, Lt Hosmer supervised the loading of stores and supplies for his men. This included one 1903 Springfield .30 rifle serial number 1236496, two Colt .45 pistols serial numbers 794503 and 471366 and two pairs of binoculars. Some items of interest loaded included 2,400 cigarettes, 96 candy bars, 24 tins of tobacco, 6 decks of cards and 2 boxes of matches. In addition, another five Armed Guards boarded the ship. The five were communications seamen under the direction of the Communications Officer, Ensign Doren S. Weinstein, US Navy Reserve. Ensign Weinstein had travelled on the *Coolidge's* previous journey.

At 0700 hours on Wednesday 30 September 1942, the *Coolidge* left the wharf under her own power for degaussing and compass calibration tests, returning at 1700 hours. At this time, 80 metal boxes containing 540 rounds of boxed metal Mk 1 20 mm high explosive cartridges (lot 1106), 9,000 rounds of the same cartridges from lot 1108 and 4,860 cartridges from lot 1225 were taken on board. Also loaded were 20 rounds of 3" dummy cartridges and 10 30 second dummy time fuses.

The next day the ship again left the wharf and cruised around San Francisco Bay undertaking degaussing and compass calibration.

On Friday 2 October 1942, Lt Hosmer supervised the loading of 1116 rounds of 3" anti-aircraft cartridges, 564 rounds of 3" common cartridges, 196 5" projectiles and 197 5" powder tanks containing powder.

From when the men first boarded the ship till Monday 5 October 1942, Lt Hosmer and his men loaded stores and armaments, undertook maintenance and repairs and carried out drills. At night, regular liberty was granted to enable the men to go ashore. Lt Hosmer also secured another five pairs of binoculars for his men who were, of course, to act as the ship's lookouts.

At 1030 hours on Tuesday 6 October 1942, the SS *President Coolidge* cast off from Pier 44 and at 1100 hours passed under the Golden Gate Bridge. The ship left San Francisco, bound for New Caledonia (White Poppy in Naval Code) without escort.

This was the ship's very last voyage. The skipper was Captain Henry Nelson, a long serving Dollar and American President lines skipper. He was 63 years old at the time. While Captain Nelson was in charge of the ship, the passengers (troops) were under the command of Colonel Dinsmore Alter, US Coast Artillery. The ship was carrying 4,800 troops as follows:

- 43rd Infantry Division (part) - made up of:
  - 172nd Combat Team under Colonel James A. Lewis which comprised:
    - 172nd Infantry Regiment
    - 103rd Field Artillery (one battalion)
  - a platoon of engineers
  - a medical company
- 54th Coast Artillery - made up of:
  - Battalion HQ
  - Battery C
  - Battery D

The 172nd Combat Team of the 43rd Infantry Division was bound for the Solomon Islands. The *Coolidge* was also carrying a full cargo of supplies, including trucks, jeeps, artillery guns, ammunition and 519lbs of quinine (an anti-malarial drug - the entire reserve supply for the Pacific). Due to the huge number of troops being carried, there were many changes to normal shiplife. For example, meals were served in three shifts, at least for the first few days. One junior officer reported that he was in a cabin made for two people with five other junior officers.

On the first day, Lt Hosmer made arrangements with Lt Dudley, Commanding Officer of the 20th US Navy Construction Battalion (CB), Section 2, for his men to assist the Armed Guards in manning the ship's guns. The arrangement was for 71 men to be on duty at all times, made up of 15 Armed Guards and 56 CBs (also called SeaBees). Training of the CBs began immediately.

Over the coming weeks, the Armed Guards and CBs carried out more drills, including test firing of all guns. As well, there were a number of fire and abandon ship drills for all crew and passengers. Most of the Armed Guard (and presumably rest of passengers) are affected by sunburn.

On Thursday 8 October 1942 the Army conducted test firings of four 37 mm cannons (perhaps one of these is the gun lying above the swimming pool now). These were fired from the decks. The ones on the port and starboard side of the forecastle malfunctioned (I am not sure how as I cannot decipher Lt Hosmer's description of this incident). An inquiry was later held into this incident.

At 0257 hours on Monday 12 October 1942, the SS *President Coolidge* crossed the Equator at about 149°W. At 1300 hours on the same day, a "King Neptune" ceremony was held. At

this ceremony, the "...introduction of Polliwogs into the secrets of Royal Order of Shellbacker".

At 0837 hours on Tuesday 13 October 1942, a periscope was reported by a lookout. This was the second report (the first was the first day out of San Francisco). This time it turned out to be the wake of the ship when turning (it was on a constant zig-zag course) whereas the first time it was a box. At 1228 hours on Thursday 15 October 1942 the ship went off alert after three objects, presumed to be aircraft, were lost from sight.

At 1201 hours on Friday 16 October 1942, there was a breakdown in the engine room and the speed of the ship was reduced. At 1505 hours another three aircraft were sighted. They were identified as US. The next day was lost as the *Coolidge* crossed the International Date Line. During Sunday 18 October 1942, the engine was repaired and normal speed resumed.

I have been contacted by Craig Schneider (see references) whose father, Richard Brown Schneider (now 85 years old - 1998), was in the US Army, 43rd Infantry Division, 172nd Infantry Regiment, Company H, heavy weapons. He served from 1942 to 1945 and was on the *President Coolidge* on her last voyage. At the time of the sinking he was then about 29 years old. The following is a word for word account of his memories of the trip:

*I remember the Coolidge as being a beautiful ship. We left California and spent 17 days on the ocean [actually 12 and a bit to Noumea, 5 in Noumea and one and a bit to Santo] before the sinking. Most of the time was spent either in the mess hall or playing cards and talking to the other men. Many of the men in the hold were very seasick and there was a terrible stench there. I was lucky enough to have a room with a bunk. When we crossed the international dateline many of the men were dunked in the swimming pool. There were no storms and the ship cruised along on a zigzag course.*

Another serviceman who was on the *Coolidge* on her last voyage was Max Evans Senior. He told me via his son (Max Evans Junior – see references) about that trip and the following is a word for word recording as well as my comments in square brackets.

*As a then 21 year old, I originally left the US in 1942 onboard a ship called the Mooremack Sea. I had been trained as a radio repair technician and part time aerial gunner on B-17s. This ship was enroute to Guadal Canal [Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands] when a bent propeller shaft resulted in severe vibrations and a top speed of only 7 knots. We diverted to Figi [Fiji] and that is where I, along with about 500 others [more likely about 250], were transferred to the Coolidge [Note that this cannot be correct as the ship did not go to Fiji. It is probable that Mr Evans was actually boarded at Noumea].*

The crew assigned me a bunk which was "forward" on the ship, about two decks down. There were lots of bunk beds and there was a bathroom just forward of that. This bathroom was just aft of the crew quarters right behind the "foxel" ... [I think he means forecandle or fo'scle - Comment: this sounds like the stewards' quarters which were on C Deck above the cargo space of Hold One. The stewards' washroom was immediately in front of the two large rooms and they can be seen as you dive the wreck from this hold as you exit on your right hand side]. I ate in a galley about mid-ship, one deck down [this is the First Class Dining Saloon on C Deck]. I remember there being two or three galleys though [yes, there are the Tourist Class Dining Room on the same deck and the Third Class Dining Saloon right at the stern].

During the morning of Monday 20 October 1942, numerous planes and ships were seen, including a cargo ship, two destroyers and other smaller vessels. At 0722 hours it was determined that a small vessel sighted at 0701 hours was in fact a cargo ship, aground on a coral reef. This is, in fact, the reef outside Noumea, New Caledonia, and the ship can still be seen there. At 0725 hours a pilot was taken aboard and at 0815 hours the ship anchored just inside the reef, near the historic Amadee Lighthouse. At 1120 hours a minefield pilot came aboard and the ship weighed anchor at 1130 hours. At 1405 hours it passed through the

submarine net and entered Noumea port, anchoring at 1415 hours. Lt Hosmer expressed surprise at the activity in the harbour. He wrote that there were at least 15 navy auxiliaries and cargo ships, some cruisers and destroyers. There were also patrol boats (PTs) and small craft.

Over the next four days the Armed Guards, as well as most, if not all of the passengers, were given liberty in Noumea. No-one was really enthused about Noumea. Lt Hosmer went ashore and reported that the food was fair, there was a complete lack of organisation (doctors riding trucks as guards, pilots supervising ship



**Figure 20 - Amadee Island and its lighthouse  
The *Coolidge* anchored off here on 20 October 1942**

loading/unloading, PT men driving barges etc). After two days the garbage had still not been removed from the ship. Lt Hosmer asked "Where is our organisation?". A load of 20 mm ammunition was taken aboard.

Joseph Ritz was part of an ordnance company in the Americal Division stationed on New Caledonia during the war. His son, John Ritz of Hopkinton, Massachusetts (see references), has emailed me with the following memories of his father (still alive in February 2002). Note my comments in square brackets:

*One day at morning assembly [this would have been 20 October 1942] the Captain announced that the company had been requested to modify four 155 mm artillery rifles from wheeled mounts to Panama (stationary) mounts. The 155 rifle had a barrel (I would estimate) about 15 feet long and fired a 6.1 inch diameter shell. We were asked to take the gun barrel off the six wheel mount and put it on a circular plate which would later be welded and bolted to a concrete and steel base so that it could be swung through an arc of 180 degrees. The catch was that the bases were being constructed in Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides and the 155s and their attached mounts would be transported on the U.S.S. President Coolidge [sic]. The Coolidge was in Noumea harbor, due to leave in four days. With one day for loading, we had three days.*

*Under searchlights at night and under the sun during the day every available man pitched in. I wire-brushed parts and sanded welds and hustled cylinders of acetylene, helped torque bolts - anything that was needed. Everyone pitched in and the job was complete in two and a half days. This resulted in the award of the Meritorious Unit Citation.*

*On the fourth day we watched and waved as the Coolidge left the harbor. Two weeks later we received the news that the ship Captain entered Espiritu Santo harbor, took a wrong turn, hit a mine and, thinking he could beach the boat, reversed engines, went into the deepest part of the harbor and lost the Coolidge and the shore battery of four 155mm rifles on Panama mounts.*

At least three of these guns appear to be visible on the wreck now. See the *Coolidge* dive chapter.

On Friday 23 October 1942, the US Navy's Noumea Port Director, Lieutenant Commander John D. Andrews, prepared the sailing instructions for the next section of the *Coolidge*'s journey. At 1530 hours on Saturday 24 October 1942, a pilot came aboard the ship and she weighed anchor. At 1545 hours the ship passed through the submarine net and at 1739 hours the ship again passed Amadee Island and the pilot left the ship. This indicates to me

that the ship sailed via the open sea rather than travelled through the Havannah-Boulari Passage.

There were now 5,050 Army troops, 50 US Navy Guard (perhaps 51) and Signal personnel (carried on all merchant ships) and 340 (perhaps 339) crew giving a total of 5,440 persons.

The SS *President Coolidge* was on her way to Espirito Santo ("Button"). The final location was to be the small town of Luganville, located on the northern shore of Segond Channel on the island of Espirito Santo, New Hebrides (now Vanuatu).

## The Last Voyage and Sinking

As mentioned in the previous chapter, on Friday 23 October 1942, the US Navy's Noumea Port Director, Lieutenant Commander John D. Andrews, prepared the sailing instructions for the next section of the SS *President Coolidge's* journey. At 1530 hours on Saturday 24 October 1942, a pilot came aboard the ship and she weighed anchor. At 1545 hours the ship passed through the submarine net and at 1739 hours the ship again passed Amadee Island and the pilot left the ship. This indicates to me that the ship sailed via the open sea rather than travelled through the Havannah-Boulari Passage.

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The SS *President Coolidge* was on her way to Espirito Santo ("Button"). The final location was to be the small town of Luganville, located on the northern shore of Segond Channel on the island of Espirito Santo, New Hebrides (now Vanuatu).

The ship was under the control of Captain Henry Nelson, a long serving Dollar and American President lines skipper. He was 63 years old at the time. The travel instructions required the *Coolidge* to end up at a point called "Hypo" which was 5.6 miles due east of Tutuba Island which is located at the eastern end of Segond Channel. There was apparently nothing in the orders about what to do after arriving at this point.

At 0039 hours on Sunday 25 October 1942, Lieutenant C. Craig Hosmer, US Navy Reserve, in charge of the Armed Guard Unit assigned to the ship (Armed Guards were responsible for manning the ship's guns as well as providing security for the ship when in port) reported in his Log Book entitled "Armed Guard Unit Log Book - S.S. President Coolidge" that a ship was sighted ahead of the *Coolidge* (there is a complete word by word account of Lt Hosmer's log entry for the 26 October 1942 in Appendix XX). After some time this was determined to be a cargo ship travelling in the same direction and at 0128 she was passed by the *Coolidge*. That morning several islands were passed by the ship. At 1033 hours the same day, an aircraft was sighted and once again battle alarm was sounded. At 1037 it was identified as being friendly. At 1120 hours yet another plane was sighted and battle alarms sounded. Eight minutes later it too was declared friendly.

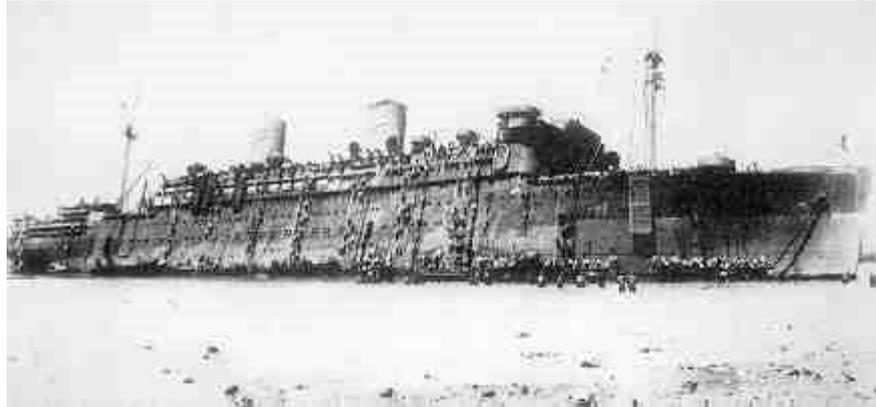
Note: all times in this article are based on Lt Hosmer's log which was written up on the morning of 27 October 1942. He states that while they are guesses, they are fairly accurate, although his watch may have been one minute fast. The times underlined are said to be accurate to a minute.

At 0500 hours on Monday 26 October 1942 the SS *President Coolidge* passed between two islands and at 0720 hours Espiritu Santo was sighted. At 0739 hours a ship was sighted bearing 345° and all guns were aimed at it. At 0750 hours it was determined that the ship was on an approaching course. At 0759 the vessel was challenged. Three minutes later the ship was ascertained to be friendly. This was the destroyer USS *Sterett* on anti-submarine patrol. It is reported that the *Sterett* had flashed a signal light at the *Coolidge* and that she had nothing to pass onto the *Coolidge*, even when asked.

The *Coolidge* was entering Segond Channel from the south-east and was obviously aiming for the eastern end of the channel. What Captain Nelson and the crew did not know was that all but one access into Segond Channel were mined.

Just after midnight on 3 August 1942, USS *Gamble*, USS *Breese* and USS *Tracy* left Luganville in Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides, to lay a series of minefields to protect Segond Channel. This channel was the main "harbour" of Espiritu Santo. The three ships laid mines at three locations. These three fields were at the south-western entrance to Segond Channel, between Malo Island and the mainland (Field One) and nearby between the south-western corner of Aore Island and the mainland (Field Two) further blocking Segond Channel. The third field was at the eastern end of Segond Channel. This field was laid in two, north-south

parallel sections. The first was between Bogacio Island (now called Bokissa Island) and the north-eastern corner of Aore Island (basically on the eastern side of Aore Island) and another section running south from the south-east corner of the mainland towards the south-western corner of Tutuba Island (Field Three). This created an entrance, really a small gap, from the south-west between Tutuba and Bogacio Islands.



