

U.S. COAST GUARD CUTTER PLANETREE
(WLB 307
WAGL 307)
U.S. Coast Guard Buoy Tenders, 180' Mesquite Class
San Francisco vicinity
San Francisco County
California

HAER No. CA-294

HAER
CA-294

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

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U.S. COAST GUARD CUTTER PLANETREE

HAER No. CA-294

RIG/TYPE
OF CRAFT:

Cutter (Mesquite Class)

TRADE:

Buoy tending (government)

OFFICIAL NUMBER:

WLB-307 (Former WAGL-307)

PRINCIPAL
DIMENSIONS:
(As built)

Length: 180'
Beam: 37'
Depth: 12'
Displacement: 935 tons

LOCATION:

Suisun Bay, Benicia Vicinity, Solano County, California

DATES OF
CONSTRUCTION:

December 4, 1942 - November 4, 1943

DESIGNER:

The preliminary design work was done by the U.S. Coast Guard based upon the design used for the CACTUS Class. Final design work was done by A.M. Deering of Chicago, Illinois.

BUILDER:

Marine Iron and Shipbuilding Company of Duluth, Minnesota

PRESENT OWNER:

U.S. Coast Guard

PRESENT USE:

Storage at Maritime Administration facility (MARAD) Ready Reserve Fleet

SIGNIFICANCE:

This vessel was built to serve as a 180' U.S. Coast Guard cutter. The federal government purchased or built thirty-nine of these vessels, built in three sub-classes, from 1942-1944. The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) designed the 180s to service Aids-to-Navigation (AtoN), perform Search and Rescue missions (SAR), carry out Law Enforcement duties (LE), and conduct ice-breaking operations. Members of the class have served in the USCG from 1942 to the present. They have significantly contributed to safe navigation on inland

and international waters in times of peace and war.

RESEARCHER: Marc Porter, 2002

PROJECT
INFORMATION:

This project is part of the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER), a long-range program to document historically significant engineering and industrial works in the United States. The HAER program is administered by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record Division (HABS/HAER) of the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, E. Blaine Cliver, Chief.

The project was prepared under the direction of HAER Maritime Program Manager Todd Croteau. The historical report was produced by Marc Porter, and edited by Justine Christianson, HAER Historian, NCSHPO. Large format photography was produced by Jet Lowe.

FOR ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION ON THE U.S. COAST GUARD BUOY TENDERS, 180' MESQUITE CLASS, SEE:

HAER No. DC-57	U.S. Coast Guard Buoy Tenders, 180' Class
HAER No. DC-59	U.S. Coast Guard Buoy Tenders, 180' Mesquite Class
HAER No. AK-44	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter IRONWOOD
HAER No. AL-198	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter SWEETGUM
HAER No. CA-293	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter BUTTONWOOD
HAER No. CA-294	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter PLANETREE
HAER No. MI-327	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter MESQUITE
HAER No. TX-106	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter PAWPAW

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Marine Iron and Shipbuilding built PLANETREE at a cost of \$872,876. Her keel was laid on December 4, 1942, and she was launched on March 20, 1943. The tender officially entered service after her commissioning on November 4, 1943.

PLANETREE stayed on the Great Lakes as an AtoN tender and icebreaker until April 1944 when she transferred to the Thirteenth District and left for her new homeport in Seattle, Washington. PLANETREE spent the next six months of World War II servicing AtoN and helping to build LORAN stations (long range aid to navigation) on offshore islands as far away as the Aleutians. In June 1944 PLANETREE was reassigned to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii and engaged in AtoN work. She remained based in Hawaii until 1947 when postwar military personnel shortages led to her temporary decommissioning.

On September 1, 1949, PLANETREE returned to active duty and departed for Guam. From Guam the tender serviced AtoN spread from Okinawa to Saipan to Eniwetok. In October 1954 PLANETREE returned to Honolulu, Hawaii. For the next two decades PLANETREE did AtoN work, carried out re-supply missions throughout the South Pacific on a regular basis, and swung into action as a SAR platform when the need arose.

