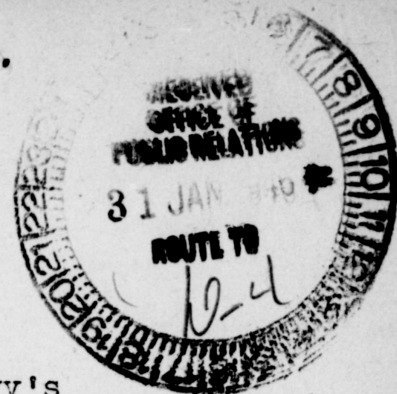


SHIP'S HISTORY

USS LST-201 * USS PONTUS



This is no saga of one of the United States Navy's proud fighting ships. Rather, it is the simple story of a hard-working Landing Ship(Tanks) which, as a partially converted Motor Torpedo Boat Tender, played a vital part in the blockade that left thousands of Japs without food, supplies, and reenforcements up and down the dank and dangerous New Guinea coast from Buna to Saidor to Aitape.

The names of the villages where the LST-201, later to become the USS PONTUS (AGP-20), quietly and unpretentiously did her work, are as little known as this ship which repaired, supplied, and served as a floating home for the fighting PeeTee Boats.

On April 2, 1943, the story of the LST-201 began when she was taken over by a United States Coast Guard crew under Lieut. Samuel D. LaRoue, USCG, at Algiers, La., relieving a Navy ferry crew that had taken the freshly-painted ship down the Mississippi from Seneca, Illinois, where she was built.

The prime function of any landing ship is to carry her valuable cargo of stores and munitions right up on the beach where Army and Navy crews can utilize them immediately. Thus it was that the LST-201, known more simply to her crew as the Two-Oh-One, maneuvered in and out of the St. Andrew's Bay, near Panama City, Fla., from the end of April clear into May. Again and again the new crew sent the ungainly ship crunching onto the beach; over and over they pulled her off into deep water with the ship's stern anchor and winch, until Skipper LaRoue knew his men could put their ship on any beach, in any country, and bring her off safely.

Tactical maneuvers were also in order, and between beaching exercises, the 201 cruised out of St. Andrew's Bay to execute "turns" and "corpens" with two sister ships, LST's 66 and 202. Gunnery practice was no less strenuous despite the fact that these early landing ships were lightly armed with a single three-inch gun apiece and twenty-millimeter guns.

With LCT-254 on her deck, the 201 got underway on May 22, 1943, with LST's 66 and 202, on a journey that was to take her half way around the world and keep her out of the United States for more than two and one-half years.

Battle drills and casualty exercises were constant throughout the trip across the Pacific. First stop for the convoy was at Guantanamo, Cuba, on the Atlantic side. Then, touching port only at Balboa, Canal Zone; Pago Pago Island; and Savu, Fiji Islands, the three ships, with their escorts, arrived in Brisbane, Australia, on August 11, 1943.

Two weeks were all that could be spared the LST-201, for she was ordered to proceed on the 23rd to Mackay, Australia, north of Brisbane, for partial conversion.

Alongside the USS DOBBIN, a repair ship, the 201 began conversion on the 26th of August. Working quickly, the DOBBIN crew installed water distillers, a huge machine shop and a carpenter shop on the tank deck, extra generators, and a ten-ton Lorraine crane forward on the top deck.

Here, too, at Mackay, the 201's first Navy crew came aboard. Under Lieut. William Cameron, USNR, these men and officers were attached to PT Base FOURTEEN and were part of an advanced field torpedo unit which was to serve aboard the 201 as a repair crew.

Then, in easy stages, beginning on the 9th of October, the LST-201 started up the coast of Australia, heading for Milne Bay, New Guinea. The nine-days voyage ended at Gili Anchorage, Milne Bay, and here finishing touches were added to the ship's original conversion.

On the 18th of November the 201 started up the Guinea coast for Dreger Harbor, near Finschafen, stopping off at Buna and again at Morobe where she beached to take on supplies, remaining until January 11, 1944. Escorted by the PC-1131, the 201 went into Dreger Harbor next day, anchoring between the USS PORTUNUS, a sister ship, and the SC-737.

Here at Dreger Harbor, operating under Commander Task Group 70.1, the LST-201 began her first work as a PecTec Tender, hoisting engines from the boats and replacing them with new or overhauled engines. Boat officers and crew were subsisted by the tender, and it was a common sight to see a long line of men on deck waiting for chow with aluminum trays held at the ready.