**Figure 21 - The *Coolidge* shortly after running aground.  
You can see how close it is to the shore**

The obvious idea was that ships would enter this gap and once in the main Second Channel, turn left and proceed towards Luganville.

Later on, two other fields were laid, one further east of this point and another along the eastern coast. In total, 171 Mark VI mines were laid on the morning of 3 August 1942. For more information about the USS *Gamble*, USS *Breese* and USS *Tracy* and to see some photos of the *Gamble* and *Breese*, see my book *Some Shipwrecks and Aircraft of the Pacific*.

These actions basically made Second Channel accessible through only one point, the eastern channel via the southern channel between Tutuba Island and Aore Island, on the eastern side of Bokissa Island. This was not the channel chosen by Captain Nelson. Of interest is the fact that a US warship, the USS *Tucker* (also see my book *Some Shipwrecks and Aircraft of the Pacific*), had been sunk at the other end of Second Channel by a minefield on 3 August 1942, less than three months earlier.

At 0844 a small vessel was sighted in the cover of an island at a range of 10 miles. This boat was a patrol boat, PC479. The *Coolidge* was said to be six miles from "Hypo" (the rendezvous point). The patrol boat was at the entrance to the safe channel. At 0858 hours they signalled to the larger vessel using a signal lamp but they lost sight of each other as Tutuba Island came between them. The message was not able to be deciphered by the Signal Officer. When asked the meaning of the message, the patrol boat clarified its message as being a merchant ship challenge and identification was made. It is said that the patrol craft gave chase but never had any chance of catching the much larger ship which was far ahead. This is not mentioned in Lt Hosmer's log.

At 0906 the *Coolidge* entered the main entrance to Second Channel (Scorff Passage). Lt Hosmer reported seeing several ships in port, including a cruiser (USS *Chester*). At 0928 hours the USS *Chester* challenged the incoming vessel but (it is reported) after the *Coolidge* responded, it ceased the communication. Private Joseph P. Ignatz from Wisconsin (later of Chicago, Illinois) and Privates Peter Jarocz and Mike Cirar from Chicago were members of the 172nd Infantry Regiment of the 43rd Division. They thought that they were on their way to Guadalcanal (they probably were but via Santo - later on, Joe was shot in the right wrist and left arm, Peter was slightly paralyzed in his right leg from shrapnel in his spine and Mike lost a kidney. All caught malaria and after the war remained close friends - Pete was even Godfather of Joe's daughter, Diana). Joe reported to me via Diane the following about the entry into Second Channel:

*I remember that I was standing on deck. There were flashing signals on shore and a Naval destroyer was blinking at us, too.*

It is also reported that immediately a shore-based station signalled the bridge of the *Coolidge* a morse code lamp warning, **S T O P** .

Ensign Doran S. Weinstein, the Signals Officer that morning (in fact the officer in charge of Signals on the ship and who travelled on the previous voyage of the ship), immediately shouted to the Captain to stop. The bridge telegraph signalled to the engine room to put the engines into reverse. The time was 0935 (Lt Hosmer's time is 0930 for this - see later) and the momentum of the large vessel travelling at almost full



**Figure 22 - The list of the ship is very apparent**

speed (17.5 knots) meant that it was going to take a long time to pull the *Coolidge* up.

Meanwhile, Ensign Weinstein and his offsider took down the entire message which was "Stop you are standing into mines".

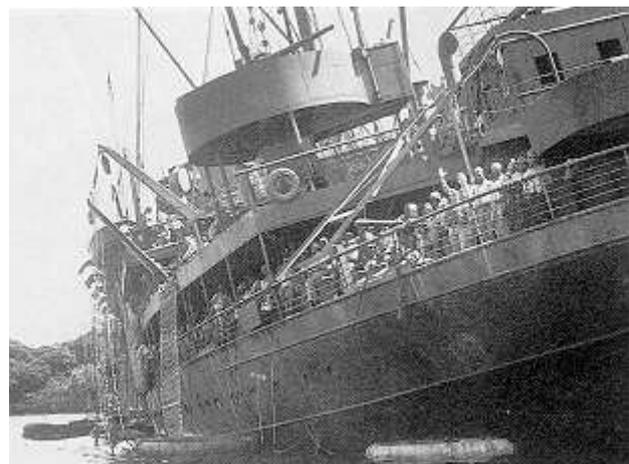
At 0930 hours on Monday 26 October 1942, an explosion rocked the ship. Within 30 seconds (0930 1/2 hours) there was another explosion as the ship hit a second mine. The ship was shaken badly. According to Lt Hosmer, a list to port commenced immediately.

Joe Ignatz told me that:

*At this time I felt the first concussion, then a second - shortly after. Someone yelled "Hard right rudder! The ship turned towards shore. It started going down by the stern and tilted to the left. At first no one got off. The ship's crew was preparing for evacuation.*

This corresponds with the above paragraphs.

Captain Nelson decided that the *President Coolidge* was mortally wounded and he ordered the helm to be swung to starboard (right) and at 0938 hours (0935 according to Lt Hosmer) the bow of the ship hit the coral reef along the northern shore of Second Channel, only 50 to 100 metres from the shore. Already nets had been lowered and the lifeboats were in the process of being lowered. Abandoning of the ship started right away. One minute later the list was 8° to port. There is a lot of oil on the water, obviously from a holed tank. People are abandoning ship on the starboard side



**Figure 23 - There is no panic, some of the soldiers even take time to wave to the camera**

A fireman, 30 year old Robert Reid, had been killed by one of the explosions or the resultant flooding. The crew of the engine room was in dire straits and their story alone could fill a page. Needless to say, it was a dramatic and heroic escape by three of the crew. A brief description is that another fireman was severely burned and crippled by the explosions and Howard Quinn, Chief Engineer and John L. Paton, First Engineer, went through a ventilator to the fireroom, found the fireman and carried him to safety.

CE Quinn and FE Paton were awarded the Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal for their parts in this rescue. See *Coolidge Heroes* Chapter for more information on this rescue.

Richard Schneider who was on board (see original mention on previous page) told me the following about his memories of the sinking of the *President Coolidge*. The following is a word for word account with my comments in square brackets. For a more detailed memory of Mr Schneider, see Memories Chapter:

*On the day of the sinking I was in my bunk. When the ship hit the mine I fell from the top bunk onto the floor. An alert was given and we were told that the ship was not going to sink. We were instructed to stay in our quarters. Then the ship hit another mine. This time an alert went out that the ship was going to sink and we were instructed to leave. I was on the port side. I made my way to the lobby and remember sitting in a chair. (I also remember seeing a painting of the lady in the photo on your web site [comment - this is, of course, the Lady. Whether Mr Schneider saw the actual figurine or a painting of it I do not know]). The ship pitched and my chair slid to the other side of the lobby. I made my way to the deck and jumped from the deck to a life boat with three men already on board. We started towards shore and watched the ship go down.*

Max Evans Senior (see original mention above) also told me about the final moments of the ship and the following is a word for word recording as well as my comments in square brackets. For a more detailed memory of Mr Evans, see Memories Chapter:

*On that fateful day of the sinking, I was on deck and heard people yelling, "Torpedo .... torpedo .... torpedo!" The next thing I knew was that there was an ear splitting explosion that lifted the front of the ship up. Then when it settled back down into the water, there was yet another explosion. [this tallies with the two mines but presumably the torpedo shout was either faulty memory - someone singing mines, mines - or a mistake by whoever was shouting out. Note that in Craig Hosmer's Log Book he says that some of his men thought the ship had been hit by a torpedo] You mentioned in your writings [Michael McFadyen's Web Page on Coolidge] about the ship's captain running aground. This could be true but I have no knowledge of that ... "it was real hectic about that time." We were led to believe that the ship's captain had panicked and accidentally hit the mines. Like I said before, troops began stripping there [sic] combat gear preparing to abandon ship. Once I was on shore, some US Navy troops gave me two sets of clothing and shoes. One to wear while washing the other. A full issue of clothing came about one month later.*

Roy H. Dobbins, was the *Coolidge's* carpenter. His daughter, Julie Dobbins (see references), told me the following story as told to her by her father (he died 22 February 1999). For a more detailed memory of Mr Dobbins, see Memories Chapter.

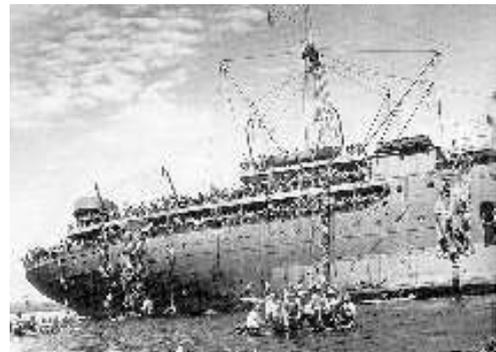
*Dad's copy of The Lady and the President by Peter Stone has excellent pictures and from a diagram included in the book he told me and showed me that he was in his quarters (a room with 9 bunks) on "C" deck, starboard side, bow end when it hit the mine. Dad was the ship's carpenter on this trip. He had been in the U.S. Merchant Marines since 1939, and had sailed on it [the Coolidge] prior to it being modified for carrying troops, in all he sailed on the Coolidge for at least 13 months. He found the Coolidge to be a beautiful ship. He commented that this ship burned a barrel of oil per minute for fuel. She sailed quite powerfully. At the time of the explosion he had just retired from his shift (he couldn't remember the exact time of the day). When the Captain blasted the siren he gathered up only the clothes on his back AND his Seamen's wallet. He recalls the escape from the ship a close one. The crew had had lifeboat drills, so he*

*went to his assigned one. He also recalls that whoever the s-o-b was who was ringing the alarm bells was "ringing the hell out of the bells".*

*Dad stated that he was helmsman in the lifeboat of more than 25 Merchant Marines and U.S. Army soldiers. His lifeboat had reached land when the Coolidge sank. He remembers being very sad - as though he had lost a good friend. His admiration for the Captain was maintained as he continued to sail with him on later voyages. Dad continues to defend the innocence of Captain Henry Nelson regarding his situation with the loss of the Coolidge.*

Captain Nelson ordered the *Coolidge* to be abandoned. Whether this was before or after people had already made this decision themselves is not clear.

At 0940 hours Lt Hosmer reports that the abandon ship is proceeding with no problems or panic. There are rescue boats approaching the ship while the lifeboats are taking people from the ship to close to the shore where they wade ashore. By 0945 hours the list is 10° and Lt Hosmer notes that it is apparent that the ship will heel over and slip off the coral reef. The stern gun crew reports that the "stern is going down fairly fast". Ten minutes later he goes to his cabin to retrieve papers and other items. At 1000 hours the list is 14° and Lt Hosmer orders the anti-aircraft gun crews to move to the starboard side of the bridge and for the crews of the three stern guns to abandon ship. At 1010 he orders the crews of the remaining large guns to abandon ship. The list is 16°.



**Figure 24 - The evacuation of the stern as it starts to sink**

At 1012 Lt Hosmer records that the nets are full of men waiting for the lifeboats and there are more men waiting on the now increasingly angled decks. "She can't stay up much longer" he writes. He orders men at the bottom of nets to jump into the water and swim ashore (they all have life jackets on). Four minutes later he reports that the list is 18.5° and men still will not jump in. He tells men above to "kick men in face to get them off".

There is now a long gap in Lt Hosmer's account, the next report is 1045 hours.

As Lt Hosmer indicates, the evacuation was quite orderly, although the men were reluctant to jump into the water. As I indicated in the previous page, there had been many lifeboat drills earlier in the trip as the *Coolidge* crossed the Pacific. Despite this, leaking oil and the increasing angle of list made it impossible to launch some lifeboats and the cargo nets slung over the sides (see the photos) made it difficult to climb down, especially for those who tried to take rifles and equipment with them. As can be seen from the photos, all the soldiers and crew had lifejackets on so it was unlikely that anyone was going to drown. Anyway, as the ship was so close to shore, there was no panic and people even thought that they would be able to come back later and collect their equipment.

I received an e-mail from Stephen Parisi (see references), was born 16 December 1916 in Providence, Rhode Island, and was a member of the 43 Infantry Division. He lives in Rehoboth, Massachusetts, (2002) and recalls:

*Many boats were dispatched from shore to pick up survivors, others swam the few yards to shore. It was organized chaos, but most of the soldiers stayed calm throughout the evacuation.*

Steve was at the 60th Anniversary of the sinking of the SS *President Coolidge* in Espiritu Santo in October 2002. He has also e-mailed me and at the Anniversary I spoke to him a number of times. In 1993 he had returned to Santo for the (delayed) 50th Anniversary. While there, he heard divers speak about the wreck of the ship. he decided there and then

that he would learn to dive. He returned again the next year, heard more stories and at some time (either on this trip or when he returned to the USA) spoke to Allan Power of Allan Power Diving Services about diving the wreck. Allan declined to take Steve diving.

When Steve returned to the USA, he learnt to dive, at the age of about 80 years old. In 1998 he returned yet again to Santo and on 24 June 1998 he dived with Allan Power to the bow. On that trip he did at least two more dives, one to the Promenade Deck and one to Hold Two. On 26 October 2002 he dived to the bow, aged almost 86 years old. As far as can be known, he is only the second survivor to dive on the ship (see Michael Jones comments to me), and almost certainly the oldest.

Joe Ignatz (see previous) told me via his daughter, Diane, that he remembers climbing down a rope ladder but the last rung was about 5 feet above the water. He jumped. Diane remembers her father and his mates Pete and Mike telling her that they felt as if their boots were going to go through the bottom of the boat. The boat motored them to shore and they had to jump into 4 feet of water and wade ashore. Joe says that at this time he remembered that he had left all his personal things on the boat. He checked his pockets and found he had the grand total of one comb. Mr Ignatz also told me of officers abandoning ship early but this is incorrect if he meant the ship's officers. It is possible that he saw some of Lt Hosmer's men, including one who took his unit's papers and valuables off early in the piece (see Lt Hosmer's diary chapter). As they were members of the Navy and were dressed similar to the ship's crew, this may have been what he saw.

The cruiser USS *Chester* was in Santo harbour for emergency repairs prior to travelling to Sydney for even more repairs. The Captain sent out his lifeboats and rescued 440 of the *Coolidge's* crew and passengers.

At 1045 hours Lt Hosmer reported that he was finally having success in getting the men to jump into the water. He is now at the aft end of the Boat Deck (if this is correct, it is near the pool) and the last of the men are now on the ropes. It is a difficult task to walk due to the extreme list. Two minutes later he is near the Bridge when Ensign Weinstein tells him that Jack Rhodes (BM Second Class), has gone in the water to save a drowning merchant marine man. The *Coolidge's* Chief Officer tells the remaining men to get off while they can so they all move towards a motor boat. At 1049 hours they board the boat which is already occupied by Captain Nelson. While doing this, a Filipino crewman is seen hanging onto a metal ladder. He has a broken arm so Ensign Weinstein jumps to the ship and carries the man down to the boat. One minute later everyone from the Bridge is in this boat. The *Coolidge* gives a big lurch to port and is now completely on her side.

Among the passengers being carried was Captain Elwood J. Euart, from the 103rd Field Artillery. It is not really clear exactly what happened but the myth is that after safely exiting the ship, he became of the view that some of his crew were still inside and he went back in to find them and was lost when the ship suddenly sank. However, I have been contacted by a couple of people and their advice, although not the same, contradicts this myth.

