NATIONAL REGISTER ELIGIBILITY ASSESSMENT
VESSEL: USS *Bolster* (ARS-38)

USS *Bolster* underway off San Diego. Date unknown. http://navysite.de/ars/ars38.htm

Vessel History

The USS *Bolster* (ARS-38) was an auxiliary salvage and rescue ship built for the U.S. Navy at the end of World War II under a Maritime Commission[1] contract. The vessel remained active well after the war ended serving in both the Korean and Vietnam Wars. After operating for nearly half a century, *Bolster* was decommissioned in 1994

Bolster was launched December 23, 1944, and commissioned on May 1, 1945. It initially served in California as a repair ship until July 18 when it sailed for Pearl Harbor. On August 15, *Bolster* left Pearl Harbor for Yokosuka, Japan. Arriving in the war zone after the Japanese surrender, *Bolster* conducted salvage operations in Japanese waters until October of 1946, and later in the Philippines until April of 1947. After returning to Pearl Harbor *Bolster* operated alternately between there and Adak, Alaska, conducting salvage and towing operations until August of 1950. That month it departed Pearl Harbor for Sasebo, Japan, with two barges in tow and remained in East Asia for service during the Korean War.

[1] The Maritime Commission was the predecessor agency of the Maritime Administration.

Korean War

Bolster was involved in several notable salvage operations during the Korean War. On September 27, 1950, the USS *Brush* (DD-745) struck a mine off Korea. The USS *Worcester* (CL-144) remained with the ship until *Bolster* arrived and escorted the *Brush* safely to Sasebo, Japan. In January of 1951, the Royal Thai Navy frigate *Prasae* went ashore off the coast of North Korea during a storm. *Bolster*, leading a group tasked to refloat the vessel, anchored approximately one mile from the beach in bitter cold weather with six foot seas. The crew managed to get a line to the frigate, but *Prasae* had broached and became embedded in over seven feet of sand. It was decided not to continue salvage efforts off the enemy's coast, so *Prasae* was destroyed by gunfire from the covering vessels. In early 1952 the cargo ship *Meridian Victory* ran aground on a reef with a cargo of ammunition while entering Suyong Man, Korea. The *Bolster* patched the ship's leaks and escorted it to Kure, Japan.

Left to right: A helicopter crew rescues survivors from the Royal Thai Navy vessel, *Prasae* in 1951. Two views of the *Prasae* hard aground on the Korean coast in 1951. Photographs courtesy of the Naval History and Heritage Command.

Post-Korea

Bolster supported training exercises and continued its salvage work in Pearl Harbor following the Korean War. It made a number of cruises to Japan, Hong Kong, Korea, Okinawa, and to the Philippines. Also in the 1950s, the ship took part in two nuclear tests. In 1955 it was present at Operation Wigwam, an underwater atomic explosion 450 miles southwest of San Diego, which tested blast effects on submarine hulls. Between March and June of 1958, it participated in Operation Hardtack, a series of atmospheric atomic tests in the Pacific.

In May of 1962 it assisted the Australian Navy in refloating the Panamanian-flag merchant vessel *Dona Ouriana,* which grounded at Pocklington Reef, 200 miles south of Guadalcanal. One-hundred-eight feet of the ship's 483-foot hull were firmly aground. A coral reef had to be blasted out from underneath the vessel without damaging the vessel further before *Bolster* was able to tow it into deep water.

In November of 1962 *Bolster* assisted in the refloating of the Korean warship *Han Ra San*, formerly USS *PC-485*, sunk by a typhoon near Guam. In December of 1964 it helped refloat the Philippine warship *Rajah Soliman*, which sunk after a typhoon swept through Manila Bay, Philippines. The ship rolled after sinking and had to be righted before it could be refloated. *Bolster* was assisted by USS *Grasp* (ARS-24), the seagoing tug USS *Takelma* (ATF-133), and two Singapore-based lift craft leased from the British Royal Navy. The difficult righting and refloating of the *Rajah Soliman*, which extended through January of 1965, provided valuable salvage training for the Vietnam War.

Vietnam War

In February of 1966 the civilian tanker *Sea Raven* grounded at Chu Lai, Vietnam, damaging its hull, which flooded its engine room with 12 feet of water. *Bolster* and USS *Reclaimer* (ARS-42) managed to pump the water out and refloat the vessel. The following month the USS *Summit County* (LST-1146) ran aground at Chu Lai incurring similar damage. *Bolster* refloated the vessel and towed it to Sasebo, Japan. On April 24, 1966 the civilian cargo ship *Excellency* went ashore on Triton Island in the China Sea. Several tons of ammunition in its cargo was transferred to an LST, and the ship was refloated by *Bolster*, *Reclaimer*, USS *Coucal* (ASR-8) and the seagoing tug USS *Ute* (TF-76).