The work of the PecTec Boats, operating along the coast of Guinea up past Jap-held Saidor and as far as the southern coast of New Britain, had so paralyzed Nip's supply line of barges that special efforts were put forth to smash at the tenders.

Despite protection from United States Army night fighters,

high-flying Jap planes broke through for hit and run attacks frequently. Finally, in a desperate effort to break up the Motor Torpedo Boat teams, the Japs concentrated on the LST-201 and the PORTUNUS throughout the 22nd and 23rd of January. Four separate attacks during the last night brought the Japs a single hit on the 201. An anti-personnel bomb exploded midships on the starboard side, slashing five men with flying shrapnel. To the ship itself there was no injury. And next morning a gigantic Purple Heart was painted on the bomb-pocked bulkhead.

Lacking an "A" Frame, a giant metal sling for raising PeeTee Boats out of the water for hull, shaft, and screw repairs, the 201 took a pontoon drydock alongside. The boats were then hauled into the drydock by hand, air was pumped into each pontoon, and the repair crew scrambled aboard from the tender as the drydock lifted the boat out of the water.

The Commanding Officer, Lt. S. D. LaRoue, was relieved of his duties on February 15, 1944, by Lt.(jg) Ralph A. McCurdie, USCG.

Throughout the month of February, while Tokyo Rose, the glib-tongued propaganda specialist, sank PeeTee boats and tenders over the air-waves, the 201 stuck out bombing attacks that averaged one each day.

When her Motor Torpedo Boats had too long a trip to strike the Japs, the 201 moved further up the coast to Saidor, right behind Jap units fleeing from American and Australian units which were advancing along the beaches. From Saidor, the PeeTees smashed an already tenuous Nip supply line, sending scores of heavily laden barges to the bottom.

With the Aitape-Hollandia landings scheduled, the LST-201 went back to Dreger Harbor for supplies and spare parts, then proceeded to Aitape where she dropped her hook near Celeo Island, a scant two miles off the coast. Here, she tended Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron SEVEN under Lt. Comdr. R. Leeson of Boston, and MTB Squadron EIGHT under Lt. E. I. Farley.

Continuous patrols were effected by the squadron boats, westward to Hollandia and east along the Jap-infested jungles past the Driniumor River. With base communications established on the 201, the boats cooperated with Australian Beaufort bombers in a campaign of extermination against the Jap barges used to ferry troops behind the Allied perimeter at night. In sharp actions throughout May and June the PeeTees destroyed more than 100 barges of all types, strafed

Jap campfires, and raced past Jap-held beaches with guns blazing in the face of 75-MM fire.

American casualties were very light. Wounded were returned to the 201 quickly and were unloaded on the ship's extended ramp. The men were rushed by stretcher to the Sick Bay where the doctor and his assistant corpsmen, informed by radio of the extent of injury, were waiting.

On July 9, just 11 days before the 201's redesignation as an AGP, Motor Torpedo Boat Tender, Lt. McCurdie was relieved of his command by Lt.(jg) Edgar V. Saugstad, USCGR.

The LST-201 was officially re-named USS PONTUS (AGP-20) on the 15th of August.

The PONTUS got underway on August 24th for Brisbane, Australia where a complete overhaul and additional conversion was scheduled. The first of September found her in Milne Bay, and twelve days later the first line was over at the Howard Smith dock in Brisbane. Three days in drydock were required for minor hull repairs while a dozen Australian dock-workers swarmed over the ship's bottom to scrape off "grass" and barnacles.

A new skipper took over the job on October eighth. Lt.(jg) Robert F. Sauer, USCGR, relieved Lt. Saugstad, while the PONTUS was getting a thorough conditioning by her own crew and a score of workers from the Naval Section Base nearby. Living compartments were built for the additional men in the AGP complement, repair facilities were enlarged, torpedo racks and a new shop were set up on the tank deck, and the radio shack had its face lifted.