I was emailed by Walter J. Wall Jr (see references), who was in the 103rd Field Artillery. He is 79 years old (in 2000) and lives near Newport, Rhode Island. He told me the following:

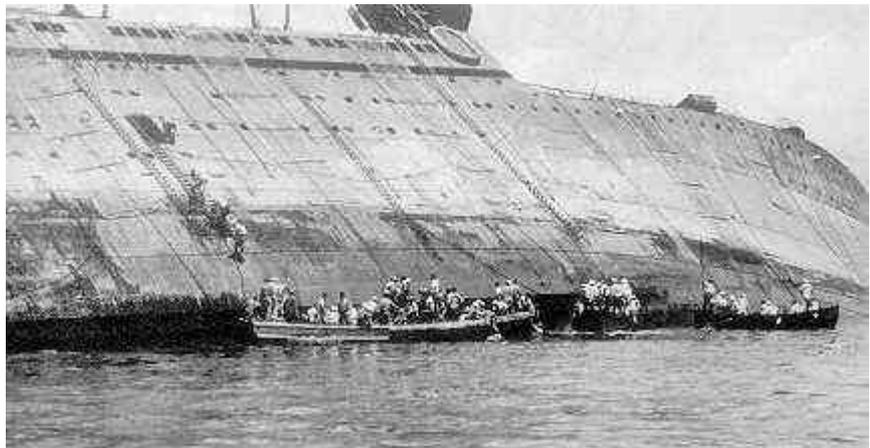
*Elwood Euart was my battery commander, and we loved him dearly. Untill [sic] recently coming on your website, we were always told that he was master at arms for the day, and was heading for the brig to release four prisoners, when when the ship went down? Still don't know?*

Sue Stephenson of Chicago, Illinois, e-mailed me that her father, Charles J. Stephenson, then a First Lieutenant with the 43rd Division, 172nd Regiment was on the *President Coolidge*. Her father told her that:

*Captain Euart, two other officers and he were told to stay in their cabin after the first explosion (Stephenson and Euart were cabin mates). They had their bags all packed and their rifles propped up alongside their bunks while they waited for further orders. When one of their rifles slid down to*

*the floor and they began to see the waterline rise up into view out of the porthole, they decided they couldn't wait any longer and had better head up on deck. As they turned to go up the stairs, Captain Euart, who I believe was a Mess Officer, turned the opposite way and said he was worried about "his boys" in the kitchen and wanted to go down and make sure none of them had gotten stuck in the refrigerators/freezers which could have swung shut and trapped them. That was the last time my Dad said he saw Captain Euart. He then told me what he knew about his death, which was as you reported on your website. the desperate attempt to help him climb out through the door of the overturned ship. Dad was very grateful to have had the chance to visit Captain Euart's grave upon his return to San [sic] Espirito Santo [in the late 1970s or early 1980s].*

However, a first hand version given by Warrant Officer Robert H. Moshimer (included in *The Lady and the President - The Life and Loss of the S.S. President Coolidge* by Peter Stone) is a bit different. WO Moshimer (who incidentally claims to have seen the first mine from the bow) went back to where a Service Battery crew were located. This was on C Deck,



**Figure 25 - The ship is now listing very badly. The door at the top left is the where Capt Covill and WO Moshimer attempted to haul Capt Euart from the ship**

somewhere near the middle of the ship. He went there as soon as the ship ran aground and he states that when he arrived, his friends had just been told to leave the ship by another route. He then returned to the C Deck Lobby outside the First Class Dining Saloon (this area can be entered nowadays from the lobby in the Continental Lounge or a door in the hull - the same door to feature later in this story).

While in the lobby, the list increased dramatically and WO Moshimer went to the inside door (there are a series of two doors like an airlock giving access to the outside) where he found a rope. He threw the rope to men trying to climb the slippery floor towards the door. Also assisting in this were Captain Warren K. Covill and Lt Ward D. MacDonald. They used this to help the men get up to the door. It is said that one of the men was the Chief Mate of the *Coolidge*, Patrick Carl Olsen. All the men escaped this way and it appears that Captain Euart was the last one left down the bottom of the foyer. He tied the rope to himself. Captain Covill and WO Moshimer went out the outer door and stood on the side of the hull. Suddenly the ship listed further and was now totally on her side. Capt Covill and WO Moshimer attempted to haul Capt Euart up the considerable distance to the doors.

At 1052 hours, Lt Hosmer reports that he saw Mr Olsen appear on the side of the ship from somewhere (it is unclear if he did in fact come from inside or some other place). He also saw two other men (Capt Covill and WO Moshimer - it is not clear where Lt MacDonald was now). The two men are trying to pull someone up out of the passenger doors 2/3 of the way aft. Mr Olsen runs to the door and starts helping the other two men. The *Coolidge* starts to slide backwards off the reef into deeper water.

At 1052 1/2 hours there is another great lurch and the ship begins to slide rapidly. Capt Covill and WO Moshimer as well as Mr Olsen were sucked under by the ship. At 1053 hours the SS *President Coolidge* disappeared beneath the oil and water. There was a great

rush of air and dust forced from the ship as water entered the lower parts of the ship and this made the rescue more difficult with waves and huge bubbles disturbing the water. WO Moshimer had to remove his helmet and gear around his waist. A large self-propelled barge that was attempting to rescue the men went out of control, spinning around and around.

The three eventually bobbed to the surface but Capt Euart was never seen again. Patrick Olsen was awarded the Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal for his part in the rescue attempt. See *Coolidge Heroes Chapter* for more information on CO Olsen's part and the citation he received. This story is somewhat confirmed by Richard Schneider's account of the sinking below.



**Figure 26 - The SS *President Coolidge* disappears beneath Segond Channel**

The latter part of this story is confirmed by Craig Hosmer in his diary. However, this does not seem to me to be a complete telling of the story as the timeframe of the story does not match the time that the ship was aground before it sank. For example, from the story it only seems like 15 to 30 minutes at the most but the *Coolidge* did not sink for about 74 minutes. It is unclear what Lt Hosmer did in the 29 minutes between 1016 hours and 1045 hours.

Richard Schneider (see references) who was on board told me:

*I could see the men on the starboard side trying to get off of the ship. I saw one man attempting to be pulled out of a porthole, but he couldn't make it [perhaps this was Captain Euart - see later in this chapter - but he was trying to get out of a door, not a port hole - it could be an error of memory or perhaps the distance from the ship. It tends to confirm other stories related above about Captain Euart]. The water looked oily and I think there were some flames [I do not think this is correct as there is no other record of a fire and the photos do not show it]. The ship righted itself up and went down rear end first. It was an amazing sight, I wasn't far from the sinking ship. I could see the water whirling in a big circle as it went down. I lost all of my equipment and personal belongings, escaping with only the clothes on my back. This is about all I can remember.*

Frank Cameron was on one of about 15 ships anchored in Segond Channel. He reports in an article published in *Last Minutes of the President Coolidge* by Frank Cameron, *MAST* magazine, May 1946, pages 18-20 that the *Coolidge* hit the beach at 0945. Between 1015 and 1030 the list increased alarmingly and by 1030 it was obvious to him that the ship was doomed. The following is a word for word description of the final moments of the sinking:

*A huge geyser appeared by her stern bubbling furiously and she seemed to surround herself with a thin film of smoke as if to curtain the final shame of her death throes. More geysers appeared along her side. Her stacks at last touched the water and then with a tragic gracefulness, her bow rose as her stern settled more deeply and she slid off the coral ledge and disappeared from sight. It was 1045.*

This account roughly tallies with others, although the timing is a little out, understandable considering the hectic situation and the period of time that may have passed between the event and the recording of their memories.

The Captain orders that the motor boat he is in (and Lt Hosmer and many others) set out for Navy Headquarters. There are many men in the motor boat and they put most onto a raft to be taken ashore. There are 11 men left in the motor boat, including the Captain, Chief and First Officers, Chief, First and Second Assistant Engineers, Lt Hosmer, Ensign Weinstein, Rhodes, SM Arthur Tumbur (? - one of the communications officers) and the injured man. This boat is rapidly taking water so at 1058 hours they put four men on a Navy motor launch and at 1105 hours all but the First Officer and First Engineer now get onto an invasion boat as the motor boat is rapidly sinking. The boat is towed by the invasion boat.

At 1113 hours, the invasion boat comes along side the cruiser USS *Chester* and discharges the injured man and at 1125 hours they reach the shore in the vicinity of Luganville township.

As a result of their actions, Captain Elwood Euart was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and Captain Warren Covill, Lt Ward MacDonald and Warrant Officer Robert Moshimer were awarded the Soldier's Medal.

Amazingly, only two lives (not five lives as reported in some sources) had been lost out of the 5340 (not 5355 as some other sources report) persons on board. Details of the accident were not released in the United States until 12 December 1942, almost seven weeks after the *Coolidge* sank. An official US defence media release (see references) on that date is as follows:

### **Communique 217**

*December 12, 1942*

*S. S. PRESIDENT COOLIDGE LOST ON WAR MISSION; VERY FEW CASUALTIES*

*The former liner S. S. President Coolidge, owned by the American President Lines, San Francisco, Calif., chartered and operated by the War Shipping Administration for the U. S. Army, was lost in recent weeks in the South Pacific. The vessel, operating as a transport, was fully loaded with troops and equipment when it struck a mine and sank. Through prompt and efficient rescue efforts casualties were limited to four men. Henry Nelon [sic - at this web site], 3714 Irving Street, San Francisco, Calif., who is a survivor, was master of the S. S. President Coolidge.*

*The S. S. President Coolidge, Of 21,936 gross tons, was completed in 1931 at the Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Co., Newport News, Va. It was 615 feet 6 inches in length, had a beam of 81 feet 3 inches, and a draft of 28 feet 2 inches.*

As you can see, this report stated that there were four deaths but did not mention that the accident was caused by a US mine. A British Pathe cinenews that I have seen also claims four deaths and it reports that the ship hit a mine. I do not know the date of this film. It was not until a report appeared in the *San Francisco Call-Bulletin* on 15 December 1942 that the US public knew that the ship had been sunk by a US mine. The actual location of where the ship sank was not reported until April 1944, 17 months later. Until then, it was reported that the accident occurred in the Solomons area.

Captain Nelson was charged before a military commission of "...through negligence suffering a vessel of the United States to be lost". I have attached some information about the three inquiries into the sinking in a separate page.

## Salvage Works

After the sinking of the SS *President Coolidge* on 26 October 1942, salvage efforts did not start right away as one might think when it is considered how much equipment was aboard. The first salvage attempt started on 15 January 1943 when the Chief of the Medical Unit on Espiritu Santo, Colonel Arthur G. King, MD, undertook training to dive on the *Coolidge* in an attempt to retrieve some urgently needed medical supplies, mainly the 519lbs of quinine (an anti-malarial drug - 250,000 doses, the entire reserve supply for the Pacific) that the *Coolidge* was carrying. However, the dive never went ahead as a mine had broken loose in the area.

However, I received an e-mail from Michael A. Jones, Sr (see references) who advised me that his father (not sure of his name) was on the *Coolidge* when she sank. Mr Jones told me that his father said that the Navy did recover medical supplies, the mail and other material from the *Coolidge*. His father told him that they went to the army base and got torches to cut an access in the side of the ship. He said the first man in the hole came out like a torpedo, went to the surface and never returned. They were wearing surface supplied breathing apparatus and he says that he followed the second man in.

*It soon became apparent why the first man left in such a hurry. The second man had stopped just inside the laundry compartment [this is hard to accept as the laundry is located the level below the First Class Dining Room and has no direct or even easy indirect access to the outside] that still had the water tight doors shut. The man was stunned to see the bodies of those who perished still in the positions in which they died [this is unlikely to be true as only two men died and they were in totally different parts of the ship]. Some reaching out, some in fetal [sic] positions, some with their hands about the water tight door mechanism. The light in the water made a most horrifying scene, as it illuminated the undulating and drifting corpses. [It is possible that he entered a part of the ship - say the door where Captain Ewart died - and saw one body, but it is very unlikely that he saw two bodies]*

*Dad and the other divers had never used underwater torches before and that in itself put more stress on the boys, as they could only imagine what awaited them on the other side of the hull.*

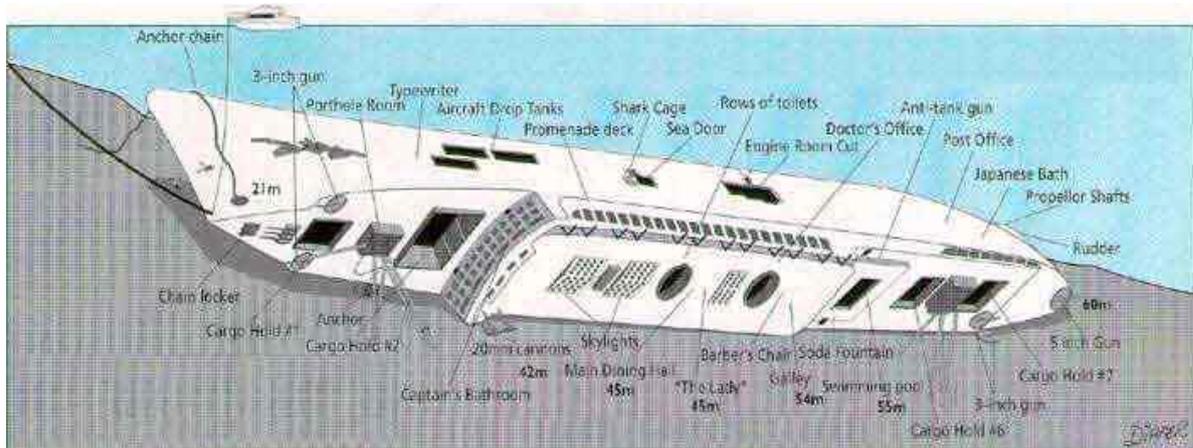
During the War it has been reported that the US Navy sent some divers down and they apparently removed some items from the front holds, perhaps some ammunition and maybe three artillery guns from the second hold. There is still at least four guns in this hold. Whether this is the same salvage mentioned in the above paragraphs I do not know.

Richard P. Toulson of Los Altos, California (see references) was based on Espiritu Santo during 1944 (on flying boats) has told me that his group received salvaged cargo, equipment, Coca Cola from the wreck.

As indicated above, at some time the hull over holds two and three is alleged to have been opened by Americans, presumably the Navy. This is reported by Peter Hole, one of the people who later worked on the salvage of the *Coolidge's* props, in *The Lady and the President - The Life and Loss of the S.S. President Coolidge* by Peter Stone. However, no time frame is given for this to have occurred and no actual evidence presented.

After the war, Reece Discombe, a New Zealander, arrived in Espiritu Santo and dived on the *Coolidge*. He was possibly the first person to dive on the wreck other than the Navy personnel. During one of these dives he found one of the ship's bells. This was located at the base of the forward mast. It was quite large, 20 inches in size and of course, made of brass. On it is inscribed "SS PRESIDENT COOLIDGE" and "Pacific Brass Oundry [sic] of San Francisco 1940".

Apparently some Japanese attempted to gain approval to raise the *Coolidge* in 1947 but this (thankfully) never happened.



**Figure 27 - A diagram of the *President Coolidge* as she lies today, showing the salvage work carried out** Diagram courtesy of Aquamarine, Santo

On 8 May 1953, Burton Kent Jaquith, a former employee of the Dollar Line, purchased the *SS President Coolidge* for "US\$10.00 and other valuable considerations" (this is a direct quote from Mr Jaquith to me). The *Coolidge* was part of a package of vessels he purchased. These included the *SS Russell Chittenden*, a Liberty on Gwadaraba Reef at the Trobriand Islands in Papua New Guinea. It is reported that in 1957 Mr Jaquith arranged for the Miyachi Salvage Company of Kobe, Japan, to salvage the wreck. However, the Government of the New Hebrides (the infamous French-British condominium) refused to permit the salvage. It is not known why this happened, but elsewhere in the world, some salvage was done on other World War II wrecks (the Solomon Islands, Coron in the Philippines, Chuuk Lagoon - very limited). Mr Jaquith did not comment on this to me.

In the late 1960s, Australian diver Barry May turned his talents to the Pacific. Barry was originally from Sydney and in the late 1950s it was reported that he never dived without a stick of gelignite (personal comment to MM by Les Catterson). During this time Barry salvaged (or attempted to salvage) various shipwrecks located off Sydney. These included the *SS Hilda* and the *MV Malabar* (see my books *Shipwrecks of the NSW Coast*). In 1967 he travelled to New Caledonia to salvage some wrecks. With Des Woodley they spent almost two years raising metals before being told to leave the country.

