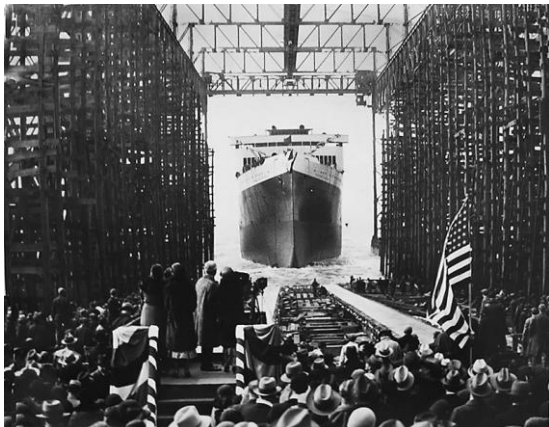


History of the SS President Coolidge.

The President Coolidge commenced construction on the 21 April 1930 and she was completed 10 months later at a cost of \$7,050,000 US dollars by the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company. She was 'christened' by Mrs Grace Coolidge with a bottle of water from the river that ran through the farm that had belonged to her husband, the former US president. The water was used because America was in the grips of prohibition, where the production, transportation and sale of all alcohol was illegal in the United States of America.



The President Coolidge was powered by a steam-electric machinery produced by Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company. This consisted of twelve high pressure steam boilers turning electricity producing turbines that were then powering two electric motors on the drive shafts to turn the propellers. This was a very effective propulsion system that allowed the SS President Coolidge to a service speed of just over 21 knots.



The Coolidge was fitted out with all of the fineries of the time and could accommodate 988 passengers in first class, second class and third class and her crew numbered 385. Dining on the President Coolidge was well planned with 3 dining rooms. The First class dining saloon seated 272 people, there was a special dining room which also seated 120, and a private dining room for 18 people. The first class state rooms were air-conditioned to maintain a constant temperature and there was a theatre for 'sound pictures' even though the first 'talking movie' was only released 2 years earlier. Two swimming pools adorned the decks, one of which also had its own sand beach for those who wished to sunbathe. With the privileged class of passengers that travelled on her, the Coolidge was also equipped with a gymnasium, soda fountain, barber shop, children's play area, beauty salon, stock exchange, shopping arcade, and a play deck for golf, tennis, handball, squash and quoits. This was in every way a floating city not just an ocean liner.

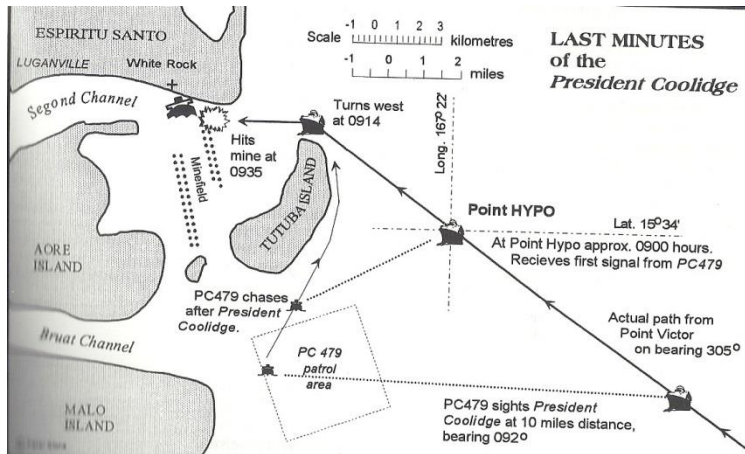
The President Coolidge was based in San Francisco and was charged with the cross Pacific route - she travelled to East Asia via Honolulu. On one of these crossings in 1937, while navigating San Francisco Bay in thick fog, the Coolidge collided with an Oil Tanker, causing damage to her bow section which took 19 days to repair before she could sail again for Japan.



In November 1940 as things heated up between the England and Japan, the Coolidge was called upon to evacuate American citizens from Hong Kong, and then in early 1941 she made the trip from South East Asia with over 1000 passengers, which was the largest number of passengers to be carried across the Pacific on a regular service by a civilian vessel. On the 2 June 1941 the President Coolidge was put into service for the American Army as a transport ship for the South Pacific. When war was finally declared between the US and Japan, the Coolidge was transformed into a troop carrier. She was stripped of whatever fineries could be removed and what could not was boarded up and painted over. Within two months the Coolidge had morphed from a Luxury Ocean Liner into a military troop carrier, with grey paint and defensive guns mounted on the deck. The American Government had had the plans altered during the building process to include mounts so that the guns and cannons could be easily mounted without too much of a problem. This shows the forethought of the US government even 10+ years before they entered the war, to prepare civilian ships for the work of war. The Coolidge remained a civilian vessel even though it was seconded to the US government, and kept her officers and many of her crew as they already knew the vessel so well.

Early 1942 saw the Coolidge fully converted and capable of carrying 5000 troops where she had previously carried less than 1000 passengers. The Grand Ball room was filled with bunks, other rooms were filled with rows of toilets and as much of the grandeur as possible was removed to make way for the extra people. On the 12th January 1942 the SS President Coolidge 'went to war' on her first official voyage as a troop carrier. She carried a full complement of troops, equipment and supplies to the South Pacific region. During this voyage she visited Melbourne and Wellington in New Zealand, and was back in San Francisco on the 7th of March. A quick turn-around was planned and she left again for Melbourne on the 19th March, on her way she stopped in at Bora Bora and returned on the 8th May. 26th May saw her leaving for Suva in Fiji and Auckland in New Zealand and home again on 29th August. On the 6th October 1942 the SS President Coolidge sailed from San Francisco on what was to be her final voyage.

