

U.S. COAST GUARD CUTTER BASSWOOD  
(WLB 388  
WAGL 388)  
U.S. Coast Guard Buoy Tenders, 180' Iris Class  
Marianas Section, Victor Wharf  
Agana  
Guam County  
Guam

HAER No. GU-3

HAER  
GU-3

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

U.S. COAST GUARD CUTTER BASSWOOD

HAER No. GU-3

RIG/TYPE  
OF CRAFT:

Cutter (Iris Class)

TRADE:

Buoy tending (government)

OFFICIAL NUMBER:

WLB-388 (WAGL-388)

PRINCIPAL  
DIMENSIONS:  
(As built)

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

LOCATION:

Unknown

DATES OF  
CONSTRUCTION:

March 21, 1943 - January 12, 1944

DESIGNER:

Preliminary design by United States Coast Guard and final design by Marine Iron and Shipbuilding Corporation of Duluth, Minnesota

BUILDER:

Marine Iron and Shipbuilding Corporation of Duluth, Minnesota

PRESENT OWNER:

Unknown

PRESENT USE:

Unknown

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.

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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.

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

HAER No. DC-60	U.S. Coast Guard Buoy Tenders, 180' Iris Class.
HAER No. AK-45	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter FIREBUSH
HAER No. AK-46	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter SEDGE
HAER No. AK-47	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter SWEETBRIER
HAER No. AK-48	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter WOODRUSH
HAER No. AL-199	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter SALVIA
HAER No. CA-309	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter BLACKHAW
HAER No. FL-17	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter REDBUD
HAER No. GU-2	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter SASSAFRASS
HAER No. GU-3	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter BASSWOOD
HAER No. HI-61	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter MALLOW
HAER No. MA-152	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter BITTERSWEET
HAER No. ME-68	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter SPAR
HAER No. MI-323	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter BRAMBLE
HAER No. MI-328	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter ACACIA
HAER No. MN-98	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter SUNDEW
HAER No. NJ-139	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter HORNBEAM
HAER No. OR-118	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter IRIS
HAER No. PR-43	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter SAGEBRUSH
HAER No. TX-107	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter BLACKTHORN
HAER No. WA-169	U.S. Coast Guard Cutter MARIPOSA

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Construction of BASSWOOD, the first of the C Class 180s, began on March 21, 1943. This was one month after construction began on the last of the B Class. Less than two months after the keel laying, on May 20, 1943, BASSWOOD slid off the ways. The U.S. Coast Guard officially commissioned the cutter on January 12, 1944. Marine Iron and Shipbuilding produced the vessel for \$896,402.

BASSWOOD spent the spring months of 1944 breaking ice and servicing AtoN on the Great Lakes. She then headed for the Fourteenth U.S. Coast Guard District and her new homeport at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. From her base at Pearl Harbor, BASSWOOD serviced AtoN and conducted SAR missions. In September 1944 BASSWOOD moved to her new homeport in Astoria, Oregon where she served in an AtoN role for the remainder of the war. BASSWOOD left Astoria for San Francisco, California in early 1946. In August she changed homeports yet again, this time to Honolulu, Hawaii.

BASSWOOD operated out of Honolulu in an AtoN and SAR capacity for the next twenty-two years. Her assignments during this period took the tender on missions throughout the Pacific. A recurring duty during these years was conducting visits to Jarvis, Baker, and Howland Islands so the United States could maintain its claim of sovereignty over the islands.

In 1968 BASSWOOD took up residence in Guam. From her new homeport, the tender continued to service AtoN and conduct SAR and LE missions. Her area of operations during this period was all of Micronesia, an area as large as the continental United States. Besides her primary duties, BASSWOOD regularly participated in Project Handclasp, a U.S. Navy program that provided medical care and other humanitarian assistance to the inhabitants of remote Pacific islands.<sup>1</sup>

Part of BASSWOOD's Pacific service included AtoN missions in Vietnamese waters during the Vietnam War. Three other 180s, BLACKHAW (see HAER No. CA-309), IRONWOOD (see HAER No. AK-44), and PLANETREE (HAER No. CA-294) conducted operations in Vietnam. Most of these buoy tending missions were of short duration, with the cutters generally spending about one month in the war zone and then returning to bases in the Philippines or elsewhere. The buoy tender's role during missions to South Vietnam was simple: to service as many AtoN as possible during their deployment while simultaneously preparing personnel from the South Vietnamese Directorate of Navigation to take over responsibility for AtoN maintenance. The mission was simple but not often easy. The buoy tenders were often the target of enemy fire from ambush positions along the coast or interior waterways. Bathymetric surveys of Vietnamese waters were old or of poor quality, making the proper placement of markers difficult, not to mention increasing the risk of the buoy tender running aground. Even when a

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<sup>1</sup> BASSWOOD Decommissioning Pamphlet, in BASSWOOD Cutter File, U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office.

marker was on station, there was no guarantee it would stay that way. Civilian mariners soon realized that batteries used in AtoN would serve well in their junks, so AtoN were stripped of batteries at an alarming rate. Scavenging was not limited to floating AtoN. On one occasion BASSWOOD began replacing a range dayboard, essentially a painted board, mounted near a village. It was the fifth time the marker had required replacement in five months. As the buoy tender's crew lowered the board into place, an elderly villager appeared on the scene, promptly cut the line being used to hoist the board, and strolled away with the board.<sup>2</sup>

After the U.S. Coast Guard's involvement with AtoN in South Vietnamese waters ended in 1972, BASSWOOD returned her full attention to AtoN work, SAR missions, and LE efforts throughout the Pacific. Though the tender often went to aid vessels in distress, not all of BASSWOOD's SAR missions played out on the water. A team dispatched from the tender spent six hours sifting through the still burning wreckage of Korean Airline Flight 801 after it crashed on Guam. The Coast Guard team managed to find and rescue a mother and daughter who were the last two survivors found.<sup>3</sup>

BASSWOOD's activities as a LE platform centered mainly on the maintenance of the U.S. exclusive economic zone and enforcement of international fisheries laws. The tender's most spectacular LE mission occurred in 1997 when she sortied from Japan on short notice to intercept a vessel using illegal drift nets in the South China Sea. The chase lasted ten days during which every attempt to halt the offending vessel was warded off. When backup in the form of the USCG Cutter CHASE arrived, the vessel halted its flight and Coast Guard boarding teams quickly effected a seizure. Two of the fishing boat's crew were eventually convicted of fisheries violations.<sup>4</sup>

Though not configured differently than other 180s in any substantial way, BASSWOOD's assignment to the South Pacific did change her manning. The tender carried its own team of divers to complete buoy work and light salvage rather than relying on assistance from naval units that could be thousands of miles out of position when needed. Buoy tenders operating in less isolated waters usually just called for a U.S. Navy dive team when they encountered problems that required underwater work.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 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), 21.

<sup>3</sup> BASSWOOD Decommissioning Pamphlet.

<sup>4</sup> BASSWOOD Decommissioning Pamphlet.

<sup>5</sup> BASSWOOD Decommissioning Pamphlet.

The tender's career came to an end in September 1998. After her decommissioning she entered the mothball fleet at Suisun Bay, California.<sup>6</sup>

Basswood was sold to a private owner in November 2000.

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<sup>6</sup> BASSWOOD Decommissioning Pamphlet; 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), 10.

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Hall, Wes. *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.

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