In late 1968 they moved to the New Hebrides (now called Vanuatu) with a 45 foot boat *Danielle*. After apparently doing some preliminary exploration work, they returned to Sydney and purchased the ex-Royal Australian Navy dive vessel *Seal* and renamed it *Pacific Seal*. They did some work on the 66 foot vessel and motored to Middleton Reef (an infamous location in the western Pacific where many ships and yachts have come to grief). Here they salvaged the propellers of the largest vessel wrecked there, the *TSS Runic* and came back to Sydney. They did more repairs to the salvage boat and then travelled to the New Hebrides, leaving Sydney in November 1969. Aboard was Allan Power. He was a young Sydney spearfisher and he came along to take some photographs of the wreck of the *SS President Coolidge*. The aim of the trip was to salvage the props off the wreck. The props of the *Coolidge* were made of brass and weighed an estimated 14 tons each. They were about six metres across.

Barry May found out who the owner of the wreck was (Burton Jaquith) and wrote him a letter. However, Burt Jacquith advised me in January 2001 that there is no way that he received a properly addressed letter and he does not accept that it would have got lost in the system. Receiving no response, he then spoke to the New Hebrides Government and they expressed no interest in the wreck. Using information from Reece Discombe (who was now

working and living in Port Vila, the country's capital), his team located the wreck and started the salvage attempt. Allan Power joined in the work.

The main problem encountered was the depth. The shallower of the two props was the starboard one. This was at 55 metres. The deeper port prop was at 65 metres. Using small 72 cubic foot tanks, without content gauges, meant that they did not have much time on each dive to do the work. This was fairly complex and tiring work.

The props were held on the driveshaft by a huge nut which was secured by another nut. The first nut was removed by a dynamite explosion and then another stick was used to loosen the main nut. Then, a special wrench was used but this did not work very well. Barry May then built a wrench which fitted over the nut and had a steel cable which ran around the wrench and up to a point on the propeller blade. Here it was attached to a winch which was used to pull the cable in. As this happened, the wrench turned, loosening the nut. It took one week to remove the nut on the starboard prop. It was finally removed with an explosive charge and another one was used to push the prop off the shaft. The prop was supposed to then swing under the *Pacific Seal* on cables connected to the prop. However, they were not strong enough and the cables broke and the prop fell to the sand below, 70 metres down. They then attached cables to the salvage vessel and moved it to shallower water where it was placed before being cut up into more manageable pieces.

After the starboard prop had been salvaged, May had to go to Sydney to sell some of the metals they had collected. The work continued in his absence and the remaining salvers decided to do the job quickly. They placed a whole case of dynamite on the prop shaft and blew the prop off. It split into two and fell to the seabed. In addition, the explosion holed the hull at the stern and oil was leaking. The oil escaping was apparently quite considerable and visible on the surface. One blade separated from the hub and other two blades and flew 9 metres and rammed into the sand. It took some time to dig the two props out and lift them. In total, it took four months to salvage the two props. Barry May moved onto salvaging the USS *Tucker* (see my book *Some Shipwrecks and Aircraft of the Pacific*), a US destroyer that had sunk at the opposite end of Second Channel about two and a half months before the *President Coolidge* sank. Both had hit US mines. About June 1970, the *Pacific Seal* (with May?) then then moved to New Guinea but Allan Power stayed behind. During this time, Peter Cole and some people May left behind continued work on the *Coolidge*. They removed four to six prop blades (possibly from Hold Three) each weighing 4.25 to 4.5 tons each.

After working in the Solomons (on the Honiara wrecks) and New Guinea, May came back to Santo in 1971 and returned to the *Coolidge*. During this work 50 tons of field gun shells and rifle rounds were removed. Most came from hold three and after removing the explosive, the casings were sent to Australia. They also removed wheels and tyres and sold them to locals. The wheels were useless, sometimes falling apart as soon as they were used, but the tyres were still okay. Rifles from the holds were also taken to the surface but they were corroded. Barry May and his crew entered the engine room but finding a almost four metres of oil in there, they decided not to open it up. The price being paid for used metal dropped around this time so they decided to stop the salvage work and left Santo. Barry May now owns and runs the Cairns dive boat *Auriga Bay II* which he built in 1976.

By now oil was leaking from the hull, especially where the salvage work had cracked the hull. Ian Lockley from Fiji purchased the salvage rights from Barry May in 1972. An interesting aside is that Lockley was also involved in the 1986 salvage of parts of the MV *Mikhail Lemontov* (see my book *Some Shipwrecks and Aircraft of the Pacific*) in New Zealand. After many complaints from residents living alongside Second Channel, the Government asked Lockley's company, Salvage Pacific (Fiji), to quote on removing the oil. The initial job was to survey how much oil was left in the ship.

Mr Lockley designed a small recompression chamber and it was built in Suva, Fiji. In 1974 it was taken to Santo and anchored to the hull. A shark cage was also constructed (what for? - there are very few sharks seen on the wreck) and placed on the hull near "Euart's Door". The cage can still be seen there today. Allan Power was hired to work on the survey. The

aim was to drill holes in the hull from the highest levels till no oil was encountered. This showed the amount of oil left in each tank. Starting in October 1974, it took over six weeks to do the survey. While most of the work was done on the outside of the hull, a considerable amount of difficult work inside the wreck was required. In the end, the survey showed that there were 34 tanks containing an estimated 650 tons of bunker oil.

The plugs inserted into the drill holes were now corroding away, letting oil escape. It is also suggested that some wooden plugs were removed by Lockley to enable oil to leak to scare the Government into action. In May 1976 a diver, Mr Martin, placed bronze plugs into the holes and sealed them with concrete. Finally, in 1977, the Government contracted Salvage Pacific to remove the oil and the British Government provided \$60,000 for the work. The team drilled large holes into the tanks and placed a valve into each hole. At this stage, no real thought had been given as to what to do with the oil once it was removed. Suggestions were made, including putting it in some underground tanks the Americans had built during the war. However, someone suggested sending a sample to Shell in Sydney to be tested and it turned out that the oil was in very good condition, even though it had been underwater for 35 years.

Ian Lockley had an idea for disposing of the oil. To do it, he purchased an old tug from Fiji. This was the *Tui Tawate* (see my book *Some Shipwrecks and Aircraft of the Pacific*), an old World War II tug of the Empire class, originally named *Empire Shirley*, which was sold to BP in New Zealand after the war. Here it was involved in the rescue of people from the *Wahane* disaster. The tug only just made it to Santo where it was then converted to hold oil in all its compartments, including crew quarters. It was proposed that the oil be burnt in the boilers of the tug and so used up this way.

It appears that someone then suggested that the oil be used by the cruise vessel, *SS Arcadia*. The *Arcadia* regularly visited Santo on her cruises from Sydney. The oil could easily be used by this old ship so the Government arranged for P & O, the owners of the *Arcadia*, to purchase the oil. The oil was pumped into the *Tui Tawate* and from there into the *Arcadia*. Over three visits in 1977 the ship took on board 200 tons of oil at a time and used it in her furnaces.

In the end, the cost of the project was \$92,000. P & O had paid \$17,000 for the oil so the Government had paid \$75,000 less the \$60,000 the British Government had provided.

The *Tui Tawate* now rests in 44 metres of water straight off Bougainville Resort, a few kilometres to the south of Laganville. According to Kevin Green of Aquamarine, fewer than 10 people had dived it till October 1998. During that month, seven of my friends dived on it (I was ill) and reported that it was a good dive.

After the oil salvage, Ian Lockley stayed on in Santo to do more salvage on the *Coolidge*. They cut a huge hole on the starboard side above the engine room. This gave access to the huge electric motors and generators, which, off course, contained huge amounts of copper. The condensers were also removed. This work was not proving profitable as much machinery and other items had to be removed to get to the valuable metals. This was the last salvage work done on the wreck.

Burt Jaquith has never relinquished the ownership of the *SS President Coolidge* nor abandoned her. He has told me that as he was not in a position to do the salvage work himself, why should not others benefit from their work, even though it was illegal. He said that the only legal relationship he has relating to the wreck was to grant Alan Power the right to dive and conduct dives on the wreck ("Why not, he was doing it already and would continue to do so"). I once asked him if he wanted to sell the *Coolidge* to me. He said he would be interested but I never pursued it. Perhaps I should have done so!!

## Investigation into Sinking

As detailed in previous chapters, on 26 October 1942 the *Coolidge* was on a trip from "White Poppy" (Noumea, New Caledonia) to "Button" (Espirito Santo, Vanuatu) when she hit two US mines while entering Segond Channel on Santo. The master of the ship, Captain Henry Nelson, ran the *Coolidge* aground and evacuated the ship. One hour and 14 minutes after hitting the mines, the *Coolidge* slipped off the shore into its final resting place. Two lives had been lost out of the 5340 persons on board. The dead were a fireman, Robert Reid, killed by the initial mine and an Army officer, Captain Elwood Euart.

After the loss of the *Coolidge* it was always a sure thing that there had to be an inquiry into the loss of the ship, especially considering the amount of equipment being carried and the number of person involved. There were to be three separate hearings into the cause of the sinking. These were:

- 1 A **Preliminary Court of Inquiry** started on 12 November 1942 and went for five days. This was on the USS *Whitney* and was at the order of the Commander of the South Pacific Area and South Pacific Force, Admiral William "Bull" Halsey.
- 2 A **Military Commission** at the College La Perouse at Noumea, New Caledonia. This was from 8 to 14 December 1942 and was to adjudicate on a charge laid against Henry Nelson by Admiral Halsey.
- 3 A **US Coast Guard Investigation Board** in San Francisco on 6 February 1943. (This board took no action after reading the proceedings from 2 above and accepted the findings from that commission)

However, before this happened, Captain Nelson wrote a letter to the Commanding Officer of Naval Forces at Santo, Captain Walter H. Roberts. This is reproduced in Appendix XX.

### Preliminary Court of Inquiry 12 to 17 November 1942 USS *Whitney*

It is not clear to me what occurred at this Court of Inquiry, but it apparently heard evidence about the sinking. It is possible that a report entitled "Survivors' Statements" (see Appendix XX) about the sinking of the *Coolidge* was presented to the Inquiry. After five days of hearings, the Court decided that there should be further actions and charges laid against Captain Nelson. In Appendix Three of *The Lady and the President - The Life and Loss of the S.S. President Coolidge*, Peter Stone has attached some papers relating to the three hearings. One of the papers is headed *Record of Procedure of a Court of Inquiry Convened on Board the U.S.S. Whitney, 12 November 1942* (page 243). This paper sets out some things which, on the basis of now known facts and assumptions, does not appear to be factual. In Lt Craig Hosmer's Log Book (see Appendix XX), he states that he appeared before this enquiry but states that it started on 17 November 1942 on the USS *Whitney*. He states that he was called again on 19 November 1942 but was not required to give evidence again. He was also interviewed on 14 November 1942 while on board MV *Tabinta* in Noumea. He makes no mention that he was a defence counsel.

After this Inquiry, Admiral Halsey prepared a paper called *Finding of Facts* which is also in Appendix Three of the book (pages 244-5). This sets out more "facts" that were based on the results of the Inquiry. As a result, Admiral Halsey charged Captain Henry Nelson that:

*Through Negligence Suffering a Vessel of the United States to be Lost. In that Henry Nelson, master of the S.S. President Coolidge... on or about October 26, 1942, having previously received a complete set of routing instructions, including special information for safely entering Segond Channel, from the duly constituted port authority at Noumea, New Caledonia, did, while conning said ship, nevertheless, neglect and fail to follow, or cause to be followed, the aforementioned instructions in*

*approaching Segond Channel, and did negligently, carelessly, wantonly, and recklessly cause said ship to make a wrong approach to Segond Channel at an excessive rate of speed which precluded him from receiving a pilot aboard and acting upon timely warnings that his ship was standing into danger; and he, the said Henry Nelson, through said negligence, did suffer the said SS President Coolidge to strike two mines in a wrong approach to Segond Channel, Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides, at or about 9:35 a.m., on the day aforesaid, in consequence of which the said SS President Coolidge, two lives, and a vast cargo of combat equipment and supplies were lost to the detriment of the success of the United States military operations, the United States then being in a state of war*

**Military Commission  
8 to 14 December 1942  
Noumea, New Caledonia**

**The stern of the *Coolidge*  
as she starts to list to port**

As a result of the above charge, Captain Nelson was ordered to appear before the Military Commission at Noumea on 8 December 1942. Captain Nelson was allocated Captain Gordon B. Parks, USN, and Lieutenant Chester Craig Hosmer, USNR as his defence counsels. However, Lt Hosmer makes no mention of this in his log book (see above).

Anyway, they apparently prepared an "Objection to the Specifications" of the charge in an attempt to stop the Commission proceeding. This was on the basis that the charge against Captain Nelson was based on conclusions of fact rather than allegations. In addition, the objection was also made because the charges were also based on the fact that Captain Nelson was given a set of instructions that he ignored but that the charge did not specify what those instructions were. See Appendix Three of *The Lady and the President - The Life and Loss of the S.S. President Coolidge* by Peter Stone (page 246).

This tactic did not succeed and the Commission started as planned. The Commission was made up of Rear Admiral Calvin H. Cobb, USN (President), Captain Schuyler Mills, USN, Captain George H. Bahm, USN, Commander Louis T. Young, USN and Commander Alexander F. Junker USN. The Judge Advocate (Prosecutor) was Captain Richard Fagan, US Marine Corps (Rtd). Captain Nelson was defended by Captain Gordon B. Parks, USN and Lieutenant Chester C. Hosmer, USNR.

**The *Coolidge* is almost gone as the list gets far worse**

At the start of the Commission, Captain Nelson made a statement to the Commission. This

is attached as Appendix XX. The Commission heard four days of evidence and then one (or possibly two) days of summary.

It would appear that the intention of the prosecution was to prove that Captain Nelson had been given complete and detailed instructions in Noumea on 24 October 1942 on how to enter Segond Channel. These instructions included something specified as being "Special Instructions" - see Appendix Three, page 247. A summary of the "Special Instructions" is basically:

- Last channel of Segond Channel is to be used
- Approach from Bogacyo (Bokissa) Island passages, that is the channel between Tutuba Island and Bokissa Island
- Aim at a White Rock on Santo
- When northern end of Aore Island is west, turn into Segond Channel
- Entry to be in daylight only

It was then intended to prove that Captain Nelson ignored these instructions.



<p><b>Friday</b> <b>11 December 1942</b></p>	<p>received a message from <i>PC479</i> that the <i>Coolidge</i> was entering a wrong entrance. Lt Davies from the patrol boat says he did not warn the <i>Coolidge</i> as he had no idea the ship would enter Segond Channel (!!!!).</p>
<p><b>Day</b>                      <b>Five</b> <b>Saturday</b> <b>12 December 1942</b></p>	<p>As the Record of the Proceedings of the Fourth Day were not ready, the commission was adjourned till Monday 14 December 1942.</p>
<p><b>Day</b>                      <b>Six</b> <b>Monday</b> <b>14 December 1942</b></p>	<p>The proceedings of days four and five (not much as it was adjourned after only a few minutes) were read to the commission. The Judge Advocate and Captain Nelson read statements. There was no closing argument by the Judge Advocate. The trial finished and the President announced, apparently almost immediately, that the Commission had decided that Captain Nelson had no case to answer.</p>

What appears to me to be the closing statement of the Judge Advocate (referred to above on Sixth Day) at the Commission is reproduced in full in Appendix Three of *The Lady and the President - The Life and Loss of the S.S. President Coolidge*, Peter Stone (pages 252-255) but it is labelled the opening argument. I am not sure if this is correct.

**The funnels of the *Coolidge* are about to go under as air rushes out under pressure creating huge sprays**

The written argument of Captain Nelson appears in Appendix Three of *The Lady and the President - The Life and Loss of the S.S. President Coolidge*, Peter Stone (pages 255-261). This appears to be the statement read on the Sixth Day after the evidence has been heard. In summary, Captain Nelson states that while he did receive instructions, they were not the alleged full set of instructions and that a vital piece of information, that being specific directions as to the method of approach to Segond Channel including details of which channel to use. It did not include information about any location of mines in the channels. This last bit was particularly noted as been relevant. Captain Nelson also made much that the obvious and safe entrance to Segond Channel was the one he chose and that there were no warnings given to him until it was far too late.

