



U.S. Coast Guard History Program

Aurora, 1931

WPC-103



The cutter *Aurora* was named for the goddess of the dawn in Greek mythology. She was the daughter of Hyperion and Theia, and sister of Helios and Selene.

Builder: Bath Iron Works, Bath, Maine

Launched: 28 November 1931

Commissioned: 21 December 1931

Decommissioned: 17 January 1968

Disposition: Sold on 16 December 1967

Displacement: 1933: 337 tons full load
1945: 350 tons full load

Dimensions:

Length: 165' oa

Beam: 25' 3"

Draft: 7' 8" (1933); 10' (1945)

Machinery: 2 x Winton Model 158 6-cylinder diesels; 1,340 bhp

Propellers: twin, 3-bladed

Performance: Maximum speed: 16.0 knots

Maximum sustained: 14.0 knots for 1,750 statute miles

Cruising: 11.0 knots for 3,000 statute miles

Economic: 6.0 knots for 6,417 statute miles

Complement: 1933: 5 officers, 39 men

1945: 7 officers, 68 men

Armament: 1933: 1 x 3"/23; 1 x 1-pounders;

1941: 1 x 3"/23; 1 x Y-gun; 2 x depth charge tracks;

1945: 2 x 3"/50 (single-mounts); 2 x 20mm/80 (single mounts); 2 x depth charge tracks; 2 x Y-guns; 2 x Mousetraps.

Electronics: 1933: none

1945: Radar: SF; Sonar: QCO

Cost: \$258,000

Class History:

The 165-foot "B" Class cutters, sometimes referred to as the Thetis-Class, were a follow on to the 125-foot cutters. Both types of cutters were designed for the enforcement of Prohibition, but the 165-footers primary mission was to trail the mother ships that dispensed alcohol to smaller, faster vessels well beyond the territorial waters of the U.S. Hence these cutters had to have excellent sea-keeping qualities, good accommodations for the crew, and long range. Although Prohibition ended soon after most entered service, their design nevertheless proved to be adaptable to the many other missions of the Coast Guard.

An article written soon after they entered service noted that: "the new cutters are low and rakish, without excessive superstructure or freeboard. A raking stem, well flared bow and cruiser stern give the appearance of speed as well as contribute to the seaworthiness of the vessels, a quality which has been demonstrated in actual service. . .The new ships are twin-screw driven by two 670 horse power Diesel engines, furnished by the Winton Engine Co. of Cleveland, Ohio. The shafting and propellers are arranged and supported in a novel manner. The ship is equipped with two overhanging rudders on a line with and just aft of the propellers. The rudders are supported by a streamline rudder post at the forward end which is bossed out for a bearing to take a stub shaft which extends through the propeller. This method of arranging the rudders has proved remarkably successful. At full speed, the ships turn a complete circle in two minutes and eighteen seconds, and can be docked with ease under the most difficult conditions.

On trial runs, the *Atalanta* averaged 16.48 knots at 468 RPM with practically no vibration and the engine under no evident strain. Due to the arduous service for which these vessels were built, only the finest materials available were used. . .It is interesting to note that genuine wrought iron pipe was used for practically all the services where resistance to corrosion, vibration, and strain was required. The fuel oil, lubricating oil, and water service to the main engines and auxiliaries; the fire and bilge system; and the steam heating system were all installed with genuine wrought iron pipe. At the Lake Union plant this pipe was furnished by the Reading Iron Company through the Crane Company's Seattle office and Bowles Company of Seattle. The new ships are a distinct contribution to modern shipbuilding and should be of great value to the Coast Guard."* They certainly did prove to be of great value to the Coast Guard.

Most saw service as coastal convoy escorts during World War II and two, the *Icarus* and the *Thetis*, each sank a U-boat. Many saw service well into the 1960s and some still service as tour boats in New York City with the Circle Tour Line, testament to their sturdy and well-thought out design.

History:

CGC *Aurora* was built by the Bath Iron Works company in Bath, Maine. She entered commissioned service on 21 December 1931 and was initially assigned to the Special Patrol Force stationed at Stapleton, New York, in support of the Coast Guard's efforts to interdict "rum runners" along the coast. Later in the decade she transferred to San Pedro, California. Here she conducted law enforcement and search and rescue patrols and served on the Bering Sea Patrol in 1940.

