

NATIONAL REGISTER ELIGIBILITY ASSESSMENT VESSEL: USS *Reclaimer* (ARS-42)



USS *Reclaimer* underway date unknown. www.nafts.net/reclaimer.htm. Contributed by Dennis Stephenson.

Vessel History

The USS *Reclaimer* (ARS-42) was an auxiliary salvage and rescue ship built for the U.S. Navy during World War II under a Maritime Commission¹ contract; however it was completed too late to see action in that war.

Reclaimer was launched June 23, 1945 and commissioned December 20, 1945. After a shake down period operating out of San Pedro, California, *Reclaimer* proceeded to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. From there, it joined the task force preparing for the Atomic Bomb Tests at Bikini Atoll and arrived at Bikini of June 1, 1946. During the tests it served as the flagship of the Director of Ship Material. In this role the ship's crew examined target ships and photographed the damage. A subsequent study of the exposure of Navy personnel to radiation centered on *Reclaimer*, stating that it had, "participated in nearly every maneuver and operation of radiological significance." It returned to Pearl Harbor in September of 1946 and to the U.S. West Coast the following month. It received final radiological clearance on January 13, 1947. *Reclaimer* was decommissioned on June 23, 1946 and placed in the Pacific Reserve Fleet in San Diego.

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

Korean War Service

Reclaimer was re-commissioned on December 1, 1950 for service in the Korean War. Enroute to the Far East it towed a Navy vessel to Pearl Harbor, arriving on February 12, 1951. It arrived at Sasebo, Japan via Guam on April 29. On May 8 it joined the USS *Grasp* (ARS-24) in a successful effort to salvage the cargo ship *Muhlenberg Victory*, which had gone ashore on an island near Sasebo. *Reclaimer* then proceeded to Pusan, Korea towing the tanker YO-179.

The ship earned six battle stars for its service in the Korean War zone. It performed patrol and salvage duties, and there are reports that it landed South Korean commandos in night-time operations on the North Korean coast. In June of 1951 *Reclaimer* escorted the USS *Wiley* (DD-597), to Sasebo after the *Wiley* was damaged by mines. On its return to Pusan it picked up the burning cargo ship *Plymouth Victory* and towed it to Sasebo. That August it took part in minesweeping operations and installed buoys in the harbor of Wonsan, Korea. On September 7, it refloated the Japanese LST Q-081, which had beached at Kangnung, Korea. In October it assisted the seagoing tug USS *Yuma* (ATF-94) in towing the disabled British hospital ship *Maine* through Japan's Shimonoseki Straits. On January 22, 1952 *Reclaimer* left Yokosuka, Japan bound for Pearl Harbor.

The *Reclaimer* left Pearl Harbor on October 21, 1952 enroute to Sasebo towing the USS YC-104. It completed the crossing on November 17. In early December it was at Sokeho Hang, Korea refloating two LSTs that had run aground in a storm. It then towed one of the vessels to Sasebo, arriving on December 18. The *Reclaimer* returned to patrol duties off Wonsan, but left there to aid the merchant ship *Gulf Haven* in danger of foundering in typhoon seas. *Reclaimer* towed the ship safely to Japan. The ship continued to operate in the waters around Korea and Japan until July 1953 when it returned to San Diego on July 25.

The ship operated out of the U.S. West Coast and Hawaii until March 1954, when it proceeded to the Marshall Islands to join the salvage operations related to the hydrogen bomb tests. Completing that work in early May, the *Reclaimer* spent four months operating in Korean and Japanese waters and then went to French Indochina to participate in "Operation Passage to Freedom," the evacuation of refugees from what would later become North Vietnam. The ship returned to the West Coast in late 1954.

Between 1955 and 1964 *Reclaimer* alternated periods operating on the West Coast and Hawaii with tours of duty in the Far East. In 1956 it relieved the oiler USS *Ponchatoula*, which was towing the merchant vessel *Venus* out of the path of Typhoon Ivy. In 1957 it refloated the LST USS *Chittenden County* (LST-561), which grounded at Kauai, Hawaii. In 1960 it installed underwater cables near Midway Island. In August 1961 *Reclaimer* and the seagoing tug USS

Lipan (ATF-85) were sent to Phu Quoc Island off Vietnam to refloat the South Vietnamese landing craft *Long Dau*, which had broached on the beach while landing supplies. In May 1962 *Reclaimer* went to Christmas Island to assist in the "Operation Dominic" atomic tests. The crew placed the anchors for target rafts and moored the rafts in position. Later the ship circled the site observing the blast and its results.

In November 1962 Typhoon Karen devastated Guam, sinking several small vessels in the harbor. The *Reclaimer* arrived at the island on the 15th to assist the USS *Bolster* (ARS-38), USS *Deliver* (ARS-23), and the seagoing tug USS *Wandank* (ATA-204) in salvage operations. Among the craft raised were the Korean warship *Han Ra San*, the Philippine warship *Negros Oriental*, the local dredge *John S. Campbell*, and the harbor tugs YTM-417 and YTM-521. In March 1963 *Reclaimer* salvaged the motorship *Shokufu* at Pago Pago, Samoa.