In the fall of 1967, *Bolster* was stationed at Da Nang, Vietnam. That November, USS *LCU-1494* broached at a landing area at Duc Pho. *Bolster* freed the vessel and towed it to Da Nang.

Post-Vietnam Salvage Work

Following the Vietnam War, *Bolster* continued to perform salvage work in the Pacific. In September of 1973, it was one of several vessels involved in recovering Skylab 3. The following year it tried unsuccessfully to salvage the liner *Caribia*, ex-*Caronia*, which wrecked as it approached Guam while in tow to a Taiwanese scrap yard. The ship could not be removed and had to be broken up in place. In late 1975 the British cargo ship *Lindenbank* grounded on Fanning Island, 1,000 miles west of Honolulu. *Bolster* and the seagoing tug USS *Brunswick* (ATS-3) proceeded to the scene from Pearl Harbor. After a month of attempting to free the vessel, which included removing part of the cargo, a storm pushed it further aground. *Bolster* and *Brunswick* were forced to abandon their efforts and return to Hawaii.

During the 1970s and 1980s *Bolster* became more involved in ocean towing, including towing decommissioned warships to the Maritime Administration's Reserve Fleet. In 1976 it escorted two former U.S. Navy minesweepers to Suva, Fiji Islands to start the Fijian Navy.

The following towing jobs are still recorded with silhouettes painted on the side of its towing winch; USS *Downes* (DD-375), USS *John Paul Jones* (DDG-53), USS *Haddo* (SSN-604), USS *Gridley* (DLG-21), USS *Mobile* (LKA-115), USS *Shields* (DD-596), USS *Nathaniel Greene* (SSBN-636), and USS *Ray* (SS-271). *Bolster* towed the *Ray* from Panama to Bremerton, Washington in early 1993.

In October 1992 *Bolster* became the fourth vessel of the U.S. Navy commanded by a woman. *Bolster*'s final captain was Barbara Scholley, a diving officer who had previously served as executive officer of the USS *Hoist* (ARS-40). Scholley commanded *Bolster* until its decommissioning on September 24, 1994.

The salvage ships of the *Diver*/*Bolster* series compiled a long and impressive record of service. Several were transferred late in their careers to the navies of Korea, Taiwan, and Turkey, where they may still be in active. The CGC *Acushnet* (WMEC-167), formerly the USS *Shackle* (ARS-9), is the oldest commissioned cutter currently serving in the Coast Guard. Its homeport is Ketchikan, Alaska

The ship received seven battle stars for its service in the Korean War zone during the following dates: Sept. 15, 1950 to Jan. 19, 1951; Feb. 9 to March 10, 1951; April 11 to 16, 1951; May 17 to 21, 1951; Feb. 8 to 23, 1952; March 13 to April 12, 1952; June 3 to 16, 1952; March 8 to April 11, 1953. It participated in the Inchon landings on Sept. 15, 1950, and the Hungnam evacuations of December 9 to 25, 1950. Because of its awards for Korean War service *Bolster* crew members nicknamed their ship "USS Battle Star."

Bolster received 11 campaign stars for its service in the Vietnam War zone during the following periods: Feb. 11 to 17, 1966; Oct. 21 to Dec. 19, 1967; Jan. 30 to Feb. 27, 1968; Mar. 3 to 7, April 7 to May 25, and July 7 to Aug. 4, 1969; April 26 to 30, May 1 to 14, June 7 to 24, July 24 to Aug. 12, and Aug. 30 to Sept. 15, 1970; and Oct. 26 to Dec. 3, 1971; and Jan 1 to Sept. 30, 1972.

Historic Context

The Navy was already experienced in marine salvage prior to World War II. Several major operations involved the recovery of three submarines: the *S-51* in 1925; the *S-4* in 1927; and the *Squalus* in 1939. However, the Navy did not have ships specifically designed and built for salvage work when it entered WWII, and it was not until the start of the war that salvage ships become a distinct vessel type.

During the first two years of the war, Great Britain had already lost a large number of ships. It was far more expedient to refloat or tow them back to port versus expending the time and resources necessary to build replacements. To this end, the British and Americans collaborated on the design of a series of steel-hulled salvage ships. Before the U.S. entered the war, the first four under construction were intended for the Royal Navy; however, after the U.S. entered the war, the number was cut to two. The first vessel, USS *Diver* (ARS-5), was completed in 1943 and delivered to Great Britain. *Diver* participated in salvage operations at Utah and Omaha beaches during WWII.

