Coast Guard Cutter Willow crew returns to homeport after 32-day patrol in Caribbean Sea



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CHARLESTON, S.C. – The Coast Guard Cutter Willow (WLB 202) crew returned to their homeport in Charleston, Saturday, after a 32-day patrol throughout the Caribbean Sea.

The Willow crew serviced 37 aids to navigation in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands.

Working alongside the Coast Guard Research and Development (R&D) Center, the Willow crew installed a prototype buoy to

replace Bahia de San Juan Lighted Buoy 2, which has historically been reported off station or missing due to the significant weather it encounters. Mariners utilize buoys to identify the best water for their vessels transiting into San Juan Harbor. The Sealite Trident 2600 buoy hull is a lightweight, non-ferrous hull made of recyclable plastic material. This plastic hull has been tested for heavy weather by the R&D Center and was moored in Bahia de San Juan, Jan. 16, 2024. The deployment of a prototype buoy is part of ongoing Coast Guard-wide field research into the next generation of aids to navigation (ATON) and mooring designs to support future decisions on the most cost-efficient ATON buoy inventory.

Additionally, Willow crew members worked with Aids to Navigation Team (ANT) Puerto Rico and Coast Guard Regional Dive Locker East to recover two wayward buoy hulls and one sunken buoy hull. Two wayward buoy hulls were in areas too shallow for Willow to operate in, so smaller craft from ANT Puerto Rico and divers from the Regional Dive locker were able to recover the two buoys from critical marine areas and complete an at-sea delivery to Willow. Removing these buoys is important as it eliminates hazards of navigation, prevents deterioration of the marine environment, and allows for the refurbishment and recapitalization of the buoy.

“We always look forward to our deployments to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands to ensure the proper maintenance of the maritime transportation system,” said Cmdr. Erin Chlum, Willow’s commanding officer. “The positive relationships we have with the local Coast Guard units and the pilot associations throughout the region allow us to address any concerns or discrepancies as soon as possible.”

Willow conducted a port call in Frederiksted, St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, where the crew offered public tours and brought in more than 300 visitors, educating the community on the Coast Guard’s role in maintaining the maritime

transportation system and search and rescue. Willow crew members also participated in a beach cleanup on the island, helping to remove 50 pounds of trash.

“The officers and crew of Coast Guard Cutter Willow greatly appreciate the warm welcome and hospitality we received on the beautiful island of St. Croix,” said Chlum. “I would like to thank everyone who came to the public tours of the cutter at the Frederiksted Pier. It was an amazing opportunity to hear directly from the people we serve when conducting our primary mission of maintaining the buoys of the U.S. Virgin Islands.”

Willow is a 225-foot Juniper class sea-going buoy tender. The tender crew is responsible for servicing 246 aids to navigation in South Carolina, Georgia, and throughout the Caribbean, including Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The Willow crew conducts law enforcement, search and rescue, and marine environmental protection missions.