



"Pathfinder," Sepik River

Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

# Pathfinder Floating Clinic, Papua New Guinea

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## LYNETTE ANDERSON

Lynette Anderson of Western Australia graduated from Sydney Sanitarium & Hospital in 1966 and from Midwifery at King Edward Memorial Hospital, Perth, in 1968. She served with her husband in Papua New Guinea: six months at Togoba Leprosy Hospital and then 6 years at Ambunti on the Sepik River doing Maternal & Child Health Clinics along 200 miles of the river. Lynette worked for ten years at Healesville Hospital, Victoria, and then nine years at Maitland Hospital, NSW in Special Care Nursery. Lynette is now retired. She is married to Richard Anderson with 4 children and 9 grandchildren.

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Pathfinder was the name given to two floating clinics that operated sequentially on the Sepik River, Papua New Guinea, beginning in 1965.

## Need for Medical Assistance on the Sepik River

When the Seventh-day Adventist Church commenced medical missionary work along the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea, it did so in cooperation with government agencies. However, it was almost impossible to accomplish very much because the mode of travel was not satisfactory given the distance that had to be covered. A log dugout canoe with an outboard motor and an unreliable diesel launch were the only means of transportation on the river.<sup>1</sup>

In 1964 an offering was collected by Seventh-day Adventist youth around the Australasian Division so that a houseboat could be constructed to serve as a floating clinic on the Sepik River. About £6,000 was given. At the time, three missionary families were working in the area who were committed to initiating the project. Pastor Elwyn Raethel, the Sepik Mission president, designed the boat. C. Roy Aldridge and Cyril T. Mitchell, along with some New Guinean laborers, were the builders. Cyril Mitchell came from a very practical background. Roy Aldridge was a nurse.<sup>2</sup>

## Pathfinder

The *Pathfinder* was constructed in Wewak, Papua New Guinea, over a period of eight to nine months. The builders worked in a shed that was covered with a Kunai-grass roof to give some protection from the heat, but even so, at times, some of the builders' electric tools would overheat and burn out.

The boat had a Hamilton Jet engine, and it was 36 feet long. The plan was to seal the decks, cover the hulls, and provide rubber mountings for the diesel engine; however, these plans were not completed due to inadequate funds. When completed, the boat was launched in the ocean at Wewak and then motored into the Sepik River up to the town of Ambunti, where it was to be based.<sup>3</sup>

The boat was dedicated by the Coral Sea Union president, Pastor O. D. F. McCutchen, on August 13, 1965. It was given the name *Pathfinder*<sup>4</sup> in recognition of the gifts and offerings that were given by the youth of the Australasian Division to pay for the construction of the boat.<sup>5</sup>

Those working on the boat, including Mary Roy, Jan Fleming, and Molly Neill, conducted medical clinics along some 250 miles of the Sepik River.<sup>6</sup> The team vaccinated infants, treated the sick, and cared for pregnant women as much as possible. They also looked for and used any opportunities to share their faith in the villages. All these tribal groups along the river practiced animism.<sup>7</sup>

In April 1966, David Lundstrom and his family arrived at Ambunti as the new district director for the area<sup>8</sup> He was also given the responsibility of making sure that the *Pathfinder* was well maintained so that the nursing staff

could visit the many villages along the river and its tributaries. When Lundstrom arrived, the boat was not operating. Molly Neill and Jan Fleming were using a plywood boat that was about 18 feet long and powered by a 40-horsepower outboard motor. However, with this vessel, they were only able to make day trips to places close by.<sup>9</sup>

After completing the necessary repairs on the *Pathfinder*, Lundstrom sailed the boat to the May River, a tributary of the Sepik, in order to assess its capabilities. He found that when traveling through a fast-flowing current, particularly when the river was flooded, the boat would take on considerable amounts of water in the open hulls. Furthermore, the jet unit propelled only one hull, which made steering the boat very difficult. The boat was too unsafe for the nurses to continue to conduct clinics on the river when on their own.<sup>10</sup> The boat spent 1968 out of the water<sup>11</sup> and did not see further service.

## Pathfinder II

On his next furlough to Sydney, Lundstrom visited with naval architects to prepare plans for a more suitable vessel.<sup>12</sup> With the help of his father, who had been a shipwright in his younger days, a model was constructed. The model was put through tests at the marine laboratories of the University of Sydney.<sup>13</sup> The Coral Sea Union Mission executive committee finally gave approval for a 52-foot houseboat to be built at Ambunti.<sup>14</sup> The plans provided for the vessel to be built of a special marine aluminum. Lundstrom designed the drive system. The hulls, together with all the deck and living areas, were built at Ambunti. The propulsion equipment was made and donated by E. M. Baldwin and Sons Pty. Ltd., of Sydney—a very generous gift. Ricky Hatch assisted Lundstrom with the construction.<sup>15</sup>

The boat was well equipped. One room was for patient examinations, and it held the medical supplies as well. Another room contained a kitchen with good cooking facilities and a dining table. Double bunk beds were also in that area. Another room had a double bed. There was plenty of storage in all areas. A small bathroom was also located in the living area. In the front of the boat behind the steering section were the living quarters for the boat drivers.<sup>16</sup>

On May 18, 1972, the *Pathfinder II* was dedicated. The Coral Sea Union Mission president, O. D. F. McCutcheon, again officiated.<sup>17</sup> At the time, Gordon and Lyn Taylor were conducting maternal and child health clinics in many villages around Ambunti. They had arrived in the Sepik in 1969, replacing Gwen Benham and Valerie Taylor, single nurses who had been providing medical welfare for mothers and infants along the river.<sup>18</sup> With the commissioning of the new floating clinic, they could again travel over 250 miles on the Sepik and May Rivers. A speed boat was attached to the *Pathfinder II* so that villages in small tributaries could be reached. To help reduce infant mortality, vaccinations were given against diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, tuberculosis, and polio. There was a strong focus on the health of pregnant women and their families. Family planning was also offered to those who had several children.<sup>19</sup>

About eighteen hundred children under five years of age were on the medical files at any one time. Usually, those files also had records on about two hundred pregnant women. Each year, all school children in the area received a medical consultation. There were at least five large schools. Leprosy, malaria, tropical ulcers, and yaws were just some of the many things that were treated. In one village, there were few children and no pregnant women. It was discovered that all the men of the village had gone away to work on a plantation and had contracted gonorrhoea, and it had been transmitted to their wives when they returned home.<sup>20</sup>

In 1975 Gordon and Lyn Taylor returned to Australia. Their work was continued by Glenn and Narelle Stanley, who remained only a few months before they were transferred to Togoba in the Western Highlands.<sup>21</sup> By the early 1980s, the boat and its ministry of mercy were being cared for by Papua New Guineans. Alice Bora and Rhoda Philip, nursing graduates of Sopas Adventist Hospital, were conducting the medical clinics, and Job Napai was the boat's captain.<sup>22</sup>

Because of the costs and difficulty of providing adequate maintenance for the boat, the *Pathfinder II* was not operational between the early 2000s and 2013. In July 2013, a group of eight traveled to Ambunti on the Sepik River to make major repairs to the *Pathfinder II*.<sup>23</sup> It continues to operate, albeit with some challenges.<sup>24</sup>

## Contribution

The medical needs of the people who live along the Sepik River have been served by the *Pathfinder* floating clinics since 1965. People along the river depend on the visits of the clinic. The name *Pathfinder* has become synonymous with the spirit of service and holistic ministry that is central to the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

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## NOTES

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