



## Sweetbrier, 1944

WAGL / WLB-405  
180-C Class

*"The Rose of the Fleet"*



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A Eurasian rose (*Rosa eglantheria*) having prickly stems, fragrant leaves, bright pink flowers, and scarlet hips. Also called *eglantine*.

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Builder: Marine Iron and Shipbuilding, Duluth, MN

Keel laid: 3 November 1943

Launched: 30 December 1943

Commissioned: 26 July 1944

Decommissioned: 27 August 2001, 26 Oct 2001, turned over to Republic of Ghana

Cost: \$865,531

Length: 180 feet

Beam: 37 feet

Draft: 12.8 feet

Displacement: 1027 tons

Propulsion: Cooper-Bessemer diesel; 1200 SHP; single propeller

Performance:

Max: 13.2 knots

Cruising: 7.5 knots, 11,200 mile range

Fluid Capacities (in gallons):

Diesel Oil: 28,000

Potable Water:

Deck Gear:

Anchors:

Armament: 2 x 20 mm guns (1945)

Small Boats:

Complement: 57

Electronics:

Radar:

Sonar:

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### **Class History:**

When the US Coast Guard absorbed the Bureau of Lighthouses on 1 July 1939, *Juniper*, a 177-foot all welded steel buoy tender, was under construction and plans for a successor were on the drawing board. Plans initiated by the Bureau of Lighthouses called for the construction of several identical buoy tenders to replace existing coastal buoy tenders. The preliminary designs generated by the Bureau were for a vessel similar to *Juniper*. When the Aids to Navigation (ATON) system transferred to Coast Guard control, USCG planners reviewed the preliminary plans for the new class of buoy tenders and modified them to meet the service's multi-mission role. To be an effective part of the Coast Guard, the new buoy tenders needed to be multi-purpose platforms. They had to be capable of conducting Search and Rescue (SAR) and Law Enforcement (LE) missions, as well as their primary mission tending ATON. On 20 January 1941 the US Coast Guard contracted Marine Iron and Shipbuilding Company of Duluth , Minnesota

to build the design based on *Juniper* and modified to meet the service's requirements. On 31 March 1941 Marine Iron and Shipbuilding laid the keel for the first vessel of the new buoy tender class. The new vessel measured 180 feet overall and had a beam of 37 feet at the extreme. She had a displacement of 935 tons and drew 12 feet. The new design was similar to *Juniper* in appearance but did exhibit some important differences. Gone was the turtle back forecastle. A notched forefoot, ice-belt at the waterline, and reinforced bow gave the vessel icebreaking capabilities. Extending the superstructure to the ship's sides increased interior volume above the main deck. A single propeller, turned by an electric motor powered by twin diesel generators, replaced the twin-screw arrangement. The 30,000-gallon fuel capacity gave the new design a range of 12,000 miles at a 12-knot cruising speed; at 8.3 knots the cruising range increased to 17,000 miles. Finer lines at the bow and stern increased the new tender's sea keeping ability in rough weather; an increase in draft also promoted seaworthiness. Numerous minor alterations increased the vessel's utility as a SAR platform while deck-mounted guns and depth charge racks supported military duties. Marine Iron and Shipbuilding launched the prototype vessel on 25 November 1941, even as three more took shape. Preparations also went forward to begin a fifth vessel. By the time they commissioned the first 180, *Cactus*, on 1 September 1942 twelve vessels were under construction at the Marine Iron shipyard and at the Zenith Dredge Company shipyard, also in Duluth . The initial designation for the new buoy tenders was WAGL, which was a US Navy designation denoting an auxiliary vessel, lighthouse tender. The designation changed from WAGL to WLB in 1965. A few of the 180s have been designated as other types of vessels over the years; three became WMECs (medium endurance cutters), one of those, *Evergreen*, was a WAGO (oceanographic research vessel) before it became a WMEC. *Gentian* was a WMEC for a time and was then designated a WIX (Training Cutter) in 1999. Though designations have changed over time, each vessel's hull number has remained the same since commissioning.

## DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE 180' CLASS

Six "B" or *Mesquite* class tenders followed the initial production run of thirteen vessels in the "A" or *Cactus*-class. The first *Mesquite*-class tender hit the water on 14 November 1942. Marine Iron and Shipbuilding built all except one of the *Mesquite*-class. The USCG built the lone exception, *Ironwood*, at the service's shipyard in Curtis Bay, Maryland. Twenty *Iris* or "C" class vessels followed the *Mesquite*-class tenders. The first launch of an *Iris* class vessel took place on 18 June 1943, and the final addition to the class slipped off the ways on 18 May 1944. Differences among the three classes were minimal. Their basic dimensions, length and beam were the same and draft varied based on loading. All were built of welded steel along the same framing pattern and with very similar internal and external layouts. All three classes could steam 8,000 miles at 13 knots, 12,000 miles at 12 knots, and 17,000 miles at 8.3 knots; though the "B" and "C" class vessels had engines with 20 percent more power than the "A"