Possibly after this, the defence made a closing statement, entitled *Fatal Failure of Proof*. I have attached this as Appendix XX. This is also in Appendix Three of *The Lady and the President - The Life and Loss of the S.S. President Coolidge*, Peter Stone (pages 261-2).

After considering all the evidence produced, the Military Commission (consisting of Rear Admiral Calvin H. Cobb, USN (President), Captain Schuyler Mills, USN, Captain George H. Bahm, USN, Commander Louis T. Young, USN and Commander Alexander F. Junker USN) found Captain Henry Nelson not guilty. I do not have available to me the exact wording of the finding so I cannot report on any qualifications that the Commission may have made in giving the acquittal.

The US Navy was not really happy with this finding and did not make much of an attempt to publicise this fact. The records of the Commission was not approved by the US Secretary of the Navy until 26 April 1943, more than five months after the accident and almost four months after the Commission.

One matter that appears from this incident is that the skippers of US merchant ships operating during the war were not given all available information, especially about minefields. For example, a simple, straightforward advice to Captain Nelson that Segond Channel was mined and that entry should not be made except as contained in separate instructions would have avoided the loss of the *Coolidge*.

**Coast Guard Investigation Board**

**6 February 1943**

**San Francisco**

When Captain Nelson finally returned to America, another investigation was held. This was held before Coast Guard Marine Inspection Officer Lt Commander Henry V. Barbieri and was reported to be "informal". This appears to have merely reviewed the following items:

- Evidence given to the Military Commission
- A form (924d-1) completed by the First Mate and sent to the Coast Guard on 3 December 1942
- Another of the same form completed by the First Mate when he returned to the US
- A report by Captain Nelson on 28 January 1943
- A personal presentation by Captain Nelson to Lt Commander Barbieri

As the Military Commission had already tried Captain Nelson and found him not guilty, the US Coast Guard Marine Investigation Board decided to take no further action.

## **Diving the SS *President Coolidge***

As you drop below the surface and start descending along the mooring line, your first sight is of a difference between light and dark, with a distinct line separating the two. At ten metres you can now ascertain that the line is the join of the hull and the deck at the bow and the lighter colour is the hull and the dark is the deeper water. At 15 metres you are just over the hull and about 5 metres above the bow itself. Your first thought is that this really is a huge wreck. Your guide leads you across the hull towards the stern and the depth decreases a few metres before dropping quite slowly. Over the side the guide goes and you follow. Amazing! It is a breathtaking sight that confronts you. Below and to your left is the enormous bridge, stretching all the way to the bottom at more than 40 metres. To your right past a jumble of huge masts there is a huge gun emplacement and below it, yet another gun. The masts themselves disappear out of sight, angled down towards the sand. This is really a lot bigger than you imagined. Your first dive on the wreck has vastly changed your views on what to expect. This is the *SS President Coolidge*, the largest easily accessible shipwreck in the world.

As I indicated above, there is only one word to describe diving the *SS President Coolidge*, **AWESOME**.

When you descend down the mooring line permanently attached to the bow, you see that this is indeed a huge ship, but it is really not until you swim further back along the hull and drop from the hull past the deck towards the sand almost 30 metres further down that you begin to appreciate its enormous size. Out of the dark huge shapes emerge, the bridge, masts and crane arms, enormous cargo holds, anti-aircraft guns, anchors and winches, far too much to examine in even a dozen dives.

The minimum depth for even a basic dive on the *Coolidge* is 33 metres, so we are talking deep diving. However, do not let this put you off diving the *Coolidge*, as deep diving on the *Coolidge* is not like deep diving off Sydney or Melbourne.



### **Diagram of *Coolidge* courtesy of [Aquamarine Diving](#)**

There are numerous dives that you can do on the wreck. This article details the standard (and not so standard dives) on the *Coolidge*. A lot of the dives do one or more of the individual parts that I explain below. Remember, the ship is on its port side so all references to the back of a hold really refer to the bottom of the hold, the right refers to the rear and the left refers to the front.

#### **NOTES**

- Nearly all dives on the *Coolidge* are deep, more than 30 metres
- Likewise, nearly every dive on the wreck is a decompression dive. Deco ranges from a minute or two on the afternoon dive to up to 30 minutes on the very deep morning dives.
- Deco is done in the shallows next to the reef.
- Aquamarine Diving and Santo Dive both do shore and boat dives. Pro Dive does boat dives.
- You can choose to do either boat dives or shore dives or a combination of both.
- Boat dives are especially good for deeper morning dives.
- Shore dives are fairly easy and not too troublesome.

#### **BOW AND SAND BELOW HOLDS (Maximum depth 35 to 40m)**

This is not normally done as a dive by itself, but as a part of the next two dives or on the way back from another dive. At the bow there is a rope that leads back to the deco stop. The first thing back from the "pointy end" is the [chain locker/stores hatch](#) Then there are two

huge anchor winches. On the port and starboard sides there are two large gun turrets. These are three inch guns, both pointing forward. A huge eel lives in the base of the top one. Next is Hold One. Under the lower gun there are some interesting items. There used to be a pistol (maybe it is still there hidden), a typewriter, a large number of fire extinguishers, a huge spare anchor that fell off the deck and further out a lot of aluminium aircraft drop tanks. From here you pass the masts and crane arms, which all point down to the sand. There is a powerstation in between the masts but there is only a small room that can be explored. Further on you get to Hold Two and then The Bridge. In front of the bridge there is the cover of hold two, an enormous piece of metal lying upright against the bridge.

### **CHAIN LOCKER (Maximum depth 20m)**

Not a dive in itself, this is a few minutes of distraction on the way back to the deco stop. The very small hatch is right at the bow and after entering you see a few items. There is at least one spare porthole here. You can go a bit towards the stern and then there is another hatch that leads to the lower sections. In here you drop to the bottom of the ship. In second level at the bow there are five or six shovels. In other sections there are coils of rope, chain, hose and assorted items. Since about 1999 you can swim into Hold One from the chain locker. Despite this, it is still very dark and I would not enter unless you have a person who waits outside this hatch.

### **HOLD ONE (Maximum depth 30m)**

On your first three dives you are generally taken to dive the holds, the promenade/bridge area and the medical supplies hold. Hold One is crammed with equipment vital for the war effort, the loss of which must have severely affected the Americans' push into the Solomons. Today you can see the goods, six wheel drive trucks (10 wheels all up), jeeps and an upside-down tracked vehicle (a dozer?). These are just some of the things to see. On the right at the back of the hold there are seven jeeps stacked in twos. There is one by itself the other six are stacked on top of each other (at least now). The wheels are not on the jeeps, they are stored inside the body. In the middle level of the hold at the right you can exit the hold into Hold Two through a rust hole.

At the top front right of the hold there is a room where there are stored at least 22 spare porthole glasses. These make a great photo/video when someone puts a bright torch at one end of the pile. There are also some spare porthole parts as well as other sections of glass for use elsewhere in the ship. At the front left middle there is the stewards washroom. This has 10 hand basins in two back to back rows, with a shower opposite each basin and a light above each shower. Above this and back towards the entrance there is a tight squeeze into an area which was the "White Boys" living area. There are some beds here and a very tight exit through a vent to the outside. There is a bit of china and other stuff on the edge of the hold.

### **HOLD TWO (Maximum depth 35m)**

Hold Two is a treasure trove! At the entrance to the hold there is a lot of bric-a-brac, plates, cups, teapots and other items. One of the first things you will notice as you enter is that there are huge cuts in the hull over top of you. These were caused by some salvage work, probably Americans during the war. Straight away you will see a huge wheeled artillery gun and more six wheel drive trucks and jeeps. The gun may be one of four 155 mm guns modified in Noumea and loaded onto the *Coolidge* at the last stop. These were to be linked up with bases being built at Santo. See Joseph Ritz's memories on the [Coolidge's last trip](#) page. There is a tracked vehicle here. It is upside down and appears to be a bulldozer.

At the back right of the hold there are some aircraft drop tanks and past here there are two rust holes through which you can enter the Medical Supplies Hold (Hold Four). The upper one brings you out in the upper level of the bottom of Hold Four where there are heaps of drop tanks. The lower hole takes you to the bottom level of the bottom of Hold Four. At the front of Hold Two there are some interesting things to see. At the middle right there is a crews' barber shop, with the chair still sticking out of the floor. At the top left of this hold there are some toilets that were the seamen's washroom. You can also enter the Medical

Supplies Hold at the right middle, over some trucks. You can enter Hold One on the opposite side of the hold.

On the 4th level in, right side as you enter (towards stern), there are three field guns. Two of these have huge wheels and are medium sized and the other is a smaller gun but still quite large. I never saw these till October 2002, despite diving here dozens of times before!

### **PROMENADE DECK (Maximum depth 32m)**

The Promenade Deck can be done in conjunction with the Bridge or one of the holds. This dive takes in the shallower section of the Promenade Deck. This deck gets its name from the fact that it encircles the whole of the superstructure and enables a person to walk or "promenade" around the ship. It is the next level above the main deck and along the whole length of the shallow side there are interesting things to see. After swimming over the bridge, you follow the outside of the ship till you reach about the 30 metre mark. Drop inside the enclosed passageway and head back towards the bridge. In early 1999 the deck collapsed considerably, at least a metre, on the outmost part of the "deck". It was caused by corrosion helped along by an earthquake. The damage stopped then at a spot adjacent to the main lobby.

However, in 2001, this whole section dropped completely. The roof of the First Class Smoking Room is now almost straight below the original deck of the Promenade Deck. The inside wall of the Promenade Deck (which was the floor as you swam along), now hangs almost vertical, hinged at the deck floor.

Along the way you will see rope ladders used to escape the sinking ship, helmets, water bottles, gas masks, rifles, bullets, Thompson sub-machine guns, plates, cups, cooking utensils, morphine and cat gut phials (these used to be there but have now disappeared) and many more pieces of equipment. Along the way you will see what was the entrance to the First Class Smoking Room (home of The Lady). Through this door and some other doors/windows you can still see rows of toilets. More about them later. Further along you can see more bullets and equipment. From here you can go onto the Bridge, Hold One or Hold Two.

At the front of the Bridge, at the bottom of the Promenade Deck as it rounds the bridge, there is a row of six toilets. I have no idea where they were originally, but if they were on the deck above as it appears they may have been, then these toilets had the best view of any toilets I have ever seen!

### **BRIDGE (Maximum depth 40m)**

On one of your first dives you may be taken to see the bridge area. This has a great deal of interesting things to see. The remains of the Bridge can be seen on the upper most level of the ship. The wheelhouse is not really recognisable as the top was made of timber and now totally missing as it has been eaten away by borers. Below this level is the Boat Deck which had the officers' quarters. Just down from the side of the ship on this level you can see the Captain's Cabin. All that remains are the bath, toilet and basin. The rest of the cabin and his office, including walls and ceilings, appears to have been made of timber or some other fragile substance (as were all cabins) and they have either been eaten away or rotted away. Lower down there are some other officer's cabins but they are too deep to see on this dive.

The next level of the ship is the Promenade Deck which has the Promenade and deeper into the centre of the ship the Library and Writing Room. There is not much to see here. The next level is the A Deck. This has a lot of passenger accommodation. The rooms closest to the hull of the ship, accessible through the window at the front of the Bridge, are First Class. There are a large number of baths, toilets and basins to be seen, some in groups of two (back to back).

### **MEDICAL SUPPLIES - HOLD FOUR (Maximum depth 36m)**

This dive is known as the Medical Supplies dive. In fact, the dive goes to the fourth cargo hold which, unlike the front two holds has no cargo hatch through which to enter. Originally

used mainly for carrying motor vehicles, access to the hold from the outside was through a pair of large twin doors. Nowadays, access is through a number of ways, the easiest of which is a large long hole cut in the hull of the Lower Deck for salvage purposes. Note that Hold Three has hatches from Hold Two but they appear to be hidden under a pile of jeeps and trucks. Hold Three is really part of Hold Two. Normally, on a guided dive to this location you are taken into Hold Two and go right to the bottom and turn right. There is a rust hole between this hold and Hold Four on this level (at the shallower part) and after going through (it is quite large), you see a sci-fi type scene, with dozens of egg-like objects. These are aluminium aircraft drop tanks, extra fuel tanks for large planes. Some have collapsed under water pressure but most are still intact. At the bottom of this hold near where you entered, there are hundreds of empty glass jars, most "concreted" into the steel of the ship. There is also a good deal of ammunition in this hold.

You can also enter from Hold Two through the lower level of the bottom of the hold. This comes out under the previously described section and you come into the next level up.

The next level is fairly empty but there are a number of objects which I will discuss later in this paragraph and one object which looks like a huge spinner for a prop, perhaps a spare for the *Coolidge*. It is tied to the floor (now the wall). There are also some smallish wooden boxes that contain things that look like soup tins. I could not ascertain what they were, perhaps smoke bombs or even soup cans! The next level up is the Lower Deck. Above it the hull is open so it is very light here. On the bottom of this section of the hull there are a dozen or more items that are in timber crates. I first thought that they were washing machines or refrigerators but closer examination of one located up on the hull near the hold shows them to be fuel powered cookers. The cookers have huge pots with handles that are removable for serving and cleaning. They also appear to have built in two gas or fuel canisters.

On the ledge between this level and the one deeper in the ship there used to be a huge amount of artefacts on display. Bullets, heavy calibre shells, plates, cups, teapots, cooking utensils, phones and other items. As indicated, this hold is called the Medical Supplies hold and was a large amount of medical supplies and equipment being carried here. However, it is possible that the supplies were salvaged in 1943 by the Americans but this is not clear. There were still more things to see, for example, there are some glass vials that contain morphine, eye drops, cat gut and other drugs. There is now longer the amount of artefacts here as before, I do not know what happened to them.

From here you can go to the next level of the hold which is fairly empty and then through a small hatch to the next level and forward towards Hold Two along former accommodation areas. Just before here there are a number of glass vials hidden and these are shown to you. There are some other objects here, including old 78 rpm records (all broken), a glass ink well, a whistle, some different bottles. You then enter Hold Two though a rust hole and there are at least six complete records on your right.

### **FIRST CLASS SMOKING ROOM - THE LADY AND THE TOILETS (Maximum depth 48m)**

#### **A painting of "The Lady" showing how she looks now**

 The *Coolidge* is, of course, famous apart from its size for two things. The first is "The Lady". This was a ceramic figurine of a lady sitting astride a "horse" (actually a unicorn, but the horn has broken off) that used to sit on the wall above the fireplace in the First Class Smoking Room.

Everyone who dived the *Coolidge* wanted to see this amazing item which after more than 50 years still retained its colour. Apparently the figurine was covered up when she was in war service as Alan Power (who has dived the ship more times than anyone else) states that he did not notice "The Lady" for many years after he first started diving the wreck.

However, in the early hours of 26 January 2000, The Lady fell off the wall (more about this later). The First Class Smoking Room used to be accessed via a door off the Promenade Deck. After dropping through, you moved towards the stern and dropped a bit further. Soon you saw where The Lady was located. To the left there was the fireplace and on the right of

this was where The Lady was attached to the wall. Below are the remains of hundreds of beds that were set up in the smoking room. The section of wall that holds the Lady had fallen about 500mm or more till late 1999. This was caused by corrosion and a number of earthquakes, most in early-mid 1999. As of September 1999 it was in a fairly worrying condition and was being held by a rope. The Lady itself had two large cracks in it, one at the top and one at the right. I prophesised in September 1998 that "there is a great likelihood that the Lady will collapse and be destroyed within a year or two if there are more earthquakes". Well, on 26 January 2000 The Lady fell but luckily she floated down and out a doorway onto the lower Promenade Deck where she landed with minor damage. From here the local dive operators moved her to the outside of the wreck. On 29 January 2000 she was removed from the water and then later returned (stupidly in my opinion) to the wreck after perhaps some restoration. In my view it should have been retained on shore, restored and placed on display in the Santo Hotel and a replica put back on the wreck. This was allegedly done due to pressure from Australian dive shop owners as they were of the opinion that all divers wanted to see (and kiss - where did this habit come from) the Lady on the wreck. Any diver who goes to the *Coolidge* just to see the Lady in situ is not a diver I would want to dive with. Get a life!!! Anyway, the Lady is now located in the First Class Dining Room.