Five general types served during the war that included the following classes: conversions from *Bird*-class minesweepers (seven); wooden-hulled, *Anchor*-class 183-foot ships (nine); two classes

of steel-hulled, 213-foot ships, *Diver* class (16 ships); the slightly wider-beamed and faster *Bolster* class (six ships); and four miscellaneous ships.

The *Diver*/*Bolster* class vessels were built at the Basalt Rock Company, a shipyard in Napa, California, originally founded in 1920 as a local rock quarry. The company became involved in shipbuilding in 1938 when it began constructing barges for its own use. In addition to the salvage ships, its World War II Navy contracts also included two coastal tankers, two coastal freighters, and a number of barges.

Description/Characteristics of Vessel Type

Hull Number: ARS-38
Builder: Basalt Rock Company, a shipyard in Napa, California.
Length: 213.6'
Beam: 43'
Draft: 13'
Displacement: 1,530 tons standard; 2,045 tons full load.
Propulsion system: Diesel-electric, four engines, twin screw.
Cooper-Bessemer engines replaced by Caterpillars in 1960s and 1970s.
Horsepower: 3,000
Speed: 16 knots
Complement: 69
Armament: two 44 mm guns.

The *Diver*/*Bolster*-class was the second class of vessels built for the Navy specifically designated for salvage work. The group of salvage ships to which *Bolster* belongs is designated as the *Bolster* class. *Bolster*-class ships are near sister ships to the *Diver* class; however, the *Bolster* class was designed with a slightly larger beam, which provided greater stability and more internal space. Originally 12 ships were ordered of this class; however, only six were built. These included the following vessels: USS *Bolster* (ARS-38); USS *Conserver* (ARS-39); USS *Hoist* (ARS-40); USS *Opportune* (ARS-41) USS *Reclaimer* (ARS-42): and USS *Recovery* (ARS-43).

Bolster-class vessels were fitted with 20-ton capacity booms forward and 10-ton capacity booms aft. They were also fitted with bow lift rollers, port and starboard, rated at 75 tons each, which were useful in harbor clearing operations. The ships had automatic towing machines with 2,100 feet of two-inch towing wire. In addition to assisting disabled vessels at sea, the towing capacity would prove particularly valuable during the many amphibious landings in both the Pacific and European Theaters. Landing craft and landing ships were in constant danger of broaching to in the surf and becoming stuck in the sand. Destroyers providing close in gunfire support often ran the risk of grounding in shallow waters that were poorly charted.

Additional salvage equipment included two fixed fire pumps rated at 1,000 gallons per minute each, four portable fire pumps, multi-point mooring gear for stationing the ship over a wreck, and eight sets of "beach gear," pre-rigged anchors, chains and cables for use in refloating grounded vessels. Quick release stowage for the beach gear anchors was provided forward and

aft on both sides of the ship. Diver support equipment included one double re-compression chamber, and two complete diving stations aft for air diving. The ships carried two 35 -foot work boats designed to support salvage operations.

Photographs of the USS *Bolster* taken in February 2009. The photographs reveal the deteriorated state of the vessel. Maritime Administration photographs.

Statement of Significance

The *Diver*/*Bolster* class, to which *Bolster* belongs, was the second class of vessels built for the U.S. Navy specifically designated for salvage work. The first vessel, USS *Diver* (ARS-5), was completed in 1943 and delivered to Great Britain. *Bolster* was the first vessel in the *Diver*/*Bolster* class series. The steel-hulled salvage ships proved to be a very successful design with at least one still in operation, the USCGC *Acushnet,* formerly the USS *Shackle* (ARS-9). *Bolster* received seven battle stars for its service in the Korean War and 11 campaign stars for its service in the Vietnam War.

Integrity of Characteristics/Features

The vessel is in poor condition and has been in the Maritime Administration's National Defense Reserve Fleet in Suisun Bay, Benicia, CA for nearly 15 years. Most of its equipment had been stripped prior to the ship being transferred to the Maritime Administration.

National Register Eligibility Statement

Although the steel-hulled salvage ships proved to be a very successful design, *Bolster* does not possess the significant historical or technological characteristics, and does not represent a revolutionary change in naval design necessary for listing. *Bolster* is also not the last remaining example of the class. Its near sistership, the *Diver*-class vessel CGC *Acushnet,* is currently an active ship in the U.S. Coast Guard. While *Bolster* participated in many note-worthy events, it was one of many vessels involved and one of many vessels that performed salvage work during the Korean and Vietnam Wars and during the atomic bomb tests in the 1950s.

Date: 28 August 2009
Determination: NOT ELIGIBLE

Sources

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