The Coolidge was on orders to sail to Noumea in the French territory of New Caledonia, where she would receive her orders for the rest of her voyage. She arrived in Noumea on the 20th October and had a 4 day layover before receiving orders to sail to the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) and wait at a point on the chart designated as 'Hypo'. The orders seemed to be unclear what to do when they arrived at this point, but Captain Henry Nelson was to later make a decision that would seal the fate of the ship.



The voyage had been uneventful to this point, but Captain Nelson had been left with an uneasy feeling about his orders to wait at point 'Hypo' for further orders, as he had heard of Japanese submarines operating in the area. Upon careful studying of the charts it was thought that the sand banks around Tutuba Island would be a perfect place for a Japanese submarine to

lie in wait for a supply vessel like the SS President Coolidge to come along and this made both Captain and Officers very uneasy. In fact, just a few days earlier a submarine had done just that and had surfaced and shelled the island, but Captain Nelson was not aware of this because of the poor communications between the military and civilian vessels.

THE DECISION THAT CHANGED IT ALL

Early on the morning of 26th October 1942 Captain Henry Nelson and his First Officer Kilton Davis had decided after careful consideration that if there was no pilot vessel waiting for them, or more orders received at point 'Hypo', that the Coolidge would enter the Segond Channel by the most direct route. As the Coolidge approached point 'Hypo', extra lookouts were posted to keep a lookout for any other contacts. At 07:30 a Destroyer was sighted, and through the communication of coded flash transitions it was identified as DD-407 (USS Sterett), on anti-submarine patrol around the eastern entrance to the Segond Channel. This only added to the uneasiness of Captain Nelson. Upon further communication the destroyer was asked if it had orders to meet with and escort the Coolidge into the harbour. The reply came as a very quick and short response, 'negative'.



The presence of a destroyer in the area on submarine sweeping duties acted as a trigger to identify the very real threat to the safety of the Coolidge, its crew, cargo and passengers. This was the last piece of information that Captain Nelson required to make his decision to enter the Segond Channel un-escorted. There were three deep water entrances to the channel to choose from, but the decision was made to continue on a direct course to the largest, which was straight ahead of the Coolidge.

As the Coolidge approached closer to the chosen entrance to Segond Channel, a patrol boat, Patrol Boat PC479, which was patrolling the south-eastern entrance, spotted her. However this PC479 had

only just been sent as a relief for *USS Gamble*, who was responsible for patrolling the entrance and escorting vessels into the safe harbour. *USS Gamble* had been granted leave from its post to return to the wharf for re-fuelling. PC479 was tasked with intercepting the *Coolidge* and safely guiding her through the mines that had been laid across the entrances to the channel, however as she was trying to flash her orders to the *Coolidge*, who was doing 17 knots, the Island of Tutuba was in the way and the two vessels lost sight of each other. At 09:19 the *Coolidge* entered the Second Channel. Captain Nelson and First Officer Davis made their way to the starboard bridge wing where they had an unobstructed view of the harbour. Suddenly there was a message flashed from one of the shore stations near Luganville, which was acknowledged. The following message was flashed in morse code: S-T-O-P. The signalman and his assistant did not wait for the rest of the message to be received and hurried to alert the bridge 'Stop..stop..stop..' As the telegraph on the bridge rang with the order to the engine room 'STOP ENGINES – FULL ASTERN' the signalman took down the rest of the message 'STOP YOU ARE STANDING INTO MINES'. But it was too late... The sound of an explosion was heard and a shudder through the hull of the ship was felt. 09:35 even though the engines were engaged in astern propulsion, the *Coolidge*, travelling at 17.5 knots, still retained forward movement and less than 30 seconds later a second explosion was experienced in the mid-ship area of the hull. At this point Captain Nelson showed his years of knowledge and ordered the watertight doors closed and commanded the Helmsman to turn hard to starboard and beach the ship. At 09:38 the SS *President Coolidge* was stuck fast on the coral ledge just 50 meters from shore.



Captain Nelson gave the Abandon Ship order and ordered all personal belongings to be left behind. He believed that the ship was securely aground on the reef and that the salvage operations would happen in the next few days. The ship would then be sailed in to port, tied up alongside and all belongings and cargo could be unloaded safely at that time. The disembarking of the men went very

smoothly with little if any panic. As the Coolidge was so close to land and the bow was in shallow water it was easy for the men to be unloaded from life boats and walk to the beach thus freeing up the boats allowing them to rescue more men. All but 2 men survived. Robert Reid, a fireman in the boiler room, was killed in one of the mine blasts. Field Artillery Captain Elwood J Euart was also killed. He re-entered the ship as it was rolling further to the port to search for men that had become trapped. He tied a rope around himself and assisted all of men out, but when it came time for him to climb out he was too exhausted and the climb was too great for him. At 10:52 the SS President Coolidge slipped beneath the sea and settled on the sea floor where it remains today.



Because of the quick thinking of Captain Nelson and the manner in which the men conducted themselves during the disembarking of the sinking ship, 5340 lives were saved.