15th MEU H-1 Det Conducts Live-Fire Training from USS Miguel Keith in the Indo-Pacific

PHILIPPINE SEA (Sept. 28, 2024) A U.S. Marine Corps UH-1Y Venom attached to Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron (VMM) 165 (Reinforced), 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, prepares to land aboard the expeditionary sea base USS Miguel Keith (ESB 5) in the Philippine Sea, Sept. 28, 2024. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Capt. Staci Morris)

by Capt. Brian Tuthill, 17 October 2024

PACIFIC OCEAN – UH-1Y Venom and AH-1Z Viper aircrew assigned to the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) conducted a series of day and night close air support training missions with live ordnance Sept. 25 and Oct. 13, launching from the

expeditionary sea base USS Miguel Keith (ESB 5) to a range west of Okinawa, Japan.

The H-1 helicopter detachment, part of Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 165 (Reinforced), 15th MEU, temporarily transferred to Miguel Keith from the amphibious assault ship USS Boxer (LHD 4) on Sept. 21.

This marked the first time a full H-1 detachment has operated from an ESB-class ship during a deployment, allowing the 15th MEU to extend its aviation operations capabilities across the Indo-Pacific.

The live-fire training at Idesuna Jima featured mixed sections of Viper and Venom helicopters launched from Miguel Keith to conduct simulated close air support missions, flying approximately 30 miles to engage simulated targets in both day and night conditions. During each of the training events, the H-1 detachment completed 18 sorties with four aircraft, employing 2.75-inch rockets, 20 mm semi-armor-piercing high-explosive incendiary rounds, and .50 caliber and 7.62 mm crew-served weapons.

This training enhanced pilot proficiency, ensured important skill sustainment and qualifications were met, and also increased overall unit readiness.

“This training was significant for our detachment and the 15th MEU because it resulted in the certification of an aircraft commander and an aerial gunner, as well as the completion of several section leader training events,” U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Col. Michael J. Harper, H-1 detachment officer in charge, VMM-165 (Rein.), said about the September training event. “As part of our long-term aircrew training plan, this means these crewmembers will return to the MEU aboard Boxer more capable and ready to lead and train Marines in our parent squadron after deployment.”

The training in October was similar, and allowing for pilot combat flight leadership progression, trained additional section leads, and qualified Venom aerial gunners in preparation to attend the Weapons Tactics Instructor program next year.

The integration of Miguel Keith as a “spoke” for 15th MEU aviation operations expanded the capability and capacity of the MEU’s Marine Air Ground Task Force. The detachment’s transfer allowed Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 225’s full complement of F-35B Lightning II aircraft to return aboard Boxer, supporting additional operations with partner and allied forces in the U.S. 7th Fleet area of operations.

“The H-1 detachment operating from an ESB during our deployment expands the concept of employment for the hub-spoke-node construct, where this afloat spoke serves as an intermediate base for aircraft to operate within contested areas,” said Harper. “This concept provides the MEU’s aviation combat element with enhanced operational utility and demonstrates the versatility of an H-1 detachment to conduct distributed operations ashore or at sea, offering more options to the Joint Force commander.”

Elements of the same H-1 detachment previously operated aboard Miguel Keith in April 2022 during training exercises with dummy ordnance and crew-served weapons to advance efforts to certify the ship to for aviation explosive ordnance, said Harper. That evolution marked the first time an ESB-class ship hosted H-1 helicopters in the Indo-Pacific, laying the groundwork for the detachment’s current temporary assignment that provided vital experience for the Miguel Keith’s crew.

“Our time aboard Miguel Keith has allowed the H-1 detachment to build proficiency and continue to refine standard operating procedures for ordnance storage and handling on ESBs,” said

Harper.

The experiences and lessons learned by Harper's detachment will benefit future forward-deployed aircraft, including CH-53E Super Stallions or CH-35K King Stallions, MV-22B Ospreys, Navy MH-60s, but especially Vipers and Venoms.

"One of the greatest strengths of H-1 aircraft are their relatively small size and logistical footprint compared to other aviation platforms that provide fire support or lift," Harper said. "We rely on theater lift or forward arming and refueling points to get us closer to the objective. Operating from an expeditionary sea base capitalizes on our mobility and small footprint, while compensating for our range."

ESB-class ships like Miguel Keith enable sea-based expeditionary forces, such as the 15th MEU, to maintain forward presence anywhere across the globe, with the capability to transition quickly from competition to combat missions. The ESB design showcases the flexibility and agility of naval forces, particularly in vital chokepoints, and demonstrates the range of capabilities these ships can offer. Each ESB is equipped to support aviation, unmanned systems, troop movement, equipment staging, and command and control functions.

Elements of the 15th MEU are under the command and control of Commander, Task Force 76, which 7th Fleet employs to cooperate with allies and partners to preserve a free and open Indo-Pacific.

As 7th Fleet's primary Navy advisor on amphibious matters in the 7th Fleet area of operations, CTF 76 is responsible for conducting expeditionary warfare operations to support a full range of theater contingencies, ranging from humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations to full combat operations.