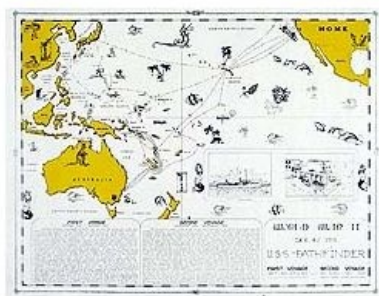


AN INCIDENT AT GUADALCANAL

Pathfinder



In the Second World War, the Pacific was poorly charted, and the Navy would require the services of a cadre of hydrographers to rapidly survey areas of tactical and strategic interest. Officers of the US Coast and Geodetic Survey provided the nucleus of that cadre and served from the Solomon Islands north to the Aleutian Islands. They served on Coast and Geodetic Survey Ships, including the brand new *Pathfinder* and even the USS *Rocky Mount*- vice admiral Richmond Kelly Turner's amphibious command ship. Of the survey ships, the most illustrious of all was the *Pathfinder*, of which it was said, "The road to Tokyo was paved with *Pathfinder* charts."

The men who served on these ships literally fought the war with sextants, shooting thousands of horizontal angles for three-point fixes while operating fathometers or heaving the lead. Anchorages were wire-dragged, invasion beaches surveyed before the US Marines or Army landed, tide information determined and provided to amphibious planners, tactical operating areas delineated, passages blasted through coral reefs, and charts printed and distributed to fleet units either in anticipation of amphibious operations or to

expedite the establishment of supply and refitting bases. The work was not without its hazards. This account recalls an incident in the life of this survey ship.

Pathfinder

The *Pathfinder* was christened in 1942 by Eleanor Roosevelt Boettiger, the then 14-year-old granddaughter of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The Navy immediately took charge of the ship, designated her AGS-1, fitted her out with anti-aircraft guns, depth charges, a printing press and a Navy crew and sent her out to Funafuti (Ellice Islands) to survey the harbour and help clear obstructions, as this base was used as a staging area during the Guadalcanal-Solomon Islands campaign. When the *Pathfinder* first sailed, the captain was captain Bascom H. Thomas of the United States Navy Reserve, while many of the other officers were on loan to the Navy from the Coast and Geodetic Survey. William Gibson was navigator/operations officer and Junius Jarman was data processing and chart production officer. Numerous junior officers acquired survey data and were boat officers-in-charge, including Ernst Stohsner, Charles Schoene, Walter Chovan, Edgar Hicks and Lorin Woodcock.

Following the Funafuti survey, the ship proceeded to Nouméa (New Caledonia). On 2 February 1943, the *Pathfinder* sailed as an escort vessel for a group of transports bound for Guadalcanal to resupply Marine and Army units engaged there. After delivering the convoy, the ship proceeded to Tulagi Harbor for surveying operations. Woodcock said the survey "was accomplished very expeditiously under the most trying conditions. The field parties spent as much as 11 hours a day in the field, and spent the nights alternating between working on boat sheets and survey records, and manning battle stations while from one to a half dozen Japanese bombers droned about overhead, spattering bombs here and there, sometimes uncomfortably close."

After finishing the survey, the ship surveyed the coast of Guadalcanal from Point Cruz to Berande Point. At this time, all supplies were landed on Guadalcanal by lighter; the purpose of the survey was to determine anchorage areas as close inshore as possible to expedite unloading operations. An incident that occurred during this survey was perhaps the *Pathfinder*'s finest hour. On 7 April 1943, 187 Japanese planes attacked Tulagi Harbor. The *Pathfinder* shot down two enemy dive-bombers, assisted with two others, and sustained two near-

misses. Bill Gibson “was at the bridge conn during the action keeping the ship on figure eight courses at flank speed, and specifying targets to the bridge gun crews as the rapidly swinging ship brought them into the various gun sectors.” On one occasion, the ship was in a hard right turn and a bomb fell close aboard right where the ship would have been had it remained on a straight course.

During this action, much of the ship’s complement was out in survey launches either wire dragging or conducting sounding lines. Stohsner described his experience:

“The ship was out doing hydrography between Florida and Guadalcanal Islands at the time. I had the wire drag out and was on the 30-foot guide launch about two miles east of the ship. Our first knowledge of the actual attack was a geyser of water next to the *Pathfinder* caused by the near-miss of a dive-bomber. A number of planes peeled out of the sun at the same time attacking aircraft in the vicinity of the *Pathfinder*. One of these escaped fire from the ships and came directly towards us and commenced strafing. All personnel topside dove over the side. The recorder, dragmaster, and myself were at the plotting table below and did not have time to get out. Six machine gun slugs hit the launch up forward within a few feet of us....”

This was not all that happened that day. Following the attack, the *Pathfinder* manoeuvred to assist the stricken destroyer USS *Aaron Ward*, which was doomed to soon sink. In describing the role of the *Pathfinder*, admiral Chester W. Nimitz, commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet, stated as follows:

“The performance of *Pathfinder* on 7 April is noteworthy. Preceding the attack this vessel was conducting survey operations off Berande Point, Guadalcanal. Despite warning of approaching planes and the departure of most of our large ships from the area, her personnel continued hydrography until enemy planes were near. Leaving her ship boats with one quarter of the crew at their assigned survey duties, the commanding officer then went to maximum speed and manoeuvred close aboard *Aaron Ward*. Two planes dived on her and were shot down. Her boats brought off wounded from *Aaron Ward* who were cared for on board during the night. Early next morning these men were disembarked for hospitalisation and at 0700 on 8 April local time ‘the ship resumed its survey operations’. It is a pleasure to report on the efficient and business-like conduct of duty under fire of this USC&GS ship operating under my command.”

During this attack, Lorin Woodcock was out on a survey launch and observed two planes collide overhead. Two parachutes wafted down and Woodcock directed his launch to the closest chute. Fortunately for him, LST 449 beat him to the downed pilot who commenced shooting at his would-be captors. As Woodcock and his crew had neglected to carry their standard issue weapons with them, they would have been in jeopardy if they had pulled that pilot out of the water. As captain Woodcock said during an interview, “I fought the war with a sextant. I sure was lucky that time.” As a footnote to history, President-to-be John F. Kennedy was a junior officer on LST 449. Jarman was in charge of the forward anti-aircraft guns on the *Pathfinder* as it pulled up to the *Aaron Ward* and recalled “looking back at Kennedy’s ship while four dive bombers were attacking it. There were so many exploding bombs along with the resulting water spouts that I could not see the LST.”

The *Pathfinder*, being a combat as well as a survey ship, made many innovations and increased the efficiency of chart production and chart distribution, never done before the Second World War. She was outfitted with a printing press, photographic equipment and all equipment necessary for printing charts. However, no one on board had ever worked in a printing plant. Junius Jarman, who read every available textbook on cartography and printing, made the *Pathfinder* become the first US vessel to ever publish Hydrographic Office Charts for distribution to fleet units. This bypassed the time-consuming step of sending the data back to the USA for verification, compilation and final printing.

The *Pathfinder* survived the war in spite of enduring over 50 bombing raids and being crashed by a kamikaze airplane at Okinawa. By October 1945, it was doing some minor surveys in Tokyo Bay prior to being sent home for decommissioning and return to the Coast and Geodetic Survey. The ship spent the next 25 years surveying in the North Pacific Ocean, Bering Sea and Alaskan waters, compiling an enviable record of accomplishment. The ship is commemorated by the naming of Pathfinder Reef in the northern Mariana Islands and Pathfinder Seamount in the north-east Pacific Ocean. Today, there is also an USNS Ocean Survey Ship named in commemoration of the illustrious vessel.