

Austal USA Celebrates Keel Laying for the Future USNS Solomon Atkinson



Ship sponsor JoAnn Atkinson, wife of namesake Solomon Atkinson, authenticates the T-ATS 12 keel welding her initials into the keel plate with the help of Austal USA A-class welder Rufus Lord. (Austal USA)

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MOBILE, Ala. – Austal USA celebrated the official start of construction on the future USNS Solomon Atkinson (T-ATS 12), the Navy's seventh Towing, Salvage and Rescue Ship, with a keel laying ceremony today at the company's Mobile, Ala. ship manufacturing facility. Ship sponsors JoAnn Atkinson, Solomon Atkinson's widow, and daughters Michele Gunyah and Maria Hayward, authenticated the keel by welding their initials into a keel plate that will be welded to the hull of the ship.

They were assisted by Rufus Lord, a fifteen-year Austal USA veteran A-class welder.

Keel laying is the formal recognition of the start of a ship's construction. The keel laying symbolically recognizes the ceremonial beginning of the construction of a ship. This ship milestone is being recognized just over two weeks after Austal USA celebrated the christening of the future USNS Billy Frank Jr. (T-ATS 11).

"I am proud of the Austal USA T-ATS program team for providing us with the opportunity to celebrate two T-ATS milestones so close together," said Dave Growden, vice president of new construction. "This ceremony is evidence of the hard work and dedication put forth by Austal USA and our Navy and supplier partners to keep the T-ATS program steadily moving forward."

Local community leaders, Austal USA employees, Navy personnel, and family and friends of ship namesake Solomon Atkinson attended the ceremony today.

Solomon Atkinson, born in 1930 in Metlakatla, Alaska, worked as a commercial fisherman before enlisting in the U.S. Navy in 1952. A year later, Atkinson volunteered for the underwater demolition teams and became a frogman, the precursor to present day SEALs. In 1962, Atkinson became one of the first Navy SEALs and was a plank owner for SEAL Team 1. As a SEAL, he deployed to Korea and completed three combat tours in Vietnam. His Vietnam service-related awards include a Bronze Star, a Navy Commendation Medal with Combat "V," and a Purple Heart. Atkinson also had the distinction of training numerous astronauts, including Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, in underwater weightless simulations at the Underwater Swimmers School in Key West, Florida. Atkinson retired from active naval service in 1973 as a Chief Warrant Officer 4 and returned to Metlakatla, where he continued to serve his people and state on the Indian Community Council and Board of Education, as founder and president of the first veterans'

organization on Annette Island, and as mayor of Metlakatla.

T-ATS 12 will provide ocean-going towing, salvage and rescue capabilities to support fleet operations. T-ATS will be a multi-mission common hull platform capable of towing U.S. Navy ships and will have 6,000 square feet of deck space for embarked systems. The large, unobstructed deck allows for the embarkation of a variety of stand-alone and interchangeable systems. The T-ATS platform will combine the capabilities of the retiring Rescue and Salvage Ship (T-ARS 50) and Fleet Ocean Tug (T-ATF 166) platforms. T-ATS will be able to support current missions including towing, salvage, rescue, oil spill response, humanitarian assistance, and wide-area search and surveillance. The platform also enables future rapid capability initiatives such as supporting modular payloads with hotel services and appropriate interfaces.