Anyway, in 2001, the whole roof of the First Class Smoking Room collapsed downwards, pulling the Promenade Deck with it. This has almost totally destroyed the Room, although it is still accessible. I did not go in there on my October 2002 trip but you can still enter it.

The floor of the Smoking Lounge is covered with green and vermilion rubber tiles that are still visible. On your left as you swim to the bow there were some very ornate lights.



The second thing that everyone wanted to see were the toilets. Installed for the large number of troops being carried, three rows of toilets were placed on the promenade deck on the starboard side of the ship just near

The Lady. You turned around after seeing The Lady and rose a bit. Straight ahead, just beyond the door through which you entered you saw the toilets. As a result of an earthquake in mid-1991 the upper row fell to the floor (wall) below. In early to mid-1999 another earthquake caused six of this same row to fall all the way to the bottom of the Smoking Room. There are a total of 41 toilets. These used to be as follows:- one row of 15 and two rows of 13 (at least that is what I counted when there and when I checked my video - although a book says there are 45). On the top row the second last one (as you move forward) was smashed to pieces (13 in this row), the next row of 13 was intact and the bottom row of 15 had the second one smashed totally and the second last one was broken. This row is the one that had six fall to the bottom of the room so there were only 9 toilets in this row. There were no further breakages. There were two urinals at the far end of the toilets. The toilets apparently had a divider between the rows (not between each toilet) and it would have been very cosy indeed, especially in rough seas! As a result of the collapse of the First Class Smoking Room, these toilets were further damaged. The fate of the toilets that fell in 1991 and 1999 are unknown. You can still see the remaining toilets through the Promenade Deck doors/windows and can still enter and swim along them, coming out in the Continental Lounge.

#### **FIRST CLASS LOBBY AND CONTINENTAL LOUNGE (Maximum depth 35m)**

The previous dive continues by going into the First Class Lobby where there are a couple of very interesting things. The most obvious is the skylights that give a good deal of light to the area. There is also the base of a colourful ceramic tiled fountain located under the main staircase that went up to the Boat Deck. The timber staircase is totally gone, as is the railing and the stairs down to the Bridge Deck. The metal base of the staircase remains.

From here you go into the Continental Lounge which is quite open and lit from another set of skylights (you can exit or enter though some broken ones). There are some lights on your left that are commonly known as "mushroom" lights. The next section to see is the Library and Writing Room but there is little to see here.

**FIRST CLASS DINING ROOM (Maximum depth 45 - 50m)**

This dive really starts at Euart's Door. This is the door that Captain Elwood Euart was attempting to exit when the *President Coolidge* sank. For more details on this, see the article on the [ship's sinking](#). The door was the main entrance to the ship (starboard side) when it was tied up at a wharf. The door now lies at an angle and it is a bit of work to get through the door. When you are in the Lobby, for a morning dive drop down to the bottom and you will find some crockery. There is an entrance to the dining room here and you can swim along the bottom to the other end. At this end of the dining room there is a lift on either side of the ship. For an afternoon dive, go through the upper entrance to the dining room up near Euart's Door. There is a dishwasher here and some crockery inside (cups mainly).

Inside the dining room you can go to the far end of the room. At this end notice that there is a well over the dining room. There are some interesting lights in the dining room.

The Lady now resides here. She is located towards the rear of the room, about 38 metres or so deep. It is bolted to the ceiling (the right side as you enter) and is now upright rather than on its side as it used to be.

If you are experienced you can drop down from the Lady and enter a door to the rear and go into private dining areas and then to the galley. Only do this if you are very experienced. See [Galley](#).

Return to the forward entrance and then the lobby. You can either exit out Euart's Door or go through the passageway forward below the door. This comes out in [Hold Two](#). An alternative is to go through a rust hole at the top near the door. This passes by another group of toilets, two rows of nine. An alternative is to go up a level to B Deck and go towards the bow. Ahead you will see a wall. To your right and down a bit there is a small door. This comes out in Hold Two. From here, exit the hold through the cut or the hatch and go to the deco stop.

**SWIMMING POOL (Maximum depth 55m but you can reach 60m)**

Another dive takes you to see the swimming pool. After dropping from the second mooring, you swim along the top deck of the ship, passing by the second of the funnels and anti-aircraft emplacements before dropping down to the pool. The depth is about 55 metres at the bottom of the pool (it still has water in it!!). The colourful tiles of the pool can be seen at the deepest part and the stainless steel ladders are still there as well. If you are feeling okay, you can drop down under the pool and see the entrance hatch to the refrigerated Hold Five (there is another above the pool). You can go up through the [Soda Fountain](#) or on the outside of the pool. Another alternative is to quickly look in Hold Six behind the pool. Above the pool there is a small artillery gun, now upside down that was being carried on the deck here. Next thing to see is normally the [Beauty Shop](#).

**SODA FOUNTAIN (Maximum depth 55m)**

The Soda Fountain was located under the Swimming Pool and now it is at the same depth. You can enter through one of the windows (at bottom or top) and see the bar with spots for ice cream containers and the soda tapes. On the bottom (actually the port wall) there are hundreds, if not thousands, of Coca Cola bottles (did you know that during the War, Coca Cola promised to supply American troops with a bottle of Coke for five cents, no matter where they were and what it might actually cost to produce and ship to them). Normally done with the pool.

**BEAUTY SHOP (Maximum depth 53m)**

The Beauty Shop is located forward of the [Soda Fountain](#) and the [Swimming Pool](#). You enter via a door on the next level down from the pool. Straight inside this compartment there is a sign which says "Beauty Shop". The Barber Shop is below and you can see the barber's chair sticking (seemingly) out of the wall. Continue on by exiting the ship or go up a level via the lobby (to your left). You used to be able to enter the First Class Smoking Room.

### **HOLD SIX (Maximum depth 55m)**

Hold Six is located behind the Swimming Pool (Hold Five is a refrigerated hold under and above the Pool). It is a small hold which is mostly empty but there are some jeeps on the right, trucks to the rear and at least one medium wheeled artillery gun on the right. On the left, towards the bow, you can see through into the Tourist Lobby and then onto the Tourist Class Dining Room. Due to the depth and distance from the deco stop, you cannot spend too much time in this hold to explore in more detail. Do it with the Swimming Pool or have a look at the Tourist Smoking Lounge which is located immediately to the rear of the hold. There are a number of obvious entrances to this lounge.

### **ENGINE ROOM (Maximum depth 51m)**

One of the best dives is the engine room. After swimming across the hull you enter the engine room through a huge salvage hole. When this salvage work was carried out in 1976 or 1977 by Ian Lockley, he planned to salvage the condensers, electric motors and generators. However, he only removed the hull sections, a lot of minor machinery (mostly pumps) and the starboard condenser. All these items (with the possible exception of the condenser) are piled on the hull near the cut. As you enter the hole and your eyes adjust to the darker space, the huge electric motors dwarf the other divers and provide great interest. Below you as you enter the room there is a round object, the port condenser. After a few minutes you drop below the upper motor and behind you can see an electrical switchboard.

After coming back into the main engine room, there are two hatches on your left. These lead to the engine control room. In here there are a large number of gauges and some controls. The gauges include some you can read, one saying Vaccum and the other Steam Pressure. The Steam Pressure gauge appears to indicate that the ship sank with considerable steam pressure still built up. The controls are levers, with squeeze handles (like old time train track points controls). Note that these are not as shown in Peter Stone's book *The Lady and the President...* There are three telegraphs, two near the gauges and another back towards the hatch. After some time looking at the gauges, you go up a metre or two and then back behind you. This is the false funnel and was originally the exhaust vent for the engine room. You can swim right along this and exit out the rear funnel. As you near the outside, The Lady used to be seen on your right. When you reach the Boat Deck you can go into the crew's cabin area and swim forward to the skylight above the main lobby. Through the lobby you go and then along the main stairwell back inside the wreck to the Upper Deck. An open door, Euart's Door, provides a way out and you return to the hull, now a short swim to the bow and the decompression site. An alternative is to go through a hatch and swim right along a deck of accommodation (Deck A). I found a beautiful glass gravy boat in one of the baths on this section of a dive in 1999. You can also go into the First Class Dining Room and exit out Euart's Door.

### **GALLEY (Maximum depth 55m)**

This is one of the most difficult dives on the wreck and the maximum number of divers taken on a tour is normally three. There are a number of ways to do this dive. One is after entering the water at the amidships mooring, you swim down to the Swimming Pool and enter Hold Six. Two levels in you turn left and go across the Tourist Class Lobby, go to the Tourist Class Dining Room and then along a passage way to the Bakery. This is 55 metres. There are some machines here, most noticeable of which is a dough-mixing machine. After a minute, you go up through the Tourist Galley, past an oven and preparation table, to the scullery. This is about 40 metres. There is a pile of crockery here, plates, bowls, preparation plates etc. Some of them have the name "Whitman of China" on them. Next to here is the Butcher Shop. There is a large meat bandsaw here.

It is now time to drop down through the First Class Galley. There is a long stainless steel preparation table and then some ovens/cooktops. At the bottom the depth is about 52 metres and you are in the main galley scullery. There is more crockery in this area, mostly green and white. There are even some nice mini casserole dishes. From here you enter the First Class Dining Room and swim right across the bottom, gradually coming up to 45 metres.

Twenty one minutes have passed. When you exit the room, you are below Euart's Door and there is more crockery here. The dive still some six minutes from ending when you rise straight up and exit Euart's Door. Eventually you get to the deco stop and after 27 minutes you have 27 minutes of decompression to do.

This is a big dive, only for the very experienced and only if you have no problems with dark and tight places.

You can also enter via the First Class Dining Room. At the end, you go through a door and see the galley in an opposite direction from that described above. Exit is the same way.

#### **DOCTOR'S OFFICE (Maximum depth 45m)**

The Doctor's Office is another of the difficult dives of the *Coolidge*. A maximum of two divers are taken by guides to this location. The Doctor's Office is located on B Deck behind the First Class Dining Room. There are a number of ways of getting there, the most popular (but not necessarily the most direct) is as follows. You enter the water from the middle mooring and swim towards the Swimming Pool. Above the pool there is a small hatch. This is the entrance to Hold Five which is a refrigerated hold. After entering the hatch, swim in a bit and exit one deck down on B Deck. This is in the Tourist Class Lobby. You can also get here by dropping down into the Tourist Class Smoking Room which is straight adjacent to the pool (under it if the ship was upright) and then going through the Lobby. From here you head towards the bow along a passage to the Doctor's Room and Office (as it is called on the ship's plan).

When I did this dive I went in via Euart's Door and the First Class Dining Room and went up a level to the Doctor's Office. It is a tight squeeze to fit in the doorway. Here you will see bottles of all types of medicine, a thermometer and a number of ampoules. These contain liquid and grains. There are bottles of all sizes and colour.

Exit is via one of the other ways I have described as an entry. An excellent dive, one of the best there is on offer.

#### **STERN - For more details see separate page (Maximum depth 70m)**

The most memorable dive on the *Coolidge* is the stern. Dropping down a shot line directly onto the stern of the ship, you come down straight onto the huge fairings around the upper propeller shaft and the end of the shaft itself. Just below this is the rudder and underneath is the port shaft (62 metres). A short swim takes you to the stern itself where the ship looks biggest. At 70 metres (230 plus feet) below the surface of the ocean, the great bulb of the hull is awe-inspiring. Below and just off the stern are the remains of a lifeboat, a lifeless keel is all that remains.

After examining the 5 and 3 inch guns on the stern (the starboard one lies on the sand), you can go into the Hold Seven (the rear hold) which has a number of six wheel drive trucks and artillery guns. These guns, like the one visible in Hold 2, may be one of four 155 mm guns modified in Noumea and loaded onto the *Coolidge* at her last stop. These were to be linked up with bases being built at Santo. See Joseph Ritz's memories on the *Coolidge's last trip page*. There are also thousands of rounds of ammunition lay waiting for an enemy that never came while what at first looks like a large grader lies on the sand. However, this is probably the carriage for a large artillery gun, probably a "Long Tom" which has fallen out of the hold. Past the rear Tourist Smoking Room (this is large and empty but interesting nonetheless) and the pool you swim, back along the entire length of the *Coolidge*. A sensational dive unlike any you will experience anywhere else in the world. Definitely only for the experienced deep diver. The lounge and Hold Seven can be done as separate dives without too much trouble.

## **Appendix 1 The Last Day as recorded by Lt Craig Hosmer**

Lieutenant C. Craig Hosmer, US Navy Reserve, was in charge of the Armed Guard Unit assigned to the SS President Coolidge. Armed Guards were responsible for manning the ship's guns as well as providing security for the ship when in port. Each day on the voyage from when he boarded the ship in San Francisco on 28 September 1942 until 24 November 1942 when he was back in Noumea, New Caledonia after the sinking, he kept a diary. This diary is entitled *Armed Guard Unit Log Book - S.S. President Coolidge*.

The following is a word for word transcript of Lt Hosmer's log entries for Monday 26 October 1942, the day the Coolidge sank. This day's report was written up on the morning of 27 October 1942. Lt Hosmer states that while the times are guesses, they are fairly accurate, although his watch may have been one minute fast. The times underlined are said to be accurate to a minute. Note that I have expanded Lt Hosmer's abbreviations and corrected spelling errors. Where I could not decipher his handwriting or did not understand what was written or thought further clarification was needed, I have commented on this in square brackets.