class. The “A” class vessels could carry the most fuel with a tank capacity of 30,000 gallons. The “C” class carried 29,335 gallons and the “B” class about 700 gallons less. The layout of the Commanding Officer’s cabin and the radio room was slightly different in the “A” class vessels. The bridge wing door on the “B” and “C” vessels opened to the side while the doors on the “A” vessels opened forward. The cargo holds as originally laid out in the “C” were larger, by a nominal amount, than those in the other vessels. To hoist buoys and cargo, the “A” vessels carried an A-frame structure that straddled the superstructure and supported the cargo boom. The other two classes were fitted with power vangs that attached to the bridge wings and manipulated the cargo boom. The “A” vessels were originally fitted with manila line as part of the cargo handling system while the second and third generation vessels used wire rope. From the outside, other than the A-frame used in the first production run, the three classes were almost indistinguishable. Over the years their internal differences and variation in equipment were minimized by successive overhauls and improvements. Moreover, it does not appear that any one of the three classes was superior to the other two in the eyes of the US Coast Guard administration or the men who manned the buoy tender fleet. Tenders from each of the three classes remained in use past the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It usually took from two to four months between the time shipyard workers laid a keel and the day the vessel slipped off the ways. Once launched, however, the tenders were far from ready for service. The practice was to build the superstructure, finish the interior, and complete the machinery installation while the vessel was floating. Hence, on launch day the tenders were little more than finished hulls. As the shipyard workers neared the end of the building process, the Coast Guard would begin assigning officers and men to the vessels. Once each vessel was complete and ready to enter active service, the US Coast Guard commissioned her as part of the fleet. Often the commissioning ceremonies took place after the tender had departed from Duluth and arrived at an initial duty station. For the 180s as a whole, it took an average period of 308 days to go from the beginning of construction to commissioning. Divided according to sub-class, the elapsed time from keel laying to commissioning averaged 360 days for the *Cactus*-class; 323 days for the *Mesquite*-class; and 269 days for the *Iris*-class. The building process averaged 192,018 man-hours of labor per vessel. In keeping with the Lighthouse Service practice of naming tenders after foliage, all of the 180s were named after trees, shrubs, or flowers.

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### **Cutter History:**

*Sweetbrier*, a 180-foot Iris or C-class tender, was built in Duluth Minnesota by the Marine Iron and Shipbuilding Company. Her keel was laid on 3 November 1943 and she was launched on 30 December 1943. She was commissioned on 26 July 1944 under the command of LT Paul Lybrand.

Her first homeport was Eureka, California, where she was assigned to do aids to navigation (ATON) work. However, early in 1945 she was sent to Japan to work as a support ship for the Navy. On 9 May 1945, in Nakagusuku Bay, Okinawa she successfully shot down a kamikaze plane. During the course of the war she is reported to have shot down two additional planes and helped in the destruction of at least eight others. Not only did she support Navy vessels but she also was part of an escort and convoy armada. In this armada she acted as leader through sub infested waters.

In February 1948, she was removed from active duty due to lack of personnel and stored in Subic Bay in the Philippines. Then she was recommissioned on February of 1950 to be sent back out from 1951-1953 to serve in the Korean War.

After returning from the war, she was sent to Juneau, Alaska. She spent a quiet several years doing ATON and ice breaking and, according to former crewman EN2 Judson Hansen she participated in the raising of the first 49-star national flag at Sitka, Alaska during the winter of 1959. Then in August 1974, she was sent to Curtis Bay, Maryland, where she underwent a \$2 million renovation. After the renovation, which lasted well into 1976, she was sent back to Juneau and then on to Cordova, Alaska where she spent the rest of her career. The only cutter to call Prince William Sound home, she was the northern most ported vessel in both the Coast Guard and the Navy during her time there. Her duties included ice operations, ATON, search and rescue, international treaty enforcement, marine law enforcement and environmental protection.

In March 1989, like many other cutters, she was involved in the *Exxon-Valdez* oil spill. She acted as coordinator for 52 days (16 April-11 June). During this time she was responsible for duties such as: transporting heavy equipment, serving as air traffic control center, security, maintaining the safety zone around the ship, conducting beach surveys, shuttling supplies and dignitaries, deploying beach monitors and setting oil booms, all of these on top of regular duties.

Then on 19 November 1989 she assisted *Alaska Command*, a processing factory ship, which had an explosion. Their prop was useless, and a man was injured badly. The ship was drifting toward Pilot Rock and had dropped anchor, but was dragging it. It was snowing heavily; there was a driving wind and tall water. The storm turned out to be a hurricane force storm off the coast of Alaska. After fighting to pull the ship away from the shore, *Sweetbrier* eventually towed the vessel 20 miles. From there the CGC *Mustang* towed it the last 2 miles to dock.

In May 1990, *Sweetbrier* and her crew received the Meritorious Unit Commendation award for the outstanding performance of all missions during the previous sixteen months of service.

She spent the rest of her years in relative quiet and then on 27 August 2001, she

was decommissioned and turned over to the Republic of Ghana to be used as a vessel in their Navy.

Researched and written by Ms. Melissa M. Ashmore.



USCGC *Sweetbrier* [WAGL-405; WLB-405]; no caption/photo number; 22 January 1954; photographer unknown.

During the Korean War, some tenders had additional armament installed. This photo provides a good view of that added armament which included two depth charge tracks off the stern, a single 3"/50 caliber main battery behind the stack, two 20-mm single mount cannons mounted above the bridge, and two "mousetrap" anti-submarine depth charge launchers on the forecastle.



Original caption: "Sweetbrier (WAGL-405)"; 1955; Photo No. 17CGD-010555-1; photographer unknown.



No caption/date/photo number/ photographer unknown.



No caption/date/photo number; photographer unknown.



Original caption: "Stern Oblique: Buoy Tender Sweetbrier, WLB-405"; December, 1971; no photo number; photographer unknown.



Original caption: "SWEETBRIER (WLB-405) August 1998 Columbia Glacier, Prince William Sound, Alaska. Photo taken by CG H-60 Helo from AIRSTA Kodiak. ENS Vasilios Tasikas - Conning Officer." No photo number.

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### Sources:

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