



Petrel, 1983

WSES-4

Any of the various medium-sized, long-winged sea birds of the order *Procellariiformes*.

Builder: Bell Halter Inc., New Orleans, Louisiana

Length: 109' 1"

Beam: 39'

Draft: 9' 7" (full load); 6' (on cushion)

Displacement: 152 long tons

Cost: \$5,000,000

Commissioned: 8 July 1983

Decommissioned: 28 January 2994

Disposition:

Machinery:

Main Engines: 2 Detroit 16V149TIB Diesel engines (1,800 hp @ 1,900 rpm)

Lift Engines: 2 Detroit 8V92 Diesel engines (378 hp @ 2,000 rpm)

Performance & Endurance:

Max: 30+ knots

Cruising: 25 knots; 1,100 mile range

Complement: 17

Armament: Small arms

History:

During the late-1970s and early 1980s the Coast Guard increased its capabilities to meet the growing threat posed by maritime smugglers. The Service tested and evaluated the surface effects ship [SES] *Dorado* (WSES-1) for a period between 1981 and 1982 to test its effectiveness as a patrol craft for the shallow waters around the coast of Florida. When the tests proved successful, the Coast Guard acquired three SESs for active use: *Sea Hawk* (WSES-2); *Shearwater* (WSES-3); and *Petrel* (WSES-4) beginning in the summer of 1982. On 1 November 1982 the Coast Guard established the Coast Guard Surface Effect Ship Division in Key West, Florida. The Division was made up of these three SESs and included a support staff. This was the first time a Coast Guard "division" was formed since the Vietnam War. They were tasked with, as a public affairs pamphlet noted: "maritime law enforcement, targeting [their] efforts towards the interdiction of narcotics and controlled substances smuggled into the United States by sea. Not since Prohibition have Coast Guard cutters been commissioned primarily to support maritime law enforcement. The Division's secondary mission is in support of the Coast Guard's search and rescue (SAR) duties." Those duties expanded as new problems arose, including interdicting illegal migrants, enforcing fisheries regulations, and operating in support of the Maritime Defense Zone operations and exercises, particularly those duties involving mine countermeasures and coastal defense.

These cutters were unique. Although the Coast Guard had experimented with non-traditional vessels such as hydrofoils as late as the 1970s, no such craft had seen extensive service. These three SESs were an exception. They were rigid sidewall hovercraft constructed of a lightweight aluminum alloy. Their lift engines powered fans that created a pressurized air cushion under the cutter, thereby lifting the craft, thus reducing drag and draft. The solid sidewalls pierced the water, creating a catamaran hull, and the air cushion was sealed by flexible rubberized skirts at the bow and stern. This allowed these craft to operate at high speeds in waters both shallow and deep, making them ideal patrol craft for the waters off the coast of Florida and well out into the Caribbean. Their wide beam and the catamaran hull also made them extremely stable craft, even in high seas.

The *Petrel* was built by Bell Halter Marine, Incorporated, of New Orleans, Louisiana. She was placed in commission on 8 July 1983. On 14 January 1984 she seized a P/C carrying 6-tons of marijuana and the F/V *Moses* carrying 1 ton of marijuana. On 17 January 1984 she seized a F/V near Cay Sal Bank with marijuana on board. The Surface Effect Ship Division was awarded a Coast Guard Unit Commendation for their service in interdicting narcotic smuggling

from 17 November 1982 to 29 January 1984. On 31 March 1984 she seized the P/C *Bay Trawler* south of Northwest Providence Channel after 1.5 tons of marijuana were discovered in a concealed compartment. On 6 April 1984 she seized three craft near Orange Cay after marijuana was discovered. On 3 June 1984 she seized the abandoned F/V *Ocean Queen* off Cay Sal Bank carrying 6 tons of marijuana. On 24 June 1984 she seized the 39-foot F/V *Old Horse* on Great Bahama Bank with 1 ton of marijuana. On 9 September 1984 she rescued 100 Haitians on board a 40-foot sailboat in the Old Bahama Channel and transferred them to immigration.

On 7 January 1985 she seized the P/C FL-3783-DL 10 miles southeast of Miami, carrying marijuana residue. On 13 March 1985 she seized a M/V in the Yucatan Channel carrying 15 tons of marijuana. On 2 September 1986 she seized a 55-foot lobster boat 110 miles southwest of Dry Tortugas carrying 10 tons of marijuana -- the lobster boat unsuccessfully tried to ram the cutter. On 14 October 1986 she seized the F/V *Rainbow Chaser* 280 miles southwest of Miami carrying 1.5 tons of marijuana. On 13 February 1988 she seized the F/V *Malaijar* after it had ejected 12 canisters containing 650 pounds of cocaine. On 9 December 1988 she seized the Honduran M/V *Caroline* after forcing her to stop with small-arms fire.

She was well decorated for her actions. A *Change of Command* pamphlet dated 19 June 1992, published when LT James E. Rendon took over command from LT Charley L. Diaz, noted:

PETREL (WSES-4) is one of the most decorated patrol boats in the Coast Guard with forty three drug busts to her credit (more than any other patrol boat in commissioned service). In her short nine year history, PETREL has received three Coast Guard UNIT COMMENDATIONS, one MERITORIOUS UNIT COMMENDATION and the SPECIAL OPERATIONS SERVICE ribbon for her work in drug interdiction operations. In 1991, PETREL was authorized to display the NATIONAL DEFENSE SERVICE MEDAL. In 1992, PETREL received another MERITORIOUS UNIT COMMENDATION for Rescue and Assistance efforts involving the nearly scuttled motor vessel HARBOUR -- HARBOUR was later seized by another cutter with nearly five tons of cocaine on board. In addition to her extensive work in drug law enforcement, PETREL has made some dramatic rescues at sea: most recently the sailing vessel TAMPAWITHA which was disabled off the coast of Cuba in 22 foot seas and 55 knots winds and the 500 foot Walt Disney World cruise liner STARSHIP MAJESTIC which caught fire with 1100 people on board. PETREL (WSES-4) has also been recognized for her humanitarian efforts involving the steady flow of Cuban refugees and the mass exodus of Haitian migrants which made headlines this past winter.

She was decommissioned on 28 January 1994.

Sources:

Cutter History File. USCG Historian's Office, USCG HQ, Washington, D.C.

Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships. Washington, DC: USGPO.

Robert Scheina. *U.S. Coast Guard Cutters & Craft of World War II*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1982.

Robert Scheina. *U.S. Coast Guard Cutters & Craft, 1946-1990*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1990.