She had the distinction of being the first U.S. Coast Guard buoy tender to serve in Vietnam. In early 1966 the military command in charge of U.S. operations in South Vietnam requested the support of a buoy tender. PLANETREE was dispatched from Guam later that spring. She was ordered to set buoys used during the offloading of petroleum by tankers. The buoy tender set sixteen of these buoys in four different ports. Her success with the buoys stimulated requests for other AtoN missions and soon PLANETREE's crew had their hands full marking channels, setting mooring buoys, and placing buoys on hazards to navigation. The military command soon requested a permanent buoy tender presence in Vietnamese waters. The request was denied, but the U.S. Coast Guard agreed to rotate buoy tenders through the theater on a regular basis and began staging 180s out of the Philippines for brief missions to South Vietnam.¹

U.S. Coast Guard buoy tenders worked in the waters of South Vietnam on a rotating basis until the spring of 1972. During their deployments the tenders worked on AtoN, helped conduct surveys, and carried cargo between installations. They also came under enemy fire on a regular basis, though no buoy tender was seriously damaged by hostile fire. The ultimate goal was not for the buoy tenders to maintain South Vietnam's AtoN in perpetuity but rather to train the Vietnamese to eventually take over

¹ Eugene N. Tulich, *The United States Coast Guard in South East Asia During the Vietnam Conflict* (Washington: U.S. Coast Guard Public Affairs Division, 1975), 19-21.

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those duties. Therefore, buoy tender deployments also tended to be training cruises. Personnel from the Directorate of Navigation, the South Vietnamese agency charged with matters relating to marine navigation, would board the USCG cutters when the buoy tenders arrived in South Vietnam. They would then serve as apprentices to the U.S. crew as the cutter went about its mission. The transfer of responsibilities for AtoN from the USCG to the Directorate of Navigation began early in 1972 and was officially completed by December of that year.²

The tender's homeport changed to Juneau, Alaska in August 1974. PLANETREE continued her AtoN and SAR work in Alaskan waters until 1999 when decommissioning ended the cutter's career.

PLANETREE survived thousands of miles of bluewater crossings in the Pacific and service in the rough waters off Alaska, but her career was not without mishap or close calls. The buoy tender was twice in serious danger of being lost. The first time came in January 1983 when the vessel was en route from Alaska to Hawaii to participate in refresher training. A severe storm overtook PLANETREE about 1,100 miles west of San Francisco. The storm's waves, driven by wind gusts as high as 100 m.p.h., reached as high as five stories and opened three holes in the tender's hull. PLANETREE's crew eventually managed to patch the holes and stem the inflow from 50 gallons per hour to a more manageable 5 gallons per hour. During the storm the tender also began to leak propeller shaft lubricant, which threatened its ability to maneuver and avoid the largest of the storm driven waves. Fortunately for the crew, the supply of lubricant lasted until a fresh supply arrived on the USCG cutter MUNRO, and the tender's pumps kept pace with the leaks in the hull throughout the storm.³

PLANETREE's other encounter with near disaster came on January 25, 1990 when the tender ran aground in Wrangell Narrows near Deception Point, Alaska. The grounding opened two holes in the hull: one measured 1' x 2', and the other was 6" x 1". Six pumps contained the water that flooded into the tender, estimated to have rushed in at 400 to 500 gallons per minute. The PLANETREE's crew, aided by personnel from the U.S. Coast Guard cutters FIREBUSH and ANACAPA, pumped an estimated 3.2 million gallons of water out of the holed vessel in the first twenty-four hours. PLANETREE eventually managed to reach a commercial drydock under her own power.⁴

² Tulich, 21-22.

³ "Ailing Coast Guard vessel battling high Pacific waves," *Tribune* (Alameda, CA), 27 January 1983.

⁴ "Damaged Buoy Tender to be Escorted to Ketchikan," *Coast Guard News*, 26 January 1990, 1; "Holed Coast Guard Buoy Tender Gains on Flooding," *Coast Guard News*, 26 January 1990, 1.

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The aging cutter went through an “Austere” renovation in 1991. These repairs were designed to extend the vessel’s life for a number of years. PLANETREE’s remaining time in the U.S. Coast Guard would, however, prove short. She was decommissioned in March 1999 and the federal government placed her in the ready reserve fleet. As of January 2002, she remains in the mothball fleet at Suisun Bay, California.⁵

⁵ Wes Hall, *Historical Context and Statement of Significance: Cactus, Mesquite, and Basswood Classes, United States Coast Guard 180-foot Buoy Tenders (WLBs)* (Castle Hayne, North Carolina: Mid-Atlantic Technology and Environmental Research, 1997), 8.

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