During World War II she was rearmed with depth charges and dual-purpose batteries and was assigned to the Northwestern Sea Frontier, stationed in Juneau, Alaska. Arriving at Ketchikan on 4 January 1942, the *Aurora* was ordered to escort duty. En route from Seattle on 18 December 1941 she had made a probable sound contact and attacked it, expending a single depth charge. Between 4 January and 2 May 1942, she escorted 18 convoys between Icy Straits, Yakutat, Seward, Alitak, Dutch Harbor and Chernofski. The only incident of note occurred on 16 April 1942, while she was escorting the SS *Columbia* from Icy Strait to Kodiak. At 1445 one of the lookouts reported a submarine diving about two miles ahead. This was not confirmed

by any other member of the crew. Within one minute an echo was picked up on the QC (underwater sound) equipment and a depth charge was dropped a minute or so later. *Aurora* circled and again established contact, this time attacked with two charges from the stern and two from the "Y" gun, forming a diamond pattern. Contact was maintained for an hour and a half and two more attacks of four charges each were made, with settings between 100 and 200 feet. There was no conclusive evidence that the submarine was damaged, however.

From 12 July to 8 August 1942, she escorted convoys from Kodiak to Icy Straits and return. On 9 August 1942 she escorted a convoy from Anchorage to Kodiak and then proceeded to Ketchikan. On August 22nd she arrived at Seattle. Here she remained for the rest of 1942 undergoing repairs in drydock. On 4 January 1943 she left drydock in Seattle and after taking on ammunition and making other preparations she departed for Alaskan waters on January 8th. She moored at Ketchikan on the 11th and proceeded to Pleasant Island via Juneau and Petersburg to report to the routing officer aboard the USS *Swiftsure*. As no convoy was leaving in the immediate future she returned to Juneau until the 17th when she began escorting two vessels to Kodiak. She returned to the routing vessel on the 24th but required three days to repair damage from heavy seas, and it was not until the 28th that she began escorting the cable ship *Restorer* from Icy Strait to Kodiak. She remained here until 2 February 1943, when she departed for Dutch Harbor, with 13 Army and Navy personnel aboard, arriving, via Sand Point, on the 5th. Three days later she was escorting another vessel through Unimak Pass to a point 12 miles beyond Scotch Cap Light when the vessel proceeded independently. En route to Dutch Harbor on the 9th she searched in the vicinity of Cape Cheerful for a reported submarine.

The cutter continued on escort and anti-submarine patrols throughout Alaskan waters for the remainder of the war, but encountered no enemy activity. She safely escorted each of her charges to their destinations. She also escorted the *Restorer* on numerous cable laying missions and assisted vessels in distress. During 1945 her patrol area consisted of the waters between Cape Ommaney and Yakutat, being relieved by the CGC *McLane* for approximately seven days during each patrol. She again assisted numerous vessels, many having run aground on the rocky shoreline, including the USS *Hiram*, reported aground on Porpoise Island. The vessel was found in good condition, floating free under her own power at high tide.

After World War II, most of her extra armament was removed and she was transferred to Jacksonville, Florida, where she served until 1 September 1946, when she was placed "In Reserve" status at Mayport, Florida. She was recommissioned on 23 July 1947 and was stationed at Savannah, Georgia, where she conducted search and rescue and law enforcement patrols. On 15 October 1956 she went to the assistance of the disabled trawler *Miss Beulah* about 10 miles off the George coast. No sooner had the cutter taken the vessel in tow than a storm of gale proportions was encountered, breaking the tow line and necessitating the removal of the trawler's two-man crew. Unable to use boats because of the mountainous seas, the *Aurora* worked her way in close to the trawler's bow, thus allowing the two men to jump aboard the tossing cutter. After the storm abated, these men were returned to the trawler which was then towed to safety in Savannah.

From April 1959 until 17 January 1968 she was stationed at San Juan, Puerto Rico. From 6 to 10 June 1965 she searched unsuccessfully for a missing USAF aircraft off the coast of Florida. On 14 February 1966 she assisted in the rescue of 18 crewmen from the Liberian-flagged merchant vessel *Pensacola* over 40 miles south of Isla Saona. *Aurora* was decommissioned on 17 January 1968 and placed in storage at Miami. She was replaced by the new 210-foot *Courageous* (WMEC-622). *Aurora* was sold in December of the same year.