From here the story of the PONTUS reads like a page from its first cruise, for getting underway October 17, she proceeded to Mackay, the little town where she first took on the characteristics of a tender. Thence, she crossed the Coral Sea and headed into Milne Bay again. Then, she stopped briefly at Cape Cretin, Dreger Harbor, where she went aground on November 9 and came off the reef next day at high tide. Past Saidor, past Aitape went the PONTUS, westward to Mios Woendi Anchorage on November 17th. Here, beaching was in order, and the PONTUS thrust her nose ashore, opened her bow doors, lowered her ramp to take on PeeTee spares ranging from huge Packard engines to cartons of fragile radio tubes.

Two days later the ship was off for the Philippines in convoy with AGP's WACHAPREAGUE and WILLOUGHBY, 41 PeeTee

boats, and seven Army crash boats.

Proceeding into San Pedro Bay, Leyte, P.I., on November 27, the PONTUS was on the fringe of an air-sea battle between Jap suicide planes and a portion of the United States Fleet steaming just outside the bay. Only a single Nip flew over the PONTUS, but he made no attempt to attack.

In San Jaunico Straits, between Samar and Leyte, the strip of water known as "Suicide Strait", the PONTUS completed her change from Coast Guard to Navy on December 15, 1944 when Lieut. Commander Willard Emery, USNR, of 9 Charles River Square, Boston, Mass., relieved Lt.(jg) Sauer as Commanding Officer. Lieut. Walter J. Verlander of 1140 Louisiana Ave., New Orleans, La., was appointed Acting Executive Officer.

Christmas Eve, December 24, 1944, must have seemed like the perfect time for a show of strength to air-minded Japanese Intelligence Officers, but they found that the lights blinking at them from the beach brought neither good cheer nor Merry Christmas greetings to them. Plenty of flak was waiting for the Nip planes from Army anti-aircraft units posted around the harbor and from the vast numbers of ships in the bay and the strait. At twenty minutes of ten this night, the PONTUS historian noted merely that the ship went to general quarters (a common enough notation) and that at five minutes after ten she "commenced firing at one plane illuminated in searchlight." One minute later it was all over, and before the cur was up the last Nip had fled home.

When spare parts were urgently needed by PeeTee Squadrons in Subic Bay and Lingayen, Luzon, the PONTUS carried them, leaving Leyte on April 7, 1945, and returning to a new PeeTee tender anchorage at Guiuan Harbor, Samar, on May 8th.

The PONTUS was underway again on June 25, enroute to Malalag Bay, Mindanao, P. I., where she relieved the USS PORTUNUS on the 27th, assuming duties as tender for Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron TWENTY-FOUR, the "Seahawk" squadron under Lieut. Hoagland that spelled ruin to a group of Japanese motor torpedo boats based near Davao.

Another assignment on August first took the PONTUS to Tawi Tawi, Sulu Archipelago, to tend MTB Squadron EIGHT. Here she relieve the USS OYSTER BAY on August sixth.

The Jap surrender on August 15th was celebrated with a full squadron of PeeTee Boats cutting capers through the harbor while a seaplane tender nearby, the USS POCOMOKE, blasted the air with flares and gunfire. "V" of Victory were formed by PONTUS gun crews, using tracers and another huge "V" illuminated the beach from twin searchlights on the PONTUS' bridge. The PONTUS departed Tawi Tawi on September 4th with a championship softball team, hundreds of souvenir bolo knives collected by the crew and the reputation of a first-class tender.

Further duties took the PONTUS to Puerto Isabela, Basilan Island, Guiuan, Samar; Subic Bay, to tend Ron 39. Here, on October 17th, Lieut. John R. Davidson, USN, of Forsyth, Montana, who had served as Executive Officer since February, relieved Lt. Comdr. Emery as Commanding Officer.

The PONTUS departed Subic Bay on the 31st of October for Guiuan Harbor to decommission PeeTee Boats. From this anchorage, on November 20th, after a day in drydock, the PONTUS began the long, long journey back to the states.

A roaring typhoon caught the ship on November 23, just four days from Guam. The Thanksgiving dinners of the day before tasted not so good as a 75-knot wind and fifty-foot waves rolled the PONTUS violently on her sides and sent green water crashing on her forecastle. Two days fighting the sea swept the PONTUS slightly off course, making her late for an appointment in Guam, but she survived staunchly.

Destined for San Francisco, the PONTUS was re-routed on December third for Pearl Harbor, with orders to proceed to the Canal Zone for onward routing to New York and eventual decommissioning.

Her job is done now, for the fighting PeeTees no longer roam the Pacific waters. The PONTUS has a rest in store.