### **Monday 26 October 1942**

- 0400 Reveille.
- 0420 General quarters condition 1.
- 0500 Passing between two islands. Men being kept at general quarters in this area.
- 0615 1st Division sent to breakfast.
- 0635 2nd Division sent to breakfast.
- 0645 3rd Division sent to breakfast.
- 0720 Espirito Santos sighted.
- 0739 Vessel sighted bearing 345 distance about 10 miles. Guns manned and tracking commenced. Extreme range scale 94.
- 0750 Vessel ascertained to be on approaching course.
- 0759 Vessel challenged.
- 0802 Vessel ascertained to be friendly. Range 6800 [yards] scale 90 tracking continued for practice of xxxx and trainees. Commander of crew on lookout.
- 0848 Small craft sighted in cover of island bearing about 340. Guns trained on. Range extreme scale 49 [?].
- 0858 Vessel signals as from battle group. Signal Officer cannot decipher. Ask meaning.
- 0902 Vessel says means same as merchant ship challenge. Identification made. Vessel appears to be P.C. or converted destroyer. Too distant to tell. Very black smoke coming from her. Cease tracking,.
- 0906 Standing into channel. Several ships visible. Appear to be a cruiser and several auxiliaries and merchant men. Uncock guns. Secure all ready boxes with one dog.
- 0925 Instruct all AG [Armed Guards] and Army on watch at general quarters to stand at ease. One foot from sides of tubs, spaced evenly.
- 0928 Received challenge from cruiser.
- 0930 Explosion rocks this vessel. Instruct all men to remain at battle stations. {I automatically look at rigging} [this last comment is crossed out in log]

- 0930:30 Another explosion - mines! Ship shaken badly. Port list commences. Instruct gun 1 to send man to flood forward magazine if any sign of fire and report. Instruct gun 5 to do same as regards the after magazine. Master maneuvering ship to starboard to beach her. List increasing to port. All stations report no casualties.
- 0935 Bow of vessel strikes coral bottom about 100 yards from shore. Nets have been lowered. Life boats lowering. Abandoning of ship by troops commences.
- 0936 List to port now about 8°. Much oil on water. Most abandoning being done from starboard side. Some oil soaked casualties getting up on Sun Deck from engine room hatches.
- 0938 Secure Army Officers on watch with instructions to go to their abandon ship stations if possible. Secure all Army enlisted men on gun watch with instructions to abandon ship in orderly fashion.
- 0940 Abandon ship continues orderly. No panic. Rescue boats can be seen proceeding up the bay from other ships and shore stations. All troops so far are getting into life boats - then taken close enough to shore to wade in and life boats returning for more. Much oil on water making things very messy. Gun 5 reports soldiers struggling in water. Order man sent for same if necessary. [Seaman Second Class Jack] Rhodes is manning phones with me here on the signal bridge. Communications uninterrupted.
- 0945 List about 10°. It is becoming apparent that the ship will heel over and slide off the coral reef. Gun 5 reports stern going down fairly fast. Send 1st Division to cabins to secure partial pay cards and what valuables they can carry.
- 0950 Send 2nd Division for partial pay cards and valuables.
- 0955 Send 3rd Division for partial pay cards and valuables. I go to my cabin and secure various papers and publications , [the rest of this entry is crossed out] 3 khaki shirts, 3 khaki trousers, shaving gear, valuables etc.
- 1000 Order men out of sky guns [these are the anti-aircraft guns] to starboard side of bridge. Guns 3, 4 and 5 ordered to abandon ship. List 14° to port.
- 1005 Men from sky guns placed in charge of [Coxswain Henry] Guillmette, ordered to abandon ship in orderly fashion and keep together on shore
- 1010 Guns 1 and 2 ordered to abandon ship in orderly fashion. Signal gang except [Seaman First Class Arthur] Trumbur ordered to abandon. Mr [Ensign Doren] Weinstein, Trumbur, Rhodes and myself now left up on the signal bridge. Papers and publications of Mr Weinstein and myself entrusted to [xxxx Second Class Robert] McColl. All Armed Guard and communication personnel instructed to get together on beach and report to Naval Headquarters. I go back along Sun Deck and instruct remaining soldiers etc to abandon ship in orderly fashion. Secure some boxes of ammunition so they won't slide down and explode. Check that all sky doors are closed on starboard side so ammunition won't go out. Obtain Armed Guard insignias from armory. List about 16°. Have been checking inclinometer in chart room.
- 1012 Soldiers have been waiting at bottoms of nets for life boats to take them in where they can wade ashore. List increasing. Many soldiers still on deck as nets are full. I start ordering men at bottoms of nets to jump into water and swim ashore. She can't stay up too much longer. Ask Colonel [Dinsmore] Alter [US Coast Artillery - in charge of the passengers on the ship] on forward deck to give such order there. All soldiers have on life preservers.
- 1016 Am moving aft along the Boat Deck ordering men to jump. Water is oily. Nets about 10 feet or more above water. Many seem afraid to jump. Keep exhorting them to kick men in face to get them off. List about 18.5°.

NOTE THAT THERE IS A GAP OF 29 MINUTES IN DIARY HERE

- 1045 Finish getting idea over. Am at aft end of Boat Deck. Footing very precarious due to the extreme list. Last of soldiers now on nets and starting down. Decks apparently cleared. [Next entry crossed out in diary] Start forward now, hand over hand along [I cannot read next bit] and walking in angles of the scuppers.
- 1047 Reach vicinity of bridge. Mr Weinstein tells me he send [sent] Rhodes over [the] side to save a drowning man - one of the merchant marine. Weinstein, Trumbur, Chief Officer and couple more of deck and engine room officers around. Chief Officer tells us to get over side while we can. We are all balancing ourselves in the scuppers of the Boat Deck. Angle of deck so steep Chief Mate had to be pulled up here. We start down the net. They are quite slippery by now, but list is great enough that we can more or less walk down the side by using hand lines to steady. Nets stop about 15 feet from water. Go down hand over hand along undersides of ship on hand line for rest of way.
- 1049 Reach ship's motor boat. There has been no particular thrill or excitement so far. Everyone is calm and doing the logical things. The Captain [Nelson] is already aboard this boat. Am being helped aboard. Very slippery due to oil. Am in bow of the boat. The anti rolling fins are now out of the water. Someone uses them to step aboard. Mr Weinstein about 3/4 of the way down. Sees helpless Philippino man on metal ladder about 3 or 4 feet from net. Man's arm is apparently broken. Mr Weinstein jumps to the ladder and carries man down to the boat. We help them aboard.
- 1050 Chief mate and all others that started down with me now in the boat. Ship gives a bad lurch to port and is now on her port side
- 1052 Mr Olson, one of the junior mates, appears on the side of the ship from somewhere. There are also visible two men trying to pull someone up out of the passenger doors about 2/3 way aft. Olson runs along sides of ship, reaches them and starts to help. Ship is slowing beginning to slide into deep water.
- 1050:30 Ship gives a great lurch. Begins to slide rapidly backwards into deep water. We are now about 50 feet from her. See Olson and the two others dive into water.
- 1053 Ship disappears beneath the oil and water. Tremendous waves, air bubbles, swirling water and oil. A large self propelled barge was trying to reach those on the side of the ship. It spins around out of control, is drawn to where the men are and apparently runs some of them down. Too much happening at once for me to tell. Man visible on barge desperately clinging to its engine housing.
- 1054 Captain [Nelson] orders boat to take us to Navy Headquarters up the Bay. We place most of survivors in this boat off on a raft to make their way ashore. There are now in the boat: the Captain, Chief and First Mates, Chief, First and Second Assistant Engineers and an injured oil covered seaman, Mr Weinstein, Rhodes, Trumbur and myself. Plus numerous sextants, and chronometers and some of Captain's papers. Many boats and rafts about us. Much confusion.
- 1058 Boat rapidly filling with water. We signal Navy motor launch, transfer Rhodes, Trumbur, Second Assistant Engineer and Chief Mate. Rhodes instructed to get men together and report to Navy Headquarters. Motor boat continues on course. Injured man seems to be suffering.
- 1105 Condition of boat becomes more severe. Signal an invasion boat and transfer all instruments. All but First Mate and First Engineer transfer to this boat. Ship's motor boat placed in tow and continue on course.
- 1113 Come alongside USS Chester and disembark injured man.

- 1125 Arrive on shore at office of Cargo officer. Disembark. Nobody here seems anxious to do anything for us. Provide water upon being asked. I request transportation to search for the men.
- 1155 Transportation provided. We are taken as far as the medical center.
- 1230 Find two men of Communications Unit and [Seaman First Class Rufus] Warner of Armed Guard unit here at center. All uninjured. Hear that Rhodes has most of our men up the beach somewhere. Receive instructions to wait here for Captain of this base. Hundreds of oil covered naked survivors here. Kerosene broken out. They are cleaning up. Trucks taking them to River for further washing. Injured being given medical attention.
- 1330 Captain of base hasn't shown up so begin search for the men. Mr Weinstein and I obtain various rides up and down the road along the beach. Many false alarms since quite a few of the soldier survivors have been given sailors' uniforms to replace their oil soaked clothing. No trace of any more of my men. Continue search all afternoon.
- 1400 Report to Port Director. Instructed to round up my men and make report of muster.
- 1700 Meet up with Master [I think this is what it says - Captain Nelson] and some of ship's officers. Chow down [eat dinner] with them at CB [Construction Battalion] camp. Hear that my men and remainder of Communications unit are at 76th Coast Artillery Headquarters Camp.
- 1730 Arrive at 76th Coast Artillery Headquarters. Men are here.
- 1735 Muster men. Absentee; Wilson, Robert William, S 1/C [Seaman First Class] Armed Guard, USNR. He has been seen off the ship, however, so am sure that he is safe. Thank God all the boys are ok. Arrange for chow for the men at one of the kitchens here at this unit (a new outfit).
- 1745 Phone receiving ship and arrange for me to bunk down.
- 1800 Obtain two Army trucks to transport men to the receiving ship.
- 1830 Arrive at receiving ship. They are very nice to us but have very little. A few tents in a coconut grove which are already filled. They put up tarpaulins to sleep under. Get a few blankets and about 10 cots. Ensign Sickerman, the torpedo officer here, arranges cots and blankets in his tent from Mr Weinstein and myself. There is also another officer here - a survivor from a torpedoed destroyer. He was the engineering officer but managed to navigate a diesel launch here from the Solomons area with some of his men. Mr Weinstein and myself are all filthy, oil stained and tired. [The next entry is crossed out in diary] No mirrors but he tells me I am as dirty as the rest.
- 1845 Muster. Absentee; Wilson. Armed Guard and Communications units declared a unified command temporarily stationed at Advanced Base Button. Mr Weinstein appointed Executive Officer.
- 1930 Bunked down. No one takes long to get to sleep tonight.
- This has been quite a day. The men are all cheerful and morale is good despite the losses they have all suffered. Little more than the clothes we wear and partial pay cards were saved in most cases. They were marvelously calm when the mines exploded. Stuck right to their posts. Some thought it was a torpedoing and broke out ammunition, cocked guns etc
- This island is Espirito Santo of the New Hebrides Group. It is medium sized and French owned. All the area that we have seen has been planted with coconuts. Trees evenly planted about 25 feet apart, grass in between. Coconuts now ripe and falling. You have to stay away from the trunks else you will be hit. Weather

quite warm. Roads very dusty. All water bad except that distilled for drinking purposes. .

## Appendix 2 The Heros

The following awards for bravery were issued in relation to the sinking of the SS *President Coolidge*. These details came from US Maritime Marine Web Site (<http://www.usmm.org/>).

### Patrick Carl Olson

The President of the United States takes Pleasure in Presenting the Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal to Patrick Carl Olson, Chief Mate on SS *President Coolidge* 10/26/42

For heroism beyond the line of duty.

SS *President Coolidge* was landing army personnel when she hit two mines in quick succession. Listing heavily and sinking rapidly, she was run aground on a reef to gain time to debark the troops. Olson was making a final search for stragglers or injured when the ship rolled over port side. Hauling himself up the slanting deck he reached the starboard side which was now nearly horizontal and only a few feet out of water, when he heard cries for help coming from deep within the hull [note: these were from Elwood Euart]. By this time the ship, pounded by the surf, was slowly sliding, stern first, off into deep water, but Olson, completely disregarding his own safety, crawled to an open side port from whence the cries came.

An army officer [Elwood Euart] had been trapped by the rising water in the ship's hull, and the critical angle of the smooth deck made unaided escape impossible. Olson made several attempts to lower a rope ladder only to have it blown away from the outstretched hands of the drowning man by the blast of escaping air forced out of the ship by the rapidly rising water. Quantities of broken glass and other debris, blown through the vent with great velocity, cut into Olson's face and arms, but he persisted in his heroic rescue attempt until the ship suddenly slipped to the bottom sucking Olson down with her. When the ship struck bottom and the vacuum of her plunge was broken, a violent discharge of imprisoned air shot Olson to the surface where he was soon picked up by a rescue boat.

Though unsuccessful in his heroic attempt, his magnificent courage, which sustained him literally into the depths of death, was in keeping with the finest traditions of the United States Merchant Marine.

For the President  
Admiral Emory Scott Land

### John L. Paton

The President of the United States takes Pleasure in Presenting the Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal to John L. Paton, First Engineer on SS *President Coolidge* 10/26/42

For heroism above and beyond the line of duty.

When his ship hit two mines, it immediately listed heavily. All lights below decks were blown out, and the wrecked engine room began to fill. A fireman, crippled by the explosion and severely burned, was trapped in the fireroom. The only possible means for his rescue was a fireroom ventilator to the boat deck, but its smooth, slippery walls made it impossible for him, in his crippled condition, to effect his own escape. With the ship then sinking rapidly, Paton and the Chief Engineer entered the ventilator outlet on the boat deck, and lowered themselves into the darkness to the fireroom deckplates. Disregarding the increasing danger of their own position, the rescuers slowly worked their arduous way up the slippery ventilator carrying the injured man with them.

Engineer Paton's extraordinary courage in rescuing a shipmate under extremely dangerous conditions will be an enduring inspiration to seamen of the United States Merchant Marine everywhere.

For the President  
Admiral Emory Scott Land

### **Howard Quinn**

The President of the United States takes Pleasure in Presenting the Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal to Howard Quinn, Chief Engineer on SS *President Coolidge* 10/26/42

For heroism beyond the line of duty.

When his ship hit two mines, it immediately listed heavily and all lights below decks were blown out--and the engine room began to fill rapidly. A fireman, severely burned and crippled by the double explosion had been trapped in the fireroom and was in imminent danger of drowning. The only possible way to reach him was through a ventilator to the boat deck, but the vessel's extreme list and the smooth and slippery walls of the ventilator made even this means of rescue well-nigh impossible. Though the ship was sinking rapidly, Chief Engineer Quinn and his First Assistant, with complete disregard for the increasing danger to their own position and without the aid of other than their own hands lowered themselves down the ventilator into the darkness to the fireroom floor plates. Under tremendous physical exertion the rescuers slowly worked their hazardous way up the slippery ventilator carrying the injured man with them.

Chief Engineer Quinn's extraordinary courage in rescuing a shipmate under extremely dangerous conditions will be an enduring inspiration to seamen of the United States Merchant Marine everywhere.

For the President  
Admiral Emory Scott Land

### Appendix 3 Some Memories

The following are some memories of the SS *President Coolidge* and her sinking. These have mostly been sent to me by relatives of the men concerned but the last one I found in a copy of an old magazine. I hope you find them as interesting as I did. My comments and clarifications are in square brackets.

#### **Roy H. Dobbins - Ship's Carpenter**

Roy was in the US Merchant Marine and had been on the *Coolidge* for more than a year when the ship sank. The following is an edited version of a letter his daughter, Julie Dobbins, wrote in a letter she sent in January, 1999 to a fellow in the US Army (Graham Fuschak) who was doing some research on the US Army personnel on the trip. Roy H. Dobbins died February 22, 1999.:

Several times I sat with Dad and asked him questions about what the *Coolidge* was like and why he so much enjoyed the ship. From the conversations with him I was able to gather these notes and send them to you in this letter. I don't know if what he said will be of any help, but you are more than welcome to know how he enjoyed being on board the *Coolidge* and how the evacuation affected him upon the clash with the mines. Dad's copy of *The Lady and the President* by Peter Stone has excellent pictures and from a diagram included in the book he told me and showed me that he was in his quarters (a room with 9 bunks) on "C" deck, starboard side, bow end when it hit the mine. Dad was the ship's carpenter on this trip. He had been in the U.S. Merchant Marines since 1939, and had sailed on it [the *Coolidge*] prior to it being modified for carrying troops, in all he sailed on the *Coolidge* for at least 13 months. He found the *Coolidge* to be a beautiful ship. He commented that this ship burned a barrel of oil per minute for fuel. She sailed quite powerfully. At the time of the explosion he had just retired from his shift (he couldn't remember the exact time of the day). When the Captain blasted the siren he gathered up only the clothes on his back AND his Seamen's wallet. He recalls the escape from the ship a close one. The crew had had lifeboat drills, so he went to his assigned one. He also recalls that whoever the s-o-b was who was ringing the alarm bells was "ringing the hell out of the bells."

Dad stated that he was helmsman in the lifeboat of more than 25 Merchant Marines and U.S. Army soldiers. His lifeboat had reached land when the *Coolidge* sank. He remembers being very sad- as though he had lost a good friend. His admiration for the Captain was maintained as he continued to sail with him on later voyages. Dad continues to defend the innocence of Captain Henry Nelson regarding his situation with the loss of the *Coolidge*.

After the sinking, Dad returned to the United States (San Francisco), but as a passenger this time. The clothes he was wearing were some he had had to buy from the Red Cross.

I remember his being mesmerized in 1988 while watching the broadcast of the National Geographic Explorer program [on the *Coolidge*]. It had been some 46 years since he had seen the inside of what was once a showplace of a ship.

My parents moved back to Arkansas in 1949 and Dad went to work for the Cotton Belt Railroad (St. Louis Southwestern RR). Dad had pictures of most all the ships on which he sailed hanging on the wall of their bedroom. But there was this one ship's picture which was much larger and in color. I always knew it was special. It was a picture of a ship painted on silk, in a frame that measured at least 2 feet wide. We were always allowed to pull up a chair to climb on and look carefully at the pretty painting. As I got older I realized that this was the *Coolidge*, the ship that Dad always spoke about when he told his friends of the sinking. This was truly his

favorite ship. And you know something, he remembered each year on the anniversary of its' sinking and would reflect on what a loss. Even now, at age 84 his eyes brighten and he shakes his head yes emphatically when I ask him if he was scared when they had to leave the ship. His speech is affected by a stroke now, but he still can say, "the *Coolidge* was a damn good ship."