The 7 January 1968 *Sunday San Juan Star Magazine* article by Connie Underhill about the *Aurora* entitled "End of the Voyage" describes her final year in service:

It could be great to say that the Coast Guard Cutter 'Aurora' is being decommissioned after a long and distinguished career. But there is little

distinguished about the Aurora's record, and her 36 year career is coming to an end only because the Coast Guard has built a better one. But there are thousands of yachtsmen, commercial fishermen and merchant marines from Trinidad to Miami who will miss her. Most of them were only aware that the Aurora was there and ready to go should they need her, but the ones in trouble saw the Aurora appear on the horizon as the most beautiful sight in the world. Mostly the Aurora's Caribbean career consisted of standing by. Such was the case, for example, with the tugboat Coral, which ran aground on a reef. Through the night the Aurora stood by the Coral's side giving reassurance to the tug's crew. The next day the crewmen were airlifted to safety by a Coast Guard helicopter and the helicopter would get credit for rescue, if that kind of credit were given in a service where rescue is routine.

Rescue was so routine to the Aurora that she never took the allotted two hours to be underway. Her crew -- five officers and 48 enlisted men -- were never really 'off.' Scattered all over town during off-duty hours they checked in every hour or left a phone number where they could be reached. There were times she'd be ready to go in 25 minutes. It took the Aurora less than two hours to get underway in July of this year when she went out on the report of a small plane that had last reported its position over Mona Passage. The Aurora made a two-day search without result and was on its way back to San Juan when the B52 SAC bomber crashed shortly after takeoff from Ramey Air Force Base.

The eight-engine jet bomber crashed in 90 feet of water; three crewmen who bailed out had been recovered by fishermen and a Coast Guard helicopter. The Aurora was ordered back and spent several days searching for survivors and then at the request of the Air Force remained at the site of the crash to serve as marking buoy and as a diving platform in the Air Force's attempt to recover what it could of the \$8 million plane.

And so it went with the Aurora. She was never the star of any mission but always a welcome and necessary part of a joint effort. The three men, a woman and a dog on the 50-foot schooner Alai le Noir, awash off Grand Turk, were the rescue objects of two aircraft, two helicopters and the Aurora in April of this year. Again the Aurora's task was to stand by.

The ship was best suited to be the pivot of a major search and rescue effort, the on-scene commander. She was able to stay at sea for a week and with a full-time crew including specialists, could operate 24 hours a day. The ship's commanding officer, Lieut. Cmdr. Boyd Acklin, would coordinate the movements of aircraft and other ships, and act as the contact to the rescue controller in San Juan.

The San Juan search and rescue area extends over more than a million square miles: from a point 500 miles north of the Dominican Republic to Cuba, southward to the north coast of South America and 1,000 miles east to sea. It includes all the Leeward and Windward Islands and Mona Passage, one of the most heavily traveled sea lanes in the world. And this was the Aurora's beat. If her Caribbean career was relatively uneventful, at least the Aurora had glamorous beginnings. She was built in Bath, Maine, and in December 1931 joined a special patrol force in Stapleton, N.Y.; her assignment: to run down rum runners. At that time her top speed of 16 knots, which has today slowed down to 13, made her a fast ship indeed. Defender of the prohibition act, she was fulfilling the Coast Guard's law enforcement mission.

The Aurora's law enforcement duties in and around Puerto Rico were much less hectic and probably a great deal more necessary. She would drop into a port like Fajardo for surprise small boat boardings. The Aurora would hail a passing motor boat and inspect her for safety devices such as life jackets. If violations were found, a report was forwarded to Miami where legal action could be initiated. If all regulations were complied with, the owner was given a certificate. The routine and uneventful work of the Aurora's was probably responsible for saving more lives than its search and rescue operations.

The Aurora has just returned from her last tour of duty, providing supplies for Coast Guard stations in St. Croix and St. Thomas. The plodding old lady of the sea was expected at both islands, and while there weren't any tears a great deal of nostalgia surrounded the next-to-last voyage of a good ship. She will make her last voyage Tuesday to Miami where she will probably be scrapped.

Images:



Scanned photo provided courtesy of Orlando Gallardo, Jr. It was taken in the 1960s, not too long before she was decommissioned in January, 1968. The photo was provided to Mr. Gallardo by a former crewman of *Aurora*, a Mr. Villafañe, who eventually retired from the Coast Guard as a Master Chief Petty Officer.

Sources:

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