



---

## Uploaded to the VFC Website

▶▶▶ 2015 ◀◀◀

---

This Document has been provided to you courtesy of Veterans-For-Change!

Feel free to pass to any veteran who might be able to use this information!

For thousands more files like this and hundreds of links to useful information, and hundreds of "Frequently Asked Questions, please go to:

[Veterans-For-Change](#)

---

*If Veterans don't help Veterans, who will?*

---

**Note:**

VFC is not liable for source information in this document, it is merely provided as a courtesy to our members & subscribers.



## Surface-Effect Ships (SES)

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" of cutters 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 vessels, *Sea Hawk*, *Shearwater*, and *Petrel* were built by Bell Halter Incorporated of New Orleans at their facility at Chalmette, Louisiana. Commissioned in the early 1980s the Division was based at Key West, FL. The vessels of the Surface Effect Ship Division distinguished themselves and were awarded multiple Coast Guard Unit Commendations with the Operational Distinguishing device for their service in interdicting narcotics smuggling and illegal migration and for the conduct of search and rescue operations from November 1982 to January 1994. Finally, after over 11 years of successful service, the Division was stood down and the vessels de-commissioned on 28 January 1994. Having faithfully performed their duty, the vessels were laid up for storage at Key West.

Official Coast Guard Imagery (click on thumbnail for High resolution image)

Caption/Historical Information



Surface-Effect Ships underway



Surface-Effect Ships co-operating with a USCG Helicopter



SES Division tied-up at Key West