I also have a copy of the San Francisco Chronicle from December 4, 1942 in which Dad is quoted. The article has a photo of five of the crew at the Sailors Union of the Pacific office signing up for another ship after the *Coolidge* sank.

### **Richard Brown Schneider - US Army, 43rd Infantry Division**

I have been contacted by Craig Schneider whose father, Richard Brown Schneider (now 85 years old - 1998), was in the US Army, 43rd Infantry Division, 172nd Infantry Regiment, Company H, heavy weapons. He served from 1942 to 1945 and was on the *President Coolidge* on her last voyage. At the time of the sinking he was then about 29 years old. The following is a word for word account of his memories of the trip:

I remember the *Coolidge* as being a beautiful ship. We left California and spent 17 days on the ocean before the sinking. Most of the time was spent either in the mess hall or playing cards and talking to the other men. Many of the men in the hold were very seasick and there was a terrible stench there. I was lucky enough to have a room with a bunk. When we crossed the international dateline many of the men were dunked in the swimming pool. There were no storms and the ship cruised along on a zigzag course.

On the day of the sinking I was in my bunk. When the ship hit the mine I fell from the top bunk onto the floor. An alert was given and we were told that the ship was not going to sink. We were instructed to stay in our quarters. Then the ship hit another mine. This time an alert went out that the ship was going to sink and we were instructed to leave. I was on the port side. I made my way to the lobby and remember sitting in a chair. (I also remember seeing a painting of the lady in the photo on your web site [comment - this is, of course, the Lady. Whether Mr Schneider saw the actual figurine or a painting of it I do not know]). The ship pitched and my chair slid to the other side of the lobby. I made my way to the deck and jumped from the deck to a life boat with three men already on board. We started towards shore and watched the ship go down. I could see the men on the starboard side trying to get off of the ship. I saw one man attempting to be pulled out of a porthole, but he couldn't make it [perhaps this was Captain Euart – see Sinking Chapter- but he was trying to get out of a door, not a port hole - it could be an error of memory or perhaps the distance from the ship. It tends to confirm other stories related above about Captain Euart]. The water looked oily and I think there were some flames [I do not think this is correct as there is no other record of a fire and the photos do not show it]. The ship righted itself up and went down rear end first. It was an amazing sight, I wasn't far from the sinking ship. I could see the water whirling in a big circle as it went down. I lost all of my equipment and personal belongings, escaping with only the clothes on my back. This is about all I can remember.

Max Evans Senior - radio repair technician

Another serviceman who was on the *Coolidge* on her last voyage was Max Evans Senior. He told me via his son (Max Evans Junior) about that trip and the following is a word for word recording as well as my comments in square brackets.

As a then 21 year old, I originally left the US in 1942 onboard a ship called the *Mooremack Sea*. I had been trained as a radio repair technician and part time aerial gunner on B-17s. This ship was enroute to Guadal Canal [Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands] when a bent propeller shaft resulted in severe vibrations and a top

speed of only 7 knots. We diverted to Figi [Fiji] and that is where I, along with about 500 others [more likely about 250], were transferred to the *Coolidge*.

The crew assigned me a bunk which was "forward" on the ship, about two decks down. There were lots of bunk beds and there was a bathroom just forward of that. This bathroom was just aft of the crew quarters right behind the "foxel" ... [I think he means forecastle or fo'scle - Comment: this sounds like the stewards' quarters which were on C Deck above the cargo space of Hold One. The stewards' washroom was immediately in front of the two large rooms and they can be seen as you dive the wreck from this hold as you exit on your right hand side]. I ate in a galley about mid-ship, one deck down [this is the First Class Dining Saloon on C Deck]. I remember there being two or three galleys though [yes, there are the Tourist Class Dining Room on the same deck and the Third Class Dining Saloon right at the stern].

On that fateful day of the sinking, I was on deck and heard people yelling, "Torpedo .... torpedo .... torpedo!" The next thing I knew was that there was an ear splitting explosion that lifted the front of the ship up. Then when it settled back down into the water, there was yet another explosion [this tallies with the two mines but presumably the torpedo shout was either faulty memory - someone singing mines, mines - or a mistake by whoever was shouting out]. You mentioned in your writings [Michael McFadyen's Web Page on *Coolidge*] about the ship's captain running aground. This could be true but I have no knowledge of that ... "it was real hectic about that time." We were led to believe that the ship's captain had panicked and accidentally hit the mines. Like I said before, troops began stripping there [sic] combat gear preparing to abandon ship. Once I was on shore, some US Navy troops gave me two sets of clothing and shoes. One to wear while washing the other. A full issue of clothing came about one month later.

### **Frank Cameron - Sailor (?)**

Frank Cameron was on one of about 15 ships anchored in Segond Channel. He reports in an article published in *Last Minutes of the President Coolidge* by Frank Cameron, *MAST* magazine, May 1946, pages 18-20 that the *Coolidge* hit the beach at 0945. Between 1015 and 1030 the list increased alarmingly and by 1030 it was obvious to him that the ship was doomed. The following is a word for word description of the final moments of the sinking:

A huge geyser appeared by her stern bubbling furiously and she seemed to surround herself with a thin film of smoke as if to curtain the final shame of her death throes. More geysers appeared along her side. Her stacks at last touched the water and then with a tragic gracefulness, her bow rose as her stern settled more deeply and she slid off the coral ledge and disappeared from sight. It was 1045.

## **Appendix 4 Statement of the Accused: Henry Nelson**

*Captain of the SS President Coolidge*

The sea has been my life for over 44 years. I received my unlimited master's license in 1905. Since that time I have been master of many vessels sailing in all parts of the world -- since 1920 the *President Wilson* for 3 years, the *President Pierce* for 13 years, the *President Cleveland* for 1 year, and the *President Coolidge* for 3 years. I have sailed under various instructions from both private and governmental agencies. In all that time I have neither disregarded nor violated any instructions received unless they would have imperiled the safety of my vessel. I am at present the senior master and Commodore of the APL. I have been master of the S.S. *President Coolidge* since early 1940, a period of over 2 1/2 years. My affection for that vessel was as great as that a man may have for an inanimate object. My patriotism and love of country has never been questioned. I am not a young man, having reached the age of retirement even for Naval Officers. It was because of my feeling that my country needed me in its time of crises that I continued at sea rather than to seek retirement to enjoy with my family the few remaining years of my life.

I did not cause the loss of the S.S. *President Coolidge*. I received no special instructions for entrance to Segond Channel. I directed my ship to that channel in the safest manner possible with due consideration for the information that I had regarding it. With the information I had, it would have been poor seamanship to have directed my ship through the narrow Bocayco passage [the passage between Bocayco - now Bokissa - Island and Tutuba Island] when a wider and less navigationally hazardous entrance was available. For then, it would have been folly on my part under these circumstances to have delayed my arrival at Buttons by taking the longer Bocayco passage route and thus longer expose my ship to open water and submarine attacks.

I have been subjected to this trial by Military Commission at a foreign place and have been without the advice and comfort of my friends and family during this period. I have not been allowed to communicate with my company in order to receive advice, instruction, or aid. It has been necessary for me to entrust my defense of the charge before the Military Commission to those who were not previously well known to me either personally or by reputation.

I re-affirm my innocence of the charge and specifications. My whole life, career, and activities have been foreign to such.

Henry Nelson, Master"

## Appendix 5 Statements by Survivors

### Summary of Statements by Survivors of the S.S. *President Coolidge* dated January 19, 1943:

- 1 The *PRESIDENT COOLIDGE* was sunk by the mines in a mine field, at 0035 ship's time, on October 26, 1942, while the vessel was proceeding from Noumea to the harbor at Luganville Bay, Santos Island, with 5050 U.S. troops aboard. The vessel was beached upon a ledge, several hundred yards from the beach, by the Master; listed over on her port side, gradually filled, slipped entirely off the reef and sank, at 10.45 ship's time. It is stated her bow was down in 70' of water and her stern in 270'.
- 2 The vessel, employed in transporting troops, was reported under orders to proceed to the "Buttons", as the waters of Luganville Bay are known, where she was to meet a small boat with a pilot outside the mine field. The location of the mine field was refused the Master. The vessel was reported by the 2nd Officer, who was on dock, to be making 15 knots but others believe that speed excessive. Weather fair and clear; sea smooth; wind not stated; visibility good; daylight. Ships in vicinity in the harbor.
- 3 The vessel approached Santos Island at about 095 ship's time, stopped one half hour to talk to a destroyer, anchored at the spot marked "X" on Charter No. 2833. The destroyer instructed the Master to proceed into Luganville Bay to the east and around Tutuba Island. The vessel then proceeded, evidently following the destroyer's instructions, without waiting for a pilot and had reached the position marked No. 1 on the Charter (enlarged Pekoa Segond Channel) when the first explosion occurred. The 2nd Officer stated the vessel did not wait for a pilot as it was not healthy outside. The first explosion, at 0935 ship's time, was amidships port side at the after fireroom, as the water rushed into that compartment first according to the men on watch. One half minute after the first explosion, there was a second explosion on the starboard side of the engine room. These explosions were not on the sides of the vessel, but on her double bottoms. Engines were at standby at the first explosion, but it is uncertain how long they had been at that point. The vessel had enough headway to permit the Master to turn her to the beach 300-400 yards away. In three minutes the water had entered the fireroom and had reached the operating controls. The Master immediately ordered right rudder and headed for shore. The vessel ran the distance to shallow water, pushed herself upon a ledge, several hundred yards from the beach and sank on one hour. As vessel now lies, she is completely out of sight upon coral reefs that drop off very fast.
- 4 Almost immediately, the Master gave orders to abandon ship. Life rafts and lifeboats were used; Navy vessels, of which there were a number in the harbor, gave assistance. Some of the men swam the short distance to shore. It is reported one in the crew and four among the troops were lost. The crew of vessel was ashore for 6 or 7 days, and then taken aboard the SS *ISLAND MAIL* and SS *CAPE FAIRWEATHER*. 26 of the crew "hitch hiked" on Army planes from Santos Island to Noumea, where they boarded the SS *LURLINE*, sailed November 6, 1942, and later arrived in San Francisco. Most of the cargo was aboard when the vessel sank; a small amount of the cargo only having been discharged at Noumea.
- 5 The Master; Third Mate, who was on watch; and the members of the Purser's Department, went to Noumea, where a hearing was to be held.
- 6 The Master of the SS *JOSEPH STANTON* (U.S.) in Espiritos Santos, on October 25, 1942, reports that at about midnight all hands were called to battle station and firing was heard in the distance. It was later ascertained this firing came

from a Japanese submarine shelling the airport. When the *PRESIDENT COOLIDGE* entered Espiritos Santos the next day, the Master of the *JOSEPH STANTON* stated the *PRESIDENT COOLIDGE* was ordered to stop by the patrol vessel outside in order to pick up a pilot, but did not do so and steamed toward the wrong channel entrance at about 15 knots in a northerly direction, instead of a westerly direction which she should have followed. The signal tower operator at the Port Director's Office, is reported to have ordered the vessel to stop and go full speed astern in order to avoid the mines. But this order was likewise ignored. It is also stated that while the Navy tried its best to avert the accident, the commands were heeded too late. Because the cargo and side ports were open, a breach of regulations, the ship sank much faster than had they been closed.

LT. STEPHINS, USNR.

## Appendix 6 Letter from Henry Nelson

The following is a word-for-word copy of a letter from Henry Nelson, Master, *SS President Coolidge* to Captain Roberts, Commanding Officer, Naval Forces Base "Button" (Santo) sent on 28 October 1942 regarding the Loss of *SS President Coolidge*.

"Dear Sir

- 1 Sailing from White Poppy for Button on October 24th, we arrived at a point called "Hypo" off the island outside of the port of Espiritu Santos and not having had any instructions as to any mines or other dangers to this port, proceeded on a course as I thought to the harbor of Button.
- 2 We contacted two destroyers prior to the entry where the ship struck the two mines. No information was given to us and no challenge was made by either of the two ships, and the first intimation was from a signal station further in the harbor telling me to stop, that we were approaching danger. I in turn stopped the engines and backed the engines, but with the speed that we were carrying, we still went too far and we struck two mines. I immediately, with the speed we had left, headed the ship for the beach, and ordered "Abandon Ship", which was done and completed in forty-five minutes of 5,000 personnel for which there is only a loss of one crew member.
- 3 Sailing from White Poppy, no one mentioned to me, no one informed me, that there was a mine field at Espiritu Santos. Had there been some knowledge of mines, I never would have approached anywhere within miles of the port. There was no guard boat anywhere visible.

Yours respectfully,

Henry Nelson  
Master, *SS President Coolidge*"

## **Appendix 7 Military Commission Closing Statement**

Readings from the Commission against Captain Henry Nelson, Master of the *President Coolidge*:

### **Closing Statement by Henry Nelson's Counsel**

#### **Fatal Failure of Proof**

The Prosecution has shown no jurisdiction over the accused under NCB 333:

NCB 333 ".....The officers, members of crews, and passengers on board merchant ships of the United States, although not in the naval service of the United States, are, under the laws of the United States, the decisions of the courts, and by the very necessities of the case, subject to military control while in the actual theatre of war."

The prosecution has entered no evidence that *Espiritu Santo*, New Hebrides was on October 26, 1942, an "actual theatre of war". Such fact is not one of judicial notice. See NCB 309. Nor, even if it were, has the prosecution requested that such notice be taken as required by NCB 309.

The judge advocate has stated that matters of geographical location are within the judicial notice of the court. But this matter of actual theatre of war is not a geographical factor. You cannot take judicial notice of the activities conducted in that area by human beings. But they have made it an actual theatre of war, the judge advocate will say, there are mines there and the captain of the *Coolidge* admits there was the possibility of enemy submarines there. The gentlemen of the commission will admit that there are mines in San Francisco, and there is a possibility of enemy submarines and there are mines in all the harbors of Australia, and there are submarines there. Is that going to be the indicia for actual theatre of war. Further what is an actual theatre of war? To my mind that phrase implies an area where there is combat. There was no combat in *Espiritu Santo* on that date.

## **VIII**

It is maintained that the loss of the *President Coolidge* was due:

1. To the inefficiency of the Port Director's Office at Noumea, in that, Captain Nelson was not given directions for safely approaching Segond Channel and was not informed that these waters were mined and in the haphazard way that the enclosures were attached to the basic routing instructions and delivered to the *President Coolidge*,
2. and to the inefficiency of an inexperienced commanding officer of a navy patrol and pilot boat, and
3. to the inefficiency of Navy signalmen.

It is believed and it has been demonstrated that Captain Nelson should be acquitted of the charge and specification. Thank you Gentlemen.

Chester C. Hosmer  
Lieutenant (JG) USNR

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Michael McFadyen is an extremely keen (some would say obsessed) Sydney scuba diver. He has dived in most South Pacific countries, mostly on shipwrecks. Countries where he has dived on wrecks include Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, the Solomon Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (Chuuk Lagoon) and the Philippines. In Australia he has dived in New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory. As you could guess, his interests include shipwrecks but he also enjoys diving reefs, especially off Sydney and New South Wales. As of 16 September 2003 he has almost than 1,900 dives.

As well as been a keen diver, Michael has had more than 300 articles published. These have appeared in *Sportdiving*, *DIVE Log Australasia*, *DIVE Log New Zealand* and *Scuba Diver*. His web site is one of Australia's most popular dive related web sites and attracts tens of thousands of hits a year. He regularly presents talks for dive clubs and other similar organisations.

Michael was the President of St George Scuba Club from 1998 to 2002 and is now a life member. He was the inaugural President of the Scuba Clubs' Association of New South Wales (SCAN).

This book is the product of Michael's research into the Sydney and New South Wales shipwrecks he has dived on over the years.

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