Vietnam War

On May 2, 1964 the aircraft carrier USS *Card* (CVE-11) serving as a helicopter transport, was sunk at Saigon by a Vietcong explosive charge attached to its hull. At the time, *Reclaimer* was enroute from Hong Kong to Subic Bay, Philippines. It was ordered to proceed to Saigon at top speed. The *Reclaimer*, aided by the seagoing tug USS *Tawakoni* (ATF-114), succeeded in refloating *Card* and towing it to the Philippines. In 1965 the ship carried out further salvage operations in the Vietnam War zone, including refloating *LST-559* in the harbor at Da Nang.

In February of 1966 the civilian tanker *Sea Raven* grounded at Chu Lai, Vietnam. Damage to the hull flooded its engine room to a depth of 12 feet. *Bolster* and *Reclaimer* pumped the ship out and refloated it. 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* (ARS-8) and the seagoing tug USS *Ute* (ATF-76). The *Reclaimer* returned to the West Coast for a brief visit in late 1966.

In March 1967 *Reclaimer* aided the merchant vessel *Norbega* that was adrift west of Midway Island. Returning to Vietnam, it salvaged the South Vietnamese *LSM-405* grounded at Phan Thiet. The *Reclaimer* returned to the West Coast for the first half of 1968. It returned to Da Nang, Vietnam for further salvage duty on August 29. In September it salvaged the *LCV-1615* and the following month it salvaged the *LCU-1576*. The ship continued to alternate periods on the West Coast or Hawaii with tours of duty in the war zone until the end of the Vietnam War. It spent all of 1970 in Vietnam. When the destroyer USS *Warrington* (DD-843) was damaged by a mine off North Vietnam on July 17, 1972, *Reclaimer* took it in tow and delivered it at Subic Bay five days later. The *Reclaimer* was awarded one battle star for its service in the Vietnam War.

Post-Vietnam

Following Vietnam, *Reclaimer* continued its salvage operations and towing work in the Pacific. In April of 1980, the Greek cargo ship *Anangel Liberty* loaded with kaolin clay went ashore on French Frigate Shoals in the western Hawaiian Islands. The *Reclaimer*, assisted by the tug *Mana*, refloated the ship, which resumed its voyage to Japan. In June of 1982 it picked up a target hulk in Singapore. In late 1983 the *Reclaimer* was involved in the salvage of the submarine USS *Bluegill* (SS-242), which was being used to train divers and diving bell operators on the seafloor off Lahaina, Hawaii. *Reclaimer's* captain served as salvage master for the operation. During the early 1980s the ship's crew also recovered two bodies from the crash of an FA-14, and participated in joint military exercises with the South Korean navy. In 1994, it completed the ocean tow of a de-fueled nuclear submarine.

The *Reclaimer* was decommissioned on September 16, 1994, and placed in the National Defense Reserve Fleet. It was transferred to the U.S. Maritime Administration on July 28, 2001, and is currently lying in the reserve fleet anchorage in Suisun Bay, California.

The salvage ships of the *Diver/Bolster* series compiled long and impressive service records. Several were transferred late in their careers to the navies of Korea, Taiwan, and Turkey, where they may still be in active. The U.S. Coast Guard Cutter (USCGC) *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.



Left: CGC *Acushnet*, circa 1950. Right: CGC *Acushnet* circa 2000. The *Acushnet* (WMEC-167), formerly the USS *Shackle* (ARS-9), is the oldest commissioned cutter currently serving in the Coast Guard.

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*-class was the second class of vessels built for the Navy specifically designated for salvage work. The group of salvage ships to which *Reclaimer* 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).

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

Type: Submarine Rescue Vessel

Hull Number: ARS-42

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 *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 of War. Landing craft and landing ships were in constant danger of broaching to in the surf and becoming embedded 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 recompression chamber, and two complete diving stations aft for air diving. The ships carried two 35-foot work boats designed to support salvage operations.

Statement of Significance

The *Bolster/Diver* class, to which *Reclaimer*, 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. *Reclaimer* was the fifth vessel in the *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). *Reclaimer* earned six battle stars for Korean War service and one battle star for Vietnam.

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 more than eight 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, the *Reclaimer* does not possess the significant historical or technological characteristics, or integrity of design and materials necessary for listing. The class does not represent a revolutionary design, nor is *Reclaimer* the last remaining example of the class. Its sistership, the CGC *Acushnet* is currently an active ship in the U.S. Coast Guard. While *Reclaimer* 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 1940s and 1950s.

Date: 12 May 2009

Determination: NOT ELIGIBLE

Sources

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U.S. Navy, Naval Historical Center website: <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq90-3.htm#anchor156376>

Maritime Administration's Property Management and Archive Record System Website: <http://www.pmars.imsa.com/detail.asp?Ship=4067>